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FOOD OF THE GODS

by

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August, 1996

A Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

The thesis is a short novel, *Food of the Gods*, followed by a critical afterward and bibliography.

In *Food*, four graduate students, all to varying degrees perverse, come together in a cabalistic union. Bored and desperate, they begin to transgress a series of taboos, eventually performing communal acts of aggression, murder, and even cannibalism. Frank West, one of the students, is the novel's narrator and questionable moral center. It is through his confession that the four's "monstrous deeds" are filtered through.

Thematically, *Food* examines the potential for evil in individuals, as well as the group dynamics which encourage such acts of violence to erupt.

The required critical afterward looks at cannibalism as a literary trope in *Food* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, discussing how the anthropophagous act can be read as a symbolic one, simultaneously creating and destroying boundaries between various dichotomies (such as eater/eaten or self/other) related to notions of identity.

SOMMAIRE

Cette thèse est un bref roman intitulé *Food of the Gods* (*La Nourriture des Dieux*), suivi d'un épilogue critique et d'une bibliographie.

Dans *Food*, quatre étudiants licenciés, tous pervers à des degrés divers, forment entre eux une union secrète. Poussés par l'ennui et le désespoir, ils commencent à transgresser une série de tabous et finissent par commettre ensemble des actes d'agression, meurtre, et même cannibalisme.

Frank West, l'un des étudiants est le narrateur et la conscience morale douteuse du roman. C'est par sa confession que nous apprenons sur les "faits monstrueux" des quatre.

Le roman analyse le mal qui existe en chacun, ainsi que la dynamique de groupe qui pousse à de tels actes de violence.

L'épilogue critique examine le cannibalisme dans *Food* et *Heart of Darkness* (*Coeur de Ténébres*), et explique comment celui-ci peut être interprété comme un acte symbolique, créant et détruisant simultanément les limites entre divers contraires (comme mangeur/mangé ou le moi/autrui) liés à des notions d'identité.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have recently discovered that many people consider writing about cannibalism to be almost as appalling a deed as actually eating human flesh. My uncle, whose tastes in reading range from the sacred to the profane, gave up on *Food of the Gods* about halfway through it, begging off because of an upset stomach and bad dreams. (One hopes it was the subject matter and not the author's treatment of it that so distressed his digestive system.) My father, who is normally my greatest critic and best editor, didn't make it past Dostoevsky's quote on the title page. Fortunately for me, however, I was able to assemble a Cannibal Club of my own, a support group of people with strong enough guts to wade through draft after draft of my gruesome gastral gruel, offering me help and suggestions (and not the infrequent word of consolation) along the way.

Iona Brindle, Lora Hutchison, Brian Lamb, Mauro Nunez, Greg Olear, and Linda Petriuk read the earliest version of *Food of the Gods* (back when it was a play) and offered that all-important first round of feedback and suggestions. Their thoughts proved particularly helpful in sorting out my characters' motivations and with integrating the concept of taboo-breaking into my story. Greg and Linda also read my first attempts at a prose version of *Food*, and again gave me much-appreciated critiques.

Jody Arlington and Jackie Pitcher were the two guinea pigs on whom I first tried out the novel in its entirety. They picked out (and apart) all its inconsistencies and short-comings meticulously, as though they were cleaning bits of corn on the cob from in between their teeth with toothpicks. Their efforts deserve many more thanks than I have given them.

Maggie Kilgour not only legitimized the topic of cannibalism at McGill, but was also extremely generous with her suggestions for the critical afterward which follows *Food*. Her unpublished essay "The Function of Cannibalism at Present Time" (not to mention her book *From Communion to Cannibalism*) was an enormous resource, and I thank her for it.

Finally, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to Trevor Ponech for all his efforts on behalf of my thesis. His recommendation of several philosophical texts proved invaluable in the writing of my critical essay on *Food* and *Heart of Darkness*. Further, besides being my advisor, he was also an encouraging editor, allowing me to "do my own thing," but wisely stepping in when it came time to streamline and focus what might very easily have become a bloated, fatted calf.

There are also, I am sure, people I'm forgetting. I apologize to those I've overlooked, and offer my gratitude to the unnamed dozens who kept me going on a steady diet of encouragement, unqualified moral support, and an apparently endless stream of cannibal jokes, one of my favorites being:

Q: Why don't cannibals eat clowns?

A: Because they taste funny.

Thank you, everyone, for all the help.

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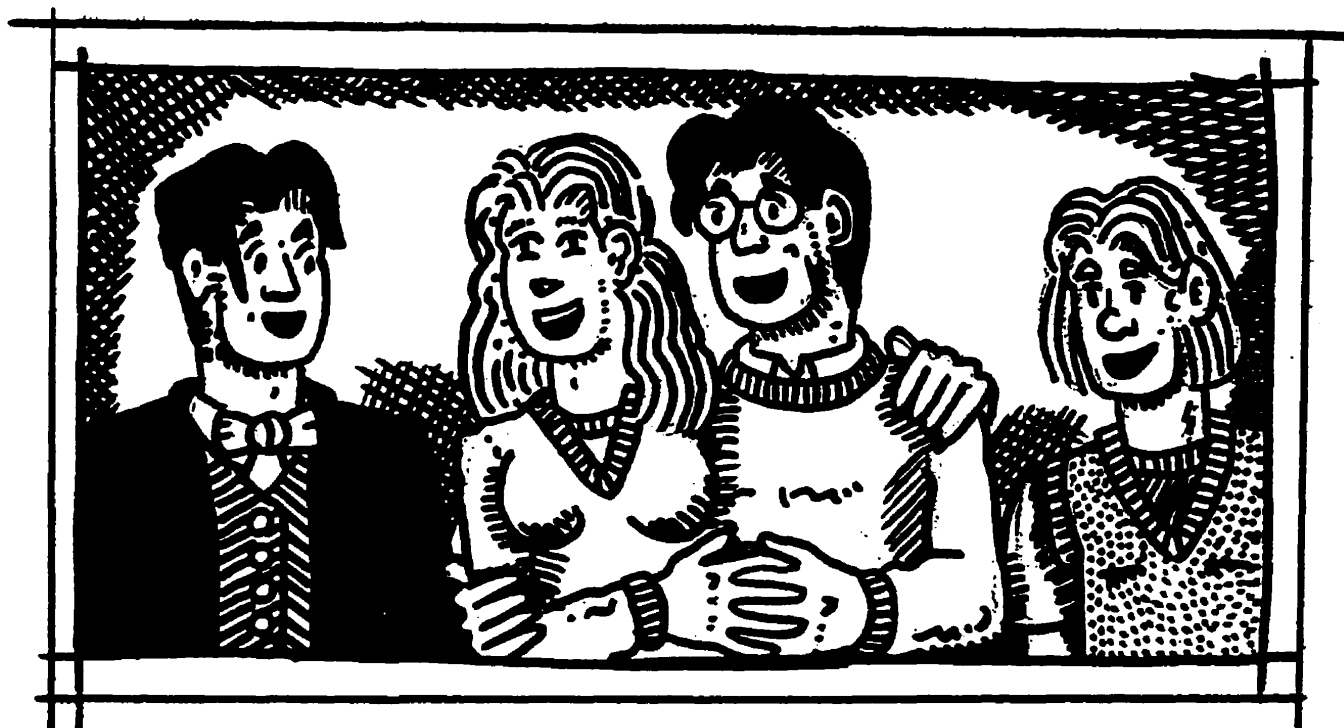
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FOOD OF THE GODS

A Pot-Boiler by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa

"If you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality, not only love but every living force for maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing would be immortal, everything would be permissible, even cannibalism."

...Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov.



"...I don't care what the papers wrote about us, what the police eventually claimed, no one would have been able to guess how far we'd go, how complete our degeneration would ultimately be, by just looking at us..."

"Club: An assembly of good fellows,
meeting under certain conditions."
...Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary*.

"Madness is something rare in individuals, but in
groups, parties, peoples, ages, it is the rule."
...Frederick Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*.

1. GOING NATIVE.

The South Room, where we take all of our meals except for Christmas dinner and Easter lunch (both days very big deals around here, don't let the commercials fool you), is one of those extremely dark places the world is famous for. But it's not a cool dark, nah, it's a hot dark. You know, steaming and burning. Like Calcutta, a real hell-hole. The room has no windows, so what little light there is comes not from outside, but from the few naked bulbs dangling above us. And in each of the room's corners stands a big metal fan. Five in total, their blades slowly and stupidly cutting through the thick, stagnant air, stirring up not even the slightest hint of a breeze.

The South Room's a dining hall, and I'm an inmate, a (don't laugh) lifer.

My name is Mears and I depend on certain routines to get me through the long days and longer nights. I always sit at the same table with the same three men. Every meal, every day, eternally. No one else sits with us, not ever. I think it's because the others sense and respect the common bond between us four, the

thread that links us even when we're not sitting together in the dining hall, but separated by feet of concrete and steel in our dark, boiling cells at night.

We're the youngest ones inside, the biggest disappointments. I'm an ex-star reporter. To my left sits Hope, the has-been banker. To my right, Keen, the fallen lawyer. Across from me, Frank West, the once-upon-a-time graduate student, takes his meals. That is how we always eat. That is our ritual, which is only broken on those rare occasions when someone new to the prison who doesn't know how it is tries to join our group. Like today, a white kid--green around the gills, the joint's most recent addition--showed up at our table, tray in hand, wanting to sit with us.

"Can I?" he asked.

The banker didn't look up from his food. The lawyer smiled. Frank shrugged indifferently. Amused and a little surprised with myself, I told the new guy to take a load off.

We ate in silence, each of us a little wary of the new variable in our midst, who, for the most part, held his head down, except when sneaking the occasional look in Frank's direction. This was unusual for us (our silence, I mean), since quite a long time ago it had been decided that one of our habits would be to tell each other stories. Yarns, really, either true or made-up, designed to pass the time and help us forget or perhaps remember something. We take turns and often hear the same story repeated over and over again, but that doesn't matter much because there is an eternity to kill within this pit's black walls, and we all share a similar temperament. This combination makes us very tolerant of each other's ramblings and shortcomings.

So on this particular day (you've got me started now, you might as well hear it all), Frank was running his hands along our wooden table's edge, thoughtfully tracing its indentations and scrapings, when he suddenly blurted out, "Look at these names. Have you ever read them? Have you ever even noticed them?"

Well, of course we had. He was pointing out the countless names that had been scarred into the table's surface by desperate convicts seeking...a kind of permanence, I guess. A certain immortality, even. Their names, their dates of incarceration, how long they'd been inside, and, in some cases, even their crimes. "Look at this one," Frank said, pointing, "This one goes back decades. We're not even allowed real knives down here any more." He picked out another name, more worn and less readable. "And this one. If this guy's still around, he'd be older than...well, my father, certainly." He got almost exasperated with himself, like there was something he wanted desperately to express, but couldn't. "As long as this table exists, these men and their crimes are forever. Nothing changes. Evil becomes a recurring season. Do you see?"

No one said anything, not right off, because we all knew better. Every so often, Frank West got that way. He'd come up with some half-profound statement that didn't make much sense, and we would keep quiet and accept his announcement respectfully. At least we did that day, except for new guy, who answered Frank's question with one of his own, "Why do you do that?" To which Frank replied--after looking at me, then the others, then turning back to the new guy--"What?"

The new guy cracked a nervous smile. "Not eat. I've been watching you since I got in and I've never seen you eat, not once." Dead silence at our table. "I was just curious." More silence. "My name's Chuck, by the way," the new guy said.

"I eat bread," Frank said, turning away from Chuck to look out an imaginary window. "Other things."

"Are you a vegetarian?" the new guy asked, obviously just trying to make casual conversation and, hopefully, friends. The dumb pudding--he must not have heard.

"Jesus," the banker said.

"He doesn't know," I said, then added, "You shouldn't say that."

"Everyone knows," remarked the lawyer.

"What?" the new guy asked. "What? No one talks to me in here."

Frank said, "Yes, I'm a vegetarian."

"Religious reasons?" the new guy wanted to know. The lawyer laughed, and Frank answered, "In a way, yes."

"Tell him, Frank." (That was the lawyer.)

"What?" (That was Chuck, the new guy, not letting up.)

"There's a story behind why Frank doesn't eat," I told him. "Meat, that is."

"Oh, yeah?"

"But," I cautioned, "You may not want to hear it."

"No, tell me. Why wouldn't I?" Chuck asked, then said, "You four don't look like everybody else in here."

Chuck had a Southern accent and a kind face, and I wondered what he'd done that was so bad he belonged in here with the rest of us sinners.

"That's because we're different," said the banker.

At this point Frank stepped in and took over--loudly. "No, you're not," he said. "You're all just like everybody else. It's me he's talking about. I'm the only one who's different." Frank looked at Chuck then, and must have judged that the kid was worth something. "If you really want to know, I don't mind telling you. These guys have heard it all before, but they'll listen. And they'll keep me in line if I start getting too glib or disrespectful about what happened. Because it's a tawdry thing what I did. Terrible and inhuman and stupid. And no one's fault but my own. But it is worth telling, I think. And it might even help you. If you're sure."

I wondered if at that moment the new guy didn't realize how big the can of worms he'd just opened was. But he couldn't turn back, not anymore, and he knew that. So Chuck, the poor sap, said, "Yeah, I am."

"Well, then," Frank began, "This is a story about hunger..."

* * *

This is a story about hunger and appetite and desire, all of which are really the same thing. What you have to understand is that we were all lacking. Each one of us was incomplete in some way or other. The sum of us, after a moral addition, always came up short.

Of course, I didn't know that about the others at first. Or, for that matter, about myself. And no one--I don't care what the papers wrote about us, what the police eventually claimed--no one would have been able to guess how far we'd go, how complete our degeneration would ultimately be, by just looking at us. But the potential was there from the beginning. Hidden maybe, like a trapdoor spider ready to pounce beneath the sand, but existing. You don't do what we did unless the need is there. The want, the gap.

There were four of us.

Brian Lamb was from a small town somewhere out west. He used to joke about it being an in-bred, close-minded backwater he'd barely escaped, the high school football team on which he played its emotional and social center. And from what he told me about his friends, his family, the things they thought and believed, how many of his ex-girlfriends were pregnant and married or pregnant and not married, Brian's escape was almost a literal one, into the more understanding and tolerant world of academics. College first. Then when I met him, graduate school. He still had most of his football player's physique, wide shoulders and thick arms. He wasn't the dumbest of the four, not really, just the most hesitant. Of course, he passed his days in a constant haze of drugs, so maybe that was part of it. Still, considering the life he left behind, I wonder if Brian didn't think himself a kind of usurper. The belief that he didn't belong at Georgetown, that he shouldn't have

been there in the first place, feeding his need to connect. Prodding him to join our group, no matter what we demanded.

He's dead now and we are--.

... "Are you sure this is cooked?" Brian asked, looking from his plate heaped with food towards mine. Eric was not amused and said, "Just eat it!"...

...are all to blame.

Jennifer Carter surprised me more than anyone else. Of the four, she seemed the most stable and complete. There was nothing in her behavior to indicate--.

No, that's not true. I wouldn't have been so attracted to her if I hadn't seen it. The streak that ran through her, the way her heart thumped so loudly you could hear it from across the room whenever she got angry. What she did to Doug. Her blood and bile practically bubbling over. And she wasn't some kind of Patty Hearst figure, either. That definitely wasn't it. And, oh boy, she--.

...she very casually asked, "Can I have the mayonnaise?" I looked at her blankly, blinked, and handed the jar...

...she was attractive. Slim, brown hair, blue eyes, perfect breasts... Although, you know--from the first I never thought her look suited her. It would've been more appropriate if she'd swerved towards extremes. Short, electric hair and pierced body parts. A reputation to match.

These days, I alternately hate her more than anyone else, blame her (irrationally, I admit) for everything, or take full responsibility for her corruption. Maybe if she hadn't been so desperate everything would've ended differently.

Third was Eric Zann, who--.

... "Who's gonna be first?" Eric demanded and, when no one spoke up, answered his own question. "Fine. I will. I'm not afraid"...

...who is--.

Jeez, I just don't know. How do you summarize the unintelligible, the unspeakable? Eric Zann, whose last name had nothing whatsoever to do with his first. That's not very revealing, I know, but--.

Okay. He was older than the rest of us. Twenty-seven years to my twenty-two, Jennifer and Brian's twenty-three. And amazingly handsome. Tall and dark-haired, he was lean, a thin layer of muscle stretched over his skeleton, covered by slightly olive-colored skin. Green eyes. He'd spent, I learned one night (the night, in fact, we saw *Rosemary's Baby*), a year or so modeling in Germany when he was twenty-one. Print work. Eric didn't particularly like people asking him about that time in his life, which was strange, since one wall of his apartment was completely covered with a collage of his old magazine ads and layouts. And when he stared at the glossy pages, when he stared at them and touched his torso (which he did whenever he'd had even some minor amount to drink), what could you do but ask?

During one of her infrequent moments of pretentiousness, Jennifer once compared Eric to Dorian Gray from the book by Oscar Wilde. Because of his looks and the way he carried himself, I guess. And although I teased Jennifer about it at the time, I eventually came to realize how appropriate her comparison actually was. A smooth and unblemished surface hiding any and all traces of the corruption, the decay, beneath it. Of course, sometimes even Eric's outward appearance reflected his internal paucity, his degenerative unhealthiness. However, I didn't see it plainly until after--.

...after that first bite, Jennifer very stupidly said, "You know, this isn't bad. It tastes like...um..." She floundered. Trying to make a joke, I said, "Chicken?" Jennifer and Brian smiled and did their best not to laugh, but couldn't help it. Eric got angry...

...after we'd been stopped by the police.

But he didn't just have good looks, a "hot body." No, there was more to Eric than that. There was also his persuasive personality, his rhetoric, his intelligence. Eric was particularly adept at endearing himself to you and you to him. He made himself indispensable to us, our group. Which is funny, since we ultimately all proved to be interchangeable. Even disposable. He could have done anything he wanted. Which, I suppose, he did. And made us, too.

I was the fourth. And I have to be the one who now shoulders most of the responsibility. I was the lead pawn. Eric's--maybe--unknowing right-hand-man. I personally have to account for two people's lives, their blood staining my hands forever. I wrote letters of apology to their respective families. Imagine me, after all I'd done, craving these people's forgiveness. Stupidly, I involved the others. Not Brian and Jennifer, no. I mean The Innocents. The Normal Ones. When I think what might've happened to them if...

I believe in God again. Not Eric's pagan, brutal monster, but the God of my childhood. The reproaching, white-bearded God The Father my parents threatened me with whenever I did anything wrong.

I wore glasses back then. And my hair was thicker and darker and longer. Eric and I looked a lot alike. We could've been brothers. And, in a way, were.

I was afraid of being alone with my thoughts. I always used to walk around with my head sandwiched between headphones blasting music. A good chunk of that time, I hated myself. (I can't explain why, except that it had to do with my feeling directionless, that everything I did was meaningless.)

There were others--Jackie, Fiona, Jordan, Georgie, Pickman--but they're secondary. They walked the same jungle we did, feet squishing through ankle-deep mud, totally oblivious to the far-off drums beating beneath Washington's streets, mistaking them for subway trains or sewer blasting. Unaware and therefore not answering the call we four--or, at least, our darker selves, our savage selves--had

been apparently waiting for all our lives, judging from the readiness with which we shrugged off our genteel shells. And by the fervor with which we gave in to the rumblings I still hear even today sometimes...

This is the story about me and the hunger I felt...

We were four first-year English graduate students who for various reasons stood apart from the rest of our classmates. Jennifer wanted to be an artist, a painter, and was getting her degree in order to please her parents and have something to fall back on if her oil painting went wrong. (Pursuing fame on an empty stomach wasn't an appetizing enough proposition for her.) Which, when I met her, it had. She'd been totally blocked those first months and, when not in class frantically sketching out possible compositions, spent hours sitting in front of empty, white canvases, waiting for inspiration that never came and the release from having to try that darkness brought. She did go to some parties occasionally, but only out of boredom and not from any real desire to meet people. Brian, meantime, didn't even do that. He lived further from campus than anyone else in the program and wouldn't make appearances unless absolutely necessary.

I became friends with Brian and Jennifer over the corpses of three murdered people and a dog.

Okay, Brian first.

We were both in Peter Pickman's Joseph Conrad class. (Now I might be getting ahead of myself here, but you should know that even though Pickman hated me and was doing his absolute best to flunk me, I had to stay in his seminar because the creative thesis I was working on at the time was to have been Kurtz's version--in his own words, not Marlow's--of his trip down the Congo, a sort of reinvention of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.) Anyway, one day after Pickman's class, Brian asked me for drinks to the Brickskeller, a dark, smoky pub close to his apartment. After two pitchers of watery beer, we went to his place and smoked up.

Now I'd done some pot as an undergraduate, but not a lot, and it quickly became apparent that Brian was much more of an expert than I'd ever be. We had I don't know how many joints, and I wondered how long Brian had been smoking.

"Did you start in college?" I asked him.

"High school," Brian said. "When I was thirteen. I spent a summer with my Uncle Dennis on his farm. His son Marc, my cousin, was always getting high."

I said, "Fun," but Brian shook his head.

"Dennis was an alcoholic and beat Marc. He never laid a hand on me, but every day, each morning, there were new bruises and cuts on Marc's face, his back. And one day Uncle Dennis shot Rufus dead. Right in front of me." He stopped for a second. "Oh, Rufus was my dog. A big, black giant schnauzer."

"Jesus, Brian, that's--," I began, but started laughing instead, then stopped myself. I was high. "I'm sorry. That's fucking terrible."

"We got him back, though," Brian said, resting his elbows on the futon behind him. Now almost completely flat on his back and far from the room's solitary source of light, a shadeless lamp, Brian was lost in a pool of darkness. His face, a shadow. The joint, a pin-point of red light.

We both smoked on.

"It was mainly Marc's idea," Brian's voice said. "I mean, it was totally his idea. I just went along with it."

"What?"

"After Rufus was killed, Marc and I buried him in a cornfield... Five days later, we dug him up. He was just this clump of matted fur and blood and mud and...rotting flesh and maggots. One side of him was alive with the white things. We put his...remains in a plastic bag and took them home." Brian exhaled, and blue smoke curled up around the black space of his face. "Marc's mother didn't

spend summers on the farm. We were in charge of the cooking. It was Marc's idea."

I leaned forward and tried to make out where in the murk Brian must've been. If what he was saying..."What was?" I heard myself ask. I thought: *This is just like, uh, Pet Semetary.*

"We cooked him up. Rufus, I mean. We cooked him up and fed him to Dennis. Mixed the maggots with rice and white corn and served the stinking dead thing in a stew. Marc and I sat at the table with him."

No, I thought. *No way. I don't--*. "Didn't he--? I mean, couldn't he--?"

Brian shook his head. "Dennis was drunk, he didn't taste anything funny. He ate the whole thing while we sat there shaking, trying not to laugh or scream.

"That night he got sick. Throwing up and his stomach cramping."

"Wow," I said.

Brian nodded. "Yeah, but he figured out what we'd done the next morning."

"How?"

Brian shrugged. "Dennis was a suspicious bastard. He looked around, found some hair and bone we'd stupidly left in a trashcan beneath the kitchen sink. He guessed what he must've eaten and beat Marc black and blue. Then he sent me home. But it was worth it."

I tried then to imagine what Brian's summer with his uncle must have been like. Sustained terror for three months while he and his cousin were victims of daily scenarios which included physical beatings and mental abuse and being subjected to an alcoholic's rampages. With surprising ease, I projected what Brian's state of mind and his emotions leading up to and including the Rufus Dinner must have been like onto myself. Projected and almost totally justified them. Almost, but not quite because there were still two or three planks of the wooden bridge missing. There was, at this point, still a gap over the abyss I

couldn't jump. I'd looked into that pit before (with Jody, for instance) and I would again very soon, but I didn't have the guts, the insides, yet to do anything about the leap of conscience, of morality, required. So I didn't say anything. I just looked to where Brian should have been. He finished his joint and moved forward, back into the light.

"He was Marc's father," he said. "It was his idea."

The abyss loomed. Trying to shrink it, I said, "But you went along with it."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because..."

"Why?"

"Because Marc was my friend."

I nodded.

"And because there was nothing better to do."

I nodded again.

"And..."

"What?"

"Because I wanted to."

Yes, I thought. And it really was that simple. Unless someone is threatening you, unless you're going to die if you don't comply, you don't just do something--anything like that, at least--unless you really want to. And then, if it's really awful, really unthinkable, it stops being a want and starts being a need. But I don't want to get into that just yet.

After he'd finished telling me about Rufus, I left. We were friends then, the rest would soon follow. Walking back to my apartment through the night, I replayed what we'd talked about. What Brian had been through, what he'd done and why, occupied my thoughts. I realize now that it was all there in Brian's

words. His motivations, his processes, his character. Allowing Marc to influence him, insisting it was his cousin's idea. That was Brian's weakness. He lacked restraint insofar as that he always chose the smoothest path, always looked for the point of least resistance. *Like a tree swayed by the wind*, I thought. I'd just re-read that passage from *Heart of Darkness*. He wanted, I guess, to be liked. We--.

We all did.

That's why I told Jennifer about Jody. Because I wanted her to like me, and not just as a friend. I wanted to sleep with her so badly I found myself telling her the most secret, personal parts of my life. We were walking home from the Halloween party Jackie had given for all the graduate students in the English department, I remember. We'd dressed up and gone reluctantly, and I'd spent most of the evening drinking other people's wine and getting high. I met Eric that night. By then, he'd already more than ingratiated himself to Brian and Jennifer. He'd already chosen them, I mean.

Eric offered me a beer, and I gratefully accepted it. We spent a good hour alone, introducing ourselves and taking those first wobbly steps towards getting to know one another. We were in Jackie's food pantry, away from the rest of the party, a grinning jack o' lantern the inky room's only light. Eventually, Eric excused himself--after deciding we'd meet the following week for coffee or a movie--and I found Jennifer, and we left. Walking her home through the cold night (there was a black rain was falling), she asked me if I'd ever been in love. I told her I had. I told her about Jody Arlington.

"I met her my last year at NYU. She supported me in everything I did. My writing, the comics I used to draw (and still do sometimes), everything. She was fantastic and, uh, fascinating. You know how some people are magnetic and compelling? Well, that was Jody."

Jennifer asked me to explain what I meant, and I said, "In some ways, she was a total mystery to me, which I liked. And which turned me on. And there was also something...dangerous about her, okay? Something weird. Like she never talked about her parents, her family, where she came from, her past, anything like that. Never. Until the night I finally asked her point-blank, and she told me about the... Well, about the murders."

"What murders?" Jennifer asked.

By this point, we were in a butcher shop's doorway, under its awning, waiting out the worst of the rain. I went on, "She had an older brother and a younger sister. Billy and Becky Gilly. That was her real last name, not Arlington. When Jody was sixteen and Billy was eighteen, he murdered their parents and Becky."

"God," Jennifer said, "How?"

I closed my eyes. It was a horrible thing to think of. "With a baseball bat. He beat his parents and eleven-year-old sister to death with a baseball bat."

"W-why?"

"Billy just snapped. That night, after eighteen years of abuse, sexual and physical, yes, but mostly emotional, he went berserk and turned murderous."

"Why didn't he kill Jody?" she asked, disturbed.

I held up a finger. There was the rub. "Jody heard the sounds, the screams coming from her parents' room, and climbed out her bedroom window," I said, then added, "At least that's what she said."

"That's--God--terrible," Jennifer said.

I wasn't finished yet. I said, "After Jody told me all that, I...I did some checking."

"What, you didn't believe her?" Jennifer wanted to know.

"No, no, I did. I just had to make sure she wasn't..." I paused.

The truth, Frank

"No, not a hundred percent. So I got hold of newspaper articles, court transcripts that had been made public, whatever I could track down. I found most of the stuff in an expanding folder, a sort of scrapbook Jody kept hidden behind books on a shelf."

"You went through her things?" Jennifer asked, and I might have been a little embarrassed if I hadn't seen what Jennifer'd just done to Fiona.

"I had to," I said. "And what I found out was that what Jody had almost been tried as an accessory to murder. Everyone in her town had thought she'd helped him. And that that was why she was still alive."

Jennifer seemed confused, looked out at the rain-slick street (there weren't any cars on the usually busy road), and said, "But she wasn't tried. She was innocent, right?"

My answer, my explanation, which I may not have worded as carefully as I do now, gives a good chunk of everything away. It more than hints at "the why." Although he didn't yet know it, Eric had chosen incredibly well. I was a perfect addition to his team of cripples. Sitting there, huddled with Jennifer against the rain, I didn't want to freak her out further, but I was too tired to lie. I spoke slowly, choosing my words carefully. It must have sounded unnatural.

"Her guilt or innocence were, well, moot," I said. "I became pretty much obsessed with the possibility of what Jody might have done. Oh, I was scared that she might've, yes, that was certainly a part of it, but more than that I was interested in the emotions she surely experienced. The despair felt throughout her childhood, leading up to the crime. The thrill, the rush, as she stood over them, bat in hand, the pounding." I stopped for a minute. "If she did help him, I mean. Do you--?"

"Yes, I think," Jennifer said, still staring out into the darkness. "You were jealous of her?"

I wondered if it was that simple. *Yes.*

"In a way, yeah, I was. My father, my parents, have never been particularly cruel or kind to me. But even if they were, I doubt I'd ever..." I hesitated, how could I say this without sounding degenerate? "I'd never do anything so drastic or dramatic or even so passionate to them. I don't think I'd have it in me. The potential for violence, I'm saying. Imagine what must have been driving her. Imagine the motives behind the murders."

Jennifer still wasn't getting it. "But she didn't murder them. Or most likely she didn't."

I moved closer then, as if being nearer to her would affect her understanding of what I was trying to articulate. "Yeah, but she *might've*. And she *may've*, there's no way of being absolutely sure. Knowing that, knowing Jody, I mean, made me feel static. Almost sedentary. Like--she's done things. Survived slaughters." I sighed. This was coming out all wrong. "I'm over-simplifying things. Basically, it's that I've never felt any one thing as intensely as Jody has. And yes, I loved her. Really, really loved her."

"What you're saying is--?"

"Yes, I'm jealous of her. Maybe even of her brother a little," I admitted.

"What finally happened?"

"With Jody, you mean?"

Jennifer nodded, and I sighed.

"I guess I became more interested with the suggestion of violence in her, the possible motive she had, and the crime she maybe committed, than with the actual person. Eventually, she got tired of me fixating on it, always asking about the night her family was murdered. We broke up. I mean, she broke up with me. It was--."

...it was the best sex I'd ever had. Almost the only sex I'd ever had...

"...was a devastating blow."

"Well," Jennifer said.

By then, the rain had let up some, and I walked Jennifer the rest of the way home. She invited me up to her apartment, and I went--nervously. I, uh, always got a bit panicky at the start of a new--new sexual--relationship. Always, even though I knew that those anxieties or whatever were irrational fears and insecurities and uncertainties and issues of control going back to my childhood and, I guess, to the way my parents treated me. At least usually. But this time with Jennifer was different. She got angry at my fumbblings and yanked off her blouse, then my pants. She pulled me down on top of her and we fucked. Oh, I want to say we made love or had sex, but it was a violent, almost animal act. And afterwards, the dread I felt lying next to her in the darkness seemed not just psychological, but tangible. Without thinking about it, I suddenly said, "Jennifer, at the party, I-I saw you and..." Jennifer touched my cheek. "And what, Frank?" she asked, but I couldn't say it, Fiona's name or what I'd seen. I wish now that I had. In any case, we fell asleep naked, belly to belly, and I had a dream about decapitated heads. Maybe because I had Kurtz and Marlow on the brain. Or maybe something in Jennifer triggered the image, I don't know.

The next morning when I woke up it was still raining. The almost-freezing drops were coming down hard and had started to strip the trees around Georgetown's campus of their red and brown leaves. I left Jennifer's and bumped into Eric on my way home. We went for a long walk. I had thought it an amazing coincidence at the time, but now know better.

My friendship with him wasn't cued by a single conversation or event the way mine and Brian's or mine and Jennifer's had been. Rather, it developed steadily (but quickly), over a few well-orchestrated meetings. For coffee or beer or trips to the movie theater near campus. (It turned out that, like me, Eric was a big horror movie fan--or so he claimed.) Our relationship was prodded forward with

Carefully-worded questions and subtly drawn-out confessions. Our intimacy matured rapidly. Eric had planned it all in advance, you see. As I've told you, by Jackie's Halloween party, he, Brian, and Jennifer were already close friends. For weeks, Jen and Brian had been telling me about Eric Zann, this great guy I had to meet, that I'd love him. "He's even writing a book," Jennifer said, but when I asked her what about, she didn't know.

I was the third and last person Eric needed.

* * *

"...Eric needed," Frank said. "Anyway, I--."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. You've left a lot out so far, Frank," the banker interrupted. "Like what Fiona did at the Halloween party. It's one of my favorite parts."

"He doesn't need to know that," I said, meaning the new kid.

"No, he's right," Frank said. He broke off a corner of toast and ate it. "But it wasn't so much what Fiona did, it was more what Jennifer did to Fiona while she was passed out."

"Fiona?" Chuck asked.

"Fiona Griddle was one of my other friends in the English department. She wasn't one of the four. She just happened to be in the way of the darkness when it rolled in and blanketed Georgetown. That sounds melodramatic, and I'm sorry, but it's exactly what happened.

"Anyway, Fiona got hammered at this Halloween party. While we were talking, she just started heaving, throwing up red chunks of vegetable matter (Fiona was a vegetarian) that looked like meat. She went almost completely limp, and I had to practically carry her into Jackie's bedroom. I put her down on Jackie's bed and held her head over a trashcan. She emptied the rest of her stomach into it." Frank shuddered. "Disgusting."

"I wiped Fiona's face up with a washcloth from the bathroom and gently set her head down against Jackie's pillows. Then I went back to the party.

"When I came back later to check on her (I was afraid Fiona might drown in a pool of her own vomit like that...whoever it was), Jennifer was in the room. Carefully and quietly, I watched what was about to happen through a thin sliver, the crack between door and frame.

"Cat-like, Jennifer eased herself onto the bed and over Fiona's body. She started to caress her. Fiona's face first, as if Jennifer were cleaning up some last trace of vomit I'd missed. It seemed an innocent gesture, one born out of concern for a friend who's had too much to drink. I was momentarily touched, but then remembered: *Jennifer has no friends besides Eric and Brian*. She moved down to Fiona's neck, kissing it, a backwards glance thrown over her shoulder to confirm that the bedroom door was closed. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I narrowed the crack even more and bit my lip. Just like they do in the movies. I said to myself: *If I'm caught...* Jennifer curved her body—her upper-body, I mean—down towards Fiona's and began rubbing up against it in small circles, both sets of breasts kneading. It was exciting, I admit that. Jennifer kissing Fiona's neck, her lips, grinding her body against Fiona's, carefully so as to not wake her. What I'm saying is...I did get hard. I was enjoying it. Until, that is, Jennifer's hand made its way down past Fiona's waist and slipped in between her legs.

"My excitement gave way to outrage. Directed at first towards Jennifer, of course, that she would take advantage of Fiona, of anyone for that matter, while they were unconscious and helpless. And outrage and disgust towards myself, that I was excited, and that I wasn't doing anything to stop what I was seeing. These feelings in turn gave way again to excitement, then flip-flopped back. Outrage, excitement, disgust, thrill, and so on. I wondered how long the show would go on,

how much Jennifer would violate..." Frank's voice trailed off and Chuck asked, "God, how far did she get?"

"I love that part," said the banker.

"Not much beyond what I've told you," Frank said. "She was interrupted, but not caught, before things got much worse."

The lawyer spoke up, the first time in awhile. "Don't forget Georgie."

A kind of self-loathing and despair came into Frank's voice then. He said, "Georgie wasn't a part of it, not at first. I don't want to talk about her until it's absolutely necessary." He turned back to the new guy and explained, "Georgie's my younger sister. She was a freshman at Georgetown when I—.

"When it happened. She was in Phys. Ed. I saw her about once a week and whenever she got into trouble and needed someone to bail her out. She has nothing to do with what happened to us. Georgie had no idea what I was going through."

"What exactly happened? I still don't know," the new guy said.

So Frank took a deep breath and resumed his story, and one more of the bulbs above us seemed to burn itself out. "Time passed..."

* * *

Time passed, and late, stifling summer, which had greeted me when I first arrived in Washington, gave way to the milder days of autumn. Then, during November's first days, we enjoyed a brief and almost hot Indian summer. This was about the time I gave my presentation in Pickman's class, right before the weather turned decisively wet, cold, and dark, the sun always hidden behind a gray blanket of clouds. Eventually, during the weeks just before Thanksgiving, it even snowed.

All the specific events I've described so far (Jackie's party, sleeping with Jennifer, becoming friends with Brian and Eric), all these incidents blended into the daily activities of my first term as a graduate student and breezed by with no

significance—at the time, I mean—whatsoever. I kept busy, trying to lose myself in whichever novelties came my way. I was constantly struggling to keep boredom (and the depression that unavoidably followed it) at bay. Luckily, I had plenty of distractions to occupy my thoughts and hands.

There was Washington to explore, for one. In many ways, the city was a great unknown to me. A map full of uncharted territories. Oh, I'd visited D.C. before, of course, but never extensively, and never without my parents or someone else in charge to keep tabs on my whereabouts. My father and older brother had both gone to Georgetown before me, you see, and I often imagined myself walking the same streets they had years earlier. Frequenting the same bars, shopping in the same stores, eating at the same restaurants... That always made me feel like a fake. A fraud somehow. They were both great successes by the time I got to Georgetown, and the shadows they cast were long ones. I imagined them laughing at me, at what I liked to do, what I thought was important.

Those were some of my saddest moments, my darkest hours. Whenever I pictured myself as the third in a line of men who'd walked the same trail, but the only one who'd stumbled and fallen and failed.

But that was only part of it. (The part of it that filled me with self-loathing and a dark depression.) It was also a thrilling time. On every street and around every corner, new experiences were waiting for me whenever I went out with my three friends on some nocturnal wandering to an out-of-the-way club or bar. New experiences, and new terrors. Late one November night, for instance, Jennifer, Brian, Eric, and I were walking back from the Insect Club, which was located at the exact point where a so-so neighborhood gave way to a bad one, and we happened across an arm. A human arm, I mean, ripped from someone's shoulder and still bleeding. We were terrified. All of us, even Eric a little. (Well, maybe not Eric.) We'd never seen anything like that. A dead body is one thing, but a

dismembered limb? I mean, where was the torso? So terrified, yes, but also excited. At NYU, where I'd gotten my undergraduate degree, I'd lived in a structured cocoon--classes every day, extra-curriculars in the evenings, a group of friends to protect me at night. At Georgetown, all that had collapsed. I had my sister, the play, the comics I wrote and drew, but I didn't feel like I really belonged to anything, didn't have that sense of community.

That is, until after Halloween, the night Jennifer and I became a couple, and I joined a daisy chain that now suddenly consisted of me, Jennifer, Brian, and, as its origin point, Eric. We became fast friends. We discovered we had more in common than anyone would have originally thought. I was attracted to them, that was the root of the trouble. And not just to Jennifer, to all of them--what they thought and did and had done. And there was nobody else around. I mean, I liked my other classmates and friends fine, but I'd reached a point in my life where my imaginings about making a difference and counting for something weren't enough. Where I needed a new kind of stimulation. Action and experimentation, too. And the four of us, alone with our individual weaknesses, became daily more like accomplices, a cabal or secret club, than devoted friends.

Two incidents to show you what it was like. The first was nothing, one in a long line of events that made me smile and think I was happy. Not because I had as many friends as when I'd been at NYU, no, but because I had closer ones, better ones, people who really got my juices flowing.

The second one was, well, not nothing.

Okay, so it was about mid-term and we were all swamped. Eric and Jennifer were teaching assistants and both had a seemingly endless stack of undergraduate papers to mark. Brian and I, meanwhile, had to turn in the first of two research papers Pickman's Conrad seminar demanded. Basically, it was

marking, writing, researching, re-writing, and more writing. The exciting life of a graduate student. This--THIS--was why I'd come to Georgetown.

