

The Barber of 18th and Castro

On the last day of spring, June 20, 1973, at high noon, at the corner of 18th and Castro in San Francisco, Robert Place found the Face of God in a pornographic photograph. Not that he was given to dirty pictures. Rather, he had been drawn, by some—what?—thing to this neighborhood, by some thing he had vaguely heard or read or sensed, that had nothing to do with the corner barber shop where he had sought refuge, but had everything to do with whatever was intersecting the intersection which was inventing its flamboyant self even as he watched.

He had parked his 1957 Chevy BelAire with the candy-apple red body, tuck-and-roll upholstery, and the white “Says-who? Says-me!” top, and then he had walked all four of the single-block arms reaching out like a cross from the main intersection which was more like ground zero than anything he’d expected even in California. Everything rushed oingo-boingo right up at him: the omelet-brunch cafes with cake made out of, go figure, carrots; the dandy little flower shop near the corner kiosk where a one-legged ancient eye, maybe the world’s oldest newsboy, hawked the call, “*Chronicle!*” like the last screech of a dying species, selling headlines, “Nixon bombs Saigon”; the loud beer bars with slender young men in white tanktops and baseball caps posing and partying in windows open to the street; the chic boutiques selling nothing anybody would ever need after a nuclear attack.

All of it was alien to him. Or he was alien to it. He had entered foreign territory. Fear—not so much the fear of the unknown, but more like the human animal’s fear of his own kind—bristled the shorthairs on the nape of his neck. The unexpected thrill of temptation put him on edge. Seeking sanctuary, he spied a revolving

red-and-white barber pole. He bolted past the blue arrow pointing up the stairs. On the landing outside the barber's door, he stopped, catching his breath. He was a young man in need of something familiar, and what was more solid than a good old-fashioned barber shop?

Until that bone-bright noon hour when Robert Place actually witnessed what looked like the campus of the world's most flamboyant boys' college, he had little more than a tourist's curious Kodak hope that there, at that world-famous intersection, he'd see people unlike any of the people back home in southern Illinois, people stranger and more festive even than the hippies he'd seen on TV in the Haight, people, who, rumors persisted, had always existed, the way bohemians and gypsies and magicians, all of them outlaws, had always existed, even before the Druids, but had never been seen before, at least not in broad daylight, in such visible numbers. So he had come to see for himself.

Because of his uneasy feeling that he already recognized these new people even if he did not know them, Robert Place immediately affected toward them a distanced attitude which he knew camouflaged his ground-glass fear he might, in fact, be one of them, whatever they really were. After a grueling four-day cross-country marathon in his car, he had come to California for what? A trim? Yeah. Sure. That was it. A little trim and some talk. A simple visit to a quiet barbershop. The best place for some local gossip. Some shaving cream hot around his ears. The scrape of the straight-edge razor across the thin skin over the hard bone of his skull. That was all.

Only a few days and many miles before, he had been driving aimlessly through his small town where he knew every street and every house and everyone who lived, or who had ever lived, in those houses, when one of those almost religious, certainly reckless, transfiguring impulses no one can ever deny had possessed him. He had thrown one suitcase into his Chevy, left a rose on his mother's fresh grave, and headed west. He had driven from Canterbury, in Green County, in southern Illinois to the San Francisco crosshairs of 18th and Castro where, in the heart of lightness, of the California sun at high noon in June, almost the solstice, the day of the year's longest

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light, the most familiar thing to him, the only thing he understood, man-to-man, as his father always said, was the gold leaf spelling out FLOYD'S BARBER SHOP. His hair was not long and he had not even felt in need of a haircut; yet why else had he pulled his Chevy to the curb in front of the shop, traipsed back and forth three or four dizzying blocks, and then run from his car up the flight of stairs leading to the door of Floyd's Barber Shop that looked down directly on the corner of 18th and Castro?

Floyd sat customerless in his single green barber chair. He wore a white puckered nylon barber's smock. Across his lap were spread the guts of a player piano he was working over with a screwdriver. He looked up at Robert Place. "Come on in," he said. "I have to do it, otherwise I spend all day looking out the window. Take a look. You'll see. What a parade. It looks like half of Noah's ark. The stag half if you catch my drift. The neighborhood's changed."

Robert wanted to ask, from exactly what to exactly what, and was it good, or bad, or neither; but he kept silent, not wanting to tip his hand, because he figured it didn't matter where he'd played before: California was a brand new game.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Floyd said. "Hope you're in no hurry."

Robert checked his watch against the clock on the wall. One of them was ten minutes fast. Inside himself, the clock of his body, the only clock that really mattered, began to slow. He felt the speed built up on the I-80 freeway descent from Reno and Truckee down to San Francisco slowly recede from himself. Time zones like tide in the Bay ebbed from him. He jingled loose change in his pocket. Nickels and dimes from back home mixed through his nervous fingers with quarters and Kennedy half-dollars he won in less than an hour playing the slots at a filling station somewhere in Nevada.

"I hope you're not in a hurry," Floyd repeated.

Robert remembered his appointment book on the front seat of his unlocked car. Never had he ever left his car unlocked. He peered through Floyd's gilt-lettered window. At the parking meter he had forgotten to feed, a white-helmeted metermaid ticketed his

windshield. She turned slowly from the Chevy toward Robert as if she could feel him watching her every move. The noon sun glinted from her helmet. Robert could not see her face. He did not want to. He did not need to. Back home he could drop a deer at a hundred yards. She was a dead bitch in his book.

"No," he said, "I'm in no hurry. I was late for the last appointments I made four days ago. I sell, I mean, I used to sell Fuller Brushes door to door." He was warming up, trying to feel like himself again. "I can tell you more than you'd ever want to know about natural bristle brushes for your hair and your bottles and your carpets and your drapes and your dog and your cat."

"That a fact?" Floyd said. More than once he'd been told his droll roll of a phrase reminded the teller of W. C. Fields, which only encouraged him, despite his efforts to speak naturally.

"And the women!" Robert presumed that Floyd, same as all barbers, liked to talk about women, when he should have known only most of them like to talk about women, but they all love to talk about sex, except the Seventh Day Adventist ones who were always closed on a Saturday when a man was most likely to get his hair barbered. "Let me tell you," Robert said, "about those little housewives. Those lonely ladies sure do want to talk, talk, talk. Always saying, 'Well, Robert, enough me talking about me. What do you think about me?' Do you believe the utter conceit of women?"

"Much, much less than I believe," Floyd said, "in the unutterable conceits of men."

"Those girls were always giving me coffee till I thought I was going to drown. Always asking me if the coffee was sweet enough and how they could make it sweeter, shaking their hair down, trying out the sample brushes, teasing me, asking me how I thought they looked. I tell you. More than once before I left, I had to comb my teeth. It was murder. Door-to-door can kill you."

"That so?" Floyd fielded like W. C. "I'm what you might say interested in hair brushes too. Being a barber and all, it's natural."

"I bet you've heard everything too," Robert, doing his best Holden Caulfield, said. "At least twice."

“Frankly, I never hear the half of it. In one ear. Out the other. I’d go crazy if I really listened. We’re all maniacs except when we’re not. I must confess music’s my mania.”

“Is that right?”

“Right as rain.”

“What kind of music? Grateful Dead? Judy Collins? Lawrence Welk? What?”

“Piano. I play the piano. But not with these hands. These are the hands of a barber. I always play piano with my feet.” He surveyed Robert’s puzzled face and grinned. “I catch me a rube everytime with that,” he said. “Player piano, of course.”

“I knew that,” Robert said.

