

THE FRUMP

(a novel)

by Francis Baumli

dedicated to A.K.

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This, a meditation, before
beginning The Frump. I
dedicate this poem to the
withered muse who inspired me.

CONDEMNED

The whitening bones within my soul are
rotting in this darkened hole.

I beg to romp the more with whores
who roar and moan in guttural tones.

They tore a morsel of my flesh
from off this corpse that bursts with worms,
then choked upon their meal morose,
and loathed the more my bed of coals.

Elope with me, oh hoary whores,
and share this drink of greening foam;
I'll dote upon your folded lips
that drip beyond my dangling grope.

A host of lice with busy mouths
has chosen out my rotted home,
speaking lies about this flesh
that bloats and rots beneath the boards.

Please caress these cancerous boils,
cavort and laugh in my abode;
condone the more the devil's goads

that squeeze this pus from oozing sores. [same stanza]

The scent of old offallic bones
will fill my swollen scrotal lobes;
so praise this gore of lolling heads
that rot and grin upon the floor.

OVERTURE

Hollow tombs reflect the moon's
carnal stream of penile spit.
Is there not room within this crypt
to sip the oozing blood of wombs?

Chapter 1

THE OLD WOMAN

The dying mind, its faculties numbed. slowly slips into the hollow tube of night's fantasy, finding an almost familiar satisfaction in imminent death.

No; it is not beautiful to see a body stiffen and turn with age, ripen and crack because it no longer is young and beautiful.

So why this struggle? Why this horrible, repulsive fear of nuzzling the earth while relinquishing one's flesh?

The limbs grow weary—so old—so cold; but let me wrap a tattered blanket about my hollow bones. I do not want anyone to hear them crack.

And who am I now? And who have we become?

"Please do not invade my privacy."

Only a dying woman can know what it is to push her head against the foot of the coffin and stretch a little—only a little—to soften the monotony of eternal rest.

Look at the ground heave and swell! It cracks and breaks with the frosts of winter and the drought of summer. But look at the ground heave and swell! A tiny eruption has caused it to quiver in expectation of a further nudge.

And now look at the ground heave and swell! The workings of humanity trample the flowers until they sour in their own milk. And again—look at the ground heave and swell! But it is only the sound of a dying animal scurrying from one grave to another, desiring companions for a while. And now listen to the ground heave and swell! It is only the sound of a decaying woman, leaning to her yearning for death.

“What a lovely child!” A pretty white dress against a green background, holding an apple in one hand and a prayer-book in the other, smiling, just a bit insecure and yet a bit too secure—“but see the nice man, dear?”—yes, the photographer is patient. With his black hood over his head he scowls through the camera at the smiling young girl.

It is a good picture—frailty so fragile. Outside, the tiny wisps of dried, burned grass are pleading for rain. The withered flowers are bent down. Even the strong oak trees have a parched look; their shade is scarcely comforting to the brood of lesser plants nestled beneath their limbs.

But the stubborn, neglectful sky is now becoming angry at the parched earth below. It mutters and roars a warning, its thunder foretelling the brewing storm. The weary clouds will soon acquiesce and shed their waters unto the earth.

See my little white butterfly flit hither and thither over the flowers? But no. The flowers are not fresh. These have been pressed for memory's sake, and they now are creased and folded from many years of gentle caresses. What is it like, my little one? Your tiny breasts are blossoming like rose-buds; they burst and strain against their bonds as you cry and whimper in pain. Bow your head, sweet dear; let mother run her hands through your hair.

See the little girl hold her doll, rocking it with crooning sympathy? Buy a pretty dress for the daughter now, and let her sex be known.

But look carefully, and see the young lady as she moves silently toward her fated demise. Such a shame to be alone in the house at night where she will be afraid. Her groin is sore from squeezing it so tightly. And now she can almost feel the cold grip of steely hands closing about her neck from behind. Her buttocks ache and her bones are biting through to the hard chair. But she is having too much fun to move—like the dreamer who is having a good dream and fights to stay asleep. Her thighs are stiff now, her nipples hard. She holds the prayer-book against her pretty breasts and is quiet for a while. The joy of being a young girl.

But lend me an ear my son, my brother, my sister, my lovely daughter; let me tell you a tale about a little girl I once knew. She was young, and, as a child should be, young at heart. Carelessly she breathed the air as if it were her own, and on a warm and windy day she would run outside and look up at the sky happily. She was a carefree child. She would run up and down the paths of the sloping pastures, back and forth, as a pendulum in a singing clock or a leaf upon a tree. She would stoop to sniff a flower and laugh to see the honey-bee, routed from its perch, fly away to seek a berth upon another stem.

I doubt not but that she came from somewhere. But even if I were to ask all persons upon this earth about her place of birth, they would only sigh, laugh with happy memories, and wonder at my question. Each man would look in puzzlement at the lips which formed that question! How very odd to see a stranger ask about our child. And every woman would judge with indignation the lips which formed that question! How inappropriately carnal that our society would abide any stranger asking about our child. This fleeting, fresh, and fecund flower never stops to let a person deny her smile. But they see it. They witness it for she is theirs even though no one waits for her to claim an

audience. They know that she is everywhere—learning, laughing, smiling. No one knows and never will know what it would be like to claim this child, for she belongs to no one and yet she is ours; we kiss her in our dreams alone—alone and without regret—our dreams and thoughts seduce her only to find that they have been raped in turn by her purity.

The waters caress the soles of her feet as she dangles them over its soft and rippling surface. Her laugh returns to the pond and the lake and the streams and her voice carries back and forth and gives thanks to all of nature for its bejeweled finery.

But now, these many years later, there is the eternal and unbegotten sigh of mortality and death. Do you not see that flower, so very white and heavy with life? But look very closely—more closely—and even more closely now. Do you see the tiny latticed handiwork upon its delicate frame? Prick it slightly with nature's fingers and now there is the flowing and the smell. Never had there been any hope that nature could esteem itself so kind as to not prey upon this lovely flower.

I beg of you my son, to see and follow me; a slight prick of my finger (or was it the firmament of my body?) and this freedom was forever blunted.

My hopes and dreams move between an orb of black and a sphere of white, then fall into this gray abyss of intertwined hope and crying fear.

My body will not be still, and I dream with a silent desperation because I fear that there is nothing here of consequence to be told or believed. But the blood wells from its tomb and upon my cheeks there is this shameful show of crimson. My cheeks float upon the dew of honeyed kisses, and there is something barren and ashamed that flows like honey beneath my hands.

Yes; take my squeezed and dripping heart; fondle it until it has ceased to be a song.

Interred within a coffin lies all of humanity's hopes and certitudes; and there they will lie until one day death touches every conviction about which this vacuum revolves.

A maidenhead of maidenhood peers from the arbor, watches the stallion cover the mare, and laughs in silent nervousness at the simple thought that maybe she should not laugh. She turns to run to the house, and feels her legs cross and cross. The door, and then she is inside. In her

bedroom she lies down on the bed and curls her knees up to her chin, thinking maybe she will sleep, or maybe frighten herself by pretending she is dead.

But now she is old, and her eyes look out upon the world. They open wide. Her thoughts race; she wishes she were young again—once again dependent upon those fantasies which shape and mold.

The old lady raises the sheet and peers down at her feet, but her eyes are fading into blindness, a cloud benumbs her brain, and all her senses are vaguely confused. It is as though she were a stone cast into a lake, or a coin dropped from a ship into the sea—sinking, sinking, turning over and over, embracing the sun's yellowed light and then forever leaving its warmth and beauty—sinking down into the darkened depths of black mud at the very bottom of the murkiest of waters. And the old lady groans slowly and darkly; there is a smell of death that pervades upon the air, pervades upon the taste, as her youth grows bitter and her throat is choked. A heavy weight lies upon her breasts, feasting its eyes upon her countenance. A light seems to shine too brightly. She raises her hand and waves it feebly in the air, a futile attempt to expel these outside intrusions, and also the inner intrusions of old memories.

Ah, to be young again—just once, young again. Only clasp the hands across the withered shrunken breasts; the mind prays forever and dreams the sweetness of tepid, cooling memories.

A tiny baby girl has grown and become not so very tiny; she lies with naked breasts softly reflecting the moonlight. With a blush of modesty she moves into his arms—an act beseeching secrecy.

“Someday, when everything is right, we will do it. I promise I will be the best lover you have ever had,” she whispers, pulling him close. “But, oh, just hold me tight for a minute please; just hold me tight.”

Later that night, alone, a young girl lamented her fear and went to sleep. The next day, all the next day, her breasts ached as they had before—long before—during those months when they first became breasts.

The old lady moves one leg against the other and with a plaintive cry asks that her toenails be cut. She knows she is being childish, but she wants her toenails cut. Only this and nothing else or less. She moves her head back and forth impatiently. Her granddaughter moves to obey. She giggles and lifts her nose at the smell of the

old woman's feet; her brother looks on, laughing around the thumb in his mouth.

(Yes, my friend; we are the spirit and we are the spittle.)

The old lady reaches down and caresses the wrinkles in the blanket. Drawing a part of the coverlet up into a small fold, she strokes it as one would pet a cat or a little dog. She feels the bed grow harsh and hard and moves her legs about, trying to find a more comfortable way of resting in her thoughts. She wants only a caress—to be loved by her husband's body, even though she knows it is long dead and molded.

Yes; he has stiffened into a righteous silence and has no comfort to offer. And she has no right to hope that he would nourish her now. She had watched him, an old man, fumbling for his handkerchief, absentmindedly unbuttoning his shirt, his groping fingers touching the withered, dry skin. Embarrassed at himself, he had hurried to button the shirt, his stiff hands shaking as he did so. She had watched him fearfully. It was the last time she felt any emotion for him. Even when he died, she was too preoccupied with practicalities to care.

In earlier years she had loved him, or at least she had desired him for a while, clung to him in a passion that would suffice to be called love.

She had always been too concerned with the sexual part of life. At first she had thought it abnormal, perverted, but at the same time she secretly thought it a special gift. But her husband had partaken of her secret gift. He had probed it, tasted it, and had taken something away from her in doing so. The very fact that he loved her seemed to deny her the privacy of her mystery. He trivialized it, stripping it of the uniqueness it deserved. He had once written, in his diary, "Her breasts were jumping up and down as she ran; I was afraid they would tear off. She laughed as I ran after her, thinking I was playing. She had no idea how desperate I was. I ran faster and faster to catch her, to stop her and save those lovely breasts. But she was too inspired; she outstripped me, the gleam of her white legs flashing beneath her brown skirt, her laughter mocking me as I became winded and lagged behind."

She had read this and had felt disappointed. He was making too little of her mystery, thus letting it preoccupy him; as a result, or perhaps because she tired of him, she soon felt distant from him and sadly alone. But this

loneliness sustained her; and it brought back the old sense of longing, the fresh thought of her own beauty and her own sex.

She could not have loved him for long anyway. His sex was not soft and pure as hers was; it was tenacious and grasping. It smelled like nothing she was familiar with and reminded her of something very old—like the way a wild beast's dung might have smelled in ancient Egypt. Marrying him had been mildly exciting at first, then unpleasant and almost frightening. Before, he had always seemed so soft and neutral in his clothes, especially in the crisp, white dinner jackets he was fond of wearing. But when he became her husband it was too intimate, too unbearably intimate. There was something bestial about him—his curious smell, the guttural sounds he made after dinner, the strange hairy texture of his skin, his animal parts. Once, when he was completely naked, he had walked across the room and, with his back to her, had reached down to pick up a piece of linen. The length of his heavy sac and the two bulging glands within seemed too terribly brutish, too animal, too inhuman. She had never thought knowing a man would be like this. She could not love his animal parts; they were separate from him, and he had demeaned himself by acting in

terms of them. They were so coarse looking. His penis was so lifeless when soft, and too heavy and too alive when hard. Also it was dark and ugly, full of huge, sinewy veins.

She groans and moves her hips, wonders if she should smile since she is this old, and pushes her fingers into the wood of the bed. She might summon him, invite him, plead with him even; but she had never done that before, and it is not worth the effort now. She dreams. She looks into the mirror and sees herself and wonders why it is herself. But then she smiles because really it is all so simple. And then she sleeps more deeply.

