

Raise High
the Roof Beam,
CARPENTERS

and

SEYMOUR
an Introduction

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RAISE HIGH THE ROOF BEAM, CARPENTERS

by J. D. Salinger

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One night some twenty years ago, during a siege of mumps in our enormous family, my youngest sister, Franny, was moved, crib and all, into the ostensibly germ-free room I shared with my eldest brother, Seymour. I was fifteen, Seymour was seventeen. Along about two in the morning, the new roommate's crying wakened me. I lay in a still, neutral position for a few minutes, listening to the racket, till I heard, or felt, Seymour stir in the bed next to mine. In those days, we kept a flashlight on the night table between us, for emergencies that, as far as I remember, never arose. Seymour turned it on and got out of bed. "The bottle's on the stove, Mother said," I told him. "I gave it to her a little while ago," Seymour said. "She isn't hungry." He went over in the dark to the bookcase and beamed the flashlight slowly back and forth along the stacks. I sat up in bed. "What are you going to do?" I said. "I thought maybe I'd read something to her," Seymour said, and took down a book. "She's ten months old, for God's sake," I said. "I know," Seymour said. "They have ears. They can hear."

The story Seymour read to Franny that night, by flashlight, was a favorite of his, a Taoist tale. To this day, Franny swears that she remembers Seymour reading it to her:

Duke Mu of Chin said to Po Lo: "You are now advanced in years. Is there any member of your family whom I could employ to look for horses in your stead?" Po Lo replied: "A good horse can be picked out by its general build and appearance. But the superlative horse—one that raises no dust and leaves no tracks—is something evanescent and fleeting, elusive as thin air. The talents of my sons lie on a lower plane altogether; they can tell a good horse when they see one, but they cannot tell a superlative horse. I have a friend, however, one Chiu-fang Kao, a hawker of fuel and vegetables, who in things appertaining to horses is nowise my inferior. Pray see him."

Duke Mu did so, and subsequently dispatched him on the quest for a steed. Three months later, he returned with the news that he had found one. "It is now in Shach'iu," he added. "What kind of a horse is it?" asked the Duke. "Oh, it is a dun-colored mare," was the reply. However, someone being sent to fetch it, the animal turned out to be a coal-black stallion! Much displeased, the Duke sent for Po Lo. "That friend of yours," he said, "whom I commissioned to look for a horse, has made a fine mess of it. Why, he cannot even distinguish a beast's color or sex! What on earth can he know about horses?" Po Lo heaved a sigh of satisfaction. "Has he really got as far as that?" he cried. "Ah, then he is worth ten thousand of me put together. There is no comparison between us. What Kao keeps in view is the spiritual mechanism. In making sure of the essential, he forgets the homely details; intent

on the inward qualities, he loses sight of the external. He sees what he wants to see, and not what he does not want to see. He looks at the things he ought to look at, and neglects those that need not be looked at. So clever a judge of horses is Kao, that he has it in him to judge something better than horses."

When the horse arrived, it turned out indeed to be a superlative animal.

I've reproduced the tale here not just because I invariably go out of my way to recommend a good prose pacifier to parents or older brothers of ten-month-old babies but for quite another reason. What directly follows is an account of a wedding day in 1942. It is, in my opinion, a self-contained account, with a beginning and an end, and a mortality, all its own. Yet, because I'm in possession of the fact, I feel I must mention that the bridegroom is now, in 1955, no longer living. He committed suicide in 1948, while he was on vacation in Florida with his wife....Undoubtedly, though, what I'm really getting at is this: Since the bridegroom's permanent retirement from the scene, I haven't been able to think of anybody whom I'd care to send out to look for horses in his stead.

In late May of 1942, the progeny—seven in number—of Les and Bessie (Gallagher) Glass, retired Pantages Circuit vaudevillians, were flung, extravagantly speaking, all over the United States. I, for one, the second-eldest, was in the post hospital at Fort Benning, Georgia, with pleurisy—a little keepsake of thirteen weeks' infantry basic training. The twins, Walt and Waker, had been split up a whole year earlier. Waker was in a conscientious objectors' camp in Maryland, and Walt was somewhere in the Pacific—or on his way there—with a field-artillery unit. (We've never been altogether sure where Walt was at that specific time. He was never a great letter writer, and very little personal information—almost none—reached us after his death. He was killed in an unspeakably absurd G.I. accident in late autumn of 1945, in Japan.) My eldest sister, Boo Boo, who comes, chronologically, between the twins and me, was an ensign in the Waves, stationed, off and on, at a naval base in Brooklyn. All that spring and summer, she occupied the small apartment in New York that my brother Seymour and I had all but technically given up after our induction. The two youngest children in the family, Zooey (male) and Franny (female), were with our parents in Los Angeles, where my father was hustling talent for a motion-picture studio. Zooey was thirteen, and Franny was eight. They were both appearing every week on a children's radio quiz program called, with perhaps typically pungent Coast-to-Coast irony, "It's a Wise Child." At one time or another, I might well bring in here—or, rather, in one year or another—all the children in our family have been weekly hired "guests" on "It's a Wise Child." Seymour and I were the first to appear on the show, back in 1927, at the respective ages of ten and eight, in the days when the program "emanated" from one of the convention rooms of the old Murray Hill Hotel. All seven of us, from Seymour through Franny, appeared on the show under pseudonyms. Which may sound highly anomalous, considering that we're the children of vaudevillians, a sect not usually antipathetic to publicity, but my mother had once read a magazine article on the little crosses professional children are obliged to bear—their estrangement from normal, presumably desirable society—and she took an iron stand on the issue, and never, never wavered. (This is not the time at all to go into the question of whether most, or all, "professional" children ought to be outlawed, pitied, or unsentimentally executed as disturbers of the peace. For the moment, I'll only pass along that our combined income on "It's a Wise Child" has sent six of us through college, and is now sending the seventh.)

Our eldest brother, Seymour—with whom I'm all but exclusively concerned here—was a corporal in what, in 1942, was still called the Air Corps. He was stationed at a B-17 base in California, where, I *believe*, he was an acting company clerk. I might add, not quite parenthetically, that he was by far the least prolific letter writer in the family. I don't think I've had five letters from him in my life.

On the morning of either May 22nd or 3rd (no one in my family has ever dated a letter), a letter from my sister Boo Boo was placed on the foot of my cot in the post hospital at Fort Benning while my diaphragm was being strapped with adhesive tape (a usual medical procedure with pleurisy patients, presumably guaranteed to prevent them from coughing themselves to pieces). When the ordeal was over, I read Boo Boo's letter. I still have it, and it follows here verbatim:

DEAR BUDDY,

I'm in a terrible rush to pack, so this will be short but *penetrating*. Admiral Behind-pincher has decided that he must fly to parts unknown for the war effort and has also decided to take his secretary with him if I behave myself. I'm just sick about it. Seymour aside, it means Quonset huts in freezing air bases and boyish passes from our fighting men and those horrible paper things to get sick in on the plane. The point is, Seymour is getting married—yes, *married*, so please pay attention. I can't be there. I may be gone for anywhere from six weeks to two months on this trip. I've met the girl. She's a zero in my opinion but terrific-looking. I don't actually *know* that she's a zero. I mean she hardly said two words the night I met her. Just sat and smiled and smoked, so it isn't fair to say. I don't know anything about the romance itself at all, except that they apparently met when Seymour was stationed at Monmouth last winter. The mother is the end—a finger in all the arts, and sees a good Jungian man twice a week (she asked me twice, the night I met her, if I'd ever been analyzed). She told me she just wishes Seymour would *relate* to more people. In the same breath, said she just loves him, though, etc., etc., and that she used to listen to him religiously all the years he was on the air. That's all I know except that you've *got* to get to the wedding. I'll never forgive you if you don't. I mean it. Mother and Daddy can't get here from the Coast. Franny has the measles, for one thing. Incidentally, did you hear her last week? She went on at beautiful length about how she used to fly all around the apartment when she was four and no one was home. The new announcer is worse than Grant—if possible, even worse than Sullivan in the old days. He said she surely just *dreamt* that she was able to fly. The baby stood her ground like an angel. She said she *knew* she was able to fly because when she came down she always had dust on her fingers from touching the light bulbs. I long to see her. You, too. Anyhow, you've *got* to get to the wedding. Go A.W.O.L. if you have to, but please go. It's at three o'clock, June 4th. *Very* non-sectarian and Emancipated, at her grandmother's house on 63rd. Some judge is marrying them. I don't know the number of the house, but it's exactly two doors down from where Carl and Amy used to live in luxury. I'm going to wire Walt, but I think he's been shipped out already. *Please* get there, Buddy. He weighs about as much as a cat and he has that ecstatic look on his face that you can't talk to. Maybe it's going to be perfectly all right, but I hate 1942. I think I'll hate 1942 till I die, just on general principles. All my love and see you when I get back.

— Boo Boo

A couple of days after the letter arrived, I was discharged from the hospital, in the custody, so to speak, of about three yards of adhesive tape around my ribs. Then began a very strenuous week's campaign to get permission to attend the wedding. I was finally able to do it by laboriously ingratiating myself with my company commander, a bookish man by his own confession, whose favorite author, as luck had it, happened to be my favorite author—L. Manning Vines. Or Hinds. Despite this spiritual bond between us, the most I could wangle out of him was a three-day pass, which would, at best, give me just enough time to travel by train to New York, see the wedding, bolt a dinner somewhere, and then return damply to Georgia.

All sit-up coaches on trains in 1942 were only nominally ventilated, as I remember, abounded with M.P.s, and smelled of orange juice, milk, and rye whiskey. I spent the night coughing and

reading a copy of Ace Comics that someone was kind enough to lend me. When the train pulled into New York—at ten after two on the afternoon of the wedding—I was coughed out, generally exhausted, perspiring, unpressed, and my adhesive tape was itching hellishly. New York itself was indescribably hot. I had no time to go to my apartment first, so I left my luggage, which consisted of a rather oppressive-looking little canvas zipper bag, in one of those steel boxes at Penn Station. To make things still more provocative, as I was wandering around in the garment district trying to find an empty cab, a second lieutenant in the Signal Corps, whom I'd apparently overlooked saluting, crossing Seventh Avenue, suddenly took out a fountain pen and wrote down my name, serial number, and address while a number of civilians looked interestedly on.

I was limp when I finally got into a cab. I gave the driver directions that would take me at least as far as "Carl and Amy's" old house. As soon as we arrived in that block, however, it was very simple. One just followed the crowd. There was even a canvas canopy. A moment later, I entered an enormous old brownstone and was met by a very handsome, lavender-haired woman, who asked me whether I was a friend of the bride or the groom. I said the groom. "Oh," she said, "well, we're just bunching everybody up together." She laughed rather immoderately, and showed me to what seemed to be the last vacant folding chair in a very crowded outside room. I have a thirteen-year-old blackout in my mind with regard to the over-all physical details of the room. Beyond the fact that it was jam-packed and stifling hot, I can remember only two things: that there was an organ playing almost directly behind me, and that the woman in the seat directly at my right turned to me and enthusiastically stage-whispered, "*I'm Helen Silsburn!*" From the location of our seats, I gathered that she was not the bride's mother, but, to play it safe, I smiled and nodded gregariously, and was about to say who *I* was, but she put a decorous finger to her lips, and we both faced front. It was then, roughly, three o'clock. I closed my eyes and waited, a trifle guardedly, for the organist to quit the incidental music and plunge into "Lohengrin."

I haven't a very clear idea of how the next hour and a quarter passed, aside from the cardinal fact that there was no plunging into "Lohengrin." I remember a little dispersed band of unfamiliar faces that surreptitiously turned around, now and then, to see who was coughing. And I remember that the woman at my right addressed me once again, in the same rather festive whisper. "There must be some delay," she said. "Have you ever seen Judge Ranker? He has the face of a *saint*." And I remember the organ music veering peculiarly, almost desperately, at one point, from Bach to early Rodgers and Hart. On the whole, though, I'm afraid, I passed the time paying little sympathetic hospital calls on myself for being obliged to suppress my coughing spells. I had a sustained, cowardly notion, the entire time I was in the room, that I was about to hemorrhage, or, at the very least, fracture a rib, despite the corset of adhesive tape I was wearing.

At twenty minutes past four—or, to put it another, blunter way, an hour and twenty minutes past what seemed to be all reasonable hope—the unmarried bride, her head down, a parent stationed on either side of her, was helped out of the building and conducted, fragilely, down a long flight of stone steps to the sidewalk. She was then deposited—almost hand over hand, it seemed—into the first of the sleek black hired cars that were waiting, double-parked, at the curb. It was an excessively graphic moment—a tabloid moment—and, as tabloid moments go, it had its full complement of eyewitnesses, for the wedding guests (myself among them) had already begun to pour out of the building, however decorously, in alert, not to say goggle-eyed, droves. If there was any even faintly lenitive aspect to the spectacle, the weather itself was responsible for it. The June sun was so hot and so glaring, of such multi-flashbulb-like mediacy, that the image of the bride, as she made her almost invalidated way down the stone steps, tended to blur where blurring mattered most.

