



"Highsmith writes the verbal equivalent of a drug—easy to consume, darkly euphoric, totally addictive. . . . She belongs in the moody company of Dostoevsky or Angela Carter."

—*TIME OUT*

DEEP
WATER
PATRICIA HIGHSMITH

AUTHOR OF MERMAIDS ON THE GOLF COURSE

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Deep Water

Patricia Highsmith



W. W. Norton & Company
New York London

To E.B.H. and Tina

“There is no better dodge than one’s own character, because no one believes in it.”

–*Pyotr Stepanovitch* in *Dostoyevsky’s*

THE POSSESSED

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Vic didn't dance, but not for the reasons that most men who don't dance give to themselves. He didn't dance simply because his wife liked to dance. His rationalization of his attitude was a flimsy one and didn't fool him for a minute, though it crossed his mind every time he saw Melinda dancing. She was insufferably silly when she danced. She made dancing embarrassing.

He was aware that Melinda twirled into his line of vision and out again, but barely aware, he thought, and it was only his familiarity with every physical detail of her that had made him realize that it was she at all. Calmly he raised his glass of Scotch and water and sipped it.

He sat slouched, with a neutral expression on his face, on the upholstered bench that curved around the Mellers' newel post, staring at the changing pattern of the dancers and thinking that when he went home tonight he would take a look at his herb boxes in the garage and see if the foxgloves were up. He was growing several kinds of herbs now, repressing their growth by depriving them of half the normal sunlight and water with a view to intensifying their flavor. Every afternoon he set the boxes out to the sun at one o'clock, when he came home for lunch, and put them back into the garage at three, when he returned to his printing plant.

Victor Van Allen was thirty-six years old, of a little less than medium height, inclined to a general firm rotundity rather than fat, and he had thick, crisp brown eyebrows that stood out over innocent blue eyes. His brown hair was straight, closely cut, and like his eyebrows, thick and tenacious. His mouth was middle-sized, firm, and usually drawn down at the right corner with a lopsided determination or with humor, depending on how one cared to take it. It was his mouth that made his face ambiguous—for one could read a bitterness in it, too—because his blue eyes, wide, intelligent, and unsurprising, gave no clue as to what he was thinking or feeling.

In the last moments the noise had increased a decibel or so and the dancing had become more abandoned in response to the pulsing Latin music that had begun to play. The noise offended his ears and still he sat, though he knew he could have wandered down the hall to his host's study and browsed among the books there if he had cared to. He had had enough to drink to set up a faint, rhythmic buzzing in his ears, not entirely unpleasant. Perhaps the thing to do at a party, or at any gathering where liquor was available, was to match your drinking with the augmenting noise. Shut the noise out with your own noise. You could set up a little din of merry voices right inside your head. It would ease a great many things. Be never quite sober, never quite drunk. *Dum non sobrius, tamen non ebrius.* A fine epitaph for him, but unfortunately not true, he thought. The plain, dull fact was that most of the time he preferred to be alert.

Involuntarily his eyes focused on the suddenly organizing pattern: a conga line. And involuntarily he found Melinda, smiling a gay catch-me-if-you-can smile over her shoulder, and the man over her shoulder—way over it and practically in her hair, in fact—was Joel Nash. Vic sighed and sipped his drink. For a man who had been up dancing until three last night, and until five the night before, Mr. Nash was doing very well.

Vic started, feeling a hand on his left sleeve, but it was only old Mrs. Podnansky leaning toward him. He had almost forgotten she was there.

"I can't thank you enough, Vic. You really won't mind picking it up yourself?" She had asked him

the same thing five or ten minutes ago.

“Of course not,” Vic said, smiling, standing up as she got up. “I’ll drop around tomorrow at about quarter to one.”

Just then Melinda leaned toward him, across Mr. Nash’s arm, and said almost in Mrs. Podnansky’s face, though she looked at Vic, “Fuddy-duddy! Why don’t you dance?” and Vic saw Mrs. Podnansky jump and recover with a smile before she moved away.

Mr. Nash gave Vic a happy, slightly tipsy smile as he danced off with Melinda. And what kind of smile would you call that? Vic wondered. Comradely. That was the word. That was what Joel Nash had intended it to be. Vic deliberately took his eyes from Joel, though he had been on a certain train of thought that had to do with his face. It wasn’t his manner—hypocritical, half-embarrassed, half-assured—that irritated him so much as his face. That boyish roundness of the cheeks and of the forehead, the prettily waving light-brown hair, those regular features that women who liked him would describe as not *too* regular. Most women would call him handsome, Vic supposed. Vic remembered Mr. Nash looking up at him from the sofa as he handed him his empty glass for the sixth or eighth time last night, as if he were ashamed to be accepting another drink, ashamed to be staying fifteen minutes longer, and yet a certain brash insolence had predominated in his face. Up to now, Vic thought Melinda’s boyfriends had at least had more brains or less insolence. Joel Nash wouldn’t be in the neighborhood forever, though. He was a salesman for the Furness-Klein Chemical Company of Wesley, Massachusetts, up for a few weeks of briefing on the company’s new products, he had said. If he had been going to make a home in Wesley or Little Wesley, Vic had no doubt that he would take Ralph Gosden’s place, regardless of how bored Melinda became with him or what a fluke he turned out to be in other respects, because Melinda was never able to resist what she thought was a handsome face. Joel would be more handsome than Ralph in Melinda’s opinion.

Vic looked up and saw Horace Meller standing beside him. “Hi there, Horace. Looking for a seat?”

“No, thanks.” Horace was a slight, graying man of middle height with a narrow sensitive face and somewhat bushy black mustache. His mouth under the mustache wore the polite smile of a nervous host. Horace was always nervous, though the party was going as well as any host could have wished. “What’s happening at the plant, Vic?”

“Getting Xenophon ready,” Vic replied. In the din they could not talk very well. “Why don’t you drop around some evening?” Vic meant at the printing plant. He was always there until seven, and he left himself after five, because Stephen and Carlyle went home at five.

“All right, I will,” Horace said. “Is your drink all right?”

Vic nodded that it was.

“I’ll be seeing you,” Horace said, moving off.

Vic felt a void as soon as he had left. An awkwardness. Something unsaid, and Vic knew what it was: Horace had tactfully refrained from mentioning Mr. Joel Nash. Hadn’t said Joel was nice, or welcome, or asked anything about him, or bothered with any of the banalities. Melinda had maneuvered Joel’s invitation to the party. Vic had heard her on the telephone with Mary Meller the day before yesterday: “. . . Well, not exactly a guest of ours, but we feel responsible for him because he doesn’t know many people in town . . . Oh, thanks, Mary! I didn’t think you’d mind having an extra man, and such a handsome one, too . . .” As if anyone could pry Melinda away from him with a crowbar. One more week, Vic thought. Seven more nights exactly. Mr. Nash was leaving on the first, Sunday.