A bare arm lies on an old quilt. Its skin is withered and shrunken so that it wraps about and beneath the aged, rotten muscle. But her mind continues—an old woman's mind must remember all. She must satisfy the highest quest by remembering the movement and the moment. She is like the whirling funnel of water which has sucked the fish up out of the sea and has carried them out to land, depositing them one by one upon the ground where they burst their guts and bulge their eyes and then decay. But now and then there is a fish which drops upon the water of a pond. After a while it turns over and swims away. (Just as her thoughts

now try to turn toward a different goal.) Her mind remembers, regrets, and justifies all.

The joy was in her pride when, as a small and wondering girl, she stood before the mirror in her mother's clothes and admired her new figure. Such a lady, who rolled up strips of cloth and stuffed them in her blouse. The joy of expectations. It was this only, or so it seemed, which sufficed to make her flattened chest grow more, and the tiny, hard knots form beneath her nipples. Then there were the times she cried at night. Such depression, cruel and terrifying in its mystery, and also comforting, because it was so close and private. But there were times when it was not so private, as when her breasts first began to show. She then endured the crafty looks of her brothers, the confused, hostile, and strange looks of her father, and the invasive sympathy of her mother. Then there was the morning when she awoke and felt the cramps. There was blood. A horrified need to communicate this and the more terrible fear of the unknown; and the awful realization that she had taken on a new form.

Later, much later, there was a birth—a birth during which devils cavorted and clutched at her throat. The pain had dulled her mind but she did not scream, not even when,

with a final gasping strain, she felt her son pulled from her womb.

Quickly, quickly, she must reach down and touch the quivering life. The sheath of wet membrane that covers its little body was foreign to her touch. Quickly, afraid it might be too late, she tore the strange covering away—pushing and scraping it away from that little body, then cupping the tiny body in her hands. With a sigh, and then a cry for darkness, she fell back into a sleep as dark as death itself. But later she awoke, heard a voice, went back to sleep, and again awoke to a quiet room. A great sense of loneliness came over her and she wanted to cry. She asked for the child and a murmuring of voices answered; someone held out a tiny baby with a face wrinkled like the head of a weary penis. Something was said about a man-child, and she again fell back upon her pillow. The pain was in her groin, and all that existed was a memory of despair. She felt so sad and so mortal she could have died at that moment and known that everything was as it should be. She had fulfilled her duty to the species.

But now her child was born, was unique in itself, and would never again be such an intimate part of her. Its life, its quickening destiny, would replace her, outstrip

her, eclipse her. But in the midst of this knowledge—this despair—she felt the beginnings of a great joy. At first she wanted to shake it off, to feel justified in her sadness. But the joy would not be denied. She wondered if her joy were merely an instinctive response, like the milk that now flowed from her breasts. Yet she could not dismiss this joy even if it were only instinct. Her joy came over her in waves. If she could love so easily, then maybe others could love this much too, and this baby, this growing child of hers, might live in a better world than hers.

She clasped her hands together and wondered if she should pray, but then she knew her thoughts had been a greater prayer than any words could now express.

She clutches the sides of her bed and there is that memory of an even earlier day, even earlier, much earlier, when she awoke in the morning with a strange feeling of expectation and, suddenly remembering, felt a twinge of anxious fear and lay back down; but only for a little while—because now she was sure.

The day progressed; she stood at the back of the tiny church and then was led to the front. Standing shyly beside this man who was about to be her husband, she glanced

sideways at him and saw him staring straight ahead. Her heart was pounding and her cheeks burned as the preacher looked at her. She felt so naked, with the people in the congregation staring at her, discerning the flesh within her purity.

Her tongue, though dry and fearful, had pronounced the words as they already had a thousand times in preparation. She finally turned to go, moving her legs, wondering if she appeared awkward or frightened. Glancing about she could see the bloodshot eyes of her friends and relatives who had begun drinking early that morning. The white dilated eyes with flecks of red—reflecting her white gown of silk, reflecting the spots of blood that would honor her deed—his deed—that night. Every eye was turned upon her, every mind thinking of the motives and the end and the revelry which would begin that night—the plight of a frightened bride. It was hers for the price of weeping.

Years later, an old woman by this time, she groans softly and pretends it is a prayer. A holy prayer lifted up in song.

She had moved forward to light the holy candle. It burned fitfully in the vestibule. The cold stone of the

church threatened to stifle it. The blowing snow coming through the half-opened door threatened to snuff it.

Now she mutters thickly, and the angels seem to dance in unison, as if to show her they have heard.

The softest sounds of her sobbing drift out upon the night. There they are reduced to the bits and shreds of nature's eternal lament. The darkening clouds threaten to cover her eyes entirely. Fate lowers its heavy drapes and mourns woefully that its task is nearly done.

My bones grow weary and my eyes are now asleep.

What would it be to lie beneath a tree in the summer on a hot day? The grass, heavy and cool, spread out like a blanket beneath the trees. One can look at the sky and stare deeply into the blue nothingness and think eternal, ethereal thoughts. Or walk along the path in the stretching, endless meadow while thinking silent things. For a few moments all is quiet. The sun is shooting orange and yellow rays up into the clouds above the horizon. They are soft and happy rays. Soon to be subdued because the sun is setting and all is still. The grove of trees stretches away, silhouetted against the sun. But walk in amongst the trees and enjoy their company; the sun has not yet disappeared. Standing quietly, you can feel a breeze ripple

lightly through your hair. Its touch gives a vague uneasiness, a feeling of something mysterious.

Let us stare into the sun and feel the very same as that certain savage, perhaps a million years ago, who stared into the unknown and, because it was unknown and fearful, felt that he should worship it.

The sun dips slowly down the sloping horizon and settles its breast against a bed of warm, eternal sleep.

Her feelings pass, as all shall pass. She wishes that all of humankind could be with her now; it would be beautiful to share these moments, to hope and know that the sun will rise again.

As she died she thrashed so hard she thought the earth itself would tremble. But it merely stretched its skin, heaved a silent sigh, then slept the more soundly.

Chapter 2

THE STERILE SEED

Benny slouched against the parking meter and spat at the ground. He shook his head, realizing he had been lost in thought. Looking down, he put his foot on an old cigarette butt and ground it into the pavement. A car rumbled by and a young boy shouted, "Hey you old fucker!" Benny looked up and shook his fist half-heartedly.

He had just gotten off work and he was tired. He had spent the entire day in the back room at Tibbs Jewelry, working on an intricate watch that was probably going to be impossible to repair. Mister Tibbs had given him hell because he had done nothing else the entire day. He knew he would soon be losing his job.

"Too old," he thought. "Only 38 and too old already. And broke."

Straightening himself, he slowly walked up the sidewalk. His clothes hung loosely and his shoulders drooped. Anyone could see he was in poor health. And his entire demeanor seemed so dejected as to almost suggest that this person did not exist at all. His complexion was sallow. His whole body seemed to have that slovenly look

which only those with a terminal disease have. His hair was graying—not turning silver, just a dirty gray—the oil and dirt staining his sideburns dark.

A man and woman walking together came down the sidewalk, talking quietly. Benny refused to change his course to let them pass, and with surprised annoyance, the man stopped and turned himself and his companion aside. Benny's hatred burned and he waited for a rebuke, but the man said nothing.

Benny's anger unvented, he continued on. Passing a bookstore, he looked in and saw The Will to Power by Friedrich Nietzsche in the window. Old memories stirred, and he appeared to bend just a little more, bowed down with the weight of memories. He had a degree in philosophy, but he had not finished graduate school. He had left school, had left the woman he loved, and had married Harriet. And then his luck had gone sour. Soon he and Harriet were broke. They left Detroit for New York City where her parents lived, but contrary to their plans, no help was to be found there. Harriet's parents were just as poor as they were. And two years later, in the course of just three months, Harriet's parents both died. So 12 years ago Benny and Harriet had moved to the poor district. Benny had read

books on watch repairing and finally got a job at Tibbs Jewelry. But Benny's health was never good, and he liked his beer too much. Plus now there were two children to feed.

Not only was Benny in trouble with his boss, his mother was in his home, dying. She had come to New York, to stay with her son, when she could tell death was not far away. And now his wife was about to have another baby. Any day now, any hour.

"And here I am about to get drunk," he thought angrily to himself.

"Fucking bitch of a wife," he said aloud.

He hated Harriet with a passion. He had left Amanda, the woman who loved him, for Harriet. Why? It now seemed, looking back years later, that he had fallen in love with the idea of loving Harriet, and not with Harriet herself. He had courted her madly for six weeks, then married her, and almost immediately he had regretted it. Now she was at home, ready to drop a kid he couldn't afford to feed, and doing it right in front of his dying mother.

"Seventy-three years old," he thought. "Jesus! What a life to lead."

At times like this he would think about his own fears of death, but these thoughts eluded him at the moment. He was approaching the bar and he looked forward to the needed drinking. But his thoughts drifted back, for a moment, to Amanda. He often wondered what had happened to her and if she ever thought of him. He knew he had hurt her terribly. She had truly loved him. He had mustered the courage, about three years ago, after 11 years of marriage, to write a letter to her. The letter was addressed to her parents in Michigan, and they apparently had received it because the letter was never returned. He had waited several months, hoping for an answer. But the answer never came. Eventually, the truth that she now was lost for good calloused him over, and he accepted the inevitable.

Turning from the street into the bar, he walked toward the corner table where he always sat. He automatically tossed his cap on his usual table before realizing it was already occupied. With an embarrassed start, he leaned over the table and retrieved his cap. But annoyance replaced embarrassment, and he glared angrily at the two young men. They looked back haughtily, expecting him to apologize, intending to ignore his apology with reproving vanity. But Benny's apology was not forthcoming. Instead, with a twist

of his mouth, he said, "What the hell are you doing at my table?" One of the young men smiled over at the other and shook his head with injured humor. Benny quite suddenly lost his temper. He leaned over and grabbed the rich material of the suit on the closest man. "I said what the goddamn hell are you two doing in my seat?!" he yelled, pulling the man toward him. The young man followed Benny's pull and came up out of his seat, bringing his arms up under Benny's shoulders, snapping him upwards and loosening Benny's grip. Benny fell backwards and stumbled over a chair. With a shout of rage, he turned to the bartender. "Hank, why in livin' hell are you lettin' someone sit at my table?! Do you think you're runnin' a fuckin' flop-house here?"

Hank looked up from the bar where he was washing glasses and said quietly, "Settle down Benny. Take another seat. It's a free country ya' know."

"Free country shit! When a man can't sit at his own goddamned table where he's sat for ten years?" Benny turned back to the table and stared hatred at the two men who were watching him warily. "You stupid sonsofbitches!" he said, walking closer. "You stupid goddamned sonsofbitches! A man's

mother is dying and you won't let him get a drink to steady his nerves! You stupid goddamn whorin' sonsofbitches!"

"If your mother's dying, you should get to her bedside," one of the young men sneered, a smirk on his face.

"You dirty sonofabitch!" Benny said. His fists clinched and he moved toward the two.

The man nearest him jumped up and made ready to fight, pulling off his coat and jerking off his tie. "Listen old man," he said, "there's other places to sit. Now get the hell out of here before you get your ass creamed." Hank was shouting something at Benny but he didn't hear. He moved in at the young man and blindly threw a punch. With a grunt the man ducked and brought his fist up into Benny's belly, then backed away as Benny sagged. The man moved in and grabbed Benny by the shoulders, turned him, and pushed him to the door where he shoved him out into the sunlight.

Benny squinted his eyes against the sun and leaned over, breathing hard, trying to catch his breath. Straightening up, he walked slowly down the street, stooped against the pain but trying to appear inconspicuous to people who were watching him. Hurrying down a side-street, he took a short-cut to the park. His belly ached and he

felt nauseated. His mouth burned for the taste of a beer. With a groan he sat down on a bench and leaned back, tired and exhausted.

"Just an old man," he muttered. He crossed one leg over the other while loosening his shirt. The sun was warm but the breeze blew through his shirt and he shivered. Again his thoughts turned back to Amanda. He felt an aching in his throat.

As soon as the pain in his groin subsided, Benny got to his feet. He needed some beers soon—two or three for a start. He decided to take the long way through the park. It would bring him out beside another bar where he sometimes drank.