Once the bridal car was at least physically removed from the scene, the tension on the sidewalk—especially around the mouth of the canvas canopy, at the curb, where I, for one, was loitering—deteriorated into what, had the building been a church, and had it been a Sunday, might

have been taken for fairly normal congregation-dispersing confusion. Then, very suddenly, the emphasized word came—reportedly from the bride's Uncle Al—that the wedding guests were to *use* the cars standing at the curb; that is, reception or no reception, change of plans or no change of plans. If the reaction in my vicinity was any criterion, the offer was generally received as a kind of *beau geste*. It didn't quite go without saying, however, that the cars were to be "used" only after a formidable-looking platoon of people—referred to as the bride's "immediate family"—had taken what transportation *they* needed to quit the scene. And, after a somewhat mysterious and bottleneck-like delay (during which I remained peculiarly riveted to the spot), the "immediate family" did indeed begin to make its exodus, as many as six or seven persons to a car, or as few as three or four. The number, I gathered, depended upon the age, demeanor, and hip spread of the first occupants in possession.

Suddenly, at someone's parting—but markedly crisp—suggestion, I found myself stationed at the curb, directly at the mouth of the canvas canopy, attending to helping people into cars.

How I had been singled out to fill this post deserves some small speculation. So far as I know, the unidentified, middle-aged man of action who had picked me for the job hadn't a glimmer of a notion that I was the bridegroom's brother. Therefore, it seems logical that I was singled out for other, far less poetic reasons. The year was 1942. I was twenty-three, and newly drafted into the Army. It strikes me that it was solely my age, my uniform, and the unmistakably serviceable, olive-drab aura about me that had left no doubt concerning my eligibility to fill in as doorman.

I was not only twenty-three but a conspicuously retarded twenty-three. I remember loading people into cars without any degree of competence whatever. On the contrary, I went about it with a certain disingenuous, cadetlike semblance of single-mindedness, of adherence to duty. After a few minutes, in fact, I became all too aware that I was catering to the needs of a predominantly older, shorter, fleshier generation, and my performance as an arm taker and door closer took on an even more thoroughly bogus puissance. I began to conduct myself like an exceptionally adroit, wholly engaging young giant with a cough.

But the heat of the afternoon was, to say the least, oppressive, and the compensations of my office must have seemed to me increasingly tokenless. Abruptly, though the crowd of "immediate family" seemed scarcely to have begun to thin out, I myself lunged into one of the freshly loaded cars, just as it started to draw away from the curb. In doing it, I hit my head a very audible (perhaps retributive) crack on the roof. One of the occupants of the car was none other than my whispering acquaintance, Helen Silsburn, and she started to offer me her unqualified sympathy. The crack had evidently resounded throughout the car. But at twenty-three I was the sort of young man who responds to all public injury of his person, short of a fractured skull, by giving out a hollow, subnormal-sounding laugh.

The car moved west, directly, as it were, into the open furnace of the late-afternoon sky. It continued west for two blocks, till it reached Madison Avenue, and then it right-angled sharply north. I felt as though we were all being saved from being caught up by the sun's terrible flue only by the anonymous driver's enormous alertness and skill.

The first four or five blocks north on Madison, conversation in the car was chiefly limited to remarks like "Am I giving you enough room?" and "I've never been so *hot* in my entire life." The one who had never been so hot in her entire life was, as I'd learned from a certain amount of eavesdropping at the curb, the bride's Matron of Honor. She was a hefty girl of about twenty-four or -five, in a pink satin dress, with a circlet of artificial forget-me-nots in her hair. There was a distinctly athletic ethos about her, as if, a year or two earlier, she might have majored in physical education in college. In her lap she was holding a bouquet of gardenias rather as though it were a deflated volley-ball. She was seated in the back of the car, hip-pressed between her husband and a tiny elderly man in a top hat and cutaway, who was holding an unlighted clear-Havana cigar. Mrs. Silsburn and I—our respective inside knees unribaldly touching—occupied the jump seats. Twice,

without any excuse whatever, out of sheer approval, I glanced around at the tiny elderly man. When I'd originally loaded the car and held the door open for him, I'd had a passing impulse to pick him up bodily and insert him gently through the open window. He was tininess itself, surely being not more than four nine or ten and without being either a midget or a dwarf. In the car, he sat staring very severely straight ahead of him. On my second look around at him, I noticed that he had what very much appeared to be an old gravy stain on the lapel of his cutaway. I also noticed that his silk hat cleared the roof of the car by a good four or five inches. . . . But for the most part, those first few minutes in the car, I was still mainly concerned with my own state of health. Besides having pleurisy and a bruised head, I had a hypochondriac's notion that I was getting a strep throat. I sat surreptitiously curling back my tongue and exploring the suspected ailing part. I was staring, as I remember, directly in front of me, at the back of the driver's neck, which was a relief map of boil scars, when suddenly my jump-seat mate addressed me: "I didn't get a chance to ask you inside. How's that darling mother of yours? Aren't you Dickie Briganza?"

My tongue, at the time of the question, was curled back exploratively as far as the soft palate. I disentangled it, swallowed, and turned to her. She was fifty, or thereabouts, fashionably and tastefully dressed. She was wearing a very heavy pancake makeup. I answered no—that I wasn't.

She narrowed her eyes a trifle at me and said I looked exactly like Celia Briganza's boy. Around the mouth. I tried to show by my expression that it was a mistake anybody could make. Then I went on staring at the back of the driver's neck. The car was silent. I glanced out of the window, for a change of scene.

"How do you like the Army?" Mrs. Silsburn asked. Abruptly, conversationally.

I had a brief coughing spell at that particular instant. When it was over, I turned to her with all available alacrity and said I'd made a lot of buddies. It was a little difficult for me to swivel in her direction, what with the encasement of adhesive tape around my diaphragm.

She nodded. "I think you're all just wonderful," she said, somewhat ambiguously. "Are you a friend of the bride's or the groom's?" she then asked, delicately getting down to brass tacks.

"Well, actually, I'm not exactly a friend of—"

"You'd better not say you're a friend of the *groom*" the Matron of Honor interrupted me, from the back of the car. "I'd like to get my hands on him for about *two minutes*. Just *two minutes*, that's all."

Mrs. Silsburn turned briefly—but completely—around to smile at the speaker. Then she faced front again. We made the round trip, in fact, almost in unison. Considering that Mrs. Silsburn had turned around for only an instant, the smile she had bestowed on the Matron of Honor was a kind of jump-seat masterpiece. It was vivid enough to express unlimited partisanship with all young people, all over the world, but most particularly with this spirited, outspoken local representative, to whom, perhaps, she had been little more than perfunctorily introduced, if at all.

"Bloodthirsty wench," said a chuckling male voice. And Mrs. Silsburn and I turned around again. It was the Matron of Honor's husband who had spoken up. He was seated directly behind me, at his wife's left. He and I briefly exchanged that blank, uncomradely look which, possibly, in the crapulous year of 1942, only an officer and a private could exchange. A first lieutenant in the Signal Corps, he was wearing a very interesting Air Corps pilot's cap—a visored hat with the metal frame removed from inside the crown, which usually conferred on the wearer a certain, presumably desired, intrepid look. In his case, however, the cap didn't begin to fill the bill. It seemed to serve no other purpose than to make my own outsize, regulation headpiece feel rather like a clown's hat that someone had nervously picked out of the incinerator. His face was sallow and, essentially, daunted-looking. He was perspiring with an almost incredible profusion—on his forehead, on his upper lip, and even at the end of his nose—to the point where a salt tablet might have been in order. "I'm married to the bloodthirstiest wench in six counties," he said, addressing Mrs. Silsburn and giving another soft, public chuckle. In automatic deference to his rank, I very nearly chuckled right along

with him—a short, inane, stranger's and draftee's chuckle that would clearly signify that I was with him and everyone else in the car, against no one.

"I *mean* it," the Matron of Honor said. "Just two minutes—that's all, brother. Oh, if I could just get my two little *hands*—"

"All right, now, take it easy, take it easy," her husband said, still with apparently inexhaustible resources of connubial good humor. "Just take it easy. You'll last longer."

Mrs. Silsburn faced around toward the back of the car again, and favored the Matron of Honor with an all but canonized smile. "Did anyone see any of his people at the wedding?" she inquired softly, with just a little emphasis—no more than perfectly genteel—on the personal pronoun.

The Matron of Honor's answer came with toxic volume: "*No*. They're all out on the *West Coast* or someplace. I just wish I *had*."

Her husband's chuckle sounded again. "What wouldja done if you had, honey?" he asked—and winked indiscriminately at me.

"Well, I don't *know*, but I'd've done *something*," said the Matron of Honor. The chuckle at her left expanded in volume. "Well, I would have!" she insisted. "I'd've said *something* to them. I mean. My gosh." She spoke with increasing aplomb, as though perceiving that, cued by her husband, the rest of us within earshot were finding something attractively forthright-spunky—about her sense of justice, however youthful or impractical it might be. "I don't know *what* I'd have said to them. I probably would have just blabbered something idiotic. But my *gosh*. Honestly! I just can't stand to see somebody get away with absolute murder. It makes my blood boil." She suspended animation just long enough to be bolstered by a look of simulated empathy from Mrs. Silsburn. Mrs. Silsburn and I were now turned completely, supersociably, around in our jump seats. "I *mean* it," the Matron of Honor said. "You can't just *barge* through life hurting people's feelings whenever you feel like it."

"I'm afraid I know very little about the young man," Mrs. Silsburn said, softly. "As a matter of fact, I haven't even met him. The first I'd heard that Muriel was even engaged—"

"*Nobody's* met him," the Matron of Honor said, rather explosively. "I haven't even met him. We had two rehearsals, and both times Muriel's poor father had to take his place, just because his crazy plane couldn't take off. He was supposed to get a hop here last Tuesday night in some crazy Army plane, but it was *snowing* or something crazy in Colorado, or Arizona, or one of those crazy places, and he didn't get in till one o'clock in the morning, *last night*. *Then—at* that insane hour—he calls Muriel on the phone from way out in *Long Island* or someplace and asks her to meet him in the lobby of some horrible hotel so they can *talk*." The Matron of Honor shuddered eloquently. "And you know Muriel. She's just darling enough to let anybody and his brother push her around. That's what gripes me. It's always those kind of people that get hurt in the end . . . Anyway, so she gets dressed and gets in a cab and sits in some horrible lobby talking with him till quarter to *five* in the morning." The Matron of Honor released her grip on her gardenia bouquet long enough to raise two clenched fists above her lap. "Ooo, it makes me so mad!" she said.

"What hotel?" I asked the Matron of Honor. "Do you know?" I tried to make my voice sound casual, as though, possibly, my father might be in the hotel business and I took a certain understandable filial interest in where people stopped in New York. In reality, my question meant almost nothing. I was just thinking aloud, more or less. I'd been interested in the fact that my brother had asked his fiancée to meet him in a hotel lobby, rather than at his empty, available apartment. The morality of the invitation was by no means out of character, but it interested me, mildly, nonetheless.

"I don't know which hotel," the Matron of Honor said irritably. "Just some *hotel*." She stared at me. "Why?" she demanded. "Are you a friend of his?"

There was something distinctly intimidating about her stare. It seemed to come from a one-woman mob, separated only by time and chance from her knitting bag and a splendid view of the guillotine. I've been terrified of mobs, of any kind, all my life. "We were boys together," I answered,

all but unintelligibly.

"Well, lucky you!"

"Now, now," said her husband.

"Well, I'm *sorry*," the Matron of Honor said to him, but addressing all of us. "But you haven't been in a room watching that poor kid cry her eyes out for a solid hour. It's not funny—and don't you forget it. I've heard about grooms getting cold feet, and all that. But you don't do it at the *last minute*. I mean you don't do it so that you'll embarrass a lot of perfectly nice people half to death and almost break a kid's spirit and everything! If he'd changed his *mind*, why didn't he write to her and at least break it off like a gentleman, for goodness' sake? Before all the damage was done."

"All right, take it easy, just take it easy," her husband said. His chuckle was still there, but it was sounding a trifle strained.

"Well, I mean it! Why couldn't he write to her and just tell her, like a *man*, and prevent all this tragedy and everything?" She looked at me, abruptly. "Do you have any idea where he is, by any chance?" she demanded, with metal in her voice. "If you were *boyhood* friends, you should have some—"

"I just got into New York about two hours ago," I said nervously. Not only the Matron of Honor but her husband and Mrs. Silsburn as well were now staring at me. "So far, I haven't even had a chance to get to a phone." At that point, as I remember, I had a coughing spell. It was genuine enough, but I must say I did very little to suppress it or shorten its duration.

"You had that cough looked at, soldier?" the Lieutenant asked me when I'd come out of it.

At that instant, I had another coughing spell— a perfectly genuine one, oddly enough. I was still turned a sort of half or quarter right in my jump seat, with my body averted just enough toward the front of the car to be able to cough with all due hygienic propriety.