Floyd gestured to the plaster-of-paris busts sitting awry on a shelf over Robert’s head. He had saved and bought each one of them from Silvestri’s statuary company in South San Francisco. “There you see them.” He pointed with his screwdriver. “Bach. Mozart. Schubert. Beethoven. Liszt.”

“A whole shooting gallery.” Robert stared straight at the barber. Floyd was a man dragging age forty-five like it was sixty. He combed his graying hair into the stiff part and pomp he had learned as a boy thirty years before. His glasses were as thick as binoculars. Robert liked that. He liked the way some older men and older women kept on with the styles they got locked into when they were young, like they were fixed in some time warp, instead of changing with the fashions and looking ridiculous in clothes that were too young for them, or too modern, or too ugly, like the new uniform for the old, polyester leisure suits for the men and polyester pant suits for the ladies, topped off with a frizzy reddish short perm, or worse, one of those Dynel wigs that catch the sun like orange copper wire. If he got old, which he doubted, that’s what he planned to do. Sort of stay just like he was. Not change a thing.

“Turn around and look,” Floyd said. “Bach and Liszt. I like them best.”

Robert panned his head to the figurines. They were each ten

inches of white plaster with the names chiseled into the bases. “Nice,” he said. “Really nice.” He surveyed the rest of the room.

This was not the first barber shop, waiting room, or bookstore that Robert Place had cased. In fact, it was a matter of police record that Robert Steven Vincent Place had been found guilty of at least one misdemeanor: slicing articles and smuggling magazines from the Green County Public Library. His mother had paid his hundred-dollar fine, but his year’s probation was not half up, and he was on the run.

He had confessed to the judge that he had started with laundromats, that one day he had ripped one article from one magazine in one laundromat. The judge didn’t bother to ask his motive, and Robert could hardly have volunteered one. He didn’t know exactly why he coveted certain pictures like the first ones he had ever stolen, photographs of blond bodybuilders on Venice Beach hoisting even blonder starlets high as the American Dream onto their broad shoulders in the brilliant California sunshine.

From stray magazines in laundromats and doctors’ offices, he had moved on to stealing the neighbors’ mailed magazine subscriptions, and from there on to harder stuff, to the *pieces de resistance*, the photo-books on reserve at the public library. He had moved from a noisy tearing the pages to a quieter slicing them with a single-edge razor blade, and he had cut out for himself quite a collection of classical Greek athletes. His most prized theft was from a portfolio of reproductions of Lumiere’s 1903 photos of the legendary strongman Eugene Sandow in an appealing variety of masculine, but modest, figleaf poses.

His satisfaction with his secret addiction had given him a false confidence that he figured out later had made him greedy and all too careless. He constantly needed more pictures to satisfy himself. Sometimes the actual tearing felt better, bolder than slicing.

Pleasant little dangers thrilled him.

It was his own fault when Miss Ollie Thomas, the head librarian, and his mother’s cousin, had herself pinched him red-handed and called the sheriff. She had caught on to him, because he never

coughed except when he was in the library, which, as his second cousin once-removed in a family inclined to TB, she thought was worrisome, but then she divined that he only coughed when he was, of all things, tearing out pages, and the louder he coughed the more pages he was tearing out at a pull. She was, of course, incensed, even when she apologized to his mother for calling the law.

The week after his sentencing Robert had returned to one of the two laundromats he frequented with a half-filled basket of clothes. He disliked washing his laundry in machines which he suspected harbored the curlicue hairs of strangers. He added his soap and extra bleach, dropped in his quarter, and settled back to pass the time reading.

Unexpectedly, as he leafed through an old 1964 issue of *Life* magazine, he came across the ragged seams of the pages he had ripped out the week before. The photospread had featured what they termed a man's-man kind of motorcycle bar called The Tool Box in San Francisco. Oh, he'd ripped that one out right away! Yessir! He liked cars and motorcycles both! And now he had the same gutted issue in his hands again. He looked neither to the right or left in the laundromat. He grinned at touching the ragged tear, the evidence that he had once before been in this place. Getting caught once was thrill enough, but better was the thrill of returning to the scene of an undetected crime.

In his switch of his clothes from washer to dryer, he stuffed the evidence, the rest of *Life*, unnoticed by the hawk-eyed manager, into the bottom of the basket on whose canvas he had carefully marked with a red felt-tip pen: "If found, return to R. S. V. Place." He didn't need to put his street address, not in Canterbury where everybody knew him.

"I don't really play piano," Floyd said. "I'm not a pianist. I'm a mechanic of the piano."

"I don't really sell Fuller Brushes," Robert said. "But I did. People like to meet me. I like to meet people." He reached for a small stack of magazines that lay next to him on the burgundy leatherette seat.

“Why don’t you flip through a few of those,” Floyd said. “Being from back East, you might never have seen those kind of pictures.”

“I’m not from back East. I’m from the Midwest. The southern part of the Midwest. New York and New England’s back East.”

“It’s all back East here in San Francisco which has nothing to do with California which has nothing to do with the rest of the country, if you catch my drift.” Floyd adjusted a wire and a screw in the board across his lap. “Nossir,” Floyd added, as if he were changing the subject to answer a question Robert had never asked. “I never get lonesome up here looking down on the boys and girls in Rainbow County.”

“Is that a bar?” Robert asked.

“Nope,” Floyd said. “It’s the other foot of the rainbow arch from Oz. It’s just a T-shirt I made up. It’s a state of mind. What size do you wear? Maybe I should give you one.”

“Hey, don’t injure yourself doing me any favors,” Robert said. “I can pay.”

“I got a hundred of them,” Floyd said. “A man has to be enterprising.”

By the late Sixties, Floyd had nearly gone under. He had standards. He had tradition. He figured men and boys should be groomed a certain way. He hadn’t been able to see himself as one of those fancy-nancy men’s salons that other barbers changed to when nobody wanted Princetons or flat-tops or, his favorite, crewcuts anymore. He figured to ride out the long-hair fad. But here he was forty-five, with a one-chair shop and a steady but small clientele of older balding gentlemen of the sort people once kindly called “born bachelors” as opposed to “eligible bachelors.” His trade kept him comfortable. The brisk pace that had once been Friday’s and Saturday’s had fallen off taking with it the strain from his eyes and the pressure from his varicose veins.

“I been closed for four months, yeah.” Floyd said. “Just a second and I’ll have all these wires tied up. Out for four months. Back for three.”

"Vacation?" Robert asked. He was vaguely bored. The magazines were nothing to write home about.

"Operation," Floyd said. "Eyes. Yeah. Wouldn't be able to see today but for those two operations."

He smiled with such a general gratitude for his health that Robert, who in his own life was grateful for nothing, felt uncomfortable. Robert wished for another customer, preferably a mother with a small boy who would have to be hoisted to a kid's chair inside the big one. With commotion like that he could easily slip one or two of the crummy nudist magazines into the sleeve of his jacket.

"I always figured," Robert said, "that little boys always understand the world earlier and better than little girls."

"Why's that?"

"Because little boys get taken younger to barber shops. You sit them up on that little chair. You wrap that big cloth around them. All of a sudden they see what it's like to be a disembodied head caught between two mirrors. That's why little boys cry at the barber shop, because, all of a sudden, they're scared. They're face to face with the secret how we're all just curving off into infinity."

"I like that myself," Floyd said.

"Maybe that's why you barber."

"Could be." Floyd looked up at a hundred mirrored images of himself.

"To tell the truth," Robert said, "I think everybody ought to have two full-length mirrors facing each other in their house."

"Why's that?"

