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The Mixed-up adventures of Morgan Rio : reading sequences and narrative cohesion

Louis DiMonaco
San Jose State University

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**The Mixed-Up Adventures of Morgan Rio: Reading sequences
and narrative cohesion. [with Original writing]**

DiMonaco, Louis Anthony, M.A.

San Jose State University, 1991

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THE MIXED-UP ADVENTURES OF MORGAN RIO:
READING SEQUENCES AND NARRATIVE COHESION

A Project Report

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By

Louis DiMonaco

May, 1991

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Dr. Robison Swigart

Dr. Aldon Nielsen

Dr. Paul Douglass

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

THE MIXED-UP ADVENTURES OF MORGAN RIO: NARRATIVE VERSIONS AND NARRATIVE COHESION

by Louis DiMonaco

This project contains the results of a reader response survey of an original work of narrative fiction. The work was written in single page 'units,' printed without page numbers and distributed to twenty-five readers, twelve of whom received manuscripts that had been shuffled randomly. After reading the manuscript, each participant was asked to respond to two pages of questions concerning such narrative elements as continuity, plot, climax and closure. Eleven readers responded to the survey.

The results indicated that even the sometimes wide disparity between the sequence of events read, and the order of events as they occurred in 'time' did not impair the reader's sense of continuity, plot and climax. However, the data regarding closure was inconclusive.

To my wife

Billie

for love and endurance

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Critical Introduction

Project Description

This creative writing project is designed to show that a work of fiction can maintain cohesion even when the reader is free to choose his or her own reading sequence.

The original hypothesis: that a narrative sequence has an inherent structure that exists independent of the traditional elements of plot, climax and closure, has undergone a degree of modification. Much of the success of this initial hypothesis depended on the ability of the events of the narrative to exist independent of a fixed order. As the creative writing process unfolded, a number of cause and effect relationships and fixed temporal sequences developed which contradicted those efforts to achieve independent, and therefore interchangeable, event sequences. This is not to imply that the events of the narrative presented here necessarily have a fixed "order of occurrence" that is absolute, regardless of the version or "order of telling" experienced by any one reader, but that such continuity as exists in any of the versions must first be accounted for by the numerous chronological and cause and effect events, before such continuity can be assumed to be a result of a structure that exists independent of traditional narrative elements.¹

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¹ The terms "order of occurrence" and "order of telling" are taken from Nelson Goodman's article, "Twisted Tales; or, Story, Study, and Symphony."

Despite problems with the original hypothesis, it has been possible to create a narrative that is composed of interchangeable pages; to present sequentially different versions of the narrative; to carry out a reader response survey and to discuss how the order of 'events in time' relates to the order or sequence in which those events are presented.

The project has remained in harmony with the original nature of the inquiry; that being, an investigation of how and in what way a sequence of narrative events can maintain cohesion given a diversity of reading sequences. Both the chronological events and those events which can be said to have little or no chronological reference--for example the dream sequences of the narrative; and the short, narrowly referential pages--have been shuffled and rearranged without conscious design.

Because of the interchangeability of pages, the narrative is said to be 'twisted' in the sense used by Nelson Goodman: that the order of occurrence and the order of telling are by degrees narrowly or widely disparate. What effect this 'twisted' condition has on the elements of continuity, plot, climax and closure remains the subject of this study.

Reader Response Survey

Method of Data Collection

The reader response survey was conducted in the following manner: twenty-five 'packets' were made; each packet consisted of one, 10 x 13 inch, envelope; each envelope contained a copy of the manuscript (without page numbers); a cover letter (reproduced under "Creative Writing Manuscript") and two question sheets (reproduced under "Questionnaires"). A self-addressed stamped envelope was also enclosed for the convenience of the readers.

Thirteen of the packets contained manuscripts in the order reproduced in this project report. The remaining twelve manuscripts were shuffled randomly. No effort was made to keep track of the order of pages or 'sequence of events' in the shuffled manuscripts; care was taken, however, to determine which reader received a shuffled or an original manuscript.

Communication with and responses from the readers participating in this study were exchanged solely by written means. The identities of all readers who responded to this survey, with the exception of readers #10 and #20, were unknown. All quoted material below is transcribed as exactly as possible from reader response questionnaires. For purposes of reference, each reader has been given an arbitrary number from 1-25.

Data

This section contains the reader response survey information arranged into four tables. Table 1 (below) gives the following information: the reader number; the condition of the manuscript received by the reader (original or shuffled); whether the manuscript was returned; if the manuscript was read in the order presented; and, lastly, information about each reader's background relevant to this study.

Table 1

General Reader Response Survey Data

#	Responded	Order received*	Read in order	Reader information
1	Yes	O	No	Elementary School Principle
2	No	S		MBA: International Business
3	Yes	O	No	Undergraduate Psychology Major
4	No	O		English Professor
5	No	O		English Professor
6	No	S		Student: English Major
7	No	S		Student: English Major
8	No	O		Student: English Major
9	No	S		English Professor
10	Yes	O	No	English Professor
11	No	S		Student: English Major

12	No	O		Student: English Major
13	No	S		Student: English Major
14	Yes	S	Yes	Elementary School Teacher
15	No	O		Student: English Major
16	No	S		Writer
17	No	O		Writer
18	No	O		College student
19	Yes	S	No	Psychologist/Counselor
20	Yes	S	Yes	Carpenter/H.S. Education
21	Yes	O	Yes	Primary School Teacher
22	Yes	O	No	High School Teacher/German
23	Yes	O	Yes	English Major: Graduated, B.A.
24	Yes	S	Yes	Artist
25	Yes	S	No	Real Estate Agent: College Grad.

---

* O (original) refers to the manuscript as it is reproduced in this report under "Creative Writing Manuscript."

S (shuffled) refers to manuscripts that were shuffled or rearranged without conscious design, in much the same way one would shuffle cards, albeit a bit more awkwardly.

Table 2 (below) correlates the reader responses to question sheet #1 (see pages 172 and 173 for question sheets #1 and #2, respectively). The horizontal numbers correspond to the question numbers. The vertical numbers are the arbitrarily assigned reader numbers.

Table 2

Response Survey Data: Question Sheet #1

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Yes ^a	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Story
3	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Narrative
10	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Narrative
14	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Nar/Story
19	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes ^b	Yes	Yes	Yes	History
20	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Story
21	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Narrative
22	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Narrative
23	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes ^c	Yes ^d	No ^e	No ^f	Yes ^g	History ^h
24	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Narrative
25	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Story

^a "I hope I did."

^b "Several."

^c "90% of the time = Yes"

^d "Yes--Morgan's inability to have sex w/ the whore, particularly given his job, his friend Evo, and the girls."

^e "Ship--business partners--Simone--Affairs--split of partnership--Death of Affairs--Divorce--Whore--Shrink. But this is mostly how it read. So, hard to say."

^f "I want 'The madness of Morgan' to be more shocking, more harsh, more explainable. But perhaps this longing is what kept (keeps) me reading. Interesting to think about."

^h "I call it a History because @ the end I learn Morgan's on the couch. Before I learned this I'd call it a Chronicle."

Table 3 contains the totals for each question asked on sheet #1. The questions below are condensed versions of those actually asked on the questionnaire. Of the twenty-five readers solicited for this study, eleven have responded for a 44% rate of response. The survey was conducted from March 1st through April 15th, 1991.

Table 3

Aggregate Responses: Survey Question Sheets #1 & 2

Questions	Yes	No
1: Read all pages?	11	0
2: Read some pages more than once?	8	3
3: Read in order?	5	6
4: Sense of continuity?	11	0
5: Was there a climax:	8	3
6: Did piece have a plot?	9	2
7: Was story: Complete Incomplete	7	4
8: Could you reconstruct chronology?	8	3
9: Story? Chronicle? Narrative? History?		
3 0 6 2		

Table 4 (below) gives each reader's response under the heading of one question, repeating this format for all questions. This was done to facilitate comparisons. All responses were hand written to varying degrees of legibility. As nearly as possible, all responses are reproduced complete and unabridged.

Table 4

Reader Response Data: Question Sheet #2

Question #1: In what sense would you say the narrative did or did not have continuity?

#1 "I could follow the events. It was confusing at first but I searched for what I wanted to read."

#3 "The scenes were scattered but they were related."

#10 "Reappearance of the same characters in different situations & time settings establishes continuity."

#14 "It seemed to me that the narrative had continuity in that it had an order I could follow, a sense of wholeness."

#19 "The identities of the two characters never or almost never developed beyond the initial stages."

#20 "The story was continuous because you knew what was going on."

#21 "The continuity was there. Each of the characters flowed into the next. Very interesting--Morgan and Evo were almost like one whole person but not really."

#22 "The sense of the continuity was represented by the form used throughout the narrative. The order was not the most apparent consideration for the narrative. What was sensed was a presentation of human events to be considered but not to be resolved."

#23 "Has continuity in Morgan's troubles and in Evo's constancy. Evo is Morgan's alter ego, and he survives. His is a continuous existence."

#24 "The continuity occurs throughout the narrative [sic] very similar to the way one would relate the events of one's own life--when you think of the events and not necessarily the orders."

#25 "It was about two guys who were really different, like alter egos."

Question #2: In your opinion, what event was the climax of the narrative?

#1 "I suppose the fire and the confrontation with the dream woman/women but I didn't feel relieved or enlightened by this 'climax.'"

#3 "The conversation in the hotel bar between Morgan and Evo where they talk about the crisis of their relationship. It's not a climax as in orgasmic release; an intellectual climax, almost neurotic."

#10 "There seemed to be several: the fire that killed Amelia & Amanda; the moment when Morgan comes home to find his house for sale; and the two one-sentence pages stand out by virtue of their brevity: 'He would never know' and 'He was still gung-ho for the dream. . . .'"

#14 "I didn't consider there to be one climax, but rather a number of them in each time section."

#19 "The crisis in the bedroom with Morgan and Simone when he said he wanted 'intimacy.'"

#20 "The fire."

#21 "The climax 'to me' came at the banquet when Morgan had just about had it with the superficial life he was leading and let Simone's world know about it."

#22 "The climax was in several parts: the banquet, the fire, the wedding."

#23 "Ironically the climax is Morgan's inability to climax with the whore."

#24 "When Amilia [sic] and Amanda were killed in the fire."

#25 "I kept waiting for Morgan to do something. Blow up or something."

Question #3: Give your reasons for feeling that the narrative was or was not complete.

#1 "It was complete in that I knew the characters went as far as they could go and would not substantially change."

#3 "It was complete in the way the characters revealed themselves a [sic] being constant. Evo was obsessed with sex or the sexual part of himself and Morgan was obsessed with his feelings."

#10 "The rise & fall of the business; the marriage & separation of Morgan and Simone; the wedding of Evo all suggest some sense of closure."

#14 "I was able to gather meaning, to sense the order of what was happening. It was complete for what was included."

#19 "The characters were complete in their incompleteness."

#20 "It was complete because you knew the story when you finished."

#21 "Complete and not complete. Some things were left unsaid but you could just about know what was not said. Morgan was feeling trapped but used a lot of words to justify what he was doing without expressing 'trapped.'"

#22 "Not complete. There was something left undone. The spaces had not been filled in. There was a feeling

of despair without a solution. A feeling of something else must happen."

#23 "Complete because it tells a history of Morgan from age 20-40? Incomplete because I need to know his childhood, his thoughts, his parents, and more about his blunders--as he aspires to balance his Alter Ego (Evo) with his own sense of humanity (Morgan)--to understand his madness. What, after all, does he expect of himself? Perhaps he expects nothing. If so, then in the Deconstructionist vein (what is not written) the story is complete. You (author) tell me none of his expectations because he had none."

#24 "The narative [sic] was complete in each sequence. Whole thoughts expressed at that particular time in the narative (sic). The thoughts and events were woven throughout the narative [sic] in such a manner to add to the whole segment at one time."