It seems very disorderly, but I think a paragraph ought to be wedged in right here to answer a couple of stumpers. First off, why did I go on sitting in the car? Aside from all incidental considerations, the car was reportedly destined to deliver its occupants to the bride's parents' apartment house. No amount of information, first- or secondhand, that I might have acquired from the prostrate, unmarried bride or from her disturbed (and, very likely, angry) parents could possibly have made up for the awkwardness of my presence in their apartment. Why, then, did I go on sitting in the car? Why didn't I get out while, say, we were stopped for a red light? And, still more salient, why had I jumped into the car in the first place? . . . There seem to me at least a dozen answers to these questions, and all of them, however dimly, valid enough. I think, though, that I can dispense with them, and just reiterate that the year was 1942, that I was twenty-three, newly drafted, newly advised in the efficacy of keeping close to the herd—and, above all, I felt lonely. One simply jumped into loaded cars, as I see it, and stayed seated in them.

To get back to the plot, I remember that while all three—the Matron of Honor, her husband, and Mrs. Silsburn—were conjunctively staring at me and watching me cough, I glanced over at the tiny elderly man in the back. He was still staring fixedly straight ahead of him. I noticed, almost with gratitude, that his feet didn't quite touch the floor. They looked like old and valued friends of mine.

"What's this man supposed to *do*, anyway?" the Matron of Honor said to me when I'd emerged from my second coughing spell.

"You mean Seymour?" I said. It seemed clear, at first, from her inflection, that she had something singularly ignominious in mind. Then, suddenly, it struck me—and it was sheerly intuitive—that she might well be in secret possession of a motley number of biographical facts about Seymour; that is, the low, regrettably dramatic, and (in my opinion) basically misleading facts about him. That he'd been Billy Black, a national radio "celebrity," for some six years of his boyhood. Or that, for another example, he'd been a freshman at Columbia when he'd just turned fifteen.

"Yes, *Seymour*," said the Matron of Honor. "What'd he do before he was in the Army?"

Again I had the same little effulgent flash of intuition that she knew much more about him than, for some reason, she meant to indicate. It seemed, for one thing, that she knew perfectly well that Seymour had been teaching English before his induction—that he'd been a professor.

A *professor*. For an instant, in fact, as I looked at her, I had a very uncomfortable notion that she might even know that I was Seymour's brother. It wasn't a thought to dwell on. Instead, I looked her unsquarely in the eye and said, "He was a chiropodist." Then, abruptly, I faced around and looked out of my window. The car had been motionless for some minutes, and I had just become aware of the sound of martial drums in the distance, from the general direction of Lexington or Third Avenue.

"It's a parade!" said Mrs. Silsburn. She had faced around, too.

We were in the upper Eighties. A policeman was stationed in the middle of Madison Avenue and was halting all north- and south-bound traffic. So far as I could tell, he was *just* halting it; that is, not redirecting it either east or west. There were three or four cars and a bus waiting to move southward, but our car chanced to be the only vehicle aimed uptown. At the immediate corner, and at what I could see of the uptown side street leading toward Fifth Avenue, people were standing two and three deep along the curb and on the walk, waiting, apparently, for a detail of troops, or nurses, or Boy Scouts, or what-have-you, to leave their assembly point at Lexington or Third Avenue and march past.

"Oh, *Lord*. Wouldn't you just know?" said the Matron of Honor.

I turned around and very nearly bumped heads with her. She was leaning forward, toward and all but into the space between Mrs. Silsburn and me. Mrs. Silsburn turned toward her, too, with a responsive, rather pained expression.

"We may be here for *weeks*" the Matron of Honor said, craning forward to see out of the driver's windshield. "I should be there *now*. I told Muriel and her mother I'd be in one of the first cars and that I'd get up to the house in about *five minutes*. Oh, God! Can't we *do* something?"

"I should be there, too," Mrs. Silsburn said, rather promptly.

"Yes, but I solemnly *promised* her. The apartment's gonna be loaded with all kinds of crazy aunts and uncles and absolute strangers, and I told her I'd stand *guard* with about ten bayonets and see that she got a little privacy and—" She broke off. "Oh, God. This is awful."

Mrs. Silsburn gave a small, stilted laugh. "I'm afraid I'm one of the crazy aunts," she said. Clearly, she was affronted.

The Matron of Honor looked at her. "Oh— I'm sorry. I didn't mean you," she said. She sat back in her seat. "I just meant that their apartment's so tiny, and if everybody starts pouring in by the dozens— You know what I mean."

Mrs. Silsburn said nothing, and I didn't look at her to see just how seriously she'd been affronted by the Matron of Honor's remark. I remember, though, that I was impressed, in a peculiar sense, with the Matron of Honor's tone of apology for her little slip about "crazy aunts and uncles." It had been a genuine apology, but not an embarrassed and, still better, not an obsequious one, and for a moment I had a feeling that, for all her stagy indignation and showy grit, there *was* something bayonetlike about her, something not altogether unadmirable. (I'll grant, quickly and readily, that my opinion in this instance has a very limited value. I often feel a rather excessive pull toward people who don't overapologize.) The point is, however, that right then, for the first time, a small wave of prejudice against the missing groom passed over me, a just perceptible little whitecap of censure for his unexplained absenteeism.

"Let's see if we can get a little action around here," the Matron of Honor's husband said. It was rather the voice of a man who keeps calm under fire. I felt him deploying behind me, and then, abruptly, his head craned into the limited space between Mrs. Silsburn and me. "Driver," he said

peremptorily, and waited for a response. When it came with promptness, his voice became a bit more tractile, democratic: "How long do you think we'll be tied up here?"

The driver turned around. "You got me, Mac," he said. He faced front again. He was absorbed in what was going on at the intersection. A minute earlier, a small boy with a partly deflated red balloon had run out into the cleared, forbidden street. He had just been captured and was being dragged back to the curb by his father, who gave the boy two only partly open-handed punches between the shoulder blades. The act was righteously booed by the crowd.

"Did you *see* what that man did to that *child*?" Mrs. Silsburn demanded of everyone in general. No one answered her.

"What about asking that cop how long we're apt to be held up here?" the Matron of Honor's husband said to the driver. He was still leaning forward. He'd evidently not been altogether satisfied with the laconic reply to his first question. "We're all in something of a hurry, you know. Do you think you could ask him how long we're apt to be tied up here?"

Without turning around, the driver rudely shrugged his shoulders. But he turned off his ignition, and got out of the car, slamming the heavy limousine door behind him. He was an untidy, bullish-looking man in partial chauffeur's livery—a black serge suit, but no cap.

He walked slowly and very independently, not to say insolently, the few steps over to the intersection, where the ranking policeman was directing things. The two then stood talking to each other for an endless amount of time. (I heard the Matron of Honor give a groan, behind me.) Then, suddenly, the two men broke into uproarious laughter—as though they hadn't really been conversing at all but had been exchanging very short dirty jokes. Then our driver, still laughing uninfectedly, waved a fraternal hand at the cop and walked—slowly—back to the car. He got in, slammed his door shut, extracted a cigarette from a package on the ledge over the dashboard, tucked the cigarette behind his ear, and then, and then only, turned around to make his report to us. "He don't know," he said. "We gotta wait for the parade to pass by here." He gave us, collectively, an indifferent once-over. "After that we can go ahead O.K." He faced front, disengaged the cigarette from behind his ear, and lit it.

In the back of the car, the Matron of Honor sounded a voluminous little plaint of frustration and pique. And then there was silence. For the first time in several minutes, I glanced around at the tiny elderly man with the unlighted cigar. The delay didn't seem to affect him. His standard of comportment for sitting in the rear seat of cars—cars in motion, cars stationary, and even, one couldn't help imagining, cars that were driven off bridges into rivers—seemed to be fixed. It was wonderfully simple. You just sat very erect, maintaining a clearance of four or five inches between your top hat and the roof, and you stared ferociously ahead at the windshield. If Death—who was out there all the time, possibly sitting on the hood—if Death stepped miraculously through the glass and came in after you, in all probability you just got up and went along with him, ferociously but quietly. Chances were, you could take your cigar with you, if it was a clear Havana.

"What are we going to do? Just *sit* here?" the Matron of Honor said. "I'm so hot I could die," And Mrs. Silsburn and I turned around just in time to see her look at her husband directly for the first time since they'd got into the car. "Can't you move over just a tiny little bit?" she said to him. "I'm so squashed in here I can hardly breathe."

The Lieutenant, chuckling, opened his hands expressively. "I'm practically sitting on the fender now, Bunny," he said.

The Matron of Honor then looked over, with mixed curiosity and disapproval, at her other seatmate, who, as though unconsciously dedicated to cheering me up, was occupying far more space than he needed. There was a good two inches between his right hip and the base of the outside armrest. The Matron of Honor undoubtedly noticed it, too, but, for all her metal, she didn't quite have what it would have taken to speak up to that formidable-looking little personage. She turned back to her husband. "Can you reach your cigarettes?" she said irritably. "I'll never get mine out, the

way we're packed in here." With the words "packed in," she turned her head again to shoot a brief, all-implicit look at the tiny guilty party who had usurped the space she thought ought rightfully to be hers. He remained sublimely out of touch. He went on glaring straight ahead of him, toward the driver's windshield. The Matron of Honor looked at Mrs. Silsburn, and raised her eyebrows expressively. Mrs. Silsburn responded with a countenance full of understanding and sympathy. The Lieutenant, meanwhile, had shifted his weight over to his left, or window-side, buttock, and from the right-hand pocket of his officer's pinks had taken out a package of cigarettes and a folder of matches. His wife picked out a cigarette, and waited for a light, which was immediately forthcoming. Mrs. Silsburn and I watched the lighting of the cigarette as though it were a moderately bewitching novelty.

"Oh, pardon *me*," the Lieutenant suddenly said, and extended his cigarette pack to Mrs. Silsburn.

"No, thank you. I don't smoke," Mrs. Silsburn said quickly—almost with regret.

"Soldier?" the Lieutenant said, extending the pack to me, after the most imperceptible of hesitations. In all truth, I rather liked him for putting through the offer, for the small victory of common courtesy over caste, but I declined the cigarette.

"May I see your matches?" Mrs. Silsburn said, in an exceedingly diffident, almost little-girlish voice.

"These?" said the Lieutenant. He handed his folder of matches readily over to Mrs. Silsburn.

While I looked on with an expression of absorption, Mrs. Silsburn examined the match folder. On its outside cover, in gold letters on a crimson background, were printed the words "These Matches Were Stolen from Bob and Edie Burwick's House." "Darling," Mrs. Silsburn said, shaking her head. "Really darling." I tried to show by my expression that I perhaps couldn't read the inscription without eyeglasses; I squinted, neutrally. Mrs. Silsburn seemed reluctant to hand the folder back to its owner. When she had, and the Lieutenant had replaced the folder in the breast pocket of his tunic, she said, "I don't think I've ever seen that before." Turned almost completely around, now, in her jump seat, she sat gazing rather fondly at the Lieutenant's breast pocket.

"We had a whole bunch of them made up last year," the Lieutenant said. "Be amazed, actually, how it keeps you from running out of matches."

The Matron of Honor turned to him—or, rather, on him. "We didn't do it for *that*," she said. She gave Mrs. Silsburn a you-know-how-men-are look, and said to her, "I don't know. I just thought it was cute. Corny, but sort of cute. You know."

"It's darling. I don't think I've ever—"

"Actually, it isn't original or anything like that. Everybody's got them now," the Matron of Honor said. "Where I got the idea originally, as a matter of fact, was from Muriel's mother and dad. They always had them around the house." She inhaled deeply on her cigarette, and as she went on talking, she released the smoke in little syllabic drafts. "*Golly*, they're terrific people. That's what *kills* me about this whole business. I mean why doesn't something like this happen to all the stinkers in the world, instead of the nice ones? That's what I can't understand." She looked to Mrs. Silsburn for an answer.

Mrs. Silsburn smiled a smile that was at once worldly, wan, and enigmatic—the smile, as I remember, of a sort of jump-seat Mona Lisa. "I've often wondered," she mused softly. She then mentioned, rather ambiguously, "Muriel's mother is my late husband's baby sister, you know."

"Oh!" the Matron of Honor said with interest. "Well, then, *you know*." She reached out an extraordinarily long left arm, and flicked her cigarette ashes into the ashtray near her husband's window. "I honestly think she's one of the few really brilliant people I've met in my entire life. I mean she's read just about everything that's ever been printed. My gosh, if I'd just read about one-tenth of what that woman's read and forgotten, I'd be happy. I mean she's *taught*, she's worked on a *newspaper*, she designs her own *clothes*, she does every single bit of her own *housework*. Her

cooking's out of this *world*. Golly! I honestly think she's the most wonder—"

"Did she approve of the marriage?" Mrs. Silsburn interrupted. "I mean the reason I ask, I've been in Detroit for weeks and weeks. My sister-in-law suddenly passed away, and I've—"

"She's too nice to say," the Matron of Honor said flatly. She shook her head. "I mean she's too—you know—discreet and all." She reflected. "As a matter of fact, this morning's about the only time I ever heard her say boo on the subject, really. And then it was only just because she was so upset about poor Muriel." She reached out an arm and tipped her cigarette ashes again.