"So in case you ever need to escape for any reason, like, you know, to get away from whoever's after you, you can just stand yourself between the two mirrors and walk right out of space and time into some infinite dimension."

"That sure is another reason to be able to see," Floyd said. "If I was blind, I'd never know if you were telling me the truth about mirrors or not."

"You are so right," Robert said.

"Of course," Floyd continued, "more practically speaking, if I

was blind, I couldn't barber. Whoever heard of a blind barber?" He thought a moment. "Guess it's possible to have, you know, the touch without the eye for it." He paused lost in the thought. "Me? I got the eye and the touch. Mmmm. Must be a blind barber somewhere."

"I figure," Robert said, "if the human mind can think of it, somebody somewhere is doing it. You should hear some of the things my human mind thinks about."

"Damn!" Floyd shifted his piano tools hand to hand. "That sure would take a trusting customer."

"What would?"

"A blind barber."

Robert began a careful roll of the magazine next to him.

"I can see now," Floyd said. "Good as you."

Floyd kept his eyes on the piano board, but Robert felt accused. He flipped the magazine away casually. The guilty flee, he thought, and he meant not from the barber but from back home. For crissakes, what am I doing here?

"It's funny," Robert said.

Floyd looked up with a vaguely cross expression.

"That I came up here, I mean. I came into your barber shop not wanting or really needing a haircut and I'm not getting one. I came into your shop and I'm not getting what I didn't want."

"Oh," Floyd said. He folded his tools into a felt bag. "I thought you meant that I could see was funny."

"Oh no," Robert said. "I guess I came up here looking for something else. Barbers always know what's going on around town."

"I mean," Floyd said, "it would be funny if I couldn't see and I was a barber. But it wouldn't be funny if I couldn't see and I was a pianist. You see them on the TV all the time. Pianists who can't see. They say it helps them play better. They feel it more. But you never see a barber who can't see cutting hair on TV."

"I guess not," Robert said. "Too bad for you that good old Ed Sullivan isn't on anymore. He eyed the morning's *Chronicle*. A sensational murder, one of a series of murders by the Zodiac Killer, spread across the front page; he was fascinated, but the paper itself was too

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bulky to smuggle under his clothes, and he was too shell-shocked from his arrest in the Green County Library to tear out the long article that continued to the last page of the first section. Instead, he tried to memorize the interesting, vivid details of thirteen apparently connected murders and six other persons missing.

“Even if I couldn’t see,” Floyd said, “it wouldn’t make me any better a pianist.” He lifted the wired board off his lap. “This here’s like I always rebuild.” He carried it across the shop and drew back the curtain on an adjacent room. “You remember player pianos? I get them from all across the country. Bought one in Nebraska for twenty-five bucks. Sold it in Sausalito to Sally Stanford for you wouldn’t guess how much.” He pulled the curtain closed. “Nossir. Seeing or not seeing would be all the same to me pumping at one of my players with both feet.”

Robert looked out the window. Down in the street the ticket left by the triumphant meter maid flapped in the ocean breeze sweeping down 18th Street to Castro where men, he never would have thought it, walked arm in arm. They were strangers, maybe dangerous strangers, but he recognized them all the same. “I should’ve locked my car.” He thought of the .22 caliber handgun stashed under the seat and he laughed because it’s impossible for someone on probation to get a permit for a handgun, but it’s no way impossible for that same person to get a handgun, especially when that person’s daddy dies and leaves it loaded in a bedroom drawer. “Damn,” he said.

Floyd moved to the window, wiping his hands. “That your Chevy?”

He admired the Chevrolet gleaming all red and white with hardly a speck of any road grime Robert had wiped off every time he stopped to gas up. He had bought it, restored and cherry, the day he turned sixteen, paying for it with insurance money his mom had given him as his share of his dad’s policy. Those had been the days! The draft had been lenient to neglectful. By 1973, the draft was carnivorous for red-blooded all-American boys. He told Louise Yavonovich, the gray-haired lady who ran the Green County Selective Service Board, that she couldn’t draft him because he was leaving for California.

“For school?” she asked.

“Yes, a school” he said, “for becoming a minister, a Quaker minister,” but his *yes* revealed itself for the lie it had always been before he had driven the first five hundred miles west. He knew he’d never sit in another school in all his life. He knew enough to get by in the world. And more. Even though he was no way, José, one of those spineless conscientious objectors, he vowed he’d never let anyone take him to some hellhole place like Vietnam, or even to prison for dodging the draft.

By no more than impetuous instinct, he had hopped into his car that day and worked out his plan about heading toward the coast, with its beaches and sex and drugs and rock ‘n’ roll, leaving fat old ugly Louise, no more the wiser, and a little the worse for wear, sitting on her cellulite in the sprawl of her manila alphabetical files. Even before the fierce rainstorm he had sat out in his car west of Omaha he had laughed. He was just another missing person out of millions. The old bitch would never catch up with him. He had no way of knowing that Louise had rather fancied him, and had let him make good his escape, because, in her heart she knew the war was a sad cause, and that Robert was all that was left of the Place family, his dad dead all those years, and his mother gone six weeks.

With Floyd looking down with him at his Chevy parked at 18th and Castro, he saw every mile of the 89,787.3 reflected back at him in the late sun of a thin Pacific afternoon. A wave of depression suddenly washed over him. It always did, right after he felt good about getting his own way. He wished to God he had been drafted. They’d have given him a uniform, an M-16 rifle, and his own chopper, and then turned him loose so he’d have had no choices to make about anything, but shoot it and screw it!

“Nice car,” Floyd said. “And nice arms. You got real nice muscular arms.”

“Thanks,” Robert said.

“You work out a little?”

“Naw. I’m just naturally strong.” Robert pulled up his sleeve

and flexed his right arm, cocking his fist near his face. "You want to feel my bicep?"

Floyd rubbed his hands together and cupped his right palm over Robert's peaked arm and his left under it.

"Is that okay or is that okay?" Robert said.

"It's better than okay."

"You can let go now."

"So," Floyd said, "whyn't you drive your car over to my place? We can work us out a deal. You do something for me. I'll 'restore' it for you."

"Restore it?" Robert said. "You said you weren't blind! Are you crazy? That car doesn't need any restoring." He climbed into Floyd's barber chair. "Just trim it."

Floyd fastened the striped barber cloth tight around Robert's neck. He folded the tissue strip down neatly over the cloth. Wrapped and swaddled, Robert felt his body become subject to the barber. His mother had spent the entirety of his boyhood diapering and scarfing and lacing him in and out of clothes. One fall she had taken him after school to find a winter coat. She had wanted to shop at Penney's, but he had fast-talked her into a better buy at the Army-Navy Outlet. She had thought of her husband, a strict man Robert did not know was not his father, who had said the boy's last year's parka would fit well enough this season. Robert thought only of the brown leather bombardier's jacket he and his buddies had stared at through the plate glass window. They had pledged to form their own squadron. His blood-buddy Stoney named himself command pilot. Robert was to be head bombardier.

"This is the size," Robert had said, handing the jacket to his mother.

"That's too large, I'm sure."

"The boy's probably right." The clerk, whose name tag read *Nigel*, had spoken archly over the perfect knot of his stylish silk tie. "He really ought to know. He came in here several days ago with a gang of boys who disturbed the manager no end. I remember your

boy especially. We caught him wearing this very jacket in the shoe department.”

“I was trying it on.”

“As a mother,” Nigel the clerk had said, “you ought to know. We don’t favor unattended young boys roving through our store.”

His mother had been cowed. “Thank you,” she had said. “I’ll talk to his father.”