Amidst all that mess, the English Chair, God bless 'er, decided to schedule a departmental wine and cheese for Marie Dickens, a professor who'd been at Georgetown since the forties and was now finally retiring. Attendance for faculty and graduate students was not mandatory, but STRONGLY ENCOURAGED. (Or so the memo I got in my mailbox read.) Eric, Brian, Jennifer, and I met at the Brickskeller, which had developed into one of our favorite watering holes, and debated. Should we go? Shouldn't we? "We have to," Brian said, "She's my advisor." We all agreed with him grudgingly (department politics, you know), and Eric even suggested an experiment. "We should try making new friends," he said.

Jennifer: "What do you mean?"

Eric: "I mean other people besides us four."

All right, it was decided. Not only would we go to the wine and cheese, we would also (brace yourselves) mingle.

The appointed day finally arrived, and we went, descending on the English department's lounge together, then immediately splitting up to make nice with our other colleagues. Divide and conquer, as it were.

How did it go? Well, Fiona and Jackie were there, and as always were a joy to talk to. As for the rest... Well, there was Richard Papen from California, who told me about his unrequited love for another graduate student named Camilla, who wouldn't give him the digital time of day. And there was Tyne Chickani, also from California, who two years before had done a nude scene on an adult HBO comedy series and who hadn't yet realized her fifteen minutes of fame, that quick flash, were up. Then there was Sean Bateman, a spoiled brat from Boston who spent most of the night on a cellular phone, talking to someone named Patrick, who kept repeating the phrase "She's not moving, she's not moving" over and over

again... Derek Gobart was an extremely effeminate homosexual whose sole purpose in life seemed to be figuring out who else in the department might be gay. He wanted to know if I'd heard anything about this one particularly handsome man. (He was, of course, referring to Eric.) Sandy Shippers was a short, shrewy woman who kept going on about the "buckets of money" Georgetown was paying her to study there. Ralph Golding was in a fraternity and had just recently returned, tanned and smug, from a "wild" week-long vacation on some tropical island. And so on and so forth and fill in the blanks.

In short, my classmates were for the most part an uninteresting (if I've made this handful sound even half-amusing, then it is a credit to my words, not their persons), self-absorbed, boorish, hyper-academic, listless, vain, pretentious, over-privileged bunch. Of course, take all this with a grain of salt...

The evening wore on, I ate cheese and drank wine, the Chair said some nice things, Marie Dickens said some incomprehensible ones (her age was showing), and the crowd eventually started to thin out. By ten o' clock, I found myself in one of the lounge's corners, sitting on a moth-eaten, termite-riddled couch, talking with Eric, Brian, and Jennifer, all of whom had responded to the English department's various teachers and students in much the way I had--with sentiments ranging from mild distaste to utter loathing. Brian had pilfered a bottle of wine from the refreshment table, and we four passed it among us. Fueled by the vulgar red wine, our laughter becoming more spontaneous, our biting remarks (about the idiotic, semi-retarded grad student Tim Coney, who hit on Jennifer--and, in the process, pissed me off--incessantly, or about Samantha Dreck, who was methodically fucking her way to the top of the class, and so on) less whispered, until the few other people still in attendance would periodically look over to us and shake their heads in disapproval.

Eventually, we left, an uncharacteristically drunk Eric kissing Marie on the lips (!), and walked downtown towards Dupont Circle, towards the bars and clubs. We stopped outside Club Metropolis and saw that BJORN AGAIN, an ABBA cover band, was playing there. "Oh, I love ABBA," Jennifer said, "We have to!"

"I do, too," I said, and we went in.

Without a doubt, it was the best concert I'd ever been to. Really, the only one I'd ever been to. Beer and drinks were annoyingly expensive, but BJORN AGAIN, a camp scream, more than justified the booze's inflated cost. They weren't identical to ABBA, but suggested the group's essence perfectly (you should have seen the crowd go ape when BJORN AGAIN came out for an encore and played "Dancing Queen"), and we spent the rest of the evening hooting, laughing, and dancing. Having fun, is what I'm saying. We even managed to close the club, Brian and Eric taking one cab at almost four in the morning, Jennifer and I another to her place, where we fell asleep on the couch, holding each other during a valiant, albeit misguided, attempt to watch an old, black-and-white horror movie (the one that would in a few weeks inspire my Pickman presentation) from the fifties on the Late-Late Show.

The next morning: did it bother me that I wasn't exactly raving about or drooling over the other people in my department? No, I decided, because Jennifer and Eric and Brian were enough.

So: Incident Number Two. A much darker, more telling night that stands out from my mind's landscape of those first few months.

It was a Saturday, I remember, and Brian and I had been in the library researching since nine that morning. (I used to go to the library every Saturday religiously. Usually with Brian, hardly ever with Eric or Jennifer.) We were starving. Neither one of us had had breakfast and we hadn't yet broken for lunch, when--at around three in the afternoon--Eric and Jennifer tracked us down to the

library's fifth floor and demanded we leave immediately. Because, they explained, the four of us were going on a road trip. I said that first things were first, that Brian and I needed to get something to eat before we passed out. Eric seemed genuinely pleased that we were hungry and insisted (now with renewed vigor) that we come with them instantly, no questions asked. I wavered, but Jennifer kissed me and what could I do but agree?

She drove the car they'd rented. Despite our begging, neither she nor Eric would tell us where we were going. He barked orders continuously, demanding Jennifer take the next left, telling Brian to shut up, wanting me to look out for this one particular dirt road that cut through the endless fields of corn running past the car's windows. (As if I could.) I was ravenous and light-headed. Hours, it seemed, slipped by. Brian, thankfully prepared as always, rolled a fat joint and offered it around.

"No thanks," Eric said, "But you and Frank go ahead."

He didn't include Jennifer, and I wondered why, but didn't mention it. (I figured it out later. He wanted us primed, the asshole. Tenderized, if you will. But not her. She didn't--wouldn't--need incentives or stimulants. She was as bad as Eric when...)

I got furious. Lamely, I slammed my fist into Jennifer's seat in front of me.

"Hey," she said.

"Some food better fucking well be part of this master plan of yours," I said.

The sun was suddenly low in the sky, the pale yellow it had been that morning almost magically darkened to a deep orange. Nearly red. The corn, already harvested, were just brown stalks, empty husks, blowing and rippling in the unnaturally cold wind. I couldn't get over how hungry I was. The pot and the countryside's sameness--we'd driven almost two hours by this point--lulled me into an agitated sleep. (Brian's drugs helped some, too, no doubt.)

When I woke up later, it was night and I'd lost all sense of time. We were still driving, and Brian had fallen asleep next to me. Again, I tried to piece together what Eric and Jennifer might be up to, and why I'd let myself get dragged in so easily. I'd behaved like a rodent lulled and lured by smelly cheese. (Oh, that's a terrible simile and I apologize.) I wondered what my two friends had discussed while Brian and I were out cold.

"This is absurd," I said suddenly, "Where the fuck are we going?"

Jennifer answered, "Shhhh, you'll wake Brian."

"Too late," he said, stirring into consciousness.

We were bouncing along a lonely dirt road, the car's headlights picking out the occasional clump of tall grass or faded signpost from a sea of pitch.

Eric abruptly announced, "We're here," and Jennifer slammed on the breaks. We screeched to a halt, kicking up a cloud of dust. Slowly, my legs cramped and half-asleep, I stepped out of the car.

"What is this place?" Brian asked.

It was a starless, moonless night. Jennifer said, "A farm," and clicked on a flashlight. She told Brian and me to wait while she and Eric got some things ready. They dug around in the car's trunk. I was still starved and high and half-asleep, but not so much so that I couldn't recognize what Eric was holding in his hands.

"What are you doing with a--" Brian began.

Eric: "It's for the pig."

"...sledgehammer?" he finished.

"What pig?" I asked, and Jennifer told us to be quiet and wait, the second time in almost as few seconds. She and Eric started walking and soon vanished, were swallowed up by the darkness. They were headed in the direction of a large, vaguely blacker shape that stood against the night sky. *The farmhouse*, I thought, until the smell hit me. Sweet and overripe and fetid. Brian also must've gotten a

whiff--of something he recognized from his days on the farm--because he whispered to me, "Frank, this isn't a farm. It's...a slaughterhouse, I think." Something prodded me then, and I set off after Jennifer and Eric. Slowly, all the while tripping and nearly falling, I made my way towards the building, and, once there, heard voices coming from somewhere inside. It sounded like they were arguing, but their words were muffled and I could only make out little snippets of what they were saying. It was as though the shadows themselves were obscuring their voices.

"...the fucking caretaker's not here..." Eric was saying.

Mumblings. Then: "...way for nothing..." Jennifer. "...something else..."

More silence. More unintelligible mumblings. Finally, Eric: "...better than nothing. A fat..." And Eric again: "...take advantage of this unfortunate accident..."

An involuntary shiver ran through me, and I backed away from them, away from what was without question a slaughterhouse, not understanding anything I'd just heard or that had happened over the last few hours, even contemplating the possibility that I was dreaming it all up. I found my way back to Brian. Not long after that, Jennifer and Eric returned, their bodies pushing through the darkness, their flashlights yellow knives slicing through tar.

Like an extra from some rotten teen horror film (say, *Carrie*), Jennifer led a pig, a sow, stolen out of its pen, past us and into a dense patch of woods behind the slaughterhouse. "Come on," Eric commanded, the sledgehammer still in his hands. And other things, too, a knife, a mesh sack. We followed them into the woods to a small grove, where Jennifer held up a hand for us to stop. She bent down and set up and lit five candles, arranging them in a circle that had already been carved into the dirt and cleared of grass.

"Why are we stealing a pig?" Brian asked.

The already waiting circle. They'd been there before. Jennifer and Eric, I mean. They'd prepared. Eric sighed and said, "We're not just stealing a pig, we're killing and--."

"What?" I asked. Jennifer carefully positioned the sluggish sow in the circle's center.

"And eating it," Eric said, and I shuddered. The car ride, the secrecy, the solemnity, what we were apparently about to do, everything...it was like a ritual. Like some kind of sacrifice. I heard Jennifer say: "On its head. Aim there. Above its neck."

Eric raised the sledgehammer and brought it down on the sow's neck ferociously. Its shrill, incessant squealing, which had been disturbing me because it was surprisingly like a human being's crying, was abruptly cut short. I heard something snap, and blood spurted out, hitting my face, the back of my hands. I didn't say anything. The violence... I was horrified! Everyone was being so goddamn cavalier about this...slaughter. And that's what it was. They SLAUGHTERED it in cold blood.

Eric, holding a knife now, moved in to slit the pig's throat, but Brian stopped him. He said, "No, let me. I've gutted animals before. If you're going to cook one, you..."

Things got confused then. I remember when we eventually told the police about this part of it, there was a lot of disagreement. Eric wasn't with us because his lawyer hadn't shown up yet, but I'm pretty sure Jennifer and I fought. Brian--.

..."Brian had gutted animals before," I was telling the detective. "On his uncle's farm. I know because Brian later told me that he and Eric had discussed the summers he'd spent with his uncle and cousin. "

The detective asked: "What does this have to do with anything?"

"Don't you see?" I looked at Jennifer to see if she would challenge me. "Of course Eric must have know that. He must have known Brian had seen—done—things like that to animals before. He guessed that Brian would want to be a part of that, that he wouldn't be disgusted. He chose Brian maybe even specifically for that. His experience must've counted for something. He chose us all. That day, he wanted us high so that we'd—." I stopped because it must've sounded as if I were raving. I began again, more calmly. I said to the detective: "Brian gutted the pig, the sow. Gutted and cleaned it. RIGHT THERE IN THE FUCKING WOODS! It was all very bizarre. They cooked it on a campfire. Then they ate it. It was almost raw. Red juices, barely a step up from blood, dripped down their chins."

Jennifer spoke up, suddenly and angrily. "You can't do that, Frank. You can't just leave out that you ate it, too."

After a pause, I said simply: "I was hungry. I was...high."

"Come on," Jennifer said.

"But I was hungry. And I was high. And I was...tired." Jennifer looked at me with an expression of such complete contempt I wondered how I'd ever been in love with her. I continued: "You and Eric brought us out there. You planned it from start to finish. It was expected of Brian. And of me. It was our—" I searched for a word, a phrase "...assigned end. There wasn't anything else to do. There wasn't anything I could say."

Jennifer: "You could've said no. You could've waited in the car."

I thought about that, and—at a loss—pleaded with the detective, "I. Was. Starving."

Jennifer stood up then, furious, and yelled at me. "You were turned-on! Christ, Frank, you are such a shirker. You're making yourself out to be this kind of unaware victim. But you're not stupid, Frank, you knew it! You knew it all. And it excited you and you wanted it." She sat back down, almost crying. "You want to do

things, but you don't want any of the responsibility. Any of the blame. You're always talking about weakness. Well, that's your weakness," she finished...

...Brian did the actual cleaning, that's certain. But as for the rest of the evening's particulars, I don't remember them clearly, except that the pig was devoured, and we did more drugs (this time Jennifer and even Eric joined in) and danced, and Jennifer kissed me ferociously. Red pig juices smeared from her face to mine, my lips, my chin. It was phenomenal. And it was horrifying. But more than anything else, it was somehow satisfying.

I should have known then that there was something shockingly, basically wrong with us. And not just inside me and inside the others, but everywhere, the city, our neighborhoods, Georgetown. (The entire city was falling apart. It had recently come out that Washington's beloved mayor was addicted to not only cocaine, but also 14th Street prostitutes, and that he had been stealing city funds to finance these animal addictions.) And that the wrongness, the foulness surrounding us, allowed us four to slip from decency to degeneracy without thinking we were worse than anyone else. It was as though everything around us was suffering from a wasting disease. An illness with symptoms, however dark and obvious, that were easy things to ignore. (Easy, I admit, because I was willing.)

Like the night I saw someone being attacked in Glover Park. That's a good example of what I'm talking about.

Glover Park's a stretch of woods, streams, and fields several miles long that cuts Washington in half. It's broken up into several sections by some of the city's major streets and institutions, Georgetown University, to name one, and some of the embassies. Places where civilization and modernity slice through the centuries of forests and dense trees like they were nothing. Cars zoom by on the black, cracked asphalt and people work in their glass buildings—quite unaware, I imagine, of the rampant wilderness only several hundred feet away from them, where deer

are always being spotted and even once, amazingly, a wolf. Except for the three times a day when Glover Park is flooded with those same people--bankers, secretaries, doctors, teachers, lawyers, and students--who are usually mindless of the park and what it represents. I'm talking about morning before work starts, lunch hour, and dusk right after work, when everyone is out jogging or walking their tamed dogs.

When I first got to Georgetown, I went running late in the day, just after sundown, when the crowds had thinned out. In Washington's heat, it was the only time I could do it, the warm, stale breezes feeling almost nice against my wet skin. Then, during winter, I stopped going regularly because I hated wearing the bulky layers of sweats I needed to keep from freezing. That, and it would start getting dark before five. And, I'd been warned, you weren't supposed to go to the park after dark because it became a dangerous place where people were mugged, gay men cruised for tricks, women were raped, and a gang of kids, of young boys, roamed the landscape looking for thrills and violence. Knowing all this, and imagining most of it to be made-up, I still used to go for long walks through the park's densest forests, along a dirt trail and late at night. I'd wake up next to Jennifer in her bed, filled with an inexplicable sense of revulsion and a burning desire to leave. Glover Park was my place of reprieve, where I wallowed in the anxiety-smothering darkness...

The park's trees shot up past me, and their branches met over my head, forming a tight canopy that blocked out the street lamps and moon. The thickness of the vegetation, even stripped bare during winter, deadened the noise from whatever street I was near, and I could just barely, somewhere on the fringes of my hearing, make out the occasional car zooming by. I might have been anywhere, and anything could have happened.

* * *

"...anything could have happened," Frank said, choking on the last word.

I asked him if he was all right, if maybe he didn't want to call it quits for the day. He shook his head and said that he was fine, that he just needed some water. The new guy handed over his glass without saying a word. Frank took a sip, thanked him, and settled in for more of his story: "Well, the week after we'd, ah, killed the sow..."

* * *

Well, the week after we'd killed the sow, I was walking through my favorite section of the park, one dominated by a wide stream and little waterfalls all along its two mile path, stepping slowly and carefully because I was afraid of tripping in the dark and hurting myself, breaking an arm or leg. Everything was quiet, and I'd almost reached the end of the trail when I made out very faint voices coming from somewhere in the envelope of black around me. Curious, immediately drawn to them, I left the relative safety of the carved path and crossed over into the more concentrated night, straining my eyes as if that would help me hear the voices better. I eased over a fallen tree and then almost had to crawl on all fours because the ground was so broken and uneven. (It was cold enough that each breath I took was a white cloud of fog. Clouds you could barely see it was so dark.) Then, all at once, everything sharpened. The voices became clear and understandable, and bolts of light--coming from one flashlight, then a second, and a third--flared brightly, more or less dispelling the blanket of midnight blue, and I saw what was happening.

A gang of five boys (they couldn't have been teenagers, no way) had surrounded a man and were hitting him with their fists and flashlights and what looked like a crowbar. He was a faggot, I guessed, who'd been cruising the trail for a quick fuck, but had stupidly picked the wrong kid. The boys' flashlights danced wildly, flickering over a wash of red, the man's bloody face, and then disappearing

somewhere in the treetops above us. One of the boys, their leader, had the others drag the man over to a sawed-off tree stump. The man was begging them, literally pleading for his life. Laughing and howling, they pissed on him and asked him if he wanted to suck their cocks. He was dripping red blood and yellow piss when they put his legs, knees turned up, on the stump, so that the leader could jump down on them. He did--hard. I heard one leg, then the other, snap. You understand what they'd done? They'd broken his legs. And for what? What was his crime really?

The leader called for the crowbar, was handed it, and raised it above his head to deliver the killing stroke. I--thinking of Eric and Brian and the pig, no doubt--heard myself yell out: "Stop!"

They froze. I stepped behind a tree just as one of their flashlights illuminated the exact spot where I'd previously stood. "Who's there?" one of them called. There was silence while they looked for me desperately. My coat was black, thank God, and that helped hide me. "Help...me...please..." It must've been the man. Time slowed and even flowed backwards. I thought: *If I'm caught...* I wouldn't be able to outrun them, and in a fight there was no question who'd come out worse. A beam of light passed over the tree that hid me and lingered, then finally moved on. I heard whispering and a muffled sound, a thud, one last kick perhaps, and then the five boys scrambling away. I took off in the other direction, sprinted through the woods towards campus, towards safety, tripped and fell, twisted my ankle, thought of the man's broken legs, incredibly made it to the streets, limped painfully to a pay phone, and called 911. I reported what I'd seen. I didn't give them my name or go back to help the man. Instead, I hobbled back to Jennifer's, afraid I'd be attacked myself, the way a herd's weakest animal is singled out by predators. I woke Jennifer up and told her what had happened. I was close to tears and I wanted her to tell me that I'd done all I could, that there wasn't really

anything more I could've done. Instead, she said, "Coward," and turned away from me, disgusted.

I didn't sleep that night--I was electrified and shaking--and probably would've ended it with Jennifer the next day or week at the latest, if not for what she was about to tell me about Doug, her old boyfriend, and for the things Eric and I were about to do.

It was the next morning and we were in Jennifer's kitchen having breakfast, not looking at or speaking to one another. She was at the table reading the newspaper and I was at the counter toasting some bread. Out it popped. At its sound, she folded the paper and announced, "It didn't make the papers." I spread peanut butter on the blackened toast.

"It only happened four hours ago," I said, "It won't be in the paper until tomorrow. If then even." I got a glass of orange juice and sat with her at the table. "There wasn't anything I could do. You realize that, right?" I asked. Jennifer didn't answer, took a sip from her mug of coffee. I went on, "I saw them break his legs. Have you ever seen that? In person, I'm talking about, in real life. Not during a football game or whatever."

Jennifer looked at me. "You'd be surprised, I think, at what I've seen. And done."

I asked her what she meant.

"Do you remember the first night we..." She let it hang there, between us, and I nodded and said, "Yes."

Jennifer continued, "I asked you if you'd ever been in love before and you told me about Jody."

Cautiously, I said, "Right."

Jennifer took a gulp from my glass. "I thought you'd ask me if I'd ever been in love, but, for whatever reason, you didn't." I wondered what she was getting at.

"I'm sorry," I said, not exactly sure why I was apologizing.

"Don't be an idiot," Jennifer said, "I'm not even sure I would've been able to tell you about it back then. But I can now. And I think you should know."

"What?"

In a flat monotone she told me. Without looking away from me once she told me. Jennifer began: "I've been in love, really in love, once. With this fucker named Doug Bradley. It ended...badly." She took a deep breath. "He made me an emotional cripple, then raped me in a hotel room."

I started, said, "Jesus."

Jennifer shook her head. "No, don't worry, he won't do it again."

"What, you pressed charges?" I asked, and Jennifer almost laughed at that.

"No," she said, "I mean he really won't ever do it again."

"Jen..."

"I told my brother what Doug had done to me, and together we set a trap for him. For Doug. In the woods where he went hunting. (For deer mostly.) We set a bear trap right where I knew Doug would step. It sprang shut on his ankle and broke it. Cut through the flesh and snapped the bone. Then Martin, my brother, Martin and I, we dragged Doug to where he wouldn't be found. It was cold and Doug had lost some blood. I cleaned up the red trail in the snow so no one would find him."

I didn't know what an appropriate response to what I'd just heard was, so I played it safe and kept my mouth shut. It's significant now that what surprised me most about Jennifer's story was that I'd never known she had a brother until that day. Finally, I managed to say "Jesus" again and ask, "Were you wearing masks at least?"

"No. That was the whole point. I wanted him to see what he'd done to me. What he'd made me do to him," Jennifer said. "We left him to die. To freeze to death."

I couldn't believe it. "Jennifer," I said, "What are you--? Did you--?" This time Jennifer did laugh. "No," she explained, "We went back. Much later. Doug had passed out, but he was alive. Weak and hurt, but alive. Martin pissed on him, on his face, to revive him." Immediately, of course, I connected the image in my head with what I'd seen the night before. The boys, like animals, urinating on the queer as if...as if staking out their territory. Jennifer went on, "Your story last night is what made me think of Doug... Anyway, we pried open the trap and dumped him crawling distance from the road. Some trackers found him eventually. He kept his mouth shut. I thought he might try to get back at me, hurt me somehow, but--" she shook her head "...no. We'd shown him what I was capable of when backed into a corner. That, and I think he maybe realized he deserved what he got." She shrugged. "I just heard from someone that his limp is almost totally gone."

Finished, she pushed away from the table and stood up. She held her arms open in a gesture that seemed to demand I judge her. Which, of course, was the one thing I couldn't do. I could--and did--however, put this new piece of the jigsaw puzzle next to the one I'd kept hidden since Halloween night when I saw what she'd done to Fiona. Then I slid those two pieces into the one she and Eric had given me at the slaughterhouse the week before. Slowly, my picture of Jen was nearing completion, and more and more it was reminding me of Jody, and what had attracted me to her. I couldn't blame Jennifer for what she'd done to Doug, but, much as I wanted to, neither could I understand it.

I used to imagine what I'd do if I ever found out something like that, like being raped, had happened to Georgie. Threats to her, to anyone I love, really, terrified me much more than any harm I could imagine for myself, and I knew that

I'd extract a terrible vengeance--that sounds silly, but it's true--on anyone who ever hurt my sister. Or rather, that I'd want to. Whether or not I'd be able to, physically, I mean, was something I couldn't answer.

I don't know, perhaps the response to that as yet unanswerable question is what Jennifer wanted from me after her tale of torture and retribution. She maybe wanted me to say that I approved, that I'd even done something comparable. Unfortunately, it was all I could do to say, "Jennifer, I--I'm--. I have to go to class."

* * *

"...I have to go to class,' I told her," Frank was saying.

"Class?" the new guy interrupted, and across the dining hall some kind of brouhaha erupted. Two of the older inmates--from looking at them you'd guess they'd been inside since the Day One--who were, if you catch my meaning, normally the closest of friends, were suddenly fighting. The bigger one, the black one, had pinned the white one down onto their table. He held the white guy by his throat, and even from where we were sitting I could see the veins on his thick arms bulging. None of the other inmates moved or said anything. Most kept eating. You gotta understand--this was a fairly common sight. Stuff like this was always happening.

The white guy was pinwheeling his arms, desperate to find and grab something, an improvised weapon, the metal trays we ate off, anything. Numbly, I wondered where the guards might be. (Those fiends always seem to vanish whenever their services are actually needed.)

People went insane here. They were close to seventy, those two men, and had likely spent most of those years in tiny cells of their own fashioning, with nothing but their routine and the dark memory of the crimes they'd committed filling their days and nights. They'd looked for something in each other, comfort or

understanding or something like that, and perhaps just today realized that neither of them actually possessed it.

Finally, three guards rushed in and pulled the two gnashing men apart before either was seriously hurt. They hauled them out of the cafeteria, and lunch, although it hadn't been interrupted, not really, resumed. Frank, not missing a beat, picked up right where he'd left off.

"Yes, class," he said. "I mean, I was a graduate student. I mean, I didn't spend all my time socializing with Jennifer, Eric, and Brian. A lot of it, yes, but not all of it. I kept busy. I wrote and drew a comic book with an undergraduate student named Jordan. I hung out with Fiona, saw my sister once a week. I even directed a play."

Chuck: "Really?"

"Yeah. A one-act about a werewolf," Frank said. "Although I have nothing to show for it, for all my work. The comic book lost its funding and was never published. The play's lead, the teenage wolfman, got sick and we had to cancel our performances because I hadn't arranged for an understudy. Everything I had a hand in seemed to crumble like tissue paper in the rain. But, at the time, these activities kept me busy and perhaps kept me from falling sooner than I did."

That made sense, and I nodded.

"And there were, of course, my classes, which, for the most part, were pretty boring and not very challenging. Getting ready for three of my four seminars first term was busy work, done half-asleep or during television commercials. Only my Conrad class with Pickman proved to be engaging and even dangerously beyond me."

"Pickman," the new guy said, as though the word were a marble or mint rolling around in his mouth. "You've mentioned him before. Is he special somehow?"

The lawyer, who was the least friendly of our bunch, smirked smugly. (I couldn't think why he should. Did he think himself better than Frank? Superior? Whole?) Frank, meantime, momentarily faltered, and I wondered again if today might not have been too soon since the last time he'd told his tale. (Not that he had a choice. It was his turn, and that was all there was to it.) Evidently not, as he smiled sadly and said, "Special... Yes, he was," before he fell silent. Then, encouraged that Frank really did want to go but just needed some gentle prodding, I said to him, "Tell the kid about Pickman's head."

The banker agreed, "Yeah, tell him about the freak's scabs."

"Don't call him that. I can call him a freak, but don't you," Frank warned.

The banker clamed up, and Frank turned back to the new guy. "He's right, though. Pickman was a freak. And a cocksucker. And, well, Swedish. He had a special mug he'd bring to every class. On it were written the words: SO SENSITIVE. SO SENSUAL. SO SWEDISH. I don't know why, but I fixated on that damn thing and it nearly drove me insane..."

"Anyhow, he was disgusting. And he was bald, but not naturally so. Jackie once told us that Pickman was such a control freak, such a Type-A personality, that he couldn't stand long or uncombed hair, which was why he was cue ball-bald."

He paused for effect, but Chuck didn't get it. Frank's eyebrows crumpled together at the new guy's slowness, and he finally had to say, "Pickman would shave his head each morning so that he wouldn't have any messy hair to worry about."

"Oh," Chuck said when it finally registered.

"What's more," Frank said, moving along, "He was a shitty shaver and periodically came to class with fresh cuts on his head. I'm not kidding, razor nicks that bled. And sometimes, when he didn't think anyone was watching, he'd pick at the scabs and then..."

"What?" Chuck asked.

"Well, he'd eat them," Frank said. "Look, it's true, I don't care if you believe me or not. He looked like a goddamn bald Jesus Christ. You know, bleeding from an invisible Crown of Thorns, and--."

"You shouldn't say things like that in here," I said, but Frank shrugged my warning off.

"Well, his class was a nightmare. The only things that made it just barely bearable were that both Jackie and Brian were in it with me and that sometimes we smoked up before going...

"You know, I almost left Georgetown because of Pickman. And wouldn't that have been a scream? Escaping my density--remember that from *Back to the Future?*--before it all went wrong. Before we all went south...

"Jackie, who was the only woman in the class, was giving a presentation..."

* * *

Jackie was about to give a presentation (this was about half-way through the semester), and Pickman called the class to order: "Gentlemen. Jackie. Let's dig in. This week we're hearing from--" he checked his tiny black agenda book, which was filled with obsessively/compulsively typed pages "...Jackie, I believe, on Conrad's story 'An Outpost of Progress.' Correct?"

"Right," Jackie answered, "And I'd just like to once again re-affirm that I think this whole idea of having auditors give presentations stinks."

"One second, Jackie," Pickman said. "Before you start, I'd like to confirm that--" again he checked his agenda "...next time--." He stopped. "Oh. We'll be hearing from Mr. West, correct?"

"Yes," I said. "I guess."

Pickman sneered and asked, "Mr. West, should we prepare anything?"

I told him and the class that they should read *Heart of Darkness*. Pickman asked, "You'll be discussing *Heart of Darkness*, is that right?" I told him yes, and he asked if I had a specific topic in mind or not yet. "No, I do," I said, thankful I had prepared something at least. "I think I want to discuss how *Heart of Darkness* is about our primitive instincts and desires. How the whole thing is this, well, journey back to our origins. Back to the primordial ooze, the jungle, the mud, the river. And that Kurtz isn't evil, he's just lacking that maybe moral component that keeps most of us from giving in to our 'monstrous passions.' (I think that's the phrase Conrad uses.) I mean, he commits these 'unspeakable deeds'--which we never really find out what they are, right?--because the jungle judges him and finds him to be empty." I paused. "I think." I paused again. "Then I want to maybe compare *Heart of Darkness* to *Creature from the Black Lagoon*. You know, the movie? And talk about how this piece of 3-D popcorn entertainment takes these very Conradian themes and popularizes them for a teenage audience. And how Kurtz's phrase 'the horror, the horror' is given physical form in the shape of the, uh, Gill-Man." A third pause. "Obviously, I haven't thought this all the way through. Not totally, not yet. But that's basically it. Pretty much." Pickman was just staring at me. "I think," I concluded.

Pickman said that he must've misheard me, that he'd thought I'd said *Creature from the Black Lagoon*, and that that must obviously be a mistake. When I told him it wasn't and that I was going to bring in a videotape with clips from the film edited together so we could discuss it intelligently, he asked to see me outside.

I followed him into the hallway, and, once there, the door to the classroom closed, he wheeled on me. "Let's cut the pretense, Mr. West, shall we? It's obvious you don't take me or my class seriously," he snapped, and before I could even open

my mouth, plowed ahead: "Your last paper was a joke. I gave it the nominal grade of B- and you the benefit of the doubt."

"Sir..."

"After I'd read it, I did some checking. You're here on a fellowship, a fact which surprised me until I found out that you'd won that fellowship based on a piece of creative writing you'd done, and not a critical one."

I stammered, "P-professor Pickman, can I--?"

"One second. You're aware of Georgetown's policies? Its marking system? You do know that graduate students aren't allowed a single grade lower than a B-. Anything below that, and they're--." He, I'm not kidding, licked his lips. "And *you're* out of the program."

What was he saying? "Meaning?" I asked.

"You're fucked," he said simply.

I was floored. I'd known that he didn't like me, but this was--. "Jesus," I said, now starting to get angry at Pickman and his guerrilla tactics. "Jesus," I repeated, "You are so smug."

Pickman seemed to like that. He didn't let up. "Mr. West, I believe it would be in your best interests to withdraw from my class. If you do before next Monday, you won't be penalized. It won't even appear on your transcript. Of course, you won't get your money back--."

"What?"

"...but then, it wasn't really yours to begin with."

"Excuse me?" I was furious now. Livid.

"I'll say it plainly: I don't think you're cut out for serious scholarship." *Obviously*, I thought. He continued: "Oh, and if you do stupidly decide to stick it out in my class because you want to...prove something to yourself, I can almost guarantee that you won't be returning to Georgetown next term." Pickman started

back to the classroom. His hand was on the doorknob and his back was towards me when he said, "Don't bother coming back to class today. I want you to seriously think about this. I think you'll agree with me that you really have no choice at all."

He went back into the classroom, and I went home then, leaving my books and bag in, I hoped, Brian's care.

For the next two days I drifted, unsure as to what my next move should be. I couldn't understand Pickman's irrational and complete loathing for me. Nowadays, I like to give him as much credit as possible and imagine that he might've seen in me that something--or lack of something--no one else could. That swimming in Conrad's dark waters had in some way attuned his senses to the potential in me for...what, horror and evil? I can't be sure. At the time, however, I was comforted by my friends with different, more easily swallowed, theories for Pickman's threats and insults. For instance, that he was much older than he looked and that his mind was going. Or that something "bad" had happened to him the year he'd spent on sabbatical in New Mexico, something involving a woman and death, and that he'd become embittered and forever changed. Or that he was a failed novelist and resented anyone with aspirations to writing anything beyond research papers and academic theses. And so on and so forth.

Yes, my friends comforted, but also advised. Eric thought I should withdraw from Pickman's course immediately. "Under no circumstances" (exact words) should I risk possible expulsion from the program. Fiona agreed. Jackie didn't. Brian, who was also having trouble with some of his classes, mainly smoked up and kept quiet. Georgie suggested I call our father for advice. "Oh, yeah," I said, and stormed off. She of all people should've know that this was something I'd never do. Because if I had called, he'd have found some way to turn things around, blame me for Pickman's wrath, and say I was wasting my time at

Georgetown, that I didn't deserve the same privileges he and my older brother had received.

It was at my lowest point, when I was most confused about things, conflicting advice ricocheting around in my skull, that Jennifer (who'd previously avoided the topic of my academic unraveling completely) finally asked me about Pickman directly.

"What are you going to do?" she wanted to know. It was late at night and we were in bed together.

"I don't know," I replied, then decided something. "Jackie's right. I'm not withdrawing."

I felt Jennifer's hand on my shoulder. She moved closer to me. "You could go to the Head of the department. Tell her Pickman's threatening you." I thought about it and said, "I will if I have to," wondering if I really could, knowing I'd at least need to get proof of Pickman's madness before I could make my next move. There was silence then, and Jennifer's shape shifted in the blackness. She set her head on my chest and said, "Frank?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you."

I was surprised (hearing that sentiment articulated always unnerves me a bit) and didn't say anything for a long while. Jennifer waited tensely. Finally, I quietly offered the words back to her and meant them. Because at that moment, I was in love with Jennifer. (This was long before our night behind the slaughterhouse or our conversation about Doug and her brother.) And having said those four mysterious words, I became less worried about Pickman and his grudge against me, having replaced that trivial fear with a deeper, more significant one: that Jennifer and I had become connected and were each now responsible for the other's actions and feelings. At least in part. There was now someone we had to

answer to. So I felt fear, yes, but also not a little comfort. Flunking out wasn't an option anymore because I couldn't leave Georgetown, not after what Jennifer and I'd just said to each other. And it suddenly registered that I no longer merely knew people, acquaintances like Fiona and Jordan, but that I now had close friends who meant something to me. I had, I believed, someone who loved me. You know what I'm talking about--connection. Even my friendships with Brian and Eric seemed to deepen with our (Jennifer's and mine) nocturnal admissions of love.

I didn't sleep that night, I didn't need to, but I didn't get out of bed either. I was content simply to let Jennifer drift off, her head on my chest, her breathing only slightly out of synch with my own. And the next morning, I woke up feeling whole, determined to put my house in order.

Which was what I did. That day and each day leading up to my presentation I spent, swear to God, twelve hours in the library, researching both *Heart of Darkness* and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* to the point of collapse. I formulated a solid thesis and the necessary arguments to back it up. I organized clips from the movie. I even prepared questions for Brian and Jackie to feed me in case I got sidetracked during my presentation. Then, in order to document what I was going to say and how, I got permission for the Head of the department to videotape my presentation. That way I'd be able to appeal the shitty grade I knew Pickman was planning to give me. Fiona, who had developed an all-too-easy-to-exploit crush on me, agreed to record the class, but not without some reservation. "People will say you're paranoid," she warned. I told her she had no idea.

The day of the presentation, just when it felt like winter was about to settle in for good, we got a break. An Indian summer that would last twelve hours descended upon Georgetown. Everyone and everything looked gold-tinted that day, basking in the warm afternoon sunlight like alligators sunning themselves by the river's edge. Even Pickman's scarred, scabbed head appeared to radiate warmth

and health as he predictably objected to Fiona and her camera, both of which were ultimately allowed.

I gave my presentation, grinning like an idiot, and discussion was generated, and my peers were wowed. It was, in a word, fantastic. I was an academic at the height of his powers. Pickman agreed--grudgingly. "A competent job, Mr. West," he said icily. Well, that "competent" presentation (and the second paper I wrote for Pickman based on that presentation) balanced out my previous B- and eventually got me an A- in the class. And earned me, in Pickman, an enemy for life.

You know, it's funny, but what I've just told you--about beating Pickman at his own game, about loving Jennifer--makes it sound like I was headed towards a happy ending. Well, I wasn't. In fact, that couldn't be further from the truth.

It's my fault, I know, because I'm jumbling things up. Twisting the timeline of all these events to suit my needs right now at this moment. Moving forward, then retreating through my memories like a river that's hit a dam and starts flowing backwards over itself. I allow myself that freedom partly because I honestly don't remember the exact order of things. Of all the things, I mean. I have a general idea, yes, but it's vague and, ultimately, irrelevant. Everything I've told you leads up to one specific event. Everything (whether I've already described it or I add it in later) builds towards New Year's Eve and collapses into it. What's important is that sands shifted and things changed. And just as quickly as I'd fallen in love with Jennifer, I fell out of love with her. And where I'd previously been satisfied with my small circle of friends, I suddenly felt I wanted and needed more. I looked to Fiona and Georgie and Jordan and the people in my play and saw how they, well, laughed, and compared them to the people I'd surrounded myself with and what they--.

We.

...they did for fun. The sense that something had to give way grew in me over a period of time, and peaked the night we stole and killed and ate the sow. I remember one morning plainly deciding to turn over a new leaf--still hang out with Brian but not do as many drugs, see if I could ease out of my romantic relationship with Jennifer and just be her friend, and, unfortunately but necessarily, stop returning Eric's frequent phone calls--when it was all decided for me and I was effectively cut-off from the people who might've saved me. I don't remember exactly which particular incident (if there even was one) precipitated my realization that I was trapped with--.

...Eric was with us, had finally joined us, I remember, in the room with the detective, and I was explaining how I'd been trapped by him. I was telling the detective, "Something, some thread, bound the four of us together," when Eric spoke up, interrupting me.

"You can't leave it out," he said, and the place went silent. Jennifer, who was at the water cooler in one of the room's corners, visibly stiffened. "You want to tell it so badly, fine. But tell it right. You can't leave out whatever bit suits you."

"I know," I said, hating him. "I'm not going to."

Eric turned to the detective. "What happened was important. Frank just doesn't want his family to find out."

"Fuck you," I said, then added after a bit, "Christ, I hate this part."

Eric lunged at me, grabbed my arm, and the detective pushed away from the table and reached for his gun. Eric smiled and let go of me. "Liar," he said, "You enjoyed it." I grimaced because that wasn't what I meant. I said, "No, I hate this part because it's when everything changed forever. It's when, for me at least, things got decided. Up until that night, everything had been inconsequential...well, almost. I mean, any one of us could have pulled out before--."

Eric had an amused expression on his face—how dare I even attempt to make sense of what he'd done to us? He said, "It's only as necessary as everything else."

I thought about it, and the man was right. "You're right," I admitted, "Of course you're right." I turned back to the detective and continued my confession: "A bar had just opened. It was called the Big Hunt"...

...with them for life.

I...