Looking down the path, he could see a woman sitting on a bench at the far end of the fountain. As he approached, he realized she was crying. Benny felt afraid, and as he came over he grew uncomfortable, realizing that the path went directly in front of her. He wanted to turn back to avoid attracting her attention, but it was too late.

The woman stopped crying and looked up, embarrassed, then immediately looked back down at the ground. Benny felt he should say something, and stopped beside her, standing quietly for a moment. "Is there something wrong lady?" he

asked. She remained silent for a moment, then shook her head.

"Can I help you with anything?" Benny said, still unsure.

But the woman rose, looked at him for a moment, then quickly turned and hurried back down the path in the direction Benny had come from.

Benny shook his head. "Everybody's got troubles," he muttered aloud. "Not just me. Everybody."

About fifteen minutes later, Benny had come out of the park and was back on the street. The sun was starting to go down; almost an hour had passed since he had left work.

As he walked along, a mother and her two children came walking toward him, the younger boy crying, screaming about wanting candy, his angry mother dragging him along by the arm. Benny looked after the child and sneered. "Fuckin' spoiled brat," he thought. "Somebody ought to starve him a couple of days until he's too goddamn weak to cry."

He nearly passed the bar where he planned to stop. Turning abruptly, he went inside. Someone's voice hailed him, and he turned and saw L'il Jimmy, the tiny Hungarian who was everybody's friend and spent all his time in the bars. "C'mon over," L'il Jimmy said. "I'll buy ya' a beer."

Without a word Benny went over and sat down beside him. A man with a white apron around his large belly brought over a beer. Jimmy stared closely at Benny for a moment and then said, "Well now, just what the hell's eatin' you today? Your wife ain't had her kid yet has she?"

"Any time now," Benny answered.

"Nothin' to worry about," L'il Jimmy said. "All kinds of women have all kinds of kids every day and things work out just fine."

Benny sat quietly for a moment, looking down at his beer, then said, "Shit man, don't you know anything about me at all?"

"What do you mean by that?" L'il Jimmy asked.

"Listen, I got a mother dyin', a wife droppin' a kid I can't feed, and I hate 'em both. I've thrown my whole goddamn life away." He spat on the floor. "And you ask what's buggin' me. As if I had a fuckin' thing in the world to live for besides this damned stuff." He raised the beer to eye-level and drank. "Goddamn you're stupid!"

L'il Jimmy looked up in feigned hurt. "Now just a minute. What are you sayin'? You expect me to be a friend and take that kind of insult?"

"Forget it. Forget it," Benny said. "I didn't mean a damn thing by it."

"That's all right, Benjamin," L'il Jimmy said. "I know you didn't." That was Jimmy's way; doing everything to make a fellow feel good. Like calling him by his real name instead of the usual "Benny."

"But ya know; I hate to repeat an old saying, but things could be worse, ya' know."

Benny sat silent.

"Ya' know?"

Benny turned his glass up and drained it. "Yeah; and things could have been a whole hell of a lot better by God. They could have been just one hell of a whole lot better."

"Yeah; but in this world of ours, we can't worry about that. We got to work with what we have."

"Well, just look at me. Just look at me for a minute."

L'il Jimmy looked down at his glass and then looked up. "And just what's wrong with you?"

"Fuck; you're not that stupid. All you have to do is take one look at me. I'm a fuckin' total wreck, that's what I am. I can't have anything, never feel right, ain't got a woman in the world I give a damn for. Except for one I don't even know no more."

"What do you give a damn about women for? I gave up on them a long time ago. Never miss 'em."

"Yeah, but I know that somewhere in this goddamn world there's a woman I still love. What do you think I keep on living for? I've got love in me like a barrel about to run over, and there's one woman in this world I could give it to. Give it all to. But I blew it all to hell. Blew it all to hell with a few words spoken by a fuckin' goddamn priest. That's what I did with my twisted fucked up mind."

"Wait a minute. Now just a minute! Man; I ain't ever heard you wound up like this before. What's this talk about some other woman anyway? You been runnin' out on your old lady, Benny?"

"Hell no I ain't," Benny said. "But if I had a goddamn chance, I would. Just look at me. What in the hell woman would have me? Just what in the hell woman would look at me, let alone look at me twice?"

"Why, just about any woman that was interested in you," L'il Jimmy answered.

"All right then! Jesus Christ! What in hell woman would ever in all hell be interested in me?!" Benny waved his arms wildly as he gestured. "What in hell woman would ever be interested in me or my kind?"

Jimmy was silent for a moment and then looked up. "What do you mean by talkin' about some other woman Benny? You thinkin' about makin' out on another woman? You ain't got no money."

"Hell no I ain't got no money. You know that." Benny was silent for a moment, then continued. "I'm thinkin' about a woman I had a chance to marry years ago and didn't just because I was a stupid goddamn fool and because that stupid wife of mine took all the sense I ever had away from me. That's what I'm thinkin' about, goddamn it."

L'il Jimmy remained silent.

"Man; you don't know what it's like to love a woman so goddamn much it hurts when she loves you back. That's something you don't know a damned thing about and never will."

"I guess you're right," L'il Jimmy answered. "But you don't know that things would've been any better with this other woman if you'd married her."

"Oh no? Oh no?" Benny's temper rose. "And just how can you say that? Just how in hell can you say that?"

"I ain't sayin' it," Jimmy answered carefully. "I'm only suggestin' it as a sort of possibility."

"Well, take your possibilities and go to hell with them," Benny said. "Don't talk about something you don't know a damned thing about."

"No harm intended," L'il Jimmy said quietly.

Benny apologized quickly, "Well hell; I didn't mean to get riled up like that. I'm just a little out of it—my mother dyin' an' all."

"Yeah. That's all right. Are ya' sure she's dyin'?"

"She's goin' for sure this time. Old age has got her and she's got a cold on top of it. No way in hell she's goin' to live more than a few days. Just slowly dyin'. Isn't anything to be done except let her die peacefully."

"That's right. Just let 'em die peaceful and they'll be eternally grateful."

"Yeah. She'd better be. She's got a lot to be grateful for."

"I'm glad you ain't runnin' out on Harriet like I thought a minute ago. It just didn't seem right, her havin' a baby an' all."

"Hell; it wouldn't bother me none if I did. You know how long it's been since I got laid by that woman? Do you know how it is to sleep beside a woman for a goddamn year without gettin' fucked and then fuck her one night, just

one goddamn night, and the bitch gets pregnant? I fucked her one time these last two years and I got a kid out of the deal. How's that?"

"Well, it just happens, doesn't it."

At ten o'clock Benny left the bar and headed home. His head spun from the alcohol and he walked unsteadily. It took half an hour to get to the old apartment building where he lived.

He put his hand on the iron railing as he mounted the steps up to the entrance, then walked through the heavy door into the long, dimly-lit corridor. Mounting the steps which led to the third floor he panted, angry at his failing strength.

By the time he reached the third floor he was seething with impotent rage. He looked out the window that was at this end of the corridor and saw the neon sign of the hotel down the street. As he walked on down the hall toward his apartment, he heard his neighbor's television blaring and knocked against the door as he passed. Not bothering to knock at his own door, he pulled the key from his pocket and quickly let himself in.

He stared. His mother, lying on her bed in the corner, waved her hand over her face.

Benny watched her for a moment and felt afraid. Sitting at the table were his two children—his 12-year-old son Ernie, and his 3-year-old daughter Sandy. His wife, lying on their bed, lifted her head and looked at him.

"Oh God! Drunk on a night like this!" she moaned. "Come here Sandy, and stand by your mother."

Sandy got up from the table and went to Harriet as Ernie followed.

Benny shuffled over to the table. There he leaned on his elbows, thinking about his job. It was only a matter of days before he would lose it. Then he would have to start looking.

Brooding, tired, completely worn out, he almost fell asleep. In the midst of his weariness, he again thought of Amanda.

"Damn!" he said as he came to with a start. He looked over at his wife. She was lying naked beneath a sheet, her round belly pushing up, a high mound beneath the white sheet. He felt the anger stir in his gut.

"God; how could I have married an ugly bitch like that? Gettin' goddamn pregnant on me!" he thought to himself.

He looked at Harriet for a long time, the hatred boiling. His feet were planted on the floor in front of

him, the faint stripes of his slacks following the skinny curve of his legs down to his scuffed shoes.

He raised himself up, stiffly, his back straight against the back of the chair. He stared at her. She stared back and fear was in her eyes.

Benny suddenly shouted: "Do you know how many times I've fucked you in the last two years?!" His voice was like an explosion in the quiet room. Ernie cowered as he looked at Benny. Harriet lay there stiffly, frightened and quiet.

"I said something and by God you'd better answer me!" Benny shouted from his chair. "Do you hear me? I said it and I'll say it again! How many times have I fucked you in the last two years?!"

"Benny! Benny! Don't you care about the children? Even if you don't care about me?"

"I don't give a fuck about the children or about you!" He jumped from his chair and ran to the bed. "You bitch! You goddamn slut! You fucked me once in the last two years! Do you remember? Huh? Do you remember? You bitch!"

He reached down and jerked the sheet off the bed. Harriet lay there rigid, her big misshapen belly merging down into her fat, blue-marbled legs.

Turning to his mother, lying semi-conscious on her bed over in the corner, Benny shouted, "Look mom! See what you raised your kid to marry? This piece of rotten flesh that's hatching a piece of rotten kid-meat! Do you see this piece of shit I married?"

Harriet screamed in fright, turned over on her stomach, and pressed herself against the mattress. To his dying mother Benny yelled, "I only fucked her one night and she got pregnant! By God, she got pregnant!" He jerked off his shirt, tearing buttons. Pulling the belt out of his slacks he threw it on the floor. Picking the belt back up, he lashed it once across Harriet's bare ass, making a red mark on her flesh. Then he pulled down his slacks and underpants. Kicking off his shoes, but leaving his socks on, he crawled across the bed toward her as she tried to get away. Grabbing her inside the thighs, turning her over onto her back, Benny jerked her toward him. "Do you know I've only fucked you once in the past two years?!" he shouted. "Do you know that?!"

"Benny! Benny! The children! The children! What about me?" Harriet was crying and moaning, clutching her arms around her belly. "What about our baby? My baby? This unborn baby?"

Benny grabbed her and pushed his knees between her thighs. He had an erection, and he lay down heavily on top of her, pushing his penis up against her swollen vulva. With a mad laugh he pushed his head down between her breasts, then grabbed them forcefully with his hands. Pulling them up to his head, he shoved one breast and then the other against his ears.

"Look Ernie! Look! This is your goddamn lesson!" he shouted. "Look! You thump the one that's against one of your ears and you can hear it with the other ear! See? Thump, thump, thump, THUMP!"

He pushed his penis into Harriet and started moving back and forth while Harriet sobbed hysterically. "And look here son! Make sure when you do this someday you hump her hard! Especially when you're on a high pregnant mound like this one! Especially like this one!"

Ernie and Sandy ran over to the bed where their grandmother lay. Sandy was whimpering as she took her grandmother's hand. The old woman opened her eyes for a moment, looked blankly at the ceiling, then closed them again.

Benny was rutting on top of Harriet. "You bitch! You goddamn bitch! I ought to kill you! Kill you and then fuck you again, you goddamn bitch!"

He shoved his body forward as he ejaculated. Then he lay there quietly.

Over by the old woman's bed, the two children looked shyly at one other. Sandy had stopped whimpering. Ernie stifled a giggle.

Benny got up abruptly, his penis going limp. He pulled on his underpants and started to walk to the window, but then changed his mind and walked back to the bed. A look of horror came over his face as he realized what he had just drunkenly done. Harriet rolled off the bed. Moving away from Benny, she ran over to the children, vomiting and gagging on her own vomit. Benny looked at her and shouted, "I'm Benjamin! Your goddamn husband! You bitch! I'm your goddamn husband!"

He went back to the table and sat down. His wife walked around him and went back to her bed. "You'll burn for this!" she said in a low, gritty voice, trying not to cry. But as she lay down she began sobbing.

