

The background of the book cover is a close-up photograph of a man's torso. He is wearing a light blue and white vertically striped dress shirt and a pink and blue vertically striped necktie. His right hand is visible, holding a clear glass filled with a light-colored liquid, possibly a drink. The lighting is soft, and the overall aesthetic is classic and sophisticated.

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# Norman Mailer

## An American Dream

A NOVEL

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# An American Dream

A Novel

Norman Mailer



Random House

New York

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*An Appreciation to*

Anne Barry

Richard Baron

Walter Minton

Harold Hays

Donald Fine

*and not least*

Scott Meredith

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EPILOGUE / The Harbors of the Moon Again

*About the Author*

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I MET Jack Kennedy in November, 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had just been elected to Congress. We went out one night on a double date and it turned out to be a fair evening for me. I seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz.

She was Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly, of the Caughlins first, English-Irish bankers, financiers and priests; the Mangaravidis, a Sicilian issue from the Bourbons and the Hapsburgs; Kelly's family was just Kelly; but he had made a million two hundred times. So there was a vision of treasure, far-off blood, and fear. The night I met her we had a ninety minutes in the back seat of my car parked behind a trailer truck on a deserted factory street in Alexandria, Virginia. Since Kelly owned part of the third largest trucking firm in the Midwest and West, I may have had a speck of genius to try for his daughter where I did. Forgive me. I thought the road to President might begin at the entrance to her Irish heart. She heard the snake rustle however in *my* heart; on the telephone next morning she told me I was evil, awful and evil, and took herself back to the convent in London where she had lived many times before. I did not know as yet that ogres stand on guard before the portal of an heiress. Now in retrospect I can say with cheer: that was the closest I came to being President. (Eight years later the time I found Deborah again—all of seven years later in Paris—she was no longer her father's delight, and we were married in a week. Like any tale which could take ten books, it is best to quit it by a parenthesis—less than ten volumes might be untrue.)

Of course Jack has gone on a bit since those days, and I have traveled up and I have voyaged down and I've gone up and down, but I remember a full moon the night we had our double date, and to be phenomenologically precise, there was also a full moon on the night I led my patrol to the top of a particular hill in Italy, and a full moon the night I met another girl, and a full moon.... There are times when I like to think I still have my card in the intellectual's guild, but I seem to be joining company with that horde of the mediocre and the mad who listen to popular songs and act upon coincidence. The real difference between the President and myself may be that I ended with too large an appreciation of the moon, for I looked down the abyss on the first night I killed: four men, four very separate Germans, dead under a full moon—whereas Jack, for all I know, never saw the abyss.

Of course, I did not have any illusion that my heroism was the equal of his. I got good for one night. I was a stiff, overburdened, nervous young Second Lieutenant, fresh from Harvard and graduated a year behind Prince Jack (we never met—not there). I had gone into the Army with a sweaty near-adolescent style, Harvard on the half-shell ("Raw-Jock" Rojack was the sporting name bestowed on me in House Football) and I had been a humdrum athlete and, as a student, excessively bright: Phi Beta Kappa, *summa cum laude*, Government.

Small wonder I was thus busy working to keep some government among the hard-nosed Southerners and young Mafiosos from the Bronx who made up the double nucleus of my platoon, working so busily that death this night first appeared to me as a possibility.

considerably more agreeable than my status in some further disorder. I really didn't care much longer whether I stayed alive. When I steered us up the hill therefore to get pinned down in a long, bad line, one hundred feet from the summit, a modest twin dome, a double hill with a German machine gun on one knoll and a German machine gun on the other, I was so ready to die in atonement I was not even scared.

Trapped beneath a rusty sputter—the guns had not quite found me nor any of the others—the full moon giving a fine stain to the salient of our mood (which was fear and funk and sniff of the grave), I could nonetheless feel danger withdraw from me like an angel, withdraw like a retreating wave over a quiet sea, sinking quietly into the sand, and I stood and then ran, I ran up the hill into the aisle of safety I felt opening for me which is part of what I captured that large decoration later, because the route I took was under the separate fire of each of those guns and the two together could stitch you to a pulp. Their fire was jagged however, it was startled, and as I ran, I threw my carbine away, out ten yards to the front of me, crossed my arms to pull a grenade from each shirt pocket, pulled the rings with my teeth which I had hardly been able to do in practice (much too hard on the teeth), released the spoon handles, the fuse now lit, and spitting, and shot my arms out like the wings of the letter Y. The grenades sailed away in separate flights and I had time to stop, turn around; and dive back for my carbine which I had overrun.

Years later I read *Zen in the Art of Archery* and understood the book. Because I did not throw the grenades on that night on the hill under the moon, *it* threw them, and *it* did a near perfect job. The grenades went off somewhere between five and ten yards over each machine gun, *blast, blast*, like a boxer's tattoo, one-two, and I was exploded in the butt from a piece of my own shrapnel, whacked with a delicious pain clean as a mistress' sharp teeth going "Yummy" in your rump, and then the barrel of my carbine swung around like a long fire antenna and pointed itself at the machine-gun hole on my right where a great bloody sweet German face, a healthy spoiled overspoiled young beauty of a face, mother-love all over it making, possessor of that overcurved mouth which only great fat sweet young faggots can have when their rectum is tuned and entertained from adolescence on, came crying, sliding smiling up over the edge of the hole, "Hello death!" blood and mud like the herald of sodomy upon his chest, and I pulled the trigger as if I were squeezing the softest breast of the softest pigeon which ever flew, still a woman's breast takes me now and then to the pigeon on the trigger, and the shot cracked like a birth twig across my palm, *whop!* and the round went in the base of his nose and spread and I saw his face sucked in backward upon the gouge of the bullet, he looked suddenly like an old man, toothless, sly, reminiscent of lechery. Then he whimpered "*Mutter,*" one yelp from the first memory of the womb, and down he went in his own blood just in time, timed like the interval in a shooting gallery, for the next was up his hole-mate, a hard avenging specter with a pistol in his hand and one arm off, blown of rectitude like a stringer of saliva across the straight edge of his lip, the straightest lip I ever saw, German-Protestant rectitude. *Whap!* went my carbine and the hole was in his heart and he folded back the long arm with the pistol, back across his chest to cover his new hole and went down straight and with a clown's deep gloom as if he were sliding down a long thin pipe, and then I turned, feeling something tear in my wound, nice in its pain, a good blood liberty, and I took on the other two coming out of the other hole, one short stocky ape-like wretch with his back all askew, as if he'd had a false stuffed hump which shrapnel had

