A Keyhole View of a Shadowy Room: Three Stories

An Honors Thesis
by
Andrew M. Yerkes

Thesis Director

Ball State University
Muncie, Indiana
May 1986

Expected date of graduation Spring 1986
Indiana's Man in Black

Janey lies on the flowery bedspread of the Holiday Inn just three blocks from the river in Logansport, Indiana. Her forearm presses heavily against her high, furrowed brow, shielding her small blue eyes in their sallow sockets. Ron stands by the window, smoking a cigarette and holding the curtain open with his hand. A slice of the room is colored orange by a summer evening sun that is nearly extinguished in the cool, high branches of a sycamore tree across the motel parking lot. The sun spills lazily into the room, touching Janey's face just out of reach of Ron's long shadow. The light is mellow, but it brings a dull ache to Janey's eyes, so she covers them with her arm. Ron just watches the sun sink into the tree top. He just smokes his cigarette, not even squinting, the smoke ghost-like in the orange band.

Ron turns from the window and looks at Janey, her striped maternity dress looking like a tent pulled over her swollen belly, clashing with the flowery bedspread.
"Its going to be a helluva party tonight Jane Marie. They rented the big room downstairs and everything. They're gonna pass out awards and make speeches from a stage. You hear me Jane Marie? A stage!"

She looks at him seriously. "Maybe somebody'll ask you to sing," she says.

"Yeah, that's what I figure. I'll set out the sign and the forty-fives after dinner. Ol' Simpson, he'll probably kid me a little and then take one over to the stereo and put it on. Then somebody'll ask me to sing and every one of those old class mates of mine will want a copy of "That Midnight Train to the Sky" by Ron J. Cummings, Indiana's Man in Black."

Janey's arm falls back over her eyes, her other hand moving down to gently stroke her stomach. She smiles. "Uh huh," she says.

Soon the purple night falls like a great rhinestone studded curtain, and outside facing the road, the Holiday Inn sign flashed green and gold carrying the message, "Welcome Class of '79." In the motel room, Janey puts on her favorite maternity dress, a light blue with lace around the collar, and Ron puts on his black suit over a white shirt with silver rhinestone buttons. He slips his black boots over white athletic socks, and the heavy wooden heels thud on the worn motel room carpet as he moves toward his suitcase and draws out a black four-in-hand, tieing it in a neat bow. Last, he dons his black
cowboy hat with the silver band. He looks in the mirror, and putting a toothpick into his mouth, he smiles.

"C'mon, Jane Marie, lets us go knock 'em dead. Those old classmates of mine will never believe what Ron J. has become. I'm gonna sing like they never heard before. Their jaws are gonna drop clean offa their skulls, right?"

"Sure, Ron, honey."

Ron smiles and picks up his guitar case, which had been propped in the closet by the door. He swings the door open with his free hand, and, grinning again, he says, "Jane Marie, if you feel up to it, could you carry that box of my forty-fives?"

"Yeah, okay," she says, bending over and grunting with discomfort, "I'll get 'em."

"Thanks, doll," he says with a wink, his toothpick jutting from his wide grin as he opens the door and motions Janey through with the wide sweep and low bow of some great southern gentleman, "After you."

The dinner is a great success. Everyone is there. Brad Emerson, Logansport high's combination football team captain and class president, gives a long speech filled with fond memories and humorous anecdotes. Above the din of silverware and glasses of red wine, Brad Emerson gives out joke awards, and people grudgingly push themselves from their roast beef to receive awards for things like "most natural toupee," or "person who has changed the least." Ron and Janey sit at a table for two, and
Ron gazes around the room in an absent-minded way, ignoring the festivities in search of the perfect spot to set up his forty-fives. There is a candle in the middle of each table, each a different color of glass. The one in the center of Ron and Janey's table is blue, and it is like a teardrop with its top cut off. It throws its tinted light onto Ron's distant smiling face, and with the flickering flame, the light moves across his features in blue light and shadow, changing his expression from happiness to sadness to anger. Janey looks around her, carefully eyeing the men and women in their tweed jackets, silk dresses, and silly red wine smiles. She shifts uneasily in her seat as two drunken women avoid her glance and turn toward one another, giggling. Ron sits, smiling inwardly, and now he is audibly humming his repertoire, strumming an imaginary guitar. Lost in his imagined concert, Ron's big black hatted head bobs back and forth with his humming, and people begin to look at him, trying to hide their amusement. Janey shifts in her seat again, and sliding down in her padded seat, she makes an awkward attempt to kick an oblivious Ron under the table. She has to get way down in her seat, but finally, she gets him on the shin.

"Ow," he says suddenly looking at her, "What is it Jane Marie?"

She looks at him, her face visibly red even in the dim candle light. She sighs heavily. "Never mind," she says.
Suddenly, from the stage, Brad Emerson begins to softly sing the Logansport high school fight song, slurring his words. "Logansport high school, marching along/ fall in line and you can't go wrong..." Everyone is standing, singing along. Janey has to motion to Ron J. to get out of his seat, and suddenly realizing that the whole room is standing, Ron J. gets up quickly, making a commotion as he tries to rise without scooting his chair out. He nearly tips the table over, and Janey lets out another deep sigh. Everyone looks at them as Ron tries to sing along halfway through the song in his loudest, best Johnny Cash monotone. He makes a movement toward his guitar under the table, obviously planning to ad-lib a guitar part for the fight song, but Janey manages to kick him again.

He looks at her, confused. "What?" he asks like a wrongfully scolded child, "I was just gonna--"

"I know what you were gonna do, Ron, hon," she whisper apologetically, "I just don't think this is the time."