Benny's thoughts wandered, for the hundredth time that day, back to Amanda, the woman he had left years ago to

marry this woman. He remembered the first time he and Amanda had made love, up in the attic above the theatre where his class was preparing a play. They had gone up there that afternoon, and it had been so easy, opening to one another in their nakedness. The room was hot and the sweat had rolled off their bodies. They were warm, slick, and slippery. And that first afternoon—the first time he had ever made love to her—Amanda had reached a climax. This had been more satisfying to Benny than to her. It gave him a feeling of power and fulfillment. It made him feel like a man.

But with Harriet it had never been that easy. Many times, in that brief period he had courted Harriet, they had made love—sometimes it was gentle and ethereal, other times they exhausted themselves in their frenzy. He had experienced a new, very unique satisfaction at losing himself this way. But he had always felt denied too. It was something intangible. Something he could never quite understand. Harriet had sometimes cried in frustration at her inability to orgasm, but he had comforted her, and they had hoped for the day when he could satisfy her. But he had never been able to give her that gift.

Benny now realized, as he sat there at the table, that it was this very thing which had attracted him to Harriet. Her physical acceptance of him had always been only partial—partial and incomplete because she herself was incomplete.

Within but a few weeks after they had married, Harriet's frustration had mounted, and soon it replaced any desire for sex. Before long their love-making came only after long hours of Benny's pleading and resentful arguing. Since their marriage 14 years ago, Benny knew he had not made love to her even a hundred times.

"Made love? What a stupid idea," he thought to himself. "We never made love. We fucked. No. Not even that. I masturbated in her cunt."

But at this moment the box of cereal before Benny's eyes was more real than his anger. He picked it up, shook it and heard nothing. Looking inside, he saw it was empty.

As he sat there he felt the old despair tugging insistently, prowling ever closer, wanting to be let in.

Anger at Harriet replacing his earlier horror at himself, Benny looked up and shouted. "Hey bitch! How did you like it!? Did it get you over the hump this time!? Did it get you over the hunch hump!?"

He laughed loudly but bitterly.

Getting up, he walked over to the couch, turning to survey the room. "Do you call this goddamn place a home? Someone once told me, or maybe I read it someplace, that the difference between a house and a home is that in a home there's love."

He looked over at his mother whose breathing, audible and ragged, was coming in long, shuddering gasps. He had told L'il Jimmy she had a cold. The truth was she was dying of pneumonia and the doctors would not come. She probably was dying of thirst too. It had been two days since she could drink any water. And here was her son, 38 years old, and not able to afford a doctor for his dying mother.

The old woman gave a low moan and Benny felt a wrench of guilt. She was cold and had to be covered, even though the room was stiflingly hot and the fever was burning her up. She lay on an old bed, yellow with filth, a tattered blanket drooping its ragged edges down to the floor. Ernie and Sandy stood beside her, their glances wavering between Benny and his mother. They were terrified at this suddenly violent man. Before he had always been one to sit and brood.

Soon Benny was again lost in his thoughts. Time passed. After a while—perhaps an hour—he looked over at Harriet. She seemed to be sleeping. Ernie and Sandy were lying on their bed, which was made out on the floor.

At last, wearily, Benny got up, took off his underpants, and crawled in beside his wife, trying not to wake her.

But she did awaken. She turned to him. "I'm sorry Benny," she said softly.

Surprised at her apology, he did not reply.

"I'm really sorry. I mean it," she said.

"Sorry for what?" Benny asked, his hatred subdued by this strange new attitude.

"Sorry for everything that's gone wrong for so long," she said.

Lying there beside her, Benny tried to understand. But this was too strange. Too inconsistent with what she had been before.

After a few minutes Harriet turned to him, put her hand around his penis, then began stroking him. She moved her hand slowly, very gently. For perhaps two minutes he was numb to her, but then he slowly became aroused.

She pulled him onto her, rose up to meet him, and pushed back at his love-making.

"Do you think it'll hurt the baby?" she whispered. Benny didn't answer.

Over beside the couch was a packing crate for a piano. Two days ago Benny had brought it in from the street. It was to be the coffin for his mother's body.

Chapter 3

THE PSEUDO-INSEMINATION

The sun rose a dark red, dispelling the night, making the morning eerie in the gray, murky dawn. Slowly the city began to come alive.

Benny got up about nine o'clock and brought out a bottle of vodka he had stashed in the piano crate two days ago. Drinking the vodka straight, chasing it with water, he sat naked at the table. His genitals were pushed out over the edge of the chair while his loose, flabby belly hung down to his legs. His forearms were slightly browned but the rest of his body was white. Bathroom-tile white, he thought. Pallid as the soles of a dying woman's feet. The wisps of black hair on his body accentuated the whiteness of his skin. Every few minutes he would raise the bottle to his lips, sip slowly, and let it warm his empty stomach and permeate his brain.

Ernie rose after a time, dressed hurriedly, and left without a word. The old woman coughed and Benny stirred uneasily. Taking a heavy drink of the vodka, he went over and turned the television on. His anger from the day before began to return, rising faster than the vodka could melt

it. Someone in the apartment next door began pounding on the wall, but stopped after a short time. Hearing it stop, Benny went over and turned the television up louder. The person started pounding again. Picking up a stool, Benny walked over to the wall and pounded back, long and persistent, until the pounding on the other side stopped. Satisfied, he walked back to the couch.

The people in the apartment were three brothers and two sisters, all in their sixties. They had lived together their entire lives. "Sixty years!" Benny said to himself, but then, with a sense of shame, finished the thought with, "And they're probably better off than I'll be at sixty. If I even make it that long."

Sandy, who had been awakened by the pounding, left the room to use the bathroom out in the hall. As Benny settled back to watch TV, he noticed that Harriet's breathing was rough and heavy. This made him aware—sure even—that the baby would be born this day. It would come quickly. Ernie and Sandy had been born with very little pain, and with no heavy labor. The labor had lasted perhaps five or ten minutes before each birth. Benny thought this was probably unusual, but he had never had an opportunity for asking a doctor about it. Both his children had been born at home

with not even a midwife to help. Harriet was a hardy woman—he had to give her credit for that.

Benny remembered what he had done the night before, and how Harriet had actually made love to him. He could not understand it. He had taken a long time getting the job done, and she had actually seemed to enjoy it. And afterwards she had clung to him and insisted that he hold her close. Benny thought maybe it was a woman's instinctive need for security and protection—a need women have just before giving birth to a child—something simple like that. Harriet was incapable of really loving. He was sure of that.

Sandy came back in from the hall and began rummaging among the boxes and cans in the cupboard above the sink. Benny gripped his bottle tightly. "Booze," he thought, "instead of food for my kids."

Sandy, with two crackers in her hands, walked over to the bed where Harriet lay and sat down on the floor. Benny watched the television for another hour and then got up and dressed. But then his thoughts were distracted by his wife's groans. He knew it would be any time now.

After a while, Ernie came in and Benny turned to him. "Where have you been?"

"Been out for a walk, that's where I've been," Ernie answered.

"And what've you been doing, out for an hour when your grandmother's dying?"

"I just went for a walk and got picked up by a queer. He wanted me to go see a movie with him," Ernie answered nonchalantly.

Benny started, then jumped for the boy, grabbed him and held him hard by the wrists. "You got picked up by a goddamn queer? You mean you went with him? Didn't you know he was a queer?"

"Course I did," Ernie answered. "I didn't go to the movie with him. I got him to buy me breakfast, and then I ran. That's all, damn it!"

"Listen here, boy," Benny said angrily. "Don't go cussin' in front of your father. And don't go gettin' picked up by any more goddamn queers or I'll beat the livin' hell out of you. Ya' want to get killed by some pervert or somethin'?"

"I wasn't doin' nothin' wrong," Ernie answered, squirming free from Benny's grip. Benny started to go after Ernie, but was interrupted by a groan from his wife. She

was holding the sheet, wrapped tightly about her body, and she stared straight up at the ceiling.

"Oh Benny! It's comin'! It's comin'! I can feel it right now! Get some rags quick, and put them under me!"

Benny hurried. Finding an old quilt in a drawer, he put it under her naked, sweating body. Looking down at her, he waited while she heaved and contracted. A short scream escaped her lips. Benny looked about, not sure what else to do. He shouted at Ernie to get a rag and soak it in water and bring it to him. Again Harriet screamed. Benny turned and shouted at Sandy to get away from her mother. When she did not move, he lunged toward her, but she dropped to the floor and crawled under her mother's bed.

Again and again Harriet screamed. This had not happened with the other children. She heaved and labored, her breathing heavy, sweat dripping off her fat, white body, soaking the mattress beneath her. Benny heard a groaning behind him. He turned, realizing it was his mother. He walked over to her and watched as she lay there, coughing and hacking, fighting for air.

Horrified, Benny walked back and forth between the two beds, the old woman's groans and Harriet's screams both becoming louder.

Walking over to his mother's bed, Benny bent over her. He saw her open her glazed eyes, mutter something through her brittle lips, then groan softly with a dry, rasping sound.

Benny screamed at her. It was a loud, long, animal scream. The old lady stopped her muttering and focused her eyes on him.

"You bitch! You goddamn bitch! Do you think you need all the attention in this fuckin' house?!" Benny was shouting in her face. He stared at her fluttering eyelids, frightened at himself, but even more frightened of her.

The old lady groaned, and Benny hurried back to his wife. Just as he arrived beside her the baby was born, seemingly by its own effort, coming out with a sound like a loud sucking pop. There it lay, shiny, sheathed in afterbirth, wet and wrinkled. Benny grabbed the blanket, wiping the afterbirth from the baby's body, out of its nose and off its face. As it started crying Benny handed it to Harriet, who gathered the baby against her body, nursing it. Benny watched them. The baby's tiny red body, pushing against Harriet's big white breast with the big brown nipple at the end.

Benny looked around, wondering what to do next. Taking up some newspapers he wrapped the afterbirth in them and shoved the bundle at Ernie. "Here," he said. "Take this out and dump it in the garbage can." The newspapers were dripping and Ernie was gagging as he ran from the room down the hall.

Benny paced the room for a couple of minutes, turning to watch the television every few moments, then glancing over at his mother, feeling guilty that he had shouted at her.

After perhaps ten minutes, Harriet called to him. He walked over and took the baby, wrapping it in an old sheet.

"God, what a huge prick this kid's got," he gloated to himself. "Bigger than any I've ever seen on a kid." He lay the baby on the bed that Ernie and Sandy slept on. Hearing a knocking at the door, he hurried over and opened it. There stood L'il Jimmy, staring past him at Harriet's naked body.

"What the hell's goin' on?" L'il Jimmy asked. "Yer wife drop the kid did she? Ain't a boy is it?"

"Sure is!" Benny answered. "It's a boy with the biggest cock I ever saw on a kid in my life."

"Well, no shit!" L'il Jimmy said. "Let's go have a beer on that. You've got to have one to celebrate the kid! And his cock! Besides, tomorrow's Sunday. There won't be a chance for a beer if you wait 'til then."

"I don't know," Benny faltered. "My mom's not too well, ya' see."

"Aw, come on. You think she won't wait for you to drink a beer? Come on."

Benny gave in. That was L'il Jimmy's way. He could talk you into anything. Looking down at where Sandy was hiding beneath the bed, he said sternly, "You watch over things, and if the kid cries, help your mother. And do as you're told. You understand?" Sandy didn't respond, so in a loud voice he added, "I'm goin' out for a while. You take care of things 'til I get back."

Benny and L'il Jimmy walked down the steps. Benny was glad to get out in the fresh air where he could breathe without smelling the musty apartment. They walked down the street to the bar, and as they entered Benny felt a great sense of relief. The darkness and the sound of familiar voices were the kind of welcome he needed. Sitting down in a booth, Benny waited while L'il Jimmy went to get the beers. As L'il Jimmy brought back the two glasses, Benny

looked up gratefully and L'il Jimmy grinned. Benny felt like he wanted to shake this little man's hand or something. But not sure what to do, he just raised the glass, took a quick taste, then drained it.

"You want another?" L'il Jimmy asked.

Benny nodded. He felt a sense of peace, of friendship, with L'il Jimmy. Looking over at the bar, he noticed that the light seemed more yellow than usual, the air thick and hard to breathe.