Robert had ignored Nigel. He pulled the desired jacket down from the clerk’s tight hand. He slipped in his arms and pulled the zipper. “I like it.”

His mother had looked nervously at the clerk. “It does have windcuffs.” Then making an unconvincing counterattack, for a moment she stared the clerk in the eye. “Well, Robert,” she had said, “we’ll take it. That’s what we’ll do. We’ll buy it right now. No sense shopping around and then coming back right where we started.” She looked Nigel the clerk dead on. “I think this will be fine,” she had said. “Do you take charge cards? I’ll have to put it on my charge card.”

Back in the neighborhood, though the evening was warm, Robert wore the brown leather jacket out to show his buddies.

“Take it and shove it,” Stoney had said. “Who needs a crummy leather jacket.”

Robert Place could have taken them, maybe, one by one, but all of them together were too much. An older boy with light-blond down on his upper lip knocked Robert to the ground. Stoney picked up a piece of broken glass. He straddled the small of Robert’s back and cut up the shoulders of the new leather jacket.

Robert escaped and ran and ran until he could run nowhere but to his mother’s kitchen.

“I’m furious,” she said. “After all I went through for you with that pansy clerk! Just you wait till your father gets home!”

Robert’s father took one look at his bruised face and sent him to his room, shouting after him: “I’ll be up to take care of you, sissy-boy!”

Robert sprawled across the bed. His head throbbed from the kicking. Angry voices rose and fell in the kitchen below. He dozed

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in pain and missed the tread of his father's boots up the stairs. He started when his door opened and light from the hall thrust an awkward rectangle across his bed.

"Take off the jacket," his father had said. "It goes back."

Robert wrapped his arms tight around his chest. The leather was warm.

"Take it off."

Robert glared up at the big man silhouetted in the doorway. "No," he said. He folded his arms tighter, holding on to himself as he had never held on to anything in his life.

"Then I'll take it off for you." His father pulled at the jacket.

Robert would not surrender.

His father pulled off his belt. He was a short, powerful man whose veins rose in anger as he twisted the buckled end of his belt around his fist. "Don't tell me *no*, you goddam kid." He lashed out. "No goddam pussy-boy is going to tell me *no*." His belt struck across Robert's chest and arms. The boy rolled defensively to his stomach. His father saw the scuffs and tears on the jacket. "Sonuvabitch!" he said. In fury he tore Robert's corduroy slacks down below his slim haunches. His left hand shredded his son's worn cotton shorts. The blows from his belt welted across Robert's flesh, until finally, his father, hardened in rage, fell across him. His breath had the copper tobacco smell of Camels. "You tell your ma any of this," he whispered close into Robert's ear, "and next time I'll kill you. Make it look like an accident and kill you. Just hang you up by your neck in the attic and kill you. Just knock over a chair like you did it yourself, and kill you, you little sissy suicide, just like all faggot suicides. Send you straight to hell!"

"My old man was a real bulldog lady-killer," Robert bragged to the barber. "Everytime I come into a barber shop it reminds me of him. The way he used to smell once a month of all that Fitch Hair Tonic and rosewater. Once a month I could smell him coming."

"You don't say," Floyd said.

"He got himself killed in a fight on an oil rig in Louisiana."

"That a fact." Floyd combed and clipped at Robert's head. "Getting kind of thin on the top."

"Yeah," Robert said. "So it goes."

Floyd clipped at one small hair growing in Robert's left ear. "Do you suppose," he said, "that they put out their eyes when they're kids?"

"Who?" Robert looked up from the magazine in his lap.

"Those pianists on TV. The ones that can't see because it makes them play better."

"I don't know," Robert said. "Most people'll do most anything."

"Sometimes in India they put out a kid's eyes so he can hustle more from tourists. Hear the Mex do that too."

"Sounds to me," Robert said, "something like the boys who sang soprano for the pope. I got an article I tore out of some magazine at home on that. They'd take these altar boys and, you know, sort of spay them, operate on them, you know, down there, so they'd keep their real high voices. Their families were happy. Even the kids were happy. A kid with a real high voice could make a fortune in those days."

"That a fact," Floyd said. "Maybe then that's why they do it. Just so 'Mr. and Mrs. America' can sit at home in front of their 'T and V' and watch those black boys who can't even see play the piano." He reached for the talcum. "Dagos really did that stuff, huh?"

"Lots of people do lots of things that sound cruel to us but not to them. Anybody who's not an orphan knows that." On the shelf, between Bach and Liszt, Robert spied a fresh half-eaten deli sandwich. He shifted nervously in the chair.

"Hold still," Floyd said. He reached for the shaving cream. "I'm finishing up around your ears."

On the end-table next to the chromium-and-leatherette couch lay a second half-eaten sandwich. Blood sausage, the same color as the burgundy couch, hung bitten out of the white bread. In a Coke with no more than two swigs out of it, small bubbles fizzed noiselessly to the top.

"One of your customers left his lunch."

"Some customers leave stuff. Some take it. There's losers and there's claimers. You want it?" He arced his razor in a smooth crescent

above and behind Robert's ear. The downstroke scrape flourished into a fast, thrilling swoop down his neck.

"I feel like my life is in your hands," Robert said.

"It is," Floyd said.

"I don't know if I like that." Robert hated the nervous laugh in his own voice. "I only started back to barbers about two months ago. Before that it was nearly five years, being a hippie and all, I had hair down below my shoulders. Then something, nothing really, happened, and this guy, this judge, made me cut it. When I was a kid, barber shops always gave me a headache.

"So. Just a little scrape with the law," Floyd, W. C. Fields, said. He swooped his razor over and around Robert's other ear.

"I never liked anybody fussing over me that much. Besides, this barber shop my old man took me to had pin-up pictures of really big girls and I wasn't a very big boy. I mean now it wouldn't matter."

"The bigger the better, huh?" Floyd rinsed his razor. He knew enough to humor his customers ambiguously. He met all kinds at the corner of 18th and Castro. "Never kid a kidder," he said.

"I kid you not," Robert said.

For years Robert had been titanic cruising among icebergs of females in his hometown. At the age of four, innocent of all need for cover, in the driveway between their homes, he had compared himself to the lower half of a giggling little Judy Esterbank. One month later, a modern doctor, new to small-town practice, had sold his mother an introductory twofer on the latest big-city hygiene and had wheeled him through white double doors to pull out his tonsils and slice off his foreskin.

He never really trusted her ever again.

At the age of ten, playing Lewis and Clark, he had tripped over a tent peg catching the strapless halter of twelve-year-old Joyce Gillette. One flawless white breast popped pert and eager into view. He stared and she smiled. He stepped forward and she stepped back tucking herself away as neatly as she packed her camping equipment. He stared at the veil of her halter. She stepped to him and cupped his groin in her hand. It felt good. "I ought to kill you," she had said.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

But her hand felt warm through his jeans. Three years later she kissed him there. Repeatedly. Up and down.

“Indeed I do love the little ladies,” Robert said to Floyd. Screw Judy and screw Joyce. He hated himself for continuing the elaborate lie he had intended to leave back in the Midwest.

“And that’s why you moved to San Francisco.” Floyd dusted Robert’s neck with clouds of talcum. “That’s why everybody moves to San Francisco. They say it’s the weather. They say it’s the restaurants. But it’s the sex that brings them. San Francisco’s the place where when you go there you get laid.”

“I’m interested in that Coke,” Robert said. Brown air bubbles rose in slow chains up through the mocha cola.

“It’s second-hand and half-dead,” Floyd said. He handed Robert the bottle. “Just wipe the cooties off the top.”