He is looking at her quizzically as the last strains of the fight song echo in the big banquet room, but he is suddenly encouraged by the fact that people have risen from their tables and have begun to mill about, greeting one another. He goes to a table at the front of the room, and begins clearing off the dishes and silver, laying them all on the floor to prepare for his display. Everyone, especially the bus boys, who have just filed into the room, look on with disdain. When the table is completely cleared off and the bus boys have removed the dishes from around
Ron J.'s feet, he goes back to his seat and pulls his guitar from under the small table. He strolls confidently to the front of the room, a new toothpick sticking out of his broad smile, Janey following with the box behind him. They begin taking the forty-fives out of the box and arranging them in neat stacks on the table. From the bottom of the box, Ron takes a poster and stands it at one end of the table, pulling out the little cardboard stand-up support in the back. The poster reads in bold blackletters formed with what look like railroad tracks:

RONALD J. CUMMINGS

IS

INDIANA'S MAN IN BLACK

The rest of the poster is comprised of a picture of Ron, enveloped in shadow in his black suit, hat, and boots, standing with his guitar, a cigarette hanging from his mouth.

Ron stands in front of the finished display, surveying it proudly. He then picks up his guitar and sits at the end of the table opposite the poster; he just sits there, holding his guitar and smiling—like a bookend. Janey watches him from a nearby table, her chin in her hand.

After a few minutes of people milling around trying to ignore him, one nameless classmate finally approaches with amused interest.

"What record label do you perform for, Mr. Cummings?" he asks with a slightly drunken smirk.
Ron sticks out his hand. "Just call me Ron J." he says, his tooth pick moving in his mouth. "I didn't catch your name--"

"Buddy Waterson, real estate," the smirker replies, "You didn't answer my question. What record label do you perform for?"

"Well, none at the moment. Ya see, I cut these forty-fives myself. It's a damn good record--one side is 'That Midnight Train to the Sky', and the other side is 'That Midnight Train to the Sky,' Instrumental version."

The real estate agent picks up a record and looks at both sides of it. "'That Midnight Train to the Sky' on side one and two, huh?" he asks, still smirking.

"It's a damn good record," Ron says.

"I'm sure it is. And you say you cut it yourself?"

"Well, not exactly. I had to pay someone else to cut them for me--and I had to pay for the studio time and all."

"So you had to pay someone else to let you record this forty-five," Buddy Waterson concludes, holding the forty-five like a lawyer would hold an incriminating piece of evidence, "You had to pay them!"

"Yeah, I guess," Ron answers, a little confused. Would you like to buy one? Only two bucks a piece."

"I'll think about it," he says, he walks away, chuckling. Janey watches him as he makes his way across the room, whispering in people's ears and thumbing back toward Ron over
his shoulder. Every person he whispers to laughs long and loud. Janey turns away quickly and massages her back, which has begun to ache. She glances at Ron, who still sits on the edge of the table, his guitar across his leg. She searches the room for Buddy Waterson, and finally spies him in a far corner laughing with Brad Emerson. She sees Brad hold up one finger in Buddy Waterson's face, and she watches him stagger toward the table where Ron is sitting.

"Mr. Cummings," Emerson says slurring far worse than before, "would you be so kind as to allow us to play one of your records for everyone?"

Ron J.'s face lights up. "Why sure," he says, "and please, just call me Ron J.!

"Right!" he says as he stagers toward the stereo with one of Ron's forty-fives in his hand, "Ron J. it is!"

Janey crosses her fingers as Brad puts the record on the turntable, the first few seconds of static sound filling the room before the song starts. Then the first cords come from the speakers, sounding like they're being played from the bottom of a well. Ron's Johnny Cash monotone suddenly joins the guitar, unsure at first, gradually getting louder, singing "Oh my baby's gone/ she done died/ she's ridin' that midnight train to the sky."
Ron silently strums along on the guitar, mouthing the words with the record, his head bobbing again, and for a few moments the room is like a vacuum except for Ron's voice. Brad Emerson turns up the sound a little so that everyone can hear. Slowly, the drunken class president begins a chuckle that turns to a laugh, and then a guffaw. Quite suddenly, he is laughing so hard that tears begin to stream down his cheeks, and Buddy Waterson joins him in his hysterics. It spreads quickly, like a gasoline fire, and soon the entire banquet hall is rolling on the floor. Some people can barely breathe for laughing. Ron just stands there, his eyes looking everywhere, like a small, frightened animal. Suddenly struck with an inspiration, Buddy Waterson staggers laughing over to the stereo, and reaching for the turntable, he flips the record from forty-five to seventy-eight speed. The laughter becomes almost deafening. Janey begins to cry too softly for anyone to hear. Ron just sits at the edge of the table, holding his guitar.

When the record is finally over, the laughter continues. Brad Emerson moves with some difficulty over to where Ron is sitting and puts his arm around his shoulder. "Ron," he says, "It's a helluva record." At this, Brad begins to snicker and snort again, his eyes watery. Everyone begins to laugh loudly once again, and now Ron is red faced and angry. Brad just stands there looking at him and laughing;
he stands there too long. Ron wheels and roundhouses him, sending the much broader class president and football team captain back a few steps. Emerson merely steps forward and sticks Ron with a solid right to the nose, and it makes a sound like someone slapping raw meat with a two-by-four. Ron is lifted off his feet and sent crashing into his display table. The table slides out from under him and the forty-fives are sent everywhere, many of them broken underneath its crashing weight. Ron's sign is face down, as is Ron. A bus boy quickly flips on the overhead lights, and the once candlelit room is bathed in fluorescent white. Ron gets to his hands and knees, and he begins to desperately gather his broken records.

He looks up at Janey and says, "Jane Marie, come help me, please?"