Then, very quickly, his mood shifted. Benny felt a dark chill of burning fear slowly take hold of him. "No," he said. "Wait. Let it go. I've got to get back." He rose and stood there, hesitating.

L'il Jimmy started to protest, but looking at Benny's face, he only said. "Well; you do what you have to do."

Benny hurried back to the apartment, running up the steps. As he came through the door, he saw Sandy scrambling out from beneath the bed on which her mother lay. Sandy was spitting and gagging, wiping at her mouth with the tail of her blouse. She ran past Benny and headed for the bathroom out in the hall.

Benny knew what had happened. While Sandy had been lying beneath the bed on which Harriet lay, some of the

liquid afterbirth had soaked through the mattress and had dripped into her mouth.

Chapter 4

THE GRANULOMATIZED OVUM

The sun glared fitfully in the darkening sky. Its orange glow burned sullenly, soon to glide down the folds of the evening clouds. It cast long shadows that pierced the curtains of the room and threw a cloak of darkness about the man sitting on the couch.

Behind Benny the old woman coughed and sputtered, hacking out red blood, spattering little Sandy who stood in fascinated terror beside her. Harriet lay on the bed, breathing long and steadily. Her baby was nestled at her bosom, awake and silent in this strange new world. One side of the room cradled life, on the other side rested death, and Benny regarded them both—aware of the irony in this crude but very real metaphor. He watched the tiny baby, trustingly snuggled against its mother's fat breast. Its tiny fists opened and closed as it kicked its legs. But the old woman's persistent cough brought Benny's attention back to her. He stared in silent, musing hatred. He did not love his mother, and he had no reason to regret his lack of love. She was just a piece of human flesh who happened to

be lying on a bed in this room. He wished she would die quickly.

The old woman, lying on the bed, threw out her arms and strained for air. "Hack! Hack! Arruugrrugh!" Her sputtering nauseated Benny. Her sharp, bony feet stuck up through a hole in the blanket. Part of a wrinkled, mummified breast could be seen, pressed against another hole in the blanket. Her head tossed back and forth, cradled in her thick, white hair which lay askew on the pillow. "Hack! Ooogh! Ooogh!" Benny winced, then grimaced with a sneer.

Ernie came in from the hall and sat down in front of the window. He stared up at the sky for a moment, then turned and looked at his grandmother. Her mouth was stretched open too wide—wider than seemed possible. It was a silent grin of pain, punctuated by those horrible hacking sounds.

Ernie felt transfixed by this spectacle. His was a morbid curiosity. Though still a child, he knew this. That old woman was going to die and he had never seen anyone die before. He could remember times when he had been very sick and had thought he would die. But he knew now that he had never been nearly this sick.

Ernie remembered talking to his grandmother about her younger days. She seldom talked about her husband. The person she preferred to remember was an old man named Russell. He was a tiny man, about five feet tall, who had come to her little town on a train from another city. Ernie did not remember the name of the place he had come from nor the name of the town his grandmother had lived in. But this little man named Russell had come to her small town, hitching his way from boxcar to boxcar. Cold, feverish, and starved, when he got off the boxcar at the town where Ernie's grandparents lived he could barely stand. Ernie's grandfather had taken him home. Russell claimed he was an orphan, and that he had no last name. So, since he had come to the town on a train, they, rather humorously, began calling him Mister Train. Soon the name stuck, and Russell Train, in a gradual but significant way, became part of their household. Ernie's grandparents cared for the little man as if he were their son. He had quickly become well, and despite his age, did much of the work around the home. He chopped wood for the stove, and piled straw around the cracked foundation of the house to keep the cold out. Less than a year before, the couple's son, Benny, had left home for college, so it was understandable that they became

attached to this man in a very short time. When the husband died of a heart attack, Russell cried bitterly at the funeral. From that time on he lived in a small house in town, and walked out to the widow's place every morning. He would spend the day there, do chores, eat his meals with her, but then, before the sun was down, he would head back to his own small house and dirty bed.

The woman loved him as a son, and when Russell Train died in his sleep one night, she spent her last money to buy him a coffin. She had him buried beside her husband in the cemetery, between his grave and where she was to be buried.

As Ernie thought about all this his eyes grew heavy. He lay down on the rug and curled up, in a fetal position, rubbing his eyes with his fists. He soon fell asleep and began a dream that came from within the abyss of a deep, dark hole that slowly rose up to meet him. He was sitting in a jungle. The massive, rank vegetation steamed and rotted behind him in the dark night air. At his back, all was silent and mysterious, yet intimate and safe too. But before him a large group of naked, dancing men swayed back and forth in violent, loud celebration. Then, even as the men were dancing themselves into a frenzy, someone screamed

and the crowd surged forward. They came toward Ernie, moved past him, and melted into the jungle at his back. Before him he heard the scream again, and this time saw where it came from. A naked man was seated in a white-hot, glowing fire which burned all about him and licked at his flesh. As the man sat there, without moving, his eyeballs were actually melting from the heat as he clutched his arms about his folded legs. He stared from empty eye sockets now, the flesh beginning to melt from his body and glide in sheets from his ribs and back while his ears burned black and slowly disappeared. With a twist of his neck the man looked slightly upward and, opening his mouth, tried to scream again but could not.

Ernie awoke with a start and a cry of terror.

At the sound of Ernie's cry, Benny turned and glared at the boy. Ernie looked about, frightened by his dream, embarrassed that he had cried out.

Benny got up and strode over to him, standing above him, glaring down. "What in hell do you mean makin' a racket when your grandmother's dyin'? Just what in goddamn hell do you mean?"

Ernie stared at the floor sullenly. "I was sleeping," he answered.

"You was sleeping?" Benny mimiced. "You was sleeping? What in hell do you mean by raising hell while you was sleeping?" He reached down, grabbed Ernie by the arm, and jerked him to his feet.

"I said, what in hell do you mean?!" he shouted, shaking the boy who stood terrified in his grip. Tears came to Ernie's eyes and he began sobbing.

"Benny! Let him alone! He's just a little boy!" Harriet said from her bed.

"You leave me alone, woman," Benny answered her. Then, to Ernie, he snarled, "Tell me what in hell you were doing!"

"I was havin' a dream, that's all. I was just dreaming," Ernie sobbed, terrified at his father's violence. Benny drew back his right arm and, still holding Ernie with his other hand, hit him on the side of the head with an open palm.

Ernie fell, and as he lay there, his head stinging from the pain, from far away he felt his muscles relax as his bladder drained into his pants. He lay still, a great sense of peace coming over him, and he lay there for a long time. He heard his parents squabbling, their loud voices, their hatred, but he did not care. He just lay there. Finally he

aroused himself, moved by a nervous shaking, and he rose stiffly, quickly, and walked over to the corner of the room. He picked up a pair of slacks that were dirty but dry, and walked quickly around Benny and out the door into the hall.

Benny sat down on the couch, his mind dulled by anger. As he watched the bed where his wife lay, his thoughts again turned to Amanda. She would not be fat and flabby. She would be smooth, appealing, strong. He got to his feet, walked to the window, and looked down at the street below, determined that if he saw Ernie leave the building he would run after him and make him come back. But the door opened behind him and Ernie came back in. Benny felt a bit miffed that the boy had acted contrary to what he had expected. Ernie walked past the couch, over to his grandmother's bed—the farthest place from Benny, and dropped his wet pants behind the couch. Benny started to shout at Ernie, but he stopped himself—he knew his shouting would give Ernie the victory. He turned back and stared out the window.

Ernie stared down at his grandmother. Her face was very white—too white, but it had turned blue around the lips and nose. He wanted to leave the room and go out to the streets and forget this place, but death had a strange hold on him

and he remained where he was. He looked at the large potted plant, nearly as tall as he was, green and brown at the tips of the leaves. It stood by the side of the bed. The old woman had placed several of these large plants about the room after she had moved in. She used each of them as a sort of cane. Although sturdy, they could not support her weight, but still, she had placed them at opportune places between pieces of furniture, and when she moved about the room she would grab onto a piece of furniture, stretching out her hand toward a plant, hobbling toward it, her arm outstretched as she made her way, then grabbing onto it as it swayed and bent before she continued hobbling her way to the next plant or piece of furniture, until finally she got to where she was going. All of the plants had a shiny, browned spot on their stalks, about four feet from the floor where the old lady had gripped them so many times.

A knocking sounded at the door and Ernie looked up. Benny looked menacingly at him, meaning that Ernie had better not answer the door.

Benny rose, buttoning his shirt, and walked to the door. Opening it he groaned, "Oh Jesus Christ no!" It was the kid who lived with his crippled aunt upstairs. He was about 20 years old, but had the mind of a four-year-old.

The boy stretched his hands out to Benny's face and Benny backed away, slapping the kid's hands down as he shouted, "Now get! You hear?! Get the hell back upstairs!" The boy backed away in fright and turned to go, still stretching out a hand toward Benny. Benny closed the door with a curse, went back to the frayed couch, and sat down. "Fuckin' goddamn stupid idiot!" he said.

The boy was allowed to run about the apartment building because he was afraid to go outside. He had a habit which often got him into trouble with some of the other tenants. He would come to a door and, after knocking, reach for the person's face and try to squeeze a pimple—real or imaginary. This had earned him more than a few cuffs. So, not infrequently he would knock on someone's door, displaying a cut lip or a swollen cheek, asking silently to have it taken care of. But a few of the people in the building gratified the idiot's wishes by letting him squeeze at their faces or arms.

Benny, feeling the sweat rolling down from his armpits, unbuttoned his shirt. He looked down at the rotted, peeling linoleum at his feet. Kicking at a piece which had turned up, he broke it off with the toe of his shoe and smoothed the frayed edge down with his heel. His musings were

arrested by a coughing—loud and long—from his mother. As the coughing persisted he rose and walked over to the bed. Sandy and Ernie, who had been standing beside the bed, backed away from their father. He stood over the old woman, watching her tongue loll out, her whole face turning blue as she tried to get air. Benny put his hand over his eyes.

“Oh God, what in hell can I do?” he thought. “What in hell can I do?” The old lady’s coughing persisted, but began getting weaker. She would cough, expelling the air, but then could not quite take a breath for the next cough. She sputtered, gagged, her whole body stiffened, but then she finally relaxed and breathed again. Behind him, Benny heard his wife say, “Oh God in heaven have mercy on us. Have mercy on us in our misery.”

Benny turned and stared, then walked quickly over to her and arched above her. “Will you shut your goddamn forked tongue, you bitch of a slut?!” He looked back at his dying mother who was coughing again. Her coughs grew weaker and weaker as she tried to breathe. Benny hurried back to her bed, squeezing himself between the bed and the wall. Her coughs became nothing more than a silent heaving, a shaking in her breast, and Benny watched in horror as even that stopped.

The old lady's face was now an icy blue. Benny stepped back, afraid, then reached down as if to touch her hair. But instead he abruptly touched her face. The mouth and nose were cold. He could tell she was dead.

Benny turned from the bed, looked over at Ernie as if expecting him to say something, then walked over to the window, looking out. It was getting dark outside. Had this much of the day passed? Harriet was crying, saying something to him, but Benny made no answer. He stepped back from the window and looked up at the ceiling, seeing the places where plaster had fallen out. A single light bulb dangled from its cord. Even though his eyes smarted from the glare, Benny continued staring at the light. He stretched a hand out toward it, as if reaching for it, but then pulled his hand back.

He turned his burning eyes in the direction of the bed on which the dead woman lay.

"Is that all?" he asked, his voice quite loud in the large room. "You mean that's all there is? It isn't anything else?"

He sat down on the floor and a sob shook him. "Come here to your father, girl. Come over here." Sandy looked at Ernie hesitantly, then shyly walked over and stood in front

of Benny, just out of reach. "Let me look at you a minute," Benny said. "I just need to see you for a minute." He then added, as if it were an afterthought, "You're young, you know?"

Sandy stared back. Benny looked at her for a moment longer and then rose, glanced over at Harriet who was still crying, and walked back to the window. Looking out, he whispered to himself, "And that's all there is to it. They just go." He looked out into the darkness, bent down so he could get a better look at the moon, then shook his head. "That's all there is to anything. Meant to be this way. The whole thing made this way in the beginning when there never was a beginning and it all came out this way and it'll go on this way probably forever just the way it was meant to be."