Joel Nash materialized, looming unsteadily in his broadshouldered white jacket, bringing his glass. “Good evening, Mr. Van Allen,” Joel said with a mock formality and plopped himself down when

Mrs. Podnansky had been sitting. "How're you tonight?"

"Oh, as usual," Vic said, smiling.

"There's two things I wanted to say to you," Joel said with sudden enthusiasm, as if he had at the very moment thought of them. "One is I've been asked to stay a couple of weeks longer here—by my company—so I hope I can repay *both* of you for the abundant hospitality you've shown me in the last few weeks and—" Joel laughed in a boyish way, ducking his head.

Melinda had a genius for finding people like Joel Nash, Vic thought. Little marriages of true mind. "And the second?"

"The second—Well, the second is, I want to say what a brick I think you are for being so nice about my seeing your wife. Not that I have seen her very much, you understand, lunch a couple of times and a drive in the country, but—"

"But what?" Vic prompted, feeling suddenly stone sober and disgusted with Nash's blatant intoxication.

"Well, a lot of men would have knocked my block off for less—thinking it was more, of course. I can easily understand why you might be a little annoyed, but you're not. I can see that. I suppose I want to say that I'm grateful to you for not punching my nose. Not that there's been anything to punch it for, of course. You can ask Melinda, in case you're in any doubt."

Just the person to ask, of course. Vic stared at him with a calm indifference. The proper reply, Vic thought, was nothing.

"At any rate, I wanted to say I think you're awfully sporting," Nash added.

Joel Nash's third affected Anglicism grated on Vic in an unpleasant way. "I appreciate your sentiments," Vic said, with a small smile, "but I don't waste my time punching people on the nose. If I really don't like somebody, I kill him."

"Kill him?" Mr. Nash smiled his merry smile.

"Yes. You remember Malcolm McRae, don't you?" Vic knew that he knew about Malcolm McRae because Melinda had said that she had told Joel all about the "McRae mystery," and that Joel had been very interested because he had seen McRae once or twice in New York on business matters.

"Yes," Joel Nash said attentively.

Joel Nash's smile had grown smaller. It was now a mere protective device. Melinda had undoubtedly told Joel that Mal had had quite a crush on her. That always added spice to the story.

"You're kidding me," Joel said.

In that instant, from his words and his face, Vic knew two things: that Joel Nash had already made love to his wife, and that his own dead-calm attitude in the presence of Melinda and Joel had made quite an impression. Vic had frightened him—not only now, but on certain evenings at the house. Vic had never shown a sign of conventional jealousy. People who do not behave in an orthodox manner, Vic thought, are by definition frightening. "No, I'm not kidding," Vic said with a sigh, taking a cigarette from his pack, then offering the pack to Joel.

Joel Nash shook his head.

"He got a bit forward, as they say—with Melinda. She may have told you. But it wasn't that much as his entire personality that irked me. His cocksureness and his eternally passing on somewhere, so people'd had to put him up. And his revolting parsimony." Vic fixed his cigarette in his holder and clamped it between his teeth.

"I don't believe you."

"I think you do. Not that it matters."

"You *really* killed Malcolm McRae?"

“Who else do you think did?” Vic waited, but there was no answer. “Melinda told me you’d murder him, or knew about him. Did you have any theories? I’d like to hear them. Theories interest me. More than fact sometimes.”

“I haven’t any theories,” Joel said in a defensive tone.

Vic noticed a withdrawal, a fear, just in the way Mr. Nash was sitting on the bench now. Vic leaned back, raised and lowered his shaggy brown eyebrows, and blew his smoke out straight in front of him.

There was a silence.

Mr. Nash was turning over various remarks in his mind, Vic knew. Vic even knew the kind of remark he would make.

“Considering he was a friend of yours,” Joel began, just as Vic had known he would, “I don’t think it’s very funny of you to joke about his death.”

“He wasn’t a friend of mine.”

“Of your wife’s.”

“A different matter, you’ll admit.”

Mr. Nash managed a nod. Then a sidewise smile. “I still think it’s a pretty poor joke.” He stood up.

“Sorry. Maybe I can do better next time. Oh, just a minute!”

Joel Nash turned.

“Melinda doesn’t know anything about this,” Vic said, still coolly leaning back against the newel post. “I’d just as soon you didn’t tell her.”

Joel smiled and waved a hand as he walked away. The hand, was limp. Vic watched him walk to the other side of the living room, near Horace and Phil Cowan, who were talking together, but Joel did not try to join them. He stood by himself and took a cigarette. Mr. Nash would wake up in the morning still believing it was a joke, Vic thought, though he would be wondering a little, too, enough to ask a few people some questions as to what Vic Van Allen’s attitude toward Malcolm McRae had been. And various people—Horace Meller, for instance, and even Melinda—would tell him that Vic and Mal had never hit it off very well. And the Cowans or Horace or Mary Meller, if pressed, would admit that they had noticed something between Mal and Melinda, nothing more than a little flirting, of course, but—

Malcolm McRae had been an advertising executive, not a very important one but there had been an obnoxious air of superiority and patronage about him. He had been the type women call fascinating and men generally loathe. Tall and lean and immaculate, with a long narrow face in which nothing stood out in Vic’s memory except a large wart on his right cheek like Abraham Lincoln’s, though his eyes were supposed to have been fascinating, too, Vic remembered. And he had been murdered, for no known reason, in his Manhattan apartment by an assailant the police had up to now failed to find. That was why Vic’s story had made such an impression on Joel.

Vic relaxed still more against the newel post and stretched his legs out in front of him, recalling with a peculiar relish now how Mal had stood behind Melinda on the golf course with his arms around her, showing her how to make a shot that she could have done better than he if she had wanted to. And that other time, around three in the morning, when Melinda had coyly retreated to her bed with a glass of milk and had asked Mal to come in to talk to her. Vic had stubbornly sat on in the living room pretending to read, determined to stay there no matter what time it got to be, so long as Mal was in his room. There was no comparison in their intellects, Mal’s and Melinda’s, and Mal would have been bored stiff if he had ever had her for half a day to himself. But there had been the little lure of sex. There was always Melinda’s little come-on that went something like “Oh, Vic? I love him, truly I do” but just not in that way. Oh, it’s been like this for years. He doesn’t care for me that way either, so— with the upturned, expectant, green-brown eyes. Mal had come out of Melinda’s room after twenty

minutes or so. Vic was sure there hadn't been anything between them, ever. But he remembered certain satisfaction when he had heard that Mal had been killed last December. Or had it been January? And his first thought had been that Mal might have had it from a jealous husband.