She looks at his face, staring up at her from the floor. Blood has begun to trickle from his nose to the corner of his mouth. The sudden bright light has begun to hurt her eyes. She is nearly blinded by it.

"Please," he says again.

She just stands there, paralyzed in the blinding whiteness, and she has picked up the guitar case, holding it open in front of her belly, hiding her pregnancy.

Ron throws all of the records into the box and holding them in one arm, he grabs the guitar with the other. He gets up hastily, his nose bleeding profusely. "C'mon Jane Marie," he says, and she follows him out of the big room.
When Janey gets to the room, Ron is sitting on the bed, his nose still bleeding, playing his guitar hard and swearing.

"Fuck those tasteless a-holes," he mumbles, "...don't know there as from their elbow when it comes to country music. Fuck 'em...wonder what ever happended to ol' Simpson?"

Janey goes to bed with Ron still playing and mumbling.

When she wakes the next morning, Ron has almost all of their bags packed, and he is moving briskly around the room, humming happily.

"Whatcha doin'?" she inquires groggily.

"Oh, good morning!" he says playfully, "How're you?"

"What are you doing?" she asks again.

"We're goin to Nashville!"

"What!?"

"Yeah," he says, "I'm tired of tryin' to please these know-nothin', cultchurul idiots in Indiana. We're goin' to Nashville. They'll know what to do with me there."

"Oh," she says.

They go out to their little Ford Maverick, and the early morning is already bright and hot. Ron carefully loads his slightly damaged poster after everything else so it won't get creased, and he throws a blanket over it, tucking in all four sides so it won't get wet or stained. Ron gets in and starts the car, and they pull out of the parking lot, heading east out of town, toward the highway. They head straight into the low morning sun, and Janey
has to shield her eyes. The morning light is so bright that she can hardly stand it. She rummages around in the glove compartment, searching for something with unusual desperation. Just as they get to the edge of town, she pulls the sunglasses out from under a map of the state of Kentucky with a sigh of relief. She puts them on and lies back on the headrest.

"Well we're off!" Ron says with a toothpick grin.

"Uh huh."
I was well into my second month as a student in London, and I was beginning to have some luck, or so I thought, divesting myself of the gandy accouterments of tourism and had begun to immerse myself in the musty, tired richness of English living. You see, we Americans are an infamous and easily spotted breed, often lambasted and lampooned for our unshakeable ethnocentricity, our disgusting fondness for huge slabs of burnt beef, and, worst of all, our horrible mutilation of the English tongue. We are not at all favorably disposed to cultural camouflage. In fact, we often bitterly resent the lack of Americanization in the world, condemning the idiots for not knowing a good thing when they see it. Anyway, my friend Jack and I, self-proclaimed intellectuals that we were, were determined to throw off the American stereotype, and, in a fit of grave self-over estimation, believed that we, clad in our Polo shirts, Levi's blue jeans, and deck shoes, had begun to achieve a modicum
of cultural invisibility. We believed that we could sit in a pub, and, like duck hunters in rented Donald Duck costumes, observe real English culture completely undetected.

We had begun to frequent a little pub in Bayswater, which is one of the seemier, and so as we saw it, more rough-hewn and realistic sides of London. The pub, a dimly lit, well-worn little lodge called the Moscow Arms, seemed a perfect place to come and learn something really substantial about English culture. Our relationship with the place seemed to have grown over the past month and a half by leaps and bounds. The bartenders, Graham and James, had gone from completely ignoring us at the bar for a good half an hour to pointing at us after mere minutes for our orders, shoving our pints at us, grunting unintelligibly, and eyeing the coins we handed them suspiciously. They always seemed unsure that the stupid Americans had completely succeeded in deciphering the English monetary system. Little did they know that we had long ago discovered the importance of being adept with the native currency, intellectuals that we were, and we saw this as a major step towards acceptance into the nearly impregnable social circle at the Moscow Arms.

When I say the social circle at the Moscow Arms, I mean the alcohol-tempered, battle weary core of six men, including the two bartenders, who were present and accounted for every night of the week. These were men who had forgotten
what it felt like to be drunk. They had reached that sad point in their drinking careers when, like the hitter who loses his bat speed or the quarterback who can no longer scramble out of the pocket, they could no longer drink fast enough to get drunk. This is not to say, of course, that they couldn't have thrown back one beer after another in rapid succession, but these were middle-aged Englishmen, and they liked to call themselves social drinkers. In other words, their very nature precluded any of the sophomore chug-a-lug contests so typical of American college campuses. So, sadly, they were doomed for the duration of their existence to experience only the light, almost imperceptible hum that Jack and I could have attained with our first pint -- less if we hadn't eaten anything -- and they were destined to have even the insignificant pleasure of that small hum dissipate and fall away upon contact with the damp, cool October London air.

Eventually, after about a month and a half of regular attendance, we were finally treated with a certain indifferent service that was characterized by the barkeeps serving us quickly while talking to the members of the group standing across the bar. They would hand us our lager, and without turning their head to look at either of us, they would go on uninterrupted with their arguments about soccer or politics, or, in James' case, who was an English citizen of Irish ancestry, the extent of the talent of Barry McGuffin, a young Irish middleweight.
It was during this period of invisibility, which Jack and I construed as some preliminary form of acceptance, that I began to observe some of the things I have mentioned so far. As I said, there was a completely reliable core of six men, including the two bartenders, who could always be found gathered around a particular corner of the rectangular bar that sat in the center of the pub. They all leaned on their elbows, faces forward, as if to thrust themselves deeper into the conversation. Their eyes were always attentive to whichever man had the floor, and the only time they moved was to lift their pints to their lips for long, luxurious gulps or to lift their index finger in order to punctuate a well made point. There were also, of course, the obligatory trips to the toilet, always at the end of a beer, never in the middle of one, so, when they came back, a new lager stood shining in its place like a cylinder of gold bullion, lukewarm in its glass. We sat at a table at what we considered to be a safe distance for unabashed observation and we watched. We got to know each of the six men, and we soon found that there were long lulls in our own conversation filled with their voices arguing with friendly intensity and laughing collectively, gathered around their corner of a scratched, beer stained walnut bar, their shoes banging and tarnishing the brass rail.