disgorged beyond his shoulder blade: I fired at him and he went down and I never knew where it hit nor quite saw his face; then the last stood up straight with a bayonet in his hand and invited me to advance. He was bleeding below his belt. Neat and clean was his shirt above the level of his helmet, and nothing but blood and carnage below the belt. I started to rise. I wanted to charge as if that were our contract, and held, for I could not face his eyes; they now contained all of it, the two grenades, the blood on my thigh, the fat faggot, the ghost with the pistol, the hunchback, the blood, those bloody screams that never sounded, was all in his eyes, he had eyes I was to see once later on an autopsy table in a small town in Missouri, eyes belonging to a redneck farmer from a deep road in the Ozarks, eyes of blue, so perfectly blue and mad they go all the way in deep into celestial vaults of sky, eyes which go back all the way to God is the way I think I heard it said once in the South, and I faltered before that stare, clear as ice in the moonlight, and hung on one knee, not knowing if I could push my wound, and suddenly it was all gone, the clean presence of *it*, the grace, *it* had deserted me in the instant I hesitated, and now I had no stomach to go, I could charge with bayonet no more. So I fired. And missed. And fired again. And missed. Then he threw his bayonet at me. It did not reach. He was too weak. It struck a stone instead and made a quivering whanging sound like the yowl of a tomcat on the jump. Then it stopped between us. The light was going out in his eye. It started to collect, to coagulate into the thick jelly which forms on the pupil of a just-dead dog, and he died then, and fell over. Like a noble tree with rotten roots. And the platoon was up around me, shooting a storm into those two holes and they were cheering, buzzing, kissing my mouth (one of the Italians for certain), pounding my back. "Get off him, he's wounded," shouted somebody, the Sergeant, and I felt like a halfback who has caught a fifty-yard pass and run another forty-eight for the longest touchdown in the history of the school, except that the final excellence of it was smuggled away since the ball squiggled out of my arms as I ran it out past the end zone. I had scored but no football in my belly at the end, just six points. And those blue eyes kept staring in the new flesh of my memory until I went over with a thud, a wave from the wound carrying me back, forcing my head to the ground with some desire of its own. "Medics," I heard a man yell.

I was carried out later on a stretcher, an X-ray showed a minor crack and small split in the girdle of the pelvis. I was evacuated to a base hospital, then sent to New York where I was given a Distinguished Service Cross, not anything less, and was used for the last year to bring good public relations for the Army. Which I did, showing the trace of a distinguished limp. A hero in mid-'44, a hero for all of '45, surviving even V-J Day, I had my pick of opportunities and used them. I went around for a time speaking with Mrs. Roosevelt at one honorable drive after another, and she liked me. She encouraged me to think of politics. Those became the years when the gears worked together, the contacts and the insights, the style and the manufacture of oneself. It all turned together very well, I was a curiosity after all, a most special product; I was the one intellectual in America's history with a DSC and I spoke to the public with a modest warrior's charm.

About the time the Party machine in New York County was sorting through its culls and giving me odd off-hand invitations to lunch with the Cardinal and the Bishop ("One question, son," asked the first Eminence, "do you believe in God?" "Yes, your Eminence") Mrs. Roosevelt was introducing me to Protestant gentry and Jewish gentry and, yes, it all began

fit and fit so well I came out, by the end, a candidate for Congress, and was then elected  
Congressman Stephen Richards Rojack, Democrat from New York.

Now, I could go into more detail about the precise sequence of steps which left me a young  
Congressman in 1946 at the age of twenty-six—the moves were not automatic after all, but  
that would merely describe the adventures of the part which I as a young actor was playing.  
There are any number of movie stars who capture the love of women they have never seen,  
the poor husbands of those women are in competition with a man they cannot meet. But  
think of those particular few movie stars who are not only profiles for a great lover, but  
homosexual and private in their life. They must live with insanity on every breath. And  
something which could correspond to this was true for me. Where many another young  
athlete or hero might have had a vast and continuing recreation with sex, I was lost in  
private kaleidoscope of death. I could not forget the fourth soldier. His eyes had come to see  
what was waiting on the other side, and they told me then that death was a creation more  
dangerous than life. I could have had a career in politics if only I had been able to think that  
death was zero, death was everyone's emptiness. But I knew it was not. I remained an actor.  
My personality was built upon a void. Thus I quit my place in politics almost as quickly as  
I gained it, for by '48 I chose to bolt the Democratic Party and run for office on the Progressive  
ticket. Henry Wallace, Glen Taylor, and me. I had reasons for the choice, some honorable,  
some spurious, but one motive now seems clear—I wanted to depart from politics before  
I was separated from myself forever by the distance between my public appearance which had  
become vital on television, indeed nearly robust, and my secret frightened romance with the  
phases of the moon. About the month you decide not to make a speech because it is the week  
of the full lunar face you also know if still you are sane that politics is not for you and you  
are not for politics.

Now, that was a long time ago. Since then I had, as I say, gone up, and I had certainly gone  
down, and I had gone up and down. I was now at a university in New York, a professor of  
existential psychology with the not inconsiderable thesis that magic, dread, and the  
perception of death were the roots of motivation; I was a personality on television and an  
author of sorts: I had had one popular book published, *The Psychology of the Hangman*,  
a psychological study of the styles of execution in different states and nations—death by  
guillotine, firing squad, by rope, by electric chair, by gas pellets—an interesting book. I had  
also—as I indicated—become the husband of an heiress, and I had been most unsuccessful  
at that. In fact I had come to the end of a very long street. Call it an avenue. For I had come  
to decide I was finally a failure.