"What'd she say this morning?" Mrs. Silsburn asked avidly.

The Matron of Honor seemed to reflect for a moment. "Well, nothing very much, really," she said. "I mean nothing small or really derogatory or anything like that. All she said, really, was that this Seymour, in her opinion, was a latent homosexual and that he was basically afraid of marriage. I mean she didn't say it nasty or anything. She just said it—you know—intelligently. I mean she was psychoanalyzed herself for years and years." The Matron of Honor looked at Mrs. Silsburn. "That's no *secret* or anything. I mean Mrs. Fedder'll tell you that herself, so I'm not giving away any secret or anything."

"I know that," Mrs. Silsburn said quickly. "She's the last person in the—"

"I mean the point is," the Matron of Honor said, "she isn't the kind of person that comes right out and says something like that unless she knows what she's talking about. And she never, never would've said it in the *first* place if poor Muriel hadn't been so—you know—so prostrate and everything." She shook her head grimly. "Golly, you should've seen that poor kid."

I should, no doubt, break in here to describe my general reaction to the main import of what the Matron of Honor was saying. I'd just as soon let it go, though, for the moment, if the reader will bear with me.

"What else did she say?" Mrs. Silsburn asked. "Rhea, I mean. Did she say anything else?" I didn't look at her—I couldn't take my eyes off the Matron of Honor's face—but I had a passing, wild impression that Mrs. Silsburn was all but sitting in the main speaker's lap.

"No. Not really. Hardly anything." The Matron of Honor, reflecting, shook her head. "I mean, as I say, she wouldn't have said anything—with people standing around and all—if poor Muriel hadn't been so crazy upset." She flicked her cigarette ashes again. "About the only other thing she said was that this Seymour was a really schizoid personality and that, if you really looked at it the right way, it was really better for Muriel that things turned out the way they did. Which makes sense to *me*, but I'm not so sure it does to Muriel. He's got her so *buffaloed* that she doesn't know whether she's coming or going. That's what makes me so—"

She was interrupted at that point. By me. As I remember, my voice was unsteady, as it invariably is when I'm vastly upset.

"What brought Mrs. Fedder to the conclusion that Seymour is a latent homosexual and a schizoid personality?"

All eyes—all searchlights, it seemed—the Matron of Honor's, Mrs. Silsburn's, even the Lieutenant's, were abruptly trained on me. "What?" the Matron of Honor said to me, sharply, faintly hostilely. And again I had a passing, abrasive notion that she knew I was Seymour's brother.

"What makes Mrs. Fedder think that Seymour's a latent homosexual and schizoid personality?"

The Matron of Honor stared at me, then gave an eloquent snort. She turned and appealed to Mrs. Silsburn with a maximum of irony. "Would you say that somebody's normal that pulled a stunt like the one today?" She raised her eyebrows, and waited. "Would you?" she asked quietly-quietly. "Be honest. I'm just asking. For this gentleman's benefit."

Mrs. Silsburn's answer was gentleness itself, fairness itself. "No, I certainly would not," she said.

I had a sudden, violent impulse to jump out of the car and break into a sprint, in any direction at all. As I remember, though, I was still in my jump seat when the Matron of Honor addressed me

again. "Look," she said, in the spuriously patient tone of voice that a teacher might take with a child who is not only retarded but whose nose is forever running unattractively. "I don't know how much you know about people. But what man in his right mind, the night before he's supposed to get married, keeps his fiancée up all night blabbing to her all about how he's too *happy* to get married and that she'll have to *postpone* the wedding till he feels *steadier* or he won't be able to come to it? *Then*, when his fiancée explains to him like a *child* that everything's been arranged and planned out for months, and that her father's gone to incredible expense and trouble and all to have a reception and everything like that, and that her relatives and friends are coming from all over the *country*—*then*, after she explains all that, he says to her he's terribly sorry but he can't get married till he feels less *happy* or some crazy thing! Use your head, now, if you don't mind. Does that sound like somebody *normal*? Does that sound like somebody in their right mind?" Her voice was now shrill. "Or does that sound like somebody that should be stuck in some booby hatch?" She looked at me very severely, and when I didn't immediately speak up in either defense or surrender, she sat heavily back in her seat, and said to her husband, "Give me another cigarette, please. This thing's gonna burn me." She handed him her burning stub, and he extinguished it for her. He then took out his cigarette package again. "You light it," she said. "I haven't got the energy."

Mrs. Silsburn cleared her throat. "It sounds to me," she said, "like a blessing in disguise that everything's turned—"

"I ask *you*," the Matron of Honor said to her with a fresh impetus, at the same time accepting a freshly lighted cigarette from her husband. "Does that sound like a normal person—a normal *man*—to you? Or does it sound like somebody that's either never *grown up* or is just an absolute raving maniac of some crazy kind?"

"Goodness. I don't know what to say, really. It just sounds to me like a blessing in disguise that every—"

The Matron of Honor sat forward suddenly, alertly, exhaling smoke through her nostrils. "All right, never mind that, drop that for a minute—I don't need that," she said. She was addressing Mrs. Silsburn, but in actuality she was addressing me through Mrs. Silsburn's face, so to speak.

"Did you ever see———, in the movies?" she demanded.

The name she mentioned was the professional name of a then fairly well-known—and now, in 1955, a quite famous—actress-singer.

"Yes," said Mrs. Silsburn quickly and interestedly, and waited.

The Matron of Honor nodded. "All right," she said. "Did you ever notice, by any chance, how she smiles sort of crooked? Only on one side of her face, sort of? It's very noticeable if you—"

"Yes—yes, I have!" Mrs. Silsburn said.

The Matron of Honor dragged on her cigarette, and glanced over—just perceptibly—at me. "Well, that happens to be a partial *paralysis* of some kind," she said, exhaling a little gust of smoke with each word. "And do you know how she got it? This *normal* Seymour person apparently hit her and she had nine stitches taken in her face." She reached over (in lieu, possibly, of a better stage direction) and flicked her ashes again.

"May I ask where you heard that?" I said. My lips were quivering slightly, like two fools.

"You may," she said, looking at Mrs. Silsburn instead of me. "Muriel's mother happened to mention it about two hours ago, while Muriel was sobbing her eyes out." She looked at me. "Does that answer your question?" She suddenly shifted her bouquet of gardenias from her right to her left hand. It was the nearest thing to a fairly commonplace nervous gesture that I'd seen her make. "Just for your information, incidentally," she said, looking at me, "do you know who I think you are? I think you're this Seymour's brother." She waited, very briefly, and, when I didn't say anything: "You *look* like him, from his crazy picture, and I happen to know that he was supposed to come to the wedding. His sister or somebody told Muriel." Her look was fixed unwaveringly on my face. "Are you?" she asked bluntly.

My voice must have sounded a trifle rented when I answered. "Yes," I said. My face was burning. In a way, though, I felt an infinitely less furry sense of self-identification than I had since I'd got off the train earlier in the afternoon.

"I *knew* you were," the Matron of Honor said. "I'm not *stupid*, you know. I knew who you were the minute you got in this car." She turned to her husband. "Didn't I say he was his brother the minute he got in this car? Didn't I?"

The Lieutenant altered his sitting position a trifle. "Well, you said he probably—yes, you did," he said. "You did. Yes."

One didn't have to look over at Mrs. Silsburn to perceive how attentively she had taken in this latest development. I glanced past and behind her, furtively, at the fifth passenger—the tiny elderly man—to see if his insularity was still intact. It was. No one's indifference has ever been such a comfort to me.

The Matron of Honor came back to me. "For your information, I also know that your brother's no chiropodist. So don't be so funny. I happen to know he was Billy Black on 'It's a Wise Child' for about fifty *years* or something."

Mrs. Silsburn abruptly took a more active part in the conversation. "The radio program?" she inquired, and I felt her looking at me with a fresh, keener, interest.

The Matron of Honor didn't answer her. "Which one were *you*?" she said to me. "*Georgie* Black?" The mixture of rudeness and curiosity in her voice was interesting, if not quite disarming.

"Georgie Black was my brother Walt," I said, answering only her second question.

She turned to Mrs. Silsburn. "It's supposed to be some kind of a *secret* or something, but this man and his brother *Seymour* were on this radio program under fake names or something. The *Black* children."

"Take it easy, honey, take it easy," the Lieutenant suggested, rather nervously.

His wife turned to him. "I will *not* take it easy," she said—and again, contrary to my every conscious inclination, I felt a little pinch of something close to admiration for her metal, solid brass or no. "His brother's supposed to be so *intelligent*, for heaven's sake," she said. "In college when he was *fourteen* or something, and all like that. If what he did to that kid today is intelligent, then I'm Mahatma Gandhi! I don't care. It just makes me sick!"

Just then, I felt a minute extra added discomfort. Someone was very closely examining the left, or weaker, side of my face. It was Mrs. Silsburn. She started a bit as I turned abruptly toward her. "May I ask if you were Buddy Black?" she said, and a certain deferential note in her voice rather made me think, for a fractional moment, that she was about to present me with a fountain pen and a small, morocco-bound autograph album. The passing thought made me distinctly uneasy—considering, if nothing else, the fact that it was 1942 and some nine or ten years past my commercial bloom. "The reason I ask," she said, "my husband used to listen to that program without fail every single—"

"If you're interested," the Matron of Honor interrupted her, looking at me, "that was the one program on the air I always absolutely loathed. I loathe precocious children. If I ever had a child that—"

The end of her sentence was lost to us. She was interrupted, suddenly and unequivocally, by the most piercing, most deafening, most *impure* E-flat blast I've ever heard. All of us in the car, I'm sure, literally jumped. At that moment, a drum-and-bugle corps, composed of what seemed to be a hundred or more tone-deaf Sea Scouts, was passing. With what seemed to be almost delinquent abandon, the boys had just rammed into the sides of "The Stars and Stripes Forever." Mrs. Silsburn, very sensibly, clapped her hands over her ears.

For an eternity of seconds, it seemed, the din was all but incredible. Only the Matron of Honor's voice could have risen above it—or, for that matter, would have attempted to. When it did, one might have thought she was addressing us, obviously at the top of her voice, from some great

distance away, somewhere, possibly, in the vicinity of the bleachers of Yankee Stadium.

"I can't take this!" she said. "Let's get out of here and find some place to *phone* from! I've got to phone Muriel and say we're delayed! She'll be crazy!"

With the advent of the local Armageddon, Mrs. Silsburn and I had faced front to see it in. We now turned around again in our jump seats to face the Leader. And, possibly, our deliverer.

"There's a Schrafft's on Seventy-ninth Street!" she bellowed at Mrs. Silsburn. "Let's go have a *soda*, and I can *phone* from there! It'll at least be air-conditioned!"

Mrs. Silsburn nodded enthusiastically, and pantomimed "Yes!" with her mouth.

"You come, too!" the Matron of Honor shouted at me.

With *very* peculiar spontaneity, I remember, I shouted back to her the altogether extravagant word "Fine!" (It isn't easy, to this day, to account for the Matron of Honor's having included me in her invitation to quit the ship. It may simply have been inspired by a born leader's natural sense of orderliness. She may have had some sort of remote but compulsive urge to make her landing party complete. . . . My singularly immediate acceptance of the invitation strikes me as much more easily explainable. I prefer to think it was a basically religious impulse. In certain Zen monasteries, it's a cardinal rule, if not the only serious enforced discipline, that when one monk calls out "Hi!" to another monk, the latter must call back "Hi!" without thinking.)

The Matron of Honor then turned and, for the first time, directly addressed the tiny elderly man beside her. To my undying gratification, he was still glaring straight ahead of him, as though his own private scenery hadn't changed an iota. His unlighted clear-Havana cigar was still clenched between two fingers. What with his apparent unmindfulness of the terrible din the passing drum-and-bugle corps was making, and, possibly, from a grim tenet that all old men over eighty must be either stone-deaf or very hard of hearing, the Matron of Honor brought her lips to within an inch or two of his left ear. "We're going to get out of the car!" she shouted to him—almost into him. "We're going to find a place to *phone* from, and maybe have some refreshment! Do you want to come with us?"

The elderly man's immediate reaction was just short of glorious. He looked first at the Matron of Honor, then at the rest of us, and then grinned. It was a grin that was no less resplendent for the fact that it made no sense whatever. Nor for the fact that his teeth were obviously, beautifully, transcendently false. He looked at the Matron of Honor inquisitively for just an instant, his grin wonderfully intact. Or, rather, he looked *to* her—as if, I thought, he believed the Matron of Honor, or one of us, had lovely plans to pass a picnic basket his way.

"I don't think he heard you, honey!" the Lieutenant shouted.