Actually, I do remember what happened. We were going to a new bar that had recently opened not far from campus called the Big Hunt. We'd been planning to go for days, but at the eleventh hour, Jennifer begged off. She had a stomach virus or something and was throwing up. Brian, who hadn't been the same since the pig was slaughtered, also backed out. If I had to guess, I'd say his reasons for doing so were indifference and fear. I thought we should call the whole thing off, but Eric was insistent. "We haven't done something together, just the two of us, in awhile, Frank. I think we should," he drawled on the phone. I told him I had schoolwork, that I was feeling a little sick myself, and that I didn't want to leave Jennifer alone. (My first two reasons were legitimate ones. I hadn't worked on my thesis for what seemed like weeks, and those days I was always feeling a little queasy. My third one, however, was a flat-out lie. Jennifer urged me to go out with Eric and leave her alone, and I--for my own part--hadn't exactly been relishing the idea of babysitting a vomiting artist who had recently remembered how little painting she'd actually done in the last year.) Well, after much debating, we compromised. Instead of going to the Big Hunt, we'd watch a movie at his place and then call it an early night, giving me plenty of time to work on *Heart of Darkness* afterwards. Believe me, I didn't want to see Eric PERIOD, but--as I've said--above all else he was persuasive.

On the way to his apartment, I rented the film *Rosemary's Baby*, which was one of my favorites at the time, and which Eric, he told me once I got there, had already seen. "Well, we don't have to watch it," I said.

"No," he said, "We will--later."

He offered me a drink then, a beer, and we drank and talked for a bit. He asked me if anything was wrong, if something was bothering me. I thought: *Well, I've just realized that I don't know the woman I'm supposed to be in love with at all. And that even though I can't quite put my finger on it, Eric, there's something seriously wrong with you. With me, too. I don't know what it is yet, but it's something you're bringing out in me. Oh, and I have no one here, no friends to speak of besides you and Jennifer and Bri--*. I hadn't answered, and he was now asking me about Brian, if I thought Brian was all right. "He seems withdrawn," Eric said. That was true enough. "I haven't spoken to him recently," I said. We talked some more, and Eric got up and walked to the wall he'd covered with photos of himself, the black-and-whites back from when he modeled set up like a shrine to...what? "Do you think I'm handsome, Frank?" he asked. I saw no reason to lie and told him he was without a doubt the most attractive man I'd ever met. Pleased, he offered me a joint. I took it and lit it. He did the same to a second joint, and I asked him what he'd done after modeling and before Georgetown. Well, as it turned out, this wasn't his first Master's degree, it was his third. He'd already gotten degrees in psychology and anthropology. *Interesting*, I thought. *What are you looking for, Eric?* The apartment darkened, and we watched the movie and got drunk. As soon as I finished whatever joint I was smoking, another magically appeared to take its place in my hand.

I was on my third or fourth, I think, when I noticed something odd about the one I'd just lit. "This one tastes strange," I said. Eric moved closer, sat next to me on the couch. "It's Thai," he said. I giggled a bit and asked, "As opposed to what?"

Eric smiled, slid in right next to me. "Mexican, which is what you're probably used to. Don't you like it?" I told him it was fine, that it actually tasted better, and I closed my eyes. The high I was experiencing deepened. I felt tired and content. My fingers seemed twice their usual length and I clumsily dropped the mostly-smoked joint onto the floor somewhere between my knees. Laughing and moving in what felt like slow-motion, Eric and I both reached down for the joint, but I got to it first.

When I sat back up triumphantly, Eric's hand was on my thigh and I very hazily thought, *What is he doing?* I said, "Eric--." He kissed me quickly, on the cheek. "Eric," I said again, this time meaning it. "What's wrong?" Eric asked. I wasn't sure, so I just said, "Nothing, I just--. I'm not gay." Eric smiled, said, "Neither am I," and kissed me again. This time on the lips. My arms didn't respond when I demanded they push him off me. The apartment seemed darker and part of my brain thought, *I'm not doing anything. Really, why shouldn't I let Eric do--?*

Another part answered, *Jennifer*, but I pushed her name and image into a cloudy corner of my mind where they readily vanished. Eric unzipped my jeans and started giving me a handjob. I almost laughed, it was so funny when you thought about it, and I wondered if I should be scared or not. I hadn't felt myself getting hard, but I was. Dimly, it occurred to me that if I was going to get Eric to stop, I'd better do something. "And quick," I said aloud. Eric didn't say anything, kissed my neck, then my chest, was undoing my shirt. I decided what to do--nothing--and a little astonished with the person sitting on the sofa, with myself, I let Eric do whatever he wanted. He stopped giving me the handjob right as I was going to come. Then he was kissing my stomach, and I worried someone would burst in and catch us. Jennifer or Georgie or--Good God--my father. Silly. I laughed and looked down to where Eric's head was now. Between my legs. Panic. A blowjob, now that was too much. I told him so. I asked him to stop, but he

wasn't listening to me. With what felt like monumental effort I explained that I wouldn't do the same for him, that I wouldn't do anything for him. "That's fine," he said into the pit opening and darkening beneath us. Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice told me that I shouldn't be doing this. I ignored it. It felt good being naughty.

He finished sucking me off and I came in his mouth. He swallowed it down greedily and I was momentarily disgusted. Then I realized how really draining that emotion was and went back to feeling happy and sleepy. Eric got up from the floor. I tilted my head back to look at him and my world blurred. I thought I might fall, which was ridiculous since I was still sitting on the sofa. (I was, wasn't I?) I wished I hadn't had that last joint. Eric was right in front of me, but it was as though I were seeing him through smoked glass. His voice sounded as if he were speaking to me through layers of cheesecloth. "Are you all right?" he asked. I must've nodded my head. I know I smiled. "Good," he said, "I was worried." I asked him why and tried to stand up, but couldn't. "Stay put," he ordered, and I placed my hands in my lap and smiled. *Are my pants undone?* I wondered. Eric ran his hand through his hair, his beautiful hair, and explained, "That last joint wasn't just a joint." *Huh?* "I'd sprayed it with PCP," he said.

Please understand, I wanted to be angry. Outraged. I wanted to yell at him, rip out his fucking throat, anything. Only...I couldn't be bothered. I didn't want to sleep, I just wanted to lie there with my eyes closed. I wanted silence, but Eric kept talking, his words running together, my blood running cold. I realized then the full implication of what Eric had just told me. Without my knowing it, he'd given me, SLIPPED ME, a drug and then--what? Why? I went rigid and sat bolt upright. "Eric, you fuck, what are you talking about?" He put his hands on my shoulders, gently nudged me back into the couch. "Why? You know I've never done anything besides pot!" I said. He sat down next to me again, still holding my shoulders.

"Calm down," he said. "I thought it was time you tried something new. Something harmless." Well, that was something. At least PCP—. *Waitaminute! PCfuckingP!* Frantically, I searched my mind for information about the drug, but drew a blank. I knew absolutely nothing about the substance pumping through my veins and arteries, mixing with my blood, flowing towards my brain and heart. On a cellular level, it was doing---what? Contaminating my--? Polluting, clouding, what? I, my mind, was getting hysterical, but my body was serenely trapped in a vat of bubbling wax, floating and immobile. "You'll be fine," Eric said. (In response, no doubt, to the look that must have been on my face.) "PCP was developed as an anesthetic." He took his lit joint and burned it into my arm. I felt nothing and wondered if he'd even done it. "One person out of every hundred reacts badly and needs...medical attention."

"What if that had been me? What if I'd been the one person?" my voice asked, not wanting to hear his answer.

Eric touched my cheek and said, "I never would have let you die, Frank. You're too important to me. You and Jennifer and Brian, you're all important to me. And to each other. You should never forget that."

This sentiment moved me, and I honestly felt like crying. I forgave Eric for what he'd done to me, the drugs, the blowjob, my arm. In the cloudy state I was in, I even considered Jennifer and wondered if I hadn't been too hard on her. Deciding I didn't love her. And for what reason? What had she done, really? Jennifer was still the same person--.

Jennifer.

I wondered what this whatever with Eric meant for us, and for our group's stability in general. I decided that for the time being I wouldn't do anything drastic. Afterall, I told myself, things weren't that bad. I'd bide my time. I'd... I'd...

I fell asleep then, and when I woke up much later, Eric announced, "I'll be right back," and left the room to, if he hadn't already, rinse his mouth. While he was gone, I tried thinking up excuses for what I'd done, reasons for my transgressions against Jennifer and what I'd been brought up to believe good and decent. I blamed the beer and drugs (I mean, Eric had tricked me into taking PCP, for God's sake), but ultimately, all my excuses proved meaningless. I might not have known it at the time, but I let Eric do what he did to me because I wanted him to. It's that simple. The desire to do something bad, something by a lot of people's standards wrong, appealed to me. Oh yes, the ease with which I gave into that particular temptation was remarkable...

Not much else happened that night. We talked about classes and the things that were keeping me busy those days. The werewolf play, a comic about the Leopold and Loeb murderers, a couple of papers, preparations for Christmas break. At some point, I remembered something Jennifer had once mentioned to me in passing, something I had been meaning to ask Eric about for quite some time. "You're writing a book?" I wanted to know. Eric asked me where I'd heard that, and I said, "From Jennifer." Eric explained that it wasn't a novel, not even a book really, but a sort of treatise. A philosophical and historical work, even a bit medical, documenting our times. "It's very important," he said. "And will do, I hope, quite a lot of good."

We didn't mention the blowjob once during the rest of our conversation that night, and neither of us pretended that anything like it would ever happen again. The PCP wore off eventually, and I left at around five that morning. There was a message on my answering machine waiting for me when I got home. It was from Jennifer, who'd changed her mind and had wanted to know if I'd come over to keep her company, telling me to call her if I didn't get back in too late. "Oops," I said. I tried to sleep for a few hours, but couldn't. I went over to Jennifer's and let myself

in with the key she'd given me. I got into bed with her and she stirred awake. "Hey," she said, "What time is it?" I told her it was too early and that she should go back to sleep. She said she'd slept enough and asked me where I'd gone last night. "Dinner and then a midnight movie," I said. "Alone." She apologized for being so nasty lately and explained that her painting (or, I should say, her lack of painting) had been depressing her terribly. I told her I understood what that was like, even though I'd never had any trouble drawing. And writing, well, very seldom.

Jennifer reminded me how much she loved me and cared about me and I felt sick about what I'd done with--. What Eric had done to me. And even though I didn't think he'd ever tell anyone about the blowjob, I decided it couldn't hurt to keep tabs on him for the next little bit. Just to make sure. You see, that morning I cared about Jennifer again and I didn't want a single night's stupidity hurting her, ruining whatever it was we shared. And yes, there was also the fear that if I did break it off with Jennifer the day after my night with Eric, it would get around that I was gay or who knows what else. It was shallow and petty and idiotic of me, I know, but my parents had always worried that I might turn out to be some sick faggot, and even though there was little possibility of Georgie and Eric crossing paths...well, you see what I mean. So--a little watch dogging was suddenly on the agenda.

I came up with this while Jennifer nuzzled my neck. We kissed and, later on, made love. We spent the rest of that day and the following night sleeping and doing things to each other in her dark apartment. Everything was almost as it had been before my friends had started going wrong.

I realize now that it had all been well-calculated. Like everything else Eric did, his seduction had been part of a strategy to keep me (who had started to express misgivings about what the four of us did together, who had been looking

for a way to splinter off from his Freak Show and rejoin fully-evolved humanity) close to him and the others. What's funny is that I actually believed I'd made the conscious decision to A) Give Jennifer another chance, and B) Remain close to her and Brian and Eric. Stupid as it sounds, I actually thought I'd had some say in the matter. But no. My decision to not strike out on my own was one motivated by fear. Fear of being alone, fear of being ridiculed, fear of, pathetic as it sounds, embarrassing my sister and getting in trouble with my father. Fear, and nothing else. That Eric had literally drugged me into compliance was incomprehensible at the time and easily forgotten, easily ignored. (Even the scar Eric had burned into my arm--you can see it, here--was efficiently explained away as a cooking accident.) It's almost comical that he would use the same technique not long after our nocturnal coupling post-*Rosemary's Baby*.

Things started getting surreal soon after that night. It turned colder, for one, and each day the sun set earlier than it had the one before. That in itself isn't strange, of course, but something within our group was likewise changing. The dynamics, the allegiances were stretching unnaturally, like a Dali painting's figures. Brian rarely came out anymore. I made sure I was never alone with Eric, and that he and Jennifer did as little as possible together. I didn't know it, but things were about to get serious.

The day of our winter picnic was when the free-fall started in earnest. We went to a park, not Glover Park, no, but one close to where Eric lived called Dumbarton Oaks. Jennifer and I met Brian on campus and then the three of us walked towards Eric's. "I have the sandwiches," Brian said. I'd picked up a few bottles of cheap red wine and said so. "How much have you had?" Jennifer wanted to know. Even though I was pissed drunk, I said, "Only a little." We walked the rest of the way joking and complaining about the amount of schoolwork we still

had left before Christmas. "My paper for Bray was due a week and a half ago," Jennifer said.

"Yikes," I said.

"Well, there's not much I can do about it."

At Eric's, the group split into two: Brian and Jennifer walking ahead of us, me and Eric, who for once looked tired and spent, trailing behind. "Have you been to Dumbarton Oaks before?" he asked. (I thought he was just making small talk.) I told him I didn't think so.

"On the far side of the park, not where we're going, there's a cemetery with mausoleums and crypts," he said as we walked. "A man was once accidentally locked inside one of those beautiful houses of death."

"Eric..."

"Really. Last year. He fell asleep next to the coffin containing his murdered sister's remains, and the caretaker (or someone like the caretaker) bolted the steel door shut on him."

Like Pickman before him, Eric licked his lips. "From the outside."

"Eric...seriously?"

He nodded. "When the man woke up and saw he was locked in, he panicked. There was only one way out, a window, and it was beyond his reach, high above his head." *Come on*, I thought, but kept quiet. Eric continued, "But he was a strong guy, and he kept his head and managed to stack three or four coffins under that lone window, pushing and pulling them into place, staggering them like stairs. He climbed them, but still came up short."

"He started straining, stretching for the window, reaching for his life, but stopped when he heard the sound of wood cracking, splintering. The coffins, it turned out, were rotted-through and couldn't take his weight. They collapsed." Eric made an appropriate gesture with his hands. "This was not a good thing. That

window had been his one escape, and now there was no way left to reach it. He clawed at the door, shouted, but no one heard him. (How could they?) They found him three weeks later. He'd just died," Eric finished.

"Just?" I asked.

"He'd lasted quite a while," Eric said, bending down to pick up a stone from the sidewalk.

That doesn't make any sense. "How?" I asked.

Eric threw the stone at a STOP sign, but it was a weak toss and his aim was off. He took a deep breath and said, "Drinking rain water and eating...well..."

A moment or two passed, and I realized what he must have meant. But that didn't make much sense either, so I said, "But how? I mean, hadn't she been--?"

"No. For whatever reason, his sister had not been embalmed," Eric said.

We walked a few blocks in silence. Then Eric asked me if Jennifer and I had plans to do anything after lunch. A bit warily, I told him we didn't, and he surprised me by offering us two tickets to some art exhibit that night at the Corcoran gallery downtown. "Thanks," I said, half-worried that some kind of hidden agenda was being implemented. "What's on?" I asked, not really caring because I knew Jennifer would want to go regardless of who the artist or what the medium was, but all Eric said was: "I think you'll like it."

A few minutes later we were in the park, and Jennifer was spreading a checkered blanket over the frozen ground. Eric and I joined her and Brian on the crest of a hill, overlooking the stream that split Dumbarton Oaks in two. One-half park, where we were sitting, and one-half cemetery, where apparently someone had once been accidentally entombed with his dead sister's remains. From our vantage point, the cemetery was quite beautiful, all stone angels and monuments, crypts that looked like cement tree houses, even a circular kind of structure that reminded me of--.

...the circle Jennifer and Eric had prepared for the sow...

...of a kind of Greek temple where sacrifices had been offered up to mythological gods and heroes. It brought to mind the neglected neighborhood cemetery where me and friends had played while growing up. It was a place we visited with surprising regularity--and always with different intentions.

When I was nine or ten, it had been a place to run and hide from my parents' fighting. Where I could be afraid of zombies and ghouls, and not the violence that was always threatening to explode at home. When I was fourteen, it was where I took Nellie Hermann to make out, the terror she felt towards her surroundings the only thing giving me the courage to even attempt those early, clumsy gropings in the dark. Then, when I was seventeen and about to leave for NYU, it was where I went to...well, to contemplate my mortality, as stupid as that sounds...

Anyway, these were the somber musings that occupied my mind while Brian and Jennifer passed out food, mostly ham and turkey sandwiches, and Eric distributed glasses of red wine. I have to tell you, I'm not usually as sentimental as I was that afternoon, allowing myself to reminisce and wax melancholic, but I was pleasantly, warmly drunk, and the winter day was almost balmy, and I'd managed to convince myself I was among friends. We drank and ate. Well, they ate (I wasn't hungry), and I stretched out, my head on Jennifer's lap. Brian was smoking and Eric made a toast--"To live forever," which is from some book, I believe--and we all raised our glasses and downed the wine. We chatted some and were silent, and Eric out of nowhere asked if any of us had ever dropped acid. I thought it a funny question and said, "No." Jennifer had, twice, and Brian had, many times. A sheepish expression on his face, Eric very slowly said, "I don't want anyone to get upset, but I've dissolved a tab in each of your cups." Looking at my wine glass cautiously, I sat up and said, "You're joking," and thought, *Well, of course you're*

not. Jennifer seemed nonplused, and Brian put out his joint and asked, "Why?" Earnestly (and I do think he was being sincere when he said this) Eric explained, "It was something I thought we should try together. To see how comfortable we are with one another. To see how much trust there is between us."

Trust.

Now isn't that something?

The almost repressed memory of the PCP-sprayed joint and what followed it surfaced in my mind like an air-filled barrel that's been tied underwater to the ocean's floor but is suddenly cut loose. I started to say something, but stopped myself short. I couldn't, after all, challenge Eric without incriminating myself. And anyway, this was different. It wasn't just me. He'd duped us all. And I had been wanting to try acid for awhile. I mean, the only reason I hadn't yet was because I'd been afraid that--.

"Omigod!" I almost yelled. "I've never done this before! What if--? What if I react badly? What if I'm allergic or--?"

Jennifer wrapped her arms tightly around me, and Eric plopped down next to us. "Don't let's get hysterical, Frank," he said. I looked around me nervously, at my empty glass, its yawning mouth now impossibly large, and I tried to calculate how long ago I'd drunk the tainted wine. Ten minutes? Twenty? How long, I wondered, does it take for the acid to kick in? I suddenly realized that my left leg had begun to tingle. Like it was falling asleep or just waking up. Pins-and-needles, but subtler. Was that an effect of the--? Brian was sitting back against a rock that looked alarmingly like a tombstone, and his knee (right? left?) was tapping rhythmically against the packed earth. The noise was deafening. Eric told me to look at him--at Eric, I mean, not Brian--and said, "You'll be fine. We all will. We just have to stay together and enjoy it. Remember who you're with." *Ohgodohfuck...LSDLSDLSDwhatdidIknowaboutitcomeoncomeoncome--!* Phrases

like "heightened sense of reality," "critical faculties clouding," and "communion with the transcendental" were all I could come up with. My heart was thumping wildly, like drums played during some savage rite before a hunt or feast, and it embarrassed me because I knew everyone could hear it, like the man's in "The Tell Tale Heart." *Villains! Dissemble no more! I admit the deed! Tear up the planks! Here, here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!* Once, ages ago, Brian had given a presentation in Pickman's class comparing Conrad's themes to Poe's. (It's inane, isn't it, what comes to one's mind sometimes?)

Jennifer's head moved into my field of vision--by now the drug had reached my heart and was being pumped towards my body's extremities--and the sun made her hair look red and fiery, even though I knew it was, objectively speaking, brown. I thought of that murdered celebrity (what's her name?) and how her boyfriend Charles Manson had used LSD on his disciplines to make them suggestible, to make them do his, yes, bidding. Killing her--no, NO, she wasn't his girlfriend, I remembered that now, she was...well, someone--and her unborn baby, and writing the word PIGS on the walls with her blood. "Are you all right, Frank?" Jennifer asked.

Jennifer Carter... Jennifer who looked like Sharon... Yes, Sharon--SHARON TATE! ROMAN POLANSKI'S--! I thought of Rosemary in *Rosemary's Baby*--the scene where she's raped by, I guess, Satan--and I yelled, "THIS IS NO DREAM! THIS IS REAL! THIS IS HAPPENING!" Then I laughed because it was all so ludicrous. It was absurd what I let Eric get away with. "Frank?" Jennifer said, letting her arm drop to the ground, dangerously close to the butter knife someone had used to spread mustard on our sandwiches and--and, OHGOODGOD, what if she cut her wrist? I sprung to my feet, swooned a little, and tried to pull Jennifer up. "Frank, what are--?" I struggled to say "THE KNIFE," but couldn't. After much tugging, Jennifer finally stood, and I grabbed

her, hugged her tightly, feeling as though I'd come THIS CLOSE to losing her. She told me it was all right, and either I started crying or she did or we both did. Whatever the case, she held me that way for a long time...

"...emotional catharsis" Brian was saying, and Eric was nodding his head in agreement. For the next while (an hour? two?), I swerved from panic and hysteria to euphoria, sadness, and beyond. The familiar, the grass, the sweater I was wearing, my girlfriend, my friends, seemed strange to me, as if they'd been replaced by only slightly imperfect copies, and that unnerved me. I thanked God I wasn't alone. There were a few bad moments, some very bad moments, when I was convinced someone (the police, Georgie, Pickman) was going to show up and arrest us for...drug-use or something... Brian got up to wander for a bit, and Jennifer kept saying that he was gone forever, that he wasn't ever coming back, but eventually he did... I didn't think the trip would ever end, and it bothered me that I hadn't had any hallucinations yet... I thought of those old Amicus horror movies. Four or five people, one of them's Joan Collins, and Peter Cushing's there, too, meet on a train and they tell each other these stories. About something they've done that's just terrible, some murder, some crime. And then it turns out that the train's crashed, and that they're all dead, and that they'd been riding the, uh, Death Train, straight to...HELL. The thought of death, of dying alone, of living alone even, terrified me, and I reached out to my friends.

I said some silly things. I must have sounded like an idiot. Don't think for a second I'm not aware of that now. I mean, I had some seriously imbecilic thoughts. But, you know, I blame the drugs. Yes, whatever angst I'd been feeling that day, the LSD intensified it and brought it forth. And the words spurted out of my mouth with little sense, but much hidden meaning. I felt fear. Fear of being alone. Fear of inaction. I raved on and on, and I'm surprised no one strangled me--you know, to put me out of my misery.

"What are we really doing here?" were the words that began my ramblings, I think. I talked about Fate, about how it was almost miraculous that we four had met, had been brought together, or whatever it was that had happened exactly. I spoke about Belonging, how they three, despite some admittedly questionable moments of madness, had in an amazingly short time come to mean more to me than any of my other friends anywhere. Even the ones I'd known since grade school. I tried to articulate how I'd never felt more juiced-up than I did right at that moment. Creatively--my thesis, my comics. Mentally--just being in contact with Eric, who was operating on a totally different plane from the rest of humanity, raised significant moral and philosophical questions on an almost daily basis. Emotionally--my ever-deepening relationship with Jennifer, the protective feelings I'd begun to have towards Brian. And even sexually--that was certainly a part of it, too. The constant erections, the perverse fantasies I won't even mention... Finally and most recklessly, I spoke about Fear, of how fragile the circle Eric had created (not that I recognized it as such back then), the circle I was an integral part of, truly was. I suggested...groping for permanence, rejecting my generation's transient, fleeting nature...I suggested we perform some ceremony. Plant a marker, carry out an act, solidify what we had, keep the group from drifting apart when our time at Georgetown eventually, inevitably, ended.

I spoke, and when I was done my throat was on fire. I drank something, not wine, but something else. (I can't remember what.) Eric reached out and took ahold of my hand, waved Jennifer and Brian over to us with his other. "Frank's right. We should do something to make up for our short time together," he said, eyes dancing, "Something that will link us forever. Something so we won't ever forget."

Jennifer: "Like what?"

I said, "You mean some kind of ritual."

"Yes," Eric agreed, "But it has to be something none of us has ever done before. Something special, something people wouldn't normally do."

Yes, I thought, That's exactly right. But-- "...what?" I finished aloud.

We thought about it then for as long and as seriously as possible under the circumstances, but all came up empty-headed. It frustrated me because I decided that what we were looking for was obvious, something that should've been readily apparent, but wasn't. I clenched my fists and smacked them into the dirt. Eric told me to calm down, to not worry, that we'd think of it eventually. No one said anything for awhile then, and we stretched out on the red and white blanket, spread out our limbs as if to make snow angels, and looked up towards the sky and clouds.

That's when the hallucinations began.

"I see a Tyrannosaurus Rex," Brian announced, and, with only minimal eye-squinting, I, too, could see the lumbering giant (granted, it was mostly a row of teeth) crashing through a wall of white cotton to devour me, devour us all. I closed my eyes and shook the image away. When I re-opened them, the clouds had re-formed into something else. I said, "I see Africa," and traced its coastline with my right hand. Seconds became minutes became hours then, and the white, billowy cut-out continent darkened with the approaching night. At some point or other, I groped the ground to my left until I found a sandwich. I took a big bite from it just as Jennifer said, "I see--."

I sat up and gagged violently. Almost convulsing, I flung the sandwich away and started heaving, wanting to throw up, but not being able to.

"What?" Brian said.

"What is it?" Eric demanded, also sitting up.

Gulping down clean air, I gasped, "The sandwich--."

Jennifer rolled towards me and said, "What?" Eric, in the meantime, had gotten to his feet and picked up the crumbling sandwich. He brought it to his nose and said, "The ham..."

"It's spoiled," I managed.

Indeed, even from where I was sitting I could smell it, the stench of rotting meat. I didn't know if it was the LSD making my senses acute or if it just seemed that way, but, whatever the case, I suddenly felt like I had to leave immediately, get out of there before the rancid smell made me start vomiting, afraid that if I did start, I'd never stop. I stammered out that I was going. "Fine," Eric said, "You'd better leave anyway if you want to make it to the Corcoran before it closes."

The walk to the gallery was long and harrowing, but Jennifer and I somehow managed it. We were still reeling from the drugs, you see, and beneath our feet, sidewalks and cement steps shifted and warped, and the pattern of a cobblestoned alley started wriggling like snakes. And not only that, but for the longest time--say, ten or fifteen blocks--I was convinced there was a bald man in a black trench coat following us, and that he had a machete hidden in his coat, and that he was going to hack us up with it. Of course, that was only paranoia brought on by the LSD--I think.

Above us, the clouds had thickened and darkened and grown more threatening as both sun and temperature dropped, and it was snowing by the time Jennifer and I got to the Corcoran.

Because we were freezing and wet, and the gallery's heat wasn't functioning properly, we kept our coats on. (Also, I didn't like the look of the old women--wrinkled, dressed in black--tending the coat check.)

Now maybe it was the weather or maybe it was the exhibit's gruesome subject matter, but the gallery was almost empty. Desolate, in fact, and barren. Its white walls hurt my eyes. The exhibit Eric had given us passes to was "The

Morgue" by Andres Serrano, a young American artist. The room Jennifer and I found ourselves in was expansive, a square, and there were huge full-color photographs spaced out evenly along its four sides.

Jennifer, standing in front of the first photograph and reading from a program, said, "Infant Death," and I assumed that to be the photo's title. The pictures were giant close-ups taken of various body parts.

Multiple Stab Wounds, another title.

Images Serrano had taken--stolen, some might say--from real corpses.

Burn Victim.

Their faces were hidden. The limbs, sometimes severed from the rest of the bodies, were, in many cases, unidentifiable.

Rat Poison Suicide.

Have you seen them? He's famous. Serrano, I mean. For taking naked, dead bodies and abstracting them into pieces of meat.

Mauled by Dog.

Wounds, traces of violence, aestheticized and made beautiful. Eroticized, in fact. The photos fascinated me, their reds and blacks and peaches. The images shifted (a lingering effect of the LSD, I hoped, and not some heretofore undiscovered fetish) and gashes became lovely, and welts and sores turned me on.

And then, without warning, it came to me. As easy as opening a menu in a restaurant, I had the idea. Besides the bite of bad ham, I hadn't eaten at the picnic, you see, and something in my stomach stirred. Hunger. It was clear now what we had to do, the four of us, and you can bet it was special enough so that we'd never forget. I grabbed Jennifer's arm.

"Frank," she said, a little startled, "What is it? You haven't--."

"Jennifer," I said.

"What?"

"We should steal a dead body and eat it."

* * *

"...steal a dead body and eat it," Frank said, and, as the four of us knew he would, Chuck blanched. Finally, he'd heard the joke's punch-line. Only it wasn't over, not by a long shot. Frank popped a piece of bread into his mouth before continuing. "So now you know what everything's been leading up to. And you know why I blame myself as much as I do. It was my idea. To do something, yes, but then to specifically do what we did. Oh, the drugs contributed some, I know, but really, as I've already said, they only deepened my existing but ignored feelings of isolation and desperation. Feelings that were already there. You see? Feelings that I was desperate to keep buried.

"And, of course, I know I'm not the only guilty one. I mean, Eric was a wonderful mentor and manipulator, plying me with drugs to weaken my resolve, planting the idea in my head with his story about the man locked in the crypt, inviting Jennifer and me to the Serrano exhibit. He played a wild game, Eric, with monstrous odds against him. But he was good. And he won.

"The night at the slaughterhouse was inspired. We'd all taken part in the killing and eating...even me. It was a great initial step to build from. Break one taboo, even a small one, and the next one's that much easier to transgress. He was a great collector of broken personalities and hollow men. People, I should say, I don't want to leave Jennifer out. Hollow, waiting to be filled. Waiting to be led. Waiting to be seduced, as the *Rosemary's Baby* night proved well enough.

"It sounds as though I'm justifying our actions, what we'd done and were about to do. Or trying to, at least. Well, I'm not. Ultimately, there is no excuse. At the moment of truth, I simply came up short," Frank said sadly, but resolved to it.

Our lunch hour was almost up. There was no way he'd finish it in the time left, but he plowed forward anyway, prodded by Chuck's question: "So that's what you're in here for, stealing a body and eating it?"

Frank crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. Briefly, I imagined him as the graduate student he'd once been, striking that same pose in Georgetown's library while trying to explain an ambiguous, dense poem to some pretty undergraduate who'd fallen in love with her TA. That image (and it recurred often during Frank's telling) gnawed away at me. Mostly because it very easily could have gone that way. I wondered if Frank thought about stuff like that while relating (and really, re-living) the story of his crimes.

I hoped not, but was sure he did. I mean, there was no way not to. That was part of our punishment.

Frank was saying, "No, Chuck. That was the original plan, but it's not what happened..."

* * *

That might've been the original plan, yes, but it's not what eventually happened...

...Okay, we were there in the gallery, yes, and I turned to Jennifer, grabbed her, and blurted out, "We should steal a dead body and eat it." She didn't say anything for a few seconds, and I thought, *That's obscene, Frank*. Then Jennifer said, "Yes, that's it," and I, surprised, said, "You--?" But she was clinging to my (MY!) idea tenaciously and already heading out of the room, which might as well have been an actual morgue, my thoughts were so dark and morbid. She called back to me, where my declaration had rooted me to the spot, "Come on, we have to tell them!"

Which we did, after calling Eric's but getting no answer, then trying Brian's and finding them both there. Walking over to Brian's, I wondered if--

...if Eric was there sucking Brian's cock because Brian hadn't been around much these last few days, and Eric still needed him...

...if the LSD was still screwing with our bodies and minds. I asked Jennifer how she felt, and she said fine. We didn't speak again until we got to Brian's, where immediately, still in the apartment's doorway, in fact, we (really, Jennifer) breathlessly told them my (MY!) idea. Brian looked at Jennifer, at me, then slouched off towards his futon. He sat down and said, "Oh, wow." Eric, smiling, beaming no less, pulled us into the apartment and said it:

"Cannibalism."

Suddenly the unspeakable didn't seem like such a good idea anymore. Again, Brian said, "Oh, wow," and I couldn't believe I'd even thought such a thing. Back at the gallery, the dirty words had fallen out of my mouth before I could help myself. Now the idea was something repulsive, and I decided to damage control the situation. I said lamely, "Of course, I'm not serious. There's no way it would--."

"No," Eric interrupted. "It's perfect. That's exactly what you and I were talking about, Frank."

Oh God, I thought, What I was talking about! "But we can't," I said, "It's wrong."

Jennifer sat down next to Brian, put her arm around his shoulders, and said to me, "It's your idea."

Christ, don't--.

"I know," I said, "And it was a dumb one. We'll do something else. Something that's maybe not, like, totally illegal and, well, immoral."

...don't remind me.

Eric was in Brian's kitchen, pouring himself a drink. He leaned over the counter and, an eyebrow raised derisively, repeated, "Immoral?"

"Against our nature, I mean," I said.

Were they being serious? Didn't they comprehend the enormity of what we were discussing? I searched their faces, but, by the looks of it, only Brian seemed to have reservations about the monstrous act I had accidentally proposed. Maybe, hopefully, that would help. "Brian hasn't said anything," I announced loudly, glad for this new distraction, which might give me enough time to think, to come up with a way out. Wine glasses in hand, Eric said, "Brian?"

"I don't even think I could," I said, but all eyes and ears were on Brian.

Jennifer nudged him and said his name. Brian closed his eyes and chose his words carefully: "I--. It...wouldn't be easy."

Jennifer smiled; Eric gave her a drink. They had him now. "No, it wouldn't," Jennifer said, "And we could never tell anyone about it. Not ever."

"Jennifer," I pleaded.

Eric was at my side, offering me a drink. He whispered into my ear, "Frank, you don't have to be a part of this if you don't want to. We're your friends. We'd never bully you into doing something you felt was...against your nature." He shifted closer to me. "For this sort of thing to work, to mean something, we all have to be willing participants. Maybe you don't want that. Maybe that it was your idea is enough for you, I don't know. But the way I'm feeling right now, just thinking about it... It sounds banal, I know, but it's like I've been asleep my whole life. You can feel it," he said.

My eyes were closed, and from someplace dark I heard Jennifer say, "I can." Then Eric asked Brian if he did, too, and Brian said, "I feel... Yes, there's something."

Eric turned back to me: "Frank?" When I didn't respond, he gripped my neck tightly and said, "Come on." Jennifer stood up and went to my other ear. "It was your idea," she said.

"I know," I said.

Eric's grip tightened. "We'll do it without you."

I decided. "If we get caught..."

Jennifer kissed me lightly on the ear. "We won't. We'll be careful." Eric also kissed me. He said to me, to all of us, "Don't worry. After we do it, nothing will be able to hurt us."

I sank to the floor, a bizarre sense of relief, as though the worst were already over, welling up in me. "What do you mean?" I asked him.

"I mean," he said, raising his glass, "Nothing will be able to hurt us because we'll be like..."

"Like what?" I couldn't imagine.

"Like gods," Eric said, and it should have sounded ridiculous or maybe psychotic, but it didn't, not really, and we toasted again. And then started to plan.

The next day, things shifted into high gear. It was late in the semester, snowing quite a lot, finals looming near. There were papers to write, papers to grade, next term's courses to choose, plane tickets to book. And, of course, the particulars of our scheme to work out. We each had an assignment. Brian supplied the steady stream of drugs that helped numb our brains whenever one of us lingered for too long on the dark nature of our proposed end. Jennifer provided the, well, libidinal support. (You'll see what I mean later.) Eric volunteered to research the philosophy behind the actual act, and I was supposed to work out the details, come up with a practical plan. When we met to talk about it, it was usually at Brian's, late at night. Eric's enthusiasm was infectious, and when he spoke about cannibalism (as the cliché goes, it wasn't so much what he said, but how he said it), you could almost forget how completely horrendous, how evil and repulsive, the deed actually was.

It was long past midnight and we were all exhausted the night Eric finally synthesized his findings and presented them to us, sitting on the floor with his legs

crossed, hands gesturing wildly, like a stone statue suddenly and jerkily come to life. He looked thinner than I'd ever seen him, I remember, and tired. I wondered when he'd last slept. He said:

"Cannibalism, let's be clear, is the consumption of particular portions or organs of a human body by another human being. It is a ritual means by which certain of the qualities of the person eaten might be obtained. And this is not just superstitious speculation, but scientific fact.

"Have you ever heard of planarian worms? They're flat, like tapeworms almost."

We shook our heads.

"Well, in 1977, scientists performed an experiment using them. It took days, but they taught one planarian worm how to run a complicated maze. Afterwards, they killed it, cutting the worm into little pieces, then feeding the pieces to other planarian worms--worms that didn't know how to run the maze. Except that once they'd eaten the, ah, educated worm, they could run the maze. Just as easily as if they'd been taught. Do you see? The theory was that memory could be acquired and consciousness absorbed through the stomach, as it were, by means of cannibalism. (For similar reasons, many so-called primitive tribes ate their wise man after his death.)

"Of course, that's only part of it. Head-hunters and other cannibals often consumed bits of the bodies or heads of deceased enemies as a means of absorbing their vitality and prolonging their own lives indefinitely. We could live forever."

"Like vampires," Brian said.

"Or ghouls," I said.

"Health risks?" Jennifer asked, and I said, "Good point."

"None," Eric said, "Not if we cook it properly."

He lectured for the better part of an hour. He spoke of uncivilized societies and barbarous cults, the Mayans, the Aztecs, and how for them human flesh was quite literally a food of the gods, and that by consuming it, we, ourselves, would be brought into contact with the divine. "And healed," he said. He spoke of sacrifices and of drinking blood, and claimed that cannibalism was a uniting practice, something to strengthen a group against whatever might be threatening its stability. He spoke, and we listened--and we ate it all up. Eventually, he turned to me and asked, "What about the plan?"

I had one ready. I'd spent days brainstorming, thinking up (and, ultimately, tossing out) countless ideas of how we could find and steal a dead body without getting caught. Eventually, I conceived of a complicated scheme involving my sister and the access she had to the Phys. Ed. department's anatomy room--"dissecting body parts to learn how muscles work," Georgie had told me one day back in September--but discarded it at the last minute because not only was it impractical, I also didn't want Georgie involved, even peripherally, with what we were about to do. So I'd gone back to square one and been happy to do so. You see, it became less real for me that way. All my designing and arranging and scheming turned the whole process into a kind of game for me, not the matter of life and death it actually was. I was glad for the distraction I'd been provided, the puzzle I had to solve, because when you have to attend to that sort of thing, the reality--the reality, I tell you--fades. The inner truth is hidden--luckily, luckily. (That is, by the way, a sentiment stolen from *Heart of Darkness*. Don't imagine that I'd stopped working on my thesis. Oh no, Mistah Kurtz and I were both going native. Hand in hand, as it turned out.) And yes, there was also the satisfaction that comes from solving a puzzle. A small one, I admit, but I took my satisfaction where I could get it.

I told them my plan, my final, new-and-improved one.

"Well, we can't do it right now, there's no way," I said. "We'll have to come back early from break." Brian wanted to know how early, and I told him the thirtieth of December. Eric asked me what I had in mind, and I continued, "We'll do it New Year's Eve. We'll dress up and go to a wake that night. There are four funeral homes within a mile of campus. One of them will most likely have scheduled a wake for that night."

Brian looked doubtful. "On New Year's Eve?" he asked.

I nodded and told him that despite the movie's title, Death never took a holiday. And that, in fact, more people died during the holiday season than at any other time. "This significantly improves our chances of finding a fresh corpse," I said. "Once inside, we'll mix in with the crowd if it's big enough. Or we'll hide out somewhere. Then, when the family of the deceased has gone and the place has been shut down for the night--there'll probably only be one person on duty because of the holiday--we'll check out where they keep the bodies. We'll find one that hasn't been embalmed, one that didn't die from some infectious disease." Quite seriously, I added, "Hopefully there'll be somebody young and healthy, who was killed in a car accident. I mean, it doesn't matter if they've been mutilated, right?"

Brian said, "Jesus."

"Then we'll dress the body up in nice clothes, a dress or a suit (remind me to get something), and very quietly walk out of the funeral home, carrying the body between us like he or she is a friend who's had a little too much to drink. That's in case anyone stops to ask us," I finished.