The bartenders were two strikingly different characters. Graham was a smallish, older man with short grey
hair greased back and few teeth in his head. He spoke in a thick cockney dialect, often waving his arms wildly when he spoke. James, on the other hand, was a big, good looking Irishman with dark hair and cheeks so ruddy they looked about to bleed. Both men moved in and out of the conversation serving customers like Jack and I, trying to hear what was being said. James wiped his hands on a bar rag as he stood there, nodding his head in agreement or shaking it in amused dismay. Graham waved off unwelcome comments and opinions with big gestures, like a man frightening crows, swearing disdainfully all the while. The rest of the group was composed of four men of different occupations. There was Mick, a sharply dressed young bank teller who complained about the incompetence of his superiors and fellow workers, constantly brushing the hair off of his forehead with his fingertips. He liked to give the impression of the misplaced potential world shaker surrounded by ignorance, and Graham waved off most all of his comments like to much flatulence.

There was Stu, the tall, mostly silent construction worker, who, dressed almost always in his work clothes, never even opened his mouth until the conversation turned to soccer, in which case his opinion blanketed all others with the warm torrent of his own rich cockney accent. He was, as far as we could surmise, generally regarded as the group's expert on the subject.
There was Will, a rather nondescript, but well-liked clerk from a bookstore on Queensway. Will was in his thirties, and with his job in the bookstore, there came a corresponding wealth of tidbits of information that he threw like pinches of spice into the conversation. These pinches of knowledge did, however, often promise a more in depth perception of a given topic than Will was ever able to deliver. Will was more of a leafer than a reader.

Last of all, there was Eddy. Eddy was to me, as I'm sure he was to Jack, the most fascinating of the group. He was the oldest, (a fact often expounded loudly and laughingly by Graham) and he was treated almost as a sort of patron. He smoked heavily, coughing constantly, but he was incredibly good natured. His job as a bank security guard on Bayswater road just didn't seem to fit his demeanor. I suspected that most of his work day consisted of friendly greetings and lifting children to drink from the water fountain. His laugh assuaged the most intense of arguments and when he spoke, Graham's hands lay motionless, like two pidgeons shot down by the sound of Eddy's voice. James just nodded, and the others fell silent, transfixed by the ease and grace with which he related his opinions, jokes, and philosophy. Even Jack and I, although we never spoke to him, began to develop great admiration for Eddy and his power over these men and the single most important thing to them -- since they no longer got drunk -- their conversation.
After nearly a month of watching and almost obsessive gathering information, we reached a plateau in our relationship with the Moscow Arms. We were tired of existing outside the circle of men with which we had become so enthralled. We wanted to be a part of the group. We talked about our mutual restlessness with our positions as mere observers from our beds across a darkened, dilapidated room in the London House Hotel. Together, we decided that we would make a bold move to nudge our way into the conversation of the regulars at the Moscow Arms. We resolved that our move would take place on our next visit, which we had planned would be the following evening, a Friday.

We walked into the pub the next evening, immediately noticing how unusually crowded it was, even for a Friday. People from seemingly all walks of London life had piled into the Moscow Arms, a capacity crowd for our colossal attempt at extending a hand of congeniality and good conversation across the sea. Through the shifting mass of heads and torsos, I caught sight of the group men, and they were once again huddled closely around their designated corner of the bar, guzzling their lagers with uncharacteristic speed. Graham and James were neglecting their duties as bartenders despite the crowd, and both were clutching half drunk pints of dark lager, replacing the usual bar rags. This was something that neither Jack
nor I had ever seen before, and we moved, tentatively but undaunted by this new turn of events, toward them.

We had planned to ease into conversation by stirring them up a bit. We planned to let them hear us comparing American football to soccer or Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher, sliding in by challenging their strong national pride, then eventually being welcomed into the group on the merits of our own conversational skills. We placed ourselves across the bar from them, and I said, loud enough for them to hear:

"Yeah, this soccer business is pretty popular over here, but give me an American football game any time."

Jack nodded in agreement, "Yeah, that's for sure. There's not a more physically taxing sport anywhere football players are the greatest athletes in the world."

We waited, glancing discreetly across the bar for some response. They just stood there, and in the dim light, I could see they were talking seriously about something. We waited, and later we tried the Reagan/Thatcher comparison. Still, there was no reaction. I told Jack quietly that I was going to try the more direct approach by asking Stu what the problem had been with Manchester in their last match. As I get closer, I heard Mick saying something like, "He wasn't that old damn it! I wasn't ready for it."

I tapped Stu on the shoulder, already beginning my question about the Manchester game.
"So what in the hell was the problem with Manchester last night?" I asked it as casually as if I had followed their exploits since the day I was born.

He turned around, opening the entire group to me, and his big, deeply lined, paint and dirt smeared face was traversed by tears.

"Huh?" he said, and I looked at all of their faces, wet with the tears of men who don't cry often. It was then that I saw that Eddy was gone. There was a space between Mick and Will that the men refused to violate. It was the closest I had ever been to them, and even in the dim light, I saw things that I had never seen before. They all leapt off of the pages of my imagination and into a world I knew nothing about. I knew so little about the men and their long standing relationship with one another, and I felt like a ridiculously colorful intruder in my green polo shirt, Levi's blue jeans, and deck shoes.