I had had a bad year this last year, and for a while it got very bad; I may as well admit that  
for the first time in my life I had come to understand there was suicide in me. (Murder I had  
known was there for a long time.) It was the worst of discoveries, this suicide. Murder, after  
all, has exhilaration within it. I do not mean it is a state to entertain; the tension which  
develops in your body makes you sicken over a period, and I had my fill of walking about  
with a chest full of hatred and a brain jammed to burst, but there is something manly about  
containing your rage, it is so difficult, it is like carrying a two-hundred-pound safe up a case  
iron hill. The exhilaration comes I suppose from possessing such strength. Besides, murder  
offers the promise of vast relief. It is never unsexual.

But there is little which is sexual about suicide. It is a lonely landscape with the pale light

of a dream and something is calling to you, a voice on the wind. Certain nights I would g  
leaden with dread because I could hear the chamber music tuning up, tuning up and near  
pitch. (Yes, murder sounds like a symphony in your head, and suicide is a pure quartet.)  
was approaching my forty-fourth year, but for the first time I knew why some of my friend  
and so many of the women I had thought I understood, could not bear to be alone at night.

I had spent the last year parting company with my wife. We had been married mo  
intimately and often most unhappily for eight years, and for the last five I had been trying  
evacuate my expeditionary army, that force of hopes, all-out need, plain virile desire an  
commitment which I had spent on her. It was a losing war, and I wanted to withdraw, cou  
my dead, and look for love in another land, but she was a great bitch, Deborah, a lioness  
the species: unconditional surrender was her only raw meat. A Great Bitch has losses  
calculate after all if the gent gets away. For ideally a Great Bitch delivers extermination  
any bucko brave enough to take carnal knowledge of her. She somehow *fails in her role* (a  
psychoanalysts, those frustrated stage directors, might say) if the lover escapes without bei  
maimed to the nines or nailed to the mast. And Deborah had gotten her hooks into me, eig  
years ago she had clinched the hooks and they had given birth to other hooks. Living with h  
I was murderous; attempting to separate, suicide came into me. Some psychic bombardme  
of the will to live had begun, a new particle of love's mysterious atom had been discovered—  
the itch to jump. I had been on a balcony ten stories high talking to my host, the cockta  
party was done, and we stood looking down on Sutton Place, not talking about Deborah—  
what else was there not to talk about this last long year?—and I was wondering, as indee  
often I did, whether this old buddy, comfortably drunk with me, a pleasant-looking stud  
forty-six, with a waist kept trim by squash at the New York A.C. and a rogue's look in the ey  
kept alive by corners he cut making his little brokerage prosper (not to speak of the wome  
he met for lunch—he had a flair, this buddy), well, wondering whether his concern was s  
true for me as the timbre of his voice, now sincere, now so place-your-bets sincere, or if he  
been banging my blessed Deborah five times a year, five times each of the last eight year  
forty glorious bangers upon the unconscious horror of my back (something so hot the  
could hardly contain themselves, and kept it down to five each twelve-month out of delicac  
out of a neatness which recognized that if ever they let themselves go, it would all go cras  
and boom) well, as I say, I stood there, not knowing if Old Buddy was in the Carnal Delight  
or a true sword and friend, or even both—there was a wife or two after all with whom I ha  
done the five times eight years bit, and sweet was the prize—no offering like a wife s  
determined to claw her man that months of hatred are converted to Instant Sweet for th  
passing stud in the hay, and I felt all the stirrings of real compassion talking to *her* husband  
next time out. So all was possible—either this guy before me now suffered conceivably a tru  
concern for an old friend and his difficult wife, or was part of the difficulty, or indeed ye  
was both, both, precisely like me so many times, and before the straight-out complexity  
this, the simple incalculable difficulty of ever knowing what is true with an interestin  
woman, I was lost. I tell you in shame that for those eight years I could point with certain  
to only five bona-fide confessed infidelities by Deborah; she had indeed announced each  
them to me, each an accent, a transition, a concrete step in the descent of our marriage,  
curtain to each act in a five-act play: but beyond this, in the great unknown, were anywhe  
from two hundred to precisely no infidelities, for Deborah was an artist in that great dialect

of uncertainty where lies lead to truth, and truth begets the shimmering of lies—"Are you mad?" she would ask when I would disclose my suspicions of a particular gentleman or lady. "Why, he's a boy," or "Don't you know he's *repulsive* to me," which she always said in her best London voice, five years of Catholic schooling in England contributing much to the patrician parts of her American tongue. Yes, before the uncertainty of this, feeling like a scientist of love whose instruments of detection were either wholly inaccurate or unverifiable, acute, I stood up in the middle of my conversation with old friend rogue, and simply heaved my cakes, all the gin-and-tonics, anchovy paste, pigs-in-blankets, shrimp cum cocktail sauce and last six belts of bourbon zip over his balcony and down in a burning cascade of glob and glottle, a thundering herd of love's poisoned hoofs.

"Oh, my God," said the friend, out-rogued for once.

"Stow it," I grunted.

"My God," he repeated, "it's dropped on the second floor."

We had both expected as a matter of course—the seizure was so pure—that my pain would land on the doorman's ears. Instead, some tenant would soon complain. The sheer mechanics of it had me next to laughter—how did one send an awning to the cleaners?

"I suppose I've got to tell them," said the friend.

"Let the rain wash away what the moonlight fails to bless," said I, in a tone I had come to abhor, a sort of boozed Connecticut gentry in the voice, putting together poetic phrases which were unpoetic, part of the product of living with Deborah's near-English lilts and lecturing too many classes over too many unfulfilled hours. "In fact, old buddy, leave me. If you can bear it."