For a few moments Vic imagined that Mal had come back to Melinda's room that night after he had gone to his room on the other side of the garage, that he had known about it, and that he had planned the murder meticulously, gone in to New York on some pretext, called on Mal with a sash weight under his coat (the murderer must have been a friend or an acquaintance, the papers had said, because Mal had evidently let him in quietly), and had battered Mal to death. Silently and efficiently, leaving no fingerprints—neither had the real murderer—then driving back to Little Wesley the same night giving as an alibi, in case anybody had ever asked him for one, that he had been watching a movie at Grand Central at the time Mal had been murdered, a movie that he would actually have seen, of course, at some other time.

"Victor-r?" Mary Meller bent down toward him. "What're you pondering?"

Vic slowly stood up, smiling. "Not a thing. You're looking very peachy tonight." He was referring to the color of her dress.

"Thank you. Can't we go and sit down in some corner and you talk to me about something?" Mary asked him. "I want to see you change your seat. You've been there all evening."

"The piano bench?" Vic suggested, because it was the only spot in sight where two people could sit next to each other. The dancing, for the moment, had stopped. He let Mary take him by the wrist and draw him toward the piano bench. He felt that Mary didn't particularly want to talk to him, that she was trying to be a good hostess and chat with everybody, and that she had left him to the last because he was rather difficult at parties. Vic didn't care. *I have no pride*, he thought proudly. He often said that to Melinda because it irritated her.

"What were you talking to Mrs. Podnansky so long about?" Mary asked him when they had sat down.

"Lawn mowers. Hers needs sharpening, and she's not satisfied with the job Clarke's did for her the last time."

"So you offered to do it, I'll bet. I don't know what the widows of the community would do without you, Victor Van Allen! I wonder how you have *time* for all your good deeds!"

"Plenty of time," Vic said, smiling with appreciation in spite of himself. "I can find time for anything. It's a wonderful feeling."

"Time to read all those books the rest of us keep postponing!" She laughed. "Oh, Vic, I hate you!" She looked around at her merrymaking guests, then back at Vic. "I hope your friend Mr. Nash is having a good time tonight. Is he going to settle in Little Wesley or is he just here for a while?"

Mr. Nash was no longer having such a good time, Vic saw. He was still standing by himself brooding at a figure in the rolled-up carpet near his feet. "No, he's just here for a week or so, I think," Vic said in an offhand tone. "Some kind of business trip."

"So you don't know him very well."

"No. We've just met him." Vic hated to share the responsibility with Melinda. Melinda had met him one afternoon in the bar of the Lord Chesterfield Inn, where she went nearly every afternoon around five-thirty more or less for the express purpose of meeting people like Joel Nash.

"May I say, Vic darling, that I think you're extremely patient?"

Vic glanced at her and saw from her straining, slightly moistening eyes that she was feeling his drinks. "Oh, I don't know."

"You are. You're like somebody waiting very patiently and one day—you'll do something. No

explode exactly, but just—well, speak your mind.”

It was such a quiet finish that Vic smiled. Slowly he rubbed at an itch on the side of his hand with his thumb.

“I’d also like to say, since I’ve had three drinks and I may not have such an opportunity again, that I think you’re pretty wonderful. You’re *good*, Vic,” Mary said in a tone that meant he was good in a biblical sense, a tone that betrayed a little embarrassment at having used such a word in such a sense, and Vic knew she was going to ruin it by laughing at herself in another few seconds. “If I weren’t married and you weren’t, I think I’d propose to you right now!” Then came the laugh that was supposed to erase it all.

Why did women think, Vic wondered, even women who had married for love and had had a child and a fairly happy married life, that they would prefer a man who demanded nothing of them sexually? It was a kind of sentimental harking back to virginity, a silly, vain fantasy that had no factual validity whatsoever. They’d be the first ones to feel affronted if their husbands neglected them in that respect. “Unfortunately, I am married,” Vic said.

“Unfortunately!” Mary scoffed. “You adore her, and I know it! You worship the ground she walks on. And she loves you, too, Vic, and don’t forget it!”

“I don’t want you to think,” Vic said, almost interrupting her, “that I’m so good as you put it. I have a little evil side, too. I just keep it well hidden.”

“You certainly do!” Mary said, laughing. She leaned toward him and he smelled her perfume which struck him as a combination of lilac and cinnamon. “How’s your drink, Vic?”

“This’ll do for the moment, thanks.”

“You see? You’re even good about drinking!—What bit your hand?”

“A bedbug.”

“A bedbug! Good lord! Where’d you get it?”

“At the Green Mountain Hotel.”

Mary’s mouth opened incredulously; then she shrieked with laughter. “*What* were you doing there?”

“Oh, I put in an order weeks in advance. I said if any bedbugs turned up, I wanted them, and finally collected six. Cost me five dollars in tips. They’re living in my garage now in a glass case with a piece of mattress inside for them to sleep on. Now and then I let one bite me, because I want them to go through their normal life cycle. I’ve got two batches of eggs now.”

“But why?” Mary demanded, giggling.

“Because I think a certain entomologist who wrote a piece for an entomologist journal is wrong about a certain point in their reproductive cycle,” Vic answered, smiling.

“What point?” asked Mary, fascinated.

“Oh, it’s a small point about the period of incubation. I doubt if it has any value at all to anybody, though as a matter of fact insecticide manufacturers ought to—”

“Vi-ic?” Melinda’s husky voice slurred, “Do you mind?”

Vic looked up at her with a subtly insulting astonishment, and then got up from the bench and gestured graciously toward the piano. “It’s all yours.”

“You’re going to play? Good!” Mary said in a delighted tone.

A quintet of men was ranging itself around the piano. Melinda swooped onto the bench, a sheaf of shining hair swinging down like a curtain and concealing her face from anyone standing on her right as Vic was. Oh, well, Vic thought, who knew her face better than he did? And he didn’t want to see her anyway, because it didn’t improve when she drank. Vic strolled away. The whole sofa was free now

To his distaste, he heard Melinda's wildly trilling introduction to "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," which she played abominably. Her playing was florid, inaccurate, and one would think embarrassing, yet people listened, and after they listened they liked her neither more nor less for it. It seemed to be neither a liability nor an asset to her socially. When she floundered and gave up a song with a laugh and a childish, frustrated flutter of hands, her current admirers admired her just the same. She wasn't going to flounder on "Slaughter," however, because if she did she could always switch to the "Three Blind Mice" theme and recover herself. Vic sat down in a corner of the sofa. Everybody was around the piano except Mrs. Podnansky, Evelyn Cowan, and Horace. Melinda's swingeing attack on the main theme was evoking grunts of delight from her male listeners. Vic looked at Joel Nash's back, hunched over the piano, and closed his eyes. In a sense he closed his ears also, and thought of his bedbugs.