Robert toasted Bach and Liszt. He wished Floyd’s magazines were better. Even a *National Geographic* with naked natives would help him swallow the dying Coke and the whole afternoon a lot easier. “You know,” Robert said to distract his train of thought, “that a ’57 Chevy is the best car GM ever put out. That’s why I got it. That’s why I still drive it.”

“That a fact,” Floyd said. He unwrapped Robert’s neck, took two swipes with the talcum brush, and flapped the green-striped cloth with a whipcrack. “Being’s we’re finished, let me show you something.”

Robert remained seated in Floyd’s chair. Now maybe he would find what it was that had caused him to pull the Chevy to the curb, forget his meter, and endure a haircut and a Coca-Cola he had not desired. Floyd disappeared into the piano repair room. Two single swipes zithered across a dusty piano harp behind the Fifties’ floral-print curtain.

Robert waited for Floyd as he had waited beside his mother’s hospital bed. Her name was Isabel and his father always kidded her, saying like it was the first time, “Is a bell necessary on a bicycle? Is a bell necessary at all?” And she always laughed even though she hated him making fun of her.

For months she had lain wasting away with cancer in the depths of white sheets. He looked down at her remembering how all through his youth she had sized him up and encouraged him saying, "At least you're tall." She warned him that no girl likes a short man. "Short men," she had said, "are impossible to deal with." She should have known. Robert's father was short. But Robert had felt tall, standing next to her shrinking form. For an hour at the beginning of her last week, he had stood by her bed with the plastic tube of the intravenous fluid pinched tight between his thumb and forefinger. Mercy or no mercy, he had hoped to kill her, but his hand had cramped even before the nurse almost caught him.

In Floyd's piano room a large cardboard box grated heavily across the gritty floor. Robert heard Floyd say, "Ah, there it is."

"I suppose they do," Robert called to Floyd who was dragging the huge box into the shop itself.

"You suppose who does what?" Floyd panted with the exertion, but his face was triumphant.

"I suppose they do put out their own kids' eyes." Robert had read more than he even wanted hanging out in libraries, slicing pages out of magazines. "There's all those operas about Greek plays where the kids get turned into mincemeat. Some parents kill their young. Maybe they're no more cruel than nature is cruel. People wouldn't pay good money to go see that sort of thing if they weren't naturally interested."

Floyd began to dig into his box. "Now, don't you laugh at me," Floyd said. He was matter-of-fact. "I have these treasures I don't share with everyone."

"I understand," Robert said. But he did not understand as much as he thought he did, and he was about to understand a whole lot more.

The box was neatly packed with magazines, picture albums, and loose photos of the kind most adult men keep to themselves. At first glance, Robert Place knew, almost faster in his groin than his head, what kind of illustrations these were. They were the kind Robert had tried all his life to avoid, but could not. They were the kind who

called to him, from the flat pages of magazines, to breathe into them his life. They were seductive, attractive, flowers of evil. They were, somehow, an occasion of sin. They were young men more stripped than dressed who posed as sailors and athletes and construction workers. They were the kind of pictures of men Robert had sliced from certain physique atlases in St. Louis bookstores to take home to lay with him on his bed, until he blacked out, saying, "Whoever you are, I want to spend eternity with you," waking up as if coming to, jumping from his bed, furiously destroying the evidence of his love for this kind of thing. He would crush the sticky pictures into tiny paper balls and burn them and flush their ashes down the toilet. They were bad boys and worse men and he was not one of them.

"Take a look at this," Floyd said. He offered a magazine to Robert.

"Very nice," Robert said. He fanned the pages from the back cover forward and made bits and pieces of bodies flip in crazy motion from the last page to the first. Couples began in orgasm and ended in foreplay.

"You know," Floyd said, "when it comes right down to it, your Chevy and my pianos show up for what they aren't." He scooped up a stack of magazines.

"What do you mean?" Robert asked.

"It's a lie what everyone says. That there's other things in life besides sex and money. Your car and my pianos aren't a hill of beans when it comes to getting laid. Down there at that intersection it's all bodies and sex. You could have the hottest car in town, and I could have the grandest grand piano, but unless you have a face and a body, which you at your age certainly do, and unless I have some extra cash, which at my age I have a little, no one's going to touch us."

Robert studied Floyd's pinched face. "What about love?"

"What's love got to do with it?"

"Hell if I know," Robert said. "I don't even care. I never loved anybody and nobody ever loved me. I'm not even looking for love. I got no expectations except of the worst kind."

"I'm a realist," Floyd said. "The only thing to be in life is

twenty-one. Forever. After that, it's all hustlers. Everyone who comes through my door is selling something. Don't ever grow old."

"I've always looked young for my age," Robert said.

"So you don't know yet what I'm talking about."

"Yes I do."

"The devil you say!"

Floyd thrust a dozen magazines named *Young Adonis* and *Mars* and *Physique Pictorial* at Robert who immediately judged their covers. They made him covetous. He wanted three or four of the magazines, contents sight unseen.

"I'd really like one of these," he said, holding a copy of *Tomorrow's Man*.

"Money can't buy them. Some of these I've had for fifteen or sixteen years. When I page through them, it's like with dear friends. When I'm eighty, they'll still be the same age, the same dear friends, and I'll still have them and they'll be a comfort."

"They're a comfort right now," Robert said. As he paged the magazines, he felt his spirit rise inside him. He was in the room but he was not part of the room. He sat between the mirrors. The men in the magazines sucked his very essence into themselves, coming alive to him, whispering secret words he could not make out. He gasped for breath like a man being dragged down a drain.

Floyd pulled the yellow shade down over the glass door. Two years before he had painted in orange hippie Day-Glo the words SORRY CLOSED on the shade, and the paint had not faded at all. He had some rising hope that his strange customer was hinting, the way first-timers so often hint, that he wanted to become dear friends with him.

Robert, in fact, sat helpless in Floyd's barber chair. He made small gurgling noises as he turned the pages. Back in Canterbury, he had only imagined what he would find out west. But he had not found it; it had found him. His hand clutched his throat as his breath finally, totally, slid out of him. He suddenly saw how life was going to be with him. Really be with him. Really in control of him. The thought took root like mandrake in his heart. He had never considered until

that minute that everything he was about, had always been about, had masked the slow flowering fact that he was not different from all those men and boys cruising arm in arm in the street below. The same wild lemming call that had summoned them from everywhere had summoned him from the south-midlands to them, to this city, to this very intersection, to this catbird seat in Floyd's Barber Shop looking down on something that was totally new to him, but also totally known.

He was not sure he liked the convergence.

What the fuck was Rainbow County?

The summer before, when he had fled south on a trial-run from Canterbury to St. Louis, Cleo Walker, with her brilly bush of flaming red hair, had walked right up and taken control of him. She had spied him sitting at a small table in an outdoor cafe in Gaslight Square and after she had scooped him up, she stripped him down in her sun-splashed studio on Delmar Avenue near Forest Park. He had not felt awkward standing nude before her. For years, naked exposure had been his urge, so he had slipped, a true exhibitionist, easy and erect from his clothes. Without meaning his words, he apologized for his thing, his *thing*, standing at attention. Cleo refused to dignify his apology with the benefit of a real reply, so he had stepped toward her, reaching for her breasts. That was the script, wasn't it? But Cleo had refused his advance for reasons he could not fathom. Wasn't painting only a high-toned excuse for getting naked and looking at nudes?

"I want," he stammered low, "I want...I want..."

"Don't reach for something," Cleo said, "you don't know you want."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're a virgin, aren't you?"