So I stood on the balcony by myself and stared at the moon which was full and very low. I had a moment then. For the moon spoke back to me. By which I do not mean that I heard voices, or Luna and I indulged in the whimsy of a dialogue, no, truly it was worse than that. Something in the deep of that full moon, some tender and not so innocent radiance traveled fast as the thought of lightning across our night sky, out from the depths of the dead in those caverns of the moon, out and a leap through space and into me. And suddenly I understood the moon. Believe it if you will. The only true journey of knowledge is from the depth of one being to the heart of another and I was nothing but open raw depths at that instant alone on the balcony, looking down on Sutton Place, the spirits of the food and drink I had ingested wrenched out of my belly and upper gut, leaving me in raw Being, there were clefts and rents which cut like geological faults right through all the lead and concrete and kapok and leather of my ego, that mutilated piece of insulation, I could feel my Being, ridiculous enough, what I could feel lights shifting inside myself, drifting like vapors over the broken rocks of my ego while a forest of small nerves jumped up, foul in their odor, smelling for all the world like the rotten, carious shudder of a decayed tooth. Half-drunk, half-sick, half on the balcony, half off, for I had put my leg over the balustrade as if I were able better to breathe with one toe pointing at the moon, I looked into my Being, all that lovely light and rotting nerve, and proceeded to listen. Which is to say, I looked out deep into that shimmer of past death and new madness, that platinum lady with her silver light, and she was in my ear, I could hear her music: "Come to me," she was saying, "Come now. Now!" and I could feel my other foot go over the balustrade, and I was standing on the wrong side of the railing, only my fingers (since my thumbs were up and pointing like horns at the moon), only my eight fingers

hold me from the plunge. But it was worse than that. Because I knew I would fly. My body would drop like a sack, down with it, bag of clothes, bones, and all, but I would rise, the part of me which spoke and thought and had its glimpses of the landscape of my Being, would soar, would rise, would leap the miles of darkness to that moon. Like a lion would I join the legions of the past and share their power. "Come now," said the moon, "now is your moment. What joy in the flight." And I actually let one hand go. It was my left. Instinct was telling me to die.

Which instinct and where? The right hand tightened in its grip, and I whipped half-around to the balcony, almost banging into the rail with my breast, my back now to the street and to the sky. Only if I turned my head could I see the Lady.

"Drop," she said one more time, but the moment had gone. Now if I dropped, all of me would pass down. There would be no trip.

"You can't die yet," said the formal part of my brain, "you haven't done your work."

"Yes," said the moon, "you haven't done your work, but you've lived your life, and you are dead with it."

"Let me be not all dead," I cried to myself, and slipped back over the rail, and dropped into a chair. I was sick. I assure you I was sick in a way I had never been sick before. Deep in fever, or bumping through the rapids of a bad nausea, one's soul could always speak to one. "Look what this illness is doing to us, you coward," that voice might say and one would shudder or twist in the fever, but that at least was a nightmare. This illness now, huddling in the deck chair, was an extinction. I could feel what was good in me going away, going away perhaps forever, rising after all to the moon, my courage, my wit, ambition and hope. Nothing but sickness and dung remained in the sack of my torso. And the moon looked back, baleful. Where was her radiance now. Will you understand me if I say that at that moment I felt the other illness come to me, that I knew then if it took twenty years or forty for my death, that if I died from a revolt of the cells, a growth against the design of my organs, that this was the moment it all began, this was the hour when the cells took their leap? Never have I known such a sickening—the retaliation of the moon was complete. What an utter suffocation of my faculties, as if I had disappointed a lady and now must eat the cold tapeworm of her displeasure. Nothing noble seemed to remain of me.

Well, I got up from that deck chair and back to the living room which felt like an indoor pool. So steamy was the air on my stomach, just so ultra-violet seemed the light. I must have been in some far-gone state because there was an aureole about each electric light, each bulb stood out like a personage, and I remember thinking: of course, this is how they appeared to Van Gogh at the end.

"You don't look too well," said the host.

"Well, buddy, I feel worse than I look. Give me a drop of blood, will you?"

The bourbon tasted like linseed oil and lit a low smoke in the liverish caverns of my belly. I could feel some effulgence of the moon glowing through the windows and dread came back like a hoot from a bully on the street outside.

"It's a great night for the race," I said.

"What race?" said my host. It was obvious he wished me to be gone.

"The human race. Ho. Ho. Ho," I said.

"Steve!"

“I’m on my way.”

My hand offered him the glass as if it were the gift of a shiny apple, and then I strolled closing my host’s door so carefully it failed to shut. I turned around to jam it once again and felt a force on me as palpable as a magnetic field. “Get out of here,” said a voice in my brain. The elevator took too long. I rang, and rang again, but there was not a sound from the cab or the cage. I broke into a galloping sweat. “If you’re not out of here in thirty seconds,” said the same voice, “your new disease takes another step. Metastases are made of moments like this, lover-man.” So I bolted down the stairs. It was ten flights taken in two banks each twenty banks of concrete steps, cement-block walls painted guacamole-green, blood-iron railing made of pipe, and I flew down pursued by panic, because I had lost my sense of being alive and here on earth, it was more as if I had died and did not altogether know it, that might be the way it was for the first hour of death if you chose to die in bed—you could blunder through some endless repetition believing your life was still here.

The door to the lobby was locked. Of course. I tired of beating on it with my hands—I was half certain I was really gone—and shifted to one foot, took off a shoe, began to wham it away. The doorman opened in a pet. “What’s going on?” he asked. “I go up in the elevator and you ain’t there.” He was Italian, some stout dull lump of rejection from the Mafia—the Mafia had assigned him to this job about the time they decided he was hopeless for waiting on tables in a hopeless bar. “Ain’t you got any consideration?” he asked.

“Up your ass, friend.” I put on my shoe and walked past him. As I was going to the street he muttered behind me, “Up yours too.”

Walking fast I was two blocks away before I saw I had forgotten my overcoat. It was a cold night in late March, it was cold, it was much colder now than it had been on the balcony, and I shivered from the realization, the wind reaching in to the forest of nerves on my gut. I could feel those nerves wriggling now like a hive of worms; they were flinching as the wind rode by. A familiar misery was on me. I was separate from Deborah as much as a week or two at a time, but there would come a moment, there would always come a moment, after everything else had gone, when it was impossible not to call her. At moments like that I would feel as if I had committed hari-kari and was walking about with my chest separate from my groin. It was a moment which was physically insupportable, it was the remains of my love for her, love draining from the wound, leaving behind its sense of desolation as if all the love I possessed were being lost and some doom whose dimensions I could hardly glimpse was getting ready on the consequence. I hated her more than not by now, my life with her had been a series of successes cancelled by quick failures, and I knew so far as I could still keep any confidence that she had done her best to birth each loss, she was an artist at sucking the marrow from a broken bone, she worked each side of the street with a skill shared only in common by the best of streetwalkers and the most professional of heiresses. Once, for an instance, at a party, a friend of hers, a man I was never able to like, a man who never liked me, had proceeded to beat on me so well for “celebrity” on television that he was carried away. He invited me to box. Well, we were both drunk. But when it came to boxing I was a good *torero de salón*. I was not bad with four drinks and furniture to circle about. So we sparred to the grim amusement and wild consternation of the ladies, the sober evaluation of the gents. I was feeling mean. I roughed him up a hitch or two in the clinches, I slapped him at will with my jab, holding my hand open but swinging the slaps in, he was such an ass, and

after it went on for a minute, he was beginning in compensation to throw his punches as hard (and wild) as he could, whereas I was deepening into concentration. Which is the first reward of the ring. I was sliding my moves off the look in his eye and the shift of his fists, I had settled into the calm of a pregnant typhoon, the kill was sweet and up in me, I could feel twenty moves away, he was going to finish with three slugs to the belly and his arms apart—that is what it would take, his eye was sweaty and I was going keen. Just then his wife broke in. “Stop!” she cried, “absolutely stop!” and came between us.

