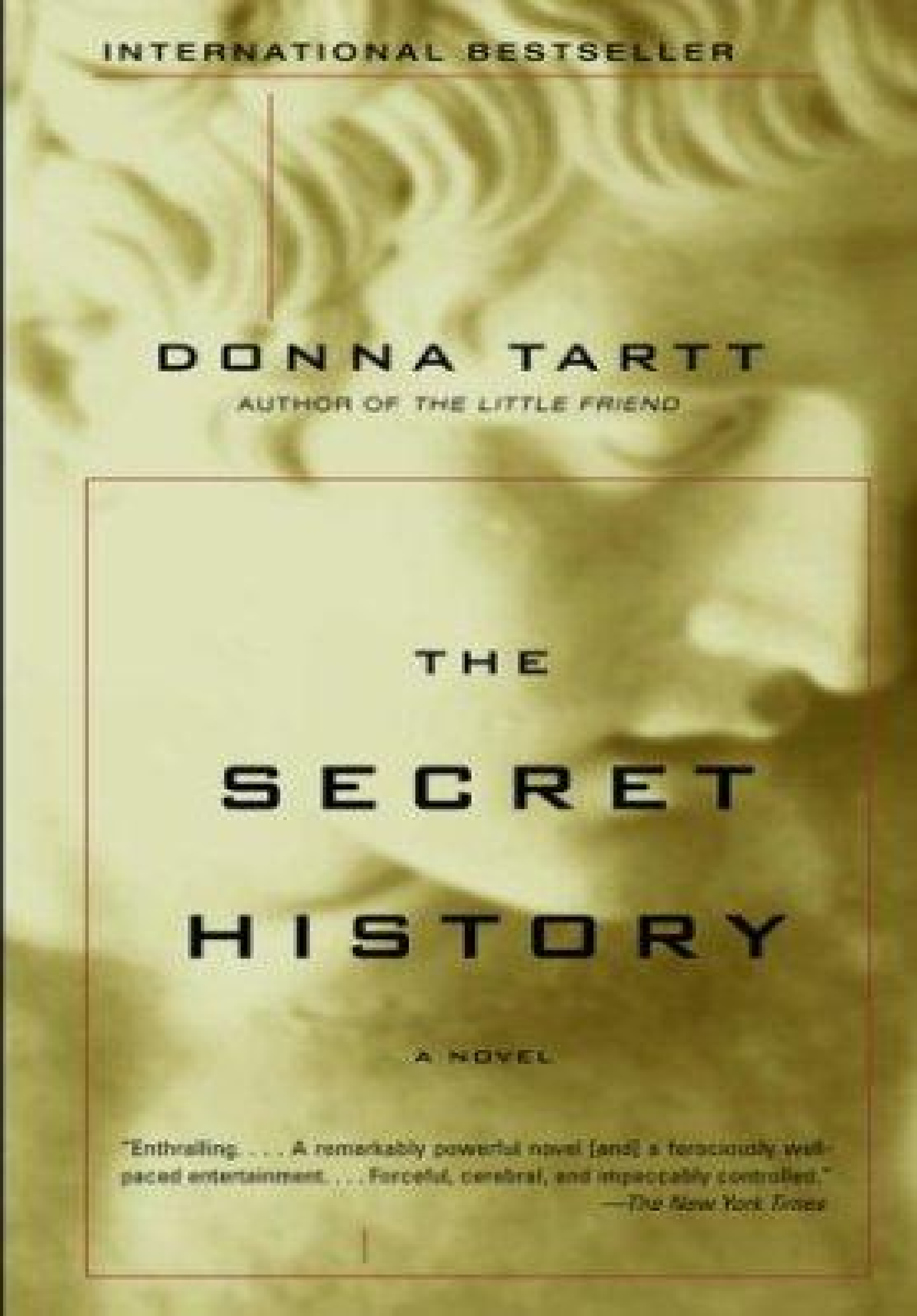

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

DONNA TARTT

AUTHOR OF *THE LITTLE FRIEND*

THE SECRET HISTORY

A NOVEL

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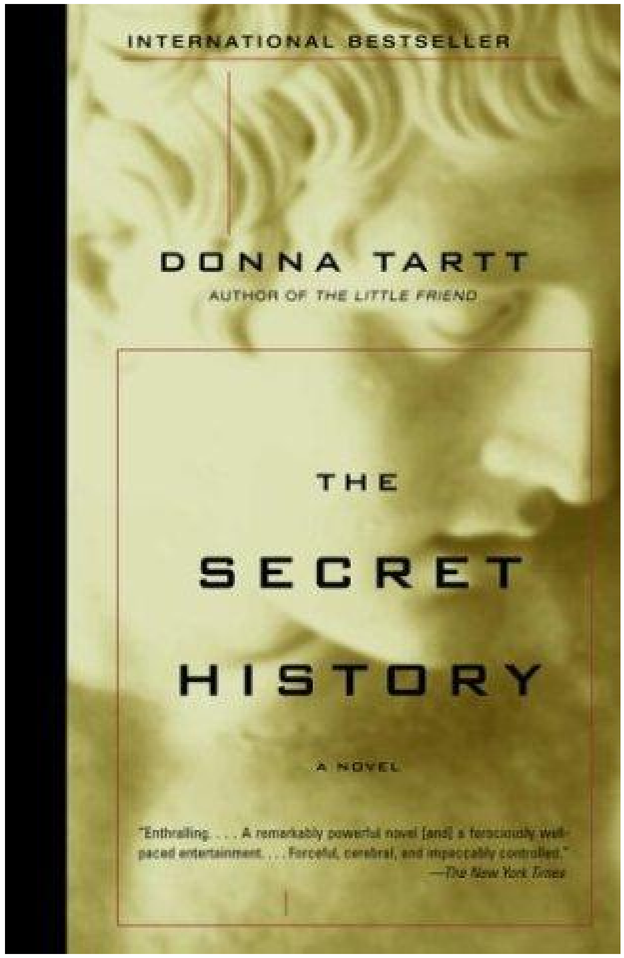
—*The New York Times*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The Secret History

For Bret Easton Ellis, whose generosity will never cease to warm my heart; and for Paul Edward Mc Gloin, muse and Maecenas, who is the dearest friend I will ever have in this world.

I enquire now as to the genesis of a philologist and assert the following:
1. A young man cannot possibly know what Greeks and Romans are.
2. He does not know whether he is suited for finding out about them.
– FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, Unzeitgemdsse Betrachtungen

Come then, and let us pass a leisure hour in storytelling, and our story shall be the education of our heroes.
– PLATO, Republic, book ii

Prologue

The snow in the mountains was melting and Bunny had been dead for several weeks before we came to understand the gravity of our situation. He'd been dead for ten days before they found him, you know. It was one of the biggest manhunts in Vermont history – state troopers, the FBI, even an army helicopter; the college closed, the dye factory in Hampden shut down, people coming from New Hampshire, upstate New York, as far away as Boston.

It is difficult to believe that Henry's modest plan could have worked so well despite these unforeseen events. We hadn't intended to hide the body where it couldn't be found. In fact, we hadn't hidden it at all but had simply left it where it fell in hopes that some luckless passer-by would stumble over it before anyone even noticed he was missing. This was a tale that told itself simply and well: the loose rocks, the body at the bottom of the ravine with a clean break in the neck, and the muddy skidmarks of dug-in heels pointing the way down; a hiking accident, no more, no less, and it might have been left at that, at quiet tears and a small funeral, had it not been for the snow that fell that night; it covered him without a trace, and ten days later, when the thaw finally came, the state troopers and the FBI and the searchers from the town all saw that they had been walking back and forth over his body until the snow above it was packed down like ice.

It is difficult to believe that such an uproar took place over an act for which I was partially responsible, even more difficult to believe I could have walked through it – the cameras, the uniforms, the black crowds sprinkled over Mount Cataract like ants in a sugar bowl – without incurring a blink of suspicion. But walking through it all was one thing; walking away, unfortunately, has proved to be quite another, and though once I thought I had left that ravine forever on an April afternoon long ago, now I am not so sure. Now the searchers have departed, and life has grown quiet around me, I have come to realize that while for years I might have imagined myself to be somewhere else, in reality I have been there all the time: up at the top by the muddy wheel-ruts in the new grass, where the sky is dark over the shivering apple blossoms and the first chill of the snow that will fall that night is already in the air.

What are you doing up here? said Bunny, surprised, when he found the four of us waiting for him.

Why, looking for new ferns, said Henry.

And after we stood whispering in the underbrush – one last look at the body and a last look round, no dropped keys, lost glasses, everybody got everything? – and then started single file through the woods, I took one glance back through the saplings that leapt to close the path behind me. Though I remember the walk back and the first lonely flakes of snow that came drifting through the pines, remember piling gratefully into the car and starting down the road like a family on vacation, with Henry driving clench-jawed through the potholes and the rest of us leaning over the seats and talking like children, though I remember only too well the long terrible night that lay ahead and the long terrible days and nights that followed, I have only to glance over my shoulder for all those years to drop away and I see it behind me again, the ravine, rising all green and black through the saplings, a picture that will never leave me.

I suppose at one time in my life I might have had any number of stories, but now there is no other. This is the only story I will ever be able to tell.

Book 1

Chapter 1

Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs.

A moi. L'histoire d'une de mes folies.

My name is Richard Papen. I am twenty-eight years old and I had never seen New England or Hampden College until I was nineteen. I am a Californian by birth and also, I have recently discovered, by nature. The last is something I admit only now, after the fact. Not that it matters.

I grew up in Piano, a small silicon village in the north. No sisters, no brothers. My father ran a gas station and my mother stayed at home until I got older and times got tighter and she went to work, answering phones in the office of one of the big chip factories outside San Jose.

Piano. The word conjures up drive-ins, tract homes, waves of heat rising from the blacktop. My years there created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup. Which I suppose was a very great gift, in a way. On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history, full of striking, simplistic environmental influences; a colorful past, easily accessible to strangers.

The dazzle of this fictive childhood – full of swimming pools and orange groves and dissolute, charming show-biz parents has all but eclipsed the drab original. In fact, when I think about my real childhood I am unable to recall much about it at all except a sad jumble of objects: the sneakers 1 wore year-round; coloring books and comics from the supermarket; little of interest, less of beauty. I was quiet, tall for my age, prone to freckles. I didn't have many friends but whether this was due to choice or circumstance I do not now know.1 did well in school, it seems, but not exceptionally well; I liked to read – Tom Swift, the Tolkien books – but also to watch television, which I did plenty of, lying on the carpet of our empty living room in the long dull afternoons after school.

I honestly can't remember much else about those years except a certain mood that permeated most of them, a melancholy feeling that I associate with watching 'The Wonderful World of Disney' on Sunday nights. Sunday was a sad day – early to bed, school the next morning, I was constantly worried my homework was wrong – but as I watched the fireworks go off in the night sky, over the floodlit castles of Disneyland, I was consumed by a more general sense of dread, of imprisonment within the dreary round of school and home: circumstances which, to me at least, presented sound empirical argument for gloom. My father was mean, and our house ugly, and my mother didn't pay much attention to me; my clothes were cheap and my haircut too short and no one at school seemed to like me that much; and since all this had been true for as long as I could remember, I felt things would doubtless continue in this depressing vein as far as I could foresee. In short: I felt my existence was tainted, in some subtle but essential way.