#25 "I didn't know enough about the characters when it was over. It needs a sequel."

Question #4: In what sense did this narrative have or not have a plot? What motivated you to continue reading?

#1 "The plot was fairly apparent given the structure: ship, business, marriage, breakdown, etc."

#3 "The plot was revealed in the flow of scenes and the fact that they had been friends a long time."

#10 "A sense of emotional conflicts working toward some conclusion or point of balance gives this 'plot.' The style alone (the use of vivid detail, sharp dialogue, etc.) are sufficient to hold the reader's attention until he reaches the point where he begins to 'know' the characters. At that point interest in the characters also motivates one to keep reading."

#14 "I felt a definite plan of action focused on the main character, Morgan--where he was going, where he had been. I was interested in Morgan, what I would learn next, if he would ever 'sweep it clean.'"

#19 "It was fragmented like a puzzle, pieces here and there started making up a whole."

#20 "It had a plot. I kept reading with no problem."

#21 "The plot was obviously Morgan's unhappiness coming to a dramatic explosion at the banquet. He could not perform for Simon (sic). He had had 'it.'"

#22 "The plot was a hidden plot. There was a symbolic exploitation of woman [sic] that was obviously projected through Evo. Morgan did not insure the salvation of woman [sic] which could have been an effective solution. Instead, Morgan leaves trails of very characteristic signs of male bargaining (marriage,

conscience about his infidelity, lack of loyalty to his assumed best friend) but in the end is more exploiting than Evo."

#23 "The purpose = yes = impressionistic view of 2 friends. Plot = No = There is no temporal pace or mechanism other than the ship and perhaps the apartment. Make sense? I need a typewriter to go into detail, but a plot to me is something which touches the future thoughts, lives, families--Morgan/Evo @ times have hopes for the future--women & \$--but once achieved this plot mechanism, so to speak, is never replaced. Instead we readers get glimpses of the present, as seen in the past by Morgan once on Dr. Superio's couch."

#24 "The plot was not apparent until I finished approximately half the narrative. This made me continue."

#25 "I was interested in the way they started and then Morgan lost his share of the business. I also like some of the erotic scenes."

Question #5: What structural features of the narrative did you find most interesting or most disconcerting?

#1 "See #1 above."

#3 "There were several undeveloped characters. I suppose its [sic] not important since this was a short story and not a novel."

#10 Most interesting (circled): "I was amazed how well this worked, how easily the mind creates a sense of chronological order regardless of the sequence in which the events are presented."

#14 "I enjoyed the different types of sequence--It was almost like a game trying to follow and piece together."

#19 "The dream was confusing, ironically for me, I didn't see any overall design to the dreams."

#20 "I liked the way it read. Real easy."

#21 "What held me 'going on' was the way it was written. Great way to keep you reading on and on. The story happened page by page."

#22 "The most disconcerting was the feeling of being left with no solutions."

#23 Most disconcerting: "Pages w/ little words--& descriptions which shunned [possibly 'showed'] convention to be stream of consciousness."

#24 "The most disconcerting structural feature was that I could not turn to the end of the pages to see what the conclusion was, that was also the most interesting."

#25 "It jumped around, but actually I got used to it. I wouldn't want a steady diet of this, though."

Question #6: Give reasons for feeling the piece was either a story, chronicle, narrative or history.

#1 "It was basically a story. A narrative is someone else's story; a chronicle and history are entirely different."

#3 "I say narrative but I guess I also mean story. Definitely not history or chronicle."

#10 A story (circled): "Seems too trivial to describe such a detailed character study." Chronicle and history (circled): "These words, imply to me, a grand, historical perspective not present in this work."

#14 "A confusing question to me. I saw a story and narrative as basically synonyms and a chronicle and history also. I eliminated the history/chronicle since the events were not in chronological order."

#19 "Actually, now that I think about it, I'm not sure. A history because it's pieces of the past, or a story because it's make [sic] up."

#20 "Story about life. Interesting and different."

#21 "A narrative--reactions between the characters--their history or story a little at a time."

#22 "The piece is a narrative--no feelings!"

#23 "History: because the style is very expository and uses the past tense quite often (perhaps too much).

History because there is no forward moving mechanism (lack of plot). Because of this indeed, the pages may be shuffled and presented in any order and still prove effective. Although some passages in my version seem to be ordered--the Accident/police/fire/whore/wedding were (thankfully) in order w/ one another.

"History because history was whereas stories set up things to come: things to happen, to be--I don't get that sense here, so I call it a history, a living history, but one which does not nor will not change."

#24 "The feeling of being in an on going narative [sic] was the stronges [sic] feeling."

#25 "It was a story, I thought."

Question #7: Please make any general or specific comments or criticisms you like.

#1 "Generally, well written, a good style, readable. Content was spread out. By that I mean so many subjects were attempted: sexual relations, male bonding, female bonding (Amelia, Amanda). It may have been too ambitious, but nonetheless interesting."

#3 "The descriptions were good, some of the dialog was to [sic] fast and not revealing of character. The form would be good for serials like in magazines before television or radio, like soap operas are now, they just go on and on."

#10 "The overall effect reminded me somewhat of Joseph Heller's Something Happened where he establishes an almost monotone style, avoiding any emotional highs or lows, until suddenly the cumulative effect is felt quite strongly and unexpectedly."

#14 "I read the narrative twice--which is usual for me. Some things fit together the second time around even though I skimmed it. I was very interested in Morgan and his dream. I guess my only criticism is that I would have liked more--what did Morgan choose to do next. Does he ever listen to his dream?"

#19 "Well, to be honest, I didn't care for the way the psychologist was depicted but I suppose I [sic] sensitive to that. I didn't and did like some of the sexual tension which was both disturbing and exciting. So I guess the story was revealing in a complicated way."

#20 (No response to this question.)

#21 "What really impressed me was the human reactions the characters had [sic] each other--separate from each other but adding to the story--a little

information at a time. Great way to have an interaction between people."

#22 "The obvious observation is the total absence of any other males other than Evo & Morgan. The meaning of this is unclear but was very uncomfortable to me as a woman reader."

#23 (No response)

#24 "The format was incredible. At first I was confused about what I was reading then when I realized that each page was a part of the whole I could not put it down. I wanted to know more so page 36? would make more sense to me. When I realized that page 36 was just page 36 the concept was even more exciting."

#25 "The best scene was w/ the whore but I suppose that's sexist!"

Interpretation of Data

Much of the ability to interpret the reader response data depends on definition. The narrative elements of continuity, climax, plot and closure are subject to continual debate. What follows is an attempt both to draw conclusions that are based on traditional definitions of these elements and to extrapolate definitions from reader responses to the text. As an example, the response of reader #20 to question #4 (the question of plot) was simply: "It had a plot. I kept reading with no problem." This reader has condensed discussions of plot definition to a basic rule: the story has a plot if the reader is motivated to keep reading; and the fewer 'problems' one encounters in the effort to keep reading, the better the plot.

Versions

Questions #1, #2 and #3 can be taken together. In reference to question #1, all the readers read all the pages, or at least stated so. This question was designed so that those readers who gave a negative response could be treated separately from those who had, indeed, read all the pages; it being assumed that those readers who had not read all the pages would have lacked sufficient knowledge of the narrative to answer the rest of the questions with an equal degree of reliability.

The data gathered from the responses to question #2 are inconclusive. This question suffers from design problems in that there was no corresponding essay questions such as: "How many of the pages did you read more than once?" or "Which pages did you read more than once?" This question was originally designed to locate readers who might have had problems keeping track of pages they read, especially given that the pages were without page numbers and, in many cases, randomly shuffled. However, without a corresponding written response question, it was impossible to determine why a reader reread a page. Readers may have, indeed, lost track of their place, but there was no way, given the design of the question, to measure quantitatively to what degree this occurred.

Regarding question #3, of the five readers who stated that they read the piece in order, only two (#21 and #23) received original manuscripts. However, #23 wrote at the bottom of manuscript page: "Note to Author, I will now shuffle pages once. I'm searching for Action now. I want action. I can't explain why. Perhaps it's late and I'm tired; I don't know. I will, however, send the manuscript back in the order I have read." Obviously, once shuffled, the manuscript was no longer in its original sequence.

This left only reader #21 as having read the original manuscript. This reader had misgivings about whether or not

there was a climax. She erased a negative answer for a positive one, and answered 'no' to "Did the piece have a plot?" She then wrote what she thought was the plot in the written section of the questionnaire: "The plot was obviously Morgan's unhappiness coming to a dramatic explosion at the banquet. He could not perform for Simon (sic). He had had 'it.'"

The response of this one reader (#21) to question #3, sheet #1, by no means establishes the fact that the original manuscript was itself 'twisted.' More responses to original manuscripts would be needed for such a conclusion, and would be valid only if those manuscripts were not shuffled by the reader. Of the thirteen original manuscripts sent out, seven were not returned at the time of this writing. The question of whether or not the original manuscript was itself 'twisted' is moot.

Continuity

All six readers responded affirmatively to questions #4 and #5: the continuity and climax questions, respectively. In reference to the question of continuity, reader #24 related the disparate order of events to the way one thinks about "the events of one's own life . . . when you think of the events and not necessarily the orders."

What seemed to give readers a sense of continuity was a stable background of experience or development. The

background, in the case of reader #24, was her life. Reader #10 considered the characters themselves as the stable background: "The reappearance of the same characters in different situations & time settings establishes continuity." Reader #23 stated that the piece, "has continuity in Morgan's troubles and in Evo's constancy. Evo is Morgan's alter ego, and he survives. His is a continuous existence." This sense of constancy and continuousness is closely related to the meaning of the word 'continuity' itself.²

For reader #1, 'following' the events produced a sense of continuity: "I could follow the events. It was confusing at first but I searched for what I wanted to read." For reader #3, it was the relatedness of scenes: "The scenes were scattered but they were related," and for reader #19, the consistent identities of the characters created a sense of continuity: "The identities of the two characters never or almost never developed beyond the initial stages."

The key words or phrases used in the written responses to describe continuity were: "Follow, related, reappearance,

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² The original study intended to place a large part of the basis for a negative or affirmative hypothesis on whether or not the piece maintained continuity; the feeling being that continuity was the bare bones, so to speak, of narrative cohesiveness. As has been mentioned, the presence of more advanced, or 'dense' cohesive element--cause and effect, and sharply rendered chronological sequences--seems to diminish somewhat the importance of continuity in favor of the more traditional element of plot.

order, wholeness," and "identities." Also, processes were expressed, as in, "You knew what was going on," and by the use of the word "flowed." Many of these words refer to continuous processes and in some sense equate with the meaning of the word 'continuity.' Given the stabilizing presence of the main character Morgan in nearly all the scenes; the recurring interactions between characters: Evo and Morgan, Morgan and Simone; and the numerous chronologically dependent events, it is not remarkable that the readers felt a continuous unfolding of the narrative.

Climax

One tends to accept the meaning of climax as a gradually accelerating intensity that culminates in an eruption of emotion and catharsis. The following, from Preminger, is a contemporary definition of the term:

By climax we mean here . . . the point of supreme interest or intensity of any graded series of events or ideas, most commonly the crisis or turning point of the story or play. (142)

It is, no doubt, premature, on the basis of this one study, to suggest definitively that the "the point of supreme interest or intensity" need not require the traditional emotional or intellectual buildup to crisis, but may merely need to signify that "turning point" or that

less emotionally intense experience which signifies a subtle or gradual turning down to closure.

Regarding the question of climax: eight readers answered affirmatively and three negatively. Of those who answered negatively, reader #1 gave the written response: "I suppose the fire and the confrontation with the dream woman/women but I didn't feel relieved or enlightened by this 'climax.'" This response reflects the expectation of catharsis. While reader #14 stated that there were "several in each time section." Interestingly, reader #25 seemed to anticipate, throughout the reading of the narrative, what he considered to be an appropriate climax: "I kept waiting for Morgan to do something. Blow up or something."