He stopped speaking and walked over to where Harriet lay on her bed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I won't say what I'm sorry for, because that would take a long, long time. But I want you to know I'm sorry. Sorry for all I've done to you. And sorry for all the things I haven't done for you."

He turned away from Harriet abruptly and walked over to where his dead mother lay. Reaching down he pushed against her eyelids, which were not quite closed, and pressed them

shut. He held them for a moment, then cautiously lifted his hand. They remained closed, and he stood back. Abruptly he went to the door and stepped out into the hall, paying no attention to Harriet when she called out a question. A few minutes later, when he came back in, he said to her, "I called the morgue. It's hot, you know."

Picking up an old pan, Benny filled it with water. He tore a piece of cloth from the sheet which covered his dead mother, then threw the sheet aside, exposing the naked, shriveled body. He stared for a minute and then turned away. Harriet called to him, "Why don't you wait a while?" she asked.

"Because I don't want to wait 'til she's cold, that's why."

He leaned over her, washing her body with the cloth, dipping it into the basin again and again. The water in the pan turned a dirty, brownish color. Benny rolled his mother over to wash her back side, and saw a filthy, stained bra the old lady had taken off which had been there beneath her. The snaps of the bra had cut completely into her flesh, and the imprint of the entire thing was on her white, dead flesh. Leaving her lying face down, he walked over and pulled the piano crate out into the middle of the

room. It was about the right length and width, but too high. He thought for a moment, then left the room, returning after a few minutes with a saw. He began sawing around the crate, about three feet from the top. His arm grew tired after a few minutes and he wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of his shirt. "Here," he said, looking over at Ernie, "take this saw and do like I've been doing. And hurry."

Ernie slowly moved to obey, took the saw from his father, and began sawing.

Benny opened the window and stood in front of it, holding his arms out from his body to let his armpits dry. He stood there for several minutes, then turned back to Ernie, who was still sawing. With a curse he jumped for him, jerking Ernie's hand off the saw which remained stuck in the wood.

"You sonofabitch! You're sawin' it crooked!"

He cuffed Ernie on the ear and Ernie fell with a cry. Then Ernie scrambled away, started to walk over to the corner where the body lay, but changed his mind. He ran for the door and hurried out into the hall. His running steps could be heard pounding down the corridor, down the steps, out into the night. Benny paid no attention. He finished

the sawing and dragged the crate over beside the bed. Grabbing his mother's body, he pulled her over to the side of the bed where the crate was.

"Hadn't you better put my nightgown on her?" Harriet asked.

"The morgue said naked. So ... ," but he did not finish.

He pushed the crate up against the bed. Then he half pulled, half rolled, his dead mother toward the crate. Holding the body at arms length, not wishing to embrace her, he pulled her near the edge. She began to slip over the edge, then suddenly, despite Benny's efforts to hold her, she toppled into the crate with a loud thump. Her face was staring up now, the eyes wide open.

Benny backed away for a moment, a dark fear, a deep disgust, coming over him. But he fought off the fear and, with an effort that left him nauseated, he bent down inside the crate and reached to shut the eyes again. Taking his hand away, the eyes came partly open, and again he reached down to close them. But they would not stay closed, and Benny decided to let the matter be. Turning, he picked up one of the pieces he had sawed from the top of the crate. After pulling the nails from the piece, and pounding them

straight with a hammer, he nailed the section down over the top of the crate. He then stepped back to survey his work. It was awkward, loose, and not very secure. But it would do. He would not have to look at her again.

Reaching down to his mother's bed, he picked up the dirty bra and threw it to the opposite corner of the room. It fell at the base of a plant.

"They'll be here in the morning to get her," he said, and walked back to the couch.

Chapter 5

THE TERATOMATOUS FERTILIZATION

Benny stirred uneasily, slowly coming awake in the chill of the early morning air. His white legs were pulled up to his flabby belly. He lay still for a while, enjoying the sleep-drugged peacefulness. But suddenly he remembered. He saw the crate on the other side of the room. Sandy was sleeping in her usual place on the floor, but Ernie was still gone. "Probably never come back," Benny muttered to himself. "Serves him right." He looked down at his sleeping wife who lay beside him, cradling the sleeping baby against her fat body. A knocking at the door startled him.

"Who is it?!" he shouted.

He shook his head. "This early in the morning?" he muttered.

There was another knock.

With a curse Benny got up. "What is it?" Harriet asked as Benny pulled on his slacks.

He walked to the door. Opening it, he started back from the five men in their white coats. One man was carrying a clipboard.

"Is this the, uh ... ?"

Benny cut him off. "Yes; this is the place. She's over there. In that ... that coffin."

One man stepped inside, then looked back at his companions with a grimace. Handing his notebook to Benny he said, "Here; sign where I put the X. We'll take her and leave."

Benny signed the form without reading it. The other four men were wasting no time; they had picked the crate up and were waiting for Benny to move aside so they could get out the door.

Benny shook his head as a feeling of raw panic came over him.

"No! Wait!" he said. "Just like that?! You mean you're taking her just like that?! Well; you can't do that! Wait a minute!" Benny looked about as if searching for something. "Just a minute!" he said. For a moment he stared at the box in which his mother lay, then raised his hand. "Peace be with you!" he said, deeply and solemnly. He looked over toward Harriet, as if expecting a response from her.

"And with you too," one of the men said, smiling at the others.

"Let's go," the man with the clipboard said. They pushed past Benny, and with the crate in their hands, went out the door.

The man with the clipboard closed the door behind him.

Benny walked over to the window, shaken and frightened. He looked down into the street, across to the yard of the apartment building on the other side. Down there, in that yard, a dog was hunched over, trying to defecate.

A woman ran outside from the front door of the building, bent down to stare at the dog's hind-end, then ran to a bush and pulled two branches from it. Running back to the dog, she knelt down behind it and pushed the two sticks together against the white stuff the dog was trying to push out. Benny watched her with disgust. That was Mildred—the old lady who was always adopting stray dogs and then worming them, always giving them too much dope. The worms would come loose too fast—more than could fit through the dogs' assholes.

He watched as Mildred, clutching the stuff between the two sticks she held in her hands, pulled a long string of greasy white-brown worms from the dog's straining purple anus.

Over in the corner of the room, Sandy was sitting up, awakened by the arrival of the men. She was wearing the dirty bra Benny had thrown from his mother the day before. It hung loosely from her shoulders, drooping down to her lap.

Later—much later that same day, far down the same street, a woman, standing in her front yard doing laundry in a tub, heard a man's shout and looked up. She saw a middle-aged man running down the street. Just as he came alongside her, he tripped and fell, but he immediately picked himself up and took off again, running as fast as he could—arms flapping, legs pumping in the humid heat.

With a shake of her head the woman turned back to her washing, scrubbing up and down, up and down.

Chapter 6

THE ANENCEPHALIC DESCENT

(or)

A SON'S PENITENTIAL CAPITULATION

So thus it is that terror permeates a soul that will forever writhe in the holiness of barren sanity:

Benny ran down the street as fast as he could. His throat burned raw, his chest ached, his legs felt weak. Finally he slowed to a stop and looked about. The air was cold, and everything he saw had a grayish cast to it. The back of his neck trembled, he was thirsty and dizzy, and a strange sensation weighed down upon him. For one moment he resisted the sensation, but then a warm memory of something he had known intimately for many years overtook him, and he was glad for this burning, suffocating, very familiar companion.

It then seemed that he was walking in a blackness at the bottom of an endless, suffocating sea of sulphur and brine. He wanted to plunge forward, and he felt his mind stretch out before him, pulling him along faster and faster. For one moment he was afraid. But very quickly, very easily, everything became familiar as he strode

forward, probing the vastness about him, awed at the intensity of his immersion.

Now he was running again. Distraught and joyful, moving through the streets with a frantic abandon, he beheld a vision and the vision was real. Stretching forth his arms he embraced a death-like ecstasy and joyfully surrendered to the euphoric consummation of this climacteric choice—this serene epiphany. Rent asunder, his soul fragmented and pulverized, in one brief moment of stark lucidity he tasted the soul of all humankind.

Collapsing inwardly, he found himself at first grieving and wallowing, but then very quickly giving himself over to a state of almost mystical quiescence. Thereupon he at last found, and was able to fully embrace, what he had been searching for. It was his long-desired destination--that vast, amorphous, welcome putrefaction called humanity.

From that epicenter he became himself. He found his own voice—his true voice. Now he could begin the questioning. The questioning that comes, and must be brandished, prior to every terminus:

Why do I roam these streets at night, afraid of the blackness of things that might be contained in the shadowy

niches? Why must I run from every danger when I am now craving death?

As I stumble to this fence I kick a crate to its edge, then stand upon this crate so I may look over the top of these boards. But the crate breaks beneath me and I fall to the ground. I grab the top of the board fence with my hands and pull. The sharp edges of the boards bite through my fingers, but with a ripping sound the boards pull away, and again I fall to the ground. I push the boards aside this time, and clamber up.

Slowly, cautiously, I peer into the weedy lot.

Through the murky darkness, my eyes see and know all. I see a man sitting on the ground. His old hat, black and dirty, is perched askew on his head while his coat, grayed by filth, is wrapped about his shoulders. He sits on the ground, bending forward, his hands in his lap. The sounds of slippery laborings are heard. This man holds a puppy in his lap, caressing and soothing it. Caressing, stroking, he opens the little dog's belly with a knife and pushes his erect penis into its warm, quivering viscera. He stirs and mixes for a while, grunts at ejaculation, then quickly pushes the dead puppy away. Its cooling corpse is finished

with serving its purpose. The man takes a handful of dried grass, and cleans himself.

I vomit upon the ground. Faint with dizziness, sick with horror, I run through the streets, crying and laughing.

Not yet demented, I cautiously move up to this stained-glass window and press my face to the panes.

See the children of God moving about beneath His watchful, loving eyes? The virgin's blood stains the white cloth upon the altar—upon the relics of the dead saints. A penis pulls at a calloused sheath, pulls and plunges in swollen lust. And so I behold this specter: a man starved for sex copulating between a fat woman's legs, her buttocks hanging over each side of the altar.

The fatted one raises her head and grins over the man's shoulder. Grins at this ashen-white face staring through the glass. The fat lass grins because she knows that her lad's penis is stiff as a length of frozen feces. Her screams of delight match my screams of horror as I clutch my ears and run.

And here—here before me stands another church. But how could another church be my destiny? Am I ordained to be the sacrifice for our castrated Lord?

But I must explore this portal too. As I walk up the steps I hear the sound of organ music. Pushing open the iron-bound, wooden doors, I lapse into a soft and welcome lassitude. A weariness comes over my eyes; I am sane now, and can breathe freely.

A cathedral this church is! Majestic and holy!

But the gargoyles laugh throatily, the devils maintain a watch in the vestibule, and the ghosts of bitter saints howl and weep. So I must move carefully as I step into this pew.

An organ peals and grumbles. A couple stands before the altar. Here, in this place, a wedding at night? The gentlemen guests stand in their awkward suits. Their shoes are heavy and freshly polished, their slacks are well pressed; their calloused, horned hands fidget against their legs. The wives of these men stand proudly beside them, pompous in their plastic shoes, the swollen fat of their feet pressing over the edges, their white ankles and plump legs sleek inside their nylon stockings. Fat arms strain against the dress sleeves while the rows of fat buttocks strain against the girdles. These female guests stand quietly, stranded like cows mired in their own manure.

The priest grins sweetly and gives the question: "Is there anyone, for moral reasons or otherwise, who would object to this union? If so, then speak now or forever hold your peace."

Forever! That is a long, long time indeed! Forever is too long a time for any marriage. I must object! "Here! Here!" I shout lustily. But the priest ignores me. As do the other members of the congregation. The invited objection was a mere formality, not an invitation to higher morals.

The poor groom stands there with his shy scrotum tucked up between his legs. And the bride there, so beautiful! She holds roses—the color of her womanliest interior.

Quickly—quickly. You must mumble the words: I do!

Forever do us part. I do. To have and to hold and then to have not and behold nothing. I do!

But let us not belabor the failings of a ceremony when the bridesmaids are tittering, the flower-girls giggling, and there are groans of delight from the holier-than-thou ones in the pews.