Eric, Jennifer, and I spent a few minutes discussing my scenario in hushed tones, weighing pros and cons, excluding an extremely unnerved Brian. Ultimately, we agreed that although it left a lot up to chance, my plan seemed to be the most doable, least risky way of obtaining a fresh body. "Unless, of course," Eric joked, "We just go out and kill somebody."

No one laughed.

Four days later, Georgie and I flew home for Christmas. Packing my things up for the holiday, what had been my daily routines at Georgetown melted away like ice cream at a summer picnic. Jennifer and Brian left before I did, and, distanced from them, I started having these strange pangs. Not of guilt exactly (we hadn't done anything really wrong yet), but of unease. The dream-like state I'd been operating in for the last few weeks gave way to a waking, hyper-aware reality. The drugs, the sex, the contact with violence I craved, the imminent cannibalism... What was I thinking? Suddenly, despite my father's insecurities and belligerent attacks on my personality, despite my mother's painful-to-watch submissiveness, I was looking forward to a break from Georgetown and Eric and the dark weirdness swirling around me. *Yes*. I thought, *A vacation from all this and I'll be able to get my head straight*. It could be fun, going back home, and it would bring to mind what used to be enough for me before I started demanding so much from my friends and experiences.

At least that's what I hoped for. And if things had gone that way, it might've saved my life. Unfortunately, the week-long vacation was a nightmare. My older brother announced his engagement to a woman I'd only met once, but instantly hated. My father asked me if I was seeing anyone at Georgetown, and I said something vague about someone who might've been Jennifer. "What's her name?" he wanted to know.

I didn't say anything.

"Or *his* name--I wouldn't be surprised," he added, winking at my brother, letting him in on the big joke that was my life. He harassed me about classes, told me I was wasting my time in English, that I'd never be a writer, and reminded me of the big shoes I had yet to fill at Georgetown.

What else?

I can't recall a single gift I got that year. It snowed a little and rained a lot. Every so often, I'd remember what was waiting for me back in Washington and I'd catch a whiff of that smell from our picnic in Dumbarton Oaks. The stench of rotting meat, on my clothes, on my hands, untraceable and unremovable. I couldn't believe no else noticed it.

Four days after Christmas, I announced that I'd be flying back to Georgetown that afternoon. Neither my mother nor my father expressed concern or disappointment. *Fuck you both*, I thought, and went to my room and started packing. A little later, Georgie knocked, came in, and sat down on my bed. She looked worried.

"Okay, what's wrong?" she asked, and I had to smile because it seemed like such an irony to me, such a complete reversal of a conversation we'd had months before in September. Back when I was the one who supposedly did the taking care of. It--.

...It was hot and we were sitting on Georgetown's big lawn, frying in the burning-white sun. "How're classes?" she asked me. I told her fine, that it was a lot of work, but I was a graduate student now and what did I expect. "You?" I said, "How's Phys. Ed. going?"

"Good. A soccer class that's a soccer class. Volleyball. A children's psychology class that's a little harder," she said, eyes hidden behind sunglasses, head tilted back.

I laughed at that. "Oh, right."

She smiled at me and said, "Fuck off, I'm serious."

"Sorry."

"I'm also taking Basic Anatomy. I have to dissect body parts to learn how muscles work."

I didn't envy her that and said so. I asked her how dorm life was, and she told me great, that she'd won Century Club. "What?" I asked, "Is that?" Georgie shook her head sadly, amazed that her brother, her own flesh and blood, could be so naive and uneducated. "A contest," she said exasperatedly, and continued as though she were explaining the meaning of life or existence of God to an infant, "Whoever can drink a hundred shots of beer in a hundred minutes wins."

"Georgie," I said, images of my sister getting drunk during Century Night or whatever, surrounded by hulking rugby players (or worse) who were waiting for her to get drunk and pass out. Who would attack her, crush her, force her to--.

I remembered my first year at NYU in the dorms. The almost weekly talks about sexual assault and substance abuse. Talks which I did my best to avoid since they, of course, had nothing whatsoever to do with me. Avoided, that is, until Melanie Wiesenthal, who lived in a room not thirty paces from mine--in what was like an urban legend made real--was raped and had her throat slit not by an intruder, but by another freshman. "Georgie," I repeated, "When I was applying to grad schools, I never once thought we'd actually end up here at Georgetown, at the same school, together."

"Frank," she said, knowing exactly where this was going, "I'm fine."

"I know that. I just... Sometimes I can't help worrying about you. I'm sorry. Look, all I'm saying is be careful. And that if you're ever in trouble, if you ever need help, you can call me. Whenever and for whatever reason," I said.

Georgie stood up. "It's too hot out here," she said, "I'm leaving."

"Wait," I said...

...it was pathetic really. "Nothing," I said, and continued to pack.

"Why are you going back so early?" she wanted to know.

"Are you serious?" I said. "Because I hate Mom and Dad and this place is a freak show."

"You've changed," Georgie said, "Are you...depressed or something?"

Now I was getting annoyed. I said, "Aren't you listening to me? I just told you, it's this place. It--."

"No, Frank, this started a long time ago," she said, then whispered confidentially, "How are you and Jennifer?"

Oh, brother.

"Fine."

"Are you doing drugs? Is that it? Besides pot, I mean."

Oh God.

"Georgie," I said, surprisingly close to telling her the truth, telling her everything I'd done and was about to do, "We...we are not having this conversation."

"Fine," she said, and after awhile, after I'd finished packing, remembered, "Your friend Eric called."

My stomach tightened. "When?"

Georgie said, "I don't know...while you were out. He said don't bother calling him, that he'll see you soon."

"Right," I said, and stopped to look at her. It killed me that this thing with Eric and Jennifer and Brian was now spilling over into my personal life away from school. Contaminating Georgie, my home, and yes, even my parents, whom I didn't really hate. It especially bothered me that Georgie had not only noticed my recent behavior, but had obviously been distressed by it. Well, I decided, at least I could do something about that. "Look," I said, "I'm sorry. Jennifer and I wanna spend New Year's together and Georgetown's the best place to meet. That's all."

Georgie said, "Whatever," but I could tell she was relieved. Not completely, no, but at least some, and that was good. "I'll take you to the airport," she said--and did.

Flying over the country, I was eager to put my crumbling relationship with my family behind me, and looked half-forward to the solace my friends would provide. Not with their deeds, but with the sense of belonging they afforded me.

When I got back to Washington, Georgetown's campus was deserted and under a blanket of snow a foot deep. I crossed it to get to my apartment like a man hiking across glaciers from the Ice Age before they melted and started frozen time flowing. The only living thing I saw on that walk was a black dog, a stray that looked half-starved and growled at me as I passed it. I spent the next twenty-four hours alone in my apartment, not answering the phone when it rang (it had to be one of the three, and I'd once again flip-flopped back to fearing what would happen when the three of us got together again) and asking myself questions like: *Can I really do this? Will I be able to? How did I let things get this bad?* And so on and so forth.

At five o' clock on New Year's Eve, I picked up the phone and called Eric. I'd just read in the newspaper that a thirty-year-old man had drowned in the Potomac two days ago, and that the DeVol funeral home, less than a ten-minute walk from campus, was holding a viewing for family and friends of the deceased that night. We met up then, the four of us, with our supplies, and the evening's events unfolded exactly as I'd planned them--at least at first.

The wake was large and thronged, and no one noticed us during the few minutes we spent mingling on the fringes of the surprisingly cheerful crowd. Then our group split up. Jennifer would be stationed out of sight in an alcove near what we assumed to be the employee lounge. (It took awhile finding, since the funeral home had three floors.) She'd keep tabs on whoever might be working that night. Brian would wait outside in an alley behind the funeral home and near a pay phone. If things went wrong and we were caught, he'd be the person we'd call. (God help us, though, if it came to that...) Eric and I would hide in one of the

home's many empty viewing rooms until everyone, mourners and employees, left. Then we'd find a body and get it--and Jennifer--out of there.

By nine, the drowned man's family had left, the lights in the funeral home had been turned off, and only one employee was left in the building. A man, who--Jennifer told us--was snoring loudly in the lounge. Eric and I sent Jennifer back to her post near the lounge and told her to come and find us the second she even suspected the man might wake up and start patrolling the building. It would be a hard thing to do, yes, but not impossible. There were two staircases from the second floor (where the lounge was) to the basement (where Eric and I were going). Jennifer would have to run. Very quietly, naturally, which is why she'd taken off her shoes, why we all had.

Eric and I quickly made our way down to the basement, through a set of double doors marked EMPLOYEES ONLY, and into a white-tiled room where there were three bodies waiting to be prepared. We both carried small flashlights, and used them to examine the corpses. We worked fast. It was like that movie *The Re-animator*. One of the bodies had already been embalmed. "Not this one," I said. Eric pulled back the second one's sheet and shook his head. "Nor this one," he said, "It's cancerous and--" (he sniffed) "...not fresh enough." Two strikes and only one body left. We went to the third gurney together, and each took one side of the corpse's white shroud. We braced ourselves, I said a secret prayer, and then slid the dead thing's sheet off to reveal its face and torso. He was young, our age, but inedible. He'd wasted away to almost nothing, and black lesions covered his neck and the skin around his armpits. "Diseased," I said, and Eric quickly replaced the sheet and turned away. "Fuck," he said, "Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck." He was obviously and understandably upset, and that was unfortunate, but I didn't care. My plan, my REAL plan, had worked magnificently.

I'd been to DeVol's earlier that day to inspect the bodies. I'd almost even gotten caught (broad daylight, you know), but all the extra trouble had been worth it. Don't you get it? All along I'd known that none of the DeVol corpses would be worth stealing or eating. Eric seemed inordinately devastated--*Why?*--but it was too late to try any of the other funeral homes tonight. *Or ever again*, I reasoned, because this last minute reprieve would allow me the necessary time to think of something else for us to do, some other bonding activity that wasn't so transgressive or perverse. And who knows? It might have gone that way, too, if someone hadn't snapped the lights on at that moment, startling us both as we stood over Bachelor Number Three.

"What are you doing here?" the woman (short, pretty, in a black suit) asked. She was at the room's double doors, one hand on the light switch. *Fuck*, I thought, *We've missed someone*. But how? Where? Eric, not showing even a flicker of concern, started walking towards her. "We're looking for someone to help us," he said, "It's our brother, you see. He's dead and--."

And Eric was at her in a flash. I've never seen anyone move so fast. Using his fisted hand like a hammer, he brought it down on the woman's neck with a savageness and a brutality I'd previously attributed to only the most ferocious animals. The woman let out a pathetic yelp and collapsed to the floor in a heap, her neck broken. At least that's what it sounded like. I was struck dumb. *It's not real this isn't happening*. Eric and I looked at each other. I took a step forward, closer to victim and murderer, and asked, "Is she--? Is she--?" Eric prodded her body with his foot and, panting, said, "Yes, I think--."

This time it was the woman who moved quickly, shooting her hand up between Eric's legs and squeezing desperately. Eric bit back a terrible scream and doubled-over. The woman (I wondered how she could possibly still be alive) was on her feet in a blur and running towards me, wanting to get past me and out the

room's double doors. She was crying, not yelling, thankfully, and--quite by instinct, quite automatically--I grabbed her, wrapped my arms tightly around her as she tried to push through me. I wanted to calm her down, I wanted to keep things from spiraling out of control, but there was still Eric to contend with. Seething with pain and furious, he spewed, "Hold her, Frank! We have to do it now! She's seen us! We'll have to--." He was back on his feet, but unsteady. I looked at the woman, at Eric, then back to the woman again. Something in her face gave me pause. Something in her eyes and nose reminded me of--.

Georgie.

I decided then. "Run," I said, and let her go. The woman, confused, eyes wide, bolted out through the doors. I turned back to Eric, who was staring at me, his face a commingling of horror, hatred, and disbelief. "How could you do such a thing?" it demanded.

And then Eric wasn't in the room with me anymore, but after the woman. I'd been left alone to contemplate the room and objects in it. Remarkably, nothing was out of place. And thank God we'd put on gloves--no fingerprints. *Okay*, I thought, *Now I've gotta find Eric before he--*. I pushed through the double doors and strained my ears. In the darkness, all I could hear was a dull, wet, thudding noise. No screams, no clattering of shoes against the foyer's marble floor, nothing like that. Terrified at what I might find, I rounded a corner and came upon Eric and the woman. She was on the floor, flat on her back, her legs (one horribly twisted the wrong way) splayed open. Eric was on her, straddling her, one knee on either side of her body. He was beating her head in with what looked like one of the woman's own thick-heeled shoes. I reached into my jacket, found the penlight, which for some reason I'd put away, and turned it on. There was blood on the shoe, blood on the woman's face, and her skull was caved-in. Grayish-pink matter seeped out from the crack in her head and onto the floor. A pool of black blood was spreading

beneath her, and I knew that this time there'd be no miraculous resurrection. She was dead all right. I very quietly said, "Stop, Eric," and he did--after a few more blows--and turned to face me. Scratches on his forehead, mess on his cheeks and shirt. The wide smile on his face disappeared and he said, rage barely in check, "What were you thinking, Frank?"

That there was no reason to kill this woman. That I wasn't a murderer.

"I'm calling the police, Eric," I said, knowing I wouldn't, but feeling I had to at least hold up the pretense that I was a good person. Eric, however, was in no mood for my posing. "No, you're not," he said, standing. "Nothing's changed, Frank. It's even better this way."

"Why?"

"Stealing a body that's already dead is fine, but it leaves out one of the most important parts of the ritual."

"What?" I said, and could have been conked on the head the answer came to me so suddenly. *Of course.* "The hunt," I said, and wondered if Eric hadn't had his own hidden plan all along: killing the funeral home's lone employee. "Yes," he said.

"Eric, forget it. It's over. We have to call the police," I said. Eric wiped the blood from his mouth and walked up to me, stood eye-to-eye with me. "Say that one more time," he threatened. I didn't. "Good," he said, "Go upstairs and find Jennifer. Don't make a sound. The last thing we need is two murdered bodies on our hands. I'll clean--" he waved towards the woman's broken body "...this up and we'll all meet outside at the pay phone. Give me the clothes and I'll see what I can do about wiping up the worst of the blood."

I gave Eric the shirt and pants I'd been carrying in a pack on my back and went to get Jennifer. "Did you find one?" she wanted to know. The man, the

worker we'd been aware of, was still asleep in a chair with the lounge's television on. I didn't say anything, and Jennifer said, "What's wrong?"

"Everything," I said, "It's all gone wrong." She seemed then to somehow guess what must have happened, and accepted it silently. (Was she in on it? On that one particular? I never found out...) We slipped out of the funeral home and into the night.

Oh boy, were we lucky. It had started snowing heavily sometime while we were inside, and a strong wind had come up. It blew big clumps of swirling snow through the dark air, making visibility not just difficult, but almost impossible. Incredibly, Eric was already at the pay phone, had somehow beaten Jennifer and me there. The woman's body was propped up against his shoulder. Brian, I noticed once I'd gotten close enough to them, had thrown up and was shivering. He must've taken a look beneath the improvised turban Eric had wrapped around the woman's still-leaking head. So we all knew now, and we'd all decided to see this thing through to its inevitable end. "Come on," Eric said, "We'll go to my place." Putting one of the woman's arms around my neck (the other was around Eric's), we walked her to Eric's building--no doorman--and took the elevator up to the seventh floor.

I can't tell you what the others must have been feeling and thinking during that walk. I can't even explain what was going through my own mind and heart. Except that... Well, you might want to laugh when I say it was like a dream, but that's the closest thing I can compare it to. And even that's no good. It wasn't a dream exactly, just unreal. If anything, like a dream brought on by a fever. At one point, I remember, I lost my grip on the woman's arm and she slipped from our grasp. Picking her up, I thought: *I can't believe I'm doing this. This isn't me, it's someone else.* I saw Eric for the first time that night. I was in a kind of numbed shock. I--. I wonder...

When I was telling you about the murder, did you--could you?--see Eric? Do you see any pictures while I'm talking? It's like I'm trying to tell you about some hallucination I had, trying and failing, because no telling of a dream can recreate that dream-sensation. You know, the mixture of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment, felt in that moment of unspeakable horror and absolute passion, that notion of being caught up in something which is so ridiculously unreal it must be a dream.

Must be, but isn't...

Once in Eric's apartment and behind locked doors, we went about preparing the body. Brian was a wreck, and no help whatsoever. Jennifer was busy getting the rest of dinner ready. So most of it fell on Eric's and my shoulders. On mine, really. And that was fine.

By the time the actual cutting began, I'd had more than a couple of drinks and joints to steady my nerves and hands. We did it in the bathroom, on a make-shift operating table Eric had set up in the tub. I couldn't imagine where he'd gotten the surgical instruments.

To do it, to do the actual cutting and sawing, I had to convince myself that the woman whose clothes I was taking off was nothing but a piece of meat, that she had no name or history or family. I could and did do this, because everything falls away in the face of hunger. Not hunger for food, mind you. I'm talking about something deeper. Something...

Rigor mortis had begun to set in and that made things easier. There was blood, of course, and the gray liquid oozing from her head, but also piss--she'd pissed herself--to clean up. That was the first step.

We'd start with the arms, I announced, serrated knives and saw at the ready. Eric held the woman's body firmly and, when he saw I wasn't moving, said, "This is for all of us, Frank."

I drew the saw across its bluish skin, splitting it easily, revealing first a layer of cottony white and yellow fat, then red thread-like tendons. (If you're trying to appreciate what this was like, imagine yourself a curious boy, peeling off the layers of a golfball and discovering the rubber bands beneath its white, pimpled surface.) The bone was tougher to cut through, but I managed. *Oh, God*, I thought, *Who is making me do this?* Eventually there was most of a body and an arm, two separate objects. Blood was everywhere, slick and red, smelly and black. On the saw, in the tub, on my clothes. I took my shirt off. It was hot in the bathroom, boiling, and there is nothing more uncomfortable than a wet shirt, wet with sweat or blood, sticking to your chest and back. Eric gave Jennifer the arm. "Don't let Brian see it like that," he warned her. The second arm was harder, and I almost lost it at one point, yelling for Eric to: "GODDAMNIT IT, COVER HER FACE!"

The legs came off next. The saw had dulled considerably and my arms ached, but I didn't mind those extra difficulties at all. They gave me something else to think about, some throbbing, muscular detail to get lost in. I told myself that Eric had done the actually killing, that what I was doing was no worse than what pathologists did every day of their lives. No more evil, that is. It was actually a good thing, I reasoned. We were, after all, getting rid of the evidence.

Cutting through the neck was different. Because it was hollow, I suppose, and the sawing noise seemed to echo. Eric was looking at himself in the bathroom mirror when he should have been paying attention to what I was doing, and the head slipped through his fingers and bounced to the floor like a basketball, rolling around a bit before ultimately coming to rest against my right foot. Finally, the thing in the tub had begun to resemble one of Serrano's photographs. It wasn't beautiful, no, but neither was it human, someone's--.

Sister.

...someone's loved one.

Jennifer took the dismembered limbs into the kitchen one by one. Except for the head, which Eric deposited in a footlocker he'd positioned under the sink. My shoes by this time were soaked through with blood and fluid, and made comical squishing noises every time I took a step. I unlaced them and kicked them off. After the head, I assumed we were done and said, "I'm having a shower," but Eric put a hand on my shoulder and asked, "What about that?" He was referring to the torso.

"What about it?" I said.

"You're forgetting one thing, Frank. The most important thing," he said, handing me a scalpel. It was so fucking hot I felt like throwing up. I wiped my brow with the back of my right hand and remembered. *The heart*. That would be harder than the appendages, but not impossible. I'd gone this far and would go further. "Get me a drink," I said, and--after I'd had it--dug into the torso. The breastbone and ribs were troublesome. I used a hammer to crack them and a crowbar to pry them back. "Be careful with the heart," Eric said. Things got messier and--can you believe it?--on some level I actually started to enjoy myself. I could've gone straight for the heart no problem, but I bizarrely thought, *I've done this much, why shouldn't I see what else--?* Trapped heat escaping from the open body made the bathroom feel even more like a steaming jungle. Beads of sweat fell from my forehead into the gaping cavity beneath me. My hands and arms up to the elbows disappeared into the hole, and I rooted through organs. Purple intestines that were like tubing. Kidneys that were, amazingly, shaped like kidney-beans. Squishy, foamy lungs. Oh, it sounds incomprehensible and...and detestable, and it was. But it held a fascination, too, that went to work on me. The fascination of the abomination. Try to think of it. All my regrets and mistakes, my desires to

escape, the powerless disgust, the self-loathing, and, finally, the surrender to something dark and warm and eternal...

Eventually, I emerged from the cavity and held the thing out for Eric's approval. He took it, deposited it into the footlocker, and told me to follow him. We by-passed the living room and went out his apartment's back entrance. The door opened onto a grimy, dark stairwell. "Leave your socks here," Eric said, and I took them off. "No one uses these stairs, but I don't want to have to mop up bloody footprints." We started walking down the stairs. There was a parking garage beneath Eric's building, and he led me to its lowest level. "Wait here," he said, and I did, on the stairs, while he popped into the garage to see if anyone was there. There wasn't, and he called me in. "We'll do this fast," Eric said, turning a hose (which, I gathered, until that night had only ever been used to wash and rinse cars clean) full-force on me. I stripped out of my clothes, and Eric wrapped them in a plastic bag and then dropped them into a nearby incinerator chute. It took awhile for the dried blood to come off my skin. I gulped the water down when it hit my face. It tasted sweet and clean. It was freezing in the garage, and my naked body shivered against the cold, but I welcomed it after the bathroom's inferno. Fifteen minutes later, I was as clean as I was going to get. We went back up to the apartment, and Eric gave me dry clothes, some of his own, pockets full even, to wear. "Put these on and go wait with Brian," he said. "Make sure he's all right."

He wasn't. He and I sat in the living room while Jennifer and Eric worked in the bathroom and kitchen, cleaning things up and getting dinner ready. Brian and I shared a joint and a bottle of red wine. He'd done the least of any of us, but was the most affected. Every so often, he punctuated the conversation we were having with short, loud bursts of giggles, and it vaguely occurred to me that he might be going insane. More than anyone, Brian lacked the insides for what we were doing.

He asked, "What are we gonna do with the rest of it? After tonight, I mean."

This was something we'd decided a long time ago. "We were thinking Malone's quarry in Arlington. Of renting a car and driving across the bridge. We could break through the ice, weigh the thing down," I said. "It's deep enough."

"That's good," Brian said, then giggled. He handed me the joint, and I said, "Thanks," and took a nice, long drag. He giggled again and began, "This is--." Taking a deep breath to get the words out, he continued, "I mean, we're sick." I handed him back the joint and said, "Yep."

Some minutes passed (I didn't know many, I'd taken my watch off for the operation), and Jennifer finally emerged from the kitchen. She set two plates down on the round table where we were going to eat and said, "Here we are." Brian and I looked at each other, then slowly stood up and took our places at the table. Eric, also carrying two plates, came into the room. He'd showered and changed, but I could still see dried, caked blood beneath his fingernails. (Under mine, too, for that matter.) "Are you sure this is cooked?" Brian asked, looking from his plate heaped with food to mine. Eric was not amused and said, "Just eat it!"

No one budged.

"Is this--?" I began.

Jennifer, "It's fine."

"...white meat or dark?" I finished.

She looked to Eric, who was silent, and said that she didn't know.

And still, no one ate.

Jennifer picked up her fork and poked at the food twice before putting it back down. Then she very casually asked, "Can I have the mayonnaise?" I looked at her blankly, blinked, and handed the jar over. Then, following her lead, I asked for the salt. Brian burst out laughing (the poor guy was gone), and Eric had had enough.

"Who's gonna be first?" Eric demanded and, when no one spoke up, answered his own question. "Fine. I will. I'm not afraid."

He took a bite like it was nothing. Then Jennifer did. And I did, a small one. And lastly, Brian. After that first bite, Jennifer very stupidly said, "You know, this isn't bad. It tastes like...um..." She floundered. Trying to make a joke, I said, "Chicken?"

Jennifer and Brian smiled and did their best not to laugh, but couldn't help it. Eric was getting angry, but he didn't stop what he was doing, just kept eating.

In truth, it didn't taste anything like chicken. If anything, it tasted like fatty pork, I guess. The thing is...such actions might be imagined, yes, but words don't have the capacity for impressing the mind or soul with the matchless terror of their reality.

It tasted of my mortality. It tasted like my complete undoing. It tasted like--like lurking death and hidden evil and profound darkness.

Nevertheless, I ate.

From somewhere over our heads, in the apartment above us, I heard people moving about, laughing and dancing. Then I heard them chanting in unison: "Ten, nine, eight--."

Jennifer looked up, asked, "Wha--?"

"...seven, six, five, four--."

Brian closed his eyes and looked as if he were about to start crying. "Oh, God," he said, "I'd forgotten."

"...three, two, one--."

I remembered just as Eric said it, "Happy New Year."

** ** *

"Cannibals have the same notions of right and wrong
that we have. They make war in the same anger and passion
that move us, and the same crimes are committed everywhere.
Eating fallen enemies is only an extra ceremonial. The wrong
does not consist in the roasting, but in the killing."
...Voltaire, *Letter to Frederick the Great*, Oct. 1737.

2. THE SPEED OF DARKNESS.

WHEE!!

The South Room's whistle blew, suddenly and loudly, signaling the end of lunch and, for the time being, Frank's story. "Damn," said the banker, "Just when things were starting to heat up." We stood from our table, picked up our trays, and shuffled towards the cafeteria's steel doors. Frank was on his feet first. Then me, then Hope, then Keen.

This is how our lunch ritual always ends: Step One; scrape whatever mushy scraps remained on our plates into the recycling bin (where today's dinner begins the transformation into tomorrow's breakfast). Step Two; hands clasped behind our backs and in an orderly fashion, file past the three armed guards keeping watch at the cafeteria's doors, identifying ourselves by name and number before leaving. Finally, Step Three; return to our individual lock-ups.

And so it went.

I told the keepers who I was and what the seven digits burned into my chest were, and the next time I'd see the rest of my group would be before dinner, during our thirty minutes of outdoor recreation in the exercise yard...

...It was dusk when our group reconvened outside in what felt like summer's dead heat. The Big Lamps, the kind stadiums use for football games at night, had been turned on, but it was still darker than the cafeteria. We sat on the bleachers packed closely together, our knees and backs rubbing, so we could see one another's faces.

Down at the yard's far end, the white guys were working out, grunting like pumped-up beasts, on a set of weights older than God. Across from them on the court, the black guys were playing their daily game of basketball, their skin shiny and slick with sweat.

I never had any real desire to take part in these organized physical activities. I got enough of a workout doing sit-ups and pull-ups in my cell at night. The others probably did, too. So instead of playing ball or pressing benches, we'd continue whatever conversation had been begun earlier that day in the dining hall. Or we'd just sit there quietly, watching the sun set, smelling the ocean's salt water (without, of course, ever being able to see it). Sometimes, Hope and Keen played chess. They did that day, immersing themselves in an unwinnable war of wits, while Chuck asked me, "Do you believe him?" (Frank hadn't yet rejoined us.)

"Of course I do," I said.

"But that's disgusting," he said. "Letting that faggot suck his cock is bad enough..." Hope and Keen glanced up from their game, and we shared a look. I shrugged, and they went back to the chess board.

I suppose it was entirely possible that since Chuck had only recently arrived to our hellish home, he hadn't yet been raped or forced to give one of the older Lifers head. But make no mistake, it would happen. Oh, yes. Sooner or later, it happened to everyone. If you're lucky, it only happens once or twice and you don't get ripped up too badly. Or worse, infected.

I sighed. Chuck obviously still had a world to learn, but I wasn't gonna be the one to teach him. Not yet, at least. He was saying: "...bad enough, but eating human flesh?"

I kept my mouth shut.

"If that's true, then he's a degenerate and a pervert and deserves worse than this," Chuck decided, and, when I didn't say anything again, asked, "Doesn't it sicken you?"

I looked at the new guy and shook my head, smiling. I asked him what he was in for. Chuck straightened a little and turned away so I wouldn't be able to look him in the eyes. "Murder," he said.

"Who?"

"My brother," he told me. "It was a stupid thing. An accident."

Well, sure it was an accident, but he'd still done it. I said, "We're all murderers. Me, them, you, Frank." (Hope had strangled his wife and Keen had shot his partner in the back.) "Frank went further than some, all right, but that's a testament to him, to his will, to his restraint," I said. The new guy didn't like that. He asked, "How do you figure?"

"Because," I explained, "He went very far, followed Eric and the others into the darkness, yeah, but he also made it back." *Almost*, I thought.

"What?" Chuck asked.

"In the end, Frank more than proved he had the insides to return from where he'd gone. He stepped back into the light and even saved lives."

"Bullshit," Chuck said. He was scared, the new guy. Of what Frank had done, or of what he, himself, had done. I think maybe this was when he finally started to suspect what kind of person he really was--as well as the real nature of the place he'd suddenly found himself in.

At that moment, one of the basketball players yelled--and his booming voice carried across the courtyard all the way to where we were sitting. Chuck and I both turned to look, and Frank was there. Also on the bleachers, standing a few feet away from us. He was holding a packet of papers in one hand, staring down at us. He sat next to the new guy and said, "The most you can hope from going over what you've done again and again is some knowledge of yourself. It comes too late, yes, but it comes, and maybe it makes up for the crop of inextinguishable regrets. I don't blame you for what you think of me, Chuck, but remember--you have distance and hindsight. You see more now than I could then. You see me..." Frank stared intently into Chuck's face, into the new guy's black eyes. "You hate yourself for what you've done," he told the new guy.

"Fuck you," Chuck said, "You have no idea what it's like. You let that faggot tell you what to do and you--you ate, but you didn't..." Chuck couldn't finish his thought, and his sentence trailed off and vanished into nothing, like fog burned away by the sun.

"Oh, I did much more than eat," Frank said, "Our New Year's dinner was just the beginning."

I said, "He doesn't want to hear, Frank."

"No," Chuck interrupted, "Let him finish."

Frank flipped through the stack of papers he was carrying. Some were typed pages, others were black-and-white cartoon drawings he'd done (I recognized his style), and there was even a small book among the other stuff, although I couldn't read its title. Studying one particular picture (a drawing of four smiling people, one of whom looked a lot like Frank), he picked up the thread and continued, "After the main course..."

* * *

After the main course, of which Brian ate about half, Jennifer, more than half, and Eric--.

Well, Eric ate it all, cleaning his plate, then ours, using a slice of bread to mop up the meat's juices from every surface the food had come in contact with, then devouring it voraciously...

After the main course, we had dessert, a pecan pie Jennifer had baked especially for me topped with vanilla ice cream, and drank some more wine. I abandoned ship at close to four that morning, staggering home through the snow and ice, leaving Brian passed out on the couch, Jennifer not yet ready to brave the dark night, and Eric promising to walk her home later. On the way to my apartment, I stopped in at a 7-11 and bought two packs of Juicy Fruit gum. A policeman, buying smokes and coffee, eyed me suspiciously, and then said something. "What?" I asked, not having understood him.

He said: "'Happy New Year,' I said."

"Oh," I said, taking my change from the Indian man working behind the counter. "Uh, thanks."

The Indian man's hand brushed mine and I thought, *He'll have it now*. The smell, I mean. That stink coming from my hands. (Like the raw-hamburger-meat-smell you get after making patties at a cookout. No matter how much soap you use or how hot the water is, you can't get rid of it... And if you shake someone's hand, they catch the stench, too.) The one I'd had since our cold-weather picnic, now grown stronger after our binding meal. *Couldn't the guy smell it? Couldn't the cop?*

The cop said something else, and again he had to repeat himself before I got what he was saying. "You have something there," he said, flicking the skin just beneath his mouth. I looked into the shiny metal casing of one of the 7-11's freezers and saw my face, reflected back at me and only a little distorted.

Yikes.

I looked bad. Black circles beneath my bloodshot eyes, hair sticking up at odd angles. And since I hadn't shaved in what must've been days, my face was dark and rough with stubble. And on that stubble, beneath my mouth, on my chin, there was a piece of red, wet--.

Oh, no.

...wet meat. A morsel from dinner. *Don't panic, Frank.* I didn't panic. I flicked my tongue out, caught the tidbit, and swallowed the cold chunk down. I wondered why Eric and the others hadn't said anything about it. "Thanks," I told the cop, and walked out of the 7-11 and into the snowy night. I ripped open one of the Juicy Fruit packs and immediately popped five sticks of gum into my mouth. I wanted to get rid of the taste, you see. And it did help a little. Not by getting rid of the flavor exactly, but by covering it up some. And when the wad of gum in my mouth had lost all hint of its sweet, orangey taste, I'd spit it out and replace it with fresh sticks. By the time I finally made it back home, I'd almost gone through both packs.

I lived in a huge house split into four apartments. I tried the front door, which was sometimes unlocked, but that night wasn't. I fished through my pockets and got out my keys. Only they weren't mine, they must've been Eric's, since I was wearing his jeans. "Fuck," I said, remembering my cold water hosing, and then sneezed. Once, twice, a third time. *Oh, Great,* I thought, *Now I'm gonna catch pneumonia.* I went around the side of the house and tried the back door, which was also locked. "Fuck," I said again. Dying to get in from the cold, I knocked on the door to be let in by someone, my neighbors or landlady, but no one answered. After five minutes of pounding, I gave up. Everyone must've been either asleep or ignoring me. I started to look for another way in, and that's when I spotted the basement's small, frosty window. I could crawl through it, I knew, and get into the

building's cellar, where each tenant had storage space, where the washer and dryer were, and, most importantly, where I'd hidden an extra key to my apartment. I bent down and tried it, but, unfortunately, it was also locked. Not giving a shit at this point, exhaustion my driving imperative, I kicked the window in. Its shattered glass clattered to the basement's cement floor loudly. I eased myself through the jagged rectangle, cutting the palm of my right hand on a piece of broken glass, but not really feeling it. Then I made the short jump to the floor, knocked over a set of old, empty mayonnaise jars (also breaking them noisily), found my key after much groping in the dark, and walked the two flights up to my apartment. I let myself in and, without turning the lights on or even undressing, collapsed into bed and instantly fell asleep.

It did me a lot of good, that night's dreamless sleep, in that it gave me the chance to distance myself from all that had happened the day and evening before. It made our deeds all the more unbelievable and alien to the functioning, real world regular people lived in. Someone else had done those things, not me. I was normal. I had a younger sister, a family that most of the time loved me. I went to school. I had friends. Or something not unlike friends. I had--.

I had a rough time of it, too, when I woke up. I spent most of January 1, 1996, A.D. (After Dinner), puttering around my apartment, phone off the hook. The first thing I did was clean and bandage my sticky, bloody hand. *At least*, I thought, *I hadn't bled to death*. It throbbed, and I was afraid it might be infected. (Not too afraid, however, since a bit later on, I forgot all about it.) I brought in the newspaper from the white, snowy world outside and fixed myself a bowl of cereal. But then the thought of eating cereal, anything really, sickened me, and I dumped the milk and shreddies into the sink. I opened the paper and searched the Daily Crime Report. There was no mention of any foul play at DeVol's. "Thank God," I said, flipping through the rest of *The Washington Post*. I passed the remains of the

day reading, for fun and for school, sniffing and sneezing (I didn't have pneumonia, just a bad cold), calling home, and watching television. At around ten that night, I replaced the phone in its cradle. Almost instantly, it started ringing. It was a shrill noise--and I was nervous--so I jumped a little and my heart skipped a beat at its loud, sudden sound. "H-hello," I said.

"Frank, it's me," the voice said. *Jennifer*. "You have to come over."

"Jennifer..."

"I have to show you something," she said. I thought about it and told her I'd be over just as soon as I was dressed and had something to eat. "I'll be waiting," she said, and we hung up. I put on jeans and a sweater, and made some spaghetti, but couldn't stomach the sight of pasta and red sauce in front of me when I sat down to it at my kitchen table. Again, I threw the food out, and, instead of the spaghetti, stuffed three pieces of plain Wonder bread into my mouth. Somehow, I managed to keep them down. I went into the bathroom and brushed my teeth for the fifth time that day. In the twenty-four hours following our...meal, I'd used up half a tube of toothpaste and scrubbed so hard my gums bled, but I could still taste it... Then I bundled up (it was snowing continuously, Washington was having its worst winter on record) and walked over to Jennifer's.

What I saw when I got there was just one of the many remarkable things that happened the week following our midnight meal on New Year's Eve.

I knocked on the door and Jennifer opened it, kissing me and pulling me into her dark apartment. She looked strange, tired but almost kinetic, and dirty, but with a squeaky-clean, oily smell about her. She asked me how I was doing with "You know, It," and I said, "Fine, I guess. Except I'm sick."

"Poor baby," she said.

Then, taking me by the hand, she led me into the living room.

"Close your eyes," she said, and I shut them. A few steps later, Jennifer told me to re-open them, and when I did I saw that her living room had been completely transformed. Tables and chairs pushed flush up against the wall. Candles burning instead of the usual light bulbs. White bed sheets, splattered with dark colors, spread out over the room's hardwood floor. And in the center of it all, on a steel easel, was a giant canvas, no longer white as I'd gotten used to seeing them at Jennifer's, but loaded with oils, covered with markings and swashes of colors. Finally, she'd broken through her block.

"Jennifer," I said, "That's...that's great." I meant it. I was happy for her. And it couldn't have been a coincidence (the painting following so closely on the heels of the eating), so the implication was that some good had come out of--.

"Do you love it?" she asked.

"I... Yes, I do. I just can't believe it," I said, "How did--?" She picked up a bottle of wine from the floor and gulped some down. "When I got home from Eric's, I couldn't sleep. I tried calling you, but there was no answer. Then it was busy all the time."

I said, "I know, I'm sorry," but Jennifer shook her head.

"No, it was just what I needed. To be alone. To have something to do instead of...think. I just did it. Before I could convince myself that it would be no good, that I shouldn't bother, the paint was out of the tubes and on the canvas."

The painting was predominantly black, with red symbols, jagged and primitive-looking, criss-crossing its rectangular surface. I asked Jennifer what it was, if anything. She smiled and said she hadn't figured it out yet, that it was just something inside her, something that had been waiting to come out for a long time.

She grabbed me by the shoulders and maneuvered me towards her bedroom.

"Hey," I said.

"No," Jennifer said, now covering my eyes with her hands, "You have to see this, too." Another few steps later, she took her hands away.

"Oh, God," I said.

"I did this for you," Jennifer explained, taking the entire room in with a gesture. On the floor, stacked against the wall one after the other, were new canvases, their paint still wet and smelly. (Linseed oil...that was the smell.) They were sunless images, blacks and greens, of forests and jungles, plants and trees on canvas after canvas. And what's more, Jennifer had continued the pictures from the canvases onto her bedroom's walls, painted creepers, vines, and ivy growing out from the stretched boxes and spreading across the walls, up to the ceiling even. "Oh, God," I said again. Jennifer took my hand. "What do you think?" she wanted to know.

"Jennifer--"

You're insane. All this is--.

"...it's beautiful," I said.

She sat down on her bed and pulled me down next to her. "You hungry?" she asked. I shook my head. She touched my cheek, my neck. "Horny?" she asked. I thought about it and--you know what?--I was. I nodded, "Yes."

I put my hand between Jennifer's legs, squeezed, and kissed her hard on the mouth. I hiked up her skirt and helped her with her panties. "I want you to--," she began, but I was way ahead of her. My right hand's fingers slid into her moist vagina and disappeared. I kissed Jennifer's mouth again, tugged her paint-stained t-shirt off. Still thrusting my now very wet fingers into her, I kissed her breasts and with my tongue traced small circles around her nipples. I worked my way down (I was now on the floor, kneeling in front of her, my dick hard), first kissing Jennifer's firm stomach, then smelling the puddle of sweat collected in her navel, then following the faint trail of hair down to her pussy, where I replaced hand with

face, fingers with tongue. I licked her and licked her, and--after a bit--Jennifer grabbed me by the hair and yanked me up onto the bed. She undid my belt and unzipped my jeans. She put my cock in her mouth and I--.