Finally, there was applause which rapidly died down as Melinda began "Dancing in the Dark," one of her better numbers. Vic opened his eyes and saw Joel Nash staring at him in an absent, yet intense, and rather frightened way. Vic closed his eyes again. His head was back as if he were listening enraptured, to the music. Actually, he was thinking of what might be going on now in Joel Nash's liquor-fuddled mind. Vic saw his own rather pudgy figure on the sofa, his hands peacefully clasped over his abdomen, his round face smiling a relaxed smile that by now would have become enigmatic to Joel Nash. Nash would be thinking, maybe he *did*. Maybe that's why he's so nonchalant about Melinda and me. Maybe that's why he's so strange. He's a *murderer*.

Melinda played for about half an hour, until she had to repeat "Dancing in the Dark" again. When she got up from the piano, people were still pressing her to play some more, Mary Meller and Joe, the loudest of all.

"We've got to be going home. It's late," Melinda said. She often left immediately after a session at the piano. On a note of triumph. "Vic?" She snapped a finger in his direction.

Vic got up obediently from the sofa. He saw Horace beckoning to him. Horace had heard, Vic supposed. Vic went over.

"What's this you told your friend, Mr. Nash?" Horace asked, his dark eyes shining with amusement.

"My friend?"

Horace's narrow shoulders shook with his constrained laughter. "I don't blame you a bit. I just hope he doesn't spread it around."

"It was a joke. Didn't he take it as a joke?" Vic asked, pretending to be serious. He and Horace knew each other well. Horace had often told him to "put his foot down about Melinda," and Horace was the only person Vic knew who had ever dared say that to him.

"Seems to me he took it pretty seriously," Horace said.

"Well, let him. Let him spread it around."

Horace laughed and slapped Vic's shoulder. "Just don't get yourself in jail, old man!"

Melinda tottered slightly as they walked out to the car, and Vic took her elbow gently to steady her. She was almost as tall as he, and she always wore flat sandals or ballet slippers, but less for his sake, Vic thought, than because they were more comfortable and because her height in flat shoes better matched the height of the average man. Even though she was a bit unsteady, Vic could feel the Amazonian strength in her tall, firm body, the animal vitality that pulled him along with her. She was heading for the car with the undeterrable thrust of a horse getting back to stable.

"What'd you say to Joel tonight?" Melinda asked when they were in the car.

"Nothing."

"You must have said something."

“When?”

“Well, I saw you talking to him,” she persisted sleepily. “What were you talking about?”

“Bedbugs, I think. Or was it Mary I was talking about bedbugs to?”

“Oh!” Melinda said impatiently, and snuggled her head against his shoulder as impersonally as he had been a sofa pillow. “Must’ve said something, because he acted different after he talked to you.”

“What did he say?”

“It’s not what he said, it’s the way he *a-a-acted*,” she drawled. Then she was asleep.

She lifted her head when he shut off the motor in the garage and, as if walking in her sleep got out, said, “G’night, dear,” and went into the house through the door at the side of the garage that opened into the living room.

The garage was big enough for five cars, though they had only two. Vic had had it built so that he could use part of it as a workroom, keep his tools and his boxes of plants, his snail aquaria, whatever else he happened to be interested in or experimenting with that took space, all in apple-pie order, and still have enough room to walk around in. He slept in a room on the opposite side of the garage from the house, a room whose only door opened into the garage. Before he went to his door he bent over the herb boxes. The foxgloves were up—six or eight pale-green sprigs already forming the characteristic triad leaf clusters. Two bedbugs were crawling around on their piece of mattress looking for flesh and blood, but he was not in the mood to offer his hand tonight, and the two dragged their flat bodies off slowly in search of cover from his flashlight beam.

Joel Nash came for a cocktail three days after the Mellers' party, but he didn't stay to have dinner with them, though Vic asked him and Melinda pressed him. He said he had an engagement, but anyone could have seen that he hadn't. He announced smilingly that he wasn't staying another two weeks after all, but was leaving the following Friday. He smiled more than ever that evening and was on a defensive tack of being facetious about everything. It was an indication to Vic of how seriously Melinda Nash had taken him.

After he left, Melinda accused Vic again of having said something to offend him.

"What could I possibly have said?" Vic demanded innocently. "Has it occurred to you that you might have said something to offend him? Or done something, or not done something?"

"I know I didn't," Melinda said, sulking. Then she made herself another drink instead of asking Vic to make it, as she usually did.

She wouldn't mind the loss of Joel Nash very much, Vic thought, because he was so new and because he wouldn't have been around very long at best, being a traveling salesman. Ralph Gosden would be another matter. Vic had been wondering if Ralph would scare as easily as Joel had, and had decided that it was worth a try. Ralph Gosden was a twenty-nine-year-old painter of fair ability in the portrait field and with a small income from a doting aunt. He had rented a house near Millettville about twenty miles away, for one year, of which only six months were gone. For four months Ralph had been coming for dinner about twice a week—Ralph said their house was so nice, and their food was so good, and their phonograph was so good, and all in all nobody was quite so hospitable in Little Wesley or anywhere else as the Van Allens were—and Melinda had been going up to visit Ralph several afternoons a week, though she never quite admitted going there any afternoon. Finally, after two months of it, Melinda had presented her portrait painted by Ralph, apparently by way of accounting for the many afternoons and evenings when she had not been home at one o'clock, or seven either, when Vic had come home. The portrait, a prettified, dashed-off horror, hung in Melinda's bedroom. Vic had forbidden it in the living room.

Ralph's hypocrisy was nauseating to Vic. He was forever trying to discuss things that he thought Vic would be interested in, though Ralph himself was interested in nothing beyond what the average woman was interested in, and behind this façade of friendship Ralph tried to hide the fact that he was having an affair with Melinda. It was not that he objected to Melinda's having affairs with other men per se, Vic told himself whenever he looked at Ralph Gosden, it was that she picked such idiotic spineless characters and that she let it leak out all over town by inviting her lovers to parties at the friends' houses and by being seen with them at the bar of the Lord Chesterfield, which was really the only bar in town. One of Vic's firmest principles was that everybody—therefore, a wife—should be allowed to do as she pleased, provided no one else was hurt and that she fulfilled her marital responsibilities, which were to manage a household and to take care of her offspring, which Melinda did—from time to time. Thousands of married men had affairs with impunity, though Vic had to admit that most men did it more quietly. When Horace had tried to advise Vic about Melinda when he had asked him why he "put up with such behavior," Vic had countered by asking him if he expected him to act like an old-fashioned husband (or wife), spurning his spouse as unclean, demanding

divorce, wrecking a child's existence for nothing more than the petty gratification of his ego? Vic also implied to Horace or to whoever else dropped a hint about Melinda, that he considered her behavior a temporary aberration and the less fuss made about it the better.

The fact that Melinda had been carrying on like this for more than three years gave Vic the reputation in Little Wesley of having a saintlike patience and forbearance, which in turn flattered Vic's ego. Vic knew that Horace and Phil Cowan and everybody else who knew the situation—which was nearly everybody—considered him odd for enduring it, but Vic didn't mind at all being considered odd. In fact, he was proud of it in a country in which most people aimed at being exactly like everybody else.