I suppose it's not odd, then, that I have trouble reconciling my life to those of my friends, or at least to their lives as I perceive them to be. Charles and Camilla are orphans (how I longed to be an orphan when I was a child!) reared by grandmothers and great-aunts in a house in Virginia: a childhood I like to think about, with horses and rivers and sweet-gum trees. And Francis.

His mother, when she had him, was only seventeen – a thinblooded, capricious girl with red hair and a rich daddy, who ran off with the drummer for Vance Vane and his Musical Swains.

She was home in three weeks, and the marriage was annulled in six; and, as Francis is fond of saying, the grandparents brought them up like brother and sister, him and his mother, brought them up in such a magnanimous style that even the gossips were impressed – English nannies and private schools, summers in Switzerland, winters in France. Consider even bluff old Bunny, if you would. Not a childhood of reefer coats and dancing lessons, any more than mine was. But an American childhood. Son of a Clemson football star turned banker. Four brothers, no sisters, in a big noisy house in the suburbs, with sailboats and tennis rackets and golden retrievers; summers on Cape Cod, boarding schools near Boston and tailgate picnics during football season; an upbringing vitally present in Bunny in every respect, from the way he shook your hand to the way he told a joke.

I do not now nor did 1 ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except a knowledge of Greek and the year of my life I spent in their company. And if love is a thing held in common, I suppose we had that in common, too, though I realize that might sound odd in light of the story I am about to tell.

How to begin.

After high school I went to a small college in my home town (my parents were opposed, as it had been made very plain that I was expected to help my father run his business, one of the many reasons I was in such an agony to escape) and, during my two years there, I studied ancient Greek. This was due to no love for the language but because I was majoring in pre-med (money, you see, was the only way to improve my fortunes, doctors make a lot of money, quod erat demonstrandum) and my counselor had suggested I take a language to fulfill the humanities requirement; and, since the Greek classes happened to meet in the afternoon, I took Greek so I could sleep late on Mondays. It was an entirely random decision which, as you will see, turned out to be quite fateful.

I did well at Greek, excelled in it, and I even won an award from the Classics department my last year. It was my favorite class because it was the only one held in a regular classroom no jars of cow hearts, no smell of formaldehyde, no cages full of screaming monkeys. Initially I had thought with hard work I could overcome a fundamental squeamishness and distaste for my subject, that perhaps with even harder work I could simulate something like a talent for it. But this was not the case. As the months went by I remained uninterested, if not downright sickened, by my study of biology; my grades were poor; I was held in contempt by teacher and classmate alike. In what seemed even to me a doomed and Pyrrhic gesture, I switched to English literature without telling my parents. I felt that I was cutting my own throat by this, that I would certainly be very sorry, being still convinced that it was better to fail in a lucrative field than to thrive in one that my father (who knew nothing of either finance or academia) had assured me was most unprofitable; one which would inevitably result in my hanging around the house for the rest of my life asking him for money; money which, he assured me forcefully, he had no intention of giving me.

So I studied literature and liked it better. But I didn't like home any better. I don't think I can explain the despair my surroundings inspired in me. Though I now suspect, given the circumstances and my disposition, I would've been unhappy anywhere, in Biarritz or Caracas or the Isle of Capri, I was then convinced that my unhappiness was indigenous to that place. Perhaps a part of it was. While to a certain extent Milton is right – the mind is its own place and in itself can make a Heaven of Hell and so forth – it is nonetheless clear that Piano was modeled less on Paradise than that other, more dolorous city. In high school I developed a habit of wandering through shopping malls after school, swaying through the bright, chill mezzanines until I was so dazed with consumer goods and product codes, with promenades and escalators, with mirrors and Muzak and noise and light, that a fuse would blow in my brain and all at once everything would become unintelligible: color without form, a babble of detached molecules. Then I would walk like a zombie to the parking lot and drive to the baseball field, where I wouldn't even get out of the car, just sit with my hands on the steering wheel and stare at the Cyclone fence and the yellowed winter grass until the sun went down and it was too dark for me to see.

Though I had a confused idea that my dissatisfaction was bohemian, vaguely Marxist in origin (when I was a teenager I made a fatuous show of socialism, mainly to irritate my father), I couldn't really begin to understand it; and I would have been angry if someone had suggested that it was due to a strong Puritan streak in my nature, which was in fact the case. Not long ago I found this passage in an old notebook, written when I was eighteen or so: 'There is to me about this place a smell of rot, the smell of rot that ripe fruit makes. Nowhere, ever, have the hideous mechanics of birth and copulation and death – those monstrous upheavals of life that the Greeks call miasma, defilement – been so brutal or been painted up to look so pretty; have so many people put so much faith in lies and mutability and death death death.'

This, I think, is pretty rough stuff. From the sound of it, had I stayed in California I might have ended up in a cult or at the very least practicing some weird dietary restriction. I remember reading about Pythagoras around this time, and finding some of his ideas curiously appealing – wearing white garments, for instance, or abstaining from foods which have a soul.

But instead I wound up on the East Coast.

I lit on Hampden by a trick of fate. One night, during a long Thanksgiving holiday of rainy weather, canned cranberries, ball games droning from the television, I went to my room after a fight with my parents (I cannot remember this particular fight, only that we always fought, about money and school) and was tearing through my closet trying to find my coat when out it flew: a brochure from Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont.

It was two years old, this brochure. In high school a lot of colleges had sent me things because I did well on my SATs, though unfortunately not well enough to warrant much in the way of scholarships, and this one 1 had kept in my Geometry book throughout my senior year.

I don't know why it was in my closet. I suppose I'd saved it because it was so pretty. Senior year, I had spent dozens of hours studying the photographs as though if I stared at them long enough and longingly enough I would, by some sort of osmosis, be transported into their clear, pure silence. Even now I remember those pictures, like pictures in a storybook one loved as a child. Radiant meadows, mountains vaporous in the trembling distance; leaves ankle-deep on a gusty autumn road; bonfires and fog in the valleys; cellos, dark windowpanes, snow.

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Established 1895.

(This alone was a fact to cause wonder; nothing 1 knew of in Piano had been established much before 1962.) Student body, five hundred. Coed. Progressive. Specializing in the liberal arts.

Highly selective. 'Hampden, in providing a well-rounded course of study in the Humanities, seeks not only to give students a rigorous background in the chosen field but insight into all the disciplines of Western art, civilization, and thought. In doing so, we hope to provide the individual not only with facts, but with the raw materials of wisdom.'

Hampden College, Hampden, Vermont. Even the name had an austere Anglican cadence, to my ear at least, which yearned hopelessly for England and was dead to the sweet dark rhythms of the little mission towns. For a long time I looked at a picture of the building they called Commons. It was suffused with a weak, academic light – different from Piano, different from anything I had ever known – a light that made me think of long hours in dusty libraries, and old books, and silence.

My mother knocked on the door, said my name. I didn't answer. I tore out the information form in the back of the brochure and started to fill it in. Name: John Richard Papen.

Address: 4487 Mimosa Court; Piano, California. Would you like to receive information on Financial Aid? Yes. And I mailed it the following morning.

The months subsequent were an endless dreary battle of paperwork, full of stalemates, fought in trenches. My father refused to complete the financial aid papers; finally, in desperation, I stole the tax returns from the glove compartment of his Toyota and did them myself. More waiting. Then a note from the Dean of Admissions. An interview was required, and when could I fly to Vermont? I could not afford to fly to Vermont, and I wrote and told him so. Another wait, another letter. The college would reimburse me for my travel expenses if their scholarship offer was accepted. Meanwhile the financial aid packet had come in. My family's contribution was more than my father said he could afford and he would not pay it. This sort of guerrilla warfare dragged on for eight months. Even today I do not fully understand the chain of events that brought me to Hampden.

Sympathetic professors wrote letters; exceptions of various sorts were made in my case. And less than a year after I'd sat down on the gold shag carpet of my little room in Piano and impulsively filled out the questionnaire, I was getting off the bus in Hampden with two suitcases and fifty dollars in my pocket.

I had never been east of Santa Fe, never north of Portland, and – when I stepped off the bus after a long anxious night that had begun somewhere in Illinois – it was six o'clock in the morning, and the sun was rising over mountains, and birches, and impossibly green meadows; and to me, dazed with night and no sleep and three days on the highway, it was like a country from a dream.

The dormitories weren't even dorms – or at any rate not like the dorms I knew, with cinderblock walls and depressing, yellowish light – but white clapboard houses with green shutters, set back from the Commons in groves of maple and ash. All the same it never occurred to me that my particular room, wherever ii "t might be, would be anything but ugly and disappointing and it was with something of a shock that I saw it for the first time – a white room with big north-facing windows, monkish and bare, with scarred oak floors and a ceiling slanted like a garret's. On my first night there, I sat on the bed during the twilight while the walls went slowly from gray to gold to black, listening to a soprano's voice climb dizzily up and down somewhere at the other end of the hall until at last the light was completely gone, and the faraway soprano spiraled on and on in the darkness like some angel of death, and I can't remember the air ever seeming as high and cold and rarefied as it was that night, or ever feeling farther away from the low-slung lines of dusty Piano.

Those first days before classes started I spent alone in my whitewashed room, in the bright meadows of Hampden. And I was happy in those first days as really I'd never been before, roaming like a sleepwalker, stunned and drunk with beauty. A group of red-cheeked girls playing soccer, ponytails flying, their shouts and laughter carrying faintly over the velvety, twilit field.

Trees creaking with apples, fallen apples red on the grass beneath, the heavy sweet smell of apples rotting on the ground and the steady thrumming of wasps around them. Commons clock tower: ivied brick, white spire, spellbound in the hazy distance.

The shock of first seeing a birch tree at night, rising up in the dark as cool and slim as a ghost. And the nights, bigger than imagining: black and gusty and enormous, disordered and wild with stars.

I was planning to sign up for Greek again, as it was the only language at which I was at all proficient. But when I told this to the academic counselor to whom I had been assigned – a French teacher named Georges Laforgue, with olive skin and a pinched, long-nostriled nose like a turtle's – he only smiled, and pressed the tips of his fingers together. 'I am afraid there may be a problem,' he said, in accented English.

'Why?'

'There is only one teacher of ancient Greek here and he is very particular about his students,' 'I've studied Greek for two years.'

That probably will not make any difference. Besides, if you are going to major in English literature you will need a modern language. There is still space left in my Elementary French class and some room in German and Italian. The Spanish' – he consulted his list – 'the Spanish classes are for the most part filled but if you like I will have a word with Mr Delgado.'

'Maybe you could speak to the Greek teacher instead.'

'I don't know if it would do any good. He accepts only a limited number of students. A very limited number. Besides, in my opinion, he conducts the selection on a personal rather than academic basis.'

His voice bore a hint of sarcasm; also a suggestion that, if it was all the same to me, he would prefer not to continue this particular conversation.

'I don't know what you mean,' I said.

Actually, I thought I did know. Laforgue's answer surprised me. 'It's nothing like that,' he said. 'Of course he is a distinguished scholar. He happens to be quite charming as well. But he has what I think are some very odd ideas about teaching. He and his students have virtually no contact with the rest of the division. I don't know why they continue to list his courses in the general catalogue – it's misleading, every year there is confusion about it – because, practically speaking, the classes are closed. I am told that to study with him one must have read the right things, hold similar views. It has happened repeatedly that he has turned away students such as yourself who have done prior work in classics.