I got very scared and started going soft. "No, I said, "Don't."

"Why not?" she asked, "You like--."

"Just...no," I said, and rolled on top of her. I stroked my cock until it was totally hard again and stuck it into her pussy. We fucked for awhile (it was little more than pounding and grunting, really), and I came: a cold, rubbery spasm. Afterwards, I got up and started putting my clothes back on. Jennifer said, "No. Stay." Looking around the room at the dark painted jungle taking over, I said that I didn't think so, that I should maybe just leave. Jennifer slumped back into her bed's sheets and said, "Fine." I told her I'd call her the next day, but didn't really think I would. You see, although I'd been horny, yes, there was a second, more important, reason for why I had sex with Jennifer. It was because I wanted to see if--.

I'd touched her body and been turned-on, but besides that felt nothing. No love, no tenderness. Whatever we'd had was finally and definitely over. The sex had been cheap, and I felt guilty and sad about it. I knew I'd have to tell her soon that we were through, but I didn't want it to be that night. That night I wanted to be alone. And, you know, it's funny, but once the decision to break it off with Jennifer was squared-away in my mind, I found I could almost enjoy the walk home. *Things will get better*, I thought, and my only regret was that each step I took ravaged the otherwise perfectly smooth blanket of snow around me.

I went in through my building's back door, noticing that someone had boarded up the window I'd broken the night before. Once inside my apartment, I took off my coat and saw that the red light on my answering machine was blinking. A message. No, two messages. I hit the PLAY button and then heard

about another, the second, extraordinary matter which happened in the wake of our little culinary experiment.

Brian voice, saying: "--guess you're not, um, there, Frank. Anyway, I'm, uh, calling to tell you that I have some...some stuff if you want it..."

Stuff? I thought, then broke the code. *Drugs.*

"...I don't know if you do, but I...I definitely don't want it anymore. It's all--. I can't--. I just don't, not any more... So call me if you do. Or--or call if you don't, I don't care. Uh, bye." A click, and the connection was broken. I sat down and put my head in my hands. Jennifer Carter painting again was one thing, but Brian Lamb not doing drugs anymore...now that was something to worry about. I realized then that of our group I liked Brian best, more than Jennifer, certainly more than Eric, and that his particular involvement in Eric's depraved scheme sickened me almost as much as what we'd eaten. It struck me (perhaps wrongly) that Eric's inclusion of Brian in our circle was a completely gratuitous act--at least much more so than his choosing Jennifer or me--something he'd done merely to display his need for immediate gratification, to show that he could (and would) consume not only the people he needed, but the people he wanted--just for fun.

"Oh, Brian," I said to no one in particular.

Not surprisingly, Eric's voice followed Brian's. He wanted to see if maybe I would like to go over there and just hang out with him. I turned the machine off half-way through Eric's discourse, afraid that if I listened to his whole message, I might actually consider venturing out into the cold night once more. "I don't think so, you sick fuck," I said. I crawled into bed, and my last thoughts as I fell asleep were of how it wasn't too late to start again, that we'd done a horrible thing, okay, but that there was still something else, that I still had my life.

I slept soundly that night, the last time ever, unaware that things were about to go from bad to infinitely worse.

The next morning *The Washington Post* ran an article in its Daily Crime Report about a local funeral home employee who'd gone missing. Her name was Jennifer Lokash, a young woman originally from Toronto. She was--.

Oh, God.

...married and had two children, Bradley (age 10) and Wesley (7). Blood smeared into a carpet suggested that the woman had been forcibly removed from the DeVol establishment, but that was all the police knew. They had no possible motive, no leads to speak of, and could only "guess" that the assault had taken place some time early New Year's Day. One of the investigating officers described the crime as "senseless" and "a hell of a way to start the new year." Stephen Ahern, another DeVol employee (he'd been the first to report Lokash missing), was not a suspect in the ongoing investigation.

"It doesn't mean anything," Eric said when I read him the article over the phone. "There's nothing to connect us to the crime and they'll never find the body."

I closed my eyes and shook my head. "Eric," I said, "She was married. This woman--she had children for God's sake!"

"Listen to me, Frank," Eric said, "It was your plan that went wrong."

My plan.

Senseless.

I didn't say anything and Eric went on, "I want you and Jennifer to come over for dinner tonight. I'm worried that Brian--." I hung up on him and, like an idiot, savagely ripped the phone cord out of the wall.

"Oh, brilliant," I said.

I dropped the useless phone to the floor and stripped out of my clothes. I took a shower and brushed my teeth again, even though I hadn't had anything to eat since the slices of white bread the day before. I was in my towel, shaving, when the doorbell rang and I went to answer it, shirtless and still dripping wet.

"Yeah?" I said to the man standing in my hallway. He was older, about fifty, and looked a lot like Pickman actually, but with a full head of graying brown hair. He flashed a smile and a badge and said, "I'm Detective Joe Bullock. Do you have a minute?"

I smiled back, hoped it didn't look too fake, and opened the door. The detective walked into my apartment--and finally there was a force of good in my story. "Gimme a sec," I said, and went into my bedroom to put on jeans and a sweatshirt. And there, right next to my bed, were the clothes I'd worn--.

After you let Eric murder that woman.

...worn after Eric hosed me down. Pink splotches, some faint traces of blood I hadn't fully scrubbed off, suddenly stood out from the white shirt like a technicolor nightmare. I kicked the clothes, Eric's clothes, under the bed. Of course, a thorough search would turn them up, but I hoped it wouldn't come to that. All I had to do was keep calm. *Oh, sure.* Once I was more or less dressed, I went back out into the living room where Detective Joe Bullock was, squatting down on his haunches and twirling the ripped phone cord in his right hand. *Oh, fuck,* I thought, *Fuckfuckshitshitfuck!*

"Crank callers?" the detective asked.

"Oh," I laughed, "No, I...tripped and the phone came..." I must've sounded retarded. "Right," Bullock said, standing up. I asked him if he'd like some coffee (because that's what you do after you've just killed someone and there's a cop snooping around your apartment, you offer him coffee), and he said that would really hit the spot. I started for the kitchen, then stopped. "Oh," I said.

"What?" Bullock asked.

"I'm sorry," I said, remembering suddenly, "I don't drink coffee."

Bullock sat down on the big, over-stuffed chair I'd bought with Fiona at a garage sale months ago and said, "A graduate student who doesn't drink coffee,

huh? What's next? A college student who doesn't drink beer?" *Funny*. He laughed and I laughed (nervously, I was terrified), and then asked him how he knew I was a graduate student. "The books on your table and shelves," he said. "You writing a thesis?"

"Yeah."

"On?"

"Joseph Conrad," I said, "He wrote--.

"Heart of Darkness and Lord Jim," Bullock interrupted, "Yeah, I know."

Funny AND smart...oooooh, I better watch it.

I sat down and, quoting every single crime movie ever made, asked the detective what this was all about. "Two nights ago, your landlady reported a break-in. Your building's basement window. Nothing was taken. Any ideas?" he asked. I smiled then, and all the weight of the world collected at the top of my spine and evaporated. *Thank God*, I thought, and said, "Oh, that was me." I explained that I'd come home late from a party, that I'd forgotten my key, and that no one had opened the door when I'd knocked. It was just like my landlady, I said, to not hear my pounding and then freak out over a broken window. I said I was sorry and that I'd gladly pay for the damage. Now, if the detective didn't mind, I had a lot of organizing to do before the term started back up again, so could he please--.

"What time did you come home that night?" he asked, "New Year's Eve?"

Don't lie. "Four o'clock, I think," I said.

Bullock wanted to know if I'd seen anything out of the ordinary on my walk back from--where was it? The party? "At a friend's house. His name's Eric Zann. He lives on the other side of the university, near the hospital," I said. "And, no, I didn't see anything strange. It was snowing and the streets were pretty deserted." Then I added, "And I was, um, fairly intoxicated." The detective smiled again, said he understood, no problem, and closed the black notebook I hadn't even seen him

open. He thanked me for my time and trouble, and I told him it was no problem and showed him to the door. Then, for some unfathomable reason, I opened my mouth again and asked Detective Bullock—jokingly, of course—if he didn't think it just a little bit silly, the police going to all this hassle over a broken window in an apartment building when nothing had been stolen. Bullock said it must sure seem that way, but that, in fact, he was working on another case, the possible homicide of a young woman, an employee at a nearby funeral home (had I heard of it?), and that he personally was checking out any and all disturbances reported New Year's Eve in the vicinity of the funeral home in question.

"Oh," I said. "Any--leads?"

The detective shook his head and said, "Some bloody footprints in the snow, that's about it." Again, he asked me if I'd seen anything unusual that night, and again, I said I hadn't. He gave me his card and told me to call him in case I remembered anything later on. (*Jeez, I marveled, They really do that.*) I said that of course I would, then closed the door behind him.

Well, I'd have to speak with the others now, that much was clear. I had to warn them about Bullock, and tell them that we'd be fine so long as no one did anything stupid or rash or gratuitous. So I called them. From a pay phone on the corner. Eric first, who assured me again that there was no way the woman's remains would be found, that they were at the bottom of Malone's quarry, fish food and fertilizer. Then Jennifer, to warn her and to tell her that it was over between us, that we could be friends if she wanted to, but that was all. And finally, Brian, to make sure he was all right, to let him know that I understood what he was feeling, and that (believe it or not) things would get better. "They have to," I said.

And almost surprisingly, they did. At least insofar as that a few weeks passed before we killed anyone else.

The days crawled by.

A month after New Year's Eve, we were once again neck-deep in the comforting academic rituals of other, more typical, Georgetown graduate students. (Or, at least, should have been.) I bumped into them every so often. My friends, I'll still call them. Jennifer and Eric always seemed to be together, and that bothered me. Not because I was jealous, but because they looked to be feeding off each other in some way, and I knew that that couldn't be a good thing for any of us. (Oh, I did see Eric once alone, on the second term's first day of classes, and he looked stunning. The eating had done him good apparently. Better, at least, than it had me or Brian, who hadn't shaved and looked a wreck.) Eventually, the papers and television stopped carrying stories about the missing woman. It remained snowy, cold, and dark long into February. We even had an honest-to-goodness blizzard, which dumped three feet of heavy, wet snow on Washington's madness and downed power lines across the city.

Come to think of it, it was sometime during the nine-hour blackout caused by that tremendous snowstorm when Georgie, whom I hadn't seen once since school started up again, dropped by for a surprise visit. She came bearing flashlights and candles.

I opened the door for her and said, "You shouldn't be out, it's dangerous." She came into my dark apartment. The batteries in the one flashlight I'd been able to find had died hours ago, and I didn't own any candles and couldn't be bothered with actually going out to borrow or buy some. And to be honest, along with the fear, I'd come to find a certain comfort in the darkness. I couldn't, for instance, accidentally see my reflection in any of the apartment's mirrors or shiny surfaces. "We need to talk," Georgie said, taking her coat off and lighting a candle, then two more. "Why are you sitting in the dark?" she asked, and when I didn't answer her, went on, "At least it's warm." *Gas heat*, I thought. I was restless, swinging my hands back and forth. I didn't like being this close to Georgie. I didn't want--.

To contaminate her.

...want to accidentally touch her with my meat-smelly hands. "Sit down, Frank," she said, and I did. On a futon and as far away from her as possible. "Are you all right? You look terrible," she said, sitting at my kitchen table.

"Thanks," I said, trying for sarcasm, but failing. She was right, of course, and what could I say? That I hadn't had a decent night's sleep in almost a month? That I hardly ate anymore?

"You haven't spoken to mom and dad in, like, three weeks," Georgie said, "Or me for that matter."

Tell her.

"Georgie," I said, "I--."

"What? Tell me."

No. "I--I keep meaning to call, I just..." I trailed off, pathetically.

Neither of us said anything for awhile. We sat staring at each other over the yellow glow of Georgie's candles.

There are moments in your life when the past comes back to you, unbidden and in the shape of an incomplete dream or image. Not *deja vu* exactly, but something very like it--the flash you get in the middle of an afternoon when something triggers, echoes, some object or action from a dream or nightmare you'd perhaps had the night before. This moment with Georgie was one of those times. I remembered seeing myself and Georgie and my older brother as young children on a beach, clinging to each other and shivering. We were wet. We'd just come in from the ocean. The sky had gone from creamy blue to deep, violent purple in seconds, and a freezing wind had sprung up out of nowhere, and lightning, about a mile out to sea, was splitting the water's surface. Flashback to us in the ocean, my mother and father yelling for us to come out of the suddenly choppy, treacherous water. We did, and then some people were dragging this man, hairy and bloated,

out of the surf and across the sand. He was a drowned man, and the three of us held on to each other while lifeguards desperately tried to beat life back into his chest, his lungs, his heart. And Georgie was asking me a question, and I had drifted off, so I asked her to say again. "You're really not going to tell me?" she repeated.

Tell her.

"No," I said, "I mean, there's nothing--."

Georgie stood, flung her hands up in the air. "Fine," she said, "I'm going." She put on her coat and went to the door.

"Georgie," I said, "Don't--." But she was pissed off, that much was clear, and not in the mood for any of my bullshit. She told me that she didn't really care anyway, that if I wanted to be an asshole, fine, that was my problem.

Then she left.

Now, I didn't know this at the time, and I wouldn't find out about it until after we'd been arrested, but the very same night Georgie and I had the short talk I've just told you about, Eric and Jennifer had a little pow-wow of their own. They were scheming in his apartment, not more than twelve blocks away from us. I don't know what their exact words were (although I can imagine), but I found out that Eric was--.

...Eric was lighting a candle, then spreading a cracker with thick, brown paste, which he offered to Jennifer. "Paté?" he asked. Jennifer took the snack, swallowed it whole, and asked if it was duck. Eric shook his head and said, "We have a problem." Jennifer didn't need to hear it from Eric, she'd seen how Brian was acting. "Brian," she said.

"And Frank," Eric said. "This was supposed to bring us together, but--." He sighed. "Has Frank said anything to you?" Jennifer shook her head. She'd seen Frank once, the day she'd shown him her paintings, and she'd know it then, too.

There was nothing between them anymore. She said, "We don't--. We haven't spoken in awhile."

Eric cut off a thin sliver of paté and didn't put it on a cracker, but simply licked the knife clean. He nicked his tongue, and a drop of blood clung to the knife's serrated edge. "I've been asking around," Eric said, "Hardly anyone's seen Brian these last few weeks. He doesn't go out. And I'm not talking about parties and readings, I mean classes, appointments with his advisor." Jennifer didn't say anything. Eric continued, "And the few people that have seen him accidentally, just bumping into him, can tell something's wrong. They say he's acting like a complete basket case. They're starting to wonder why."

Jennifer closed her eyes. She just couldn't understand it. She'd finally broken through. The paintings she'd done after That Night were her best work ever, no question. And they'd outsmarted everyone. There was no chance of getting caught now. Oh sure, the police had done some snooping around at first, but that had all died down to quiet murmurings. They were free. Eric was right, nothing could hurt them now, nothing.

Except, thought Jennifer, Ourselves.

And then there was Frank. It was worth giving it another try, she thought. Of course, before that could happen, things with him and Brian, with Frank and Brian, with their attitudes, had to be sorted out. Eric was concerned, and that meant she had reason to be, too. "What are you thinking?" she asked him.

Eric licked the knife. "I think it's bullshit that Brian's given up drugs. If he gets high enough--."

"Oh, no," Jennifer said, finally seeing what Eric meant.

"...or scared enough," he went on, "He's liable to say or do anything." Jennifer held her head in her hands. "And Frank?" she asked.

Eric went to her and put a hand on her shoulder. "Also losing it, I think." Jennifer bit her lip. Brian was one thing, but not Frank. It had been his idea in the first place, he could be convinced, he could be--.

Saved, she thought. "I could talk to him," she said.

Eric leaned down and kissed Jennifer on the mouth. It tasted coppery to her, and she didn't like it. Then Eric said, "I've got a better idea"...

...Eric was, with Jennifer's help, coming up with a strategy for the next step. There was still quite a ways to go, you see, and it wouldn't do for two of Eric's key players to be second-guessing him now. So he and Jennifer upped the stakes dramatically and set in motion a gambit that was infinitely darker than any I had previously devised, further tightening the noose strung around our necks. It took me by surprise, all of it, beginning with Jennifer's phone call demanding that I go to Eric's apartment, that we had to discuss something urgent. (This was a week after our blizzard, when the white snow had softened and darkened to a gray slush, and almost half of it had melted away. It might even have been Valentine's Day, I can't remember.) I went, afraid that Detective Bullock had crawled out of the woodwork again, or that the woman's--.

Jennifer Lokash's.

...remains had been found. I knocked, and Eric ushered me into the living room, where Jennifer and Brian, who looked to be on the verge of, well, something (maybe of deciding that his home town out west wasn't such a bad place after all), were already waiting. Eric offered me a beer, a Corona, my favorite. "No, thanks," I said. I wasn't taking any chances, not even with unopened bottles. "What's going on?" I demanded.

"Sit down," he said.

I didn't move, said, "I'll stand, thanks."

Eric said, "Fine," and strode over to a chair, on which he sat down not normally, but on its back, his feet on the seat, towering over us, like a god would over his minions. The self-idolatrizing photographs on the wall behind him further created a pseudo-sacred atmosphere in the room. As though we were in a temple, and Eric were preaching. "Jennifer and I are both worried about you," he began. "About you and Brian."

I looked at Jennifer, and she turned away. *Jennifer and I?* Did that mean--? Had she and Eric--?

...I re-focused and Eric was still discoursing, but now he was directing his words towards me specifically. He was saying, "Frank, it looks like you've lost twenty pounds..." (Actually, I'd lost seventeen pounds, but who was counting?)

"I still outweigh you," I said (it was true), and asked, "What's your point?"

Eric's voice deepened then, and broadened to fill the whole room. He said, "That what we did was for you. For all of us, yes, but mainly it was for you." That was bullshit, and I said so. Eric had wanted it more badly than me. I didn't know why yet, but he...he had even needed it, in fact.

"Fuck off," I said.

Jennifer jumped in, "All that you said about wanting to be happy--."

I was high!

"...everything we talked about. It was supposed to make that better," she implored, grabbing my hand and falling to her knees. She suddenly seemed a pathetic creature to me, and I hated her for her weakness, because it was a quality I saw and resented in myself. Coldly, I said, "I'm beginning to think that the person we ate must've been insane. And that her flesh is affecting us, our minds." I shook Jennifer's hand off and looked down. "You and Eric ate more than anyone else, Jennifer."

Eric stepped down from the chair--to walk among us, no doubt--and spoke calmly, "We were wrong to think eating a stranger's body would be enough to connect us." *What?* I thought. "Brian," Eric continued, walking past Brian on his way to what I guessed was the living room's closet, "Brian is cracking up--."

"Fuck you," Brian said, "I am not."

"...and you're not far behind, Frank" Eric said, ignoring Brian's objection, thinking it not even worth discussion because he was right and we all knew it. I hadn't seen a lot of Brian lately, hadn't spent much time with him, but I'd heard the rumors. About how bad he looked, how depressed and quiet and even disoriented he'd gotten. And seeing him there in front of me now, it was obvious that the latest English department gossip was true: Brian was quickly drowning in some murky pool's deep-end.

What are you--? Firmly, I said, "If you think I'm doing anything else, you're--."

Eric reached the closet door and stopped in front of it. He turned around to face us, and interrupted me. "Did you know, Frank, that the Iroquois tribe was cannibalistic?" he asked, "And that they rarely ate strangers or each other, preferring rather to consume their war victims, their enemies?"

"I'm leaving, Eric," I said, then turned to Jennifer: "Come with me if you want." And to Brian: "Come on, Brian, let's go."

Eric's lecture continued, "Making the act that much more significant because an enemy, by definition, is someone whom you've empowered, someone whom you fear or fight against, someone whom you feel deserves--or respect enough--to be the object of your attentions."

Jennifer shuffled off towards the kitchen.

"So the Iroquois captured their enemies and stole back the energy they'd previously given them by eating their flesh and drinking their blood," Eric went

on. "And what's more, they tortured their victims before dining on them, rationalizing these acts of cruelty by believing that they were toughening up their enemies' spirits, making them all the more worth consuming."

"Eric," I said, dread building up in me, "Please don't tell me you've--."

"Don't you see, Frank," he said, his right hand on the closet's doorknob, "In one monumental act, the Iroquois not only absorbed their enemies' bravery and vitality, but also--by killing and devouring an established threat to their community--re-affirmed their own clan's sense of identity."

I understood all that perfectly well (him wanting to believe that the four of us were a community, and that our unholy union was worth preserving), but beyond that Eric wasn't making any sense. I mean, we didn't--.

Well, I certainly didn't have any--.

...and, in Pickman, an enemy for life...

"No," I said, "Oh no," just as Eric turned the knob and opened the closet door, and Peter Pickman's body, beaten and bloodied and mangled, tumbled to the floor in a heap. Brian stood up and moved in for a closer look. Confused, not recognizing what he was seeing, he asked, "Is that--?" I took a step back as if it were just at that moment that I realized I'd fallen among a lot of unfriendly lunatics. I said, "Pickman."

They'd tortured him, that much I could tell. Gashes, what must've been stab wounds, criss-crossed his forearms, and one of his sides (he was shirtless) was black-and-blue. Broken ribs, if I had to guess. His face was also cut up, half of it swollen to the point of unrecognizability. Eric shot forward, took ahold of my arm, and said, "You have to kill him, Frank, finish it."

I blinked. *Kill him?* I said, "You mean he's not--." Pickman coughed then, scaring me so much I almost screamed. He choked out some gooey blood and the words "...help...me...please..." Weakly, he tried to push himself up. I backed off

further, towards Eric's phone, and said, "I'll call the police." (It struck me as funny, how often I'd been using that phrase recently.)

"And tell them what?" Eric demanded, stepping down on Pickman's back and forcing him flat against the floor. "It's too late for him anyway."

Jennifer returned at that moment and said, "We were careful. No one saw us."

This isn't happening, this is a dream, I thought. I asked, "How?"

Eric reached into his blazer and pulled out--*Oh, jeez!*--a gun. "This helped some."

Brian was mumbling something, had been repeating the words "no" and "God" over and over again, and Eric asked him to please shut the fuck up. Jennifer came to my side, eased me back to where Eric and the dying man were, and, handing me a wooden bat I took without thinking, said, "Here." She asked if it reminded me of anyone (all the while, Pickman, that sick, pathetic fuck, was gurgling out his last), and it only took me a second to figure it out.

"Jody," I said, "Cute, you cunt."

Peter Pickman grabbed one of my legs with a bloody paw and said, "...hurts..." I hate admitting it now, but a disturbing, evil thought quickly zipped through my mind--.

You asshole, you deserve this.

...mind before I had time to censor it. Eric said, "Look at him, he's suffering. Just get it over with." Jennifer, meantime, sat down next to Brian, and was trying to calm him, rubbing his shoulders and back. "Your fingerprints are on the bat now," she said to me, "You hate him and he's going to die anyway." I told her that my hating Pickman didn't mean he deserved to die. "Wrong," Eric said, "He threatened you last term--all of us, really--with the possibility of your leaving just as we were getting started... Communion with the gods, Frank. Did you forget?"

No, I thought. I just hadn't felt anything even remotely resembling the transcendental experience Eric had promised us upon eating the flesh. He was now saying, "This is exactly what you and Brian need. A reminder of what this is all about. The four of us, staying together, changing things--."

"Loving each other," Jennifer added from somewhere behind me.

"...and it's a precaution. After tonight we're all equally responsible for the group's actions," Eric said, and I wondered at which point exactly he had decided that we were all members of a kind of Cannibal Club, complete with dues to pay and weekly meetings and membership requirements. Smiling, he started to say, "Cannibalism's one thing--."

"FUCK YOU!" I yelled, but raised the bat over Pickman's bald, scabbed head.

"...but cannibalism and murder...that's something else entirely," he finished, "What choice do you have, Frank?"

Pickman, bawling, barely audible: "...Frank..."

I thought back to the conversation Pickman and I'd had months ago when he threatened to flunk me, and said, "No choice at all."

* * *

"...I had no choice at all," Frank said, grabbing at his chest, at some invisible weight there, and shaking his head. He looked down to the sheaf of papers sitting in his lap and flipped through them until he found the specific drawing he was searching for. One of a bald man, wearing glasses and a necktie. "That's him," Frank explained, holding it up, "Pickman."

Chuck took the cartoon drawing and asked, "You did this?" Frank nodded, and the new guy said, "It's pretty good." I momentarily turned to Hope and Keen, to see how their game was progressing. Most of the chess board had been cleared of pieces, and, judging from the lengthy interval between each move, they were

nearing a stalemate. (Neither ever won those games. That was part of it.) Moments passed in silence, the coming night gathered and deepened and darkened, and the new guy finally had to ask, "What happened? What did you do?"

Frank took the drawing back, handed it to me along with the rest of his bundle, and said, "I killed him, of course. I closed my eyes and...brained him. Three times on the head. There was a mess, on the floor and on me, but I was beyond caring. And this time I took no part in preparing the body for dinner. I sat in Eric's living room with Brian, while Jennifer and Eric cleaned the blood and insides off the floor, divided the body up, and cooked the flesh." Frank spoke mechanically (he always did at this point of the telling), and then reached over and put a hand on the new guy's shoulder. Chuck recoiled, and Frank pulled back. "Believe me when I say that Pickman was as good as dead. You didn't have to be a doctor to..." It was hard for Frank, there was no faking that. He went on as best he could and managed it pretty well. "I thought it was the most humane thing to... What good would the police have done? Pickman still would've died. We would've all gone to jail and everything would've come out. What we did, that it was my idea, my night with Eric, everything. Our lives would've been ruined. And not just our lives, our families' lives. Georgie wasn't even eighteen yet. I couldn't just..."

"But I made it clear to them, to Jennifer and Eric, that Pickman was...was it! Anything else happens, they do anything else to anyone, and I didn't care what or who they threatened, I'd go to the police and turn us all in. I said that and meant it."

Chuck shifted away from Frank and asked, "Did you eat him? Pickman?"

Frank paused, answered, "Only a few bites, Brian not even that. Jennifer and Eric, now they really--."

The new guy interrupted Frank, "Did you enjoy it? Killing Pickman? Did you?"

And wasn't that the question we'd all been waiting for?

Yeah, but Frank wasn't ready yet. So instead of answering Chuck, he ignored him (because he knew he'd be getting to that soon enough, thank you very much) and launched into the last act of his story, racing the encroaching darkness to finish it. "Another large chunk of time passed. A month, say, and..."

* * *

Another large chunk of time passed. A month, say, and winter's stranglehold on Washington finally loosened. Snow changed to showers, and March's steady, occasionally gusting wind blew the gray clouds into white, wispy ones, and set them against a sky rich with the blue promise of spring. Jennifer and Eric, as it turned out, had been careful. Exceedingly so, in fact, since Pickman (whose sparse remains joined Jennifer Lokash's at the bottom of Malone's quarry) wasn't believed to have been murdered, but simply gone missing. His wife and daughter (that was hard news to take, finding out about his family) had on several previous occasions been victim to Peter Pickman's frequent disappearances. Scuttlebutt around the department was that Pickman had a mistress in New Mexico, someone he spent summers with, that he'd been threatening to leave his wife and life in Washington for years now, and that he'd finally found the gumption to pick up stakes and head for warmer climes. Of course, no one knew the alleged mistress's name or where she might live, but what did that matter? It was assumed that Pickman had simply given up on his frustrating career (I wasn't the only student who'd had difficulties with his unsound teaching methods) and had very bravely begun a new life elsewhere. Police involvement was minimal--Mrs. Pickman was overheard saying that her husband had actually done her a great service--but still enough to cause me a few sleepless nights.

I saw Detective Joe Bullock again. I was coming out of the library, where I'd been doing work on my thesis (I'd stopped going to my other classes because they didn't seem worth it), and he stopped me just as I was about to cross Georgetown's main, muddy lawn to get home. "Detective," I said, shaking his offered hand.

"Joseph Bullock," he said, as if I wouldn't have remembered. He led me over to a bench, and we sat down.

It was sunny, I remember, and he noticed the books I was carrying and asked, "How's the thesis going?" I told him good and bad. The actual writing of it was going well. (Phenomenally well, in fact, since now I could write of Kurtz's madness and monstrous deeds and unspeakable passions with some sense of authority.) "Bad," I said, "Because I don't have an advisor anymore." He'd heard as much and said, "Word is Pickman had a pretty big mad-on for you."

I laughed.

"What?" Bullock wanted to know.

"I'm sorry," I said, "I just didn't think people actually talked that way in real life."

Well, he did, and we laughed and then chatted for a few minutes. About my disagreements with Pickman (typical student-teacher stuff, I maintained), if he'd ever mentioned New Mexico (not to me, I told him), and then finally--oh, it was laughable--about the nice turn in the weather. I asked him why he was on the case, if he thought there was some connection between Pickman's disappearance and the--what was it?--oh yeah, the still-missing funeral home employee. Bullock shook his head and said, "No, just curious." Then he lit up a cigarette and added, "The only thing the two cases have in common is you--."

I bit down on my teeth. Hard.

"...that I've happened to question you both times, that is," he said.

Well, I told him, I had to be going, and got up and left, but not before he asked me if I was all right, that it looked as though I'd lost a lot of weight. *Twenty-three pounds and counting*, I thought, and said, "No, I'm fine," and walked away, telling myself that no matter what, I shouldn't turn around.

Of course, I wasn't fine. I'd never be fine again. Not after what I'd seen and done and, yes, tasted. But I was as fine I was going to be, as good as I was going to get.

I avoided Eric, Jennifer, and even Brian completely. Changed my phone number, ducked behind buildings whenever I saw them coming my way. It was difficult, especially cutting myself off from Brian, who was the least dangerous, no threat at all really, and the one most in need of friendship and comfort after our dark doings, but I felt it was a necessary precaution.

It was the group thing, you see. I'd done some thinking and had come to the conclusion that that was a large part of it. The group, I mean, the community. Alone, we were each of us fucked-up and perverse, perhaps even evil. But I doubt any single one of us would have done what we did. No, it was only when we were together that we became life-threatening. We used each other to make allowances for our own individual behaviors. And I was done with that. Or, at least, thought I was. I tried my best to re-establish ties with the people I'd been drawn away from: Georgie, Jordan, Fiona, Jackie, even my parents. I made some important decisions.

One day, after school, I came home and found Jennifer sitting on the stone steps leading up to my building's front door. I hadn't seen her in weeks and my first thought was: *Oh fuck*. My second was that she looked good.

She stood and went to kiss me, not romantically, I didn't think, just friendly, but I pulled back anyway. (Again, I wasn't taking any chances.) From the pained look on her face, as though she might cry, I could tell that that tiny, involuntary gesture had hurt her. I was sorry and said so.

"Can we go for a walk?" she asked. "We have to talk."

Now as I've just told you, I'd made some serious decisions recently, determinations Jennifer and the others would find out about eventually. Standing in front of my apartment house, I asked myself if maybe Jennifer didn't at least deserve to hear about them from me personally, and finally decided it couldn't hurt any as long as I kept things short. "Okay," I said, and we started walking away from campus, down Embassy Lane.

"It's getting warmer," Jennifer said, and I replied, "Yeah." She twisted her head to look at me, my face, and I was afraid that she'd try to reach out and touch me, but she didn't, just said, "You look thin."

Oh God. At a loss, I said, "I'm on a diet." We walked further, passing gorgeous embassies (Argentina, Italy, Japan) set behind iron fences, on our left and right. I told Jennifer about my latest run-in with Bullock, but she didn't seem affected by that news at all. Silence for awhile, then she asked me what I was thinking. "I'm thinking--." I stopped, corrected myself, "I've been thinking about a lot of things."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one, that I didn't know Pickman had a daughter," I said. "And that I can't wait for summer vacation." Jennifer put a clenched fist to her mouth and didn't say anything. That was okay, I wasn't done yet. "I was thinking that we're all part of a food chain. And I don't mean lions and zebras and grass. I mean that me and you and Brian and Eric are separate links chained together by..."

"What it comes down to is food..."

"And I was afraid that Georgie had an eating disorder," I said, and laughed, grimly and alone. "I'm sorry, that wasn't funny." I stopped walking and announced, "I'm leaving Georgetown. I'm not coming back next term. And I don't know how yet, but I'm gonna try to convince Georgie she should transfer."

Jennifer nodded, asked, "Are you going to tell her what happened?" Now that was funny. I laughed again and said, "No. No way. That would be--." (I thought of my thesis, of *Heart of Darkness*.) "...*too dark altogether*."

I looked at Jennifer then and almost felt something for her again. It hadn't been all bad. I said, "Jennifer, what happened to us? Why do you think we--?"

"Frank," she said, eyes wet, about to cry.

"What?"

"Remember last term when I was sick?" she asked, and I told her that of course I did. (Oh boy, did I remember.) "Frank," she said, "I wasn't sick."

What now? "What are you talking about?"

"Frank..."

"What is it, Jennifer?"

"Frank, I'm pregnant," she said, and I believed her. I still trusted her, you see. I can't say why exactly, I just did. It wasn't idiocy on my part. Rather, it was because the human mind--when it has to be, I'm saying--is capable of making bizarre and tremendous somersaults in logic and rationality to preserve its sense of what must be... It can hold everything in check, past, present, and future, but not without squeezing those concepts into already-established molds. I believed Jennifer because she was crying and seemed sincere. And because if she was lying, then what kind of a monster must she really be? And because I wasn't stupid enough to fall for any more of her or Eric's tricks, was I?

Don't answer that. Maybe when all is said and done, I am just an idiotic sucker at heart.

"Jennifer," I said, "Are you--? You're sure?"

"Yes."

I began, "But I thought you were on the--."

Jennifer interrupted, "No, I wasn't," and I remembered then that we'd never actually discussed it, that I'd simply assumed she was on the pill. And that although we'd almost always used a condom, there'd been that one time it had broken while I was inside her. And that other time when we hadn't had one handy, but fucked anyway.

Stupidstupidstupidfuckfrank.

"How long?" I asked.

"Three months," she said, now crying in earnest, tears streaming down her face. A car honked at us--we were standing in the middle of the road, in front of the Spanish embassy--and I took Jennifer by the elbow and led her to the curb. We sat down and she grabbed me, my shoulders, and said, "I'm scared, Frank. That there's something's wrong with it. With the baby, I mean." Jennifer started sobbing uncontrollably, her whole body jerking with each loud, tremendous wail. *A baby*, I thought, *A son*. I put my arms around Jennifer (what else could I do?) and told her not to worry, that everything was going to be all right, that we'd get her to a doctor. *Or maybe a daughter*. Then a terrifying thought stabbed at my brain and I asked, "Jennifer, does Eric know about this?" She told me he didn't, and I was relieved because I imagined babies were a delicacy Eric wouldn't be able to pass up. She hugged me back and said that I couldn't leave Washington, not now, now that I knew. I stiffened a little, had a slight moment of suspicion, and said, "Oh, Jennifer, no. I'm still leaving next month at the end of term. I have to."

"What?" she said, her face buried in my chest

"This doesn't change anything," I said, then added, "Maybe you could...come with me." At that moment, I was telling myself that we'd somehow work things out. That away from Georgetown, away from Eric and Brian, we'd be all right. It would be hard, of course, but we could do it.

"What?" she repeated, straightening her back and pushing my arms off of her. I told her again that I was still leaving. She wiped the wetness from beneath her eyes and punched me in the chest. "You fucker, you don't care," she said, standing up. I reached for her, called, "Jennifer, wait. Don't--."

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" she shrieked. "You are a coward, Frank. We have everything we need here and you--!"

"Jennifer, please," I implored.

"Don't call me," she said, bawling again, snot streaming down her face, backing away from me. "You've--you've really fucked up BIG this time, Frank."

What are you--? I called out to her once more, but she'd already turned around and broken into a full run. I didn't follow her because we were both obviously worked-up over everything, in an emotional state, overwrought, and prone to--.

Violence.

...to getting carried away. Better not to press it. Allow us both a chance to cool down and think things through. Especially me, since I suddenly had something new to consider. A baby... Well, now I knew for sure that I was doing the right thing. I had to get away from Washington and Eric's presence, his influence. Leave D.C. and find somewhere that hadn't yet been ruined for me. I couldn't go home, that much was certain. My father would be furious that I'd left Georgetown--I mean, no question--but even I couldn't conceive of what he'd do to me when he found out I'd left Georgetown not alone, but with my PREGNANT GIRLFRIEND.

Well, I comforted myself, at least he'd be relieved that I wasn't a fucking homo.

Walking back to my apartment building, I was thinking of Philadelphia. Or that we'd maybe give San Francisco a shot. At the very least, that I'd like to try something new...

...Oh, how could I have been so fucking stupid? You can't imagine the regret, the guilt. Every day, okay? It's with you every day. Not remorse at being caught, forget that. What I mean is remorse felt because I let it go as long and as far as I did, especially since I know I could have just as easily stopped it from the first. Only you never think of yourself as an evil person, no matter what you do...

I'm twenty-three years old and I... Now I'll never see California. I...I'm sorry that I'm laughing, but it's all I have left. I... The only one of us who ended up going out west was Brian, shipped back to his home town dead and in a wooden box.

He killed himself the same week Jennifer told me I was going to be a father.

I came home from campus one day and found the red light on my answering machine blinking--one message. I hit the machine's PLAY button and was a little surprised to hear Brian's voice.

"...hey, Frank...this is Brian. Uh, Lamb... I got this new number from your... From Georgie. I guess you're not at home. I know you don't want to hear from us... I--I mean you changed your phone number... But this is--. I know this is a terrible thing to do..."

Huh?

I sat down and drew my chair closer to the black answering machine. Brian was saying: "...But I can't tell anyone else... Jennifer and Eric, they--they were over last night... Frank if you're there, pick up... They don't want you to leave... They say you're a threat to--. That you... Jennifer and Eric, Frank, I think they're going to... Every time the phone rings, I jump... I open the refrigerator and Pickman's in there, all--. All chopped up..."

Brian. He sounds--.

"...I'm not calling the police. Not for them, but--but for you... At night, Frank, at night, I--I have to turn on every light in the apartment... I never used to be scared of the dark..."

Me neither.

"...Frank, Jennifer and Eric, they want to--. It's not your fault, Frank... No one made me--made any of us--do it... Leaving you alone with them is the worst part, but I--I think this'll help... Me instead of you..."

Instead of--?

"...have you ever heard of Seconal?..."

Wha--? Brian. He sounds--.

"...I got the prescription from Health Services. Because I couldn't sleep, I told them... They're stronger than valium, but--but taste...well, pretty bad..."

...suicidal.

I picked up my phone, dialed Brian's number, and let it ring. And ring and ring and--. No answer. "Oh, God," I said, "Oh, no. Nonononono." Brian's voice drawled on like he was drunk, "...I've been taking them...one by one...while we've been--. While I've been...talking to you..."

"No, Brian," I said. I'd rush over there. It wasn't too late. He hadn't done anything really. He didn't have to--.

Die.

"...call my parents and tell them, okay? And...and don't let them think I did this because I'm a druggie fuck-up... And I'm sorry you have to...have to be...the one..." He yawned then. "...I'm--. Whoa, I'm tired now..."

"Hang on," I said, but for whose benefit? Brian barely finished, "...doesn't... feel...so bad...doesn't...hurt...be...care..." And nothing else.

I couldn't run to Brian's, I had to take a cab. Like me, he lived in a big house that had been split into four apartments. The front door was open; the door to his apartment, unlocked. I barreled through the living room, called his name. No answer. Checked the small kitchen. Nothing. The bathroom. No one. A momentary flash of hope, but then I found him. In the bedroom, lying on his mattress. And I

know it sounds terrible, but he really did look peaceful, as though he were only sleeping. On the night-table next to him, I found the nearly empty prescription bottle of Seconal. The phone was on the floor, its cord a tangled mess. It must have slipped from Brian's hand when he--.

I hung it up, checked Brian's pulse, his breathing. Nothing. I sat down on the floor and started to cry.