But the wedding is done. The couple's hands join. They are about to kiss. The fat ladies gasp in anticipation. The men grin shyly. And the groom slowly, suggestively, takes

the bride in his arms, draws back her veil, and kisses her. Long, long, he kisses her and presses her to his groin. He smells the guests' anal gases drifting to the altar with the incense. He pulls the bride closer to him, harder and harder. His hips press even harder now against hers and he moves back and forth. The ladies gasp and their vaginas start farting. The men grin and their noses start watering. The groom pushes at his bride's soft haunches, trying to enter her, but the cloth is too strong.

Regardless, he must have her. The ladies of the church discreetly faint while their husbands, taking advantage of the situation, clumsily shove their erections into their wives' mouths. The groom rushes from the church with his new wife, but not before the ladies have revived enough to give an indignant, toothy bite to their husbands' presumptuous protrusions.

Within minutes the congregation is leaving, each person lighting one of the small prayer candles at the back of the church. They drop a coin—a token for their salvation—into the locked poor-box. As the last person scrambles out the door, the priests, hurrying up the aisles, scuffling with one another silently, rush to the poor-box, pull away the false padlock, and quickly gather the coins. Conscientious

about the virtue of holy thrift, bending forward they blow out the candles.

Again I flee into the security of the night. And here, again, I walk up to another window and peer within. This time I see a young couple smiling sweetly at their tiny baby. The babe is asleep now, and they take the limp body of the infant and drop it into the boiling water of the huge pot.

I stand at the window, my every thought in a stupor because I must wait, be patient, and not commit the sin of passing judgement.

But again I hear them. The steam from the opened pot has so fogged over the glass I can barely see inside. But I hear her say, "The bones are so soft." Then his answer, "And look at the skull! Remember that soft spot at the top of his head? It's gone now. There's just a hollow place here at the top of the skull!"

I am now rigid with fear, thinking that, no, I must not pass judgement! I will not. It would be wrong to proclaim their act an evil, and overlook the more likely possibility that I have failed to perceive the world as it can not but be. I could never have imagined this. It is not myself who

gave birth to this thought. Surely, surely, it truly must be the abyss of the human soul I am looking in to.

But in headlong flight I rush away from this spectacle too. Dare we humbly bow our heads, squat in naked prayer, and wag our rank tongues as we pray, "Adveniat regnum tuum. Fiat voluntas tua."

But here, beside me. I travel so fast I almost pass it by. Let me knock and enter. Is there not peace in this poor, humble place? I shall enter quietly.

Pushing open the tiny door, held together by slats from a wrecked packing crate, I carefully step inside. Slowly the door creaks open.

A laugh greets my entrance. A laugh from the dark, a laugh which sends a chill down my back to settle at the base of my spine. I stare about and a fear clamps its icy claws upon my heart. The laugh again drifts out—a low vindictive laugh as of a demon squatting in a corner. I look into the darkness and the laughter ceases. A candle at the far end of the church is lit and flares up.

My eyes, now accustomed to the dark, see, there on the altar steps, a naked couple copulating to the holiest of trickles. And more difficult to see, standing there before them in his black robe is an aged priest with a Bible in

his hands, looking down at the naked bodies. He sees that the man is young. Very young. After this young man's ejaculation has given forth its last throb, our priest will be finished with this tiresome ceremony and quickly be on his way. As for the lady lying there, the priest felt no desire for plundering her corpus. She is too old—too worn out and useless except for the temporary convenience her orifice so generously provided for that young man.

But she has lived a good longer than I have. She will die peacefully before many more years have passed. By then her old body will be so decrepit one would not even be able to tell if her legs are still cocked in the air like a virgin in estrus—an old virgin with innocence in every orifice, dry cobwebs choking her libido, her eyes open and glassy. (Touch them and it feels like touching the belly of a dead fish.)

Such a bedraggled, violated corpse hers would then be. Would we dare wonder if maybe her breasts have been torn loose? But an old lady's breasts would, of course, stretch too far to tear. Perhaps they would be out in the street slithering about like two wounded snakes. And her ribs would be broken all the way back to her spine, crushed like sticks and poking out her back. And her guts would be

spilling out like a pot of rotting eels the cook forgot to boil.

Isn't there anyone who cares enough, who is concerned enough, to pull that priest off of her? Why would he rape a dead woman with her rotted guts spilling out? Is he insane enough to think the gore will lubricate her orifice?

Now he is chewing at her cold lips! We must kick him off of her, so we can enact the ritual of closing her eyes.

There is another job to be done too. Someone must sew that sullied orifice shut. Fortunately there are many wrinkles in this one, and they readily accept the needle. Hers should prove to be an easy one to sew shut.

Yes; we will let this priest resume his rutting tonight after her orifice has been made tighter by the stitches. He then can sate his pleasure when he is by himself. But first we must wash her carefully, put talcum powder under her breasts, and put clothespins on the nipples so they will not leak sour milk as he ruts while she rots.

So allow me the luxury of wondering: Which part of a dying woman's body rots first? Has there ever been a woman whose body, cold and stiff, was laid into the grave while that holy orifice was still warm? I wonder if the womb

itself never freezes because it is too stubbornly vindictive to succumb.

Here; down this other lonely street, it is tranquil, quiet, and sleepy. All is relaxed, beautiful, and torpid in a soft, humid laziness. The stars pierce through the inky blackness. Around us the houses sleep quietly, nestled in their grassy yards. Placid minds and flaccid souls are cloistered within. No matter that every member of this species (including this spectator—this phantom—who waits outside) is utterly deranged: spastic minds, demented souls, all of us utterly perverse in our chaotic ravings and prayerful blasphemies.

But who is this other phantom coming down the street?

"Hello! And who are you?" the voice sings out with confidence.

Not sure what to say, I answer hurriedly, "Mankind. All in one, you see. We are viewing the confusions and peregrinations of life."

"The what?" he asks with a toothless grin.

I try not to stammer. "The ways evil permeates life. Or, if I may say so, without sounding pretentious ... the mystery of how life ever managed to emerge from within this chaos of evil."

"But isn't this mess—all of it—so very lovely?" he gushes.

I recoil from him aghast. My arms are raised to gesticulate, to give emphasis to my expostulations. But I am stricken dumb. From within my demented state I cannot hope for eloquence.

Without answering the man's question—and yes, lest we forget, he did pose a question—I turn to leave.

But a new vision before me billows and curls in a fiery din of smoke and noise.

An old lady's fire-breathing orifice heaves and breathes. Young women march up to her orifice, one by one, and the old hag reaches inside. With a great effort she extracts a teratomatous tooth for each virgin. The virgins then depart, and each digs a deep hole in the ground, drops her tooth into the hole, climbs in after, and pulls the earth down about her as she wraps herself about that tooth. These many teeth then groan and grow, they sprout tufts of hair, and complete sets of new teeth. Then these angry, lustful virgins, sporting their naked, hungry orifiii, rise up out of the earth and go forth so they may plunder, cannibalize, and obliterate.

Crawling toward me, I see a naked man grimacing with pain. He raises his face to look at me. He starts to speak, tries to get the words out, but with limbs splayed falls flat upon his belly. Behind me—but no, beside me—another man, this one dressed impeccably in a white suit with black trim, says thoughtfully, "Should we try to help him?" He shakes his head, then adds, "I think not. Much too messy, you know." He turns and struts away.

Before I can step forth and kindly proffer my services to that naked, desperate man, I turn in the direction of the docks. And now I am aware that a crowd behind me is fighting and bickering for food. But I have no bread, no salt, no fishes, no wine to give them.

I pass a black hearse at the side of the street. It is solid and firm, bulging roundly in pregnant expectation of death. Stopping beside it, I hear the loud multitudes of humanity grind to a halt behind me as I open one of the side doors. Glancing in, I see that its interior is cool and inviting. The curtains of its windows are pulled shut, and all is dark, sequestered, secure. Therein one could nestle peacefully, as if into the warmth of a womb.

I must proceed toward the docks, and I do. But here! I trip against the steps of a hospital building. Yes; even

though I do not need this mansion's services, I nevertheless desire the opportunity for sickening my mind on its horrors.

Here; to my left—but what is his problem? That arm there. (We must whisper, so as to not embarrass him.) Here, on this chart at the foot of the bed, it says he is a mystic. He let his disciples bury him as he went into a state of suspended animation for sixty days. But they did not make the casket tight enough. The worms got in and engorged themselves on his left arm. Now he has what the confused doctors must be content with calling a "post-necrotic, withered arm."

I step out into the hall so I can go on with my other visitations. Much must be done before I am finished with my task. I nearly trip over this thing of a person, this part of a man, who has only a head and a torso. No arms even to help himself along, he sits there in his little wooden-wheeled box, trying to move himself about by jerking his head and torso. I would help him, if I could. But what good would it do for me to shift his position when nothing fundamental, nothing significant, would be changed? All I could hope to accomplish would be to perhaps help him look in a different direction. He then might temporarily take on

a different perspective, which soon enough would dissatisfy him. So why bother changing him at all?

Behind me there is a noise. I turn, and there, I see her. That wanton, obscenely wicked, repulsively obese creature who pretends to be a wife. But already she is leaving. She goes to join her cohorts. They—all of them—will do their foul fornicating with what they believe are fair, fleshed forms fawning in the fallow fields of pretty poppies. They will piss their putrid lubrications, and then we—all of us—will acquiesce to that resolute truth we have at last discovered: that pretty words can not make this message less disgusting.

Another man here before me. Another and another, until I wonder when these craven creatures will cease their clamoring.

Before I can even introduce myself, this one grabs me by the collar and says hurriedly, "Quick! Give me direction! I am rushing about this world, hoping to find a man who is hanging at the end of a noose but is not yet dead. I want to cut him down because, somehow, I think he can tell me the truth about life!"

I can not answer. Instead I stutter clumsily. But he falls at my feet, clutching my legs, blubbering as he sobs

out his words, begging that I give him what he wants. But I am not hanging from a noose, almost dead. And I am no guru, no saint, no wise man with answers to such questions. And I will have nothing to do with spiritual beggary.

If nothing else has yet impelled you to a different pace, then remember the chastening this journey and reckoning have imposed. You then will feel the goad.

And please remember: Forgive me my trespasses, for verily I do know what I do.

But we are now come to the docks. These wooden, floating docks which jut out into the black water. They rock and bounce with the slow, sinister motion of the waves.

Out away from the shore, only a short distance, is a small boat. Two men are seated inside. They are doing something, but I can not tell what it is. Are they fishing? No. They are stooping out over the water, as if trying to touch something, or retrieve something they lost.

And who now is pushing at my back?

"It is only I, the blind man," he says as he moves past me.

"The sea! There! In front of you!" I am desperately trying to warn him. "Watch your step or you will fall in and drown!"

My voice sounded, to me, as if I was imploring him. But he ignored me completely.

I watch him as he stumbles into the water, flounders, and then swims out to the boat, pulling it down beneath the waves.

The three of them do much thrashing as they drown. But since they are laughing, even as they choke, I am sure they die happily.

But where their boat was, I now see what they were reaching for. Floating there is the decomposing corpse of an old woman. She does not turn and rock with the waves. She merely floats there, stiff and solemn, her nakedness gleaming in the moonlight.

How can this be possible? I thought she was in her coffin!

Chapter 7

THE ARTIST'S OMNISCIENT DECLAMATION

And so the artist slips into a defiant slumber, and pronounces judgement upon his own soul:

He is not yet removed from this world. Although the umbilical cord stretches far, it still ties him to this realm. The juices pulse into the placenta and he feeds upon them greedily. Would that he were an anguished voice crying in the wilderness. Or at least from within the sullen underground. There might be dignity in that. But instead he silently occupies the barren terrain of this earthly dung-pit.

Yes; to feast the senses upon the horrors of this earth. That is his destiny, for he has become all and he must see all. He must choose the path that spirals inwardly to an epicenter that is black, hollow, and was desecrated long ago.