The fire, alone, was thought to be the climax by readers #20 and #24; and by readers #1, #10, and #22 in combination with other events in the narrative.

While it is not surprising, given the presence of numerous chronologically dependent events that the readers should have experienced a point of climax, it is a curious fact that three readers experienced several climaxes or points of intense interest. The text, though not chronologically sequential in its read version, was perceived by several readers as having more than one "time section." And each section, as reader #14 stated, contained its own climax.

Plot

The responses to question #6: "Did the piece have a plot?" and to the related question: "In what sense did this narrative have or not have a plot? What motivated you to continue reading?" tended to reinforce traditional definitions. In several cases, the term 'plot' was applied to almost any process of discovery that engaged the readers attention. A basic definition from A Handbook to Literature states that: "The minimal definition of plot is 'pattern.' Only slightly less simple is 'pattern of events.' Episodes do not in themselves make a plot; the plot lies in relations among episodes," (378).

A more malleable definition of plot may help explain the many affirmative responses to question #6. The following is from Ronald S. Crane as quoted in Preminger:

The form of a given plot is a function of the particular correlation among . . . three variables which the completed work is calculated to establish, consistently and progressively, in our minds. . . . (1) the general estimate we are induced to form . . . of the moral character and deserts of the hero . . . (2) the judgments we are led similarly to make about the nature of the consequences for him . . . permanently or temporarily; and (3) the opinions we are made to

entertain concerning the degree and kind of his responsibility for what happens to him," (378).

The key words in the above definition that reinforce the concept of plot as a motivating force, are the words "consistently and progressively." Some sense of an accumulating knowledge about "the moral character" and "the nature of the consequences," as well as "the degree and kind of his [the hero's] responsibility," is necessary (and presumably sufficient) to establish the existence of a plot structure. Since the relations among episodes in the creative writing piece were disordered in nearly every reading and for every reader (with the exception of reader #21), the plot design was also disordered or scattered throughout the text. But, given the presence of chronologically dependent events, the narrative tended to eventually assemble as a cause and effect sequence. However, the initial exposure to the story--when little is known of the characters, or for that matter, of an intrinsic chronology--could have been, and in several cases was, a critical and confusing time for the reader. For example, reader #24 stated that, "the plot was not apparent until I finished approximately half the narrative. This made me continue." In another case, that of reader #19, this initial confusion assisted in motivating the reader to read. As that reader explained: "It was fragmented like a puzzle, pieces

here and there started making up a whole." Reader #14, in the section regarding structural features stated: "It was almost like a game trying to follow and piece together."

The definition by Crane is closely aligned to the response from reader #10: "A sense of emotional conflicts working toward some conclusion or point of balance gives this 'plot.' The style alone (the use of vivid detail, sharp dialogue, etc.) is sufficient to hold the reader's attention until he reaches the point where he begins to 'know' the characters."

Responses to the presence of plot diverged in several cases. Reader #22 stated that, "The plot was a hidden plot. There was a symbolic exploitation of woman [sic] that was obviously projected through Evo." Whereas reader #1 said, "The plot was fairly apparent given the structure: ship, business, marriage, breakdown, etc."

Some of the words and expressions used to describe the plot by readers who participated in the survey were: "the flow of scenes," and the "sense of emotional conflicts working toward some conclusion or point of balance." Reader #14 stated: "I felt a definite plan of action focused on the main character, Morgan. . . . I was interested in Morgan, what I would learn next." A similar use of the word "interest" to describe the motivation to keep reading was expressed by reader #25: "I was interested in the way they

started and then Morgan lost his share of the business." Reader #21 saw the plot as culminating in a unique version of the climax: "The plot was obviously Morgan's unhappiness coming to a dramatic explosion at the banquet."

Negative responses included this from reader #23: "There is no temporal pace or mechanism other than the ship and perhaps the apartment."

Completeness

The question of completeness, question #7 on sheet #1 and #3 on sheet #2, was designed to address the problem of closure. The words: complete and incomplete were used instead of the words closure, closed or not closed to avoid confusion about the meaning of the latter terms. It was felt that 'closure' was a term necessarily academic, whereas the word 'complete' was less intimidating to readers unfamiliar with academic terms. Whether the respondents equated a sense of completeness with a sense of closure can be established only in the case of reader #10: "The rise & fall of the business; the marriage & separation of Morgan and Simone; the wedding of Evo all suggest some sense of closure."

The following extensive definition may delineate the meaning of closure as it is related to completeness:

We tend to speak of conclusions when a sequence of events has a relatively high degree of structure, when, in other words, we can perceive

these events as related to one another by some principle of organization or design that implies the existence of a definite termination point. Under these circumstances, the occurrence of the terminal event is a confirmation of expectations that have been established by the structure of the sequence, and is usually distinctly gratifying. The sense of stable conclusiveness, finality, or 'clinch' which we experience at that point is what is referred to here as closure.

Closure need not, however, be temporal; that is, it is not always a matter of endings. Indeed, the term has been used most frequently by psychologists to refer to a quality of visually perceived forms, spatial structures which exhibit relatively clear, coherent, and continuous shape. In such forms no particular point is experienced as the last one; and although one can speak of closure in works of spatial art it is obviously inappropriate to speak of it there as a quality of finality or conclusiveness. Whether spatially or temporally perceived, a structure appears 'closed' when it is experienced as integral: coherent, complete, and stable. (Smith 2)

Seven of the eleven readers felt the narrative was complete. Those who answered affirmatively used the following words and phrases to describe their sense of completeness (these words and phrases are followed, in turn, by an applicable word or words taken from the above definition by Barbara Herrnstein Smith): #1 said, "the characters would not . . . substantially change," (continuous shape, stable). Reader #3 stated that "the characters revealed themselves a [sic] being constant," (continuous, stable). Reader #14 said that she "was able . . . to sense the order," (coherence). Reader #20 stated that the narrative "was complete because you knew the story when you finished," (conclusiveness). Reader #24 said that "the thoughts and events were woven throughout . . . to add to the whole segment at one time," (continuous shape).

Conversely, negative responses to a sense of completeness were expressed by a lack of those terms used by Smith in her definition. "Complete and not complete, " stated reader #21. "Some things were left unsaid. . . . " This reader experienced a lack of finality or conclusiveness. Readers #22 and #25 responded similarly. Their respective answers were: "Not complete. There was something left undone . . . . There was a feeling of something else must happen," and "I didn't know enough about the characters when it was over. It needs a sequel."

Classifications

Question #9 and its corresponding essay form (question #6, sheet #2) deal with the terms: story, chronicle, narrative and history. One of the problems with this question was the confusion it generated in regard to the definition of the terms themselves. Several readers defined the terms in their responses. Reader #1 stated that, "it was basically a story. A narrative is someone else's story; a chronicle and history are entirely different." Regarding chronicle and history, reader #10 said: "These words, imply to me, a grand, historical perspective not present in this work." Reader #14 divided the four terms into two groups: "I saw a story and narrative as basically synonyms and a chronicle and history also." While reader #22 stated emphatically that "the piece is a narrative--no feelings!"

Reader #23 gave an extended response to the question, stating that he felt the piece was a "history because the style is very expository and uses the past tense quite often (perhaps too much). History because there is no forward moving mechanism (lack of plot). Because of this indeed, the pages may be shuffled and presented in any order and still prove effective. . . ."

Reader #23 stated further: "History because history was whereas stories set up things to come: things to happen, to be--I don't get that sense here, so I call it a history, a

living history, but one which does not nor will not change."

Reader #3 said, "I say narrative but I guess I also mean story," expressing confusion about the two terms, though not about the remaining two, adding, "definitely not history or chronicle." Reader #19 simply could not decide: "Actually, now that I think about it, I'm not sure. A history because it's pieces of the past, or a story because it's make [sic] up." Nor, for that matter, could reader #21 who said the piece was "a narrative--reactions between the characters--their history or story a little at a time."

Other readers were certain of their choices; reader #20, for example, felt the piece was a "story about life," and reader #25 concurred: "It was a story, I thought." While reader #24 said that "the feeling of being in an on going narrative [sic] was the stronges [sic] feeling."

In addition to the confusion over the definition of these terms, the question itself seemed to be tangential to the project of discovering how traditional elements of plot, climax and closure may be influenced by disparities of reading sequences. The question did have relevance to the inquiry into "how twisted a tale could get before it was no longer a tale," but such a question only raised yet another need: that of defining 'a tale.'

The question suffered, as did question #3, sheet #1, from a design problem. The effectiveness of the question was dependent on a stable and consistent knowledge of what relation a story has to a narrative, a narrative to a chronicle and so forth. The confusion expressed in responses to this question was not seen in the responses to the other questions. It would be difficult, therefore, to determine "how twisted a tale can get before it is no longer a tale." On the other hand, it is possible to draw several conclusions as to how twisted a tale can get before it is perceived as lacking continuity, plot, climax or completeness.

Conclusion

The working hypothesis of this project was that a work of fiction could maintain cohesion even when the reader was free to choose from a multitude of reading sequences. The maintenance of continuity, plot, climax and closure throughout the various reading sequences was the determining factor in testing the validity of this claim.

Given the degree of chronologically dependent events, cause and effect relationships, and fixed temporal sequences in the narrative, it is not remarkable that the readership--by a yes to no ratio of 11 to 0--felt there was a sense of continuity in the narrative. In addition, the readership--by a 9 to 2 ratio--testified to the presence of a developing and unfolding plot structure. A majority of the readers experienced a point of "supreme interest or intensity," or climax if you will. In several instances readers experienced more than one climax. (The ratio of positive to negative responses, regarding climax, was 8 to 3.)

However, the data related to the question of completeness or closure created difficulties in assessing the validity of the hypothesis. Due to the narrower response ratio (7 affirmative and 4 negative), it has been more difficult to assert that the narrative maintained a sense of completeness or closure in all its reading sequences, than that it maintained a sense of continuity and plot or that it

provided a point of interest or intensity. To satisfy the demands of the hypothesis, all the narrative elements: continuity, plot, climax and closure had to maintain cohesion.

The negative responses to the question of completeness had similarities. Each response expressed the feeling of something left "unsaid," or "undone." Reader #25 said that he "didn't know enough . . . when it was over." Reader #23 stated: "I need to know his childhood, his thoughts, his parents, and more about his blunders." Indicating, it would seem, a desire for a sense of complete information to alleviate the feeling of being left with an 'unknown quantity' in the character of Morgan.

Those readers who answered negatively to the question of completeness (#21, #23, #24 and #25), tended to agree negatively in other instances. Of the five questions pertaining to continuity, plot, climax and closure (questions #4-8), there were fifty-five responses. Twelve of those were 'no' responses; of those twelve, nine were from the group mentioned above.

The significance of this, given the number of readers surveyed, is interesting but inconclusive. It neither establishes nor denies that a narrative of varying reading sequences can maintain a sense of closure.

The remaining three elements of narrative: continuity, plot and climax, convincingly maintained their presence throughout the various reading sequences. This was due predominantly to the numerous chronologically dependent events and time sequences. It is nonetheless important that these elements surfaced through the shuffled pages and disordered reading sequences, if only to establish a position from which to begin new studies.

An appropriate beginning for further study would be to construct a narrative that consists of fewer chronologically dependent events; to more clearly design questions pertaining to completeness and closure; and to survey a larger and more widely based readership.

Creative Writing Project

Cover Letter

Dear Reader,

You are being asked to participate in a reader response survey for a Master of Arts thesis. You are encouraged to read the following 'piece' in whatever order or sequence you may choose. After the reading, please answer the questions on the last two pages.

Thank you very much for your help on this project.

Sincerely,

Louis DiMonaco

"The Mixed-Up Adventures of Morgan Rio"

The following creative writing manuscript was submitted to participants of the reader response survey. The work is printed here with page numbers for purposes of reference.