He was a bad type. “Why’d you stop it?” he asked. “It was getting to be fun.”

“Fun!” she said, “you were going to get killed.”

Well, the point to the story is that when I turned around to wink at Deborah—she had heard me talk much about boxing but had never seen me fight—I discovered she had quit the room.

“Of course I left,” she said later, “it was a sight, bullying that poor man.”

“Poor? He’s bigger than I am.”

“And ten years older.”

That took the taste away. Next time some passing friend invited me to spar at a party—no until a year later I believe, not *all* the parties ended in a bout—I refused. He filed the need to a point. I still refused. When we got home, she told me I was afraid.

It was worth little to refer to the first episode. “This man, at least,” she said, “was younger than you.”

“I could have taken him.”

“I don’t believe it. Your mouth was weak, and you were perspiring.”

When I looked into myself I was not certain any longer that there had been no fear. So took on prominence for me. I did not know any longer.

One could multiply that little puncture by a thousand; Deborah was an artist with the needle, and never pinked you twice on the same spot. (Unless it had turned to ulcer.) So hated her, yes indeed I did, but my hatred was a cage which wired my love, and I did not know if I had the force to find my way free. Marriage to her was the armature of my ego remove the armature and I might topple like clay. When I was altogether depressed by myself it seemed as if she were the only achievement to which I could point—I finally had been the man whom Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly had lived with in marriage, and since she’d been notorious in her day, picking and choosing among a gallery of beautiful politicians of the first rank, racing drivers, tycoons, and her fair share of the more certified playboys of the Western world, she had been my entry to the big league. I had loved her with the fury of my ego, that way I loved her still, but I loved her the way a drum majorette loves the power of the band for the swell it gave to each little strut. If I was a war hero, an ex-Congressman, a professor of popular but somewhat notorious reputation, and a star of some on a television show which I cannot here even bear to explain, if I also had a major work of existential psychology, a herculean endeavor of six to twenty volumes which would (ideally) turn Freud on his head (but remained still in my own head) I had also the secret ambition to return to politics. I had the idea of running some day for Senator, an operation which would not be possible without the vast connections of Deborah’s clan. Of course there had never been a cent from *them*—we lived on the money *I* made even if Deborah had the accumulated tastes and habits of the money Barney Oswald Kelly had made. She claimed he had cut her

off when she married me—which is possible—but I always thought she lied. It was more probable she did not trust me enough to show the buried loot. Heiresses have a scale: they surrender their heart a quarter-century before they open the purse. I did not care about the money itself, I half hated it, in fact I might have despised the money if it had not become the manifest of how unconsummated and unmasculine was the core of my force. It was like being married to a woman who would not relinquish her first lover.

At any rate, such were my parts. Without Deborah they did not add to any more than another name for the bars and gossip columns of New York. With her beside me, I had leverage, however, I was one of the more active figures of the city—no one could be certain finally that nothing large would ever come from me. But for myself the evidence made a good case: probably I did not have the strength to stand alone.

The difficulty is that I have given an undue portrait of Deborah, and so reduce myself. She had, at her best, a winner's force, and when she loved me (which may be averaged out somewhere between every other day to one day in three) her strength seemed then to pass to mine and I was live with wit, I had vitality, I could depend on stamina, I possessed my style. It was just that the gift was only up for loan. The instant she stopped loving me—which could be for a fault so severe as failing to open the door with a touch of *éclat*, thereby reminding her of all the swords, humors, and arbiters who had opened doors for her on better nights—why then my psyche was whisked from the stage and stuffed in a pit. A devil's contract, arranged during all of this last year, not living with her and yet never separated, for though a week might go by or two weeks in which I hardly thought of her at all, I would nonetheless be dropped suddenly into an hour where all of my substance fell out of me and I had to see her. I had a physical need to see her as direct as an addict's panic waiting for his drug—if too many more minutes must be endured, who knows what intolerable damage can be done?

It was like this now. Walking the street just this cold night in March, the horrors were beginning. On these occasions when I had to see her, my instinct gave the warning that if I waited another half hour, even another ten minutes, I might lose her forever. It made no sense, I was almost always wrong in my anticipation of her mood, I was too rattled these months ever to divine what her mood might be, and yet I knew that the way I would probably lose her in the end was by waiting too long on some exceptional night when she might be hoping I would call. For once a certain moment was passed, once Deborah ever said to herself, "I am rid of him, I am rid of him now finally and forever," then it would all be gone. She was nothing if not final, she took forever to form her mind, but come the moment and she would not look back.

So I went into an outdoor booth, and shivering in the trapped cold air, I phoned her apartment. She was home—there were agonies on those nights I phoned and she was out—but she was home this night, and she was cordial. Which was a very bad sign.

"*Darling,*" she said, "where have you been? You must rush over." She was a handsome woman, Deborah, she was big. With high heels she stood at least an inch over me. She had a huge mass of black hair and striking green eyes sufficiently arrogant and upon occasion sufficiently amused to belong to a queen. She had a large Irish nose and a wide mouth which took many shapes, but her complexion was her claim to beauty, for the skin was cream-white and her cheeks were colored with a fine rose, centuries of Irish mist had produced the complexion. It was her voice however which seduced one first. Her face was large and a

but-honest; her voice was a masterwork of treachery. Clear as a bell, yet slithery with innuendo, it leaped like a deer, slipped like a snake. She could not utter a sentence for giving a tinkle of value to some innocent word. It may have been the voice of a woman you would not trust for an instant, but I did not know if I could forget it.