With me' – he lifted an eyebrow – 'if the student wants to learn what I teach and is qualified, I allow him in my classes. Very democratic, no? It is the best way.'

'Does that sort of thing happen often here?'

'Of course. There are difficult teachers at every school. And plenty' – to my surprise, he lowered his voice – 'and plenty here who are far more difficult than him. Though 1 must ask that you do not quote me on that.'

'I won't,' I said, a bit startled by this sudden confidential manner.

'Really, it is quite essential that you don't.' He was leaning forward, whispering, his tiny mouth scarcely moving as he spoke.

'I must insist. Perhaps you are not aware of this but I have several formidable enemies in the Literature Division. Even, though you may scarcely believe it, here in my own department. Besides,' he continued in a more normal tone, 'he is a special case. He has taught here for many years and even refuses payment for his work.'

'Why?'

'He is a wealthy man. He donates his salary to the college, though he accepts, I think, one dollar a year for tax purposes.'

'Oh,' I said. Even though I had been at Hampden only a few days, I was already accustomed to the official accounts of financial hardship, of limited endowment, of corners cut.

'Now me,' said Lafbrgue, 'I like to teach well enough, but I have a wife and a daughter in school in France – the money comes in handy, yes?'

'Maybe I'll talk to him anyway.'

Laforgue shrugged. 'You can try. But I advise you not to make an appointment, or probably he will not see you. His name is Julian Morrow.'

I had not been particularly bent on taking Greek, but what Laforgue said intrigued me. I went downstairs and walked into the first office I saw. A thin, sour-looking woman with tired blond hair was sitting at the desk in the front room, eating a sandwich.

'It's my lunch hour,' she said. 'Come back at two.'

'I'm sorry. I'm just looking for a teacher's office.'

'Well, I'm the registrar, not the switchboard. But I might know. Who is it?'

'Julian Morrow.'

'Oh. him,' she said, surprised. 'What do you want with him? He's upstairs, I think, in the Lyceum.'

'What room?'

'Only teacher up there. Likes his peace and quiet. You'll find him.'

Actually, finding the Lyceum wasn't easy at all. It was a small building on the edge of campus, old and covered with ivy in such a manner as to be almost indistinguishable from its landscape.

Downstairs were lecture halls and classrooms, all of them empty, with clean blackboards and freshly waxed floors. I wandered around helplessly until finally I noticed the staircase – small and badly lit – in the far corner of the building.

Once at the top I found myself in a long, deserted hallway.

Enjoying the noise of my shoes on the linoleum, I walked along briskly, looking at the closed doors for numbers or names until I came to one that had a brass card holder and, within it, an engraved card that read julian morrow. I stood there for a moment and then I knocked, three short raps.

A minute or so passed, and another, and then the white door opened just a crack. A face looked out at me. It was a small, wise face, as alert and poised as a question; and though certain features of it were suggestive of youth – the elfin upsweep of the eyebrows, the deft lines of nose and jaw and mouth – it was by no means a young face, and the hair was snow white.

I stood there for a moment as he blinked at me.

'How may I help you?' The voice was reasonable and kind, in the way that pleasant adults sometimes have with children.

'I – well, my name is Richard Papen '

He put his head to the side and blinked again, bright-eyed, amiable as a sparrow.

'- and I want to take your class in ancient Greek.'

His face fell. 'Oh. I'm sorry.' His tone of voice, incredibly enough, seemed to suggest that he really was sorry, sorrier than I was. 'I can't think of anything I'd like better, but I'm afraid there isn't any room. My class is already filled.'

Something about this apparently sincere regret gave me courage.

'Surely there must be some way,' I said. 'One extra student '

Tm terribly sorry, Mr Papen,' he said, almost as if he were consoling me on the death of a beloved friend, tiring to make me understand that he was powerless to help me in any substantial way. 'But I have limited myself to five students and I cannot even think of adding another.'

'Five students is not very many.'

He shook his head quickly, eyes shut, as if entreaty were more than he could bear.

'Really, I'd love to have you, but I mustn't even consider it,' he said. 'I'm terribly sorry. Will you excuse me now? I have a student with me.'

More than a week went by. I started my classes and got a job with a professor of psychology named Dr Roland. (I was to assist him in some vague 'research,' the nature of which I never discovered; he was an old, dazed, disordered-lookiiig fellow, a behavioralist, who spent most of his time loitering in the teachers' lounge.) And I made some friends, most of them freshmen who lived in my house. Friends is perhaps an inaccurate word to use.

We ate our meals together, saw each other coming and going, but mainly were thrown together by the fact that none of us knew anybody – a situation which, at the time, did not seem necessarily unpleasant. Among the few people I had, net who'd been at Hampden awhile, I asked what the story was with Julian Morrow.

Nearly everyone had heard of him, and I was givm all sorts of contradictory but fascinating information: that he ivas a brilliant man; that he was a fraud; that he had no college degree; that he had been a great intellectual in the forties, and i friend to Ezra Pound and The. S. Eliot; that his family money iiad come from a partnership in a white-shoe banking firm or, conversely, from the purchase of foreclosed property during the Depression; that he had dodged the draft in some war (though chronologically this was difficult to compute); that he had ties with the Vatican; a deposed royal family in the Middle East; Franco's Spain. The degree of truth in any of this was, of course, unknowable but the more I heard about him, the more interested I became, and I began to watch for him and his little group of pupils around campus. Four boys and a girl, they were nothing so unusual at a distance. At close range, though, they were an arresting party at least to me, who had never seen anything like them, and to whom they suggested a variety of picturesque and fictive qualities.

Two of the boys wore glasses, curiously enough the same kind: tiny, old-fashioned, with round steel rims. The larger of the two – and he was quite large, well over six feet – was dark-haired, with a square jaw and coarse, pale skin. He might have been handsome had his features been less set, or his eyes, behind the glasses, less expressionless and blank. He wore dark English suits and carried an umbrella (a bizarre sight in Hampden) and he walked stiffly through the throngs of hippies and beatniks and preppies and punks with the self-conscious formality of an old ballerina, surprising in one so large as he. 'Henry Winter,' said my friends when I pointed him out, at a distance, making a wide circle to avoid a group of bongo players on the lawn.

The smaller of the two – but not by much – was a sloppy blond boy, rosy-cheeked and gum-chewing, with a relentlessly cheery demeanor and his fists thrust deep in the pockets of his knee-sprung trousers. He wore the same jacket every day, a shapeless brown tweed that was frayed at the elbows and short in the sleeves, and his sandy hair was parted on the left, so a long forelock fell over one bespectacled eye. Bunny Corcoran was his name, Bunny being somehow short for Edmund. His voice was loud and honking, and carried in the dining halls.

The third boy was the most exotic of the set. Angular and elegant, he was precariously thin, with nervous hands and a shrewd albino face and a short, fiery mop of the reddest hair I had ever seen. I thought (erroneously) that he dressed like Alfred Douglas, or the Comte de Montesquiou: beautiful starchy shirts with French cuffs; magnificent neckties; a black greatcoat that billowed behind him as he walked and made him look like a cross between a student prince andjack the Ripper. Once, to my delight, I even saw him wearing pince-nez. (Later, I discovered that they weren't real pince-nez, but only had glass in them, and that his eyes were a good deal sharper than my own.) Francis Abernathy was his name. Further inquiries elicited suspicion from male acquaintances, who wondered at my interest in such a person.

And then there were a pair, boy and girl. I saw them together a great deal, and at first I thought they were boyfriend and girlfriend, until one day I saw them up close and realized they had to be siblings. Later I learned they were twins. They looked very much alike, with heavy dark-blond hair and epicene faces as clear, as cheerful and grave, as a couple of Flemish angels.

And perhaps most unusual in the context of Hampden – where pseudo-intellects and teenage decadents abounded, and where black clothing was de rigueur – they liked to wear pale clothes, particularly white. In this swarm of cigarettes and dark sophistication they appeared here and there like figures from an allegory, or long-dead celebrants from some forgotten garden party. It was easy to find out who they were, as they shared the distinction of being the only twins on campus. Their names were Charles and Camilla Macaulay.

All of them, to me, seemed highly unapproachable. But I watched them with interest whenever I happened to see them: Francis, stooping to talk to a cat on a doorstep; Henry dashing past at the wheel of a little white car, with Julian in the passenger's seat; Bunny leaning out of an upstairs window to yell something at the twins on the lawn below. Slowly, more information came niy way. Francis Abernathy was from Boston and, from most accounts, quite wealthy. Henry, too, was said to be wealthy; what's more, he was a linguistic genius. He spoke a number of languages, ancient and modern, and had published a translation of Anacreon, with commentary, when he was only eighteen. (I found this out from Georges Laforgue, who was otherwise sour and reticent on the topic; later I discovered that Henry, during his freshman year, had embarrassed Laforgue badly in front of the entire literature faculty during the question-and-answer period of his annual lecture on Racine.) The twins had an apartment off campus, and were from somewhere down south. And Bunny Corcoran had a habit of playing John Philip Sousa march tunes in his room, at full volume, late at night.

Not to imply that 1 was overly preoccupied with any of this. I was settling in at school by this time; classes had begun and I was busy with my work. My interest in Julian Morrow and his Greek pupils, though still keen, was starting to wane when a curious coincidence happened.

It happened the Wednesday morning of my second week, when I was in the library making some Xeroxes for Dr Roland before my eleven o'clock class. After about thirty minutes, spots of light swimming in front of my eyes, I went back to the front desk to give the Xerox key to the librarian and as I turned to leave I saw them, Bunny and the twins, sitting at a table that was spread with papers and pens and bottles of ink. The bottles of ink I remember particularly, because I was very charmed by them, and by the long black straight pens, which looked incredibly archaic and troublesome. Charles was wearing a white tennis sweater, and Camilla a sun dress with a sailor collar, and a straw hat. Bunny's tweed jacket was slung across the back of his chair, exposing several large rips and stains in the lining. He was leaning his elbows on the table, hair in eyes, his rumpled shirtsleeves held up with striped garters. Their heads were close together and they were talking quietly.

I suddenly wanted to know what they were saying. I went to the bookshelf behind their table – the long way, as if I wasn't sure what 1 was looking for – all the way down until I was so close I could've reached out and touched Bunny's arm. My back to them, I picked a book at random – a ridiculous sociological text, as it happened – and pretended to study the index. Secondary Analysis. Secondary Deviance. Secondary Groups. Secondary Schools.

'I don't know about that,' Camilla was saying. 'If the Greeksi are sailing to Carthage, it should be accusative. Remember? Place J whither? That's the rule.'

'Can't be.' This was Bunny. His voice was nasal, garrulous,, W. C. Fields with a bad case of Long Island lockjaw. 'It's not' place whither, it's place to. I put my money on the ablative case.'

There was a confused rattling of papers.

'Wait,' said Charles. His voice was a lot like his sister's **| hoarse, slightly southern. 'Look at this. They're not just sailing! to Carthage, they're sailing to attack it.'

'You're crazy.'

'No, they are. Look at the next sentence. We need a dative.'

'Are you sure?'

More rustling of papers.

'Absolutely. Epi to karchidona.'

'I don't see how,' said Bunny. He sounded like Thurstc Ho well on 'Gilligan's Island.'

'Ablative's the ticket. The hard on are always ablative.'

A slight pause. 'Bunny,' said Charles, 'you're mixed up. Tb S ablative is in Latin.'