"What's the last thing you remember?" the lovely nurse, dressed in white, said to Morgan, in his semi-conscious state, from far away, pronouncing each word carefully so that they appeared to him as though they had been glued letter by letter to a long sheet of thin metal that was being rippled noisily by invisible hands.

He tried to talk.

"Rest now," she said, placing her warm, soft hand on his brow. He turned to her; he saw her face--lovely; her dress--white.

Morgan and Evo met on the deck of the destroyer Endurance in the South China Sea as they both grabbed onto the landing bar of the helicopter--formerly filled with refugees and now perfectly empty--that Evo had just flown in from Saigon City. Together they pushed it over the side of the ship. The copter flipped into the sea and rode for a while on the heaving main, its bulk swallowing water, sinking.

Morgan was watching the destroyer's wake and the turgid blue and white water of the South China Sea. Another copter, big-bellied, bloated with refugees, their arms and legs clutching, waving, came in low and laboriously and landed amid junk and rubble on the last open spot.

"What a way to run a war," Morgan said.

"It's the American Way," Evo said.

That night they got together below deck and had a few beers in a narrow, blue lit forward magazine.

"I got in this war for the adventure," Evo said.

The ship lulled on the sea like a dreaming colossus. Morgan and Evo smoked and drank in the blue light among high explosives. Evo rested the nape of his neck on a 30 mm cannon shell and looked up to where the smoke roiled in the steel beams.

"Some adventure this turned out to be," he said.

Evo was a helicopter pilot and Morgan was a medic. They became buddies; they smoked pot beside napalm bombs below deck. Evo talked about things to come: women and money.

"I'm going make a lot of money and have lots of women."

"Isn't that superficial?" Morgan asked.

"I suppose so," Evo shrugged.

They cruised across the Pacific, taking the refugees back to the States. They sailed south and through the Panama Canal, east through the Caribbean, across the Atlantic and, for no apparent reason, anchored in the Gulf of Guinea one deep, black night.

"What are we doing here?" Evo asked.

"Maybe there's trouble," Morgan said.

"There's always trouble in Africa," Evo said.

The night was made of panoramic stars and cool, tempestuous winds. Eastward, the shore lights seemed to crackle out of the deep blackness. Beyond the lights of the sparkling city, the African continent rose up mammoth and still and seemed to entomb a great silence.

"This is where mankind started," Morgan said. "That's what they say."

"Who are 'they' anyway?" Evo asked.

"Experts."

"Do 'they' know where we're going?"

"I don't think so."

Simone had to leave town urgently, on short notice and had come back changed.

She left town without giving a reason. Abruptly. She returned a few days later and seemed different.

Morgan thought she was having an affair.

He thought it might be a good idea if he had an affair too, just in case she was having one. So he called Evo who knew all the girls. This was a bad idea.

"You must be Morgan," the whore asked. The whore had a pleasant voice. The whore was small and had short hair, with small curls, very blonde. She was such a pleasant whore, hardly the type, Morgan thought.

"Are you the . . . ah . . . the . . . ?"

"You can call me Jackie," the whore said, offering her hand. "Mr. Enduro sent me."

"I thought he said your name was going to be Jill," Morgan said stupidly.

"Jill couldn't come," the whore said, and giggled.

The whore's giggle was such a high, twittering sound that it struck Morgan with a sense of immanent dread. He walked over to the bar, his head swimming with confluences of guilt, desire, fear and a vague but pervasive feeling of mortality. He poured scotch into a fine Venetian glass and slammed the liquor down quickly, feeling the smooth, fine, fiery liquid.

"Care for one?" he asked the whore.

"Maybe after," the whore said.

The word 'after' stood out, hung in the air, the whore could have said, 'maybe later,' but the whore didn't. The whore said 'after.'

At four a.m. Morgan stood in the dark room in front of the bay window and looked out at the night sky, the slim crescent moon and the starry firmament, waiting. For weeks he had been getting up at this wolfish hour, had stood resolute waiting for sunrise, trying to get through the vulnerable time before dawn. But the urge to sleep was always too powerful and he would sink into drowsiness and sudden sleep, only to wake again within his recurring dream.

In his dream Morgan saw himself sit up in bed and listen closely to the sound of waves breaking on the beach below his home. Gradually the sound of crashing waves would sift into the sound of sweeping, the sound of a broom being swept over pavement, of someone cleaning the streets.

Simone slept beside him, her face still as if in death. Muted sunlight slanted into the rooms through the large windows and the glass panes of the French doors that opened onto the balcony. The light, like a fine white powder, shone on Simone's skin. Blankets were strewn everywhere, coiled and twined. She lay on her side. The white sheet had wound itself between her thighs and over her hip and down between her breasts like a drift of snow that had stirred and settled on the ridge of a dark mountain. Morgan reached out and rested the palm of his hand on her hip.

One night Morgan and Evo were on deck, watching the new moon, a thin orange crescent, with the old moon in its arms, come up over the Bight of Benin. An officer stopped a few feet away from them and looked out into the Bight, her eyes reeling over the Continent, looking restlessly toward the land and the eerie lights flicking in the distance. She noticed Morgan and Evo watching too.

"This was the Slave Coast," the lieutenant said. She had beautiful, restive, dark eyes and her skin captured the luster of the moonlight.

Morgan felt the oppressive, ponderous weight of the huge, fathomless ship; the vast weight of the hard, black continent on one side; the deep black sea on the other; the weight of something infinitely greater and larger than himself. Evo looked back across the Bight toward the land, which spoke not, nor revealed anything to him.

"Think of it," Morgan said, "all those wrecked lives."

"Weren't they like, you know, sold by their own people," Evo said, casually. The lieutenant stiffened and gave Evo a glacial stare. She could make their lives-- morning, noon and night--one long, tedious, winding, miserable way.

"He just talks," Morgan said, pulling Evo away. "His mouth's not connected to anything sensible. He just talks."

"We were in the Gulf of Tonkin one night and I had just come out on deck after supper for a look around. I don't remember the details exactly. I must have been day-dreaming or something. Anyway I was walking along and must have ambled underneath one of the big guns."

"What do you mean by 'big guns' exactly?" Dr. Superio asked.

"You know, big as in 'humongous' and 'sixteen inch cannons that shoot two thousand pound bombs twenty miles,' kind of guns," Morgan said.

"I see," she said. Her hair was pulled back and tied behind her head.

"What happened next?"

"All of a sudden: BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, BLAM."

Morgan sat up. He was BLAMING away as loud as he could. Dr. Superio looked at him clinically: firm but curious. He BLAMED some more. Then he quieted down.

"Then I ended up in sick bay where I saw an angel."

"An angel?"

"Beautiful and white and lovely and so, so, so . . . "

"So?"

"Real."

Below deck Evo would go on about the future.

"I'm going to start a little mail order business, selling something to women, I don't know what yet, underwear or bathing suits, yes, bathing suits, only I'll call it swimwear."

"Is there a market for that stuff?" Morgan asked.

"Women will buy anything if they think it'll make them look better. They'll buy anything if they think it'll make them look like one of the girls on the cover of my catalog."

"Girls?"

"That's right," Evo went on, "I'll build up the photography studio to a modeling agency and the modeling agency to a mail order business and I'll have lots of money and women, lots of women just like that lieutenant, begging for a chance."

"What kind of chance?" Morgan asked.

"The chance to be on the cover of my magazine, the chance to be seen by millions, after all, that's what everybody wants."

"What?"

"To be envied," Evo said.

"I see," Morgan said.

"We'll be late," Morgan said.

"They'll wait," Simone replied.

Morgan wore his tuxedo and leaned against the doorway of Simone's dressing room--a large room adjacent to the master bathroom--that existed in a chaos of lipsticks, perfumes, eyeliners, mascaras; of nylons, shoes, scarves, jewelry: an open, angry disorder. He cupped tenderly a brandy snifter, taking minute sips of cognac, a volatile brand, hot in his throat. His other hand was thrust deeply into a pocket, fondling identifiable objects: keys, loose change. He was feeling cavalier now, somehow cut loose from the vast and intricate apparatus of things: of Simone's dressing room, of the rooms of the house, the houses of the neighborhood, and so on to all the tangled matter beyond.

Simone was lining her eyes a color like no naturally occurring color on earth with a thin, tapering brush.

"I'm beginning not to care about things," he said.

"What kind of things?"

"These things, for one," he said, swinging the brandy snifter away from his body, indicating the room, its contents and obligations, the matter at hand, the deeds to be done.

"I mean, what am I supposed to be doing while all those people are leaning on each other, like old trees?"

Morgan said: "You have a one track mind: women."

Evo said, "Don't forget about the money."

Evo leaned back against a rack of phosphorous bombs and took a long pull on his cigarette. Yes sir, the future looked blessed with opportunity.

"It's the American Way," he said.

"It just seems so . . . so pointless," Morgan said.

"Like what's got a point?" Evo argued. "Nothing I've seen so far has ever had a point."

"I don't know, it just seems so . . . so. . . ."

"So what?"

"So pointless."

"When you grab a word you don't let it go, do you?"

"You know what I mean."

"No, I don't, I really don't," Evo said.

"Life has to be more than just having lots of women."

"Of course there's more," Evo said, rolling his eyes up dramatically. "There's money. Don't forget about the money."

By noon, the blue of the sky was brazen and the tropical sun cast down its light copiously. The white of the distant beaches and the green of the jungle beyond were steeped in heat that coiled up as the daylight flourished. Brilliant white clouds roved above the coastal mountains.

"This is a mysterious place," Morgan said.

"This place gives me the creeps," Evo said.

Below deck Evo rested his arm on a crate of two thousand pound bombs and said: "I thought I'd try to make it as a rock star and if that doesn't work I'm going to open one of those photography studios. Women love to have their pictures taken. There's money in it."

They anchored in the gulf for tedious days and long, starlit nights. Time slipped away. Nostalgia set in gradually and got worse before it got better.

Morgan said: "We're going to look back on this and say, 'Those were the good old days.'"

"I'm not," Evo said. "Everyday is the same to me."

"Why?"

"Because I have a one track mind. Women and money."

"That's two tracks. Women and money is two tracks."

"Women is one rail, money is another, two rails, one track."

"What do the cross-ties represent?"

"I haven't figured that out yet."

"You used to love to show me off," Simone said.

He said, musing, "Yes, that's true."

"And now?" Simone asked.

Morgan looked up at the ceiling of Simone's dressing room and sighed. There was a small chandelier that must have cost six-thousand dollars, hanging from a ceiling he was sure had cost less. To Morgan this was deception; the adornments exceeded the foundation on which they were dependent. One of the slender, imitation flame light bulbs was blinking itself to extinction.

"Now I want you all to myself," Morgan said, watching the bulb expire. Simone was applying dark pigment to the high, thin arches of her eyebrows with a fine, sable brush.

"We give to the needy not the greedy," she said, concentrating yet in that sing-song voice she used for her favorite trite expressions. Her features, fundamentally handsome to begin with and now softened and rounded by the makeup, began to acquire complexity and stunning detail.

Morgan tended to indulge himself in her beauty, even more so after cognac. She was the dark beauty of Wanton Shores: openly and incessantly admired; probably secretly loved; even guiltily desired by those who felt that desire mingle with an ancient ambition.

"Do you know anything about photography?" Morgan asked. He sat on the floor, resting his back against a crate marked 'High Explosives' with his knees bent up and his forearms resting on his knees, folding the edges of a pack of Lucky Strikes into sharp corners over and over, ruminating. After the Navy he would be in the same position he was in before the Navy which was how to answer the three W's: What to do? Where to do it? and Who to do it with? He wanted to give up the path he had been on: of least resistance.

Evo said, "You don't need to know that kind of thing. You just hire somebody who does. Delegate. That's how you make money nowadays."

"I don't know much about those things," Morgan said.

"You know anything about photography?"

"Some," Morgan said.

"Perfect," Evo said, "that's just perfect."