Melinda had been odd, too, or he never would have married her. Courting her and persuading her to marry him had been like breaking a wild horse, except that the process had had to be infinitely more subtle. She had been headstrong and spoiled, the kind who gets expelled from school time after time for plain insubordination. Melinda had been expelled from five schools, and when Vic met her at twenty-two, she had thought life was nothing but the pursuit of a good time—which she still thought though at twenty-two she had had a certain iconoclasm and imagination in her rebellion that had attracted Vic because it was like his own. Now it seemed to him that she had lost every bit of that imagination and that her iconoclasm consisted in throwing costly vases against walls and breaking them. The only vase left in the house was a metal one, and its cloisonné had several dents. She hadn't wanted to have a child, then she had, then she hadn't, and finally after four years she had wanted one again and had produced one. The birth had not been so difficult as the average first child's, Vic had learned from the doctor, but Melinda had complained loudly before and after the ordeal, in spite of Vic's providing the best nursing for her and of his giving all his time to her for weeks, to the exclusion of his work. Vic had been overjoyed at having a child that was his and Melinda's, but Melinda had refused to give the child any but the minimum of attention or to show that she cared for it any more than she would have cared for a stray puppy that she was feeding in the house. Vic supposed that the conventionality of having a baby plus being a wife was more than her constitutional rebelliousness could bear. The child had implied responsibility, and Melinda balked at growing up. She had taken out her resentment by pretending that she didn't care for him in the same way any more, "not in a romantic way," as she put it. Vic had been very patient, but the truth was that she had begun to bother him a little, too. She was not interested in anything he was interested in, and in a casual way he was interested in a great many things—printing and bookbinding, bee culture, cheese making, carpentry, music and painting (good music and good painting), in stargazing, for which he had a fine telescope, and in gardening.

When Beatrice was about two years old, Melinda began an affair with Larry Osbourne, a young and not very bright instructor at a riding academy not far from Little Wesley. She had been in a kind of sulking, puzzled state of mind for months before, though whenever Vic had tried to get her to talk about what was bothering her she had never had anything to say. After she began the liaison with Larry, she became gayer and happier and more pleasant to Vic, especially when she saw how calmly he took it. Vic pretended to take it more calmly than he did, though he asked Melinda if she wanted to divorce him. Melinda hadn't wanted to divorce him.

Vic invested \$50 and two hours' time in talking the situation over with a psychiatrist in New York. The psychiatrist's opinion was that since Melinda scorned the counsel of a psychiatrist for herself she was going to bring unhappiness to Vic and eventually a divorce, unless he was firm with her. It was against Vic's principles, as an adult, to be firm with another adult. Granted Melinda wasn't an adult, he still intended to go on treating her as one. The only new idea the psychiatrist put into his head was

that Melinda, like many women who have a child, might be “finished” with him as a man and as a husband, now that he had given her the child. It was rather funny to think of Melinda’s being so primitively maternal as this, and Vic smiled whenever he remembered that statement of the psychiatrist’s. Vic’s explanation was that plain contrariness had motivated her in rejecting him: she knew he still loved her, so she chose to give him no satisfaction by showing that she loved him in return. Perhaps love was the wrong word. They were devoted to each other, dependent on each other and if one was gone from the house, he or she was missed by the other, Vic thought. There wasn’t a word for the way he felt about Melinda, for that combination of loathing and devotion. The rest of what the psychiatrist had told Vic about the “intolerable situation” and of his heading for a divorce—all that only inspired Vic to prove him wrong. He would show the psychiatrist and the world that the situation was not intolerable and that there would be no divorce. Neither was he going to be miserable. The world was too full of interesting things.

During Melinda’s five-month affair with Larry Osbourne, Vic moved from the bedroom into a room he had had especially built for himself, about two months after the affair began, on the other side of the garage. He moved as a kind of protest against the stupidity of her affair (that was about as he had ever criticized Larry for, his stupidity), but after a few weeks when he had his microscope and his books in the room with him and he discovered how easy it was to get up in the night without worrying about disturbing Melinda and look at the stars or watch his snails that were more active at night than in the daytime, Vic decided that he preferred the room to the bedroom. When Melinda gave up Larry—or, as Vic suspected, Larry gave her up—Vic did not move back into the bedroom, because Melinda showed no sign of wanting him back and because by then he didn’t want to move back anyway. He was content with the arrangement, and Melinda seemed to be, too. She was not so cheerful as she had been when Larry was around, but within a few months she found another lover—Jo-Jo Harris, a rather hyperthyroidal young man who started a short-lived record shop in Wesley. Jo-Jo lasted from October to January. Melinda bought several hundred dollars’ worth of records from him but not enough to keep him in business.

Vic knew that some people thought Melinda stayed with him because of his money, and perhaps that did influence Melinda to some extent, but Vic considered it of no importance. Vic had always had an indifferent attitude toward money. He hadn’t earned his income, his grandfather had. The fact that Vic’s father and he had money was due only to an accident of birth, so why shouldn’t Melinda, as his wife, have an equal right to it? Vic had an income of \$40,000 a year, and had had it since his twenty-first birthday. Vic had heard it implied in Little Wesley that people tolerated Melinda only because they liked him so much, but Vic refused to believe this. Objectively, he could see that Melinda was likable enough, provided one didn’t demand conversation. She was generous, a good sport, and she was fun at parties. Everybody disapproved of her affairs, of course, but Little Wesley—the old residential parent town of the newer and more commercial town of Wesley, four miles away—was singularly free of prudery, as if everybody bent over backward to avoid the stigma of New England puritanism, and not a soul, as yet, had ever snubbed Melinda on a moral count.

Ralph Gosden came for dinner on Saturday night, a week after the Mellers' party, his old gayer and more confident self, even gayer than usual because, having been away at his aunt's in New York for about ten days, he perhaps felt that his welcome at the Van Allens' was not so threadbare as it had been just before he left. After dinner Ralph abandoned a discussion with Vic of H-bomb shelters, of which he had seen an exhibition in New York and evidently still knew nothing about, and Melinda put on a stack of records. Ralph looked in fine fettle, good for four in the morning at least, Vic thought, though this morning might be his last at the Van Allen house. Ralph was one of the worst offenders about staying late, because he could sleep the next morning if he cared to, but Vic usually matched him by staying up until four or five or even seven in the morning, simply because Ralph would have preferred him to retire and leave him alone with Melinda. Vic also could sleep late in the mornings if he wanted to, and he had the edge over Ralph in endurance, both because two or three in the morning was Vic's average hour of retiring and because Vic never drank enough to make him particularly sleepy.