'Well, of course, I know that,' said Bunny irritably, after confused pause which seemed to indicate the contrary, 'but ye know what I mean. Aorist, ablative, all the same thing, really…1 'Look, Charles,' said Camilla. 'This dative won't work.'

'Yes it will. They're sailing to attack, aren't they?'

'Yes, but the Greeks sailed over the sea to Carthage.'

'But 1 put that epi in front of it.'

'Well, we can attack and still use epi, but we have to use an accusative because of the first rules.'

Segregation. Self. Self-concept. I looked down at the index and racked my brains for the case they were looking for. The Greeks sailed over the sea to Carthage. To Carthage. Place whither, place whence. Carthage.

Suddenly something occurred to me. I closed the book and put it on the shelf and turned around. 'Excuse me?' I said.

Immediately they stopped talking, startled, and turned to stare at me.

Tm sorry, but would the locative case do?'

Nobody said anything for a long moment.

'Locative?' said Charles.

'Just add zde to karchido,' I said. 'I think it's zde. If you use that, you won't need a preposition, except the epi if they're going to war. It implies "Carthage-ward," so you won't have to worry about a case, either.'

Charles looked at his paper, then at me. 'Locative?' he said.

'That's pretty obscure.'

'Are you sure it exists for Carthage?' said Camilla.

I hadn't thought of this. 'Maybe not,' I said. 'I know it does for Athens.'

Charles reached over and hauled the lexicon towards him over the table and began to leaf through it.

'Oh, hell, don't bother,' said Bunny stridently. 'If you don't have to decline it and it doesn't need a preposition it sounds good to me.' He reared back in his chair and looked up at me. 'I'd like to shake your hand, stranger.' I offered it to him; he clasped and shook it firmly, almost knocking an ink bottle over with his elbow as he did so. 'Glad to meet you, yes, yes,' he said, reaching up with the other hand to brush the hair from his eyes.

I was confused by this sudden glare of attention; it was as if the characters in a favorite painting, absorbed in their own concerns, had looked up out of the canvas and spoken to me.

Only the day before Francis, in a swish of black cashmere and cigarette smoke, had brushed past me in a corridor. For a moment, as his arm touched mine, he was a creature of flesh and blood, but the next he was a hallucination again, a figment of the imagination stalking down the hallway as heedless of me as ghosts, in their shadowy rounds, are said to be heedless of the living.

Charles, still fumbling with the lexicon, rose and offered his hand. 'My name is Charles Macaulay.'

'Richard Papen.'

'Oh, you're the one,' said Camilla suddenly.

'What?'

'You. You came by to ask about the Greek class.'

'This is my sister,' said Charles, 'and this is – Bun, did you tell him your name already?'

'No, no, don't think so. You've made me a happy man, sir.

We had ten more like this to do and five minutes to do them in.

Edmund Corcoran's the name,' said Bunny, grasping my hand again.

'How long have you studied Greek?' said Camilla.

'Two years,' 'You're rather good at it,' 'Pity you aren't in our class,' said Bunny.

A strained silence.

'Well,' said Charles uncomfortably, 'Julian is funny about things like that,' 'Go see him again, why don't you,' Bunny said. 'Take him some flowers and tell him you love Plato and he'll be eating out of your hand,' Another silence, this one more disagreeable than the first.

Camilla smiled, not exactly at me – a sweet, unfocused smile, quite impersonal, as if I were a waiter or a clerk in a store. Beside her Charles, who was still standing, smiled too and raised a polite eyebrow – a gesture which might have been nervous, might have meant anything, really, but which I took to mean Is that all?

I mumbled something and was about to turn away when Bunny – who was staring in the opposite direction – shot out an arm and grabbed me by the wrist. 'Wait,' he said.

Startled, I looked up. Henry had just come in the door – dark suit, umbrella, and all.

When he got to the table he pretended not to see me. 'Hello,' he said to them. 'Are you finished?'

Bunny tossed his head at me. 'Look here, Henry, we've got someone to meet you,' he said.

Henry glanced up. His expression did not change. He shut his eyes and then reopened them, as if he found it extraordinary that someone such as myself should stand in his path of vision.

'Yes, yes,' said Bunny. 'This man's name is Richard – Richard what?'

'Papen.'

'Yes, yes. Richard Papen. Studies Greek.'

Henry brought his head up to look at me. 'Not here, surely,' he said.

'No,' I said, meeting his gaze, but his stare was so rude I was forced to cut my eyes away.

'Oh, Henry, look at this, would you,' said Charles hastily, rustling through the papers again. 'We were going to use a dative or an accusative here but he suggested locative?'

Henry leaned over his shoulder and inspected the page. 'Hmm, archaic locative,' he said. 'Very Homeric. Of course, it would be grammatically correct but perhaps a bit off contextually.' He brought his head back up to scrutinize me. The light was at an angle that glinted off his tiny spectacles, and I couldn't see his eyes behind them. 'Very interesting. You're a Homeric scholar?'

I might have said yes, but I had the feeling he would be glad to catch me in a mistake, and that he would be able to do it easily. 'I like Homer,' I said weakly.

He regarded me with chill distaste. 'I love Homer,' he said.

'Of course we're studying things rather more modern, Plato and the tragedians and so forth.'

I was trying to think of some response when he looked away in disinterest.

'We should go,' he said.

Charles shuffled his papers together, stood up again; Camilla stood beside him and this time she offered me her hand, too.

Side by side, they were very much alike, in similarity less of lineament than of manner and bearing, a correspondence of gesture which bounced and echoed between them so that a blink seemed to reverberate, moments later, in a twitch of the other's eyelid. Their eyes were the same color of gray, intelligent and calm. She, I thought, was very beautiful, in an unsettling, almost medieval way which would not be apparent to the casual observer.

Bunny pushed his chair back and slapped me between the shoulder blades. 'Well, sir,' he said, 'we must get together sometime and talk about Greek, yes?'

'Goodbye,' Henry said, with a nod.

'Goodbye,' I said. They strolled off and I stood where I was and watched them go, walking out of the library in a wide phalanx, side by side.

When I went by Dr Roland's office a few minutes later to drop off the Xeroxes, I asked him if he could give me an advance on my work-study check.

He leaned back in his chair and trained his watery, red-rimmed eyes on me. 'Well, you know,' he said, 'for the past ten years, I've made it my practice not to do that. Let me tell you why that is.'

'I know, sir,' I said hastily. Dr Roland's discourses on his 'practices' could sometimes take half an hour or more. 'I understand.

Only it's kind of an emergency.'

He leaned forward again and cleared his throat. 'And what,' he said, 'might that be?'

His hands, folded on the desk before him, were gnarled with veins and had a bluish, pearly sheen around the knuckles. I stared at them. I needed ten or twenty dollars, needed it badly, but I had come in without first deciding what to say. 'I don't know,' I said. 'Something has come up.'

He furrowed his eyebrows impressively. Dr Roland's senile manner was said to be a facade; to me it seemed quite genuine but sometimes, when you were off your guard, he would display an unexpected flash of lucidity, which – though it frequently did not relate to the topic at hand – was evidence that rational processes rumbled somewhere in the muddied depths of his consciousness.

'It's my car,' I said, suddenly inspired. I didn't have a car. 'I need to get it fixed.'

I had not expected him to inquire further but instead he perked up noticeably. 'What's the trouble?'

'Something with the transmission.'

'Is it dual-pathed? Air-cooled?'

'Air-cooled,' I said, shifting to the other foot. I did not care for this conversational turn. I don't know a thing about cars and am hard-pressed to change a tire.

'What've you got, one of those little V-6 numbers?'

'Yes.'

'I'm not surprised. All the kids seem to crave them.'

I had no idea how to respond to this.

He pulled out his desk drawer and began to pick things up and bring them close to his eyes and put them back in again.

'Once a transmission goes,' he said, 'in my experience the car is gone. Especially on a V-6. You might as well take that vehicle to the junk heap. Now, myself, I've got a '98 Regency Brougham, ten years old. With me, it's regular checkups, new filter every fifteen hundred miles, and new oil every three thousand. Runs a dream. Watch out for these garages in town,' he said sharply.

'Pardon?'

He'd found his checkbook at last. 'Well, you ought to go to the Bursar but I guess this'll be all right,' he said, opening it and beginning to write laboriously. 'Some of these places in Hampden, they find out you're from the college, they'll charge you double. Redeemed Repair is generally the best – they're a bunch of born-agains down there but they'll still shake you down pretty good if you don't keep an eye on them.'

He tore out the check and handed it to me. I glanced at it and my heart skipped a beat. Two hundred dollars. He'd signed it and everything.

'Don't you let them charge you a penny more,' he said.

'No sir,' I said, barely able to conceal my joy. What would I do with all this money? Maybe he would even forget he had given it to me.

He pulled down his glasses and looked at me over the tops of them. 'That's Redeemed Repair,' he said. They're out on Highway 6. The sign is shaped like a cross.'

'Thank you,' I said.

I walked down the hall with spirits soaring, and two hundred dollars in my pocket, and the first thing I did was to go downstairs to the pay phone and call a cab to take me into Hampden town.

If there's one thing I'm good at, it's lying on my feet. It's sort of a gift I have.

And what did I do in Hampden town? Frankly, I was too staggered by my good fortune to do much of anything. It was a glorious day; I was sick of being poor, so, before I thought better of it, I went into an expensive men's shop on the square and bought a couple of shirts. Then I went down to the Salvation Army and poked around in bins for a while and found a Harris tweed overcoat and a pair of brown wingtips that fit me, also some cufflinks and a funny old tie that had pictures of men hunting Jeer on it.

When I came out of the store I was happy to find that I still had nearly a hundred dollars. Should I go to the bookstore?

To the movies? Buy a bottle of Scotch? In the end, I was so swarmed by the flock of possibilities that drifted up murmuring and smiling to crowd about me on the bright autumn sidewalk that – like a farm boy flustered by a bevy of prostitutes -1 brushed right through them, to the pay phone on the corner, to call a cab to take me to school.

Once in my room, I spread the clothes on my bed. The cufflinks were beaten up and had someone else's initials on them, but they looked like real gold, glinting in the drowsy autumn sun which poured through the window and soaked in yellow pools on the oak floor – voluptuous, rich, intoxicating.

I had a feeling of deja vu when, the next afternoon, Julian answered the door exactly as he had the first time, by opening it only a crack and looking through it warily, as if there were something wonderful in his office that needed guarding, something that he was careful not everyone should see. It was a feeling I would come to know well in the next months. Even now, years later and far away, sometimes in dreams I find myself standing before that white door, waiting for him to appear like the gatekeeper in a fairy story: ageless, watchful, sly as a child.

When he saw it was me, he opened the door slightly wider than he had the first time. 'Mr Pepin again, isn't it?' he said.

I didn't bother to correct him. 'I'm afraid so.'

He looked at me for a moment. 'You have a wonderful name, you know,' he said. 'There were kings of France named Pepin.'

'Are you busy now?'

'I am never too busy for an heir to the French throne if that is in fact what you are,' he said pleasantly.

'I'm afraid not.'

He laughed and quoted a little Greek epigram about honesty being a dangerous virtue, and, to my surprise, opened the door and ushered me in.