"Nothing," I said backing away and moving towards the door.

I took one last look back as I walked out with Jack behind me, and I saw them lift a shot simultaneously to their lips, and then chase it with an entire pint of lager. They were trying to get drunk.

The next day, Jack and I took our cameras to the Tower of London and took an entire roll of the Beefeaters.
Mortality and Mayonnaise

One March morning, the old woman died.

When I heard the news of my Great Aunt Lily's death, I packed up my car and steadily made my way out of the stately buildings and green grass of Berkeley's campus, down into the perpetual summer along Route One in southern California. The ocean was a calm green-blue, and it lapped the beach like a friendly old dog. I was alone on the road, and my purple convertible, a pure sports car, all flash and frivolity, headed into the long, smooth turns of the highway by the sea.

It was a very warm, bright March afternoon, the kind of day that was usually spent on the beach, not a funeral. But, I had my top down; the wind kept me from feeling the steady heat of the sun; and the scenery was beautiful. The weather had been warm, and the sky had been barely spotted with clouds for weeks. It seemed unthinkable for anyone to die in such weather; people should wait for gloom to die in. Not in a storm, mind you; storms are for violence and dark genius. It was
the calm, dismal gloom, the perpetual twilight that blocked the sun like a grey flannel canopy— that was for dying. But I was feeling good; and the warm air mingled with a cool, refreshing dampness that floated up from the shore. The sky was the shockingly blue color that always seems to hover over the sea.

"A damned funeral," I said, loud enough to hear myself over the whine of the engine. "So many beautiful women in sleeveless T-shirts and running shorts, bounding and bouncing after frisbees, and here I am on the way to a funeral, a funeral for an old bird I hardly even knew.

It came out sounding disrespectful, calling her an old bird and all, but it was true. I didn't really know my Great Aunt Lily. I knew she as a woman of considerable presence, and, seemingly, of great respect and influence within the family. She was the only one of her sister, of whom there were three (one of whom was my maternal grandmother), who ever received a college degree. This was, as I learned from my grandmother at a fairly early age, an achievement of great proportions for a woman of her time. But, being a woman with nothing better to do with a college education, she became a school teacher.

She was, along with being a woman of great influence and respect, a woman of considerable size. Standing up, she was five feet ten inches tall, a height the
that was bolstered by the constant presence of any type of surprisingly elegant wide-brimmed hat. And when she sat at a dinner table filled with chattering, chomping relatives, she sat quite alarmingly erect, so as to observe and correct the table manners of everyone present. She wore floral pattern dresses, had gigantic breasts that hung heavily, and from her arms, sacks of flesh drooped like big plastic bags filled with water. In short, she was an intimidating figure who had always seemed ancient and unreachable to me. I didn't know her and she had never made an attempt to get to know me. Funerals seemed like such a waste of time anyway.

I pulled off the highway and almost instantly into the heart of the little southern California beach town. It had been infested with at least a dozen antique shops, some of which would delight any treasure hunter, with all their quiet and musty smell, with all their rich woods and old mirrors that distorted you ever so slightly as you strolled by. There were a few of these, some better than others, and the rest of them were left to junk salesmen whose real purpose was to get you inside to take a look at his Route One T-shirts, animals made of real shells, post cards, tour maps, and Disneyland souvenirs.

I turned off the main drag onto a deeply shaded street lined with healthy, thick, green trees, so that the small amount of light that came through the trees moved with the breeze on the pavement. I pulled into the parking lot of the O'Grady Funeral Home, the largest of the homes on the street.
It was a stucco and adobe combination that was, mercifully, without the wrought iron gates that people loved to put on the Spanish type house. I pulled my suit out of the trunk and headed for the nearest door, intent upon finding some place to change. The door that faced the parking area led into a small, tastefully furnished room where a number of elderly ladies and men, some of whom I knew, some of whom I didn't, sat talking very quietly. Meanwhile, the rest of the people stood, arms folded, their faces full of forced sobriety. My parents were a part of this group, and when my father saw me, he momentarily forgot himself, smiling largely. He immediately felt guilty and replaced his warmth with the somber, forced furrows that looked like they had been steam-pressed into everyone's faces. Like I said, I really hated the idea of funerals. Mom and Dad had come from San Diego, and I knew that Dad hated being here as much or more than I did. He tried to look serious but was noticeably uncomfortable.

"That's where they do it, Kiddo," he said from the side of his mouth, pointing at a white door at the other end of the room. "That's the place."

"Where they do what?" I was afraid to ask.

"Where they do it all. To the bodies, I mean. You know, formaldehyde, makeup, the whole production. That's the room where they preserve people like big ol' pickles, one per jar. Really kind of senseless if you think about it."

"Yeah," I said. Sometimes my father's bluntness really shocked me. The whole description depressed me a little, and
for a moment I thought of all the elderly people in the room waiting to get behind the white door, waiting patiently to be drained of all their blood and filled with pickle juice. I pictured each of them suspended in the greenish fluid of their own personal gigantic jar, complete with an air-tight lid for maximum freshness. My mother spoke to me and I shook off the pickle image with a little difficulty.

"What?" I asked.

"I said I've got something to tell you that I don't think you're going to like," she repeated.

"Well, at least you've picked an appropriate place for it. What is it?"

"You're going to have to be a pall bearer."

"What!" I said, eyes wide and visibly irritated.

"Don't you dare make a scene, Michael. Go get changed in that men's bathroom down the hall an calm down. I'll tell you about it when you get back."