The Matron of Honor nodded, and once again brought the megaphone of her mouth up close to the old man's ear. With really praiseworthy volume, she repeated her invitation to the old man to join us in quitting the car. Once again, at face value, the old man seemed more than amenable to any suggestion in the world—possibly not short of trotting over and having a dip in the East River. But again, too, one had an uneasy conviction that he hadn't heard a word that was said to him. Abruptly, he proved that this was true. With an enormous grin at all of us collectively, he raised his cigar hand and, with one finger, significantly tapped first his mouth, then his ear. The gesture, as *he* made it, seemed related to a perfectly first-class joke of some kind that he fully meant to share with all of us.

At that moment, Mrs. Silsburn, beside me, gave a visible little sign—almost a jump—of comprehension. She touched the Matron of Honor's pink satin arm, and shouted, "I know who he is! He's deaf and dumb—he's a deaf-mute! He's Muriel's father's uncle!"

The Matron of Honor's lips formed the word "Oh!" She swung around in her seat, toward her husband. "You got a pencil and paper?" she bellowed to him.

I touched her arm and shouted that *I* had. Hastily—almost, in fact, for some reason, as though time were about to run out on all of us—I took out of my inside tunic pocket a small pad and a pencil stub that I'd recently acquisitioned from a desk drawer of my company Orderly Room at Fort

Benning.

Somewhat overly legibly, I wrote on a sheet of paper, "We're held up indefinitely by the parade. We're going to find a phone and have a cold drink somewhere. Will you join us?" I folded the paper once, then handed it to the Matron of Honor, who opened it, read it, and then handed it to the tiny old man. He read it, grinning, and then looked at me and wagged his head up and down several times vehemently. I thought for an instant that this was the full and perfectly eloquent extent of his reply, but he suddenly motioned to me with his hand, and I gathered that he wanted me to pass him my pad and pencil. I did so—without looking over at the Matron of Honor, from whom great waves of impatience were rising. The old man adjusted the pad and pencil on his lap with the greatest care, then sat for a moment, pencil poised, in obvious concentration, his grin diminished only a very trifle. Then the pencil began, very unsteadily, to move. An "i" was dotted. And then both pad and pencil were returned to me, with a marvellously cordial extra added wag of the head. He had written, in letters that had not quite jelled yet, the single word "Delighted." The Matron of Honor, reading over my shoulder, gave a sound faintly like a snort, but I quickly looked over at the great writer and tried to show by my expression that all of us in the car knew a poem when we saw one, and were grateful.

One by one, then, from both doors, we all got out of the car—abandoned ship, as it were, in the middle of Madison Avenue, in a sea of hot, gummy macadam. The Lieutenant lingered behind a moment to inform the driver of our mutiny. As I remember very well, the drum-and-bugle corps was still endlessly passing, and the din hadn't abated a bit.

The Matron of Honor and Mrs. Silsburn led the way to Schrafft's. They walked as a twosome—almost as advance scouts—south on the east side of Madison Avenue. When he'd finished briefing the driver, the Lieutenant caught up with them. Or almost up with them. He fell a little behind them, in order to take out his wallet in privacy and see, apparently, how much money he had with him.

The bride's father's uncle and I brought up the rear. Whether he had intuited that I was his friend or simply because I was the owner of a pad and pencil, he had rather more scrambled than gravitated to a walking position beside me. The very top of his beautiful silk hat didn't quite come up as high as my shoulder. I set a comparatively slow gait for us, in deference to the length of his legs. At the end of a block or so, we were quite a good distance behind the others. I don't think it troubled either of us. Occasionally, I remember, as we walked along, my friend and I looked up and down, respectively, at each other and exchanged idiotic expressions of pleasure at sharing one another's company.

When my companion and I reached the revolving door of Schrafft's Seventy-ninth Street, the Matron of Honor, her husband, and Mrs. Silsburn had all been standing there for some minutes. They were waiting, I thought, as a rather forbiddingly integrated party of three. They had been talking, but they stopped when our motley twosome approached. In the car, just a couple of minutes earlier, when the drum-and-bugle corps blasted by, a common discomfort, almost a common anguish, had lent our small group a semblance of alliance—of the sort that can be temporarily conferred on Cook's tourists caught in a very heavy rainstorm at Pompeii. All too clearly now, as the tiny old man and I reached the revolving door of Schrafft's, the storm was over. The Matron of Honor and I exchanged expressions of recognition, not of greeting. "It's closed for alterations," she stated coldly, looking at me. Unofficially but unmistakably, she was appointing me odd-man-out again, and at that moment, for no reason worth going into, I felt a sense of isolation and loneliness more overwhelming than I'd felt all day. Somewhat simultaneously, it's worth noting, my cough re-activated itself. I pulled my handkerchief out of my hip pocket. The Matron of Honor turned to Mrs. Silsburn and her husband. "There's a Long-champs around here *somewhere*," she said, "but I don't know where."

"I don't either," Mrs. Silsburn said. She seemed very close to tears. At both her forehead and her upper lip, perspiration had seeped through even her heavy pancake makeup. A black patent-leather handbag was under her left arm. She held it as though it were a favorite doll, and she herself an experimentally rouged and powdered, and very unhappy, runaway child.

"We're not gonna be able to get a cab for love or money," the Lieutenant said pessimistically. He was looking the worse for wear, too. His "hot pilot's" cap appeared almost cruelly incongruous on his pale, dripping, deeply unintrepid-looking face, and I remember having an impulse to whisk it off his head, or at least to straighten it somewhat, to adjust it into a less cocked position—the same impulse, in general motive, that one might feel at a children's party, where there is invariably one small, exceedingly homely child wearing a paper hat that crushes down one or both ears.

"Oh, God, what a day!" the Matron of Honor said for all of us. Her circlet of artificial flowers was somewhat askew, and she was thoroughly damp, but, I thought, "the only thing really destructible about her was her remotest appendage, so to speak—her gardenia bouquet. She was still holding it, however absent-mindedly, in her hand. It obviously hadn't stood the gaff. "What'll we do?" she asked, rather frantically, for her. "We can't *walk* there. They live practically in *Riverdale*. Does anybody have any bright ideas?" She looked first at Mrs. Silsburn, then at her husband—and then, in desperation possibly, at me.

"I have an apartment near here," I said suddenly and nervously. "It's just down the block, as a matter of fact." I have a feeling that I gave out this information a trifle too loudly. I may even have shouted it, for all I know. "It belongs to my brother and me. My sister's using it while we're in the Army, but she's not there now. She's in the Waves, and she's off on some trip." I looked at the Matron of Honor—or at some point just over her head. "You can at least phone from there, if you like," I said. "And the apartment's air-conditioned. We might all cool off for a minute and get our breaths."

When the first shock of the invitation had passed over, the Matron of Honor, Mrs. Silsburn, and the Lieutenant went into a sort of consultation, of eyes only, but there was no visible sign that any kind of verdict was forthcoming. The Matron of Honor was the first to take any kind of action. She'd been looking—in vain—at the other two for an opinion on the subject. She turned back to me and said, "Did you say you had a phone?"

"Yes. Unless my sister's had it disconnected for some reason, and I can't see why she would have."

"How do we know your *brother* won't be there?" the Matron of Honor said.

It was a small consideration that hadn't entered my overheated head. "I don't think he will be," I said. "He *may* be—it's his apartment, too— but I don't think he will. I really don't."

The Matron of Honor stared at me, openly, for a moment—and not really rudely, for a change, unless children's stares are rude. Then she turned back to her husband and Mrs. Silsburn, and said, "We might as well. At least we can phone." They nodded in agreement. Mrs. Silsburn, in fact, went so far as to remember her code of etiquette covering invitations given in front of Schrafft's. Through her sun-baked pancake makeup, a semblance of an Emily Post smile peeped out at me. It was very welcome, as I remember. "C'mon, then, let's get out of this *sun*" our leader said. "What'll I do with *this*?" She didn't wait for an answer. She stepped over to the curb and unsentimentally disengaged herself from her wilted gardenia bouquet. "O.K., lead on, Macduff," she said to me. "We'll follow you. And all I have to say is he'd better *not* be there when we get there, or I'll kill the bastard." She looked at Mrs. Silsburn. "Excuse my language—but I mean it."

As directed, I took the lead, almost happily. An instant later, a silk hat materialized in the air beside me, considerably down and at the left, and my special, only technically unassigned cohort grinned up at me—for a moment, I rather thought he was going to slip his hand into mine.

My three guests and my one friend remained outside in the hall while I briefly cased the apartment.

The windows were all closed, the two air-conditioners had been turned to "Shut," and the first breath one took was rather like inhaling deeply in someone's ancient raccoon-coat pocket. The only sound in the whole apartment was the somewhat trembling purr of the aged refrigerator Seymour

and I had acquired second-hand. My sister Boo Boo, in her girlish, naval way, had left it turned on. There were, in fact, throughout the apartment, any number of little untidy signs that a seafaring lady had taken over the place. A handsome, small-size, ensign's navy-blue jacket was flung, lining down, across the couch. A box of Louis Sherry candies—half empty, and with the unconsumed candies all more or less experimentally squeezed—was open on the coffee table, in front of the couch. A framed photograph of a very resolute-looking young man I'd never seen before stood on the desk. And all the ashtrays in sight were in full blossom with crumpled facial tissues and lipsticked cigarette ends. I didn't go into the kitchen, the bedroom, or the bathroom, except to open the doors and take a quick look to see if Seymour was standing upright anywhere. For one reason, I felt enervated and lazy. For another, I was kept pretty busy raising blinds, turning on air-conditioners, emptying loaded ashtrays. Besides, the other members of the party barged in on me almost immediately. "It's hotter in here than it is on the street," the Matron of Honor said, by way of greeting, as she strode in.

"I'll be with you in just a minute," I said. "I can't seem to get this air-conditioner to work."

The "On" button seemed to be stuck, in fact, and I was busily tinkering with it.

While I worked on the air-conditioner switch—with my hat still on my head, I remember—the others circulated rather suspiciously around the room. I watched them out of the corner of one eye. The Lieutenant went over to the desk and stood looking up at the three or four square feet of wall directly above it, where my brother and I, for defiantly sentimental reasons, had tacked up a number of glossy eight-by-ten photographs. Mrs. Silsburn sat down—inevitably, I thought—in the one chair in the room that my deceased Boston bull used to enjoy sleeping in; its arms, upholstered in dirty corduroy, had been thoroughly slavered and chewed on in the course of many a nightmare. The bride's father's uncle—my great friend—seemed to have disappeared completely. The Matron of Honor, too, seemed suddenly to be somewhere else. "I'll get you all something to drink in just a second," I said uneasily, still trying to force the switch button on the air-conditioner.

"I could use something cold to drink," said a very familiar voice. I turned completely around and saw that she had stretched herself out on the couch, which accounted for her noticeable vertical disappearance. "I'll use your phone in just a second," she advised me. "I couldn't open my mouth anyway to talk on the phone, in this condition, I'm so parched. My *tongue's* so dry."

The air-conditioner abruptly whirled into operation, and I came over to the middle of the room, into the space between the couch and the chair where Mrs. Silsburn was sitting. "I don't know what there is to drink," I said. "I haven't looked in the refrigerator, but I imagine—"

"Bring anything," the eternal spokeswoman interrupted from the couch. "Just make it wet. And *cold*." The heels of her shoes were resting on the sleeve of my sister's jacket. Her hands were folded across her chest. A pillow was bunched up under her head. "Put ice in it, if you have any," she said, and closed her eyes. I looked down at her for a brief but murderous instant, then bent over and, as tactfully as possible, eased Boo Boo's jacket out from under her feet. I started to leave the room and go about my chores as host, but just as I took a step, the Lieutenant spoke up from over at the desk.

"Whereja get all these pictures?" he said.

I went directly over to him. I was still wearing my visored, oversize garrison cap. It hadn't occurred to me to take it off. I stood beside him at the desk, and yet a trifle behind him, and looked up at the photographs on the wall. I said they were mostly old pictures of the children who had been on "It's a Wise Child" in the days when Seymour and I had been on the show.

The Lieutenant turned to me. "What was it?" he said. "I never heard it. One of those kids' quiz shows? Questions and answers, and like that?"

Unmistakably, a soupcon of Army rank had slipped unnoisily but insidiously into his voice. He also seemed to be looking at my hat.

I took off my hat, and said, "No, not exactly." A certain amount of low family pride was suddenly evoked. "It *was* before my brother Seymour was on it. And it more or less got that way again

after he went off the program. But he changed the whole format, really. He turned the program into a kind of children's round-table discussion."

The Lieutenant looked at me with, I thought, somewhat excessive interest. "Were you on it, too?" he said.

"Yes."