It was a beautiful room, not an office at all, and much bigger than it looked from outside – airy and white, with a high ceiling and a breeze fluttering in the starched curtains. In the corner, near a low bookshelf, was a big round table littered with teapots and Greek books, and there were flowers everywhere, roses and carnations and anemones, on his desk, on the table, in the windowsills. The roses were especially fragrant; their smell hung rich and heavy in the air, mingled with the smell of bergamot, and black China tea, and a faint inky scent of camphor. Breathing deep, I felt intoxicated. Everywhere I looked was something beautiful – Oriental rugs, porcelains, tiny paintings like jewels a dazzle of fractured color that struck me as if I had stepped into one of those little Byzantine churches that are so plain on the outside; inside, the most paradisal painted eggshell of gilt and tesserae.

He sat in an armchair by the window and motioned for me to sit, too. 'I suppose you've come about the Greek class,' he said.

'Yes.'

His eyes were kind, frank, more gray than blue. 'It's rather late in the term,' he said.

'I'd like to study it again. It seems a shame to drop it after two years.'

He arched his eyebrows – deep, mischievous – and looked at his folded hands for a moment. 'I'm told you're from California.'

'Yes, I am,' I said, rather startled. Who had told him that?

'I don't know many people from the West,' he said. 'I don't know if I would like it there.' He paused, looking pensive and vaguely troubled. 'And what do you do in California?'

I gave him the spiel. Orange groves, failed movie stars, lamplit cocktail hours by the swimming pool, cigarettes, ennui. He listened, his eyes fixed on mine, apparently entranced by these fraudulent recollections. Never had my efforts met with such attentiveness, such keen solicitude. He seemed so utterly enthralled that I was tempted to embroider a little more than perhaps was prudent.

'How thrilling,' he said warmly when I, half-euphoric, was finally played out. 'How very romantic.'

'Well, we're all quite used to it out there, you see,' I said, trying not to fidget, flushed with the brilliance of my success.

'And what does a person with such a romantic temperament seek in the study of the classics?' He asked this as if, having had the good fortune to catch such a rare bird as myself, he was anxious to extract my opinion while I was still captive in his office.

'If by romantic you mean solitary and introspective,' I said, 'I think romantics are frequently the best classicists.'

He laughed. 'The great romantics are often failed classicists.

But that's beside the point, isn't it? What do you think of Hamp den? Are you happy here?'

I provided an exegesis, not as brief as it might have been, of why at the moment I found the college satisfactory for my purposes.

'Young people often find the country a bore,' said Julian.

'Which is not to say that it isn't good for them. Have you traveled much? Tell me what it was that attracted you to this place. I should think a young man such as yourself would be at a loss outside the city, but perhaps you feel tired of city life, is that so?'

So skillfully and engagingly that I was quite disarmed, he led me deftly from topic to topic, and I am sure that in this talk, which seemed only a few minutes but was really much longer, he managed to extract everything about me he wanted to know.

I did not suspect that his rapt interest might spring from anything less than the very richest enjoyment of my own company, and though I found myself talking with relish on a bewildering variety of topics – some of them quite personal, and with more frankness than was customary – I was convinced that I was acting of my own volition. I wish I could remember more of what was said that day – actually, I do remember much of what,' said, most of it too fatuous for me to recall with pleasure. The only point at which he differed (aside from an incredulous eyebrow raised at my mention of Picasso; when I came to know him better I realized that he must have thought this an almost personal affront) was on the topic of psychology, which was, after all, heavy on my mind, working for Dr Roland and everything.

'But do you really think,' he said, concerned, 'that one can call psychology a science?'

'Certainly. What else is it?'

'But even Plato knew that class and conditioning and so forth have an inalterable effect on the individual. It seems to me that psychology is only another word for what the ancients called fate.'

'Psychology is a terrible word.'

He agreed vigorously. 'Yes, it is terrible, isn't it?' he said, but with an expression that indicated that he thought it rather tasteless of me even to use it. 'Perhaps in certain ways it is a helpful construct in talking about a certain kind of mind. The country people who live around me are fascinating because their lives are so closely bound to fate that they really are predestined. But' he laughed – 'I'm afraid my students are never very interesting to me because I always know exactly what they're going to do.'

I was charmed by his conversation, and despite its illusion of being rather modern and digressive (to me, the hallmark of the modern mind is that it loves to wander from its subject) I now see that he was leading me by circumlocution to the same points again and again. For if the modern mind is whimsical and discursive, the classical mind is narrow, unhesitating, relentless.

It is not a quality of intelligence that one encounters frequently these days. But though I can digress with the best of them, I am nothing in my soul if not obsessive.

We talked a while longer, and presently fell silent. After a moment Julian said courteously, 'If you'd like, I'd be happy to take you as a pupil, Mr Papen.'

I, looking out the window and having half-forgotten why I was there, turned to gape at him and couldn't think of a thing to say.

'However, before you accept, there are a few conditions to which you must agree.'

'What?' I said, suddenly alert.

'Will you go to the Registrar's office tomorrow and put in a request to change counselors?' He reached for a pen in a cup on his desk; amazingly, it was full of Montblanc fountain pens, Meisterstiicks, at least a dozen of them. Quickly he wrote out a note and handed it to me. 'Don't lose it,' he said, 'because the Registrar never assigns me counselees unless I request them.'

The note was written in a masculine, rather nineteenth century hand, with Greek e's. The ink was still wet. 'But I have a counselor,' I said.

'It is my policy never to accept a pupil unless I am his counselor as well. Other members of the literature faculty disagree with my teaching methods and you will run into problems if someone else gains the power to veto my decisions. You should pick up some drop-add forms as well. I think you are going to have to drop all the classes you are currently taking, except the French, which would be as well for you to keep. You appear to be deficient in the area of modern languages.'

I was astonished. 'I can't drop all my classes.'

'Why not?'

'Registration is over.'

'That doesn't matter at all,' said Julian serenely. 'The classes that I want you to pick up will be with me. You will probably be taking three or four classes with me per term for the rest of your time here.'

I looked at him. No wonder he had only five students. 'But how can I do that?' I said.

He laughed. Tm afraid you haven't been at Hampden very long. The administration doesn't like it much, but there's nothing they can do. Occasionally they try to raise problems with distribution requirements but that's never caused any real trouble.

We study art, history, philosophy, all sorts of things. If I find you are deficient in a given area, 1 may decide to give you a tutorial, perhaps refer you to another teacher. As French is not my first language, I think it wise if you continue to study that with Mr Laforgue. Next year I'll start you on Latin. It's a difficult language, but knowing Greek will make it easier for you. The most satisfying of languages, Latin. You will find it a delight to learn.'

I listened, a bit affronted by his tone. To do what he asked was tantamount to my transferring entirely out of Hampden College into his own little academy of ancient Greek, student body five, six including me. 'All my classes with you?' I said.

'Not quite all of them,' he said seriously, and then laughed when he saw the look on my face. 'I believe that having a great diversity of teachers is harmful and confusing for a young mind, in the same way I believe that it is better to know one book intimately than a hundred superficially,' he said. 'I know the modern world tends not to agree with me, but after all, Plato had only one teacher, and Alexander.'

Slowly I nodded, trying as I did so to think of a tactful way to withdraw, when my eyes met his and suddenly I thought: Why not? I was slightly giddy with the force of his personality but the extremism of the offer was appealing as well. His students – if they were any mark of his tutelage – were imposing enough, and different as they all were they shared a certain coolness, a cruel, mannered charm which was not modern in the least but had a strange cold breath of the ancient world: they were magnificent creatures, such eyes, such hands, such looks – sic oculos, sic ilk manus, sic oraferebat. I envied them, and found them attractive; moreover this strange quality, far from being natural, gave every indication of having been intensely cultivated. (It was the same, I would come to find, with Julian: though he gave quite the opposite impression, of freshness and candor, it was not spontaneity but superior art which made it seem unstudied.) Studied or not, I wanted to be like them. It was heady to think that these qualities were acquired ones and that, perhaps, this was the way I might learn them.

This was all a long way from Piano, and my father's gas station. 'And if I do take classes with you, will they all be in Greek?' I asked him.

He laughed. 'Of course not. We'll be studying Dante, Virgil, all sorts of things. But I wouldn't advise you to go out and buy a copy of Goodbye, Columbus' (required, notoriously, in one of the freshman English classes) 'if you will forgive me for being vulgar.'

Georges Laforgue was disturbed when I told him what I planned to do. 'This is a serious business,' he said. 'You understand, don't you, how limited will be your contact with the rest of the faculty and with the school?'

'He's a good teacher,' I said.

'No teacher is that good. And if you should by chance have a disagreement with him, or be treated unjustly in any way, there will be nothing anyone on the faculty can do for you. Pardon me, but I do not see the point of paying a thirty-thousand-dollar tuition simply to study with one instructor.'

I thought of referring that question to the Hampden College Endowment Fund, but I said nothing.

He leaned back in his chair. 'Forgive me, but I should think the elitist values of such a man would be repugnant to you,' he said. 'Frankly, this is the first time I have ever heard of his accepting a pupil who is on such considerable financial aid. Being a democratic institution, Hampden College is not founded on such principles.'

'Well, he can't be all that elitist if he accepted me,' I said.

He didn't catch my sarcasm. 'I am willing to speculate that he isn't aware you are on assistance,' he said seriously. £j 'Well, if he doesn't know,' I said, 'I'm not going to tell him.'

Julian's classes met in his office. They were very small classes, and besides, no classroom could have approached it in terms of comfort, or privacy. He had a theory that pupils learned better in a pleasant, non-scholastic atmosphere; and that luxurious hothouse of a room, flowers everywhere in the dead of winter, was some sort of Platonic microcosm of what he thought a schoolroom should be. ('Work?' he said to me once, astonished, when I referred to our classroom activities as such. 'Do you really think that what we do is work?'

'What else should I call it?'

'I should call it the most glorious kind of play.'

As I was on my way there for my first class, I saw Francis Abernathy stalking across the meadow like a black bird, his coat flapping dark and crowlike in the wind. He was preoccupied, smoking a cigarette, but the thought that he might see me filled me with an inexplicable anxiety. I ducked into a doorway and waited until he had passed.

When I turned on the landing of the Lyceum stairs, I was shocked to see him sitting in the windowsill. I glanced at him quickly, and then quickly away, and was about to walk into the hall when he said, 'Wait.' His voice was cool and Bostonian, almost British.

I turned around.

'Are you the new neanias T he said mockingly.

The new young man. I said that I was.

'Cubitum eamus?'

'What?'

'Nothing.'

He transferred the cigarette to his left hand and offered the right one to me. It was bony and soft-skinned as a teenage girl's.

He did not bother to introduce himself. After a brief, awkward silence, I told him my name.

He took a last drag of the cigarette and tossed it out the open window. 'I know who you are,' he said.

Henry and Bunny were already in the office; Henry was reading a book and Bunny, leaning across the table, was talking to him loudly and earnestly.

'… tasteless, that's what it is, old man. Disappointed in you.

I gave you credit for a little more savoir faire than that, if you don't mind my saying so…"

'Good morning,' said Francis, coming in behind me and closing the door.

Henry glanced up and nodded, then went back to his book.

'Hi,' said Bunny, and then 'Oh, hello there' to me. 'Guess what,' he continued to Francis. 'Henry bought himself a Mont blanc pen.'

'Really?' said Francis.

Bunny nodded at the cup of sleek black pens that sat on Julian's desk. 'I told him he better be careful or Julian will think he stole it.'

'He was with me when I bought it,' said Henry without looking up from his book.

'How much are those things worth, anyway?' said Bunny.