“I’ll be right over,” I said.

“Run. You must *run*.”

When we separated, she was the one who had moved out. Our marriage had been a war, a good eighteenth-century war, fought by many rules, most of them broken if the prize to be gained was bright enough, but we had developed the cheerful respect of one enemy general for another. So I had been able to admire the strategic splendor of leaving me in our apartment. It *stifled* her, she explained to me, it was a source of much misery. If we were to separate, there was small logic for her to remain behind in an apartment she did not like, nor was it better for her to leave me there, I was fond of the apartment after all. I was not, I had never been, but I had pretended to be fond. Therefore I inherited her misery. Now that I had the apartment, the empty stadium of our marriage, stifled *me*, but I had not the pluck, the timing, nor the clean desperation to move. I used it as a place to drop my dirty shirts. Meanwhile she hopped from one fine suite to another; there was always a friend leaving for Europe, and no one was ready to remind Deborah she was very behind on the rent. (What cowards were her friends!) I would get the bill finally, it would be a knockout, \$2700 for three months rent—*I* would hold it, no question of paying. Part of the attrition on my military reserves had been the expenses. Deborah got four hundred dollars a week—it was senseless to give her more; less, she would merely run up her bills, and I had been scuffling and humping, taking three hundred dollars for a spot appearance on a television show, and seven hundred fifty for a spiced-up lecture to some Ladies Auxiliary in Long Island—“The Existential Approach to Sex.” Yes, debt was grinding me bad, I was something like \$16,000 in the hole already and probably worse—I did not care to count.

The apartment she had now was a small duplex suspended some hundred or more feet above the East River Drive, and every vertical surface within was covered with flock, which must have gone for twenty-five dollars a yard; a hot-house of flat velvet flowers, royal purple and sinister, cultivated in their twinings, breathed at one from all four walls, upstairs and downstairs. It had the specific density of a jungle conceived by Rousseau, and Deborah liked it the best of her purloined pads. “I feel warm in here,” she would say, “nice and *warm*.”

The maid let me in. “Madame is upstairs in the bedroom,” she said with a smile. She was a young German maid who must have had an interesting life in the ruins of Berlin from the age of five, for nothing missed her attention. She had taken lately to smiling at me with a drooping, mocking compassionate and very wound-up spite which promised portfolios of detail if I were ever rich enough to turn her tongue just once. I was sometimes tempted to start, to grab her in the hall and take her spiced mouth, lay my tongue on hers and rustle up with a stroke those overtones of malicious music she could sing. What Madame did with me she knew too well because I might still spend a night with Deborah from time to time, but what Madame did with others ... that would have to be bought.

I ascended the stairway, a padded perfumed aisle up a wall of flowers. Deborah was in bed. Her body was not only large but lazy and she hopped into bed whenever she did not know what else to do.

“My God,” she said, “you look awful.” Her mouth turned fond at the corners. She never disliked me so much as when I came to see her looking my best. “You really are a contemptible-looking creature this evening.”

Did she know about the balcony? Sometimes I was convinced I was mad, because it seemed not at all exceptional to me that Deborah had been in touch with the moon and now had the word. She had powers, my Deborah, she was psychic to the worst degree, and she had the power to lay a curse. Once after a fight with her, I had been given traffic tickets three times in fifteen minutes, once for going down a one-way street, once for jumping a red light, and once because the policeman in the last car did not like my eye and decided I was drunk. That had all been in the form of a warning from Deborah, I was certain of that. I could see her waiting alone in bed, waving her long fingers languidly to spark the obedient diabolisms and traffic officers at her command.

“It was a bad party,” I said.

“How is Philippe?”

“Looking well.”

“He’s a *very* attractive man. Don’t you think so?” said Deborah.

“Everyone we know is attractive,” I said to annoy her.

“Except you, pet. You look as if you’ve used up your liver for keeps this time.”

“I’m not very happy,” I said.

“Well, come *here* and live. There’s no reason why you can’t move back with me.”

Her invitation was open. She wanted me to dispose of my apartment, sell our furniture and move in with her. After a month she would move out again, leaving me with the velvet floor.

“If you’d come this afternoon,” she went on, “you could have seen Deirdre. Now she’s off to school. You are a swine not to have seen her.” Deirdre was her daughter, my step-daughter. Deborah’s first husband had been a French count. He had died of a lingering illness after a year of marriage, and Deirdre, so far as I knew, had been the child of that marriage, a delicate haunted girl with eyes which contained a promise she would learn everything about you if she looked too long, and so chose not to look. I adored her, I had realized for years that being step-father to Deirdre was the most agreeable part of our marriage; for that reason I tried to see her as little as possible now.

“Is she pleased at going back to school this trip?”

“She would have been more pleased if you had come by.” Deborah’s complexion was mottling with red. When she became angry a red flush, raw as a rash, spotted her neck. “You pretended to love that child for so long, and now you give her no attention.”

“It’s too painful,” I said.

“God, you’re a whimperer,” said Deborah. “Sometimes I lie here and wonder how you ever became a hero. You’re such a bloody whimperer. I suppose the Germans were whimpering even worse than you. It must have been quite a sight. You whimpering and they whimpering and you going pop pop pop with your little gun.”

Never had she gone quite so far before. “How do you tell that story these days?” Deborah went on.

“I don’t tell it.”

“Except when you’re too drunk to remember.”

“I’m never too drunk to remember.”

"I can't get over the way you look," Deborah exclaimed. "I mean you really look like some poor peddler from the Lower East Side."

"I'm descended from peddlers."

"Don't I know it, honey-one," said Deborah. "All those poor materialistic grabby little people."

"Well, they never hurt anyone particularly." This was a reference to her father.

"No, they didn't, and they didn't have the guts to do anything else either. Except to make your father brainy enough to make your mother and then make you." She said this with such a stir of fury that I moved uneasily. Deborah was violent. I had a bad scar on my ear. People thought it came from the ring, but the truth was less presentable—Deborah had once bitten half-through in a fight.

"Go easy," I said.

"You're fragile tonight, aren't you?" She nodded, her face almost gentle, almost attentive as if she were listening to the echo of an event. "I know something happened to you."