The Matron of Honor spoke up from the other side of the room, from the invisible, dusty recesses of the couch. "I'd like to see a kid of *mine* get on one of those crazy programs," she said. "Or *act*. Any of those things. I'd die, in fact, before I'd let any child of mine turn themselves into a little exhibitionist before the public. It warps their whole entire lives. The publicity and all, if nothing else—ask any psychiatrist. I mean how can you have any kind of a normal *childhood* or anything?" Her head, crowned in a now lopsided circlet of flowers, suddenly popped into view. As though disembodied, it perched on the catwalk of the back of the couch, facing the Lieutenant and me. "That's probably what's the matter with that brother of yours," the Head said. "I mean you lead an absolutely freakish life like that when you're a kid, and so naturally you never learn to grow up. You never learn to relate to normal people or anything. That's exactly what Mrs. Fedder was saying in that crazy bedroom a couple of hours ago. But exactly. Your brother's never learned to relate to anybody. All he can do, apparently, is go around giving people a bunch of stitches in their faces. He's absolutely unfit for marriage or anything halfway normal, for goodness' sake. As a matter of fact, that's *exactly* what Mrs. Fedder said." The Head then turned just enough to glare over at the Lieutenant. "Am I right, Bob? Did she or didn't she say that? Tell the truth."

The next voice to speak up was not the Lieutenant's but mine. My mouth was dry, and my groin felt damp. I said I didn't give a good God damn what Mrs. Fedder had to say on the subject of Seymour. Or, for that matter, what any professional dilettante or amateur bitch had to say. I said that from the time Seymour was ten years old, every *summa-cum-laude* Thinker and intellectual men's-room attendant in the country had been having a go at him. I said it might be different if Seymour had just been some nasty little high-I.Q. showoff. I said he hadn't ever been an exhibitionist. He went down to the broadcast every Wednesday night as though he were going to his own funeral. He didn't even talk to you, for God's sake, the whole way down on the bus or subway. I said that not one Goddamn person, of all the patronizing, fourth-rate critics and column writers, had ever seen him for what he really was. A poet, for God's sake. And I mean a *poet*. If he never wrote a line of poetry, he could still flash what he had at you with the back of his ear if he wanted to.

I stopped right there, thank God. My heart was banging away something terrible, and, like most hypochondriacs, I had a little passing, intimidating notion that such speeches were the stuff that heart attacks are made of. To this day, I have no idea at all how my guests reacted to my outbreak, the polluted little stream of invective I'd loosed on them. The first real exterior detail that I was aware of was the universally familiar sound of plumbing. It came from another part of the apartment. I looked around the room suddenly, between and through and past the immediate faces of my guests. "Where's the old man?" I asked. "The little old man?" Butter wouldn't have melted in my mouth.

Oddly enough, when an answer came, it came from the Lieutenant, not the Matron of Honor. "I believe he's in the bathroom," he said. The statement was issued with a special forthrightness, proclaiming the speaker to be one of those who don't mince everyday hygienic facts.

"Oh," I said. I looked rather absently around the room again. Whether or not I deliberately avoided meeting the Matron of Honor's terrible eye, I don't remember, or don't care to remember. I spotted the bride's father's uncle's silk hat on the seat of a straight chair, across the room. I had an impulse to say hello, aloud, to it. "I'll get some cold drinks," I said. "I'll just be a minute."

"May I use your phone?" the Matron of Honor suddenly said to me as I passed by the couch. She swung her feet to the floor.

"Yes—yes, of course," I said. I looked at Mrs. Silsburn and the Lieutenant. "I thought I'd make

some Tom Collinses, if there are any lemons or limes. Will that be all right?"

The Lieutenant's answer startled me by its sudden conviviality. "Bring 'em on," he said, and rubbed his hands together, like a hearty drinking man.

Mrs. Silsburn left off studying the photographs over the desk to advise me, "If you're going to make Tom Collinses—please, just a teentsy, teentsy little bit of gin in mine. Almost none at all, if it isn't too much trouble." She was beginning to look a bit recuperated, even in just the short time since we'd got off the street. Perhaps, for one reason, because she was standing within a few feet of the air-conditioner I'd turned on and some cool air was coming her way. I said I'd look out for her drink, and then left her among the minor radio "celebrities" of the early thirties and the late twenties, the many passe little faces of Seymour's and my boyhood. The Lieutenant seemed well able to shift for himself in my absence, too; he was already moving, hands joined behind his back, like a lone connoisseur, toward the bookshelves. The Matron of Honor followed me out of the room, yawning as she did—a cavernous, audible yawn that she made no effort to suppress or obstruct from view.

As the Matron of Honor followed me toward the bedroom, where the phone was, the bride's father's uncle came toward us from the far end of the hall. His face was in the ferocious repose that had fooled me during most of the car ride, but as he came closer to us in the hall, the mask reversed itself; he pantomimed to us both the very highest salutations and greetings, and I found myself grinning and nodding immoderately in return. His sparse white hair looked freshly combed—almost freshly washed, as though he might have discovered a tiny barbershop cached away at the other end of the apartment. When he'd passed us, I felt a compulsion to look back over my shoulder, and when I did, he waved to me, vigorously—a great, *bon-voyage*, come-back-soon wave. It picked me up no end. "What is he? Crazy?" the Matron of Honor said. I said I hoped so, and opened the door of the bedroom.

She sat down heavily on one of the twin beds— Seymour's, as a matter of fact. The phone was on the night table within easy reach. I said I'd bring her a drink right away. "Don't bother—I'll be right out," she said. "Just close the door, if you don't mind.... I don't mean it that way, but I can never talk on the phone unless the door's closed." I told her I was the exact same way, and started to leave. But just as I'd turned to come out of the space between the two beds, I noticed a small collapsible canvas valise over on the window seat. At first glance, I thought it was mine, miraculously arrived at the apartment, all the way from Penn Station, under its own steam. My second thought was that it must be Boo Boo's. I walked over to it. It was unzipped, and just one look at the top layer of its contents told me who the real owner was. With another, more inclusive look, I saw something lying on top of two laundered Army suntan shirts that I thought ought not to be left alone in the room with the Matron of Honor. I picked it out of the bag, slipped it under one arm, waved fraternally to the Matron of Honor, who had already inserted a finger into the first hole of the number she intended to dial, and was waiting for me to clear out, and then I closed the door behind me. I stood for some little time outside the bedroom, in the gracious solitude of the hall, wondering what to do with Seymour's diary, which, I ought to rush to say, was the object I'd picked out of the top of the canvas bag. My first constructive thought was to hide it till my guests had left. It seemed to me a good idea to take it into the bathroom and drop it into the laundry hamper. However, on a second and much more involved train of thought, I decided to take it into the bathroom and read parts of it and *then* drop it into the laundry hamper.

It was a day, God knows, not only of rampant signs and symbols but of wildly extensive communication via the written word. If you jumped into crowded cars, Fate took circuitous pains, before you did any jumping, that you had a pad and pencil with you, just in case one of your fellow-passengers was a deaf-mute. If you slipped into bathrooms, you did well to look up to see if there were any little messages, faintly apocalyptic or otherwise, posted high over the washbowl.

For years, among the seven children in our one-bathroom family, it was our perhaps cloying but serviceable custom to leave messages for one another on the medicine cabinet mirror, using a moist

sliver of soap to write with. The general theme of our messages usually ran to excessively strong admonitions and, not infrequently, undisguised threats. "Boo Boo, pick up your washcloth when you're done with it. Don't leave it on the floor. Love, Seymour." "Walt, your turn to take Z. and F. to the park. I did it yesterday. Guess who." "Wednesday is their anniversary. Don't go to movies or hang around studio after broadcast or pay forfeit. This means you, too, Buddy." "Mother said Zooey nearly ate the Feenolax. Don't leave slightly poisonous objects on the sink that he can reach and eat." These, of course, are samples straight out of our childhood, but years later, when, in the name of independence or what-have-you, Seymour and I branched out and took an apartment of our own, he and I had not more than nominally departed from the old family custom. That is, we didn't just throw away our old soap fragments.

When I'd checked into the bathroom with Seymour's diary under my arm, and had carefully secured the door behind me, I spotted a message almost immediately. It was not, however, in Seymour's handwriting but, unmistakably, in my sister Boo Boo's. With or without soap, her handwriting was always almost indecipherably minute, and she had easily managed to post the following message up on the mirror: "Raise high the roof beam, carpenters. Like Ares comes the bridegroom, taller far than a tall man. Love, Irving Sappho, formerly under contract to Elysium Studios Ltd. Please be happy happy *happy* with your beautiful Muriel. This is an order. I outrank everybody on this block." The contract writer quoted in the text, I might mention, has always been a great favorite—at appropriately staggered time intervals—with all the children in our family, largely through the immeasurable impact of Seymour's taste in poetry on all of us. I read and reread the quotation, and then I sat down on the edge of the bathtub and opened Seymour's diary.

What follows is an exact reproduction of the pages from Seymour's diary that I read while I was sitting on the edge of the bathtub. It seems perfectly orderly to me to leave out individual datelines. Suffice it to say, I think, all these entries were made while he was stationed at Fort Monmouth, in late 1941 and early 1942, some several months before the wedding date was set.

"It was freezing cold at retreat parade this evening, and yet about six men from our platoon alone fainted during the endless playing of 'The Star-Spangled Banner.' I suppose if your blood circulation is normal, you can't take the unnatural military position of attention. Especially if you're holding a leaden rifle up at Present Arms. I have no circulation, no pulse. Immobility is my home. The tempo of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' and I are in perfect understanding. To me, its rhythm is a romantic waltz.

"We got passes till midnight, after the parade. I met Muriel at the Biltmore at seven. Two drinks, two drugstore tuna-fish sandwiches, then a movie she wanted to see, something with Greer Garson in it. I looked at her several times in the dark when Greer Garson's son's plane was missing in action. Her mouth was open. Absorbed, worried. The identification with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer tragedy complete. I felt awe and happiness. How I love and need her indiscriminating heart. She looked over at me when the children in the picture brought in the kitten to show to their mother. M. loved the kitten and wanted me to love it. Even in the dark, I could sense that she felt the usual estrangement from me when I don't automatically love what she loves. Later, when we were having a drink at the station, she asked me if I didn't think that kitten was 'rather nice.' She doesn't use the word 'cute' any more. When did I ever frighten her out of her normal vocabulary? Bore that I am, I mentioned R. H. Blyth's definition of sentimentality: that we are being sentimental when we give to a thing more tenderness than God gives to it. I said (sententiously?) that God undoubtedly loves kittens, but not, in all probability, with Technicolor booties on their paws. He leaves that creative touch to script writers. M. thought this over, seemed to agree with me, but the 'knowledge' wasn't too very welcome. She sat stirring her drink and feeling unclosed to me. She worries over the way her love for me comes and goes, appears and disappears. She doubts its reality simply because it isn't as

steadily pleasurable as a kitten. God knows it is sad. The human voice conspires to desecrate everything on earth." "Dinner tonight at the Fedders'. Very good. Veal, mashed potatoes, lima beans, a beautiful oil-and-vinegar green salad. For dessert there was something Muriel made herself: a kind of frozen cream-cheese affair, with raspberries on it. It made tears come to my eyes. (Saigyo says, 'What it is I know not/But with the gratitude/My tears fall.') A bottle of ketchup was placed on the table near me. Muriel apparently told Mrs. Fedder that I put ketchup on everything. I'd give the world to have seen M. telling her mother defensively that I put ketchup even on string beans. My precious girl.

"After dinner Mrs. Fedder suggested we listen to the program. Her enthusiasm, her nostalgia for the program, especially for the old days when Buddy and I were on it, makes me uneasy. Tonight it was broadcast from some naval airbase, of all places, near San Diego. Much too many pedantic questions and answers. Franny sounded as though she had a head cold. Zooey was in dreamy top form. The announcer had them off on the subject of housing developments, and the little Burke girl said she hated houses that all look alike—meaning a long row of identical 'development' houses. Zooey said they were 'nice.' He said it would be very nice to come home and be in the wrong house. To eat dinner with the wrong people by mistake, sleep in the wrong bed by mistake, and kiss everybody goodbye in the morning thinking they were your own family. He said he even wished everybody in the world looked exactly alike. He said you'd keep thinking everybody you met was your wife or your mother or father, and people would always be throwing their arms around each other wherever they went, and it would look 'very nice.'

"I felt unbearably happy all evening. The familiarity between Muriel and her mother struck me as being so beautiful when we were all sitting in the living room. They know each other's weaknesses, especially conversational weaknesses, and pick at them with their eyes. Mrs. Fedder's eyes watch over Muriel's conversational taste in 'literature,' and Muriel's eyes watch over her mother's tendency to be windy, verbose. When they argue, there can be no danger of a permanent rift, because they're Mother and Daughter. A terrible and beautiful phenomenon to watch. Yet there are times when I sit there enchanted that I wish Mr. Fedder were more conversationally active. Sometimes I feel I need him. Sometimes, in fact, when I come in the front door, it's like entering a kind of untidy, secular, two-woman convent. Sometimes when I leave, I have a peculiar feeling that both M. and her mother have stuffed my pockets with little bottles and tubes containing lipstick, rouge, hair nets, deodorants, and so on. I feel overwhelmingly grateful to them, but I don't know what to do with their invisible gifts."