You don't care about Brian, about his death, at all. You have no sympathy for him. Oh, I don't blame you, it's my fault. This must all seem terribly superficial and ridiculous to you. I've failed to describe him, his character, to you in any honest way. How are you supposed to appreciate our friendship? How could you when I'm condensing eight months of our lives into three hours? Things get left out. He's not a real person to you. Maybe no one is. Except for me, because you know me, because you can see me. You lose things in the telling. Brian's basic decency, for instance. He didn't kill. He barely ate. And more than that. In the end, he--.

I was sitting in his bedroom, crying at the stupidity of it all, at the utter waste of life and goodness, at my intrinsic worthlessness, looking at Brian, thinking, *Why him?*

The first reason, the obvious one, was that Brian had killed himself as punishment and penance for the small part he'd played in the murder and cannibalization of two fellow human beings. That Brian had owned up to what he'd done, taken responsibility for his actions, and decided that it was too much to ignore or live with. It's easy to understand when put that way, I know, but Brian's suicide nevertheless seemed unfathomable to me at the time. The hopelessness and despair must've been overwhelming and--.

No, actually that's not true. I could understand Brian's feelings of guilt and total loss. What I couldn't comprehend was why I hadn't yet experienced similar

emotions. At least not to the same degree Brian had. I didn't admire the act (which I, at that point, ultimately believed to be one of cowardice), no, but I respected the intent behind it. That Brian was once and for all going to be done with this whole sordid mess.

It was awhile later, after I'd called the paramedics and while they were on their way, that I realized just how wrong I'd been about Brian's motives. Oh, part of it was the guilt he felt, I'm sure. But that was only one fraction of the cause. Brian, as it happened, wasn't a coward at all.

I'd just called the ambulance and was about to telephone Eric to let him know what he'd done, let him know about the hand he'd had in Brian's demise, when it all clicked in mind. What Brian had been talking about on my answering machine.

"Jennifer and Eric, they--they were over last night..."

"They say you're a threat to..."

"I think they're going to..."

"...Me instead of you..."

"Be... Care..."

"Ful," I said aloud, "Be. Care. Ful."

Holy fuck.

I couldn't be certain of what I was thinking, not a hundred percent, but I could come close. Don't you see? Jennifer and Eric had gone over to Brian's to--what? What else, but discuss me and the threat my leaving posed to the group's unity and integrity.

Think, Frank.

Jennifer! She wasn't pregnant. I mean, of course she wasn't. She'd only said that out of desperation to get me to stay in Washington. (Why was our being together so important to her and Eric? I'd have to find that out.) But their ploy

hadn't worked. I'd told Jennifer that her pregnancy didn't change anything, that I was still leaving. So what could they do? Threaten me with--what?

Think.

I knew they'd never talk about the murders or cannibalism. And after Pickman's death, I'd made it pretty clear that they could say anything they wanted to about my night with Eric, that I didn't care about that either anymore. So threats were out. No, the only way Eric and Jennifer had of keeping me in Washington was--.

Think.

To kill me, of course.

And what else?

And then eat me. It made a twisted sense, I tell you. Maybe not to you, but to them and me, it was perfectly logical. They'd consume and absorb me and we'd be together forever that way. It would, in short, be the ultimate bonding activity. My flesh, the strongest epoxy yet. And as a progression it was also sensible. Step One: Kill and eat a stranger. Step Two: Kill and eat someone you know, an enemy from outside the group. Step Three: Kill and eat someone from within the group, a dissenter, an enemy among you, and reach heights you'd never dreamed possible. Good God, I realized, they were insane and had to be stopped. And Brian--.

"...me instead of you..."

...Brian had known about their plans and he'd tried to warn me. And what's more, I believed Brian had meant for his suicide to be a kind of sacrifice at Eric and Jennifer's altar. He'd offered up his body to them, to their temple, effectively saying that if they wanted to eat someone for within our circle so badly, then let it be him. But they weren't going to kill him to do it. Oh no, Brian wasn't going to give them that satisfaction at least. And they were most definitely NOT going to eat him, either. I wasn't going to let those vultures near Brian's body. They'd just

have to go hungry for awhile longer. And...and they weren't going to kill me, either. They couldn't, not anymore. That would've been too much. Two dead graduate students and one missing professor in an English department as small as Georgetown's would've brought Detective Bullock down on them so fast they wouldn't even have time to finish pre-heating the oven. And Brian had known that. Brian, whom I'd previously thought of as the most chicken, the (what was it I said?) slowest-thinking, the one with the least stomach for serious action, had proved me wrong. Proved us all wrong. He made-up for his crimes, subverted Eric and Jennifer, and maybe even saved my life. Why? Would I have done the same for him? For anyone? I chose not to answer my question, and instead simply concluded that finally Brian had shown restraint. That some baffling human quality--a resource, a reserve of strength--which either you have or you don't, had come into play.

Outside, I could hear the ambulance's sirens nearing. I looked at Brian, at his face (you can't tell anything from a man's face, I believe that now), and stood up. I wasn't crying anymore. The time for me to see if I had that same restraint was fast approaching.

A lot of things happened very quickly then. After the paramedics arrived and tried to revive Brian, I called the Lambs (how appropriate Brian's last name was, but I swear I haven't changed it for thematic or any other reasons) and told them. Now if you've never personally heard a mother's cries over a dead child, then there is nothing I can say to capture their tone or intensity. Just accept that it was gut-wrenching and hope that you never have to be the bearer of such gruesome news. Made all the more terrible because I couldn't tell them (at least not yet) that Brian's last act hadn't been a pathetic and weak one born of drugs or desperation, but an heroic and brave one. Brian's father thanked me and said he

would fly out that night to make all the arrangements. He asked if we could meet for drinks, and I said that of course we could.

The next day, at the Brickskeller, we did. He was a nice man, decent like his son. He'd decided that the funeral and burial would take place out west, but that there should also be something here in Washington for Brian's Georgetown friends. Although I didn't really think it was a good idea, I agreed with him and even suggested a place where the wake could be held. "DeVol's funeral home," I said, "It's close to campus." What made me do that is anyone's guess. An over-developed sense of closure? Some self-destructive streak? The criminalistic compulsion to re-visit the scene of our first crime? Probably a combination of all three and more.

Whatever the case, the wake at DeVol's was well-attended. The funeral director on duty that night (Friday, the first one in April) was Stephen Ahern, the man who'd been asleep in the lounge while Jennifer Lokash was brutally beaten to death right beneath him. I went with Fiona and Jackie, and couldn't believe the number of students and teachers who'd turned out. I mentioned this to Fiona and she seemed to think that although Brian had had very few close friends (really, none besides the Club), everyone who knew him from class or just around had liked him. "And," she added, "They want to see for themselves."

Fiona was right, there was no denying that. I mean the fascination when a young person dies, especially under such murky circumstances. (Although it wasn't being talked about officially, everyone there knew Brian had overdosed--and they all traded whispered tidbits of misinformation.) The need to understand what makes a person, especially one who by all outward appearances is normal and happy (at least most of the time), do something as monstrous as taking his own life. What would these same people think, I wondered, if they ever found out the behind-the-scenes of Brian's suicide, the midnight rituals and sacred slaughters. It

would be a different kind of fascination, more magnetic, more corrupt, but they'd still have come out for the wake. Probably in greater numbers.

While Brian's father spoke of how happy his son had seemed at Georgetown, I looked around the room for familiar, friendly faces. For what it's worth, the first one I spotted was Jennifer's, and from the expression she was wearing, it was pretty clear that finally, however momentarily, she and Eric had been stumped. Brian killing himself must have been a contingency neither one of them had even remotely considered, an obstacle that threw whatever plans they'd had for a complete loop.

Good, I thought. I'll need this time.

Which reminded me... I sought out Eric in the crowd, but it didn't look like he was there. *That's odd. I wonder where he--.*

Jackie suddenly said, "I feel awful for him." She meant Brian's dad, and I re-focused on what the man was saying: "...all you good people he met here, all the wonderful opportunities offered him during his brief time at Georgetown..." It was almost too much to bear. My heart seized up, and I told Fiona and Jackie that I was leaving, that I couldn't take it anymore. "Do you want company?" Fiona asked, and I said, "No, I just gotta get outta here." I left the room and hurried down the stairs to the funeral home's foyer. I didn't stop there, but kept moving, pushed past the attending Stephen Ahern and out the funeral home's heavy front door.

The night was warm and humid. I felt like ripping off my itchy black suit and tie. I sat down on the curb and waited for the swelling in my chest to relax, my breathing to ease. Oh Jesus, it was bad. I mean, Brian! I--.

Jennifer materialized out of nowhere then, looking in her black dress as though she'd been cut from the night sky itself. She asked if she could sit down with me. I shook my head, but she did anyway. I shifted away from her and said, "It's our fault he's dead. You know that, right?"

"Frank," she said, "It was the drugs."

That, too, was a laugh. "Oh, come on, "I said, "Pot? Give me a break."

She seemed to consider something, then admitted, "Frank, Brian and I slept together."

That didn't surprise me. I said so.

"More than once," she added.

That, however, did.

I stood and said, "Maybe it's his baby."

Jennifer pretended to be shocked (oh, she was good), and gasped out, "Frank."

Enough, I thought, and asked, "You're not really pregnant, are you?"

From the tone of my voice, Jennifer knew I knew, so her eyes glazed over with a strange wetness (genuine tears?), and an expression I'd never seen on her face came into her mouth and forehead. I can't be sure, but it looked like sadness almost. "No," she said.

"No," I repeated, shutting my eyes and cursing my blindness, my stupidity. "Of course not." I pressed on, "And you never loved me, is that--?"

"No," Jennifer interrupted, "I did. It just wasn't enough, I guess."

Tell her.

"Jennifer," I said, "You know about me and Eric?" She told me she did, that Eric had told her. "He pretty much seduced me," I explained lamely.

"Did you want to be seduced?" she wanted to know.

Yes.

"Yes," I said.

"Did you like it?" she asked.

Yes.

"No," I said.

She asked me again if I liked it, and this time I told her the truth.

Jennifer: "More than with me?"

"No."

I can't explain why, but it was devastating, everything that was passing between us. *Christ, I thought, How had I managed to drown in someone so shallow? How had I allowed myself to love and become so dependent on these monsters?* "Jennifer," I said abruptly, my voice catching, "I'm leaving Georgetown." She said that she knew that, that I'd already told her. "No, I don't mean next year. I mean tomorrow. Next day at the latest," I said, the words escaping my mouth almost as immediately as I thought them. A pause. Then in one second, the space and mood surrounding us darkened and sparked, and some animal that had been asleep inside Jennifer's heart suddenly stirred awake.

"What about school? Your classes?" she asked glacially.

"Oh God," I said, "I haven't been to class in, like, months."

"What are you gonna tell your parents?" she demanded. "Your father?"

That I'm a failure.

I said, "I don't know."

"Georgie?"

"Jennifer!" I practically screamed, "I don't fucking know!" I touched my forehead. The throbbing in my chest had given way to a stronger one behind my right temple. "Maybe I'll go back to school next fall. Somewhere else. I'll start over again if I have to."

Jennifer stood up, asked me if I'd really give up my fellowship, and I lunged at her, fiercely digging my hands into her forearms and pulling her close to me. I squeezed hard. I wanted to hurt her, break her thin arms. "Jennifer! Brian is dead. We--." I lowered my voice. "...we killed Pickman. I can't stay here." Jennifer,

unmoved by my sudden eruption of violence, calmly said, "No, you killed Pickman. And you're not going anywhere. Eric doesn't want you to leave."

"He's fucked," I said, letting her go, disappointed that she hadn't even flinched, "What is he gonna do?"

Jennifer began, "We'll--."

We'll. "What?" I demanded, "Call the police? You can't. Kill me? Shoot me? You can't, not with what Brian's done." Jennifer's eyes flickered. Surprise that I'd deduced as much about their previous plan as I had? More than bloody likely.

She said, "He could call your parents."

And tell them what, I wanted to know.

"That your gay," she answered. "That he sucked your cock."

"GO TO HELL!" I screamed, and someone walking on the other side of the street stopped to look at us. How had we ended up there? Her and I, dressed in our best clothes, the body of one of our supposedly good friends gone cold somewhere behind us, and Eric--.

Wait a minute.

"Jennifer," I said, "Where's Eric?"

She turned away from me. "He was right. He said it would come to this," she mumbled to herself.

Fuck, why was I even bothering? I said, "Call whoever you want, Jennifer. I don't really care anymore. I'm through with all this. You and Eric are the ones who have lost it." I stood up, then yelled "Jennifer, Brian's DEAD! You just went to his fucking wake! I--I can't believe how totally wrong I was about you. I--. I'm leaving, I don't care what you do to me anymore." I started walking away then, and actually thought I might make it.

Jennifer said, "If you leave now, it will be very bad." Then she added, "It already is."

I stopped, but didn't turn around. "Threats? What, are you joking? I told you, I don't care what you do to me."

"We know," Jennifer said, "I don't mean very bad for you."

"Huh?" I grunted, and thought again, *Eric. Where's--?*

"When a person has a family," Jennifer explained quietly, "He's never truly free."

"What do you--?" I began, but then I understood.

Georgie.

I ran then. Christ, did I run. Not a fucking cab in sight, and anyway it would take less time, my running, because I could cut through Glover Park and come out just behind the freshman dorms. I ran, thinking that Georgie had most likely gone out with friends, that Eric wasn't that stupid, that he wouldn't try anything at the dorms.

...Oh, but that was bullshit. He was desperate and crazed. Jennifer, too. We all were. So there was no comforting myself; the dread was there. (How could it not be when there was even the smallest chance that Georgie was in danger?) Running through the dark woods, sweating and panting, falling down and picking myself up, it finally came into focus. The puzzle I'd been assembling. For the first time, it hit me how awful, how really monstrous what we'd done was. Murder. Cannibalism. It sounds ridiculous, saying it out loud. Almost unbelievable. But it's true, all of it. We'd been judged, tested, by each other, and had all failed. Except Brian, he--.

Each of us lacked that one component in, I guess, our morality, in our personal make-up, which keeps normal people like you and me from--.

Like you, I mean, from taking part in the kinds of inhuman rites and crimes we readily engaged in. We literally wallowed in gallons of blood.

Most improperly, I started thinking about *Heart of Darkness*, about my thesis and how I'd never finish it. I fell again, and wanted to give up, lie there, claw and crawl into the ground, but I was suddenly and completely unnerved by an utter fear, pure abstract horror and repulsion. I sprang back up. What made my dread and terror so overwhelming was the moral shock I received with it. That I (I!!) had done these things! That I had killed! That I had consumed!! It was monstrous and unforgivable. I had engaged in these barbarous transgressions and even, yes, even enjoyed them! It was true, something I could no longer keep hidden from myself. An uncanny familiarity had accompanied each of our (MY!) violations, not because I'd done them before, no, but because I'd imagined myself doing them, or something like them. It was hard, admitting that, but if this was ever going to end, if I was ever going to stop the horror, responsibility had to be taken... And now! Georgie! The darkness that was consuming us, that had forced Brian to kill himself, that had made me murder an innocent man, that was driving Eric and Jennifer towards utter depravity, that taint was now spreading to Georgie. But I could stop it. Or I could at least try. There might yet be a partial redemption. I hadn't stood in the light for a long time, but I hadn't forgotten what it was like. If I could--.

I had to overtake and ultimately outrun the evil. Even though its head start was tremendous, and even though it was moving at the speed of darkness, I had to keep it from contaminating Georgie. I--.

I got to her dorm, ignored the student working the front desk who demanded to see my Georgetown I.D. card, and raced up the stairs to her room on the sixth floor. My head swam. I almost passed out. I'd run too fast, I had to slow down. The Rotting Meat Smell was back. I was having trouble breathing. I made it, just barely, and collapsed against a wall. I hugged it, leaning against it for support. I stumbled down the hall towards Georgie's room. I knocked a bulletin

board off its hooks, and it crashed to the floor. Someone, a girl I half-recognized, a friend of Georgie's, opened her door.

"Georgie," I choked out.

The girl, scared, closing her door most of the way as I passed it, said, "She's not here. She left with, I don't know, some guy."

No.

I counted off the room numbers--605, 606, 607, 608--and finally got to Georgie's, 609. The door was unlocked. I pushed it open.

No.

The room was empty, a mess of books and clothes and pizza boxes. I looked around and found it easily enough. It was right there on Georgie's pillow. Eric's note, I mean. It read:

F.--

I have her.

She will be joining us for dinner this evening. If you have any qualms about this, I suggest you bring an alternative to Jennifer's no later than ten o'clock tonight. Don't show up--or come empty-handed--and we'll have to make do with what we find around the house. Come with a tasty enough substitute, and she'll make it to dessert.

No tricks. No police. I will kill her if necessary.

--E.

P.S. It should be someone you know. Perhaps Jackie or Fiona.

I closed the note and stuffed it into a jacket pocket. Eric's child-like scrawl terrified me. *God, I thought What was wrong with him? Arrested development? Mental illness? Oh, God. And--. And the choice he'd given me. A friend--.*

Jackie. Fiona.

...or a sister.

No. I--.

I pulled out my wallet, found a card in it, and went to Georgie's phone. I dialed a number, and a voice came on the other end of the line. I was about to ask for Joe Bullock--.

"No tricks. No police. I will kill her if necessary."

...when I thought better of it and hung up. "Jackie," I said her name aloud. "Or Fiona."

Or Georgie.

"No," I announced to the empty, dark room. *Not her.* I lowered my head.

Next to the phone, on Georgie's desk, there was a pile of money, crumpled dollar bills and odd change. From it, I fished out a quarter.

Jackie.

Fiona.

Heads.

Tails.

I flipped the coin. Fiona lost. I picked up the phone again and slowly dialed her number. Part of me hoped she hadn't yet made it back home from Brian's wake.

"Hello?"

She had, and answered on the third ring.

I somehow kept my voice steady. We made plans. I'd go over there in about an hour. I hung up the receiver and then stood alone in the darkness of my sister's apartment for a few moments. *Jackie or Fiona, yes, but not Georgie.*

She was my baby sister. My own flesh and blood. Everyone has a line they don't cross.

Still, I thought, *Killing Fiona*.

That would take some doing.

** ** *

"I came home...hungry as a hunter."

...Charles Lamb, *Letter to Coleridge*, probably 16 or 17 April 1800.

3. HEARTHUNTER.

My father once gave me and my older brother Swiss Army knives. He'd just come home from a business trip and presented the knives to us in a very officious, very ceremonial manner. "They're not toys," he said, "They're dangerous weapons." My father put one hand on Raf's shoulder and the other on mine. "But don't be scared of them. You're old enough now, you're men now, and should each have one," he said. Then, as was his custom after any long absence, he vanished into the bedroom where my mother was unpacking his suitcases and waiting for him. Raf, my brother, and I looked at each other. This was an important day for us. We were men now.

I was nine, by the way, and he was twelve.

Still, we loved those Swiss army knives. They the were the kind with all those neat-o fold-out devices. Screwdrivers, toothpicks, tweezers, scissors, a blade for cleaning fish, a compass, a fork, even a magnifying glass. That last one was my favorite tool. My brother's, too.

We had a log pile in our backyard and would spend hour after hour those long summer days (it was right after school had let out in June that Dad gave us the knives) burning the termites and other bugs we'd find beneath the wet, rotting logs.

This was the Summer of the Cicadas, when our hometown was infested with those fat, hard, buzzing bugs that spend seventeen years of their lives underground before coming out for one brief, glorious spurt during June, July, and

August, when they fly around frantically, mating and terrorizing the population. My brother and I collected swarms of the harmless bugs and caged them in empty mayonnaise jars. Then, one by one, we systematically executed them with our magnifying glasses, the sun high and hot in the sky. The cicadas actually caught fire, I remember, their wings shriveling up, their hard exoskeletons crackling and popping like so much dry, brittle paper. One balmy night, crickets chirruping outside my window, I had a sudden revelation. I thought, *These things are older than us. They've been around for a longer time.* That struck me as being momentous somehow, and the next day I set whatever cicadas I had trapped free, and moved on to the less rewarding, but now more morally acceptable, task of melting my plastic superhero dolls with the magnifying glass.

This was also the summer Georgie went to Palisades, a day camp for little kids. She'd come home from it every day crying. We wondered why, but Georgie wouldn't say--that is, until the day she showed up with a bloody nose and decided that enough was enough. It turned out that Chris Battle, one of the boys in Georgie's group, was teasing and bullying her. (This admission came out several weeks into the summer, long after young Big Shot Chris Battle's reign of terror had begun.) Georgie told me and Raf, not our parents, and we promised her we'd take care of it.

Oh boy, did we take care of it.

We ambushed Chris Battle on his walk home from Palisades park. He was a big kid, certainly much bigger than Georgie, but no match for me and my brother. We were taller, older by a few years, and outweighed him.

He was crossing a field of high grass behind a playground when my brother and I surrounded him. Raf from the front, me from behind. We were wearing old Halloween masks, mine a wolf's head, Raf's a ninja's cowl, and bravely brandished our Swiss Army knives, longest blades unfolded. The kid was scared shitless, and

that's all we'd been meaning to do, scare him, but once you feel that initial rush of power and domination over someone it's very easy for things to get out of hand. Raf and I were holding the knives out in front of us, swinging the things in wide arcs, slowly closing in Chris Battle, who was crying. Suddenly, I stepped forward and stuck my blade into his shoulder. Automatically. I can't explain why, I just did.

It slid in with surprising ease. Then, almost as quickly as I'd thrust the knife in, I pulled it back out. Red blood welled up in Chris's shoulder, and I, suddenly terrified, backed off immediately, giving him the opening he needed. He took off in a run, screaming and clutching his hurt arm.

Raf asked, "What happened?" That meant he hadn't seen. *Good*, I thought. I told him I thought we'd scared Chris enough and left it at that.

We went home, and the next day Chris Battle didn't show up at camp. Georgie came home smiling, and I knew then that we'd done at least some good.

That night, our mother and father sat us down and told us that two "men" (that was how we'd been described) had attacked and stabbed one of the neighborhood kids. (Chris Battle, who went to Georgie's camp, and did she know him?) We were warned to be careful. Georgie, who didn't know any better because she was so young, decided, "He deserved it." Raf looked at me, but kept quiet. Chris Battle didn't go back to Palisades that summer, and the matter was soon forgotten.

By everyone but me. I still have my Swiss Army knife. Or had it before coming here. It doesn't have any special significance for me, that's not what I'm saying. It's simply the tool with which I once stabbed a young boy. After that day, I used it mainly for its scissors, trimming my nails and cutting string. The only reason I even mention it now is because while I was walking home from my kidnapped sister's apartment, I wondered if stabbing Fiona in the chest with the Swiss Army knife might not be the best possible way of killing her.

It seemed like it, I decided when I got to my dark apartment. Maybe not the most painless, but certainly the quickest. In any case, I couldn't strangle her. Although there probably wasn't much of a mess to clean up after the typical choking, there would most likely be a protracted struggle during, and that was an un stomachable proposition. And I didn't have a gun, so that was out, too. Then it occurred to me, *Clubbing her might be the way to go*. That way, I could do it with something at her place and wouldn't risk carrying around some incriminating weapon. Yes, I thought, *A lamp or heavy ashtray. Something*. Okay, that was decided then. I'd either stab Fiona or beat her to death.

I opened my refrigerator and rooted through it, pulling out a Corona I'd probably had in there since before this whole tragic-fall-thing began. It was delicious and almost freezing, with little bits of beer-ice floating in it, and the first gulp I took reminded me of summer and--.

No, not summer, but September, when Washington was still steaming. Late one Friday afternoon, when the first week of classes had just ended, and someone from the English department asked me what I was doing. I'd finished all my work for the day, so I told her, "Nothing," and we walked down to the C & O Canal and sat at a Mexican restaurant (I can't remember its name) right by the water's edge. We had quesadillas and drank beer. The Corona that day had been just as frosty as the one I was having now. The person had been--.

"...been here before," Fiona said, "But I like it."

"Yeah," I agreed, "I don't normally dig Mexican, but this is good."

Fiona proposed a toast then, "To the coming school year," and we drank from our Coronas and sat in silence for a bit. People jogged by beneath us, following the dirt path next to the canal's brown water. A family of ducks paddled along its surface, every so often dunking their heads and letting out loud quacks.

The day was hot but not humid, and the air was filled with endless, amazing possibilities.

She asked me what I thought about my classes, and I told her that they all seemed fine, except for one, and that even that one shouldn't be too much of a problem. "I don't know," Fiona said, "I've heard Pickman's a real nutcase."

I laughed and told her about his weird mug, and Fiona asked me what my impressions of the people in our program were. "Gosh," I said, thinking about it for a moment, "I don't really know anybody. I mean, there's you. And this guy Brian Lamb seems nice. That's about it."

She asked me if I knew anyone in Washington, and I told her only my sister, who was a freshman that year. She thought this was funny, since the only person she knew in Washington was Aaron, her younger brother, who was also a freshman at Georgetown. "Wow, that's neat," I said, then asked, "What do you think of the people here?"

Fiona took a bite of chicken quesadilla. "I like all the teachers. And everyone else is friendly. Well, I guess." She mentioned two names then. Jennifer Carter, as someone she could see herself becoming good friends with, and Eric Zann, as someone who gave her the creeps. "I shouldn't say that when I don't even know him," she said, then added, "Do you?"

"No," I said, "I mean, I don't think he's in any of my classes."

We spent the rest of the afternoon talking about movies and books and plays, and drinking too many Coronas, and laughing. Eventually, I left her, and as I walked home I wondered if something special might not happen between us...

...been Fiona. Thinking of her name, of her, the rug was pulled out from under me. I staggered and was shaking so badly I had to sit down. What was happening? What was I doing? I was treating all of this like a pretend game, an imaginary

movie I was the star of. It was sick, my behavior. I--I--was sick. My options were all monstrous. My sister had been kidnapped! For all I knew she was already--.

No.

...already, yes, dead. Well, it was a possibility. And if she wasn't, she soon could be. Unless I brought another body to Jennifer's by ten o'clock. I checked my watch. I had almost two hours to kill. (Poor choice of words, I know, but I thought them.) Two hours to come up with a body. Either Jackie's or Fiona's, because who else could I kill? I--.

Christ. Fiona. What did she have to do with any of this? Nothing, absolutely nothing. She--.

I--.

There was no one for me to turn to, either. No police. No parents. And if I tried to trick Eric, if I tried to get Georgie away from them, he'd kill her. He had a gun. He might be bluffing, yes, I suppose that was a possibility, but how could I know for sure? I couldn't. He'd killed before, he'd do it again. Oh, the situation was grim. And no matter what I did, there was no way we'd get away with it. If (when) I killed Fiona, that would be too much. The dead woman at the funeral home. Brian. Pickman. And Fiona. All within ten blocks of each other. No, we were going to be punished. And I was going to be the one most responsible for this insane body-count.

So. There would be one more death. Either my sister's--.

Nononononononono!!!

...or Fiona's. And if that was how it had to be, then that was how it was going to be. Fiona would be sacrificed to save my sister's life, and then we three would pay for our crimes. But I had to face up to that, and stop treating it all like some schlocky noire novel. (Although, in my defense, it did have all of the genre's standard requirements. The repentant criminal, the quasi-homosexual villain, the

femme fatale, the nice but ineffectual policeman.) Because it wasn't that. It might have those elements, yes, but there was nothing funny about it. And there was no fooling myself about...myself, either. I was a horrible person, a murderer, and there would be no keeping that from anyone. Even if we didn't get caught by the police, Georgie would know. She probably knew already. What we three did, what we three...ate. And the knowing is what makes it impossible to live with. Because I don't just mean other people knowing, I mean self-knowledge. The things I now knew... My crimes and my feelings leading up to those crimes...they whispered things to me, in my ear, about myself. I was wanton and empty and had been waiting for a chance, an excuse, to experiment with what had been previously forbidden to me. And having found these things out, I would soon have to pay a terrible price.

But first things first. I had a baby sister to save. And, yes, a friend to kill.

So I went to Fiona's, where she greeted me with a hug. "How you holding up?" she wanted to know. She meant about Brian's wake, his death.

"Not so good," I said. *And getting worse.* "You?" I asked.

She shrugged and led me towards her living room. "It hasn't sunk in yet," she said, then added, "I never used to know what people meant when they said that. Now, I think I do." I nodded. Fiona went on, "And I wasn't even that close to Brian."

Do it.

I shifted nervously in my seat and said that yes, it must be hard for his father and family. Fiona said, "I meant for you, too, Frank. You and Brian were close."

The longer you wait--.

"Not that close," I said.

The longer you wait, the harder it'll be.

Fiona asked me if I wanted a drink, and I told her yes, that I could really use one. "Why do you think he did it?" she asked me.

Because we killed two people. Because we ate their dead bodies.

"I don't know," I said. "I can't imagine anyone being so far gone that they'd do something like that."

Fiona was in her kitchen, rooting through a cupboard's cluttered contents for glasses and bottles. Her back was to me.

Do it.

I stood up.

"Vodka tonic okay?" she asked, pushing aside empty bottles and standing on her tip-toes to see back into the cabinet's darkest recesses.

"Sure," I said, and reached into my blazer for the oddly-comforting weight resting against my heart. (I'd decided to bring the Swiss Army knife after all.)

"It's here somewhere, I know," Fiona was saying.

Do it, I thought, and just then a panic was setting in: *He has Georgie*. That quelled the hesitation. I moved in behind Fiona. She suddenly looked very small to me. "Fiona," I said, "If something...awful was going to happen to Aaron and you could stop it, you would, right? No matter what?" She came down on her heels, but didn't turn around. She thought about it. I pulled the knife out and started unfolding its longest, sharpest blade. Fiona said, "Yeah, I think I would. I-I'd do whatever I had to."

Do. It. Now.

I raised the knife up high. I wanted it over. There was a spot of skin, the back of her neck, between her shirt collar and where her red hair tapered into nothingness. *There*. I closed my eyes and tightened my grip.

And it unexpectedly came to me that I couldn't do it. No, not even that. That's wrong. I could do it, yes. I could do a lot of things. Since meeting Eric and

the others, I'd plumbed the depths of evil and terror and hopelessness. Nothing was left unknown to me. There were no more taboos for me to break. Life had no secrets from me. And Death? Forget about Death, Death and I were friends now. The sound of Her beating wings had become horrifyingly familiar. And the things I used to believe about myself and how the world worked and what was good and just and acceptable...these had been replaced with new thoughts and beliefs. Of what I was capable of, what I could live with. Eric had promised us communion with the gods, a divine union, and maybe that's how it was for him. But for me, our acts of murder and cannibalism had brought us in contact not with the sacred, but with the basest, most profane aspects of humanity. I was a killer. I chose my own path.

So my sudden thought as I stood over Fiona, knife raised to stab her in the neck, wasn't that I couldn't do it (for, as I've said, I could and had done comparable already), but that I had a choice. *Sometimes*, I thought, *Sometimes good people do very bad things*. But they're still good people. Because they stop themselves from continuing the cycle of evil either they or someone else had begun. Because they regret their appalling deeds.

Oh, I wasn't thinking that I was a good person. And that's not what I'm trying to say now, either. But there are degrees. And an evil person can, well, stop being evil. And, again as I've already said, each of us reaches a line, the final, defining one, that they either cross or don't. It was as though I were on the edge of a precipice, looking down to where Eric and Jennifer had already fallen. My foot was dangling in the air over it.

Fiona.

Georgie.

My arm was quivering.

Do it.

Fiona was turning around, saying, "Why do you ask?"

I--. I--.

I snapped the blade shut and secreted the knife back into my blazer just as Fiona swung around to face me.

I couldn't do it. There had to be another way. There had to be something I was missing, something I was forgetting. "Fiona," I said, "I have to go. I'm sorry."

"Frank," she said, reaching for me.

Tell her.

"Fiona," I said, deciding. "I need your help."

I spoke to her for a few minutes, telling her some little part of it. I gave her a slip of paper and made her promise to do something for me. She said she would, but asked, "Why, Frank? What's happening to you?" I told her that she didn't want to know, that it would all come out eventually, and thanked her again for everything, for the little she'd done and was going to do.

I walked home. I checked my watch, its hands glowing in the dark, turning the watch's face into a kind of abstracted death's head. There was still time. A little over an hour before I had to be at Jennifer's with an acceptable substitute.

Think.

Okay, there was no way to somehow fake a dead body, right? By going to a butcher's shop for blood and meat and then maybe wrapping the stuff up to look like dismembered human limbs. No. No, that was out. Eric and Jennifer weren't stupid. That ploy might buy me a few seconds, but they'd be suspicious, scrutinizing everything. I was sure that no matter how much I mangled the meat to disguise it, they'd be able to sniff out its phoniness in seconds.

Think.

The police? Perhaps I'd dismissed the possibility of them helping me too readily. They were, after all, professionals. And smart as Eric was, he wasn't a criminal mastermind. I could call Detective Bullock and...

And tell them what? That I was just one of several fine young cannibals, responsible for not one, but two murders? Oh, and could he please be extra-careful when arresting Eric and Jennifer because, almost assuredly, Eric would have a gun pointed at my sister's head? No, I didn't think so. I sighed. The most likely outcome of a phone call to Detective Bullock or any of his associates would result in my immediate arrest. And then there would be no one to help Georgie.

Think

Eric. It all began and ended with Eric. His need to hunt and feed. Yes, and his need to not just feed, but to feed ritualistically. Not alone, but in a group. He had the gun. He had my sister. He was the one pulling the strings. Eric Zann. I picked up my phone and dialed his number. It rang once. Perhaps I could try reasoning with him. A second time. Perhaps he wasn't so far gone. A third time, and his machine picked up. "Fuck," I said, slamming the phone down. He wasn't there. I looked at my watch. A little under an hour. He was probably already at Jennifer's, getting ready for--.

Georgie.

...for dinner.

Think

What could I do now? There was no one to help me. Eric and Frank... As I should have known from the start of our monstrous adventures together, it was coming down to the two of us alone, a contest to see who could and would go further.

Think

He was winning, that was pretty clear.

I'm forgetting something.

I asked myself what my problem was exactly.

That he has Georgie.

Yes, he had something I wanted. My sister. And I had to get her back from him, but how? He held all the cards, and I had nothing. I needed leverage, something he craved as badly as I did Georgie's safe return. Something I could get without killing.

THINK!

We'd trade, my sister's life for whatever, and then all go to jail. I'd already come to terms with that, but there was still Georgie's life to preserve...

Eric and his appetite. I was sure I could use that against him somehow. In his hunger, he must've been sloppy at some point or other, but where? When? Yes, that was the key to it all, his hunger. If I could--.

Key.

"Waitamminute," I said aloud, my voice almost laughing at the possibility. "Wait. One. Little. Minute." Up till this point, I'd been in my living room. Now, I went to my bedroom, to my desk in the bedroom.

A long time ago, Eric had given me a set of his clothes...

I opened the desk's middle door, full of pencils and pens and change and other clutter. I started sifting through it.

...clothes to replace my wet, bloody ones. New Year's Eve. His pants' pockets were full, and much later that night, I mistook his, Eric's, keys for my own...

"Where are you?" I asked, fingernails scraping against the drawer's wooden bottom.

...keys I kept after throwing Eric's clothes into a dumpster in the alley behind my building. Keys I told Eric I'd thrown in with his clothes when he asked about them...

I found them. "Aha," I said. Two copper keys on a ring. Keys, I assumed, to Eric's apartment, which, if I remembered correctly, was in a building with no doorman. I looked at my watch, saw it was nine-oh-nine. Eric's apartment was on the way to Jennifer's. There was still a chance. I had some hope again. Not much, but a little goes a long way. I slammed out of my apartment and started running towards Eric's. I'd search it, where he lived and how, until I turned something up. If there was anything Eric valued as much as Georgie's flesh, it would be there. Or perhaps I'd unearth some clue to his particular strain of madness. Find some bargaining chip that would buy me time and my sister's life.

Speeding through the night, puffing and heart wild, still in my itchy black funeral suit, I made it to Eric's in just over ten minutes. (I was proud of myself. I only freaked-out once, and that was when I momentarily forgot which street corner his building was on.) And I'd been right, his building was, indeed, doorman-less. *Good*, I thought, and took the elevator up to the seventh floor. I found Eric's door, knocked just to make sure he hadn't unexpectedly come home, and, when no one answered, let myself in with the rogue key. I flipped on the lights. Above me, florescent tubes flickered to life, casting a soft, pale, and unnatural light over the furniture. Eric's apartment wasn't big, a living room-kitchen area, a bedroom, a bathroom, and two closets, but I'd have to move fast.

I began with the living room. More specifically, with the only object in Eric's living room large enough to hide anything of importance. A heavy wooden desk pushed up into the room's darkest corner, the one furthest away from the big picture window that looked out on Georgetown Hospital. It had seven drawers, a thin one in the middle flanked by three thicker ones on each side, all of them

locked. I fooled around with a paper clip, trying to--as they say--"jimmy" the lock open, but gave up after wasting four precious minutes. *Subtlety is not a priority*, I thought, and splintered through wood, pried open the middle drawer with a metal letter opener Eric had thoughtfully left for me on his desktop.

That first drawer was a bust. Its contents amounted to little more than a used checkbook and several bank statements, reflections--upon closer inspection--of just how obscenely rich Eric actually was. Ditto the next three drawers, which were mostly filled with either school stuff or junk mail. Then, just as I was about to give up on the desk completely, I broke open drawer number five.

Bingo.

It contained a batch of letters addressed to Martin and Evelyn Zann, sent back to Eric unopened.

His parents, I thought, and suddenly realized just how stupid I'd been. Eric had never once mentioned his family before, and I, so involved with my own personal dramas, had never bothered to ask. But now that I considered the letters, I remembered that while Jennifer, Brian, and I had been arranging trips home to our respective families for Christmas holidays, Eric had been doing...well, nothing.

Of course, I thought.

If those unopened letters were any indication, then maybe Eric didn't have anyone to seek solace or cheer or strength or inspiration from. No one to really connect with the way only family members can. He had no one to ground him; his feet were a yard off the earth. Something happens between blood relations, an accord between parent and child or between siblings. I mean the fighting and bickering, yes, but also the loving and healing. Which, I (armed with my dime-store psychology) concluded, would explain Eric's practically pathological need to construct from us a sort of surrogate family, a community of cannibals instead of

brothers and sisters. It was twisted, but made sense in the context of all we'd done and seen.

I moved on, and--with drawer number six--finally hit pay-dirt.

A neat stack of papers, typed and about fifty sheets thick, which I almost dismissed as the pages of a term paper for school. Thankfully, I didn't. I looked closer. Dates, paragraphs of prose going back some six years. *No, not a report*, I thought, *A personal record, a journal*. And, I would soon learn, a catalogue of horrors. And a warped, step-by-step methodology for salvation. Of course, I couldn't read it all, there wasn't time, but I skimmed every page, and certain entries and passages screamed out to me from the dense, single-spaced treatise. If nothing else, it was wonderfully written. Eric lacked logic and sanity in his writing, fine, but he more than made up for this deficiency with a most profound belief: that what he was doing was good. A simple and religious kind of need drove his fingers to pluck out the words staring up at me. Deliverance and redemption, mad ramblings that began with:

I have been unfortunate once. Perhaps more than once. An always-dry throat and a cut that would not heal led me to Hospital and further. To the discovery that I have been infected with an invisible enemy. A retro-virus which renders my blood's antibodies useless. My immune system has collapsed, Doctor informed me, and microbes that once were harmless are now life-threatening. Had I ever had unprotected sex with a man before? Doctor demanded. "Of course I have," I said, "With both men and women." Drugs? "Yes." Had I ever bled? "Yes," I said, and in that word was my death sentence... I was given medicines to take and injections to administer myself. I was told that it might be

years before virus flared to disease. Years, I thought, of walking on eggshells, of shrinking from sneezes and nosebleeds... I now have to fight for something I'd so far taken for granted. My life. At the heart of this horror, I have come to a realization and a pledge...I will survive this. I will make it through this.

So, I thought, *Eric was stricken with--*. I didn't want to name it, but it was the most terrible disease of our time. Spreading uncontrollably from man to man. Acts of animal passion performed in the fecund darkness. Unspeakable love translating into certain death. And what's worse, I--. Eric and I, we'd--. I read on, flipping and scanning pages until...