The figures traced on the surface of the sea thus are filled and erased forever. Harken and you will hear the whale who, buried in the deep, weeps upon hearing the cryings of humankind. Weep with this magnificent beast, and you will know a truth that is soon to be nullified:

This man has become a foundling, a changeling, a phantom, a maniac. And yet he lives, and in hoping to live the stronger, even if that must mean dying horribly, he affirms the entire cosmos and thereby illuminates the edge of every fitful consciousness.

He beholds the orgies of the multitudes—the minions of raving souls—who writhe and scream in agony. The corpses thrash upon the hills, splitting themselves asunder, engorging on the raw salt of lost passion, betraying their grieving by a false holiness. Apparitions, phantoms, visions all—yet they are a cacophony that can not be denied.

He is a lonely, lost soul who would pity himself if he had the patience or the courage. With his eyes drooping and his body aching, he mourns the earth's loneliness, wondering when the grinding machinations of the earth's convolutions will bury him forever.

He wishes this and tries to move the quicker toward his destiny, however painful it must be. He stretches forth his arms and hopes to embrace and be embraced by a complete destruction. But the universe offers nothing but an impending flaccidity; it has reduced itself to ashes by its own spontaneous but insufficient combustion.

Our lonely man is the great wallower, forever rolling in the filth of every disease, forever uttering forgotten thoughts from a blunted tongue. He wanders in a lonely ravine that is shaded by too many shadows.

Lovers somewhere in the night cover themselves and grin in silent, strained ecstasy, disguising their guilt with honeyed platitudes. They turn to one another again, and then again, losing their guilt in the act until they have learned to hate themselves. Perhaps, eventually, they will find joy in their communion with filth.

But now I am no longer even these people. I am the immediacy of everything, of all descriptives. My horrid picture stares back from a silver plate, and the silver plate is melting—dripping between my fingers.

There is a vast difference between a natural death and suicide. The man who succumbs, raving and screaming, to a natural death dies a coward, refusing to accept the fact that his soul is already dead. My brother who kills himself has already accepted his nature, and wishing to bestow one last act of mercy upon this universe, destroys his body so that it may better conjoin with his demented soul. At this juncture, at this death, all is gained. This choice rejects not only hope for the future, but also any hope for the

past. All history, all of one's being, is denied its old lackings, its cravings, and thereby is made complete.

Has anyone ever wondered why there is no weeping at this hero's funeral? I once was told that men fall silent in angry condemnation, but I have come to know better. It is awe—a tremendous, overwhelming awe which stifles not only complaints but also any incoherent platitudes.

So now I too must die. Only the select few may thus succumb—the insane, the base, and the gods. I am a motley assortment of all of these.

But in these final, frantic hours, allow me the glory of my memory, for I am one who can not know without the blessings of sacred memory.

During those days of my youthful vigor I could find joy in love, but very soon I would learn that such joy is fleeting, and soon enough I also discovered that it is terminal. Love's power, with a snake's cunning, strikes and injects the toxin. Nakedness then dances the ritual of humid death, bathing minds with that avaricious lust for feeble, futile sex—sex that soon proves itself fragile, repugnant, then terminal.

The earth, turning on its bent axis, celebrates the untimely terminus of all that postures as sexual love. And

it mocks us with its unsung dirge of stale birth, sullen life, and sadistic death.

Yes. It is pathetic, this life. It is only fit for the ritual of departure. I look into the mirror and shed copious tears, but these tears have no salt and they evaporate before they fall to the ground.

Like most human beings, I would prefer that I not rot when I am dead. But I will. So therefore, when I am prepared for burial, I hope that those who must touch me will regurgitate upon my already disgusting body.

My friend, my brother, my keeper, my companion in the leap—do not cry in death. In death, I swear, there is nothing, and in nothing there is no unhappiness. If the essence of death is not tranquil peace, blissful rest, swooning darkness, or a feeling like the babe snuggling up against the breast of its crooning mother, at least it is a nullity that guarantees the annihilation of all pain.

So come with me while I trail these vapors behind me. Wherever I travel, the smell of putrefaction shall abound and people will scurry to light candles and burn incense for me. What is the pungent odor of rank incense for, unless it be to disguise the odor of carrion flesh? And why

are wax candles lit, if not to temporarily dispel the horror of darkness descending?

So now I must quickly embalm my mind to prepare for the eve of the sun's bright rays.

Let there be a universal salvation in this blessed sacrament. Toward this end I take it as my duty to kiss the sweet chalice of proffered body and blood. Amidst the ritual of my own sacrament, I prepare for the great slaughter as I reluctantly take up the task of grieving for what now is inevitable and can not be rescinded.

The sweet, engulfing presence of sheer blackness sucks me into its bowels that I may rot and become a stench. My blood thus mixes with the red rust of a rotting rifle—the rifle that death once wrenched from a soldier's hands, throwing both weapon and body upon the ground. There that rusted rifle and decomposed corpse are clutched by the roots of a lily, thus lending a tint of red to the false and barren purity of that white flower.

(Poetry such as this is not paltry. It can not, in its grim task of revealing beauty, do other than behold and betray everything that is ugly—and therefore reprehensibly beautiful.)

All these people—these minions of people—believe themselves to be the select holy ones. But they are mere shadows. They rub their bellies in the dirt and creep along the ground, unaware, in their barren, blissful ignorance, of their impending putrefaction. They have not the courage to pray the words: Sweet death: forget me not in this hour of desperate need.

The martyred saints are keeping their distance from me. Their eyes avoid mine, as if they think me shamefully incapable of this last courageous deed.

But I will soon quit the hell of this earth and its false beckonings. The leaded castings of my coffin patiently await me. Its velvet lining hopes to comfort me. The earth, which will swallow the coffin, wonders if it can contain me.

I see my soul lowered with ropes into the grave that has been dug for me. So lonely, this hole. So filthy. It emits a sour odor like stale urine. Like soft, decaying bones in a lifeless swamp.

My lips are moist; they desire this decayed and ugly kiss of lovely death. And I do love thee, sweet death, recipient of my decease. You are the beautiful virgin who

long ago deflowered herself. My final act of charity is to join my fate with yours.

By this one foul move I will conquer and vanquish the future. I will cause the universe to come to a shrieking awareness of its own evil. Therein lies my justification and my benevolence. The annihilation of this one puny self will so disturb the circle of causality that henceforth naked fate shall never again be nature's malevolent tool.

In the past, people would leap into the deep, unmindful even of the fall. But henceforth, given the splendor of my example, no one will ever again be able to say of my heroic companions, "They know not what they do."

So now my eyes burn raw and the skin peels back from my face as I stare sightless into the void. This pause, this backward glance, this momentary surcease from my own despair, this postponement of my final reckoning, has gone on for much too long. The choice is at hand; the time is come. My search for redemption now lies in embracing this self-condemnation. My blood surges in terror as the apparition slowly, horribly, turns its head and bestows upon me the blessing of a final, grieving kiss.

Yes. In this artistic dying (the terminus and the death of this book) we are, all of us, fused into this last, self-same identity.

I nod my head slowly, reluctantly proffering this marriage to death—sweet, caressing, smothering death. I proceed, already feeling as though I am disembodied, watching my self as if looking in a mirror, beholding a different self.

At this juncture, that other self is suspended within a pure nothingness, held by neither life nor death. He pauses, trembling with fear, aware that he has already entered the unknown. He suspends even his will, and all he knows now is unspeakable terror.

His frail body is suspended in darkness, his heart beats frantically, his eyes do not see. Blinded by nothingness because there is nothing to see, he senses himself, feels his own frantic body, feels his own viscera churning in tremulous craving, and at last he despairs utterly while yet desiring to complete this one last act.

Stretching forth his arms, hands extended, body arching back, muscles straining, he reaches out to the void. An animal howl is heard but does not echo. An instinctive shriek, tiny and worthless in that vast magnitudinous

expanse, sounds out but loses its being therein. And again he screams. But in dismay and wonder at the smallness of his plea he falls silent, is guilty, and afraid.

The blackness fills and overfills itself. Like silent thunder it rolls and pulsates. The void of nothingness comes alive and shudders in preying anticipation. The doomed man again stretches forth his hands, again screams, and is again rendered silent. Straining, despairing, his bones crack as his muscles constrict in abject horror. In final, ultimate terror—fear of that which has come to take him into the realm of death, he sinks his fingers into his chest. Tearing, rending, pushing his fingers through muscle and bone, a cavity is opened.

Thus it is that all becomes naught as the mockery of memories and the nullity of hope utterly cease. A hollow shriek of anguish sounds forth ... and the salt of tears is swallowed up in the silent screamings of howling nothingness. Distant but audible, the slow sonorous moanings of the dead intone a loathsome chant. And in this darkened realm, where there is no thought, no deed, no grief, it is revealed that everything is alien even unto itself.

May this crippled cosmos rest in peace.

POSTSCRIPT

The Frump is the first novel I completed, though not the first novel I began. My debut with writing in the novel form began in early 1968, but even to my then uncritical eye, that initial foray soon revealed itself as little more than an almost preposterous assemblage of chaotic verbiage, vague spewing, and self-indulgent spillage. I abandoned the project, destroyed what I had written, and (mercifully) do not even remember its title although I vaguely and perhaps wrongly remember that it contained the word "Fire." My second novel, called Portraits from a Tomb (or, in my less narcissistic moments, merely Portraits), was begun in June of 1968 but would not be finished until September of 1970. While amidst the writing of this novel, I very quickly wrote another (tandem?) novel. This involved 17 days of

actual writing (by hand) during June of 1970 to August of that same summer. This present proffering, The Frump, was what resulted from that eruptive foray. I had just turned 22 years of age on May 31st.

Does it bear mention that, during this productive (profligate?) period, I was working on two other novels also—my fourth and fifth beginnings—while still working on Portraits from a Tomb and The Frump? The fourth novel, called The Laughing Fool, was begun in July of 1969, but would not be finished until mid-January of 1971. The fifth novel, called The Genesis of Death, was begun in March of 1970, and would reach its tentative terminus in late-January of 1971.

The Frump began with the writing of a poem called "Condemned" which would be the "meditation" beginning this book. So from that poem my little foray soon took on momentum and proved itself to be my third beginning with the novel and then very soon revealed itself as my first completion in this literary form.

It is, I daresay, a rather remarkable little book. If it is clearly a piece of juvenilia, it nevertheless has a trace (albeit only a trace) of something akin to artistic genius. And certainly it has a remarkable structure, or

(put more accurately), a generous variety of styles. Its poems are in the true "meat poetry" idiom, a genre I discovered through my great mentor Robert Nagle. The first prose chapter is done in an impressionistic style which I, immodestly, believe does competition with Virginia Woolf herself. The following four chapters are realism fast revealing itself as naturalism. The last two chapters might best be described as "subterranean surrealism" in content and (not quite ironically) as "abstract realism" in style. That final chapter, although kinetic and very Apollonian, is perhaps more an exercise in philosophy than in prosaic fiction. Which surely, at this point in the novel's frenetic progression, should warrant the reader's gratitude. (A few prim readers will gratefully note that this chapter perhaps proves that suicide is the most garish, extravagant, and undeniably egregious form of repugnant narcissism there is.)

So this novel, although more than a short story, is quite short as novels go though not undemanding as an excursion in literature. I present it to the reader with some small degree of embarrassment because of its youthful clumsiness, but also with some small degree of pride at what it achieved. The book does not have great artistic

stature, although it does possess a considerable degree of literary merit. Moreover, it reveals an ambitious grappling with the difficulties of stylistic experimentation. The result is a small but successful aesthetic edifice, as unremittingly prurient as it is perversely pleasurable. Paradoxically, at one and the same time, it contains both the miniscule minutiae of craven narcissism along with undeniable grandeur in its almost colossal cosmic aspirations. (However, it must be admitted—with a humility born of maturity—that this virginal exercise, since it is both sternly and blatantly pedagogical, obviously neglected to grace itself with the virtue of humility before it commenced with its praying and braying.)

In summary, this little novel has much to recommend it as a modest, albeit cornucopian, literary excursion. Which, all in all, suggests that my way of creating this creature was not a bad way of fast proceeding toward the end of a third beginning.

*(Written June through August 1970,
shortly after I turned 22. The
postscript was written March 30, 2011,
nearly 41 years after the writing of
the original novel. So far back in my
history that summer immersion now seems—
almost half a century ago!)*

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