"We didn't get our passes directly after retreat this evening, because someone dropped his rifle while the visiting British general was making his inspection. I missed the 5:52 and was an hour late meeting Muriel. Dinner at Lun Far's on 58th. M. irritable and tearful throughout dinner, genuinely upset and scared. Her mother thinks I'm a schizoid personality. Apparently she's spoken to her psychoanalyst about me, and he agrees with her. Mrs. Fedder has asked Muriel to find out discreetly if there's any insanity in the family. I gather that Muriel was naive enough to tell her where I got the scars on my wrists, poor sweet baby. From what M. says, however, this doesn't bother her mother nearly so much as a couple of other things. Three other things. One, I withdraw from and fail to relate to people. Two, apparently there is something 'wrong' with me because I haven't seduced Muriel. Three, evidently Mrs. Fedder has been haunted for days by my remark at dinner one night that I'd like to be a dead cat. She asked me at dinner last week what I intended to do after I got out of the Army. Did I intend to resume teaching at the same college? Would I go back to teaching at all? Would I consider going back on the radio, possibly as a 'commentator' of some kind? I answered that it seemed to me that the war might go on forever, and that I was only certain that if peace ever came again I would like to be a dead cat. Mrs. Fedder thought I was cracking a joke of some kind. A sophisticated joke. She thinks I'm very sophisticated, according to Muriel. She thought my deadly-

serious comment was the sort of joke one ought to acknowledge with a light, musical laugh. When she laughed, I suppose it distracted me a little, and I forgot to explain to her. I told Muriel tonight that in Zen Buddhism a master was once asked what was the most valuable thing in the world, and the master answered that a dead cat was, because no one could put a price on it. M. was relieved, but I could see she could hardly wait to get home to assure her mother of the harmlessness of my remark. She rode to the station with me in the cab. How sweet she was, and in so much better humor. She was trying to teach me to smile, spreading the muscles around my mouth with her fingers. How beautiful it is to see her laugh. Oh, God, I'm so happy with her. If only she could be happier with me. I amuse her at times, and she seems to like my face and hands and the back of my head, and she gets a vast satisfaction out of telling her friends that she's engaged to the Billy Black who was on 'It's a Wise Child' for years. And I think she feels a mixed maternal and sexual drive in my general direction. But on the whole I don't make her really happy. Oh, God, help me. My one terrible consolation is that my beloved has an undying, basically undeviating love for the institution of marriage itself. She has a primal urge to play house permanently. Her marital goals are so absurd and touching. She wants to get a very dark sun tan and go up to the desk clerk in some very posh hotel and ask if her Husband has picked up the mail yet. She wants to shop for curtains. She wants to shop for maternity clothes.

She wants to get out of her mother's house, whether she knows it or not, and despite her attachment to her. She wants children—good-looking children, with her features, not mine. I have a feeling, too, that she wants her own Christmas-tree ornaments to unbox annually, not her mother's.

"A very funny letter came from Buddy today, written just after he came off K.P. I think of him as I write about Muriel. He would despise her for her marriage motives as I've put them down here. But are they despicable? In a way, they must be, but yet they seem to me so human-size and beautiful that I can't think of them even now as I write this without feeling deeply, deeply moved. He would disapprove of Muriel's mother, too. She's an irritating, opinionated woman, a type Buddy can't stand. I don't think he could see her for what she is. A person deprived, for life, of any understanding or taste for the main current of poetry that flows through things, all things. She might as well be dead, and yet she goes on living, stopping off at delicatessens, seeing her analyst, consuming a novel every night, putting on her girdle, plotting for Muriel's health and prosperity. I love her. I find her unimaginably brave."

"The whole company is restricted to the post tonight. Stood in line for a full hour to get to use the phone in the Rec Room. Muriel sounded rather relieved that I couldn't get in tonight. Which amuses and delights me. Another girl, if she genuinely wanted an evening free of her fiance", would go through the motions of expressing regret over the phone. M. just said Oh when I told her. How I worship her simplicity, her terrible honesty. How I rely on it."

"3:30 A.M. I'm over in the Orderly Room. I couldn't sleep. I put my coat on over my pajamas and came over here. Al Aspesi is C.Q. He's asleep on the floor. I can stay here if I answer the phone for him. What a night. Mrs. Fedder's analyst was there for dinner and grilled me, off and on, till about eleven-thirty. Occasionally with great skill, intelligence. Once or twice, I found myself pulling for him. Apparently he's an old fan of Buddy's and mine. He seemed personally as well as professionally interested in why I'd been bounced off the show at sixteen. He'd actually heard the Lincoln broadcast, but he had the impression that I'd said over the air that the Gettysburg Address was 'bad for children.' Not true. I told him I'd said I thought it was a bad speech for children to have to memorize in school. He also had the impression I'd said it was a dishonest speech. I told him I'd said that 51,112 men were casualties at Gettysburg, and that if someone *had* to speak at the anniversary of the event, he should simply have come forward and shaken his fist at his audience and then walked off—that is, if the speaker was an absolutely honest man. He didn't disagree with

me, but he seemed to feel that I have a perfection, complex of some kind. Much talk from him, and quite intelligent, on the virtues of living the imperfect life, of accepting one's own and others' weaknesses. I agree with him, but only in theory. I'll champion indiscrimination till doomsday, on the ground that it leads to health and a kind of very real, enviable happiness. *Followed purely*, it's the way of the Tao, and undoubtedly the highest way. But for a discriminating man to achieve this, it would mean that he would have to dispossess himself of poetry, go *beyond* poetry. That is, he couldn't possibly learn or drive himself to *like* bad poetry in the abstract, let alone equate it with good poetry. He would have to drop poetry altogether. I said it would be no easy thing to do. Dr. Sims said I was putting it too stringently—putting it, he said, as only a perfectionist would. Can I deny that?

"Evidently Mrs. Fedder had nervously told him about Charlotte's nine stitches. It was rash, I suppose, to have mentioned that old finished business to Muriel. She passes everything along to her mother while it's hot. I should object, no doubt, but I can't. M. can only hear me when her mother is listening, too, poor baby. But I had no intention of discussing Charlotte's stitches with Sims. Not over just one drink.

"I more or less promised M. at the station tonight that I'll go to a psychoanalyst one of these days. Sims told me that the man right here on the post is very good. Evidently he and Mrs. Fedder have had a *tete-a-tete* or two on the subject. Why doesn't this rankle me? It doesn't. It seems funny. It warms me, for no good reason. Even stock mothers-in-law in the funny papers have always remotely appealed to me. Anyway, I can't see that I have anything to lose by seeing an analyst. If I do it in the Army, it'll be free. M. loves me, but she'll never feel really close to me, *familiar* with me, *frivolous* with me, till I'm slightly overhauled.

"If or when I do start going to an analyst, I hope to God he has the foresight to let a dermatologist sit in on consultation. A hand specialist. I have scars on my hands from touching certain people. Once, in the park, when Franny was still in the carriage, I put my hand on the downy pate of her head and left it there too long. Another time, at Loew's Seventy-second Street, with Zooey during a spooky movie. He was about six or seven, and he went under the seat to avoid watching a scary scene. I put my hand on his head. Certain heads, certain colors and textures of human hair leave permanent marks on me. Other things, too. Charlotte once ran away from me, outside the studio, and I grabbed her dress to stop her, to keep her near me. A yellow cotton dress I loved because it was too long for her. I still have a lemon-yellow mark on the palm of my right hand. Oh, God, if I'm anything by a clinical name, I'm a kind of paranoiac in reverse. I suspect people of plotting to make me happy."

I remember closing the diary—actually, slamming it shut—after the word "happy." I then sat for several minutes with the diary under one arm, until I became conscious of a certain discomfort from having sat so long on the side of the bathtub. When I stood up, I found I was perspiring more profusely than I had all day, as though I had just got out of a tub, rather than just been sitting on the side of one. I went over to the laundry hamper, raised the lid, and, with an almost vicious wrist movement, literally threw Seymour's diary into some sheets and pillowcases that were on the bottom of the hamper. Then, for want of a better, more constructive idea, I went back and sat down on the side of the bathtub again. I stared for a minute or two at Boo Boo's message on the medicine cabinet mirror, and then I left the bathroom, closing the door excessively hard after me, as though sheer force might lock up the place forever after.

My next stop was the kitchen. Fortunately, it led off the hall, and I could get there without having to go through the living room and face my guests. On arrival, and with the swinging door closed behind me, I took off my coat—my tunic—and dropped it across the enamel table. It seemed to require all my energy just to take off my coat, and I stood for some time, in my T shirt, just resting up, as it were, before taking on the herculean task of mixing drinks. Then, abruptly, as

though I were being invisibly policed through small apertures in the wall, I began to open cabinet and refrigerator doors, looking for Tom Collins ingredients. They were all there, except for lemons instead of limes, and in a few minutes I had a somewhat sugary pitcherful of Collinses made. I took down five glasses, and then looked around for a tray. It was just hard enough to find a tray, and it took me just long enough, so that by the time I did find one, I was giving out small, faintly audible whimpers as I opened and shut cabinet doors.

Just as I was starting out of the kitchen, with the pitcher and glasses loaded on the tray, and with my coat back on, an imaginary light bulb was turned on over my head—the way it is in comic strips to show that a character has a sudden very bright idea. I put down the tray on the floor. I went back over to the liquor shelf and took down a half-full fifth of Scotch. I brought my glass over and poured myself out—somewhat accidentally—at least four fingers of Scotch. I looked at the glass critically for a split second, and then, like a tried-and-true leading man in a Western movie, drank it off in one deadpan toss. A little piece of business, I might well mention, that I record here with a rather distinct shudder. Granted that I was twenty-three, and that I may have been doing only what any red-blooded twenty-three-year-old simpleton would have done under similar circumstances. I don't mean anything quite so simple as that. I mean that I am Not a Drinker, as the expression goes. On an ounce of whiskey, as a rule, I either get violently sick or I start scanning the room for unbelievers. On two ounces I've been known to pass out cold.

This was, however—by way of an unparalleled understatement—no ordinary day, and I remember that as I picked up the tray again and started to leave the kitchen, I felt none of the usual almost immediate metamorphic changes. There seemed to be an unprecedented degree of heat being generated in the subject's stomach, but that was all.

In the living room, as I brought in the loaded tray, there were no auspicious changes in the deportment of my guests, beyond the revitalizing fact that the bride's father's uncle had rejoined the group. He was ensconced in my dead Boston bull's old chair. His tiny legs were crossed, his hair was combed, his gravy stain was as arresting as ever, and—lo and behold—*his cigar was lighted*. We greeted each other even more extravagantly than usual, as though these intermittent separations were suddenly too long and unnecessary for either of us to bear with.

The Lieutenant was still over at the bookshelves. He stood turning the pages of a book he'd taken out, apparently engrossed in it. (I never did find out which book it was.) Mrs. Silsburn, looking considerably pulled together, even refreshed, with her pancake makeup, I thought, newly attended to, was seated on the couch now, in the corner of it farthest away from the bride's father's uncle. She was leafing through a magazine. "Oh, how lovely!" she said, in a party voice, as she sighted the tray I'd just put down on the coffee table. She smiled up at me convivially.

"I've put very little gin in it," I lied as I began to stir the pitcher.

"It's so lovely and cool in here now," Mrs. Silsburn said. "May I ask you a question, incidentally?" With that, she put aside her magazine, got up, and crossed around the couch and over to the desk. She reached up and placed a fingertip on one of the photographs on the wall. "*Who is this beautiful child?*" she asked me. With the air-conditioner now smoothly and steadily in operation, and having had time to apply fresh makeup, she was no longer the wilted, timorous child who had stood in the hot sun outside Schrafft's Seventy-ninth Street. She was addressing me now with all the brittle equipoise that had been at her disposal when I first jumped into the car, outside the bride's grandmother's house, when she asked me if I was someone named Dickie Briganza.

I left off stirring the pitcher of Collinses, and went around and over to her. She had fixed a lacquered fingernail on the photograph of the 1929 cast of "It's a Wise Child," and on one child in particular. Seven of us were sitting around a circular table, a microphone in front of each child. "That's the most beautiful child I've ever laid *eyes* on," Mrs. Silsburn said. "You know who she looks a teeny bit like? Around the eyes and mouth?"

At about that point, some of the Scotch—roughly, a finger of it, I'd say—was beginning to

affect me, and I very nearly answered, "Dickie Briganza," but a certain cautionary impulse still prevailed. I nodded, and said the name of the motion-picture actress whom the Matron of Honor, earlier in the afternoon, had mentioned in connection with nine surgical stitches.

Mrs. Silsburn stared at me. "Was *she* on 'It's a Wise Child'?" she asked.

"For about two years, yes. God, yes. Under her own name, of course. Charlotte Mayhew."

The Lieutenant was now behind me, at my right, looking up at the photograph. At the drop of Charlotte's professional name, he had stepped over from the bookshelves to have a look.

"I didn't know she was ever on the radio as a child!" Mrs. Silsburn said. "I didn't know that! Was she so brilliant as a child?"