...the photographer suddenly stopped in mid-shoot. His telephoto lens had caught something. A blemish apparently, just beneath my chin. "Step into the light," he said. And when I did, when someone brought out a mirror for me to see, I noticed what the make-up person must have thought simply a mole or birthmark. I wet my finger and rubbed away the base. No, not a birthmark. A lesion. The first visible sign of the dark ravages to come. The corruption I'd known was growing. The swollen bumps beneath my arms and between my legs, the fungus under my fingernails and on my gums...all easy to ignore, but no longer. Now I could see the disease's tracks. Others could, as well. So, another trip to Hospital and confirmation from Doctor. Higher doses, more drugs, and naturally modeling was no longer an option. The strain, yes, but who would want me? My body...degenerating. What would I do? Doctor asked of me. Do? I would learn...

Descriptions then of Eric's career in academia. Trying to seek answers for the illness, a treatment, in other disciplines. Also, an almost daily chronicling of the disease's progress through his body. He wrote of his futile attempts to hunt down the man who might've infected him. How turning to medicine, then the Church, then support groups, all failed him. How his parents, the rest of his small family, abandoned him. Culminating with an entry dated just over a year and a half ago...

...there is nothing to be done. I have tried every available option and there is none left. The visible lesions have thankfully vanished, but now exist within me. I defecate, and blood mingles with the other filth. Doctor informs me that there has been good indication that the disease might soon break through the blood-brain barrier and pollute my mind, causing memory-loss and temporary--.

"Omigod," I said aloud.

...temporary insanity. That will not happen. That must not happen...

...later, much later. Blind now (ironically, it is a side-effect of the drugs, not one of the sickness's symptoms) as I type these words. Will correct them later. Still, I must write because I have, I think, a new hope. I heard--because I could not see--a program on the Iroquois natives, who would eat their enemies' flesh and drink their blood for strength and added vitality. Longer life. I have nothing to lose, and it, of course, makes a perfect sort of sense. Absorbing (eating) a young, healthy body to dilute

the disease's concentration in my own. As soon as my eyesight returns, I will further research this...

So the idea had been Eric's after all. He'd been ill and gripped by a fevered madness when he first hit upon this monstrous hope, and it was only later, during more lucid moments, that he'd tricked me into thinking I was the idea's originator. It must have been important somehow, but I couldn't guess why. I read on, Eric's sentences getting longer and longer, and making less and less sense. He discussed cannibalism and what people who practiced it believed. That gods devoured men, and that if men devoured men, then the men would be transformed into gods. "And gods," Eric wrote, "Gods were not subject to human diseases or fallibilities." He wrote of Australian aborigines, the New Zealand Maoris, the Hurons, the African Ashaniti, the Balkan Uscochi, the Aztecs, the Mayans, the Fijians, and others. He studied their rituals and rites, their pagan deities that demanded blood sacrifices for healthy crops and healthy bodies. He wrote of taboos and transgressions, of the belief that once a person stops violating these taboos, he begins to die. I shuddered when I read his musing on groups...

...during my researches this afternoon, I came across this sentence: "The importance of peer group pressure is also suggested by the fact that the majority of those who become cannibals did so along with at least one other person." Yes, that is true. I cannot do this alone. I must surround myself with others. Not only so that I might perform the acts properly (for all of these blood ceremonies must be done in a group to appease the gods), but also so that there will be someone to blame. Of course, lives will be lost. But think what I will have offered them before that

final sleep. Communion with gods. A taste of forbidden fruit. Power over other men's lives...

He's insane, I thought. He's insane and he's planning to kill us and pin all of the dead bodies--Pickman's, the woman's, maybe even Brian's--on our cold, silent corpses. "He's using us as scapegoats," I muttered, and read on.

...I have already found three that will help me. They are weak, broken, desperate students, all with marginal interests in humanity's darker side, but not enough will to pursue those stirrings alone. Together, however, under my guidance, I will form a community. And, with multiple members to shoulder the blame, the unspeakable and undoable will become matter-of-fact. Furthermore, to make those final acts more palatable, I will if possible orchestrate it so that one of the three suggests the culminating deed. And, since many cannibalistic societies ingested mild hallucinogenic substances before participating in their rituals, I see no reason why we shouldn't either. It will make things easier, at any rate...

"Us," I said, "He's talking about us." But then I checked that entry's date, saw it was from April of last year, and realized, *Oh God, he's done this before!* I turned to the next page, and there wasn't another journal entry, but a newspaper clipping. It was a report about two William and Mary graduate students who'd committed suicide, poisoned themselves in the apartment they shared--at the dinner table, no less. Evidence found at the scene connected the students to the unsolved disappearances of two William and Mary employees, a teacher and a janitor, and a third student. There was no mention at all of Eric Zann or, thankfully, of cannibalism. *That son of a bitch, I thought, He'd poison us all and*

then escape to do this somewhere else. And I used to think it was strange that Eric was on his third degree. *Motherfucker.* I checked my watch--running out of time now--and turned to the next page.

...It is a success. The bleeding has stopped, my weight has steadied, my vision is almost back to what it was before, and the headaches are no longer as frequent or severe as they'd been. Consuming the three bodies (the first a stranger, the second a known enemy, the third a sacrificial member chosen from our very group) has truly purified and strengthened my wrecked body. I have stolen life from those who would take it for granted. I have hunted and tasted and lived to the fullest. I have cheated this pestilence...

...One final observation and one fear. Despite all our rituals, the hunting and dancing, the drinking of blood and eating of flesh, I have come to the conclusion that all of this would've been for nothing if not for my decision to save our poor slaughtered lambs' hearts and brains for myself, my own personal consumption. The Aztecs didn't devour their thousands upon thousands of human sacrifices' hearts, but rather offered the hearts (the "precious eagle-cactus fruit") up to their sun god, who cannibalized it the way the sun cannibalizes the night stars as it rises. And the head-hunting tribes of Africa, while they might have eaten the flesh of their enemy tribes, preserved their heads, shrunk them into totems, because they believed that the head is the seat of the soul... But they were backwards,

idiotic primitives, who didn't know any better. If, like me, they had instead chosen (finally, it is all about choice) to digest their victims' heads and hearts, they might not have been so easily "civilized" or colonized or exterminated. I can write this because it was only after I'd eaten the saved hearts and brains--after taking part in the sacred, communal three meals--that I truly felt the blackness within me weakening, and my life force returning...

My fear is quite simply that I will have to do it again. That the time I have bought myself is limited, and that I will have to engage in these flesh and blood rituals cyclically. A process of regeneration that I will have to repeat exactly each and every year. Eating the flesh with the others first, then the hearts and heads alone. We shall see...

I flipped to the next page, dated from August of this year.

...I was right! It has started again! The bleeding, the lesions, the smell of death and decay! I must preserve myself! I must begin again. This year, at Georgetown, I will assemble a new club. Together the four of us--there must be four again--will..."

It ended there, the report, at least the typewritten part of it. Scrawled (again, in that terrifying child's hand) across the bottom of the last sheet, were the words: I must have the HEARTS! The HEADS! I closed my eyes for a moment and tried to shake the horrific truth away, but couldn't. When I re-opened them, I carefully, reverently, placed the report back in the desk drawer just as I'd found it. It was a silly thing to do, I know, a stupid gesture, but I thought such religious conviction

as Eric's deserved that at least. Then, defeated, I looked at my watch again. Jennifer and Eric would be expecting me some ten odd minutes from now. And I'd show up empty-handed, forfeiting Georgie's life, having wasted vital minutes reading Eric's lunatic treatise. (Was this, I wondered, the important work Eric had told Jennifer he'd been working on?) I'd learned nothing of importance, nothing I could trade for my sister, only that Eric was like Conrad's Kurtz, a headhunter, a white devil who'd set himself up as a sort of god among--.

No, it suddenly occurred to me, Not just a headhunter. A hearthunter, too.

Oh, it was crazy. What could I do? I'd search the rest of the apartment in the little time I had left, but then what? I didn't even know what I was looking for. I stood up and turned to face the rest of the living room. I--.

Waitamminute.

I froze. "Saved hearts and brains." That's what Eric had written. That he saved the hearts and heads of his victims and ate them only after he'd cannibalized three humans.

Of course.

During the dismemberment in his apartment, he'd taken the woman's head and heart and--.

What? Hidden them?

Think, Frank.

That woman was One. Pickman was Two. Tonight, whoever it ended up being, would be Three. Then he'd eat the saved hearts and heads. The most important parts. A ritual he had to perform exactly as the year before. All of which meant that somewhere--hidden in this apartment most likely--were four fist-sized treasures. Two pieces of precious eagle-cactus fruit and two seats of the human soul. They were valuable to Eric, life-saving even.

As valuable as Georgie's life?

Well, if not, then nothing was. I asked myself where Eric would store such delicate foodstuffs, and immediately assumed the kitchen, the freezer.

No dice. Empty. And the refrigerator, too, was barren.

Think, Frank. If they're not frozen, then they have to be--.

"Pickled," I said. "In jars." Yes, but where? The closet? A quick search turned up nothing. Beneath the bed? Shoes and nothing else.

Think, Frank.

I was going about this the wrong way. Thinking normally when I should have been thinking like Eric, not sanely, but starvingly. These were valuable commodities, priceless, and he wouldn't just have them anywhere, they'd be hidden, secreted away in a safe behind a hanging picture. *Yes.* Except, I realized as I scanned Eric's walls, there were no paintings, only--.

Of course.

I went to the wall Eric had covered with photographs of himself. Images of his healthy, uncorrupted body frozen in black-and-white time forever. I drew back my fist, steeled myself against the pain in case I was wrong, and punched. Not into hard plaster, but through thin paper, through the magazine ads and photographs.

Yes.

"Please," I said, now tearing the pages down frantically, letting them fall to the floor around me. "Please let me be--." I cleared away enough of the collage to find an imperfect circle in the wall, its diameter about two feet across, where Eric had scooped out plaster and putty and built up a little cubby hole. A dark place holding four mason jars, each filled with a thick, transparent liquid, and each containing a vital organ. "...right." Two hearts, two heads. Brains, I should say.

I grabbed the jar with the healthiest-looking heart in it, stuffed it in a paper bag I found in Eric's kitchen, and ran out of the apartment, hoping that somewhere Fiona was doing what I'd asked her to.

This was the last of my story's many runs. Also its darkest one because it was when I finally realized the truth about myself. Previously, I'd come to terms with the fact that I wasn't innocent at all, but as guilty and as evil as Eric and Jennifer were. I'd concluded that although Eric might very well have been the puppetmaster, I'd killed and eaten (and reveled in it) at least half-willingly, all of which made me as bad as he was. Still, I could live with that. Spreading the blame thinly among four sets of shoulders does a lot for a person's conscience, his sense of worth. But now...

I'd been wrong. I wasn't as bad as Eric, I was far, far worse. Eric was dying of a disease that had-- (And once again, I returned to my bible, my tattered copy of Conrad's bound darkness.) ...a disease that had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, consumed his flesh, and sealed his soul to its own by the inconceivable ceremonies of some demonic initiation. An illness that had clearly affected his mind, made him insane enough to credit his short-lived bursts of health and wholeness to the eating of human meat instead of the disease's natural fluctuations. I'm not saying he'd been lunatic for two years, only that he'd had moments, flashes of madness when the idea first came to him... And once he had the idea, everything else fell into place. Eric had reasons for his abominable actions. Now, sitting here with you four, I can safely say that self-preservation is quite possibly the strongest impulse in man. It was in Eric, at least. And it wasn't an evil or selfish drive, because selfishness implies a conscious, rational choice, which I don't think Eric had. In him, it had simply been impulse and instinct, brought on by the black kisses that one day appeared on his neck and chest.

Look, I'm not excusing the part he played in it all...it's just that I can't use him as a scapegoat, not anymore. Eric, to put it plainly, had cause. I, on the other hand, had none. What I had was a perverse streak. Jennifer, too. We were the neediest, the stupidest, the most savage, the most wicked and immoral. Not Brian,

he'd done nothing, not really, and was already dead. I alone was left holding the proverbial bag--quite literally, as it happened.

I got to Jennifer's, knocked. Eric opened the door, said, "You're late." I pushed my way past him, took in the room. Jennifer, looking upset, but no one else. "Where is she?" I demanded. Eric closed the door. "Late," he said, "And bearing no gifts."

Now, I thought. Before you chicken out.

Now. While they're not expecting it.

"No," I said, shaking my head and bringing the pickled heart from out of its paper bag. "I brought this. NOW. Where. Is. She?"

To say that Eric was jolted as he'd never been jolted before wouldn't do the situation justice. Oh, it was only momentarily, the shock, the horror, but I'd seen it. A crack in that otherwise impenetrable shell. I had another flash of hope then, that we, Georgie and I, I mean, that we might actually make it out of this mess alive. Eric, once again appearing calm and collected, began, "Where--?"

I interrupted him, "In your apartment. I found it behind your pictures. The other three are hidden where you'll never get to them."

Eric: "Why--?"

This is taking too long. Something's wrong.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS MY SISTER?" I screamed.

Jennifer, who either didn't recognize or didn't understand the significance of what I was holding, spoke up, "She's not here, Frank."

Huh? "W-what are you talking about?" I stammered, "The note--."

"Was a ruse," Eric said. "She left over an hour ago."

A ruse? To what? To--.

"Sure," I said, understanding. "To get me to kill someone on a dare you were never going to follow through on." *Idiot. I'm an idiot.*

Eric said, "Well, of course I wasn't, Frank. Which is why I let myself be seen on her floor." He paused, then went on, "I assumed that her safety would be enough of an incentive to get you back on track. Apparently, I was wrong."

"She's not here," I said, to be sure.

"No," Eric said, "I went to your sister's room (she's a cutie, by the way) and asked her to walk with me for a bit. I brought her here and we made plans for your surprise birthday party in three weeks. Then, after enough time had passed--."

For me to kill Fiona. Or Jackie.

"...your sister left, untouched and unaware." Eric's voiced darkened. "But you see how easy it is for me to get to her."

I would have killed Fiona for nothing.

"Now you, Frank. Give me the heart," Eric demanded.

I had completely forgotten about my birthday. I--.

Don't get distracted.

I raised the jar high and smashed it to the floor, glass shattering and thick ooze smearing my legs, the wall, Eric's shoes. "It's OVER!" I yelled. The heart bounced like a rubber ball and rolled beneath the sofa Jennifer was sitting on. Eric screamed and started to lunge for it, but stopped himself. He turned to me and looked as though he were going to rip my throat out, but that expression, too, quickly passed. Through gritted teeth, he said, "That was silly. Now we'll have to kill someone else."

"No," I said, "You're not listening. I'm through and...and this is over."

Eric sat down on the sofa, felt for the heart beneath him, and said, "I'm getting tired of your threats, Frank. You're not leaving." I asked him why he cared (even though I knew, I needed more time), and he replied, "Our actions, what we did, set us apart from everyone else. If you left us, Frank, what would you have?"

Nothing. You'd have no one. There'd be nobody who could even begin to understand what you've gone through. What you've seen, what you've done."

He was right, of course. I had changed. Still, I said, "I don't care. That's--."

"You say that now, sure," Eric interrupted, "But you'd be alone."

Jennifer said, "Living in a world of people moving in slow-motion. Everything would be gray and dull... Oh, Frank, how could anything you'd go on to experience compare with what we four have shared?"

Wrong.

"Three," I corrected, "Brian's dead."

Eric finally found the heart and brought it out from under the couch. Besides being dirty, it was obviously bruised and damaged. He didn't like that. He said, "You've connected with us."

"I don't care," I said.

"YOU WILL!" Eric screamed, squeezing the heart, blood and pickling juices oozing through his flexed fingers. "Eventually, you'd want to tell someone about it." I said he was crazy, that I wasn't proud of our crimes. I thought of Fiona, and said that they would either let me leave or else I'd go to the police and turn us all in. Jennifer said, "You'd never do that. What about your family?"

My mother and father. Georgie and Raf. I've--. I've lost them.

I asked, "You think I can even stand being near them after what I've done?"

Eric dropped the heart, wiped his hand on his shirt, and reached behind his back. He pulled out the gun, and I told myself that if everything was going smoothly with Fiona, I'd only need to stall for a few more minutes--or not even that. "Oh, what?" I asked, "Are you going to shoot me now? Is that it?"

"That is a third option to the two you've given us, yes," Eric said, "I could kill you right now and be done with your idiocy. Jennifer and I would have you for dinner and then you'd really never be able to leave us."

Jennifer shifted, and I wondered if she hadn't just realized how dangerous Eric actually was. That if he could turn on me so viciously and suddenly, then perhaps it would only be a matter of time before she fell out of his favor--and ended up on the menu.

"No," I said, "I don't think so. Including Brian, that would mean four dead bodies. Even the idiots running campus security would figure it out." I paused, "Not to mention Detective Bullock."

Jennifer, more than a little scared and unsure now, said, "We could say it was self-defense."

Eric, picking up on that thread, continued, "Or we'd tell the police you went crazy. Killed the woman in the funeral home and beat Pickman to death. Jennifer and I wanted to say something, but we were too scared. Finally, you turned on us. Luckily, I had my father's gun with me." Eric pulled back the trigger. I thought, *It can't end like this. I have to--*.

"Eric, I know your father hates you," I said, "I know you're sick. I know you're dying."

He paused. "What?"

"I read your...journals. You're deluded, Eric, and we're all going to jail."

Jennifer stood up, asked, "Read what?"

"A diary," I said, not taking my eyes off Eric. "He's done this before, Jennifer. He's dying and he thinks these...rituals will make him live longer. He was planning to kill us afterwards." Jennifer asked him if this was true, and Eric started to say something, but I interrupted him, "Don't deny it." A moment passed, and then Eric uncocked the gun and slowly lowered it. Jennifer started crying quietly and told me to leave. "I'm sorry," I said, "That was never an option. We really are going to jail. If we went our separate ways now, there'd be no guarantees. I'd never feel safe again. In eight years, you might decide to track me down. Or Georgie. I

can't live that way. And we have to pay for what we've done. And...and Eric has to be stopped."

Eric took a deep breath and covered his eyes with his right hand. I thought, *See no Evil*. He said, "You are so simple-minded sometimes. It wasn't just for me, Frank. It was for you and Jennifer and Brian. The four of us. Even now with everything going wrong, we're still so much more than...Fiona or your sister or Pickman or Bullock will ever be. We've felt things they can't even stand to think about. We're so far beyond your ridiculous concepts of good and evil it's not even comparable. Sacrifices and mistakes were made, granted, but we haven't done anything wrong."

Good.

Evil.

It was my turn to talk. "You can tell yourself that if it helps, Eric, but it's not true. There's something seriously, very basically, wrong with us. Cannibalism in primitive societies...

"Or like in the Donner party, where they ate each other out of need...

"What we did has nothing...

"We each had a choice, and we made it. We made a conscious decision. At least, I did... Maybe you didn't, Eric, maybe the disease has affected your mind." I turned to Jennifer. "But, you, you're like me. Our choice was an incomprehensible one, but we made it anyway. And forget the drugs, they didn't--.

"None of us were driven by native tradition or physical need. Emotional need, psychological need. That's us. There's a part of us that's empty. People who are whole don't do what we did. Adding our parts, the sum of us comes up short...

"We're hollow...

"We need help...

"I'm sorry, that sounds trite."

Eric started laughing then, a chuckle that grew to a roar before finally petering down to nothing. "'We need help.' Oh, that's fucking brilliant, Frank. And Jennifer and I, we're supposed to just sit here while you call the police and, let me get this straight, tell on us? Just when exactly are you planning to do this?"

Gotcha.

"'Do this?' Eric, I'm not a comic book supervillain or Dr. Moriarty. Do you think I would've let this go on for so, would've said so much, if there was even the tiniest chance you might get away?" I asked, then added, "I did it ten minutes ago."

"What?" Jennifer asked.

"Called Detective Bullock," I said. "Well, Fiona did." (*I hope.*) "She's with him now. He's waiting for us to turn ourselves in."

"I don't believe you," Eric said. "You're lying."

Jennifer went to Eric's window, cracked it open, and looked down. She turned back, face white, and said, "No, he's not. There is a police car down there."

Thankyouthankyouthankyou, Fiona. She'd done what I'd asked her to. Called Bullock and told him to wait for me in Eric's lobby, that I had news for him about Pickman. (*Oh boy, I thought, Do I ever have news for him.*) If I hadn't known then that I was going to spend the rest of my life in jail, I might've contemplated the possibility of asking Fiona to go steady with me. Instead, I lied, "He's been in the lobby since I got here. He would've rushed up at the slightest suspicious noise--say, a gunshot." Eric grimaced, was turning something over in his head. I continued the lie: "Bullock's got the garage and side entrances covered, too. There's no getting out of this."

Eric said, "You'll never make it in there." (He must've meant jail.)

I replied, "Yes, I will."

Jennifer closed the window, put her arms around her shoulders, and said, "I'm shaking." She was terrified. I started to take a step towards her, but stopped

myself. Then I turned back to Eric, and he was holding the gun to his right temple. He announced, "I'll kill myself."

"Eric," I said, "This doesn't have to be a bloodbath."

He pulled back the trigger and held the gun steady. Thirty seconds passed. No one said anything. Then--finally--Eric decided something and lowered the gun, uncocking the trigger as he put the revolver down. Now, thirty seconds might not sound like a long time, but believe me, it is. (Why did I even bother saying that? If there's one thing we've learned down here is how slowly the seconds and minutes crawl by...)

I don't mind telling you that for a few minutes there I thought I'd blown everything. It looked as though Eric had actually come damn close to doing it, and that would've been stupid and useless, like everything else we did those long nine months. But he didn't, thank God...

Of course, I don't know what stopped him at that final moment of truth. I have no idea what thoughts could possibly have been running through his mind during that half-minute while everything was in the balance. Maybe he simply decided that enough was enough. Or he looked into himself and found some little sliver of his essence that was entirely free of the disease, healthy, a hidden reserve of strength that was enough to beat the madness and darkness into submission, however temporarily. Or maybe that's giving him too much credit. Maybe it was just the old self-preservation defense mechanism kicking in. Or maybe he restrained himself from blowing his brains out because he didn't like the idea of all that food going to waste. Or he thought of prison, of all those inmates in their individual cells, and decided that somewhere along the line they might make for nice, pre-packaged Happy Meals... I'm sorry, I'm being a jerk. I don't know what made Eric stop. Let's just say he did and leave it at that.

So Eric put the gun down and asked, "He's in the lobby?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"How much does he know?"

I lied and said, "Most of it."

Eric stood up. "I'll go down first."

I nodded again, and we said goodbye, and Eric took the elevator down to the lobby, into the waiting arms of a decidedly confused Joseph Bullock. I wouldn't see him again until the group confession--and after that, never again.

Jennifer and I were the only ones left then. We looked at each other a bit sheepishly. (If someone who didn't know our story were watching us, they might've thought we were two high school kids out on their first date.) "I should go, too," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"I'm surprised."

"Me, too. I really thought I was gonna end up shot. Or dead. Or that Eric would."

"No," Jennifer said, "I meant about us."

"Oh," I said, seriously considering it before cracking wise, "I don't know, this is pretty much how most of my relationships turn out." One final joke to share. Jennifer half-smiled. I did, too. It could've been so different. I wondered if she would continue painting, even in jail. "Goodbye, Frank," she said.

I waved, and she left. A minute passed. Two. *Almost done*. I went to Jennifer's phone, dialed Fiona's number. She wouldn't be there, of course, but I could leave a message so that she wouldn't have to hear the rest of it from someone else. I quickly told her machine the worst of it, and asked her to please try and understand what it must've been like, even though I knew how impossible that would be. Then I hung up and called Georgie, who was at home. I told her to not say anything, to let me do all the talking. I explained that I had done some very

bad things and that I was going to jail. She thought I was kidding at first, but then I said, "Georgie, I killed Professor Pickman," and she got very quiet, and I said that Pickman was only one small part of it. I told her some more, and then said that I had to go.

"When's the next time I'll see you?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said, "Maybe..." But I couldn't guess. Then I said, "Georgie, it's gonna get pretty bad."

"You'll be fine," she said, not crying, but on the verge.

"No," I said, "I mean for you. And the family." *Mom. Dad. Raf.* "Try to make them understand," I said, knowing that she wouldn't be able to. "I love you," I said.

"I love you, too." Voice trembling.

"Even after all this?"

"Yes."

She meant it, and we hung up. Then I took the elevator down to the lobby, where Bullock greeted me like an old friend.

* * *

"...greeted me like an old friend," Frank said, his story finished except for a few loose ends.

"What happened next?" Chuck immediately asked, and I groaned audibly. Not just out of boredom, but because my back hurt. These bleachers were hell on my spine. Frank smiled and said, "We confessed. The three of us. Alone first, then all in a group. Since Bullock had gotten the collar, he was the one who took down our story... He was always nice to me, always played fair. Unlike the other monsters. The press. The lawyers." Frank looked at Mears and said it was nothing personal. Mears shrugged. Frank didn't apologize to me, but that was all right. Reporters are like vultures, it's a simple truth. Frank went on, "We were rushed into

a speedy trial. They decided Eric was a clinical schizophrenic, and he was sent to an asylum for the criminally insane. Jennifer and I, however, were judged competent, and we were both held accountable for our actions. We got life in jail."

"Life?" Chuck asked.

"Plus ninety-nine years," Frank admitted.

"Then what?" the new guy demanded.

I looked at Frank. Chuck still didn't know. Frank said, "You mean with my family?"

"Sure," the new guy said.

"I haven't seen my parents since court. Georgie used to lie to them and take the bus out here. She couldn't stand it, but she came anyway, as often as she could."

"She doesn't anymore? How come?"

I thought, *How can he NOT know?*--but then remembered that it wasn't until someone else told me plainly that I got it.

Frank closed his eyes, sent out invisible feelers, and searched Chuck's innards. He said, "Roll up your sleeve, Chuck."

"My--?" Chuck began, confused.

"Your right arm," Frank said, and the new guy undid his sleeve. He was surprised to find two very dark bruises on his forearm. "What are those?" he asked.

"Those are from the injection," I said.

"Injection?" the new guy asked.

"The lethal injection," Frank said, and looked away, a little embarrassed for Chuck, who just sat there, quietly flexing his arm.

"Tell him, Frank," I said.

Frank sighed and turned back to face us, and his eyes were two dead, black sockets. It was as gruesome a sight as it was unexpected. Chuck backed off, biting

his hand in terror. "All right," Frank said, "I admit it. I lied earlier. The night Eric and I saw *Rosemary's Baby*, he didn't just—. What I mean is, we did more. Much more. And I bled some. Not a lot, but enough that I was infected with it."

The new guy named it, the sickest sex disease ever, and asked Frank if that was what he meant.

"Yeah," Frank answered. "They found it in me after I'd been in jail for about a year. Eric had already died from it. (Georgie brought me his obituary from the newspaper.) Believe it or not, I cried on and off for a week when I found that out...

"Anyway, I took the coward's way out. Blindness, shingles, blood in my shit? No thanks. I was in the infirmary having some tests when I finally did it. It was Christmas Eve, and I ripped the I.V. out of my arm and stabbed myself in the neck with it. Like Brian said, it hardly hurt at all after that first shock of pain...

"It wasn't so bad. There were some decorations on the walls, a tree in the corner. Oh, there wasn't anyone to hold my hand, no, but from my bed I was able to look out a window and see trees, the sky, stars. It was a clear night. The moon was a white hole punched out of the black sky, shining brightly, making the darkness seem not so impenetrable."

At long last, the new guy was clueing in. He said, "You mean you're—? We're all—?"

I nodded and undid my collar so he could see where my throat had been slit during a prison riot ages ago. Keen and Hope had their scars, too, but didn't bother stopping their game to show us.

Chuck: "And we're in all—?"

I think he maybe remembered something Frank had said earlier at lunch—.

...I thought of those old Amicus horror movies. Four or five people, one of them's Joan Collins, and Peter Cushing's there, too, meet on a train and tell each other these stories. About something they've done that's just terrible, some murder,

some crime. And then it turns out that the train's crashed, and that they're all dead, and that they'd been riding the, uh, Death Train, straight to HELL....

...and said, "But it doesn't seem so bad."

"You've only just gotten here," Frank said.

"What are you talking about?" Chuck demanded, "I've been here for weeks now. I--."

"No," I said, "It seems like weeks, but really--" (I closed my eyes and read Chuck's imprint the same way a blind person can read braille) "...you died four minutes ago."

"N-no," Chuck said, then accepted it, "Yes."

"Close your eyes," Frank told the new guy, "And look at the courtyard."

Chuck did, and if he saw anything even resembling the truth...

The prison setting melting away and the reality bubbling beneath it. Not black inmates playing basketball, but some of the lower devils, and the basketballs weren't balls at all, but emptied out--.

Well, I don't need to get anymore graphic about that, do I? And keeping watch over us weren't guards in blue, but some of the monsters a bit higher up in hell's hierarchy. You can tell that from the two constantly-bleeding wounds on their backs. Where their wings used to be. Then you had the eternal fire, the incomprehensible darkness, the works... And Chuck was wrong, it WAS that bad. We're all interconnected parts of the big picture down here, trapped forever in the Big Guy's burning bowels, playthings and distractions slowly melting into ooze that maybe--if we're lucky, and the scales tip in Heaven's favor--will one day be vomited forth, forgiven and accepted... Ah, but Chuck would learn all this himself. And like us, he'd get used to it. Frank, who'd sinned with his mouth, could only eat the little he needed to survive and no more, and had to constantly be using his mouth, telling his story over and over again. And that was just for starters. Me,

who'd made his living writing, could now only transcribe—and never my own words, only other people's stories. Over and over, et cetera, et cetera. I looked down to the book and pictures Frank had given me. The book was *Heart of Darkness*. For the thousandth time, I'd take these back to my cell and write down Frank's words, maybe paste in the pictures, work in some Conrad where I could... Then I'll show it to the Big Guy, even though I know He won't like it. And then He'll send me back out and make me start the whole damn thing over again. Keen, then Hope, then Frank again. See, the Big Guy down here doesn't like dark stories. Because the darkness reminds Him of that one thing that is meaningless without darkness.

I'm talking about light, of course.

And if there's one thing the Boss doesn't like to be reminded of, it's light.

...Anyway, I opened my eyes and the reality of our situation flickered out like a candle spurting its last, and the make-believe prison faded into view again. Frank was leaning back on his elbows, telling Chuck that, "Sometimes evil things happen quiet naturally."

He's right about that, of course, but about some of the other stuff...

"Sometimes evil things happen quite naturally," Frank said again, and Keen and Hope continued their never-ending tournament, and I turned back to the burden in my lap, to the bundle of materials I'd have to start piecing together like a puzzle, and thought that maybe this time I'd begin it a little bit differently...

...The South Room, where we take all of our meals except for Christmas dinner and Easter lunch (both very big deals around here, don't let the commercials fool you), is one of those extremely dark places the world is famous for...

...or something like that, I'd see. And Chuck (we can't really call him the new guy, not anymore), finally having realized the truth, sat looking across the prison's

infernal deceit, sat looking and staring into that place where the earth ends, where we'd fallen off and plummeted, straight into the heart of an immense darkness...

THE END

CANNIBAL CLUB: YOU ARE WHO YOU EAT WITH.

Anthropophagy in "Heart of Darkness" and "Food of the Gods."

When it comes to eating human flesh, there are no shades of gray; there are only people who do, cannibals, and people who don't, non-cannibals, items on the cannibals' menu. Although nowadays there are less and less of the former in real life (with the notable exception of cannibalistic serial killers like Jeffrey Dahmer), there are an increasing number of them in reel life, in movies, and literature. Indeed, fictional cannibals hold important places in both the "great books" and popular culture. From Poe's Arthur Pym to George Romero's shuffling zombies, from Melville's Queequeg to Tobe Hopper's Leatherface and family (and many, many others), cannibalism and those who practice it seem to be an acquired but, nevertheless, quite popular taste.

Unsurprisingly, the question that springs to the lips of dietitians, literary critics, and consumers of popular culture everywhere is: Why this ghoulishness?

I submit that it is because cannibalism and the inherent dichotomy it creates, between eater and eaten, can serve as a marker pointing towards other less grotesque--although, perhaps for us, more important--issues of duality and identity. Human, animal. Man, woman. Civilized, primitive. Heterosexual, homosexual...these are all opposites that can be traced back to what Eli Sagan calls "the elementary form of institutionalized aggression" (132). The cannibal act becomes the point at which the barriers between these (and other) opposites break down. It allows the newly-become cannibal to shift from one pole to the other, separating himself from his previous, non-cannibalistic community and uniting himself with other flesh-eaters. His or her identity is restructured--it goes from civilized to savage--and the individual becomes defined by what he or she eats or does not in relation to what other groups of people eat or do not eat.

Now there is, of course, a difference between literal cannibalism and literary cannibalism. (In this case, by literary I mean fictional depictions of cannibalism in literature.) That is the difference between inviting your neighbor over to watch *Silence of the Lambs* and inviting your neighbor over for dinner, the neighbor being the main course. More important for what I am going to discuss, however, is the symbolic quality they both share. Peggy Reeves Sanday writes that "[f]or the Aztec, the consumption of human flesh was part of a sacrament bringing humans into communion with the gods" (18). What she is saying is that cannibalism is not merely a physical, dietary act, but a religious, symbolic one representing--in this case, but not exclusively--the union of human and divine. Similarly, literary cannibalism in stories and movies can also be representative of something else--that is, the differences not only of diner and dinner, but of the other binaries I have already listed. So Sanday's suggestion that "...ritual cannibalism is intimately connected with the cultural construction of self and society" can be applied to not only actual cannibalism, but also to fictional representations of it (33).

Filmmakers and authors, then, may use cannibalism (in all its guises, many of which I will soon list) as a means of re-configuring their characters' places in the world. The identities of people who take up the eating of human flesh change as much as their diets do. They are symbolically divided from one society (non-cannibals) and united with another (human flesh-eaters) because they have become cannibals, obviously, but that is only the beginning. The other traits that make up their identities (say, white, heterosexual, educated, male) collapse along with their previous status of being a "non-cannibal" and give way to their opposites (foreign, homosexual, wild, female), making the anthropophagous act a symbolic one which punches holes through the walls between other formerly rigid boundaries--either social, cultural, sexual, or dietary ones.

It is just this symbolic quality of cannibalism (traditionally thought of as the most repellent, gruesome act of violence) which for Montaigne raises it above our more "civilized"--and more meaningless, since it lacks cannibalism's cultural- and identity-ordering properties--acts of violence and warfare. "I think," he writes, "that there is more barbarism in eating a living man than a dead one" (Montaigne, 281). He is right, especially when eating the dead man serves a higher purpose--be it pleasing the gods so that they provide a good harvest of corn, or highlighting contemporary Western society's problematic concepts of self and community.

There are many texts I could have chosen from to explore cannibalism and the issues of gender, race, sexuality, and identity it raises. However, since I am loathe to bite off more than I can chew, I have restricted my discussion to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and my own short novel *Food of the Gods*. Further, I have concentrated not on the two stories' "natural" cannibals (the natives in *Darkness* and Eric Zann, who is as natural a cannibal as one finds in *Food*), but on the "perverse" cannibals, the people who start eating human flesh for no apparent or good reason: Kurtz and Frank West. In *Darkness*, cannibalism is the "unspeakable deed," the horrific act, that separates Kurtz from "the civilized" and all its associations (being a white, cultured man, the ability to discourse, to work) and unites him with the primitive in all its various trappings (being a woman, being a savage, a loss of language and culture). In *Food*, cannibalism separates Frank West (a representative of the "West"-ern world) from civilized, educated, and "innocent" society sexually, punctuating his anthropophagous initiation into a disastrous heterosexual relationship, as well as a capricious and deadly homosexual one. In each novel, the anthropophagous act is also a signifier signaling the cannibal's crisis of identity, the panic that perhaps prompts Kurtz's "the horror, the horror," and Frank's realization that he must draw the line at the suggestion of his sister's murder. Since *Darkness* came before *Food*--and, indeed,

Food self-consciously cannibalizes *Darkness*--I will begin my buffet of binaries with a steaming helping of Congo stew.

Marlow--a kind of cannibal in his own right, cannibalizing Kurtz's story and incorporating it into his own--when he describes Kurtz as unfathomable and inhuman, as someone who has "kicked himself loose of the earth" (Conrad 95), is only half-right. Deep in the jungle's darkness, Kurtz may have cut himself off from the modern, European world, but he remains chin-deep in the savage, barbarous African world, even going so far as to "take...a high seat amongst the devils of the land" (Conrad 70). What is important to my analysis is how Kurtz accomplishes this shift in his identity.

Although Conrad never explicitly spells out what Kurtz does in the heart of darkness, he certainly gives us some not-so-subtle hints. Approaching the Inner Station and Kurtz's stronghold, Marlow views through a telescope "round knobs" that turn out to be shrunken heads. Marlow describes them not as ornamental, but as "symbolic," and calls them, tongue firmly planted in cheek perhaps, "food for thought" (Conrad, 82). Juliet McLauchlan takes these heads as suggestions that "...[i]t seems most probable that, in the course of Kurtz's ivory raids, the victors might [have] seal[ed] and celebrate[d] success by not only killing but eating their defeated enemies" (386). The heads, which symbolize Kurtz's lack of "restraint" (I will return to this word and its significance shortly), offer evidence that Kurtz has at the very least taken up headhunting, a ritualized form of aggression closely associated with cannibalism.

Further, when describing the Congo's effect on Kurtz, Marlow says that the "...wilderness had patted him on the head...it had taken him, loved him, embraced him, got into his veins, *consumed his flesh*, and sealed his soul to its own..." (Conrad 69, my italics). Besides linking Kurtz to the jungle--of which the natives, the cannibals, are an intrinsic part--this passage's language is obviously

anthropophagous. As is Marlow's description of Kurtz when he first sees him: "I [Marlow] saw him open his [Kurtz] mouth wide-it gave him a weirdly voracious aspect, as though he had wanted to swallow all the air, all the earth, all the men before him" (Conrad 85-6).

So Kurtz "goes native," becomes a cannibal in the jungle. Mistah Kurtz's physical act of eating human flesh would hold little meaning beyond that if we didn't know that above all else cannibalism "...is never just about eating but is primarily a medium for non-gustatory messages" (Sanday 3), and that *Darkness* is "...about 'identity,' something achieved through a devious series of identifications and distinctions, through the dialectics of self and other" (Torgovnick 158). Allowing for that ritual act of either cannibalism or near-cannibalism (when Kurtz is symbolically united with who he devours and who he devour with, the savages in the Congo), it is then possible to draw out a string of associations which illuminate the various dichotomies in Conrad's text and to deconstruct Kurtz from painter, poet, a man who had "the gift of expression," a man who "all Europe had contributed to the making" of (Conrad 68, 71), to primitive savage.

First, Kurtz can be associated with the dark jungle. Indeed, the jungle becomes an integral part of Kurtz, something inside him. Not only did it "get into his veins," it "echoed loudly within him because he was hollow at the core" (Conrad, 83). The jungle, meanwhile, is a reflection of Woman. Bette London writes that in Conrad's text "...Africa occupies the place of seduction, the enigma of femininity" (237), and she is right. Even before entering deeply into the darkness, Marlow comments: "Watching a coast as it slips by is like thinking about an enigma. There it is before you--smiling, frowning, inviting, grand, mean, insipid, or savage, and always mute with an air of whispering, Come and find out" (Conrad 19). Nature, quite clearly here, is like a woman, teasing Marlow with the forbidden fruits of her favors. And this is only one of many passages which describes the

jungle in distinctly feminized terms. Another example of this comes again from Marlow, this time collapsing the savages and jungle into one: "I made out, deep in the tangled gloom, naked breasts, arms, legs, glaring eyes,--the bush was swarming with human limbs in movement, glistening, of bronze color" (Conrad 64).