He said nothing.

"I'm not a virgin," she said. "So I know things."

"You mean it shows?" he said. "I'm a book with blank pages?"

"You're a book with no pages," she said.

"I like the way you talk."

"Fuck!" Cleo said the word he had never heard a woman say.

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

"You have an excellent body and an interesting face. You have a sexual energy I don't care to release. I only want to paint you."

He was crestfallen. "You can see faces like mine hanging in the post office."

She felt a sudden sorrow for him. "Look, *Roberto, caro Roberto*, there's nothing wrong with you. I'm a painter. I want to paint you. I don't want to have sex with you."

Yet, in Cleo's studio, he stood insistent, his pouting mouth silent, his lower part as straight and to the point as a declarative sentence. "I'm sorry," he apologized again, this time half-meaning it. "It doesn't have anything to do with you."

"I didn't think so," she said.

"This always happens when I take off my clothes, or think about taking off my clothes."

"It's no big deal," Cleo said. "I'm a painter. I look at you. I don't see your precious dick. I see light. I see shadow."

"Light and shadow," Robert said. He tried to concentrate on a pile of littered art magazines; but even they, so far across the studio, could not slow the excited flow of his blood. He had never shown himself naked to anyone, and he was embarrassed at how much he liked it.

Cleo ignored his excitement. She poured him a small glass of blood-red wine, and squeezed white and tan and browns across her glass palette. "I'm in my sepia period," she laughed. "I'm glad I'm no devotee of Freud, who I wish had been otherwise employed. Who said that?"

"Mrs. Freud?"

"Lean against the wall, Robert. Relax. Move your head to the left. Fine. Hold it. Just relax. I'm brushing in your basic line today. Later on I'll work in the tension."

He had leaned motionless against the doorway and then, finally, leaned against her for the next two months, because, one rainy August afternoon, when she had lost the light, and poured them both some more wine, she had said, "When I told you I didn't want to

have sex with you, you silly goose, I didn't mean I didn't want to fuck you. At least once."

Go figure, he thought.

Their love-making confused him. All love-making confused him.

"Was I okay?" he asked. He had not been able to keep from asking that question even he knew was ridiculous.

"Who were you thinking about?" Cleo asked.

"You," he said.

"Liar!"

He could have cheerfully killed her. She had him pegged. She polarized him the way all women did. She was all women. He knew he was supposed to desire them, but he had no feeling for why. They filled him with an empty want they could not slake. They took his coloration and line the way Cleo's sidelong look, her brush-hand resting on her mahlstick, had day-by-day transferred his face from his head to her canvas. He was the primitive and she was the sorceress capturing his spirit. Transfixed, he could not move from the pose into which she had enchanted him. His naked body trembled visibly.

"Get it together," Cleo had said. "Take a break."

She handed him a book of prints and text. Absently he leafed through page after page of what seemed to be the *Life and Hard Times of Andrew Wyeth*. Not one of the reproductions tempted him to pull his single-edge razor blade from his wallet and start slicing.

"That's why I like to paint you," Cleo said.

"Why?"

"Your face hides nothing. You're bored. You're light years away. From here. From me. From everybody."

"I don't care for cartooning." He tossed the Wyeth book to the floor and resumed his pose.

Cleo strode across the studio and retrieved the book. "Wyeth isn't exactly Norman Rockwell," she said.

"Same school." Robert hated the nasty sound in his voice, but he didn't care.

"What would you know about art anyway," Cleo said. "It's about order. You're all chaos."

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

"Is that so? I know plenty. I've read articles."

"So don't throw Wyeth down. Read it," Cleo said. She shoved the book hard against his naked belly. "And you better not tear a goddam page out of it."

"I confess my secrets and you refuse to forgive me?"

"Fuck you and your sins." She said it flatly and marched back to her life-size canvas. "Tilt your head to the left."

Robert obeyed. The Wyeth book hung in his right hand. It felt cool against his thigh. Holding his pose, he raised it and fanned once more through the pages. Print after print of paint-brushed faces peopled Wyeth's decaying afternoons. One painting, an immense field, contained a solitary male figure. Everything was brown and dead and spun out of sorrow. Wyeth had painted it the winter of his own father's death. The editor's note explained the painting as an exorcism of sadness. Robert stirred slightly from his pose. He caught the sense of the painting, but he could hardly see the face of the man in the field. Somehow Wyeth had lost his own face along with the lost face of his father. The canvas was full of nothing so much as his own grief.

Deep inside Robert that thin tensile strand of generations snapped. In a moment of his own infinite sadness he realized that he too had lost the face of his father. In the stead of the man who pretended to sire him, and had really abused him, stood only shadow images and half-remembered sounds of the sweet times: the wet-lipped kiss from that unshaved face in the dark over his bed. It was all reduced to that: the memory of his father, home from the late shift, leaning over to kiss him goodnight. As if he were again half-asleep in his little boy's sleep, Robert could feel his father's ghostly kiss on his face. He could not forget his father's love, but he could not forgive that one night of his father's drunkenness.

Robert realized that he had been losing everything despite his desperate collecting of folders of stolen clippings and magazines purloined from under the eyes of cheery dental receptionists. In the glory days of the large magazines, he had tried to save the images of the week by swallowing up the sleeves of his school jacket whole issues of

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

Look and Life. Finally, when he had been caught with his single-edge razor blade in the Green County Public Library, his mother had said, "I hope you're satisfied. You now owe me a hundred dollars more." Her face looked screwed with pain that he thought was no more than her embarrassment at his conviction. "Bobby, Bobby, Bobby. What do you expect me to live on? When will you ever grow up and settle down?" Six months later, she was dead and he had fled to San Francisco. He was fed up to his eyeballs with personal relationships. He had a need for a city of strangers.

Floyd, like most barbers, could hold a one-sided conversation with a corpse and was finishing up his long monologue when Robert remembered where he was. "Old Sammy Davis, Jr.," Floyd said, "only got one of his eyes put out. That's because his folks wanted him to dance. Be kind of hard to poke out both your eyes and dance too. Might fall off the stage. But before long, you'll see, someone'll show up and try it big as life on network TV." He handed Robert another magazine.

"And they'll be tapping out something in code, those dancers will." Robert took the magazine and laid his line on Floyd. "That blind guy you say'll be dancing on CBS will be tapping out in code something everybody ought to hear. Something like SOS." Robert considered his words. "Just like SOS," he repeated, and he wanted to cry out, not for help, but for something else, "because we're all in danger and we have to save our souls."

"That a fact," Floyd said. He passed a perplexed look up through his thick glasses. Should he make his move? Was this guy wanting it, or was he all talk and no action? Were the magazines, dragged out to arouse him, missing their mark?

"But not everyone will understand it." Robert slowly turned the pages of the last magazine.

"Maybe you shouldn't bother trying to understand what you do. Just do it," Floyd insinuated.

Robert looked up straight into Floyd's eyes through his thick glasses. "I have a gun," he announced. "A .22 caliber handgun."

"You don't say." Floyd backed off.

"Does that make you scared of me?"

"Do you have it on you?"

"No."

"Then you don't scare me. Your gun scares me. I don't like guns."

"Sometimes you have to scare people. Terror's the only thing they respect. If you scare them, you get their undivided attention."

"Whyn't you finish up," Floyd was changing the subject, "reading that magazine."

"Sure," Robert said. "So far I like it fine. It's your best one yet."

Floyd took a last few snips here and there around Robert's ears, then tried to gentle him down, and sidle on in, seductively rubbing Robert's neck with an electric massager. He was surprised to find very little tension in Robert's neck and shoulders. "You're a cool customer," he said, "as cool as a cucumber."