No answer.

'Come on. How much? Three hundred bucks a pop?' He leaned all of his considerable weight against the table. 'I remember when you used to say how ugly they were. You used to say you'd never write with a thing in your life but a straight pen. Right?'

Silence.

'Let me see that again, will you?' Bunny said.

Putting his book down, Henry reached in his breast pocket and pulled out the pen and put it on the table. 'There,' he said.

Bunny picked it up and turned it back and forth in his fingers.

'It's like the fat pencils I used to use in first grade,' he said. 'Did Julian talk you into getting this?'

'I wanted a fountain pen.'

That's not why you got this one.'

'I am sick of talking about this.'

'I think it's tasteless.'

'You,' said Henry sharply, 'are not one to speak of taste.'

There was a long silence, during which Bunny leaned back in his chair. 'Now, what kind of pens do we all use here?' he said conversationally. 'Francois, you're a nib-and-bottle man like myself, no?'

'More or less.'

He pointed to me as if he were the host of a panel discussion on a talk show. 'And you, what's-your-name, Robert? What sort of pens did they teach you to use in California?'

'Ball points,' I said.

Bunny nodded deeply. 'An honest man, gentlemen. Simple tastes. Lays his cards on the table. I like that.'

The door opened and the twins came in.

'What are you yelling about, Bun?' said Charles, laughing, kicking the door shut behind him. 'We heard you all the way down the hall.'

Bunny launched into the story about the Montblanc pen.

Uneasily, I edged into the corner and began to examine the books in the bookcase.

'How long have you studied the classics?' said a voice at my elbow. It was Henry, who had turned in his chair to look at me.

'Two years,' I said.

'What have you read in Greek?'

'The New Testament.'

'Well, of course you've read Koine,' he said crossly. 'What else?

Homer, surely. And the lyric poets.'

This, I knew, was Henry's special bailiwick. I was afraid to lie.

'A little.'

'And Plato?'

'Yes.'

'All of Plato?'

'Some of Plato.'

'But all of it in translation.'

I hesitated, a moment too long. He looked at me, incredulous. 'No?'

I dug my hands into the pockets of my new overcoat. 'Most of it,' I said, which was far from true.

'Most of what? The dialogues, you mean? What about later things? Plotinus?'

'Yes,' I lied. I have never, to this day, read a word by Plotinus.

'What?'

Unfortunately my mind went blank, and I could not think of a single thing I knew for sure Plotinus had written. The Eclogues'! No, dammit, that was Virgil. 'Actually, I don't much care for Plotinus,' I said.

'No? Why is that?'

He was like a policeman with the questions. Wistfully, I thought of my old class, the one I'd dropped for this one: Intro to Drama, with jolly Mr Lanin, who made us lie on the floor and do relaxation exercises while he walked around and said things like: 'Now imagine that your body is filling with a cool orange fluid.'

I had not answered the Plotinus question soon enough for Henry's taste. He said something rapidly in Latin.

'I beg your pardon?'

He looked at me coldly. 'Never mind,' he said, and bent back over his book.

To hide my consternation, I turned to the bookshelf.

'Happy now?' I heard Bunny say. 'I guess you raked him over the coals pretty good, eh?'

To my intense relief, Charles came over to say hello. He was friendly and quite calm, but we had scarcely more than exchanged greetings when the door opened and a hush fell as Julian slipped in and closed the door quietly behind him.

'Good morning,' he said. 'You've met our new student?'

'Yes,' said Francis in what I thought a bored tone, as he held out Camilla's chair and then slid into his own.

'Wonderful. Charles, would you put on water for tea?'

Charles went into a little anteroom, no bigger than a closet, and I heard the sound of running water. (I never did know exactly what was in that anteroom or how Julian, upon occasion, was miraculously able to convey four-course meals out of it.) Then he came out, closing the door behind him, and sat down.

'All right,' said Julian, looking around the table. 'I hope we're all ready to leave the phenomenal world, and enter into the sublime?'

He was a marvelous talker, a magical talker, and I wish I were able to give a better idea what he said, but it is impossible for a mediocre intellect to render the speech of a superior one – especially after so many years – without losing a good deal in the translation. The discussion that day was about loss of self, about Plato's four divine madnesses, about madness of all sorts; he began by talking about what he called the burden of the self, and why people want to lose the self in the first place.

'Why does that obstinate little voice in our heads torment us so?' he said, looking round the table. 'Could it be because it reminds us that we are alive, of our mortality, of our individual souls – which, after all, we are too afraid to surrender but yet make us feel more miserable than any other thing? But isn't it also pain that often makes us most aware of self? It is a terrible thing to learn as a child that one is a being separate from all the world, that no one and no thing hurts along with one's burned tongues and skinned knees, that one's aches and pains are all one's own. Even more terrible, as we grow older, to learn that no person, no matter how beloved, can ever truly understand us.

Our own selves make us most unhappy, and that's why we're so anxious to lose them, don't you think? Remember the Erinyes?'

The Furies,' said Bunny, his eyes dazzled and lost beneath the bang of hair.

'Exactly. And how did they drive people mad? They turned up the volume of the inner monologue, magnified qualities already present to great excess, made people so much themselves that they couldn't stand it.

'And how can we lose this maddening self, lose it entirely?

Love? Yes, but as old Cephalus once heard Sophocles say, the least of us know that love is a cruel and terrible master. One loses oneself for the sake of the other, but in doing so becomes enslaved and miserable to the most capricious of all the gods. War? One can lose oneself in the joy of battle, in fighting for a glorious cause, but there are not a great many glorious causes for which to fight these days.' He laughed. 'Though after all your Xenophon and Thucydides I dare say there are not many young people better versed in military tactics. I'm sure, if you wanted to, you'd be quite capable of marching on Hampden town and taking it over by yourselves.'

Henry laughed. 'We could do it this afternoon, with six men,' he said.

'How?' said everyone at once.

'One person to cut the phone and power lines, one at the bridge over the Battenkill, one at the main road out, to the north. The rest of us could advance from the south and west. There aren't many of us, but if we scattered we'd be able to close off all other points of entry' – here he held out his hand, fingers spread wide 'and advance to the center from all points.' The fingers closed into a fist. 'Of course, we'd have the advantage of surprise,' he said, and I felt an unexpected thrill at the coldness of his voice.

Julian laughed. 'And how many years has it been since the gods have intervened in human wars? I expect Apollo and Athena Nike would come down to fight at your side, "invited or uninvited," as the oracle at Delphi said to the Spartans. Imagine what heroes you'd be.'

'Demigods,' said Francis, laughing. 'We could sit on thrones in the town square,' 'While the local merchants paid you tribute.'

'Gold. Peacocks and ivory.'

'Cheddar cheese and common crackers more like it,' Bunny said.

'Bloodshed is a terrible thing,' said Julian hastily – the remark about the common crackers had displeased him – 'but the bloodiest parts of Homer and Aeschylus are often the most magnificent – for example, that glorious speech of Klytemnestra's in the Agamemnon that I love so much – Camilla, you were our Klytem nestra when we did the Oresteia; do you remember any of it?'

The light from the window was streaming directly into her face; in such strong light most people look somewhat washed out, but her clear, fine features were only illuminated until it was a shock to look at her, at her pale and radiant eyes with their sooty lashes, at the gold glimmer at her temple that blended gradually into her glossy hair, warm as honey. 'I remember a little,' she said.

Looking at a spot on the wall above my head, she began to recite the lines. I stared at her. Did she have a boyfriend, Francis maybe? He and she were fairly chummy, but Francis didn't look like the sort who would be too interested in girls. Not that I stood much of a chance, surrounded as she was by all these clever rich boys in dark suits; me, with my clumsy hands and suburban ways.

Her voice in Greek was harsh and low and lovely.

Thus he died, and all the life struggled out of him; and as he died he spattered me with the dark red and violent-driven rain of bitter-savored blood to make me glad, as gardens stand among the showers of God in glory at the birthtime of the buds.

There was a brief silence after she had finished; rather to my surprise, Henry winked solemnly at her from across the table.

Julian smiled. 'What a beautiful passage,' he said. 'I never tire of it. But how is it that such a ghastly thing, a queen stabbing her husband in his bath, is so lovely to us?'

'It's the meter,' said Francis. 'Iambic trimeter. Those really hideous parts of Inferno, for instance, Pier de Medicina with his nose hacked off and talking through a bloody slit in his windpipe '

'I can think of worse than that,' Charles said.

'So can I. But that passage is lovely and it's because of the terza rima. The music of it. The trimeter tolls through that speech of Klytemnestra's like a bell.'

'But iambic trimeter is fairly common in Greek lyric, isn't it?' said Julian. 'Why is that particular section so breathtaking? Why do we not find ourselves attracted to some calmer or more pleasing one?'

'Aristotle says in the Poetics,' said Henry, 'that objects such as corpses, painful to view in themselves, can become delightful to contemplate in a work of art.'

'And I believe Aristotle is correct. After all, what are the scenes in poetry graven on our memories, the ones that we love the most? Precisely these. The murder of Agamemnon and the wrath of Achilles. Dido on the funeral pyre. The daggers of the traitors and Caesar's blood – remember how Suetonius describes his body being borne away on the litter, with one arm hanging down?'

'Death is the mother of beauty,' said Henry.

'And what is beauty?'

'Terror,' 'Well said,' said Julian. 'Beauty is rarely soft or consolatory.

Quite the contrary. Genuine beauty is always quite alarming.'

I looked at Camilla, her face bright in the sun, and thought of that line from the Iliad I love so much, about Pallas Athene and the terrible eyes shining.

'And if beauty is terror,' said Julian, 'then what is desire? We think we have many desires, but in fact we have only one. What is it?'

'To live,' said Camilla.

'To live forever,' said Bunny, chin cupped in palm.

The teakettle began to whistle.

Once the cups were set out, and Henry had poured the tea, somber as a mandarin, we began to talk about the madnesses induced by the gods: poetic, prophetic, and, finally, Dionysian.

'Which is by far the most mysterious,' said Julian. 'We have been accustomed to thinking of religious ecstasy as a thing found only in primitive societies, though it frequently occurs in the most cultivated peoples. The Greeks, you know, really weren't very different from us. They were a very formal people, extraordinarily civilized, rather repressed. And yet they were frequently swept away en masse by the wildest enthusiasms – dancing, frenzies, slaughter, visions – which for us, I suppose, would seem clinical madness, irreversible. Yet the Greeks – some of them, anyway – could go in and out of it as they pleased. We cannot dismiss these accounts entirely as myth. They are quite well documented, though ancient commentators were as mystified by them as we are. Some say they were the results of prayer and fasting, others that they were brought about by drink. Certainly the group nature of the hysteria had something to do with it as well. Even so, it is hard to account for the extremism of the phenomenon. The revelers were apparently hurled back into a non-rational, pre-intellectual state, where the personality was replaced by something completely different – and by "different" I mean something to all appearances not mortal.Inhuman,'

I thought of the Bacchae, a play whose violence and savagery made me uneasy, as did the sadism of its bloodthirsty god.

Compared to the other tragedies, which were dominated by I recognizable principles of justice no matter how harsh, it was a triumph of barbarism over reason: dark, chaotic, inexplicable.