One night Morgan came out of the darkroom they had set up in the garage and saw Evo making love with one of the housewives on the fake tiger skin rug they used for phony jungle shots with the woman dressed in scant shredded canvas as if she had just been shipwrecked on some equatorial beach and the first thing on her mind was some of that tropical sex she had been reading about in books like Green Mansions. Maybe Evo had convinced her she was going places, that she had the looks, the body, the smarts. Maybe she was just horny. In any event, they tried various positions and finally ended up yelping and yapping together dog style.

Morgan stood in the shadows while their canine imitation reached its crescendo of moaning and yelping; he held still while they stood erect like homo sapiens again, picking up their clothes--a shirt here, socks and shoes there, his pants, her dress--until they, clothed again, left the studio, leaving him in the dark.

"Tell me about your dreams," she said. Her voice was soft and clear behind him. Morgan sat in a big, black lazy boy chair and looked out the window onto a small fenced in garden area, with small trees and a ground level fountain made of round, grey stones. The water in the fountain sprang up abundantly and the sound was soothing.

"They're always the same," Morgan said. "I hear sweeping sounds and I wake up. I seem to go outside and I see a woman, bent over, sweeping the streets."

"Your dreams are always the same?" she asked.

"Almost the same," he said. "There are variations."

"Variations?"

"Sometimes the woman changes."

"Changes?"

"Sometimes very old, other times young."

"Hmmm."

"Most of the time she's very old," Morgan began, "very old and bent over and, well, terrible. Sometimes she is not so old. She always sweeps."

"Sweeps?"

"She sweeps,"

"What?"

"She sweeps things into a bag, she cleans the streets."

"I see."

A little over a year after he and Evo got out of the Navy, Morgan bought a couple of Nikons and an old Leica. Evo had rented a house in the suburbs with a two car garage. They were taking pictures of housewives in negligees who wanted seductive shots for their low libido husbands. Evo had a way of chatting up the women, making them feel comfortable around the camera, trusting him.

Morgan moved in the surgical world of light and speed and exposure. He hired two assistants, photographers from Denmark named Rosy and Gilda. More about them later.

They made money, not a lot of money. Evo had his women, not a lot of women.

Those were the days.

The phone rang, rude, jangling. Evo was calling.

Looking back over this scene as things began to whirl away under their own enigmatic force, Morgan thought he had noticed that Simone winched when the phone rang, a startled, fleeting expression.

"How's everything?" Evo said, his voice was loud, as if he didn't trust the wires to carry his message clearly.

"Just fine," Morgan said, hesitantly.

"Is this a bad time to call?"

"No," Morgan said. "I mean yes. We're late, we're always late."

"For what?" he asked.

"Who?" Simone questioned Morgan in a whisper, her brow creased, her mouth taking the shape of the word, looking like it was trying to form for another purpose, a kiss. The more Morgan noticed these tiny things, here and there, motions that meant something else years ago, familiar sounds that had no meaning now, the more he felt himself losing something, as yet, intangible and unnamed.

Morgan cupped the receiver, told Simone it was Evo on the phone, began to have the feeling his marriage was falling apart, and said over the phone, "We've got a benefit to go to." He heard Simone ask, "What's with him these days?" He thought he heard great need in what Evo said next and no kindness in what Simone said next and the draining away of that untangled, cavalier aspect of his being and great unkindness and no need in everything he said and wished it would all crack and shatter, scatter and hide.

"You never ask me over for dinner anymore. . . . "

"I swear to god that man's a loose cannon."

"I know," Morgan said, lying. "We've been busy."

"Busy is right," she started, "and if we weren't busy we would find something to do."

Morgan had his hand over the mouthpiece.

"He's lonely," Morgan whispered to her.

She gave him the look that said don't sell me lonely because I'm not buying.

Morgan covered up. "Yes," he said to Evo, "we'll have you over. You know how Simone feels. I wish you could be too. I know it's hard. I'll be there first thing in the morning. I know it's important. Okay, critical, it's critical. You know more about it than I do. I can't talk now."

"So why are you here?" Evo asked, blowing blue smoke up into the blue light. He crushed his cigarette in the middle of the 'o' on the crate marked 'High Explosives.'

"I had illusions," Morgan said. "Now I don't."

"What kind of illusions?" Evo probed.

"What kind are there?"

"Oh, lots," Evo said.

Morgan had no idea who was going to benefit; Simone took care of those things. She was civic-minded, generous with her time and didn't mind the attention. The wealthy philanthropists and numerous others badly needed her; she contributed the ingredient of enchantment without which these functions would seem merely charity. After all, Simone had nearly mythic beauty, she had money, half of Morgan's which, though relatively new, was considerable. She was also black, and possessed the history of blackness, the mystique of black skin. Through the solid white enclave of Wanton Shores, she carried her beauty, ever so tempting and even in these days a little bit taboo. The unimaginable history of her race was imagined and surfaced to the white wealth of the community across the centuries; inspired them like an expansive, sustaining and abundant breath that reeked of absolute property.

That remnant mystery in her is what they wanted, to talk casually with it, dare to allude to it, even imagine themselves, playfully, masters again, or else deny that mystery carefully, to benefit from the assumption of equanimity, reap the admiration of enlightenment. They wanted to weave among the centuries of that relationship wherein commingled blood, bone, marrow, passion and property. Yes they did. They who always wanted something.

"Have you been to the doctor?" Evo asked.

"No," Morgan said, "I feel fine."

"But you don't act fine," Evo came back. "You act different. You should have a check up. I've got a great doctor."

"What do you need a doctor for? Are you sick?"

"You don't wait till you're sick to see the doctor. We're not spring roosters anymore. It's time for the regular check up: heart, lungs, cholesterol, blood pressure, prostate."

"That's prostate," Morgan corrected him, "not prostate."

"Yes, well it should be prostate because you only use it when you're lying down. Aha! Get it? My doctor, she gives great prostate."

Those were days that, looking back, he would try to recall in ever finer detail: finer and finer like the tiny threads woven in between the small threads of a little scene in a tapestry that would be always too large to be seen all at once.

"You're too beautiful to take anywhere, let's stay home," Morgan offered.

"Aren't we jealous?"

"It's stranger than jealousy. It's even stranger than fiction. Those guys want to see how close they can get to you without being caught."

"Caught how?" she asked.

"Caught exposing themselves. It's a game. They hide their real feelings."

"Which are?" Simone asked.

"What?"

"Their real feelings? You were saying?"

"How should I know what their real feelings are, they're hiding them, aren't they?" Morgan said.

"They're just being polite," Simone said.

"They're not," Morgan insisted. He was well into the brandy by now.

"It seems harmless enough," Simone said, putting up her hair, masses of thick, black hair.

"You don't find it insulting?"

"You just don't think there's any good in people, Morgan. That's Evo's doing. When are you going to be your own man and cut loose?" Simone said, her arms up, arranging the dense, black masses of her hair.

"I've been having strange dreams lately. Actually, they're not really dreams."

"We all dream," Simone said, turning to him, finished now with the potions, the incantations. She was dressed in a black dress wound finely around her figure, her skin like black burnished stone. Around her neck a string of ivory beads, as in the ancient days, lay against her high chest.

"Let's have a kiss now," she said. Morgan sulked. She leaned to him and he touched his lips to one cheek and another like a petulant boy.

They got in the car and drove by the ocean over roads moistened by the light rain falling. Lilted, soft music from a long ago nightclub band played over the radio as though coming from far away in time. The steady, beseeching tone of muffled trumpets and the lachrymal, low notes of the saxophone evoked a time--that could have been any time, that could have been their time--in which the effortless sense of being alone together rose up like delicate hands to hold them. The windshield wipers swept back and forth with an incessant, mechanical rhythm and swayed together with the music. Morgan was gathered up in sadness that seemed to be locked to something deep in the earth. Simone sat perfectly still beside him, only her scent, like a deep, fragrant flower come upon him, lulled him and took him back.

Morgan went into the garden where the sound was louder. He opened the garden gate and walked down the driveway to the street. The morning sunlight had diffused behind a ruffle of clouds. The sweeping was quicker now, closer. He walked farther down the road past the Delacruces's sprawling Spanish Hacienda, the Perrys's stone and slate English Manor house, the Gumps's long post adobe with yellow santolina growing wild and luxuriant to the edge of the roadway.

Then he saw the figure, distant, stooped over, sweeping with a straw broom, dragging a dark bag that now and then she would sweep something into. She was a haggard and old woman, eerie in the dawn light, who spoke in a small, shrill voice: "Sweep, make clean, make nice." She moved away from him urgently, bent over, contorted and irregular, dark-clothed, sweeping. He walked faster toward her. The old woman had now moved past the last house on the street and turned the corner out of sight.

"Hey," Morgan called, "old woman, wait." He ran down the road, slippers clapping, calling. He stopped and stood in the road in the mist and low gray clouds of the early summer morning, and watched himself from the remote distance of his dream, looking down on the road at himself watching the small figure, stooped over, shuffling away, sweeping.

"I think it's idiotic," Morgan said. "Who has an old, decrepit street sweeper out of the last century, walking bent over and haggard through their dreams?" This was yet another unanswered question; Dr. Superio never answered questions.

"Go on," she said, her voice, orderly, behind him.

"There's nothing to say," Morgan said, exasperated.

"It's just the same thing over and over."

"Concentrate," Dr. Superio said, softly, methodically, "concentrate on the details."

The day of the photography session for the new swimwear catalog that was going to put Evo Enduro and Morgan Rio at the top of the heap was overcast with close, dark clouds that moved rapidly across the sky, twisting and turning quickly like time-lapse photography. Morgan was anxious. So many variables: the girls, the gear, the processing, the printing, the arguments that came out of nowhere and ground everything to a halt. They needed a good shoot, a successful edition, more sales, expenses had mounted, things were not as they seemed.

Morgan parked behind a building that stood across the street from the Paradise Mortuary in the old part of Wanton Shores, and climbed an outside flight of stairs, using his key to get into the little studio apartment above a bakery.

He heard the water running and thought Amelia must have started her bath, but when he turned the corner into the kitchen he saw her, quiet as night, pouring coffee into two cups.

"You're early," she said, carefully pouring, not looking at him . "Couldn't you sleep again?"

"I had strange dreams again," he began.

Amelia drew down another cup and filled it with the dark, hot coffee from the pot. She was slender with skin that seemed translucent; tightly drawn over her small, soft bones. Eyes that were large: dark, green-gray eyes. She had a slow and deliberate way of moving, her hands, her eyes, her words too were deliberate, fragile.

"Do I hear water running?" Morgan asked.

"That's Amanda. I found her at the Adagio last night. She looked like a lost kitten. I went for espresso you know. I'm so wound up in this new piece, I couldn't sleep either. You should have come over. We stayed up all night talking."

Amelia said all of this as she moved carefully among the cups and plates, quietly adding cream to the coffee, buttering the bread, gathering everything together on a tray. He loved to watch her move, unhurried, methodical as if there was no end to the time there was left in the world, all the time in the world.

She brought the tray over to a low table made up of old boards on a cardboard box by the window facing east and the rising sun and the lake and behind the lake, the commercial skyline of the city where Morgan worked and, further beyond, the hills of the coast range, distant, faint ridges on a sky cast the grayest shade of granite.

Morgan read an article while waiting in Dr. Superio's waiting room: "The rich do not fulfill their obligations diligently enough to justify themselves as a class. For all the social good they do, they might as well not exist. Most of the rich are merely content to accumulate more wealth by any means and redistribute it only to satisfy their ever more expensive and frivolous tastes."

Morgan continued to read: "Wealth, the purpose of which is to both give evidence of superiority and allow one the means of transforming the world into an image of the true self, is presently subject to the abuses of arrogance, poor judgement and very often, mere greed."