Suddenly, Robert sat bolt upright in Floyd's barber chair. He held it in his hands: a black-and-white photograph on an unnumbered magazine page. It was the picture he had spent his life looking for: magazines in one hand, razor blade in the other. The photo was of a man seated alone. On either side of the photo were separate single shots of athletic women. The one on the left held a golf club. She was set to putt and her breasts hung down between her stiffened arms. The naked woman on the right held a jaunty tennis racquet. But it was the naked athlete in the middle photo who mesmerized him as much as if he'd found a snapshot of his real father, the original missing person, whom he had never seen.

He was seated, stretched slightly back straddling a locker-room bench. He was a little older than Robert, and bigger, very blond, with a fully developed chest over his washboard abdomen. His thick wrists connected his athlete's hands to his powerful arms. He wore football pads across his broad shoulders, and a football helmet, and, between his casually spread legs, he was erect. His eyes looked directly from the helmet into the camera and directly out of the page into Robert's face. The face-guard on the helmet covered his mouth. No New Testament word of mercy could spring from those Old Testament lips that Robert knew were set, mean and hard and without

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HOW TO LEGALLY QUOTE FROM THIS BOOK

mercy. He looked directly out at Robert. He was erect and Robert knew he faced the powerful, inevitable Face of God.

"I must," he said to Floyd, "have this." He rose out of the barber chair. "Ask any amount, anything. Only let me buy this from you."

Floyd thought to press the trade for sex, but the young man seemed too volatile. Besides, a quick flash of looking down the barrel of a handgun made him think better of it. "That one you can have," he said.

"I can't just take it. I learned my lesson about that the hard way."

"Then trade me something, anything," Floyd said. "I won't take your money." He stared into Robert's ecstatic wild eyes and suddenly, more than he wanted him, he wanted him gone.

"I don't have anything," Robert said.

Floyd laughed nervously at him. "Everybody's got something."

Robert mentally searched his car. He had his clothes. He had the loaded handgun. "Nothing," he said.

In the room, he seemed volatile.

In the mirrors, he looked vulnerable.

Floyd, fighting his rising lust, chided himself for being a cautious old fool. He threw risk against the wind. The boy was right. Danger was aphrodisiac. He put his hand on Robert's knee and slowly smoothed his palm up the inside of his thigh.

"Not that!" Robert watched the hand slowly advance up his leg like a giant spider. "Not that!" Robert said.

Floyd's heart jumped with a rush of adrenaline. "Then what?" Floyd stood straight up. "You said I could have anything for the picture."

"Not that. Not here. Not now. Not you."

"See what I told you about your car and my pianos?" Floyd worked the only logic he knew in situations like this. "What if I pay you?"

"For what?"

He thought to say for sex, but he said, "To take the picture. I'll give you money to take the picture," Floyd said, "and then you can leave."

“Don’t go inverting everything.”

Invert? Invert. Floyd had psychology books from twenty years before when *invert* meant only one thing.

“Then take the picture for godsake and get a move on.”

“I told you, man! I can’t take it for nothing.”

“As far as I’m concerned, you can,” Floyd said. “This is getting old. I want to close up shop.”

“Wait,” Robert said. “I got it.” He pulled out his wallet and reached inside. He handed the folded-up paper to Floyd.

“What’s this?” Floyd asked. “The number of your Swiss bank account?”

“No, you asshole,” Robert said. “It’s the combination to my gym locker.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Go on. Read it!”

Floyd unfolded the smudged slip of paper. “I need my reading glasses.”

Robert stared down at the picture of the blond athlete, but he barked his order at Floyd, “Read it.”

Floyd hooked his half-lens bifocals over his ears and read the word “Postmark.”

“That’s the title,” Robert said. “It’s a poem. A short poem.”

“Good,” Floyd said. “Short and sweet.” The afternoon had not gone the seductive way he had hoped and he regretted missing lunch as much as he missed lunching on Robert. “I have low blood sugar.”

“Read it, please. No one else has ever seen it. I wrote it on my way out here. To send back home. To everyone back home.”

“Postmark,” Floyd read. “Dear God: You created me, then you hated me....Dear Folks: You conceived me, then deceived me.... Dear Teacher: You taught me, then you fought me....Dear Boss: You hired me, then you fired me....Dear Lover: You painted me, then you tainted me....Dear Death: You embraced me, then erased me.”

“Well?” Robert asked.

“It’s not...bad.”

“Not bad?”

"It's pretty good."

"You think so?"

"Yeah," Floyd said. "I like it like really a whole lot."

"Good," Robert said. "We just made a trade. My poem for your photograph. Strange, isn't it? I came in here not knowing why I came in here. I didn't want a haircut and you cut my hair. I got a parking ticket. You handed me a magazine and I found a picture of the face that's always been in the back of my head."

"What's that?" Floyd said.

"Never you mind. You wouldn't understand."

"That's three bucks for the trim," Floyd said.

"Here's four," Robert said. "Keep the change."

"Don't insult me," Floyd said. "You never tip the owner."

"I do."

"Suit yourself."

"I'm leaving," Robert said. "It's been real."

Floyd slipped full into his W. C. Fields routine. "Never give a sucker an even break. Here's your hat. What's your hurry? Don't let the door hit you on your way out."

"You calling me a sucker?"

"No," Floyd said. "Take it easy. Where you headed?"

"To the beach," Robert said. "Land's end at Land's End." He walked to Floyd's cash register counter.

"It's been a slow day moneywise," Floyd said nervously.

"Hasn't exactly been a stampede, I'd say." Robert pulled the single-edge razor blade from his wallet and expertly sliced the magazine page so that the athletic girls disappeared, leaving only the 5x7 of the handsome football player. "Tonight's the full moon and the summer solstice. I've never seen the Pacific. I'm taking this picture and I'm going to watch the sunset and the moonrise."

"You want maybe instead to use my john?" Floyd slipped the four bills directly into his white nylon pocket.

"What for?"

"What all little boys use it for when they've stolen daddy's dirty magazines."

"I never did anything like that."

"No one ever does, according to them, when it's always the thing they do most," Floyd said. "Do you have anyplace to stay for the night?"

"What's it to you?"

"Nothing," Floyd backed off. He slept single in a double bed. "It's nothing to me."

"I'm going to the ocean. I'll roll up my jeans and I'll walk in the surf and I'll listen."

"To what?"

Robert held up the photograph. "To him," he said.

"To him?"

"To him. I'm old enough to see if he'll ever speak to me."

Floyd wanted to roll his strained eyes back in his head. All these people, all these immigrants to San Francisco were getting stranger than strange. "So," he said. "What if he doesn't speak to you."

"He'll speak to me alright."

"But what if he doesn't?"

"Either way it makes no difference since he never has anyway."

"So if it doesn't make any difference, why you so hot to go?"

"Because that picture is the Face of God."

Floyd stopped W. C. Fields from cackling: "The Face of God. You don't say." He didn't say it; instead he said: "You got to be kidding."

"He'll tell me, if he wants to, everything I need to know."

"What's that?"

"Ways to keep me out of hell. Ways to get me into heaven."

"What ways?"

"Ways you could sell like Salvation Coupons the night before Judgment Day. Ways those men and boys down in the street probably know. Old ways. Ancient ways. Ways so secret only a few men, and maybe a few women, know them. But there's more of them out here that know than back home, or anywhere else ever before in one place on this whole earth, right here, I figure, in your Rainbow County. They know the ways. I know they know the ways."