'We don't like to admit it,' said Julian, 'but the idea of losing control is one that fascinates controlled people such as ourselves more than almost anything. All truly civilized people – the ancients no less than us – have civilized themselves through the willful repression of the old, animal self. Are we, in this room, really very different from the Greeks or the Romans? Obsessed with duty, piety, loyalty, sacrifice? All those things which are to modern tastes so chilling?'

I looked around the table at the six faces. To modern tastes they were somewhat chilling. I imagine any other teacher would've been on the phone to Psychological Counseling in about five minutes had he heard what Henry said about arming the Greek class and marching into Hampden town.

'And it's a temptation for any intelligent person, and especially for perfectionists such as the ancients and ourselves, to try to murder the primitive, emotive, appetitive self. But that is a mistake.'

'Why?' said Francis, leaning slightly forward.

Julian arched an eyebrow; his long, wise nose gave his profile a forward tilt, like an Etruscan in a bas-relief. 'Because it is dangerous to ignore the existence of the irrational. The more cultivated a person is, the more intelligent, the more repressed, then the more he needs some method of channeling the primitive impulses he's worked so hard to subdue. Otherwise those powerful old forces will mass and strengthen until they are violent enough to break free, more violent for the delay, often strong enough to sweep the will away entirely. For a warning of what happens in the absence of such a pressure valve, we have the example of the Romans. The emperors. Think, for example, of Tiberius, the ugly stepson, trying to live up to the command of his stepfather Augustus. Think of the tremendous, impossible strain he must have undergone, following in the footsteps of a savior, a god. The people hated him. No matter how hard he tried he was never good enough, could never be rid of the hateful self, and finally the floodgates broke. He was swept away on his perversions and he died, old and mad, lost in the pleasure gardens of Capri: not even happy there, as one might hope, but miserable.

Before he died he wrote a letter home to the Senate. "May all the Gods and Goddesses visit me with more utter destruction than I feel I am daily suffering." Think of those who came after him. Caligula. Nero.'

He paused. 'The Roman genius, and perhaps the Roman flaw,' he said, 'was an obsession with order. One sees it in their architecture, their literature, their laws – this fierce denial of darkness, unreason, chaos.' He laughed. 'Easy to see why the Romans, usually so tolerant of foreign religions, persecuted the Christians mercilessly – how absurd to think a common criminal had risen from the dead, how appalling that his followers celebrated him by drinking his blood. The illogic of it frightened them and they did everything they could to crush it. In fact, I think the reason they took such drastic steps was because they were not only frightened but also terribly attracted to it. Pragma tists are often strangely superstitious. For all their logic, who lived in more abject terror of the supernatural than the Romans?

'The Greeks were different. They had a passion for order and symmetry, much like the Romans, but they knew how foolish it was to deny the unseen world, the old gods. Emotion, darkness, barbarism.' He looked at the ceiling for a moment, his face almost troubled. 'Do you remember what we were speaking of earlier, of how bloody, terrible things are sometimes the most beautiful?' he said. 'It's a very Greek idea, and a very profound one. Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely? To throw off the chains of being for an instant, to shatter the accident of our mortal selves? Euripides speaks of the Maenads: head thrown I back, throat to the stars, "more like deer than human being." To be absolutely free! One is quite capable, of course, of working out these destructive passions in more vulgar and less efficient ways. But how glorious to release them in a single burst! To sing, to scream, to dance barefoot in the woods in the dead of night, with no more awareness of mortality than an animal! These are powerful mysteries. The bellowing of bulls. Springs of honey bubbling from the ground. If we are strong enough in our souls we can rip away the veil and look that naked, terrible beauty right in the face; let God consume us, devour us, unstring our bones. Then spit us out reborn.'

We were all leaning forward, motionless. My mouth had fallen open; I was aware of every breath I took.

'And that, to me, is the terrible seduction of Dionysiac ritual.

Hard for us to imagine. That fire of pure being.'

After class, I wandered downstairs in a dream, my head spinning, but acutely, achingly conscious that I was alive and young on a beautiful day; the sky a deep deep painful blue, wind scattering the red and yellow leaves in a whirlwind of confetti.

Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it.

That night I wrote in my journal: 'Trees are schizophrenic now and beginning to lose control, enraged with the shock of their fiery new colors. Someone – was it van Gogh? – said that orange is the color of insanity. Beauty is terror. We want to be devoured by it, to hide ourselves in that fire which refines us.'

I went into the post office (blase students, business as usual) and, still preposterously lightheaded, scribbled a picture postcard to my mother – fiery maples, a mountain stream. A sentence on the back advised: Plan to see Vermont 's fall foliage between Sept.25 and Oct. ijth when it is at its vivid best.

As I was putting it in the out-of-town mail slot, I saw Bunny across the room, his back to me, scanning the row of numbered boxes. He stopped at what was apparently my own box and bent to stick something in it. Then he straightened surreptitiously and walked out quickly, his hands in his pockets and his hair flopping everywhere.

I waited until he was gone, then went to my mailbox. Inside, I found a cream-colored envelope – thick paper, crisp and very formal – but the handwriting was crabbed and childish as a fifth-grader's, in pencil. The note within was in pencil, too, tiny and uneven and hard to read:

Richard old Man What do you Say we have Lunch on Saturday, maybe about i? 1 know this Great little place. Cocktails, the business. My treat. Please come.

Yours,

Bun

p.s. wear a Tie. I am Sure you would have anyway but they will drag some godawful one out of the back and meke (s. p.) you Wear it if you Dont.

I examined the note, put it in my pocket, and was walking out when I almost bumped into Dr Roland coming in the door. At first he didn't seem to know who I was. But just when I thought I was going to get away, the creaky machinery of his face began to grind and a cardboard dawn of recognition was lowered, with jerks, from the dusty proscenium.

'Hello, Doctor Roland,' I said, abandoning hope.

'How's she running, boy?'

He meant my imaginary car. Christine. Chitty Chitty-Bang Bang. 'Fine,' I said.

'Take it to Redeemed Repair?'

'Yes.'

'Manifold trouble.'

'Yes,' I said, and then realized I'd told him earlier it was the transmission. But Dr Roland had now begun an informative lecture concerning the care and function of the manifold gasket.

'And that,' he concluded, 'is one of your major problems with a foreign automobile. You can waste a lot of oil that way. Those cans of Penn State will add up. And Penn State doesn't grow on trees.'

He gave me a significant look.

'Who was it sold you the gasket?' he asked.

'I can't remember,' I said, swaying in a trance of boredom but edging imperceptibly towards the door.

'Was it Bud?'

'I think so.'

'Or Bill. Bill Hundy is good.'

'I believe it was Bud,' I said.

'What did you think about that old blue jay?'

I was uncertain if this referred to Bud or to a literal blue jay, or if, perhaps, we were heading into the territory of senile dementia. It was sometimes difficult to believe that Dr Roland was a tenured professor in the Social Science Department of this, a distinguished college. He was more like some gabby old codger who would sit next to you on a bus and try to show you bits of paper he kept folded in his wallet.

He was reviewing some of the information he had previously given me on the manifold gaskets and I was waiting for a good moment to remember, suddenly, that I was late for an appointment, when Dr Roland's friend Dr Blind struggled up, beaming, leaning on his walker. Dr Blind (pronounced 'Blend') was about ninety years old and had taught, for the past fifty years, a course called 'Invariant Subspaces' which was noted for its monotony and virtually absolute unintelligibility, as well as for the fact that the final exam, as long as anyone could remember, had consisted of the same single yes-or-no question. The question was three pages long but the answer was always 'Yes.' That was all you needed to know to pass Invariant Subspaces.

He was, if possible, even a bigger windbag than Dr Roland.

Together, they were like one of those superhero alliances in the comic books, invincible, an unconquerable confederation of boredom and confusion. I murmured an excuse and slipped away, leaving them to their own formidable devices

Chapter 2

I had hoped the weather would be cool for my lunch with Bunny, because my best jacket was a scratchy dark tweed, but when I woke on Saturday it was hot and getting hotter.

'Gonna be a scorcher today,' said the janitor as I passed him in the hall. 'Indian summer.'

The jacket was beautiful – Irish wool, gray with flecks of mossy green; I had bought it in San Francisco with nearly every cent I'd saved from my summer job – but it was much too heavy for a warm sunny day. I put it on and went to the bathroom to straighten my tie.

I was in no mood for talk and I was unpleasantly surprised to find Judy Poovey brushing her teeth at the sink. Judy Poovey lived a couple of doors down from me and seemed to think that because she was from Los Angeles we had a lot in common. She cornered me in hallways; tried to make me dance at parties; had told several girls that she was going to sleep with me, only in less delicate terms. She had wild clothes, frosted hair, a red Corvette with California plates bearing the legend judy p. Her voice was loud and rose frequently to a screech, which rang through the house like the cries of some terrifying tropical bird.

'Hi, Richard,' she said, and spit out a mouthful of toothpaste.

She was wearing cut-off jeans that had bizarre, frantic designs drawn on them in Magic Marker and a spandex top which revealed her intensely aerobicized midriff.

'Hello,' I said, setting to work on my tie.

'You look cute today.'

'Thanks.'

'Got a date?'

I looked away from the mirror, at her. 'What?'

'Where you going?'

By now, I was used to her interrogations, 'Out to lunch.'

'Who with?'

'Bunny Corcoran.'

'You know Bunny?'

Again, I turned to look at her. 'Sort of. Do you?'

'Sure. He was in my art history class. He's hilarious. I hate that geeky friend of his, though, the other one with the glasses, what's his name?'

'Henry?'

'Yeah, him.' She leaned towards the mirror and began to fluff out her hair, swiveling her head this way and that. Her nails were Chanel red but so long they had to be the kind you bought at the drugstore. 'I think he's an asshole.'

'I kind of like him,' I said, offended.

'I don't.' She parted her hair in the center, using the curved talon of her forefinger as a comb. 'He's always been a bastard to me. I hate those twins, too.'

'Why? The twins are nice.'

'Oh yeah?' she said, rolling a mascaraed eye at me in the mirror. 'Listen to this. I was at this party last term, really drunk, and sort of slam-dancing, right? Everybody was crashing into everybody else, and for some reason this girl twin was walking through the dance floor and pow, I slammed right into her, really hard. So then she says something rude, like totally uncalled for, and first thing I knew I'd thrown my beer in her face. It was that kind of a night. I'd already had about six beers thrown on me, and it just seemed like the thing to do, you know?

'So anyway, she starts yelling at me and in about half a second there's the other twin and that Henry guy standing over me like they're about to beat me up.' She pulled her hair back from her face in a ponytail and inspected her profile in the mirror. 'So anyway. I'm drunk, and these two guys are leaning over me in this menacing way, and you know that I Iciiry, he's really big. It was kind of scary but I was too drunk to care so I just told them to fuck off,' She turned from the mirror and smiled brilliantly. 'I was drinking Kamikazes that night. Something terrible always happens to me when I drink Kamikazes. I wreck my car, I get into fights…"

'What happened?'

She shrugged and turned back to the mirror. 'Like I said, I just told them to fuck off. And the boy twin, he starts screaming at me. Like he really wants to kill me, you know? And that Henry just standing there, right, but to me he was scarier than the other one. So anyway. A friend of mine who used to go here and who's really tough, he was in this motorcycle gang, into chains and shit – ever heard of Spike Romney?'

I had; in fact I'd seen him at my first Friday-night party. He was tremendous, well over two hundred pounds, with scars on his hands and steel toe-clips on his motorcycle boots.