"No, she was mostly just noisy, really. She sang as well then as she does now, though. And she was wonderful moral support. She usually arranged things so that she sat next to my brother Seymour at the broadcasting table, and whenever he said anything on the show that delighted her, she used to step on his foot. It was like a hand squeeze, only she used her foot." As I delivered this little homily, I had my hands on the top rung of the straight chair at the desk. They suddenly slipped off—rather in the way one's elbow can abruptly lose its "footing" on the surface of a table or a bar counter. I lost and regained my balance almost simultaneously, though, and neither Mrs. Silsburn nor the Lieutenant seemed to notice it. *I* folded my arms. "On certain nights when he was in especially good form, Seymour used to come home with a slight limp. That's really true. Charlotte didn't just step on his foot, she tramped on it. He didn't care. He loved people who stepped on his feet. He loved noisy girls."

"Well, isn't that interesting!" Mrs. Silsburn said. "I certainly never knew she was ever on the radio or anything."

"Seymour got her on, actually," I said. "She was the daughter of an osteopath who lived in our building on Riverside Drive." I replaced my hands on the rung of the straight chair, and leaned my weight forward on it, partly for support, partly in the style of an old back-fence reminiscer. The sound of my own voice was now singularly pleasing to me. "We were playing stoopball—Are either of you at all interested in this?"

"Yes!" said Mrs. Silsburn.

"We were playing stoopball on the side of the building one afternoon after school, Seymour and I, and somebody who turned out to be Charlotte started dropping marbles on us from the twelfth story. That's how we met. We got her on the program that same week. We didn't even know she could sing. We just wanted her because she had such a beautiful New Yorkese accent. She had a Dyckman Street accent."

Mrs. Silsburn laughed the kind of tinkling laugh that is, of course, death to the sensitive anecdotist, cold sober or otherwise. She had evidently been waiting for me to finish, so that she could make a single-minded appeal to the Lieutenant. "Who does she look like to you?" she said to him importunately. "Around the eyes and mouth especially. Who does she remind you of?"

The Lieutenant looked at her, then up at the photograph. "You mean the way she is in this picture? As a kid?" he said. "Or now? The way she is in the movies? Which do you mean?"

"Both, really, *I* think. But especially right here in this picture."

The Lieutenant scrutinized the photograph—rather severely, I thought, as though he by no means approved of the way Mrs. Silsburn, who after all was a civilian as well as a woman, had asked him to examine it. "Muriel," he said shortly. "Looks like Muriel in this picture. The hair and all."

"But exactly!" said Mrs. Silsburn. She turned to me. "But *exactly*," she repeated. "Have you ever met Muriel? I mean have you ever seen her when she's had her hair tied in a lovely big—"

"I've never seen Muriel at all until today," I said.

"Well, all right, just take my word." Mrs. Silsburn tapped the photograph impressively with her index finger. "This child could *double* for Muriel at that age. But to a T."

The whiskey was steadily edging up on me, and I couldn't quite take in this information whole, let alone consider its many possible ramifications. I walked back over—just a trifle straight-linishly, I think—to the coffee table and resumed stirring the pitcher of Collinses. The bride's father's uncle tried to get my attention as I came back into his vicinity, to greet me on my reappearance, but I was just abstracted enough by the alleged fact of Muriel's resemblance to Charlotte not to respond to him. I was also feeling just a trifle dizzy. I had a strong impulse, which I didn't indulge, to stir the pitcher from a seated position on the floor.

A minute or two later, as I was just starting to pour out the drinks, Mrs. Silsburn had a question for me. It all but sang its way across the room to me, so melodiously was it pitched.

"Would it be very awful if I asked about that accident Mrs. Burwick happened to mention before? I mean those nine stitches she spoke of. Did your brother accidentally *push* her or something like that, I mean?"

I put down the pitcher, which seemed extraordinarily heavy and unwieldy, and looked over at her. Oddly, despite the mild dizziness I was feeling, distant images hadn't begun to blur in the least. If anything, Mrs. Silsburn as a focal point across the room seemed rather obtrusively distinct. "Who's Mrs. Burwick?" I said.

"My wife," the Lieutenant answered, a trifle shortly. He was looking over at me, too, if only as a committee of one to investigate what was taking me so long with the drinks.

"Oh. Certainly she is," I said.

"Was it an accident?" Mrs. Silsburn pressed. "He didn't *mean* to do it, did he?"

"Oh, *God*, Mrs. Silsburn."

"I beg your pardon?" she said coldly.

"I'm sorry. Don't pay any attention to me. I'm getting a little tight. I poured myself a great drink in the kitchen about five minutes—" I broke off, and turned abruptly around. I'd just heard a familiar heavy tread in the uncarpeted hall. It was coming toward us—at us—at a great rate, and in an instant the Matron of Honor jounced into the room.

She had eyes for no one. "I finally got them," she said. Her voice sounded strangely levelled off, stripped of even the ghost of italics. "After about an hour." Her face looked tense and overheated to the bursting point. "Is that cold?" she said, and came without stopping, and unanswered, over to the coffee table. She picked up the one glass I'd half filled a minute or so before, and drank it off in one greedy tilt. "That's the hottest room I've ever been in in my entire life," she said—rather impersonally— and set down her empty glass. She picked up the pitcher and refilled the glass halfway, with much clinking and plopping of ice cubes.

Mrs. Silsburn was already well in the vicinity of the coffee table. "What'd they say?" she asked impatiently. "Did you speak to Rhea?"

The Matron of Honor drank first. "I spoke to everybody," she said, putting down her glass, and with a grim but, for her, peculiarly un-dramatic emphasis on "everybody." She looked first at Mrs. Silsburn, then at me, then at the Lieutenant. "You can all relax," she said. "Everything's just fine and dandy."

"What do you mean? What happened?" Mrs. Silsburn said sharply.

"Just what I said. The *groom's* no longer *indisposed* by *happiness*." A familiar style of inflection was tack in the Matron of Honor's voice.

"How come? Who'd you talk to?" the Lieutenant said to her. "Did you talk to Mrs. Fedder?"

"I said I talked to everybody. Everybody but the blushing bride. She and the groom've eloped." She turned to me. "How much sugar did you put in this thing, anyway?" she asked irritably. "It tastes like absolute—"

"*Eloped?*" said Mrs. Silsburn, and put her hand to her throat.

The Matron of Honor looked at her. "All right, just relax now," she advised. "You'll live longer."

Mrs. Silsburn sat down inertly on the couch—right beside me, as a matter of fact. I was staring up at the Matron of Honor, and I'm sure Mrs. Silsburn immediately followed suit.

"Apparently he was *at* the apartment when they got back. So Muriel just ups and packs her bag, and off the two of them go, just like that." The Matron of Honor shrugged her shoulders elaborately. She picked up her glass again and finished her drink. "Anyway, we're all invited to the reception. Or whatever you call it when the bride and groom have already *left*. From what I gathered, there's a whole mob of people over there already. Everybody sounded so *gay* on the phone."

"You said you talked to Mrs. Fedder. What'd she say?" the Lieutenant said.

The Matron of Honor shook her head, rather cryptically. "She was wonderful. My God, what a woman. She sounded absolutely normal. From what I gathered—I mean from what she said—this *Seymour's* promised to start going to an analyst and get himself straightened out." She shrugged her shoulders again. "Who knows? Maybe everything's gonna be hunky-dory. I'm too pooped to think any more." She looked at her husband. "Let's go. Where's your little hat?"

The next thing I knew, the Matron of Honor, the Lieutenant, and Mrs. Silsburn were all filing toward the front door, with me, as their host, following behind them. I was weaving now very obviously, but since no one turned around, I think my condition went unnoticed.

I heard Mrs. Silsburn say to the Matron of Honor, "Are you going to stop by there, or what?"

"I don't know," came the reply. "If we do, it'll just be for a minute."

The Lieutenant rang the elevator bell, and the three stood leadenly watching the indicator dial. No one seemed to have any further use for speech. I stood in the doorway of the apartment, a few feet away, dimly looking on. When the elevator door opened, I said goodbye, aloud, and their three heads turned in unison toward me. "Oh, *goodbye*," they called over, and I heard the Matron of Honor shout "Thanks for the drink!" as the elevator door closed behind them.

I went back into the apartment, very unsteadily, trying to unbutton my tunic as I wandered along, or to yank it open.

My return to the living room was unreservedly hailed by my one remaining guest—whom I'd forgotten. He raised a well-filled glass at me as I came into the room. In fact, he literally waved it at me, wagging his head up and down and grinning, as though the supreme, jubilant moment we had both been long awaiting had finally arrived. I found I couldn't quite match grins with him at this particular reunion. I remember patting him on the shoulder, though. Then I went over and sat down heavily on the couch, directly opposite him, and finished yanking open my coat. "Don't you have a home to go to?" I asked him. "Who looks after you? The pigeons in the park?" In response to these provocative questions, my guest toasted me with increased gusto, wielding his Tom Collins at me as though it were a beer stein. I closed my eyes and lay back on the couch, putting my feet up and stretching out flat. But this made the room spin. I sat up and swung my feet around to the floor—doing it so suddenly and with such poor coordination that I had to put my hand on the coffee table to keep my balance. I sat slumped forward for a minute or two, with my eyes closed. Then, without having to get up, I reached for the Tom Collins pitcher and poured myself out a drink, spilling any amount of liquid and ice cubes onto the table and floor. I sat with the filled glass in my hands for some more minutes, without drinking, and then I put it down in a shallow puddle on the coffee table. "Would you like to know how Charlotte got those nine stitches?" I asked suddenly, in a tone of voice that sounded perfectly normal to me. "We were up at the Lake. Seymour had written to Charlotte, inviting her to come up and visit us, and her mother finally let her. What happened was, she sat down in the middle of our driveway one morning to pet Boo Boo's cat, and Seymour threw a stone at her. He was twelve. That's all there was to it. He threw it at her because she looked so beautiful sitting there in the middle of the driveway with Boo Boo's cat. Everybody knew that, for God's sake—me, Charlotte, Boo Boo, Waker, Walt, the whole family." I stared at the pewter ashtray on the coffee table. "Charlotte never said a word to him about it. Not a word." I looked up at my guest, rather expecting him to dispute me, to call me a liar. I am a liar, of course. Charlotte never did

understand why Seymour threw that stone at her. My guest didn't dispute me, though. The contrary. He grinned at me encouragingly, as though anything further I had to say on the subject could go down only as the absolute truth with him. I got up, though, and left the room. I remember considering, halfway across the room, going back and picking up two ice cubes that were on the floor, but it seemed too arduous an undertaking, and I continued along to the hall. As I passed the kitchen door, I took off my tunic—peeled it off—and dropped it on the floor. It seemed, at the time, like the place where I always left my coat.

In the bathroom, I stood for several minutes over the laundry hamper, debating whether I should or shouldn't take out Seymour's diary and look at it again. I don't remember any more what arguments I advanced on the subject, either pro or con, but I did finally open the hamper and pick out the diary. I sat down with it, on the side of the bathtub again, and riffled the pages till I came to the very last entry Seymour had made:

"One of the men just called the flight line again. If the ceiling keeps lifting, apparently we can get off before morning. Oppenheim says not to hold our breaths. I phoned Muriel to tell her. It was very strange. She answered the phone and kept saying hello. My voice wouldn't work. She very nearly hung up. If only I could calm down a little. Oppenheim is going to hit the sack till the flight line calls us back. I should, too, but I'm too keyed up. I really called to ask her, to beg her for the last time to just go off alone with me and get married. I'm too keyed up to be with people. I feel as though I'm about to be born. Sacred, sacred day. The connection was so bad, and I couldn't talk at all during most of the call. How terrible it is when you say I love you and the person at the other end shouts back 'What?' I've been reading a miscellany of Vedanta all day. Marriage partners are to serve each other. Elevate, help, teach, strengthen each other, but above all, *serve*. Raise their children honorably, lovingly, and with detachment. A child is a guest in the house, to be loved and respected—never possessed, since he belongs to God. How wonderful, how sane, how beautifully difficult, and therefore true. The joy of responsibility for the first time in my life. Oppenheim is already in the sack. I should be, too, but I can't. Someone must sit up with the happy man."

I read the entry through just once, then closed the diary and brought it back to the bedroom with me. I dropped it into Seymour's canvas bag, on the window seat. Then I fell, more or less deliberately, on the nearer of the two beds. I was asleep—or, possibly, out cold—before I landed, or so it seemed.

When I wakened, about an hour and a half later, I had a splitting headache and a parched mouth. The room was all but dark. I remember sitting for rather a long time on the edge of the bed. Then, in the cause of a great thirst, I got up and gravitated slowly toward the living room, hoping there were still some cold and wet remnants in the pitcher on the coffee table. My last guest had evidently let himself out of the apartment. Only his empty glass, and his cigar end in the pewter ashtray, indicated that he had ever existed. I still rather think his cigar end should have been forwarded on to Seymour, the usual run of wedding gifts being what it is. Just the cigar, in a small, nice box. Possibly with a blank sheet of paper enclosed, by way of explanation.

-end-