I made my way towards the white door and turned right down a narrow hallway. There was a homemade sign that said, "Rest Rooms" that hung between two of those good old swinging doors with the vents at the bottom. I picked the correct one and went in to put my suit on. The bathroom was a small, clean one, with a sink, a mirror, a grey stall, and a shiny white urinal. I hung my clothes on the inside of the stall, and began to change. I put everything on, straightened my tie in the mirror, and went to find out how I had been struck with the job of corpse-lugging.
My mother wasn't in the waiting room, so I followed the sound of hushed voices to a room in what I thought to be the center of the house. It was a large room, painted off-white, with a guest register at the entrance opposite the door I had entered. At the far end of the room, flowers with cards dangling surrounded the copper-colored coffin, in front of which the guests filed before taking their seats among the wooden folding chairs that filled the rest of the room. I stared at the coffin and the people that stood in front of it, blocking my view of the old woman, and I thought of how this way the first time I had ever been in the same room with a dead body. It made me shiver. I'd always hated the idea of funerals, and I'd never really been to one before.

Suddenly, the line in front of the coffin broke for a moment, so that I could see her face and torso clearly. She lay in the coffin like a piece of wax fruit in a basket. She had a manufactured luster, like that of an overpolished shoe. It was a sight that shocked me, even though I knew what to expect. There she was, an old woman in a silky blue dress, hands folded, face slightly smiling, not a thought in her head.

My mother saw me standing and staring and she came over and stood next to me. "She looks good, doesn't she?"

"She looks dead, Mom. I wouldn't say that she looks good."

"Well, you know . . peaceful, I mean."

"More like vacant."
Not in the mood for an argument, she went on with her explanation of how I had been chosen as a pall bearer. "She requested it," she explained. "She requested that six of her sisters' handsome young grandsons be the ones to carry her to her grave."

"That's a little bit weird, isn't it? Requesting six handsome young men to carry her to her grave? It sounds like a story by Edgar Allen Poe or something."

"Oh, hush!" she said. "She didn't have family of her own and all of her friends are either little old ladies or little old men, and you can't expect them to do it."

"I know. Okay. Who else is doing it?!"

"Your cousins."

"Not Charles!"

"Yes, Charles, and this is not the right time to decide not to get along with your cousins!"

"All right. I just thought you said she wanted handsome."

"Very funny. Try to be a little serious. This is a funeral, you know."

She walked away, satisfied in the knowledge that she had left her son feeling rather blasphemous, and she had. I knew I shouldn't have said those things, but the whole thing seemed so pagan and superstitious and useless, all of the special fluids and makeup and posing; it all came off as being very morose. Most of all, I found it hard to stomach the people who touched, caressed, and kissed the body. I was sure that if there were a heaven or a spirit world or whatever, Aunt Lily was up there gagging at all of this undo
display of public affection.

I looked up and noticed the owner standing at the entrance. The mortician was a short, balding man of about fifty. He wore a three-piece, dark-blue suit that wasn't very flattering to an already hopelessly paunchy physique. He stood at the front of the room, reminding the few people that wandered in to sign the guest register. I didn't see how anyone could possibly want to spend the rest of his life making money by preserving the dead. But, he was a strange little man, and he made me think that he was merely meeting a need. He didn't fawn over the family of the deceased or display put-on sorrow or sympathy. He didn't seem at all apologetic for the fact that he was making money off the pain of others, but he did his job well. He made sure that they had everything that they needed. He ran the show and left nothing to be worried about. He met a need, played a part, filled a position, and did it well. He seemed to be the only natural person around, and although it may have been because he was in familiar territory, death being second nature to him, it still made me like him. Not many men had resolved their lives so well or had adjusted so completely to their own choices. At that moment, he was the only person I liked in the room. I suddenly felt like running as I saw my cousin Charles approach.

"Hey, Mike, what's up?" Charles was one of those people who could make a phrase as common as "What's up?" into some-incredibly ignorant.

"Hey, Charles," I said.
"So... how's the Berkeley man? Jesus, they've got some lookers up there. Got any hot lookin' women on the line, big college man?"

He hit me in the arm and grinned nervously. I thought I would throw up from a combination of being sickened by and feeling sorry for him. He had been married for a year, he was 26 years old, and he had been one of those guys who had blushed looking at the Playmate-of-the-Month up until the day he was married. He had kept his thick, black plastic-rimmed glasses until his wedding day, at which time he bought a pair of wire-rims. They didn't help too much. Charles' glasses never sat exactly right on his face, and, somehow, after he had been married to Lee Ann, a saggy, hollow-faced girl who seemed the type who had once picked out the sloppy, drunk men in dirty singles' bars, his conversation always seemed destined to stray towards sex.

"No, not right now," I lied. I really didn't feel like comparing notes. Besides, she was a nice girl and didn't deserve to be discussed with Charles.

"Wow! That's too bad. You can't be timid about this stuff, you know. You want to take a girl out, you just gotta ask'em. Don't be afraid of'em. You got nothin' to lose. Be daring. You know what they say, "Nothing ventured..."

"Yeah, 'nothing gained.' I guess you're right, Charles."

Great advice from a guy who took twenty-five years to muster enough courage to ask out his first girl and then was stupid
enough to marry her. I let my eyes stray around the room, looking for an excuse to get out of there. Charles was almost as depressing as the waxy body at the front of the room. Then, like some greasy godsend, Lee Ann approached and dragged Charles away from me.

"We'll talk later," he said.

"Sure," I answered.

The viewing hours passed, and I walked with my parents and my grandmother out into the parking lot. It was three o'clock and the air was disturbingly hot as I emerged from the air-conditioned funeral home. I got in my car and followed them to the motel on the edge of town where they had rented two overpriced rooms. The rooms were clean and well-kept, but they weren't anything special; for a nothing little coastal town, 100 miles from any big tourist attraction, they were grotesquely expensive. But, we had gotten our room keys from a grey, splotchy little man at the front desk, who, incidentally, had a wide array of shell animals and Disney souvenirs, and had gone into our respective rooms. My mother and father stayed in a room with a double bed, and I stayed in a room with my grandmother, the room containing two singles.