Vic sat in his favorite armchair in the living room, looking at the *New Wesleyan*, and now and then glancing over the top of the newspaper at Ralph and Melinda, who were dancing. Ralph was wearing a white dacron suit that he had bought in New York and was as pleased as a girl with the slim, trim figure it gave him. There was a new aggression in the way he clasped Melinda around the waist at the beginning of each dance, a foolhardy self-assurance that made Vic think of a male insect blithely dancing its way through its last moments of pleasure before sudden, horrible death. And the insouciant music Melinda had put on was so appropriate. The record was "The Teddybears," one of her recent purchases. For some reason, the words lilted maddeningly through Vic's head every time he stood under his shower:

*Beneath the trees where nobody sees,
They'll hide and seek as long as they please!
Today's the day the teddybears have their pic-nic!*

"Ha! Ha! Ha!" from Mr. Gosden, reaching for his drink on the cocktail table.

Home on the range, Vic thought, where never is heard an intelligent word.

"What's happened to my Cugat?" Melinda demanded. She was on her knees in front of the record shelves, making an unsystematic search. "I can't find him *anywhere*."

"I don't think it's in there," Vic said, because Melinda had pulled a record out of his section. She looked at it dazedly for a moment, made a face, and put it back. Vic had a little section of the bottom shelf where he kept his own records, a few Bachs, some Segovia, some Gregorian chants and motets, and Churchill's speeches, and he discouraged Melinda from playing them because the mortality rate was so high for records that she handled. Not that she liked any of his records. He remembered playing the Gregorian chants once when she was dressing to go out with Ralph, though he knew she didn't like them. "They don't put me in a mood for anything except *dying*!" she had blatted at him that night.

Ralph went into the kitchen to fix himself another drink, and Melinda said:

"*Darling*, do you intend to read the paper all night?"

She wanted him to go to bed. Vic smiled at her. "I'm memorizing the editorial page poem for today. 'Employees serve the public *and* They have to keep their *place*. But being humble in this work is never a *disgrace*. And many times I ask myself—' "

"Oh, stop it!" Melinda said.

"It's by your friend Reginald Dunlap. You said he wasn't a bad poet, remember?"

"I'm not in the mood for poetry."

"Reggie wasn't either when he wrote this."

In retaliation for the slight to her friend, or perhaps just on a wild whim, Melinda turned the volume up so suddenly that Vic jumped. Then he deliberately relaxed and languidly turned the page of his newspaper as if oblivious of the din. Ralph started to turn the volume down, and Melinda stopped him, violently grabbing his wrist. Then she lifted his wrist and kissed it. They began to dance. Ralph had succumbed to Melinda's mood now and was dipping his steps with swishing movements of his hips, laughing his braying laugh that was lost in the booming chaos of sound. Vic did not look at Ralph, but he could feel Ralph's occasional glances, could feel his mingled amusement and belligerence—the belligerence slowly but surely, with each drink he took, replacing whatever decorum he might have had at the beginning of the evening. Melinda encouraged it, deliberately and systematically: Bait the old bear, hammer it in, kick him, she managed to convey to everyone by her own example, because he's not going to retaliate, he's not going to be dislodged from his armchair and he's not going to react at all, so why not insult him?

Vic crossed the room and lazily plucked Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* from the shelf and carried it back to his chair. Just then Trixie's pajama-clad form appeared in the doorway.

"Mommie!" Trixie screamed, but Mommie neither heard nor saw her.

Vic got up and went to her. "'S matter, Trix?" he asked, stooping by her.

"It's too loud to *sleep!*" she yelled indignantly.

Melinda shouted something, then went to the phonograph and turned it down. "Now what is it?" she asked Trixie.

"I can't sleep," Trixie said.

"Tell her it's a most unjustifiable complaint," Vic said to Melinda.

"Aw—right, well, turn it down," Melinda said.

Trixie glared with sleep-swollen eyes at her mother, then at Ralph. Vic patted her firm, narrow hips.

"Why don't you hop back in bed so you'll be wide awake for that picnic tomorrow?" Vic asked her.

The anticipation of the picnic brought a smile. Trixie looked at Ralph. "Did you bring me a sewing kit from New York, Ralph?"

"I'm afraid I didn't, Trixie," Ralph said in a sugary voice. "But I bet I can get you one right here. Little Wesley."

"You will not," Melinda said. "She wouldn't any more know what to do with a sewing kit than—"

"Than you would," Vic finished for her.

"You're being rather rude tonight, Mr. Van Allen," Melinda said icily.

"Sorry." Vic was being purposely rude tonight in preparation for the story he was going to tell Ralph. He wanted Ralph to think he had reached the end of his tether.

"Are you staying for breakfast, Ralph?" Trixie asked, swaying from side to side in Vic's arm.

Ralph forced a guffaw.

"I hope he is," Vic said. "We don't like our guests to go off on an empty stomach, do we, Trix?"

"No-o. Ralph's so funny at breakfast."

“What does he do?” Vic asked.

“He juggles eggs.”

“Juggles, she means,” Ralph explained.

“I guess I ought to stay up for that,” Vic said. “Come on, Trixie, back to bed. It’s quiet now, so you’d better seize the moment. You know, *carpe diem* and *carpe noctem*, too.”

Trixie went with him readily. She loved him to put her to bed, hunt for the kangaroo she slept with and tuck it in with her, then kiss her good night on both cheeks and the nose. Vic knew that he spoiled her but, on the other hand, Trixie got very cold treatment from her mother, and he felt that he should try to compensate. He buried his nose in her small soft neck, then lifted his head, smiling.

“Can we have the picnic at the quarry, Daddy?”

“Uh-uh. The quarry’s too dangerous.”

“Why?”

“Suppose there’s a strong wind. We’ll all get blown right down.”

“I wouldn’t mind that!—Is Mommie going on the picnic?”

“I don’t know,” Vic said. “I hope so.”

“Is Ralph going?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Do you like Ralph?”

By the light of the merry-go-round lamp on her bed table he could see the brown flecks in her green eyes, like her mother’s eyes. “Um-hm. Do you?”

“Mm-m,” she said dubiously. “I liked Jo-Jo better.”

It stung him a little that she still remembered Jo-Jo’s name. “I know why you liked him. He gave you a lot of Christmas presents. That’s no reason to like anybody. Don’t I give you a lot of presents, too?”

“Oh, I like you best, Daddy. Of course I like *you* best.”

It was too facile, Vic thought. She was getting awfully facile. Vic smiled, thinking how pleased Trixie would be if he told her he had killed Malcolm McRae. Trixie had never liked Mal because he had not liked her and, being a tightwad of the first water, he had never brought her a present of any kind. Trixie would whoop with joy if he told her he had killed Mal. His stock would go up 200 percent. “You’d better go to sleep,” Vic said, getting up from the bed. He kissed both cheeks, the tip of her nose, then the top of her head. Trixie’s hair was the color of her mother’s now, but it would probably get a little darker, like his. It grew straight down from a partless crown and looked the way a six-year-old brat’s hair ought to look, Vic thought, though Melinda complained because it was so difficult to curl. “You asleep?” he whispered.