Of course, the clearest, most important way Conrad consummates his identification of Kurtz with Jungle (and all the jungle represents--formlessness, savagery, the feminine, and, finally, even death) is through the figure of Kurtz's African Bride. As with the cannibalism in *Darkness*, Kurtz's act of miscegenation with the Bride is never stated plainly. Like so much else in Conrad's murky story, it remains "unspeakable." Torgovnick assumes, however, that the "leggings and jewelry" the Bride wears are a testament to her high position among the Africans, "the position...of Kurtz's wife" (146). A further suggestion of Kurtz's actual relationship to the Bride is readily visible when Conrad cuts from Marlow and Kurtz leaving the Inner Station, where "...the barbarous and superb woman [the Bride]...stretched tragically her bare arms after us over the somber and glittering river," to the scene with Kurtz's Intended and Marlow, where the Intended echoed the Bride's actions and "put out her arms as if after a retreating figure, stretching them black...across the fading and narrow sheen of the window" (Conrad 97, 109). The two women then become a set of Siamese twins, "one woman an affected bride, one woman, all body, surely an actual bride" (Torgovnick 147).

Maggie Kilgour, in the introduction to her book *From Communion to Cannibalism* points out that "[i]n French, to consume and to consummate are the same word" (7). Are they, however, the same thing in *Darkness*? Again although their deeds are never articulated clearly by Conrad, it is not much of a stretch to suppose that Kurtz and the African Bride have consummated their relationship. C.B. Cox claims that "we may take it for granted that Kurtz has enjoyed sexual orgies with [the Bride] in his role as a worshipped god to whom sacrifices are

offered" (30). Taking something for granted is allowed in this case because Conrad gives ample hints of the important place the Bride holds at Kurtz's side. Besides being the only person Kurtz allows to wear his precious ivory (the Russian tells Marlow that Kurtz threatened to kill him if he didn't hand over "a small lot ivory" he, the Russian, had obtained), she is the only one permitted to talk--really talk--to Kurtz.

The Russian tells Marlow "with severe exaltation" that "You don't talk with that man [Kurtz]--you listen to him" (Conrad 76). Yet later on he contradicts himself by telling Marlow of how he once observed that "she [the Bride] talked like a fury to Kurtz for an hour" (Conrad 88). It is an amusing scene (the Bride nagging Kurtz, who sits silently like a henpecked husband), one that reflects the intimacy these two characters more likely than not share.

And their union is not only sexual or matrimonial, but a violent one. Although "consummate" and "consume" are the same word in French, they are obviously not the same thing in practice. Kurtz does not consume his African Bride, does not eat her, but they perhaps consume other natives together during Kurtz's raiding parties. Cox argues that "the unspeakable rites in which she has participated presumably include torture and killings" (30). Is it such a leap, then, to assume that she also participated in Kurtz's cannibalistic meals? If this is the case--something which can never be determined but is certainly suggested in the text--then the cannibal act further links Kurtz to the Bride; both of whom have been previously joined together by their transgressive sexual acts, their violent raids on the jungle natives, and ceremonially (bestowing the ivory the Bride wears).

John Tessitore calls the Jungle Bride "the consummation of the flesh and energy, the personification of Lust" (96). Although no civilized ceremony takes place with this woman who is the *consummation* of *flesh* (and isn't that language cannibalistic?), Kurtz does marry her; and in doing so, marries the jungle. He

maintains his identity as Kurtz, but enters into a "satanic" union with the Bride. Just as dining on human flesh is a transgression, consummating his relationship with the Bride is also a transgression (in this case, against the British code regarding miscegenation)—and both acts allow for a weakening of the boundaries between the one (and what Kurtz is representative of) and the other (and what is associated with the Bride).

Freud writes in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that "[a]t the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away" (15). Judging from the shout of anguish that erupts from the Bride's mouth (and is taken up by the other savages) as Kurtz is being carried away by Marlow, this seems to be exactly what has happened: Kurtz and the Bride have fallen in love, and in the process formed a kind of union; and when he is being taken away from her, it hurts the Bride as though an actual part of her body were being ripped from her.

So Kurtz is joined to the female African Bride, who is not only linked to, as Tessitore writes, "the 'ineffable darkness' and 'unspeakable rites' into which Kurtz has descended (96), but who also—quite simply—is the embodiment of the dark Congo jungle. Upon seeing her at the Inner Station, Marlow is transfixed:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent; there was something ominous and stately in her deliberate progress. And in the hush that had fallen suddenly upon the whole sorrowful land, the immense wilderness, the colossal body of the fecund and mysterious life seemed to look at her, pensive, as though it had been looking at the image of its own tenebrous and passionate soul. (Conrad 87)

Through his marriage to this "superb" creature, this embodiment of the wilderness, then, Kurtz is bound not only to the African Bride, but to the savages, to the feminine, and to the jungle. There is, however, one final association Conrad breaks

down in *Darkness*, one last set of opposites that dissolves when Kurtz becomes one with the Congo--that is life/death, for "...the African landscape *is* death in the novella [*Heart of Darkness*]" (Torgovnick 155). And not only death, but everything associated with it: corruption (literal and spiritual), disorder, chaos, madness, and--most importantly for the topic of this essay--transformation of identity.

At the Central Station, Marlow, with his own eyes, sees how death and nature, the jungle, are inextricably linked. "To the left..." he says "...a clump of trees made a shady spot where dark things seemed to stir feebly" (Conrad 22). The "dark things stirring feebly" are, of course, dying natives--trying to convalesce in what Marlow terms the "grove of death." They sit with their knees drawn up under their chins in the fetal position, in the warm and dark grove of trees, which has--in effect--become an anti-womb.

Then what, finally, is the significance of these associations between Kurtz and what Torgovnick calls "Western conceptions of the primitive--women, sex, death, mortality" (156)?

First, it must be remembered that all these conceptions represent at least a partial loss of individual, whole identity. The female has been traditionally thought of as the "incomplete" and lesser sex. Sex is the union--albeit a temporary one--of two people. Death is the great equalizer; we all of us rot beneath the ground and seep into the soil. And primitives, savages, are often characterized as being less than human, a mass of nameless, identity-less people, creatures who cannot communicate and live like animals. So Kurtz, the man who was complete, a product of Europe, a "remarkable man" before his journey into the Congo, goes from being a whole individual to merely a voice--"A voice. He was very little more than a voice," Marlow concludes after having encountered him (Conrad 69)--to almost nothing. After Kurtz's death, Marlow says: "The voice was gone. What

else had been there? But I am of course aware that the next day the pilgrims buried *something* in a muddy hole" (Conrad 100, my italics). Kurtz is still Kurtz, of course, but he is no longer identified as he was at the novel's start; he has been transformed into a nameless "something," buried in and absorbed by the earth.

Second, the act that started eroding the wall between the side Kurtz was on (the male side, the civilized, intelligent, individualized one) and the side he eventually ended up on (where boundaries are erased, and everyone is joined in a primitive union) was one of cannibalism, which is "traditionally used to establish difference and construct racial boundaries dividing the civilized from the savage" (Kilgob, 3). In this case, therefore, cannibalism is a symbolic act of *separation* (from the civilized) which leads Kurtz to a state of *union* (with the natives) in the Congo, an almost primordial place where his Western identity melts like a wax figure beneath the hot African sun and reveals the savage one beneath it. This dual effect of the anthropophagous act (which, on one level, is seemingly contradictory) might then help explain Kurtz's final utterance, "the horror, the horror," for, as Kilgour writes:

This unsettling of discrete categories is part of its horror: it is the place where desire and dread, love and aggression meet, and where the body is made symbolic, the literal figurative, the human reduced to mere matter. In fact, cannibalism involves both the *establishing* of absolute difference, the opposites of eater and eaten, and the *dissolution* of that difference, through the act of incorporation which identifies them, and makes the two one. ("Function" 3-4)

Quite a mouthful, and almost the perfect place to leave *Heart of Darkness* for the different flavor of cannibalism in *Food of the Gods*. But before doing that, however, I must re-stress how besides dissolving the wall between eater and eaten and thus combining these two opposites because the eater absorbs the eaten (as

described in Kilgour's quote above about incorporation), another way cannibalism dissolves boundaries is by uniting the cannibal to other cannibals. Kurtz becomes more similar to the savages he eats (insofar as that he literally ingests and digests them, making them at least a temporary part of himself), yes, but his cannibalistic actions also symbolically wed him to *Darkness's* other cannibals; indeed, Kurtz all but takes them over, becoming the novel's only true cannibal.

Marlow's crew of cannibals--"fine fellows-cannibals-in their place" he says of them (Conrad 49)--do not, as far as the reader knows, eat human flesh in *Darkness*, not ever. Marlow says of them: "Why in the name of all the gnawing devils of hunger they didn't go for us...amazes me now when I think of it" (Conrad 59). He finally concludes that "something restraining" kept them from giving in to their usual appetites, a quality neither Kurtz nor the "second-rate helmsman" (a native who is also perhaps cannibalistic) have. When his helmsman gets himself killed, Marlow explains that "he [the helmsman] had no restraint, no restraint-just like Kurtz-a tree swayed by the wind" (Conrad 73).

Of course, the cannibal crew does *threaten* to eat human meat, and Marlow must dump his dead helmsman overboard when he becomes for the flesh-eating natives a "first-rate temptation." But they do not dine, while Kurtz does. Once again, the anthropophagous act allows for a reordering: Kurtz eats some possibly cannibalistic natives and becomes a cannibal; the savages who previously ate human flesh (and thereby identified themselves as cannibals) threaten to eat, but are not allowed to. Still, they have transgressed before, allowing for a future fluid transformation; one which happens in *Darkness*, when the cannibal crew shifts from what they are to what Kurtz once was--non-cannibalistic. The novel's characters, therefore, are literally "what they eat"; or, in this case, *who* they eat or do not eat.

Additionally, besides by their choice of foodstuffs, these people are also drawn together by the fact that they all commit various acts of transgression. The second-rate helmsman transgresses when he enters a civilized "kind of partnership" with Marlow, a white man; Kurtz transgresses when he associates himself with--"marries"--the cannibals; the cannibal crew transgresses when they go against their nature and *do not eat* human flesh. All these violations of previously identifying traits, it should come as no surprise by this point, begin and end with the characters' specific diets, either the anthropophagous one that comes naturally to them but is suppressed, or the acquired anthropophagous one they perversely take on. So cannibalism--the beginning of its practice or the ending of it--unites new members of the Flesh-Eating Society (Kurtz) to other, no-longer-practicing members (Marlow's crew); it is a transgression that serves as a porthole through which Conrad's characters slip from one side of associations to the other.

Now, then, there are only two small tidbits in Conrad's tale left to discuss and digest before moving on to this essay's second course. The first is yet another example of how Kurtz's fall from a civilized state to a barbarous one is linked to his mouth (in this case, what comes out of it, not what goes into it); the second is a possible explanation of why Marlow does not go the way of Kurtz, why he is "permitted to draw back [his] hesitating foot" (Conrad 101). The first concerns itself with language, the second with "restraint," the ability to keep one's self from transgressing.

Language, Peter Brooks claims, "forms the basis of social organization...as a system of difference, hence of distinction and restraint..." (251). Torgovnik calls it "that sustainer of civilization" (153). It cannot go unmentioned, then, that Kurtz--of whom it is said that "of all his gifts the one that stood out pre-eminently, that carried with it a sense of real presence, was his ability to talk, his words" (Conrad 67-8)--loses his ability to discourse, loses the skill that most identified

him as an individual, when he eats his way into the heart of darkness. Brooks writes that "[m]ore than a masterful summary, victorious articulation, 'The horror!' [Kurtz's final words] appears as minimal language, language on the verge of reversion to savagery, on the verge of a fall from language"(250).

This "fall" is further emphasized in the way that Kurtz's "Report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs" (which Marlow describes as "eloquent, vibrating with eloquence") is rendered null-and-void by the brutal, curt, and terrifying post-scriptum: "Exterminate all the brutes!" (Conrad 71-2). "Descriptive language..." it turns out "...becomes meaningless at the decisive instant when the stirrings of transgression itself [wanting to exterminate--and eat--the brutes] take over from the discursive account of transgression [writing about "colonizing" the natives--that is, cannibalizing them civilly]"(Bataille 275). Once again, then, the mouth is the focal point where the battle-lines in the war between one identity and another are drawn.

Marlow, although he comes back from the Congo bleeding and bruised, returns to London with his complete self more or less intact. Indeed, he even comes back with "some knowledge of [himself]--that comes too late--a crop of unextinguishable regrets" (Conrad 100). The reason he does and Kurtz does not is because Kurtz (as I've already mentioned in regards to the decapitated heads) lacked the "restraint" to keep himself from giving in to his monstrous passions and appetites, a restraint Marlow does have--namely, work.

In *Death and Sensuality*, an examination of taboos and their transgression, Georges Bataille writes that "[m]an has built up the rational world by his own efforts, but there remains within him an undercurrent of violence" (40). That undercurrent of violence, Bataille argues, can manifest itself in many ways. The one that concerns us at present is the violent impulse to devour another man's flesh. Bataille continues: "From the earliest times work has produced a relaxation

of tension thanks to which men cease to respond to the immediate urge impelled by the violence of desire" (41). This notion of Bataille's gives us insight into why Marlow doesn't "go native" like his Western brother Kurtz, for in *Darkness*, Marlow's restraint is closely tied to his notion of work.

Marlow sees that he is like the cannibalistic natives--"what thrilled you..." he says "...was the thought of their humanity-like yours-the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar" (Conrad 51)--but he is able to maintain the wall between himself and them: "You wonder I didn't go ashore for a howl and a dance? Well, no-I didn't. Fine sentiments, you say? Fine sentiments be hanged! I had no time. I had to mess about with white-lead and strips of woolen blanket helping to put bandages on those leaky steam-pipes" (Conrad 52).

From this passage, we can glean that the restraint which saves Marlow is work, because it distracts him from the deep truth of his savage, primordial origin (which is where the Congo natives and all men come from). And even before this excerpt, Conrad has already explained that work allows Marlow to come to terms with who he is--"I don't like work,-no man does-but I like what is in the work,-the chance to find yourself. Your own reality" (41)--and it becomes for him a defense mechanism that enables him to maintain his identity and sublimate his primitive urges into more acceptable pursuits. Kurtz, whose method of acquiring ivory, of working, is described as being "unsound" and as being "no method of all" (Conrad 89), does not have this luxury. So when the jungle "whispered to [Kurtz] things about himself about which he did not know" (Conrad 83), Kurtz was not able to resist the violent impulses which lead him to break the taboos of miscegenation, murder, and even cannibalism--all of which precipitate a transformation (and almost loss) of identity, a union with the savage, and separation from the Western.

Frank West, *Food of the Gods's* unreliable narrator, also breaks these same taboos. He eats human flesh, murders, and has sexual relations, not with an

African Bride, but with someone just as--if not more so--marginalized, a diseased, possibly homosexual cannibal. So now that our mental taste buds have been exposed to--and, hopefully, gotten more acclimated to--the unsavory topic of cannibalism in Conrad's text, I wish to slice into my own novel and examine Frank's role as "modern" cannibal. Instead of reading *Food* the same way I did *Darkness*, however, I am going to work my way backwards.

That is, instead of having the cannibal act be the *origin* point from which a series of identifications and dissolving dichotomies springs forth (as was the case in my analysis of Conrad's novel), I would like to show how in *Food*, the cannibal act can be read as the *culmination* of those identifications and changing dualities. Frank's (and Jennifer's, another student cannibal) identity further shifts and disintegrates symbolically with each taboo he transgresses, each act of pseudo-cannibalism he performs--until, of course, the only thing that remains for him is the actual deed, at which point he is united symbolically with Eric and the other members of the "Cannibal Club" and separated, again symbolically, from his sister Georgie, Iona, and the other "Innocents."

Unlike Kurtz, whose reasons for falling into barbarism may be speculated upon, but never definitively determined, we are given more of the "psychology" behind Frank's collapse into cannibalism. The first taboo he breaks, his first step from Normal towards the Perverse, is quite simply his unarticulated longing to be a transgressor, to no longer remain a passive waiter at the buffet of life, but to be an active consumer. Frank, himself, even finally realizes this. As he runs towards his kidnapped (he thinks) sister's dorm, he reflects: "I had engaged in these barbarous transgressions and even, yes, even enjoyed them! ...An uncanny familiarity had accompanied each one of my (MY!) violations, not because I'd done them before, no, but because I'd imagined myself doing them..." (Aguirre 138). It is, therefore, Frank's *imagining* that starts him towards fulfilling a life-long desire. And it is a

very real desire, for in *Food*, most everyone--but especially Frank--wants to be a cannibal. This is not as surprising as it might seem, for, as Marilyn Patton writes, "since the cannibal is the ultimate crosser of boundaries, one of the unexpected motifs of cannibal literature is the desire to *be* the cannibal" (42).

Conrad identifies this monstrous desire early on in *Darkness*. Marlow asks his listeners aboard the *Nellie* to think of the "decent young citizen in a toga" from days gone by who is confronted with "the savagery...all that mysterious life of the wilderness that stirs in the forest, in the jungles, in the hearts of wild men" (Conrad 9). The decent citizen can not understand it--it remains "incomprehensible"--but he is fascinated by it, attracted to it. Marlow continues: "[I]t has a fascination, too, that goes to work upon on him. The fascination of the abomination..."(Conrad 9).

Frank is much less eloquent than Marlow when he explains his reasons for (among other things) letting Eric "cannibalize" him sexually: "It felt good being naughty" and "The desire to do something bad, something by a lot of people's standards wrong, appealed to me" (Aguirre 53, 55). The words are different, but the intent behind them, the cravings to do the forbidden, the fascination the abomination holds, is the same. And once that initial attraction to/repulsion from the taboo, any taboo of violence, is awakened, whoever is feeling it will eventually have decide which side of his bread is buttered. Is he a "decent citizen" or a "wild man"?

Unfortunately for Frank, the cards are stacked--or, in this case, the table is set--against him. Frank, like Kurtz, is an educated, at least modestly wealthy, white, (mostly) heterosexual, Western-civilized man. Which traditionally means that almost everything is forbidden him, and that all transgressive acts should disturb and frighten him. Of course, Bataille reminds us that "taboos founded on terror are not only there to be obeyed... It is always temptation to knock down a

barrier; the forbidden actions take on a significance it lacks before fear widens the gap between us and invests it with an aura of excitement" (48). So here we find another polarity hovering over the cannibal act: repulsion and compulsion, disgust and attraction. And Frank, who does not have restraint, does not have work like Marlow (Frank is a graduate student, he does not produce anything but papers of criticism which cannibalize--feed off--works of great literature) to help keep his attraction to the forbidden from overcoming (devouring) his repulsion felt towards it.¹ Of course, Frank's fall has been a long time coming. His desire to be a cannibal has, as I've already said, been life-long.

Towards the beginning of *Darkness*, Marlow tells the Nellie men: "Now when I was a boy, I had a passion for maps. I would...lose myself in all the glories of exploration" (Conrad 11). Just as these early stirrings provide a basis for Marlow's eventual status as navigator and explorer, Frank's childhood "hobbies" can be read as indications of the man he will eventually develop into. However, Frank's passions are of a different sort. *Food's* third section, "Hearthunter," opens with an anecdote from Frank's childhood, when--in an effort to protect his sister--he stabs the bully picking on her. This blood-act might be accidental, but more likely is a manifestation of the perverse streak that exists in our bespectacled narrator from his earliest days. "The kid [the bully] was scared shitless," he tells Mears and the other prisoners, "and that's all we'd been meaning to do, scare him, but once you feel that initial rush of power and domination over someone it's very easy for things to get out of hand" (Aguirre 143-4).

Out of hand is quite an understatement. What begins as a childhood prank turns into something deeper and darker, a quasi-ritual carried out with knives that

¹Further damning Frank West is the fact that he is not even a "real" graduate student. The thesis he is working on is a creative, non-academic, one. He claims it is a re-interpretation of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but--although its contents are only described in vague terms--I wouldn't be surprised if it were merely a regurgitation of cannibalized Conrad quotes, just as a sizable chunk of his "confession," his story to the other inmates, is. Also worth noting is that Frank's other attempts at constructive production--the comic book he writes and draws, the play he starts to direct--yeild no concrete result besides, perhaps, delaying his eventual fall into cannibalism.

were acquired in a "very officious, very ceremonial manner" (Aguirre 139), by masked priests (Frank and his brother) to protect one member of a community (Frank's family) from an external enemy (the bully). Frank allows himself to stab Georgie's bully because of a desired, good end. This reason, however, is more or less irrelevant; what is important is that a taboo has been broken, blood has been spilled, and an allowance made. Although he claims that the Swiss Army "doesn't have any special significance for [him]" (Aguirre 141), in actuality it very much does. It is not *only* the tool with which he once stabbed a young boy; it is also the weapon with which he broke his first (or one of his first) taboo, the object with which a bit of the wall between Frank-as-noncannibal and Frank-as-cannibal was hacked out. This degeneration--because of the symbolic significance of Frank's youthful act of violence--becomes if not inevitable, then certainly more likely, for "once a limited license [to transgress] has been allowed, unlimited urges towards violence may break forth" (Bataille 65).

Eventually, of course, they do in Frank, but not before several years have passed. During which, those cannibalistic, violent urges still existed, but were sublimated by Frank into other, more acceptable likes and activities--his fascination with the cemetery of his youth, for instance. A place he visited "with surprising regularity," where corpses rotted beneath the ground and were consumed by the earth, it became the arena where Frank dealt with not only "the violence that was always threatening to explode at home," but with his adolescent sexual urges (Aguirre 57). The cemetery, itself, is a symbol of aggression, for "death is nothing more than the worst form of violence that can befall a man" (Girard 32). Further strengthening the connection between Frank's teenage fumbblings in the graveyard to his basic cannibalistic (that is, aggressive) nature is that, again quoting Girard, "[s]exual excitement and violent impulses manifest themselves in the same manner" (36).

Sexual attraction and attraction to violence certainly come together in the figure of Jody Arlington, whose family was murdered by either her brother or her brother and her, the only woman a more or less "adult" Frank has ever loved--until Jennifer Carter comes along. During a conversation with the latter, Frank admits to going from being "turned on" by the mysterious Jody (Jody as sexual object) to becoming "more interested with the suggestion of violence in her...and the crime she maybe committed, than with the actual person [Jody as object of violence]" (Aguirre 17). In this case, then, Frank's morbid fascinations with death and violence cannibalize his more socially-acceptable feelings of love and attraction, and Jody stops being an equal partner in a healthy sexual, romantic relationship, and becomes instead the object of Frank's obsession, something for him to fixate upon, a well of violent possibilities and theories for him to drink and eat from.

But Jody Arlington and Frank's boyhood antics are somewhat removed from the immediate events of *Food's* plot. They are related to the reader as anecdotes, not as "actual" unfolding events in the narrative. More central to the plot are Frank's relationships with Jennifer and Eric, his two initiators into a sexually-active, anthropophagous community. His actions with them are symbolically cannibalistic and binding, and they pave the way for the eventual, actual act of anthropophagy on New Year's Eve. Quite apart from the fact that Eric, indeed, turns out to already be a literal cannibal when he meets (meats?) Frank, he and Jennifer are from the first psuedo-cannibals, breaking taboos and erasing the boundaries between dichotomies.

Jennifer's transgressive nature first manifests itself the night of Jackie's Halloween party, the night she and Frank consummate their mutual attraction, the night the opposite poles of human/animal merge into one figure: Jennifer Carter. When she and Frank make love, it is a "violent, almost animal act" (Aguirre 18). Her movements that same night towards the unconscious Iona are "cat-like"

(Aguirre 20). Much later on in the novel, Frank describes how--during one of the their many fights--"some animal that had been asleep inside Jennifer's heart suddenly stirred awake" (Aguirre 135). From these examples, it is clear that the novel's language frames Jennifer in terms that suggest a half-human, half-animal wolfwoman with bestial passions, which--when Frank first meets her--are not being sublimated into the positive creative outlet her painting once provided, but rather erupting in aggressive, cannibalistic ways.

She gets "angry" at Frank's fumbings their first night together; she does not comfort him after he witness a brutal beating in Glover Park; she takes a lead role when the group kills the sow, smearing "red pig juices" from her lips to Frank's with a "ferocious" kiss (again neatly conjoining the notions of love and violence in *Food*). She is also, when Frank meets her, carrying with her at least one horrible secret, the rape and brutalization she endured at the hands of a former boyfriend, Doug. Although she--with the help of her brother--does punish Doug by crippling him, it is possible that this is an incomplete vengeance, since traditionally "[f]or a cannibal, the ultimate satisfaction of vengeance is to eat one's victim" (Sagan 5). Because Jennifer, the cannibal-in-training, does not eat Doug in the snowy woods and, in the process, fully release the aggressive energies she feels towards him at the time, these violent impulses remain inside her, bubbling to the surface with alarming frequency (in the examples I've just listed and many others) until she can finally eat someone, anyone, else.

Jennifer's general behavior, then, is violent and, by extension, cannibalistic at least to some degree. However, even if she weren't so aggressive, it would still be possible to read her relationship and Frank's as an anthropophagous union, in that it symbolically blurs the borders between Frank and her, both bodily (after the two have sex for the first time, they fall "asleep naked, belly to belly," like twins in a mother's womb [Aguirre 17]) and emotionally (after Jennifer tells Frank that she

loves him, he feels afraid because, he says, "Jennifer and I had become connected and were each now responsible for the other's actions and feelings" [Aguirre 46]). This conjoining is, however, mere overture to the more complete union the two eventually share after eating human flesh.

In *From Communion to Cannibalism*, Kilgour offers at least one possible reason for why anthropophagy so often springs from declarations and demonstrations of love, suggesting that the union one experiences when in love with another (a product of the erotic drive's desire to erase all distinctions between ego and the beloved object) is invariably only a temporary, incomplete one, which leaves the subject longing for something more. She quotes Freud: "something in the nature of the function itself...denies us full satisfaction and urges us along other paths" (Kilgour 232). In the case of Jennifer and Frank, that other path--and, indeed, all paths--leads to cannibalism.

But Jennifer's is not the only anthropophagous liaison Frank has in *Food*; in fact, it is not even the most blatantly cannibalistic one. Frank's evening with Eric, their homosexual act of passion, is much more so. Indeed, the blowjob Eric gives Frank can be read as "a salutary reminder of the extent to which our sexual practices, although we shrink from viewing them this way, mimic the act of eating another human being" (Smith 81). Just before he describes the evening's events to the detective, Frank says that "it's when everything changed forever...[u]p until that night, everything had been inconsequential..." (Aguirre 49). Prone as Frank is to exaggeration, the homosexual "incident" with Eric can certainly be seen as the event that most separates Frank from the "Innocents," the non-cannibals in *Food*, and brings him further into the fold of aberrant people-eaters.

Frank, himself, says that because of the events which occurred the "Rosemary's Baby night," his uncertainty as to which group he wanted to belong to (either the eaters or the eaten) "was decided for [him] and [he] was effectively cut-

off from the people who might've saved [him]" (Aguirre 49). Concurrent with this separation, the homosexual act of fellatio also solidifies a cannibalistic union between Frank and Eric since, as Caleb Crain writes, the "[a]ct offers an ecstatic union; it offers to relieve the self of the burden of selfhood; it offers the chance to surrender the body, to consume or be consumed" (34). Like actual cannibalism, then, homosexuality's (that is, a symbolic act traditionally associated with cannibalism) effects are at once perverse, both dividing and connecting. The two transgressions "violate the distinctions between identity and desire; between self and other" (Crain 34), all the while re-affirming the identifying labels of "homosexual" (as opposed to "heterosexual" or "normal") and "cannibal" (versus "non-cannibal" or, again, "normal").

So, tracing the crude oppositions Frank breaks down throughout his life--beginning with his shift from victim to victimizer when he stabs Georgie's bully, continuing through his career as consuming student (as opposed to productive worker), his relationship/obsession with Jody Arlington, his aggressive, ecstatic union with an almost bestial Jennifer (man and animal), and finally his transition from hetero- to homosexual--it is no wonder that Frank is so easily "duped" into eating human flesh, breaking down the most basic opposition, that one between subject and object. And Frank's identity continues to shift after his first cannibal feast, as he is drawn further and further into the Cannibal Club (where he commits not only cannibalism but cannibalism *and* murder) until the shock of a possible incestuous union with his sister allows him to step back and judge--as Kurtz does with his "the horror, the horror"--his actions with a little more distance ("Everyone has a line they don't cross," he explains) (Aguirre 141).

Just as I read Kurt's cannibalism in *Darkness* as an act symbolizing the breakdown of various dichotomies regarding identity and its formation, I hope I have shown that the equation can be reversed: that Frank's early attempts at taboo-

breaking, his initial erasure of various opposites, are acts symbolizing the imminent, actual act of cannibalism. These two ways of connecting symbolism with cannibalism--where either "-ism" can be the point of origin for analysis--are equally valid readings of the two texts because of the very nature of orality (here standing in for cannibalism), in that it is both developing, forward-moving (since orality, using Kilgour's words during her discussion of Freud, is "the model for the formation of identity"), as well as destroying, backwards-moving (in that orality becomes, again quoting Kilgour, "implicitly identified with regression to an earlier stage of development") (231).²

Furthermore, the two texts I have selected for my essay encourage this kind of play, allowing the flow from "ism" to "ism" to change directions, rendering the question of which came first--the symbol or the flesh?--if not irrelevant, than certainly less important than it otherwise might be.³ Conrad writes that "the mind of man is capable of anything--because everything is in it, all the past as well as all the future" (52). In fact, "everything" is very much in *Darkness*, all jumbled-together, for the novel--like cannibalism--simultaneously flows forwards (Marlow's actual, physical journey into the jungle, towards the individual Kurtz) and backwards (Marlow's spiritual journey towards origins; "[g]oing up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world," he describes) (48). *Food* similarly collapses the ideas of Before and After, even specifically linking this breakdown to the anthropophagous/symbolic New Year's dinner Frank and the

²Maggie Kilgour discusses orality and the oral stage of development and its link to cannibalism--"the point at which the dualism between self and other, defined basically as eater and eaten, is discovered"--(as well as its formative/regressive nature) on pages 230 and 231 of *From Communion to Cannibalism: An Anatomy of Metaphors of Incorporation*.

³ For the record, however, it is possible to read *Food* the same way I did *Darkness*. From the group's New Year's Eve dinner, one can see the symbolic results--the dissolving dichotomies--spiralling out from the act of cannibalism in several different, forward-moving, directions: Jennifer's painting again, the final sexual communion Frank and Jennifer take part in, Brian's suicide, Frank's revelation that he and Eric "did more," etc. etc. Similarly, *Darkness* can be read "backwards" as *Food* was, not only by examining Kurtz's story as told to Marlow by the Russian, but by looking at Marlow as a pseudo-cannibal, as someone who is repeating Kurtz's journey, and his past, and picking through the incidents and inclinations that would have made it very easy for Marlow to give in to his aggressive urges.

other cannibals take part in. During his confession to the prison inmates, Frank explains:

I'm jumbling things [the particulars of his story] up. Twisting the timeline of all these events... Moving forward, then retreating through my memories like a river that's hit a damn and starts flowing backwards over itself. I allow myself that freedom partly because I don't remember the exact order of things... I have a general idea, yes, but it's vague and, ultimately, irrelevant. Everything I've told you leads up to one specific event. Everything (whether I've already described it or I add it in later) builds towards New Year's Eve and collapses into it. (Aguirre 46)

Cannibalism, then--whether it is viewed as the symbolic point at which binaries of identity start to dissolve or as the symbolic terminus which bookends this disintegration is a potent enough literary device to not only reconfigure Western ideas of Selfhood and Community, but also--at the same time--those of Time, pointing towards the future as it simultaneously reflects on the past. This phenomenon comes to the fore in *Food* when Frank reveals that he and the other convicts are not in jail at all, but rather a Dante-like inferno, a Hell, where what feels like weeks is really mere minutes, where there is "an eternity to kill," where Frank's story ends with Mears beginning to re-tell it, where past, present, and future are on an eternal loop, and all the prisoners are subject to the cannibalistic "dissolution of individual identity that takes place when all souls are seen as members of the body of Lucifer [as they are in *Food*] that contains all Hell" (Kilgour 69).

Unfortunately, time and the possibility of deconstructing it through cannibalism--although something worth discussing briefly in conjunction with *Darkness* and *Food*--was not on this essay's original menu, so I leave it behind

now, perhaps to be taken up at some future date by another classics-consuming critic.

* * *

"[C]annibalism," writes Marilyn Patton, "is not a subject used frivolously in narratives; only when issues of major importance are at stake does a writer feel compelled to write about this fundamentally repulsive subject" (20). This holds true for all the different types of anthropophagy found in literature and movies: survival cannibalism (such as in Poe's *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* or Conrad's *Falk* or the film *Alive*); ritual cannibalism (practiced by "primitive" tribes in "jungle" stories); revenge cannibalism (in the musical *Sweeney Todd*, for instance); perverse cannibalism (the kind Kurtz and Frank engage in); or what I like to term "horror" cannibalism (practiced by vampires, werewolves, and zombies--not-quite-humans eating humans). All these various fictional types of cannibalism have something besides the taste of human flesh and "the horror, the horror" that goes along with the act in common: they can be read as symbolic acts which reorder "a series of crude oppositions" (Smith 75). Further, these opposites are usually directly linked to concepts of individuality, identity, and community. Thus, the act that first and foremost *separates* ("I eat human flesh, am a cannibal, and therefore different and set apart from you") also breaks down the boundaries between differences (man/woman, hetero-/homosexual, savage/civilized), between people, and *joins* them together (in either a "Cannibal Club" that really eats people or--to name another of many possible examples--as sexual transgressors).

In the case of real cannibalism--that is, cannibalism in real life--practiced today almost exclusively by serial killers, it is sometimes precisely because of the inherently symbolic nature of anthropophagy that prompts the Jeffrey Dahmers of this world to commit their cannibalistic crimes. "What motives people like Dahmer is a catastrophic failure of the imagination, an inability to think metaphorically

which compels them to act out the symbolic order regardless of the cost, to themselves and others, in horror or degradation" (Smith 84). The serial killer, an outsider from society, wishes to be a part of something, join a community, but--for whatever reason--can't. So he decides to unite with the community by eating--incorporating--some of its members. Actual cannibalism, which is symbolic of both separation and--more importantly for the serial killer--union, becomes for the unimaginative killer who can not sublimate the cannibal act into other ways of meeting (as opposed to meating) people, becomes the only "sane" choice left for Dahmer and his ilk.

Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* and Frank in *Food of the Gods* also lack the imagination to either maintain their own identities or become members of a community without resorting to the bloody cannibal act. Whether they had been breaking down (and setting up) boundaries all their lives in preparation for the cannibal feast (Frank West), or whether that feast is the center from which such breakdowns radiate out (Kurtz), both characters lacked the "restraint" to find themselves or establish a community with others in a non-cannibalistic manner.

Falk, the protagonist of another Conrad story "about" anthropophagy, who is driven to cannibalize some of his crew because he is starving to death, meanwhile, imagines his way beyond a literal union and sees the potential for a symbolic one. Instead of eating his way into a marriage with the object of his affection (a young woman only identified as "Hermann's niece"), he--still using his mouth, of course--*tells* her his sordid tale of survival cannibalism, and she, out of pity, falls in love with him. Of Falk and the niece, Conrad's narrator says: "Those two met in sunshine abreast of the mainmast... It seemed to me that they had come together as if attracted, drawn and guided to each other by a mysterious influence. They were a complete couple" (*Falk* 239).

So it is possible for cannibal narratives to have happy endings with individuals coming together as "complete couples." Still, the scenario in *Falk* is more exception than rule. It is likelier for characters in cannibal narratives to find themselves either trapped in a farmhouse besieged by flesh-craving zombies (*Night of the Living Dead*) or, like Kurtz, rotting away in the heart of an impenetrable darkness or, like Frank, telling the same story over and over again as their souls burn eternally in hell.

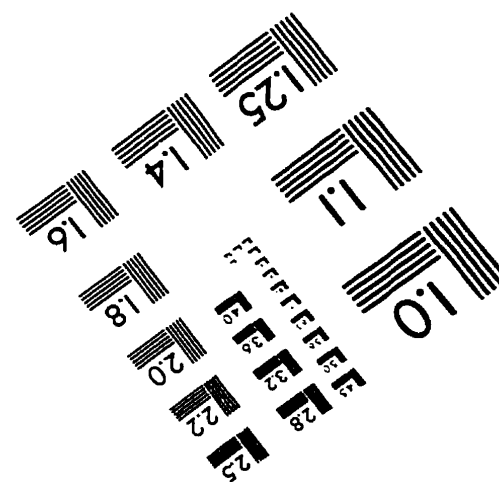
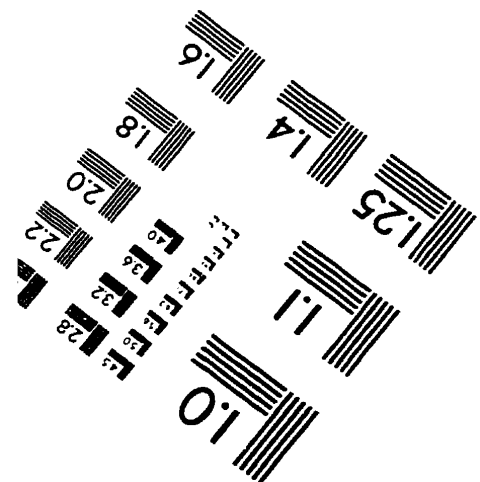
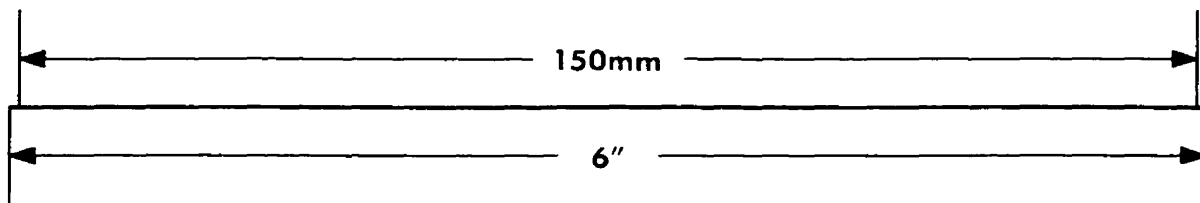
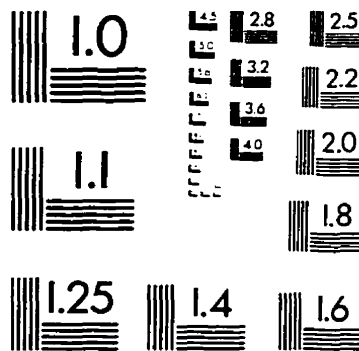
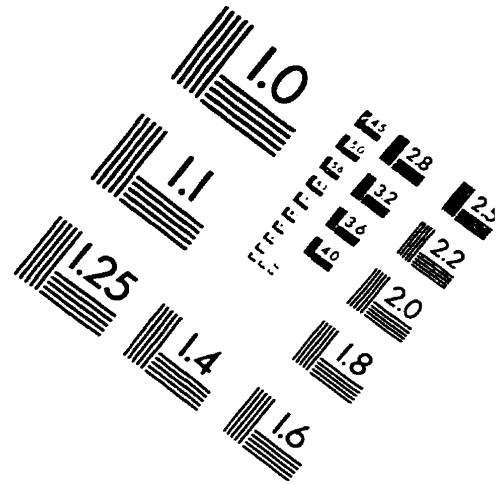
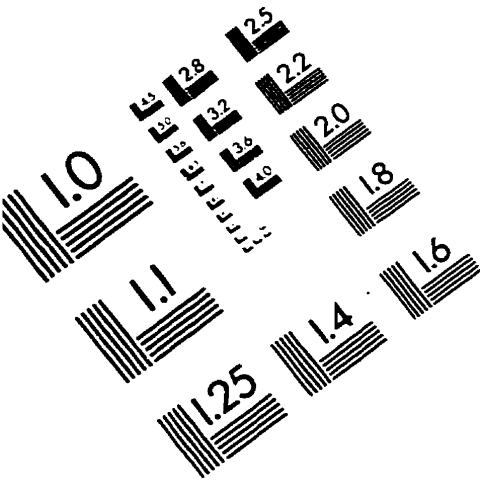
Reasons enough, I think you'll agree, to pass on that steak the next time you're in a restaurant having dinner, and head straight for the salad bar.

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