That evening after we had all been out to dinner at a seafood restaurant down on the beach, we returned to our motel, and I spent the rest of the evening watching television with my grandmother, which wasn't nearly as bad as it sounded. My grandmother was a very lively old woman, and she always
had something to say about everything that was on the tube. In the case of a mystery, she speculated on who the culprit was, what his motives were, and what terrible traumatic experience in his childhood had driven him to this desperate climax. I laughed quite a bit that evening.

My grandmother was much smaller than her younger sister Lily, and she had fine, bidlike features that rendered her intensely lovable. My grandfather had died at the age of sixty-two a few years before I was born and she had never remarried, although it wouldn't have surprised me if she just suddenly decided to at age 86. She was just that kind of person.

Finally, it was time to turn the television off.

"Good night, Mike," my grandmother called.

"Good night, Grandma."

The lights had been out for an hour in the expensive, not-so-special motel room when her voice rose from her bed like a ghost. "Lord, she's gone. She's really ... She was my little sister. Six years younger than me." Her voice was very quiet, not quite sure that I was listening. "I changed her; I fed her. I remember the first day she ever went to school. We were all in one room then, and I was in the seventh grade! Lord, she cried and cried -- she missed Momma so bad. All the kids just sat and stared at her, and tht just made her scream louder and louder so that finally the teacher picked up her pointer and was going to give Lily something to cry about. Well, I got up and came to the front of the room and stood in front of her, and when she told me
to get out of the way, I said, 'No, ma'am. No, ma'am. She ain't done nothin'.' Teacher snapped that pointer 'cross the back of my head so hard that fell down. I just got up and took Lily back home. Papa owned a lot of land, and everyone listened to him. That teacher was gone by the next Monday. God, she's really gone."

Grandmother drifted off to sleep, but I stayed awake into the early morning listening to her groan and whine like an old sleeping dog.

The next day my cousins and I, including Charles, took the flowers out of the funeral home and moved them all down to the nearby Methodist church. Then we cranked Aunt Lily down, sealed her up, took her down to the church, and set her once again at the front of a large room, nestled in all of her colorful, sympathetic blossoms.

The minister didn't seem to have known the old woman at all. He was the town's Methodist minister, and he had moved into the small town only a year ago. He talked about her life as a teacher and her involvement in the church. I think that's the only thing that makes sense about a funeral. Whether I'm buried, burned, or stuffed, I still want to be talked about.

The ancient figures that sat sparsely placed around the sanctuary were very quiet as we closed up the old woman's casket for the last time. We carried her down the church's front steps out to the errily oversized black hearse that
waited in the street as the afternoon sun oozed through the trees.

There was a small cemetery at the end of town opposite the motel. It was green, cool, and shaded, and it was close enough to the shore that you could hear the sound of the surf. As we carried the casket across the lawn, the waiting canopy flapped in the light wind above the sandy-brown hole, and Charles began discussing oral sex.

"You can't be timid about these things, boys," he said to me and the rest of the dark-suited, handsome young men. "Ask a girl if she has anything against it. Just say, 'Listen, would you mind putting your..."

"Shut up, Charles!" I snarled, barely able to restrain my disgust.

"Jeeezuss!" Charles said. "Try to make a little conversation around you guys."

"Just shut your mouth," my cousin Chris repeated.

"Jeeezuss."

And so the minister said a few words over the grave, and we planted Aunt Lily in the wet-smelling ground. My grandmother moaned softly as they lowered her, moaning just as she had the night before in her sleep.

After the funeral everyone who had attended went to Aunt Lily's small, well-kept house and sat in her living room and kitchen and ate the food that everyone had brought.
I sat in a plaid chair and ate off a paper plate. An old man planted himself beside me.

"She was a good girl, Lily."

"Hmm?" I hadn't been listening.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he stuck out his hand. "Eldon Miller. I was a friend of Lily's. I said she was a good girl. But then again you'd know that, being a pall bearer and all."

"Oh, yes. Yes, sir." I couldn't tell him that I didn't know her. I got the feeling that it would make him feel very inadequate.

"She sure was something. Why, she and I, we were fast friends back in high school in a little town not too far inland of here. Oh, but you know all that. Everyone used to talk about us -- Lily and me -- like we had something goin'. We always laughed about that, she a little bit harder than me. She was so much taller than I was. I'm not very tall, you know. Yes, sir, she was a good girl. Yep. Fixed me up with Ruth -- that's my wife. She was the prettiest little thing. I guess Lily made me sound like Saint George to her. Yes, sir, she was something. There was a time when I sure could've taken to her. But she always laughed about those rumors about the two of us just a little too hard for my pride. But Lord, she was a big, long-legged, well-shaped girl. Loved to wear hats and laugh and look at water and ride the trolley. She always said she wanted to walk all the way to San Francisco Bay along the beach. I always told her she was crazy. She was a good girl though." He paused.
"Yep," I said. "She was something. She sure was."

I felt like I should say something; I felt as though he expected it. "One thing I've never quite understood though is why she never got married. Why was that?" I asked, knowing how old men loved to be invited to tell a story.

His eyes lit up. "Well, I'll tell you," he began. "She chased after one boy - he was here today, I think - John Wetson. Big, tall, handsome brute - smart as a whip, but wild. He was a restless one. Always makin' plans to go here or there, never really goin' anywhere. His daddy grew oranges not too far outside of town. One day John just up and left. Came back about five years later. Don't know why he and Lily never got together - couldn't ever figure it out. She always had a good school teachin' job. I don't know why they didn't get married. I don't think either of 'em ever did. That's John Wetson over there next to the door. Maybe you could find out from him, if you get him talkin'."