The author was Celeste Cinder, a radical, mystical architect from Denver who had recently expatriated to San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

"When self-expression is in conflict with natural aesthetic principles, it is called waste. This does not mean that everything has to be made out of elemental materials, but that anything made should have a semblance to what is identifiable with our organic nature; namely, the processes of change which accumulate in our lives: the processes of forming, growing, aging, dying. Stasis is alien to human nature and appeals to the anomaly within us that conspires for immortality. Redemption, such as may exist, is not and can never be personal."

Amelia was always finding and bringing home runaways, the wayward and the lost ones.

"She calls herself Amanda. I don't know if that's her real name of course but it does suit her. She was sitting all alone in the back of the cafe, brooding like a small, dark thought, drinking a Coffee Orion of all things: wet and shivering. I just had to bring her home."

He sipped the rich and strong coffee.

"Of course, we can manage to keep her a little while. She's such a little thing," Amelia said.

"Where is she from?"

"I'll go see if she's finished with her bath and we can all sit together and get to know each other."

Amelia was a weaver and made intricate, obscurely designed tapestries in the studio on which Morgan paid the rent. Most of the money she made from the sale of her works went to buy more yarn to weave more tapestries in a tight circle of art and economy. Morgan had met her at the Adagio one night when Simone was out of town and he had been driven awake by his dreams.

Morgan sat quietly and watched the butter congeal on the surface of the cooling slice of bread. His thoughts went back to his dream, back to the bedroom where he had slept beside Simone, back to the couch where he had told Dr. Superio about his dream--stubbornly recurrent and obtuse--back to the night he had met Amelia at the Adagio; back and back into obscurity.

"What's the last thing you remember?" Dr. Superio asked.

Morgan took a deep breath and tried to relax; the more he tried, the more tense he became until he could not take it any longer. The whole idea made him crazy

"I can't take it any more," he said, sitting up from the couch. He looked at her carefully.

She sat perfectly still and looked at him without expression for a moment and then said: "Go on."

"You're a bitch and you're spoiled," he said after the party that was after the dance that was after the supper when they were home after he had drunk too much wine and was drinking, now, too much brandy.

"Isn't that what you wanted," she said. "Isn't that what you expected?" This shocked him.

Morgan stammered now, "I don't know what I expected, I expected something though. I expected. . . . . "

Simone said, angrily, "What did you expect?"

She said this undressing, shucking clothes off like husks, ripping herself open.

She was never like this, Morgan thought. This was a place they hadn't been before and would quickly pass through on to deeper, more dangerous ground. He felt helpless. She could take any word, however oblique, and knead it and shape it to the form of her anger. It wasn't even anger anymore. It was stronger and encompassed more. It wasn't indignation either; it was closer to rage, to wrath. Morgan had to laugh thinking such biblical dimensions were actually part of his life. Wrath. It must have to do with being beautiful, which he thought he could understand; or with being a woman, which he did not understand at all; or being a Black woman, which he understood even less. It couldn't have anything to do with being merely human.

In the coils of liquor-muddled words and deep night he thought how all things mattered and combined with and contributed to each other in a way that was at least obscure and perhaps even malevolent. This was a thought beyond which he could not go: that Simone's life, his own, and the lives of others could be made of such tightly meshed hopes and disappointments meant that the position from which understanding could be gained was beyond any place he could ever expect to stand. He would never know. This fact, once accepted, could change everything.

However, this understanding of the impossibility of understanding relieved him of neither his vast emptiness nor his ardent desires, nor his great expectations.

"I expect, I expect," Morgan searched, "I expect."

"What, what do you expect?"

"I expect . . . intimacy," he said, finally. He wanted the word back as soon as he had said it; he had overreached.

"So you want intimacy?" she said. She stood in the middle of her dressing room, amid chaos, her hands on her hips, defiant, at crossroads, between invisible places.

"Intimacy," she said again. "Intimacy."

Amelia wove large, bright-colored tapestries with fine thread and hung them in the bakery below, and once a month or once in two months, would sell one, and then another. Then there would be a long pause without a sale. Morgan bought one of them. She didn't want him to buy more. She was adamant about this, strict as a pilgrim. A sale would lift her spirits; she would buy a small bottle of champagne and they would sip it in the bath together in the evening and they would lie down on the wild-flower tapestry on the floor in front of the fireplace. But they had their problems.

"I don't want to," Amelia said, the first time Morgan tried to make love to her.

"Is this the wrong time?" Morgan said.

"I'm not menstruating, if that's what you mean," she said, her words measured like spoonfuls.

He said, "I thought, well, it's only natural. I'm sorry. I guess. I think I am. Is this happening?"

"You don't have to apologize," she said. "It's me."

"What about you?"

"I don't want to do it."

"Ever?"

"Not in the foreseeable future," she said, firmly. "I want to but I'm afraid of what it will do to me, to my art."

"Oh no," Morgan moaned.

"I'm afraid so," Amelia said.

Morgan was shipwrecked, he looked around for clues, signs, photos of old lovers, mementos of a broken heart. All he saw were the droves of tapestries, the congregation of colors woven together, hung from the ceiling, the walls, strewn everywhere, the subtle weaves and complex pastoral landscapes, the abstract swaths of formless color like a suspended emotion. Here was an agglomeration of discourse in yarn and dye, which taken singularly would enhance the Gumps's Foyer, brighten the Perrys's breakfast rooms but which all at once was just too much raw expression with little or nothing else to divert the impact. It was like breathing fire.

"They're a bit much," Simone said.

"I kind of like them," Morgan replied.

A lovely, dark haired girl with a tray of champagne glasses approached carefully. Simone took a glass off the tray precisely and raised the glass to her lips, her eyes surveying the walls, the room, the people.

"Thank you," Morgan said to the girl.

The girl started to leave. Simone asked her, "Young lady, could you please point out the artist whose show this is?"

The girl looked at Morgan, expecting him to answer.

"Amelia's," she said.

"Amelia who? What is her last name, dear?" Simone asked.

The girl looked at Morgan again. "I don't know," she said.

"And what is your name dear?" Simone asked.

"Amanda," she said.

"Well Amanda, can you point her out for us?" Simone asked. Amanda held the tray against her with one hand and turned back toward the room and pointed slowly toward a group on the other side of the room.

Simone said, "Can you describe her?" Amanda stood still, speechless, looking at Morgan.

Morgan watched as Amanda with her wide, dark eyes looked into the dark eyes of Simone, and as Simone's eyes moved by small motions to fix on the dark eyes of Amanda. As each held the other's stare momentarily, Morgan sensed an original connection in which each realized the other's existence as at least potentially her own. Then Simone's hungry eyes roved back over the room, assessing people, estimating the stratifications and where she might fit in. Amanda looked at Morgan and accused him by her wide, dark eyes. Coming here was a bad idea and a nightmare of deceit and control lay ahead of him. He wanted to surrender.

"Such a serious girl," Morgan said, needing to say something.

"Or just scared," Simone replied, and waited, setting aside the champagne glass, moving her beautiful hands, empty with nothing to do but move beautifully and adorn the empty air. Then she said, with clarity and firmness, not expecting an answer: "Don't you know?"

During the early winter it had rained thick, freezing rain for days and Simone had left town urgently.

During that time Morgan stayed with Amelia. It made him feel like he was poor and living in Paris between the great wars when life was more essential. Late in the evening the fire would go out in the wood stove and the studio would concentrate the dampness and cold in the late evening and keep it all night until the bakers would arrive at three or four o'clock and start the ovens and then the heat would rise and the fragrance of baked bread would lift up to the studio and they would lie awake together like lovers.

Morgan would hold her and her body would convey itself to him by fine and mysterious means. Gradually the thoughts to which he was inclined would curl and tense and his hand would approach discreetly the places he wanted to touch.

"I can't," she said, with a little despair.

"Not ever?"

"I don't think so."

"Why?"

"I've told you."

"This is tragic," he said.

"Not really," she said. "How important can it be?"

"It can be very important."

"Or it cannot be."

"You care more about these rugs than about me."

"That was mean," Amelia said, sitting up. She lit a candle. Her skin shivered in the cold air, her breast shook slightly, her nipples--firm and erect--signaled to him.

"See what your desire reduces you to, meanness," she said, closing her arms to cover herself.

Morgan ran his fingers through his hair as if he had reached the end of some rope whereby all his patience hung.

"Okay," he said, getting up, feeling his feet sink into the soft pile of the cold tapestry beside the bed. "I can get this at home."

He dressed by the candlelight. The light wavered on the ceiling. The room, the air, the cold, surrounded him. He would miss these rustic touches. Where was he going? Who was he going home to?

"Can you?" she asked him.

Morgan reconsidered. He stood for a moment in the room, thinking what a complication life was becoming, strange twists, odd implications, inexplicable nuances of affection and regret.

"No, I can't get this at home," he said, finally.

"I love you," she said.

"Will you at least promise not to not have sex with anyone else," Morgan said.

"I promise."

Was everybody's life like this? If so we must all exist as mere surfaces to each another, vast distances of dense surface. And now he discovered, rolling over the smooth, dense stone of personalities: his, Amelia's, Simone's, that beneath this surface lay the gross organic matrix of another life, his own but not his own, their own but not their own, and beneath that resided another quiet, dark, teeming life, and beneath that the deeper, noiseless, invisible life and on down to an alien, primal center, common to all and untouchable.

He was thinking all this through. Amelia was in the warm bed waiting, thinking her own thoughts, that if taken far enough must lead to the same depth, no doubt to that common awareness which was not of anything but the deep knowledge of darkness out of which we all come and speak not of. He looked around him at the avalanche of colors and weaves, tapestries, actual surfaces, fixed surfaces, complex surfaces. He had a sense all of a sudden of what she was trying to do. He felt like he understood it for the first time and it was created for him for the first time and would represent his new knowledge for all time. Art. Her Art. No, he could never get this at home. He went back to her bed. He lay beside her in a deep, unmeasured awe, that, given the moment, released him from his obligation to deal with surfaces.

"Intimacy," Simone said like it was a hot word she couldn't get out of her mouth fast enough.

In the stark, unflattering light of the dressing room Simone took her underpants off, she unhitched her bra and dropped it on the floor. It had been months, maybe longer, perhaps a year since he had seen her naked. He couldn't remember the last time they made love. Observed in the full light of the dressing room her body had somehow passed from youth to maturity unnoticed by Morgan. There was heft to it, her hips had broadened, stabilized, turned in their resignation to gravity though his eyes followed the lovely curve downward to those places, moist and warm and prized.

Sadness came out of him that he had missed the passage of her flesh from one mood to another as if a kind of dusk had settled unnoticed on the edge of his appetite for her and he saw too that she was beyond any of this and only suffered the occasion to make the point. They had moved over the years of their marriage in darkening rooms of mutual neglect.

But Morgan, brandy infused, was light-headed now, and renounced the obvious. He reached his hands out and touched her great, soft breasts. An odor of sweat mixed with perfume, an aroma redolent of love-making in damp air, sultry, deep, seemed to be aroused from her breasts.

He smelled like liquor, had drunk too much. Simone stood still like stone, not recoiling from him, not indifferent and not willing, merely there, and waiting, maybe for words, maybe for a gentler touch, a sobriety of feeling like the quiet rooms of a museum after everyone has left, where everything is perfectly beautiful and unwasted.

Morgan roved his hand over her shoulder, her back. His hands moved like ownership. One hand reached around for her buttocks, his body closed on her, his mouth opened and pressed on her neck, his fingers sensitive as seismic needles for the slightest movement, worked up into her from behind, waiting for the release, for the least relaxation of her limbs that meant welcome.

None came.

Amanda was a dark, scared runaway from one of the massive dank eastern city slums. She had large, frightened, dark eyes and wasn't sixteen and by the hard way she held her arms crossed at the kitchen table seemed waiting for the world to get just a little more cruel so she could cross over into it justified in absolute hatred.

"Tell us about yourself," Amelia said deliberately, slowly, so that it sounded so kind. Amanda shrugged and leaned back, her dark eyes, moist and open, begged for distance and peace.