"I don't want to talk about it." Which was in effect a counterattack. Deborah could not be not to know.

"I thought you were dead," said Deborah. "Isn't that funny. I was certain you were dead."

"Were you sorry?"

"Oh, I felt a great woe." She smiled. "I thought you were dead and you'd left a will that you wished to be cremated. I was going to keep your ashes in an urn. There—right by the window table. Each morning I was going to take a handful of your dust and drop it on the East River Drive. In time, who knows, you might have been *strewn* all over New York."

"I would have done my best to haunt you."

"Can't, pet. Not when you're cremated. That atomizes the soul. Didn't you know?" Her green eyes had a particularly bad light. "Come here, darling, and give a kiss."

"I'd rather not."

"Tell me why not."

"Because I threw up a while ago and my breath is foul."

"Bad smells never bother me."

"Well, they bother me. And you've been drinking rum. You smell Godawful." It was true. When she drank too much, a stench of sweet rot lifted from her. "The Irish were never meant to go near rum," I said, "it brings out the odor of their fat."

"Do you talk this way to all your little girls?"

She did not know what I did with the days and weeks I spent away from her. This was forever agitating her rage. Once, years ago, she uncovered an affair I had been keeping in a corner. It had been with a rather ordinary young lady who (for compensation, no doubt) had been a burning wizard in bed. Otherwise, the girl was undeniably plain. Somehow, Deborah learned about her. The subsequent details are vicious, private detectives, so forth, but the indigestible issue was that Deborah had gone with the private detective to a restaurant where the girl always had lunch and studied her through a meal, all through a long meal the poor girl ate by herself. What a scene followed!

"I don't think I've been quite so marooned in all my beloved life," Deborah had said. I mean, *figure-toi*, pet, I had to keep up a conversation with the detective, a *horrible* man, and he was laughing at me. All that money spent on fees, and for what, a poor wet little mouse

She was even afraid of the *waitresses*, and this was a tea-room. What a big boy you must be to take up with a sparrow.”

The real part of her fury was that no intrigue had ensued; if the affair had been with one of her friends, or with some other woman of parts, then Deborah could have gone to war and fought one of her grand campaigns, hook and eye, tooth and talon, a series of parties with exquisite confrontations; but I had merely been piddling and that was the unforgivable sin. Since that time Deborah spoke only of my *little girls*.

“What do you say to them, pet?” asked Deborah now, “do you say, ‘Please stop drinking so much because you smell like a piece of fat,’ or do you say, ‘Oh God, darling, I love you because you stink?’ ”

The mottling had spread in ugly smears and patches upon her neck, her shoulders, and what I could see of her breast. They radiated a detestation so palpable that my body began to race as if a foreign element, a poison altogether suffocating, were beginning to seep through me. Did you ever feel the malignity which rises from a swamp? It is real, I could swear it, and some whisper of ominous calm, that heavy air one breathes in the hours before a hurricane, now came to rest between us. I was afraid of her. She was not incapable of murdering me. There are killers one is ready to welcome, I suppose. They offer a clean death and free passage to one’s soul. The moon had spoken to me as just such an assassin. But Deborah promised bad burial. One would go down in one’s death, and muck would wash over the last of one’s wind. She did not wish to tear the body, she was out to spoil the light, and to spread an epidemic of fear, as if her face—that wide mouth, full-fleshed nose, and pointed green eyes, pointed as arrows—would be my first view of eternity, as if she were ministering angel (ministering devil) I knelt beside her and tried to take her hand. It was soft now as jellyfish, and almost as repugnant—the touch shot my palm with a thousand needles which stung into my arm exactly as if I had been swimming at night and lashed onto a Portuguese man o’ war.

“Your hand feels nice,” she said in a sudden turn of mood.

There was a period when we held hands often. She had become pregnant after three years of marriage, a ticklish pregnancy to conserve, for there had been something malformed about her uterus—she was never explicit—and her ducts had suffered from a chronic inflammation since Deirdre had been born. But we had succeeded, we wanted a child, there was genius between us we believed, and we held hands for the first six months. Then we crashed. After a black night of drink and a quarrel beyond dimension, she lost the baby, it came brokenly at birth, in terror, I always thought, of the womb which was shaping it, came out and went back in again to death, tearing by this miscarriage the hope of any other child for Deborah. What was left behind was a heartland of revenge. Now, cohabiting with Deborah was like sitting at dinner in an empty castle with no more for host than a butler and his curse. Yes, I knelt in fear, and my skin lived on thin wire, this side of a profound shudder. All the while she stroked my hand.

But compassion, the trapped bird of compassion, struggled up from my chest and flew to my throat. “Deborah, I love you,” I said. I did not know at that instant if I meant it truly, or if it was some monster of deception, hiding myself from myself. And having said it, knew the mistake. For all feeling departed from her hand, even that tingling so evil to my flesh, and left instead a cool empty touch. I could have been holding a tiny casket in my palm.

“Do you love me, pet?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“It must be awful. Because you know I don’t love you any more at all.”

She said it so quietly, with such a nice finality, that I thought again of the moon and the promise of extinction which had descended on me. I had opened a void—I was now without center. Can you understand? I did not belong to myself any longer. Deborah had occupied my center.

“Yes, you’re looking awful again,” said Deborah. “You began to look all right for a little while, but now you look awful again.”

“You don’t love me.”

“Oh, not in the least.”

“Do you know what it’s like to look at someone you love and see no love come back?”

“It must be awful,” said Deborah.

“It’s unendurable,” I said. Yes, the center was gone. In another minute I would begin to grovel.

“It is unendurable,” she said.

“You do know?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You have felt it?”

“There was a man I loved very much,” she said, “and he didn’t love me.”

“You never told me that before.”

“No, I didn’t.”

Before we married, she told me everything. She confessed every last lover—it had been her heritage from the convent: she had done more than tell me, she had gone to detail—when I would giggle in the dark while she tapped my shoulder with one cultivated and very learned finger, giving me a sense of the roll and snap and lurch and grace (or lack of it) in each of her lovers, she had even given me a sense of what was good in the best of them, and I had loved her for it, painful as the news had sometimes been, for I had known at least what I was up against, and how many husbands could ever say that? It was the warrant of our love, whatever our marriage had been, that was our covenant, that had been her way of saying I was more valuable than the others.