"Yeah, maybe. Nice talking to you, Mr. Miller."

"Call me Eldon. Anyone who was so close to Lily is - well, you know. Lord, she was something."

"Yes, she was. She was a great old girl, Eldon."

He paused for a minute and looked puzzled, as if someone had slapped him for no reason. "Old," he said. "That's funny. We moved up north when Ruth and I were married, and I always felt so bad about never seeing Lily."
I guess I never really thought of her as old. I saw that old body in the coffin, but it just seemed like a prop. I don't know - I just never thought of her as old until just now."

I just nodded my head. Old Eldon looked so sad that I just couldn't think of anything to say. Old was the only way I had ever known Aunt Lily, but I still felt as though I had just violated some kind of sacred image that Eldon Miller had kept undisturbed for over fifty years. He walked away, still dazed from the unintentional blow I had dealt him.

John Wetson looked as though he had just missed the very last bus as he stood, big and hefty and wrinkled, staring blankly.

"Mr. Wetson? Mr. Wetson?" I tapped him on a big, meaty shoulder.

"Wha'? Oh, hello."

This time I stuck out my hand. "I'm Michael Andrews, Lily's great nephew. I was a pall bearer today."

"Oh - oh, yes." The fact that he was engaged in a conversation seemed to have just dawned on him. "She was a good woman, your Aunt Lily, a really good woman."

"That's exactly what Mr. Miller was just saying - that she was really something."

He smiled. "Good old Eldon. He always did love her, too. It doesn't seem like it could have possibly been that
long ago. What is it - 50, 60 years? Then again, it doesn't seem like I was ever that young. Was I ever your age, son? Well, even if I was, it doesn't matter now. It's all gone now. It doesn't seem like it was all that long ago though.

Hesitantly, I asked, "All of what?"

He looked at me, then at the ground, and then at me again. "I almost married your great aunt, son. Oh, it was long ago, but I almost did it. We were in love.

It was a strange thing to see. I thought that I had very rarely seen a man so old and, at the same time, so large. I suppose men are in that way like dogs simply because you don't see too many Saint Bernard's or German shepherds living to be fifteen years old. They just can't support their own bulk for that long. I thought that John Weston must have been made very well. He was at least six feet four inches tall, and he weighed at least 250 pounds. The strangest thing of all, though, was that he looked as though he would cry. He was far too old to think about love, I thought.

"I loved her, but I was so young, and I knew that there would be plenty of time for that," he continued. "I left - traveled to Europe - lived there for four years. When I came back, she was 25 years old, a bitter school marm, already convinced that she was an old maid. I loved your Aunt Lily, son. And you know what? I never did get married.

"You know," he smiled, looking inwardly at some dust-covered scene lodged in his memory. "You know, I still
remember one time when I had taken her to a party. I don't know - it was at some friend of ours. But she was having a wonderful time, talking to all of her friends, and I was kind of bored and restless; so I just decided to go and check if my buggy had been fixed yet - I had left it in town at the repair shop. Well, anyway, it turned out that he was done with it, so I drove it back to the party, and there was Lily, just sitting on the front porch with her face in her hands, crying and crying. I guess she thought that I'd just left her. Well, I swung that buggy door open and said, 'Hey there, you look like you could use a ride.' She ran over and just hopped in and kissed me like I'd never been kissed before. We were 20 years old. That's 60 years ago. Sweet Lord, 60 years."

He took off his glasses and wiped his eyes clumsily with big, thick hairy hands. He wasn't a man who was used to crying, and he was embarrassed by it, so I left. Besides, I didn't feel like I could take much more of talking to him without crying myself. His story had a strange, hollow sound, and it made me very sad. I walked over to the kitchen table and filled up another paper plate with ham, jello, and potato salad, then leaned up against the kitchen counter, eating quietly. A woman of about 40 took a piece of counter next to me.
"She was a tough old bird, all right."

I turned and took a good look at her. On second glance she looked as though she might be 35 or 36, well-tanned, with dark brown hair that was flecked with grey, and probably divorced. Her black dress was cut way too low for a married woman. She made me uncomfortable, trying a little too hard to make "ice-breaking" conversation with a college junior. She let her eyes wander as if she were selecting pork chops at the meat counter.

"Yeah, she was. How did you know her?"

"She was my high school English teacher. Meanest and best teacher I can remember. I became a journalist because of her. God, she taught at that school for as long as I could remember. Until she retired, of course. Hell, she seemed old when I had her."

I nodded my head and forked a bite of my as-yet-untasted potato salad into my mouth. I turned and looked out of the kitchen window. The day was blue and warm and beautiful. Thehorny divorcee's story seemed to complete something for me. It was the last part of a dotted line of Lily's life. It was a line that had a beginning and an end. My life flashed and was superimposed upon Lily's, and suddenly I realized that the potato salad must have been left out too long that day. It had gone rancid. The bitterness crept malignantly into every part of my form, like a night that was coming too quickly. I saw the two lines in my head,
one a completed segment that ended in a metal box, and one, mine, that was still moving, pushing towards that end. A picture of me sitting and waiting in the room outside the white door flashed through my mind. I sat and waited to see the calm, indifferent little man who would pump me full of that forever fluid.

I dropped my paper plate, sweating, my eyes wide. Everyone in the house looked at me as I felt the black realization cover me and come into focus. Outside the sun blazed brilliantly upon the little coast town, the highway by the sea, and the campus at Berkeley. Inside a dead woman's house, something very dark had taken me in both hands and left me gasping.