"I don't think this is a good idea," Morgan began saying to Amelia and then to Amanda. "I mean, it's not important, we're not going to throw you out."

"That's right," Amelia said.

The sun streamed in and filled the room with yellow light. They drank coffee and ate bread quietly, each listening to their own thoughts, the cars outside passing and fading away.

"I write poems," Amanda said. That was all she said.

"How nice," Amelia said. "Perhaps you'll let us read some of them someday."

Later Amelia would occasionally find scraps of paper around the studio with poems scrawled out on them rapidly, fitfully.

After Morgan left Amelia's he stopped off at the Donut Hole, a place near the train station where truckers parked their rigs, where the homeless and the mad and the broken people slept.

He had to give Evo time to screw some of the girls so he, Evo, could keep his mind on the job.

"Why would I even want to be in the business if it wasn't for the girls," Evo told Morgan a couple days before he, Morgan, had walked in on Evo 'slipping the wood' as he, Evo, liked to call it, to Lunette LaLunair from behind dog style. Lunette LaLunair was lying across his desk with her Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms rolled down. They were both facing the door. Her permed blonde head popped up and with it an uncomplicated, bored expression, while Evo kept on and on until he started going off and then noticed Morgan.

Morgan looked at Evo looking at Morgan while he, Evo Enduro, hands clutching Lunette LaLunair's hips tightly at the tan line, let go of himself and held back, tried to finish and tried to stop, twisted up his face in a comic-tragic expression as if an old trickster had taken the two masks of drama and fused them into one face which was neither but something other and not human.

This shook Morgan up. Frankly he didn't really care about Evo 'slipping the wood' to Lunette LaLunair, who, after all, had her own agenda, one item of which was to get some place with her body; the cover of something, the commercial of something, then the small part of something and then the big part of something and so forth. But it was his face: the contorted expression that was like crying for joy and laughing to haunting hysterics and being overcome with sadness, then happiness and joy and gradually an equal mixture of pain and hope.

Morgan didn't want anything to do with this not human form because he knew for certain and as well as he could know anything that behind it lay the ultimate unknown, or worse, the eternally unknowable. It was time to face facts. Evo would always be able to walk back and forth across this opening with impunity. Morgan could never.

Anyway.

After they checked her mink at the coat-room, Morgan and Simone walked into the long, high-ceilinged banquet room of the Center for Theater Arts. The dazzling crystal of the chandeliers sparkled above them like galaxies. Along the walls were massive canvases of Pinto and Smiles. Bold, vivid sculptures of Wast and Mote stood on alabaster columns throughout the room. Women wore their stunning, ornate, priceless, one-of-a-kind evening gowns. Long tables, set with silver and china, glittering on white tablecloths, were set up like the barriers of a labyrinth. A head table was raised at one end of the long room.

This table was the object toward which Morgan, another drink in hand, and Simone moved: through old wealth and its entanglements of breeding and finesse; of excessive new wealth and its endless need to be old; and of all prevalent desires homogenized by a social machinery that was so enigmatic in its allowances and conduct that nothing could be as it seemed. And now, among these rich, who were as unprovoked by time as all rich are, Morgan felt in every handshake and pecked cheek and ritual of bobbing and bowing, the heavy distillation of real wealth, speaking monotonous cadences to him over and over and over like an anthem.

All the money people were there: the Perrys, the Gumps, the Delacruces. All the money people's wives were there also: the Mrs. Perrys, the Mrs. Gumps, the Mrs. Delacruces; along with all the money people's wives' wraps: the minks, the foxes and the leopards. All the money people's cars were there too: the Rolls, the Jaguars, the Mercedes. All the money people's cars' drivers were there: the Sams, the Freds and the Lionels; not to mention all the money people's cars' drivers' accoutrements: the gloves, the hats, the boots, that adorned the drivers who would open all the money people's cars' doors so all the money people's wives and their wraps along with all the money people themselves could get in and drive away to all the money people's houses where all the money people would sleep the sweet, ambrosial, soundless, unhurried, unharried, delicious sleep of the money people.

He cradled a Canadian and Campari Aperitif, sipping it while he hated all together every pompous bore in the place, realizing, of course, there were probably more than a few well-meaning, genuinely good people among those who would unfortunately have to hang as well and as high for the company they kept. This was a good indication of Morgan's general sense of justice with all the spirits that were coursing through his mongrel blood.

Each couple that he and Simone contacted on their way to the head table paid tribute to how wonderful Simone looked, how hard she worked putting this thing together, how marvelous it was to help the underprivileged and have so much fun doing it.

Simone said: "Isn't it lovely to help others?" And: "I know I could never have done it without Lorelle's help."

Lorelle Finny ran the Committee for Urban Relief-- C.U.R.-- and was co-director with Simone of the 7th Annual Theater Arts Fund Raiser and Benefit Supper. Simone directed a separate charity organization: the Theater Arts Initiative for the Needy or T.A.I.N.

Lorelle Finny came from Family, she came from Money, she was Educated and Good-Looking, Blonde and Lean. Her ancestors had come to America on the Rosebud in 1630.

Even without the aperitifs, Morgan didn't like Lorelle Finny. He was jealous: of her Blue-Blood, of her Breeding, of her Restraint, her Blondness, her Stature, her Old Money.

"Now would you pull down your pants, turn around and rest your elbows on the examination table, please?"

"What?" Morgan asked.

"It's part of the physical. I have to check your prostate gland," the doctor said.

"I've never had one," Morgan said.

"If you have sex you have a prostate gland."

"Well I have sex, though seldom," Morgan admitted.

"Does that mean I seldom have a prostate gland?"

She gave him a very puzzled look.

"I meant, anyway, I've never had that examination."

"It will only take a second," she said, slipping a white rubber glove on her hand and jabbing her middle finger into a jar of petroleum jelly.

"What are we looking for?" he asked, lowering his pants, turning around, resting his elbows on the table.

"Cancer," she said, slipping her finger up his anus.

Morgan felt her finger moving, probing.

"Most men get it eventually if they live long enough," she said, rooting around now with vigor.

"You mean I'm going to get it no matter what?"

"The odds are, yes," she said, "if you don't die of something else first."

For all anybody knew Simone's ancestors came over on the Rosebud in 1630 too; the only difference being that her ancestors weren't allowed on deck.

They had arrived without distinction from the fetid belly of a slave ship out of Bight of Benin anytime after 1619, and were bought and sold by the ancestors of the Finneys, the Gumps, the Perrys, and maybe even the Delacruces. This was, of course, in the old days and should be forgiven, though not forgotten: there being no responsible parties left, neither slavers nor slaves to hang, liberate, to chastise, to unbind.

Morgan's ancestors came over in waves: from China to build the railroads; from Russia to butcher seals and otters on the northwest coast; from Spain to demolish the Amerindian cultures of Mexico and the American Southwest; they even came from Ireland to drink and fight.

"The Rios came over on a drunken boat from Cork," Morgan said incongruously, too loud to no one in particular.

Lorelle came over to Morgan and said in a low, polite voice: "Don't you think you've had enough to drink Morgan?"

Morgan was irate immediately: "No, as madder-a-fact!"

"Please, this means so much to Simone."

"Millions of wrecked lives . . . ," Morgan said and swayed; his words, slurred as if sloshed on high seas.

"Morgan!" Lorelle pleaded.

"Pomposity," Morgan said to Simone as they sat at the head table, listening to Lorelle thank "our resident Queen of the Nile, Simone Rio, for her generous gift of time."

"Stop it, please," Simone begged.

"I wanna make a speech," Morgan said, feeling more and more at home in drunkenness.

"Please, not here," Simone implored him as she headed for the podium, enraged inside, while outside quiet as a lake.

Morgan called to her as she accepted the applause; the bouquet of roses; the diamond brooch as a token of their esteem; a hug and kiss from Lorelle. Then Morgan called out to everyone in general: "Hey." He stood up, knocked over his chair. "Hey, why don't the C.U.R and the T.A.I.N. get together and just bring down the C.U.R.T.A.I.N on the poor? Aha, aha, aha. I just love that joke."

Morgan tottered, Simone glared, Lorelle shed sympathetic tears. The hush over the room filled Morgan's ears with thunderous sound.

"Well," he said, "that's all I gotta say for now anyways . . . so . . . that's all I gotta say."

Then he sat down where his chair wasn't, grabbed onto the table cloth to break his fall, and took an avalanche of clattering plates and saucers with him to the floor.

Debbie Smith poured coffee like it was life giving, abundantly. Morgan liked to come by and see her. She worked at the Donut Den where truckers and drunks stopped by day and night for donuts and coffee. It had only been a few years since she had posed for the cover of their swimwear catalog. She was knuckle-biting gorgeous then and wore Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms. Now she looked more tired than she should have looked--at least so it appeared to Morgan--but for all he knew she could have been god-awful happy.

They dated for awhile; then she dated Evo; then she became Lunette LaLunair; then she went to New York and came back; then she married somebody she met in a bar; then she had a couple of kids; then she started the donut shop and now she was working, working.

"So what happened in New York?" Morgan asked once.

"What makes you think something happened?"

"You came back," he said.

"It wasn't what I wanted."

"This is what you want? Donuts and Coffee? Truckers and Drunks?"

"What's wrong with Donuts and Coffee? What's wrong with Truckers and Drunks?"

Debbie poured coffee all around in cups, abundantly.

The first part of the photo session was to get the new inventory on camera with the new girls and the part-timers.

Evo ran things.

He said: "Girls, girls, get your suits on and line up. Morgan, let's do Lori and Missy together in the Royal and Hot Pick Tonga Bottoms."

Evo said: "Morgan, front and back bottom shots for the 'Build Your Own Bikini' section. C'mon Miss, over here, that's a good girl, next to Lori. Okay girls, backs to the cameras. Pooch those lovely butts out there, arch those backs. Let's get it Morgan."

Morgan did none of the actual shooting anymore. All the work of setting up the shots, taking the pictures, the processing, the touch ups, the layouts went to Rosy and Gilda, his assistants. They were two young girls from Denmark, just out of a famous school of design and photography on the west coast. More about them later. But Morgan was at least 'responsible' for the photography, and for this he partook of half the business.

Evo handled everything else. Evo did the marketing, the publishing, the advertising, the mail orders, the management, the labor relations, the public relations and he always handled the girls.

Women tall and angular, women light and dark, women lithe as willows, women round, women whose hair flowed like wide rivers, whose hair was as red as sunsets, blond haired women, buxom women, women scantily clad or naked women, casual as an open door women, women cool as lakes, women cold as oceans, all kinds of women moved, scurried, sat posed here and there, dressing, undressing, chattering like young birds, stalking like older birds, making their way.

Evo said, "Girls, girls let's quiet down, let's have Carmine, and Carla in the Royal Ribbed Loop Top and the Sliding-Tri Top."

Evo said, "Carmine, we'll do the full Red French Racer-Back tomorrow. I know red's your favorite color. Near the cover, I said, not on the cover. If you don't shut up I'll put you in the Comanche Chamois in the back where your mother won't find you."

Morgan figured Evo was giving it to Missy for sure. The Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms clinched it. Missy was tall with full round hips and long legs good for bottom shots. She had an attitude like she was going places. Maybe she was.

Evo used to like big breasted women but he was now spending more and more time with the ones with the perfect backs and butts. Evo was still gung-ho.

"Okay, girls, you're out of hand, that's it. Heather you haven't shut up since you got here, you're through, drop off that Burgundy Banded Two Piece on your way out. Morgan, let's have Carmine and Carla in the top shots. Missy, you can't be in the top shots and you know why. Get 'em close together Morgan. Because their bosoms are bigger than your bosoms, or is it bosom? It's just one of those things. Take it up with mother nature. There ain't a thing I can do about it. Morgan, I'd really like to go back to just saying tits at least I can get the grammar right. Quit trying to clean up my language."

Evo said, "We'll break for an early lunch; I want to talk to Missy and Heather."