Trixie’s lashes were down on her cheeks. He turned off the light and tiptoed to the door.

“No!” Trixie yelled, giggling.

“Well, you’d better get to sleep! I mean it now!”

Silence. The silence gratified him. He went out and closed the door.

Melinda had turned another lamp out and the living room was much darker. She and Ralph were doing a slow, shuffling dance in the corner of the room. It was nearly four o’clock.

“Is your drink all right, Ralph?” Vic asked.

“What? Oh, yes, thanks. I’ve had about enough.”

It couldn’t possibly mean that Mr. Gosden was thinking of leaving, not at four in the morning. Melinda was dancing with her arms around Ralph’s neck. Because she thought he had said something horribly rude to Joel Nash she was going to be extremely accommodating to Ralph tonight, Vic

supposed. She was going to encourage him to stay and stay, and stay for breakfast, too, no doubt, even if Ralph turned white with fatigue, as he sometimes did. "Stay, darling, please. I'm in the mood to stay up tonight," and he'd stay, of course. They all did. Even the ones who had to go to an office the next day, and Mr. Gosden didn't. And of course the later they stayed the more chance there was that Vic would go to his room and leave them alone. Often Vic had left Melinda and Ralph alone at six in the morning, reasoning that if they had spent all afternoon together, why not let them spend two and a half hours more together until he came in at eight-thirty to get his breakfast? It was another petty thing, perhaps, annoying Melinda's callers by sitting up all night in the living room with them, but somehow he had never been able to be so obliging as to get out of his own house to please them, and besides he always read a couple of books, so his time was not wasted.

Tonight Vic was aware of a strong, primitive antagonism to Mr. Gosden that he had never felt before. He thought of the bottles and bottles of bourbon that he had provided for Mr. Gosden. He thought of the evenings that Mr. Gosden had ruined for him. Vic stood up, put his book back on the shelf, then went quietly toward the door that opened into the garage. Behind him, Melinda and Ralph were now practically necking. His leaving without saying anything could be explained as (a) his not wanting to embarrass them when they were kissing each other; (b) that he was possibly coming back in a moment; or (c) that he was too annoyed with their behavior to say good night to either of them. Explanation (b) was the correct one, but only Melinda would think of it, because Mr. Gosden had never seen him leave and come back. He had done it several times with Jo-Jo.

Vic turned on the fluorescent light in the garage and walked slowly through, glancing at his neat herb boxes, at his aquaria full of land snails that were gliding through the moistened jungle of oregano shoots and Bermuda grass in which they lived, glancing at his opened electric drill case on his worktable and automatically noting that every tool was present and in its proper place.

His own room was almost as severe and functional as the garage—a plain three-quarter bed with a dark-green slipcover on it, one straight chair and one leather desk chair, a huge flat-topped desk on which stood dictionaries and carpenters' manuals, ink bottles, pens and pencils, account books, and paid and unpaid bills, all arranged in an orderly manner. There were no pictures at all on his walls, only a plain calendar, donated by a local lumber company, over his desk. He had the ability to sleep for as long as he wished without the aid of anything or anyone to awaken him, and he looked at his wristwatch and set himself to awaken in half an hour, at seventeen minutes to five. He lay down on the bed and methodically relaxed himself from head to toe.

Within about a minute he was asleep. He had a dream of being in church and of seeing the Mellers there. Horace Meller smiled and congratulated him for having murdered Malcolm McRae in defense of his marriage. The whole town of Little Wesley was in church, and everyone smiled at him. Vic woke up smiling at himself, at the absurdity of it. He never went to church, anyway. Whistling, he combed his hair, straightened his shirt under his pale-blue cashmere sweater, and strolled back through the garage.

Ralph and Melinda were in a corner of the sofa and had apparently been reclining, or half reclining, because they both straightened up at the sight of him. Ralph, pink-eyed now, looked him up and down with drunken disbelief and resentment.

Vic went to the bookshelf and bent over, scanning the titles.

"Still reading?" Melinda asked.

"Um-hm," Vic said. "No more music?"

"I was just about to leave," Ralph said hoarsely, getting up. He looked exhausted, but he lighted a cigarette and threw the match viciously in the direction of the fireplace.

“I don’t want you to leave.” Melinda reached for his hand, but Ralph swung away and took a step back, staggering a little.

“’S awfully late,” Ralph said.

“Practically time for breakfast,” Vic said cheerfully. “Can I interest anybody in some scrambled eggs?”

He got no answer. He chose the pocketbook *World Almanac*, a book he could always browse in with pleasure, and went to his armchair.

“I should think *you’d* be getting sleepy,” Melinda said, looking at him as resentfully as Ralph.

“No.” Vic blinked his eyes alertly. “Had a little nap just now in my room.”

Ralph wilted visibly at this information and stared at Vic with a stunned expression as if he were about to throw up the sponge, though his eyes, shrunken and pink in his pale face, burned all the harder. He stared at Vic as if he could have killed him. Vic had seen the same look on Jo-Jo’s face and even on Larry Osbourne’s lean, blank face, a look inspired by Vic’s demoniacal good humor, but his standing clear-eyed and sober at five in the morning while they wilted on the sofa, wilted lower and lower in spite of their efforts to haul themselves upright every fifteen minutes or so. Ralph picked up his full glass and drank half of it at one draft. He’d stay to the bitter end now, Vic thought, as a matter of principle: it was nearly six in the morning, and what was the use of going home to sleep now, since tomorrow was ruined anyway? He might pass out, but he’d stay. He was too drunk to realize, Vic supposed, that he could have Melinda all the afternoon tomorrow if he wanted her.

Suddenly, as Vic watched him, Ralph staggered backward, as if something invisible had pushed him, and sat down heavily on the sofa. His face was shiny with perspiration. Melinda pulled him toward her, her arm around his neck, and began to cool his temples with her fingers which slipped dampened against her glass. Ralph’s body was limp and sprawled, though his mouth had set grimacing and his eyes still bored into Vic as if he were trying to hang on to consciousness now by simply staring fixedly at one thing.

Vic smiled at Melinda. “Maybe I’d better make those eggs. He looks as if he could use something.”

“He’s fine!” Melinda said defiantly.

Whistling a Gregorian chant, Vic went into the kitchen and put a kettle of water on for coffee. He held up the bourbon bottle and saw that Ralph had finished about four-fifths of it. He went back into the living room. “How do you like your eggs, Ralph—besides juggled?”

“How do you like your eggs, darling?” Melinda asked him.

“I jus’ like ’em—like ’em juggled fine,” Ralph mumbled.

“One order of juggled eggs,” Vic said. “How about you, puss?”

“Don’t call me ‘puss’!”