'Well, anyway, so Spike comes up and sees these people abusing me, and he shoves the twin on the shoulder and tells him to beat it, and before I knew it, the two of them had jumped on him. People were trying to pull that Henry off, too – lots of them, and they couldn't do it. Six guys couldn't pull him off.

Broke Spike's collarbone and two of his ribs, and fucked up his face pretty bad. I told Spike he should've called the cops, but he was in some kind of trouble himself and wasn't supposed to be on campus. It was a bad scene, though.' She let her hair fall back around her face. 'I mean, Spike is tough. And mean. You'd think he'd be able to beat the shit out of both those sissy guys in suits and ties and stuff.'

'Hmm,' I said, trying not to laugh. It was funny to think of Henry, with his little round glasses and his books in Pali, breaking Spike Romney's collarbone.

'It's weird,' said Judy. 'I guess when uptight people like that get mad, they get really mad. Like my father.'

'Yeah, I guess so,' I said, looking back into the mirror and adjusting the knot on my tie.

'Have a good time,' she said listlessly, and started out the door. Then she stopped. 'Say, aren't you going to get hot in that jacket?'

'Only good one I have.'

'You want to try on this one I've got?'

I turned and looked at her. She was a major in Costume, Design and as such had all kinds of peculiar clothing in her room. ›j 'Is it yours?' I said.

'I stole it from the wardrobe at the Costume shop. I was going to cut it up and make, like, a bustier out of it.' *j Great, I thought, but I went along with her anyway. H The jacket, unexpectedly, was wonderful – old Brooks Brothers, unlined silk, ivory with stripes of peacock green – a little loose, but it fit all right. 'Judy,' I said, looking at my cuffs.

'This is wonderful. You sure you don't mind?'

'You can have it,' said Judy. 'I don't have time to do anything with it. I'm too busy sewing those damned costumes for fucking As You Like It. It goes up in three weeks and I don't know what I'm going to do. I've got all these freshmen working for me this term that don't know a sewing machine from a hole in the ground.'

'By the way, love that jacket, old man,' Bunny said to me as we were getting out of the taxi. 'Silk, isn't it?'

'Yes. It was my grandfather's.'

Bunny pinched a piece of the rich, yellowy cloth near the cuff and rubbed it back and forth between his fingers. 'Lovely piece,' he said importantly. 'Not quite the thing for this time of year, though.'

'No?' I said.

'Naw. This is the East Coast, boy. I know they're pretty laissez-faire about dress in your neck of the woods, but back here 52. they don't let you run around in your bathing suit all year long.

Blacks and blues, that's the ticket, blacks and blues… Here, let me get that door for you. You know, I think you'll like this place.

Not exactly the Polo Lounge, but for Vermont it's not too bad, do you think?'

It was a tiny, beautiful restaurant with white tablecloths and bay windows opening onto a cottage garden – hedges and trellised roses, nasturtiums bordering the flagstone path. The customers were mostly middle-aged and prosperous: ruddy country-lawyer types who, according to the Vermont fashion, wore gumshoes with their Hickey-Freeman suits; ladies with frosted lipstick and challis skirts, nice looking in a kind of well-tanned, low-key way.

A couple glanced up at us as we came in, and I was well aware of the impression we were making- two handsome college boys, rich fathers and not a worry in the world. Though the ladies were mostly old enough to be my mother, one or two were actually quite attractive. Nice work if you could get it, I thought, imagining some youngish matron with a big house and nothing to do and a husband out of town on business all the time. Good dinners, some pocket money, maybe even something really big, like a car…

A waiter sidled up. 'You have a reservation?'

'Corcoran party,' said Bunny, hands in his pockets, rocking back and forth on his heels. 'Where's Caspar keeping himself today?'

'On vacation. He'll be back in two weeks.'

'Well, good for him,' said Bunny heartily.

Till tell him you asked for him.'

'Do that, wouldja?'

'Caspar's a super guy,' Bunny said as we followed the waiter to the table. 'Maitre d'. Big old fellow with moustaches, Austrian or something. And not' – he lowered his voice to a loud whisper 'not a fag, either, if you can believe that. Queers love to work in restaurants, have you ever noticed that? I mean, every single fag '

I saw the back of our waiter's neck stiffen slightly.

'- I have ever known has been obsessed with food. I wonder, why is that? Something psychological? It seems to me that '

I put a finger to my lips and nodded at the waiter's back, just as he turned and gave us an unspeakably evil look.

'Is this table all right, gentlemen?' he said.

'Sure,' said Bunny, beaming.

The waiter presented our menus with affected, sarcastic delicacy and stalked off. I sat down and opened the wine list, my face burning. Bunny, settling in his chair, took a sip of water and looked around happily. 'This is a great place,' he said.

'It's nice.'

'But not the Polo,' He rested an elbow on the table and raked the hair back from his eyes. 'Do you go there often? The Polo, I mean.'

'Not much.' I'd never even heard of it, which was perhaps understandable as it was about four hundred miles from where I lived.

'Seems like the kinda place you'd go with your father,' said Bunny pensively. 'For man-to-man talks and stuff. My dad's like that about the Oak Bar at the Plaza. He took me and my brothers there to buy us our first drink when we turned eighteen.'

I am an only child; people's siblings interest me. 'Brothers?' I said. 'How many?'

'Four. Teddy, Hugh, Patrick and Brady.' He laughed. 'It was terrible when Dad took me because I'm the baby, and it was such a big thing, and he was all "Here, son, have your first drink" and "Won't be long before you're sitting in my place" and "Probably I'll be dead soon" and all that kind of junk. And the whole time there I was scared stiff. About a month before, my buddy Cloke and I had come up from Saint Jerome's for the day to work on a history project at the library, and we'd run up a huge bill at the Oak Bar and slipped off without paying. You know, boyish spirits, but there I was again, with my dad.'

'Did they recognize you?'

'Yep,' he said grimly. 'Knew they would. But they were pretty decent about it. Didn't say anything, just tacked the old bill onto my dad's.'

I tried to picture the scene: the drunken old father, in a three-piece suit, swishing his Scotch or whatever it was he drank around in the glass. And Bunny. He looked a little soft but it was the softness of muscle gone to flesh. A big boy, the sort who played football in high school. And the sort of son every father secretly wants: big and good-natured and not awfully bright, fond of sports, gifted at backslapping and corny jokes. 'Did he notice?'

I said. 'Your dad?'

'Naw. He was three sheets to the wind. If I'd of been the bartender at the Oak Room he wouldn't have noticed.'

The waiter was heading towards us again.

'Look, here comes Twinkletoes,' said Bunny, busying himself with the menu. 'Know what you want to eat?'

'What's in that, anyway?' I asked Bunny, leaning to look at the drink the waiter had brought him. It was the size of a small fishbowl, bright coral, with colored straws and paper parasols and bits of fruit sticking out of it at frenetic angles.

Bunny pulled out one of the parasols and licked the end of it.

'Lots of stuff. Rum, cranberry juice, coconut milk, triple sec, peach brandy, creme de menthe, I don't know what all. Taste it, it's good.'

'No thanks.'

'C'mon.'

'That's okay.'

'C'mon.'

'No thank you, I don't want any,' I said.

'First time I ever had one of these was when I was in Jamaica, two summers ago,' said Bunny reminiscently. 'Bartender named Sam cooked it up for me. "Drink three of these, son," he said, "and you won't be able to find the door" and bless me, I couldn't.

Ever been to Jamaica?'

'Not recently, no.'

'Probably you're used to palm trees and coconuts and all that sort of thing, in California and all.,' thought it was wonderful.

Bought a pink bathing suit with flowers on it and everything.

Tried to get Henry to come down there with me but he said there was no culture, which I don't think is true, they did have | some kind of a little museum or something.' 3 'You get along with Henry?'

'Oh, sure thing,' said Bunny, reared back in his chair. 'We were roommates. Freshman year.'

'And you like him?'

'Certainly, certainly. He's a hard fellow to live with, though.

Hates noise, hates company, hates a mess. None of this bringing your date back to the room to listen to a couple Art Pepper records, if you know what I'm trying to get at.'

'I think he's sort of rude.'

Bunny shrugged. 'That's his way. See, his mind doesn't work the same way yours and mine do. He's always up in the clouds with Plato or something. Works too hard, takes himself too seriously, studying Sanskrit and Coptic and those other nutty languages. Henry, I tell him, if you're going to waste your time learning something besides Greek – that and the King's English are all I think a man needs, personally – why don't you buy yourself some Berlitz records and brush up on your French. Find a little cancan girl or something. Voolay-voo coushay avec moi and all that.'

'How many languages does he know?'

'I lost count. Seven or eight. He can read hieroglyphics.'

'Wow.'

Bunny shook his head fondly. 'He's a genius, that boy. He could be a translator for the UN if he wanted to be.'

'Where's he from?'

'Missouri.'

He said this in such a deadpan way I thought he was joking, and I laughed.

Bunny raised an amused eyebrow. 'What? You thought he was from Buckingham Palace or something?'

I shrugged, still laughing. Henry was so peculiar, it was hard to imagine him being from anyplace.

'Yep,' said Bunny. 'The Show-Me State. St Louis boy like old Tom Eliot. Father's some kind of a construction tycoon – and not quite aboveboard, either, so my cousins in St Lou tell me.

Not that Henry will give you the slightest clue what his dad does.

Acts like he doesn't know and certainly doesn't care.'

'Have you been to his house?'

'Are you kidding? He's so secretive, you'd think it was the Manhattan Project or something. But I met his mother one time.

Kind of by accident. She stopped in Hampden to see him on her way to New York and I bumped into her wandering around downstairs in Monmouth asking people if they knew where his room was.'

'What was she like?'

'Pretty lady. Dark hair and blue eyes like Henry, mink coat, too much lipstick and stuff if you ask me. Awfully young. Henry's her only chick and she adores him.' He leaned forward and lowered his voice. 'Family's got money like you wouldn't believe. Millions and millions. Course it's about as new as it comes, but a buck's a buck, know what I mean?' He winked. 'By the way.

Meant to ask. How does your pop earn his filthy lucre?'

'Oil,' I said. It was partly true.

Bunny's mouth fell open in a little round o. 'You have oil wells?'

'Well, we have one,' I said modestly.

'But it's a good one?'

'So they tell me.'

'Boy,' said Bunny, shaking his head. 'The Golden West.'

'It's been good to us,' I said.

'Geez.' Bunny said. 'My dad's just a lousy old bank president.'

I felt it necessary to change the subject, however awkwardly, as we were heading here towards treacherous waters. 'If Henry's from St Louis,' I said, 'how did he get to be so smart?'

This was an innocuous question but, unexpectedly, Bunny winced. 'Henry had a bad accident when he was a little boy,' he said. 'Got hit by a car or something and nearly died. He was out of school for a couple years, had tutors and stuff, but for a long time he couldn't do much but lie in bed and read. I guess he was one of those kids who can read at college level when they're about two years old.'

'Hit by a car?'

'I think that's what it was. Can't think what else it could've been. He doesn't like to talk about it.' He lowered his voice.

'Know the way he parts his hair, so it falls over the right eye?

That's because there's a scar there. Almost lost the eye, can't see out of it too good. And the stiff way he walks, sort of a limp. Not that it matters, he's strong as an ox. I don't know what he did, lift weights or what, but he certainly built himself back up again. A regular Teddy Roosevelt, overcoming obstacles and all. You got to admire him for it.' He brushed his