"You mean sex," Floyd said.

“Sex?” Robert said. “Sure, why not? Sex must be one of the saving ways, but the way has to be right. Just right. Or else sex is just like everyone says, the way to damnation.” He bored his stare hard through Floyd’s thick glasses. “And guess what else?”

Floyd guessed what else was he had himself another one of those religious sex nuts trying to break out of his shell. He wanted to take a step back, but he was too proud to show Robert any fear; he remembered Robert bragging that terror was the only thing most people respected once it got their attention.

“Besides sex,” Robert said, “guess what else.”

“I can’t guess.”

“Damage.”

“Damage?”

“Just a little damage.”

“Why damage?” Floyd said. “What damage? What to? Who to?”

“To you,” Robert said. “To me. To everybody.”

“What kind of damage?”

“Big damages,” Robert said, “and little damages.”

“I could call the police.”

“By the time they got here, my razor blade could cut your face. I could make you blind so you could go on TV. By the time they got here, I could cut my throat. Slice right through my jugular. None of it would make any difference to anybody but you. I don’t care. I might die or I might go to jail, but you’d still be blind, trying to cut hair and play your pianos.”

“I get the picture,” Floyd said.

“No,” Robert said. “I got the picture.” He held the photograph up and out at arm’s length. “He’ll tell me what to do. In my life I know life does damage to you.” He looked down at the swarming men in the street. He had his looks. He had his car. He had his gun. “So I figure I might as well inflict a little of the damage myself.”

“I never quite thought of life that way.”

“Well, you sure are the slow one. Everybody else thinks so. Doesn’t that explain the evil that people do to themselves, smoking and drinking and whoring and taking drugs and driving fast and

fighting and killing and raping and molesting, because that's the only way they can make the world that damages them everyday make any sense is if they do some of the damage themselves. Everybody but a fool knows when you can't beat it, you join it."

"You expect him, the guy in the picture..."

"God."

"...God...to speak to you and tell you what to do?"

"I expect he'll tell me if I should do any damage for him and if I should, to who. Maybe to you. Maybe to me. Maybe to anybody he tells me to. Nobody ever went to hell for that." Robert smiled and took a step forward. "Take it easy, Floyd. Relax."

Floyd pasted a smile on his face but his heart was racing.

"See what I mean about a little scare getting your attention?" Robert broke into guffaws of snorting laughter.

"You were putting me on?"

"I bet I had you so scared you had a bone on."

"You were putting me on!"

"If you think so, Floyd, ol' buddy! You should've seen your face, a hundred times over, scared sure as hell, curving off in those mirrors, which, by the way, could stand a bit of washing. Shoot, I was just kidding you, wasn't I? 'Don't kid a kidder,' you told me, but I did and you took it hook, line, and sinker. You wait awhile and you'll get to know I got a real killer sense of humor."

"Never mention killing."

"Hey!" Robert said. "That's a figure of speech. Nothing is what it seems. It's all mirrors. One thing's always meaning some other thing besides what a person thinks it means. You know that, being a barber, standing between your mirrors in all those parallel universes. I'm not dumb, you know. I've spent most of my life in recent years reading all kinds of the strangest things so the inside of my head's like an encyclopedia. My second-cousin, Ollie Thomas, who's madam librarian back home told me so."

"Perhaps you have," Floyd said, "low blood sugar. I myself often experience strange mood swings."

“Naw. My blood’s fine and my sugar’s better.” Robert winked the way his father always winked. “If you catch my drift.”

“Sounds like,” Floyd pulled his ear, charading, working Robert toward the door, “like we’ve circled back to sex.”

“Have you noticed that too? How everything sooner or later always comes back around to sex?”

“You are sure going to have a good time down there on 18th and Castro,” Floyd said. “That intersection is laying on its back with its legs in the air just waiting for you.”

“I ain’t done it.” Robert’s face reddened with anger. “I told you I ain’t done it! I ain’t never done it when it was my will. But when I’m good and ready, I just might, and I just might be the best at it.”

Something, some *thing*, in the room ground suddenly to a halt between them.

“What?”

It could only be one thing. Floyd wished he’d carried a little hand fan, something petite and operatic from the eighteenth century, to hide the smirk on his lips.

“I ain’t done it. Not yet.”

“Done what?” Floyd was intent on forcing Robert to say it. I love it, Floyd thought, all this talk and no action has been the braggadocio of a male virgin with very blue balls. “Done what?”

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

“Robert, I bet no one could ever make you do anything.”

“My mother always said that.” Robert’s eyes kind of crossed in his head.

“You haven’t done what?”

“I haven’t had sex. Okay? So laugh.”

“And risk another wrinkle? Never. My God, as it is, look at my face. If wrinkles hurt, I’d be screaming.”

“I’m serious, goddam it. I haven’t had sex. Not really. Not ever. Not unless you count the time I didn’t want to, and the time I thought I had to, but I never count those two times and I never talk about them.”

"Some experiences are too painful to recall," Floyd said, "but I can't recall any."

"Shut the judas-priest up. I'm not dumb. I can do sex. I know what goes on out there on those streets. I told you I've read and forgot more stuff than you ever even thought of." He held up the picture of the blond athlete. "I know what he's going to tell me, but I want to hear it from his own lips, me lying in the dunes at twilight feeling the warm breeze from the ocean."

"This is summer in Northern California," Floyd said. "What warm breeze? You'll die of exposure."

"He'll tell me. And they'll tell me."

"Who?"

"The fellows down there in that intersection. One at a time. And I'll listen. One secret at a time. That's how to make sense of it. One after another of the men who know the secret ways. One after the other. They'll all whisper to me and when I've heard them all, I'll know all about life and damage and death and the ways to stay out of hell."

"Are you sure, really sure, that's what he wants?"

"I don't know what he wants. That's why I'm taking his face with me to the beach. So maybe he will talk to me first the way the others will talk to me later."

"Maybe you should forget him and them and figure out what you want."

"I just want one SOB and one SOS one right after the other. I want some of the pleasure of all of the danger if I'm going to suffer the damage anyway."

"You're talking crazy," Floyd said. "You're going to fit right in with all the fruits and flakes. You're a nut."

"No, I ain't," Robert Place said, "but so what if I am?" He held up the picture like a holy icon. "Only he can tell me."

"Sure," Floyd said, "you've got that pornographic picture."

"It's the Face of God!"

"I've seen London," Floyd, W. C. Fields, said, "and I've seen France. I've seen the queen in her underpants."

“Are you making fun of me?” Robert said.

“I wouldn’t dare make fun of you,” Floyd said. “My blood sugar’s too low to keep this up. My prescription for you is to get laid twice before bedtime, and don’t call me in the morning.”

“What does all that mean? Everything means something.”

“It means,” Floyd said, “you’ve come to the right place. It means, Welcome to San Francisco. Welcome to Rainbow County.”

“That’s better,” Robert Place said. “I like that attitude much better.”

“Have you ever thought,” Floyd said, raising his SORRY CLOSED shade and opening the door, “about maybe swallowing something you can buy on the street to lay yourself back some, about letting your hair grow long again?”

“Why, Floyd,” Robert said, halfway down to the first landing, “You surprise me. I would never have figured you to be one to turn away business. I’m going out and I’m staying out...”

“You’re coming out.”

“...until he talks to me. So you’ll see me again. A real regular. Plan on it. I intend to show your Rainbow County a thing or two. I intend to stay a close-cropped soldier until all of them down there in that intersection talk to me, and you’re going to keep me ready for him and for them, barbered and groomed like I just stepped out of a bandbox.”