It was an old pet name of Vic’s for her that he hadn’t used in years. She was glaring at him from under her strong blond eyebrows, and Vic had to admit she was not quite the little puss she had been at the time he married her, or even at the earlier part of this evening. Her lipstick was smeared, and the end of her long, upturned nose was shiny and red, as if some of her lipstick had got on it. “How do you want your eggs?” he asked.

“Do’ want any eggs.”

Vic scrambled four eggs with cream for himself and Melinda, since Ralph was in no condition to eat any, but he made only one piece of toast, because he knew Melinda would not eat toast now. He didn’t wait for the coffee, which was not quite dripped through, because he knew Melinda would not drink coffee at this hour either. He and Mr. Gosden could drink the coffee later. He brought the scrambled eggs, lightly salted and peppered, on two warm plates. Melinda again refused hers, but he

sat beside her on the sofa and fed them to her in small amounts on a fork. Every time the food approached, she opened her mouth obediently. Her eyes, staring at him all the while, had the look of a wild animal who trusts the human food-bringer just barely enough to accept the food at arm's length and then only if there is nothing in sight that resembles a trap and if every movement of the food-bringer is slow and gentle. Mr. Gosden's red-blond head was now in her lap. He was snoring in an unaesthetic way with his mouth open. Melinda balked at the last bite, as Vic had known she would.

"Come on. Last bite," Vic said.

She ate it.

"I suppose Mr. Gosden had better stay here," Vic said, because there was nothing else to say about Mr. Gosden.

"I have every intention of 's shtaying here," Melinda said.

"Well, let's stretch him out."

Melinda got up to stretch him out herself, but his shoulders were too heavy for her in her condition. Vic put his hands under Ralph's arms and pulled him so that his head was just short of the sofa arm.

"Shoes?" Vic asked.

"Don't you touch 's shoes!" Melinda bent over Ralph's feet wobblingly and began to untie his shoelaces.

Ralph's shoulders shook. Vic could hear the faint chatter of teeth.

"He's cold. I'd better get a blanket," Vic said.

"I'll get the blanket," Melinda staggered toward her bedroom but evidently forgot her purpose because she detoured into the bathroom.

Vic removed the remaining shoe, then went into Melinda's bedroom to get the plaid lap rug that was always lying somewhere in the room. Now it was on the floor at the foot of the unmade bed. The lap rug had been one of Vic's presents to Melinda on her birthday about seven years ago. Seeing it reminded him of picnics, of a happy summer they had spent in Maine, of one winter evening when for some reason there had been no heat and they had lain under it on the floor in front of the fireplace. He stopped a moment, vaguely debating taking the green woolen blanket from her bed instead of the lap rug, then decided that was meaningless and he might as well take the lap rug. Melinda's room, as usual, was in a state of disorder that both repelled him and interested him, and he would have liked to stand there a few moments looking at it—he almost never went into Melinda's bedroom—but he did not permit himself even a complete glance around it. He went out and closed the door behind him. He heard the water running in the bathroom as he passed the door. He hoped she wasn't going to be sick.

Ralph was sitting up now with unfocusing eyes, his body shaking as if he had a chill.

"Would you care for some hot coffee?" Vic asked him.

Ralph said nothing. Vic draped the lap rug around his shaking shoulders, and Ralph lay back feebly on the sofa and tried to drag his feet up. Vic lifted both his feet and tucked the blanket under them.

"You're a good egg," Ralph mumbled.

Vic smiled a little and sat down at the end of the sofa. He thought he heard Melinda being sick in the bathroom.

"Shoulda thrown me out a long time ago," Ralph murmured. "Anybody who doesn't know how much he can take—" He moved his legs as if to get off the sofa, and Vic casually leaned on his ankle.

"Think nothing of it," Vic said soothingly.

"Ought to be sick—ought to die." There were tears in Ralph's blue eyes that made them look even glassier. His thin eyebrows trembled. He seemed to be in some self-flagellant trance in which he might really have enjoyed being hurled out of the house by the seat of his pants and his collar.

Vic cleared his throat and smiled. “Oh, I don’t bother throwing people out of the house if they annoy me.” He leaned a little closer. “If they annoy me in that way—with Melinda—” he nodded meaningfully toward the bathroom—“I kill them.”

“Yes,” Ralph said seriously, as if he understood. “You should. Because I do want to keep you and Melinda as friends. I like you both. I mean it.”

“I do kill people if I don’t like them,” Vic said even more quietly, leaning toward Ralph and smiling.

Ralph smiled, too, fatuously.

“Like Malcolm McRae, for instance. I killed him.”

“Ma’colm?” Ralph asked puzzledly.

Vic knew he knew all about Mal. “Yes. Melinda’s told you about McRae. I killed him with a hammer in his apartment. You probably saw something in the papers last winter about it. He was getting too familiar with Melinda.”

Whether it was sinking very far in or not, Vic couldn’t tell. Ralph’s eyebrows drew slowly together. “I remember . . . You killed him?”

“Yes. He began flirting with Melinda. In public.” Vic tossed Melinda’s cigarette lighter up and caught it, two, three, and four times. It was sinking in. Ralph was up on one elbow.

“Does Melinda know you killed him?”

“No. Nobody knows,” he whispered. “And don’t tell Melinda, will you?”

Ralph’s frown deepened. It was a little too much for Ralph’s brain to cope with, Vic thought, but Ralph had grasped the threat and the hostility. Ralph clenched his teeth and jerked his feet suddenly from under Vic’s arm. He was leaving.

Vic handed him his shoes without a word. “Like me to drive you home?”

“I can drive myself,” Ralph staggered around, trying to get his shoes on, and finally had to sit down to do it. Then he got up and stumbled toward the door.

Vic followed him and handed him his magenta-banded straw hat.

“G’night. I had a very nice time,” Ralph said, running his words together.

“Glad you did. Don’t forget. Don’t say anything to Melinda about what I told you. Good night, Ralph.” Vic watched him crawl into his open convertible and zoom off, skidding the car’s rear end off the road and righting it again as he went on down the lane. Vic didn’t care if he drove the car into Bear Lake. The sun was coming up in a bright orange glow above the woods straight ahead.

Vic heard no sounds from the bathroom now, which meant that Melinda was probably sitting on the floor, waiting for another attack of nausea. She did that whenever she got sick, and it was impossible to persuade her to move from the floor until she was sure the attack was over. Finally, he got up from his chair, went to the bathroom, and called, “Are you all right, honey?” and got a reasonably clear murmur that she was. He went into the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee. He loved coffee and it almost never kept him awake when he wanted to sleep.

Melinda came out of the bathroom in her robe, looking better than she had half an hour before. “Where’s Ralph?”

“He decided to go home. He said to say good night and that he had a very nice time.”

“Oh.” She looked disappointed.

“I tucked the blanket around him, and he felt better after a while,” Vic added.

Melinda came over and put her hands on his shoulders. “I think you were very sweet to him tonight.”

“That’s good. You said earlier you thought I was rude.”

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