And now she was inside me, fused at my center, ready to blow the rails.

“You don’t mean it,” I said.

“I do. There was one man I never told you about. I never told anyone about him. Although once, somebody guessed.”

“Who was the man?”

“He was a bullfighter. Marvelous ripe man.”

“You’re lying.”

“Have it your way.”

“It wasn’t a bullfighter.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was someone far better than a bullfighter, far greater.” Her face had turned plump with malice, and the red mottling had begun to fade. “As a matter of fact, he was the finest and most extraordinary man I ever knew. Delicious. Just a marvelous winter feast of things. I tried to make him jealous once and lost him.”

“Who could it be?” I asked.

“Don’t bother to hop on one foot and then the other like a three-year-old who’s got to go to the Lou. I’m not going to tell you.” She took a sip of her rum, and jiggled the tumbler negligently, as if the tender circles of the liquor might transmit a message to some distant force, or—better—receive one. “It’s going to be a bore not having you here once in a while.”

“You want a divorce,” I said.

“I think so.”

“Like that.”

“Not like *that*, darling. *After* all that.” She yawned prettily and looked for the moment like a fifteen-year-old Irish maid. “When you didn’t come by today to say goodbye to Deirdre ...”

“I didn’t know she was leaving.”

“Of course you didn’t know. How could you know? You haven’t called in two weeks. You’ve been nuzzling and nipping with your little girls.” She did not know that at the moment I had no girl.

“They’re not so little any more.” A fire had begun to spread in me. It was burning now in my stomach and my lungs were dry as old leaves, my heart had a herded pressure which gave the promise to explode. “Give us a bit of the rum,” I said.

She handed over the bottle. “Well, they may not be so little any more, but I doubt that about the pet. Besides I don’t care. Because I made a vow this afternoon. I said to myself that I would never ...” and then she did not speak the rest of the sentence, but she was talking about something she had done with me and never with anyone else. “No,” said Deborah, “I thought there’s no need for that any more. Never again. Not with Steve.”

I had taught it to her, but she had developed a pronounced royal taste of her own for the little act. Likely it had become the first of her pleasures.

“Not ever again?” I asked.

“Never. The thought—at least in relation to you, dear sweet—makes me brush my gun with peroxide.”

“Well, goodbye to all that. You don’t do it so famously if the truth be told.”

“Not so famously as your little girls?”

“Not nearly as well as five I could name.”

The mottling came back to her neck and shoulders. A powerful odor of rot and musk and something much more violent came from her. It was like the scent of the carnivore in a zoo. This last odor was fearful—it had the breath of burning rubber.

“Isn’t that odd?” asked Deborah. “I haven’t heard a word of complaint from any new beau.”

From the day of our separation she had admitted to no lover. Not until this moment. A sharp sad pain, almost pleasurable, thrust into me. It was replaced immediately by a finer horror.

“How many do you have?” I asked.

“At the moment, pet, just three.”

“And you ...” But I couldn’t ask it.

“Yes, darling. Every last little thing. I can’t tell you how shocked they were when I began. One of them said: ‘Where did you ever learn to root about like that? Didn’t know such things went on outside a Mexican whorehouse.’ ”

“Shut your fucking mouth,” I said.

“Lately I’ve had the most famous practice.”

I struck her open-handed across the face. I had meant—some last calm intention of my mind had meant—to make it no more than a slap, but my body was speaking faster than my brain, and the blow caught her on the side of the ear and knocked her half out of bed. She was up like a bull and like a bull she charged. Her head struck me in the stomach (setting off a flash in that forest of nerves) and then she drove one powerful knee at my groin (she fought like a prep-school bully) and missing that, she reached with both hands, tried to find my root and mangle me.

That blew it out. I struck her a blow on the back of the neck, a dead cold chop which dropped her to a knee, and then hooked an arm about her head and put a pressure on her throat. She was strong, I had always known she was strong, but now her strength was huge. For a moment I did not know if I could hold her down, she had almost the strength to force herself up to her feet and lift me in the air, which in that position is exceptional strength even for a wrestler. For ten or twenty seconds she strained in balance, and then her strength began to pass, it passed over to me, and I felt my arm tightening about her neck. My eyes were closed. I had the mental image I was pushing with my shoulder against an enormous door which would give inch by inch to the effort.

One of her hands fluttered up to my shoulder and tapped it gently. Like a gladiator admitting defeat. I released the pressure on her throat, and the door I had been opening began to close. But I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of a tropical dusk, and I threw myself against the door once more and hardly felt her hand leave my shoulder, I was driving now with force against that door: spasms began to open in me, and my mind cried out then, “Hold back! you’re going too far, hold back!” I could feel a series of orders whip like tracers of light from my head to my arm, I was ready to obey, I was trying to stop, but pulse packed behind pulse in a pressure up to thunderhead; some black-billed lust, some desire to go ahead now unlike the instant one comes in a woman against her cry that she is without protection cannot burst with rage from out of me and my mind exploded in a fireworks of rockets, stars, and hurtling embers, the arm about her neck leaped against the whisper I could still feel murmuring in her throat, and *crack* I choked her harder, and *crack* I choked her again, and *crack* I gave her payment—never halt now—and *crack* the door flew open and the wire tore in her throat, and I was through the door, hatred passing from me in wave after wave, illness as well, rot and pestilence, nausea, a bleak string of salts. I was floating. I was as far into myself as I had ever been and universes wheeled in a dream. To my closed eyes Deborah’s face seemed to float off from her body and stare at me in darkness. She gave one malevolent look which said: “There are dimensions to evil which reach beyond the light,” and then she smiled like a milkmaid and floated away and was gone. And in the midst of that Oriental splendor of landscape, I felt the lost touch of her finger on my shoulder, radiating some faint but ineradicable pulse of detestation into the new grace. I opened my eyes. I was weary with a most honorable fatigue, and my flesh seemed new. I had not felt so nice since I was twelve. It seemed inconceivable at this instant that anything in life could fail to please. But there was Deborah, dead beside me on the flowered carpet of the floor, and there was no question of that. She was dead, indeed she was dead.

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