Morgan had Rosy and Gilda finish up the shots while he grabbed a beer and ambled off to the dark room. He put on the red light and locked the door. He sipped the beer and laid out the roles of film and checked their labels with the master list of shots.

There was Missy in the Cobra Sliding-Tri Bottom,
Missy in the Coral and Black Splash,
Missy in the White G-String
and the Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms.

He was still gung-ho for the dream dreamt as he heaved
like sleep on the South China Sea: women and money.

"You otta marry that one," Evo said, right away, the minute Simone walked in. "She's special, real special."

Simone answered the ad. She was pushing thirty but came in sleek, like she could be when she worked at it: slim and taunt, her hair long, course, black, stretched tight and tied behind her head while the rest of it fell away down her back. She looked like the Empress of Chad.

"If she's so special why don't you marry her?"

"Oh, she'd never go for that. I got problems. On the other hand, you're her type: admiring but not possessive; respectful but not fawning; reserved but not prudish; sensitive but not beaten. You're what they call a regular guy."

"We would have to face the racial issue," Morgan said.

"As for race there's no issue to face," Evo said, "and as for issue, we'll face that race apace, and if it's a boy, amigo mio, feel free to name him Evo Rio."

"This is serious," Morgan said.

"Trust me, marry that woman and you'll have what everybody wants."

"What is that?"

"A challenge."

"What about love?" Morgan asked.

"You still say some funny things."

Evo let Morgan know time and again that he thought Morgan needed a wife. Morgan had a successful business; Morgan had money; Morgan needed the stability of love and family.

"Why?" Morgan asked.

"Because I can't, that's why," Evo said.

"Did I miss something?" Morgan asked.

"Look, I'm never going to settle down. I've got problems. No sane woman wants me for a husband."

"You must not want marriage and a family," Morgan said.

"Not want it? Not want it? Every man wants a family, every man wants love and affection and children and a wife he can love and work and knock himself out for. What do you think? Of course I want it. I want it but I've got problems. You have all the right feelings, the feelings I can't have."

"Why not?"

"Because I have problems," Evo said.

"What kind of problems?"

"All kinds," Evo said, "every kind."

"Name one."

Evo thought a minute. "I can't stop chasing girls for one problem."

"A lot of men have your problem," Morgan said. "It's really not that unusual. Women have it too."

"You don't have that problem," Evo asked, "do you?"

"I don't think so."

"You would know if you did," Evo said.

"How?"

"You would know," Evo said.

"How would I know?"

"You would be burning for them, real fire."

"Don't you think that's a little dramatic?"

"You think so because you don't have the problem."

"I wonder why I don't?" Morgan asked.

"Because I do," Evo said.

"I don't get it."

"Neither do I."

They stood together silent; each listening to his own thoughts. Evo said: "Look, you're the only family I have."

Morgan was touched. "I know," he said. "The same is true for me. We're buddies."

"That's right," Evo said. "We're buddies and we're gonna stick together through thick and thin."

Then he paused. "This, however, is thick. We're making it big, we need more, we need better, we need greater."

"More, better, greater what?" Morgan asked.

"We need a family: a wife, some kids, a big house on a hill overlooking the ocean. We need social standing, status, stuff like that."

"Why?" Morgan asked, perplexed.

"Why not?" Evo answered. "What the hell else are we going to do? Nothing? That's what nobody wants."

"What?"

"Nothing," Evo said. "Nobody wants nothing."

Morgan poured another scotch in the glass then more scotch in another glass and left them both on the bar.

"In case one of us needs this in a hurry," he said to the whore who smiled a pleasant, very blue-eyed, very blond smile, such a pleasant whore.

"Can I use your phone?" the whore asked.

"It's in the other room."

"I won't be long."

An hour or so ago, Evo had called back.

"You'll love this one," he said.

"Who?" Morgan asked.

"I don't know yet. Somebody," he said. "Anybody."

"Nobody needs just anybody," Morgan protested.

"You do," Evo said. "She's lovely. I think her name is Jill."

"Do you know her well?"

"What kind of a question is that?" Evo asked. "Look, don't worry, Simone's out of town. Right?"

"She's out of town."

"She won't be back until the weekend. Right?"

"Not until the weekend."

"So what are you worried about?" Evo asked.

"I'm not worried. I just feel strange. You know?"

"No I don't. I really don't."

"You haven't had anything since when?"

"I don't know."

"Since when?"

"Not since I got into this whole thing," Morgan said.

"What whole thing?" Evo asked.

"You know what I mean," Morgan began, arms out and palms up like some Christ showing his wounds. "This whole thing."

No one spoke. The telephone line crackled, other voices that were mixed-up in space came through in pieces, in jagged fragments; a strange language of voices scattered and never to be made whole again.

"And I'm not even sure I need any," Morgan said.

"Wash your mouth out with soap and never say that again or the goddess of nooky will wring your nuts drier and smaller than the testicles of a wood tick."

"Have you ever considered counseling?" Morgan asked Evo once when he was beginning to feel ambivalent toward Evo's two great obsessions: women and money.

"Counseling, what counseling? Can a counselor quench my desire? Can a counselor make me whole? Can a counselor give me feelings, heart, happiness? Can a counselor 'slay that old whore death.' Can a counselor 'slay that old whore death?' Repeat after me: Can a counselor 'slay that old whore death?'"

Evo had worked himself up into a red rage, his face flushed, distorted in that happy-sad expression, sweat beading on his forehead, his lips trembling like a man gone over to the other side, where bliss isn't.

Morgan went over the list of shots. There was Sonia in the Pink & Green Splash,
Angie in the Royal Tonga, Evette in the Black Tonga,
Cleo and Clare in French-cut Briefs,
Carmine and Carla, their huge breasts stuffed into:
the Coral Ribbed Loop Top, the White Sliding-Tri Top,
the Pink Twist, the Bandy Bunch Blue Strapped Chamois.
There was April in the Black Loop Top,
May in the Coral & Black & Royal Bandeau Top,
June in the Hot pink Tango Top,
July in the Hot-Pink Brazilian Bottoms.

This was the advertisement Evo ran the day they started in business five years ago and the ad he ran two weeks before the latest photo session.

Wanted: female models for natl catalog,
top pay, send best pictures to:
Primal Times, Inc. P.O. Box 69 SM, CA. 90909
Attn: Evo Enduro

The girls came out of nowhere by the hundreds. Women rolled here like marbles from the vast tableland of America and brought what they had and did what they could and left if it didn't work out or stayed if it did. That was the point, to try to make it, to make it or not, to go on from there.

Morgan entered Evo's office at the studio the day after Morgan knew his new catalog had bombed while Evo's had succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. Evo had his elbows on the desk and was resting his head on his hands. Papers filled with numbers were spread out on the desk. Unsold catalogs filled the corners of the room and were spread out all over the floor. Missy and Tuffy, dressed in Pink Tonga Bottoms and no tops, stood on either side of Evo. Tuffy rubbed the back of his neck, Missy massaged his shoulders.

"What's it mean, exactly?" Morgan asked.

"It means you're broke. I tried to warn you."

"How broke?"

"Belly up. The fact that your wife took her half of the business before the catalog even came out didn't help."

"Before?" Morgan said, staring at the floor.

"Correct. Now creditors are taking everything: chairs, camaras, film, bathing suits. I wish they'd take these catalogs. It's a good thing I had the paperwork to show we divided the business or they would have even taken Missy and Tuffy here too. The best I can do for you now buddy is a couple thousand once in awhile for old time's sake. But if you get in a bind don't be afraid to ask, you know. Whatever you want within reason; you won't go without if old Evo still has any hormones left in his veins."

The whore came back in the room and started to unbutton her blouse. The whore sat on the edge of the bed, on the deep, lavender bedspread that Simone had bought in Belgium, kicked off her high heels and then looked at him.

"Need some help?" The voice seemed to have changed. It was less pleasant and more . . . well . . . more seductive.

"Ah, no, I don't think so."

"Want me to turn around while you undress?"

"Ah, no," Morgan said.

"Want me to face you while you undress?"

"Ah, I'm not sure."

"I know, you want me to undress you, right?"

"Ah . . ."

"Oh, well maybe you would like something different," the whore said very sincerely. "Would you like to play a game?"

"What kind of game?" Morgan asked.

"Whatever game you like," she said. "Your favorite game. I'll play any game you like."

"I don't know any games," Morgan said with a sinking feeling, glancing around the familiar room.

"Don't be shy now. We can play any game at all."

"What kind of games do you like to play?" Morgan asked.

"Oh, I like to play 'Bunko Bear' anytime," she said.

Morgan looked at her for signs, signals that she would go on and not make him ask the unaskable question. She looked at him sincerely, but silently.

"Well," Morgan said, drifting over to the bar again, "'Bunko Bear' is not my favorite game."

"How about 'Baby-Boo' or 'Water World' or . . . . . ?"

"Nah," Morgan said, slamming down another scotch, "I don't feel like playing any of those games."

"We can just do it, you know, regular," the whore said.

"What ever happened to Jill?" he asked.

"Oh, she couldn't come," the whore said. "Didn't I say that already?"

"Why not?"

"Evo said you might not wanna do it with somebody he's done it with, you know, men are funny about that stuff."

"Evo said that?"

"Yes, but I said that last part, about men being funny."

Evo and Morgan started with a studio in Evo's remodeled garage and took boudoir photos of housewives. Morgan took the pictures, Morgan developed the pictures, Morgan learned to touch up the pictures, business was ok. Evo cajoled, in a primitive fashion, the shy, reluctant women into ever more enticing displays. He had a knack right off and he was a worker, becoming sophisticated in the obscure art of begging women to give their souls to the camera.

Then Evo bought a couple of swimsuits, got a couple of real beauties on walk-ins, took a couple of photos, printed a little brochure, set up a mail order system out of a little IBM PC, and made a little under fifty thousand dollars the first year, then half a million year number two, then two million, then six million--that's million, you know, with all the zeroes. Now this, the biggest catalog, the most provocative suits, the women so gorgeous, beautiful. Women everywhere on the pages like a convocation of goddesses. This issue was going to be the rocket express to mega-wealth, to mecca-money. The next big shoot was in Tonga with the elite models: the cover, and inset photos, the big promo shots, the fold outs. Holy cow!

Morgan, Evo and the Elite Models flew to Tonga together with Rosy and Gilda and a lot of equipment. Evo read the portfolios of the elite models to Morgan on the plane over. He loved reading them.

"Who are the Elite Models?" Evo asked, rhetorically.

"Well," Evo continued, reading, "there is Karissa Bair, a perfectly proportioned and athletic twenty year old from Southern California with sea washed hair the color of sunlight and a degree in Electrical Engineering from UCLA.

"I can't even look at her without weeping inside," Evo added, then went on: "Karissa is friendly and energetic and always doing something: at the beach, swimming, basking carelessly naked on the sands."

"Sounds like just what you're looking for."

"They say she has never dated," Evo said, nervously.

"I find that hard to believe and where did you come up with that information anyway?" Morgan asked, thumbing through the ads in Pacific Flyways.

"She has never dated, I'm sure of it."

"She's not a virgin," Morgan said.

"How do you know that?"

"Look at her picture and tell me she's a virgin."

Evo frowned; Morgan was spoiling things.

Evo saw in his mind's eye Karissa Bair in all her Vestal splendor. He released a painful moan as though he was being stabbed slowly with a long dull knife.

A few hundred miles later: "Kali Picket," Evo read, "is a Polynesian, a Mauri woman who lives in Del Mar and stands six feet two and wears a D-cup and has teeth white as the full moon."

Morgan leaned over to read the text, believing Evo was only imagining these descriptions. Who would write this?

"I bet she's not in any hurry to eventually marry anybody she god damn wants to marry on the face of planet earth, let me tell you." Evo ranted.

"I swear to god," he went on, "I drove my teeth right down on my lower lip when I saw her picture, just her picture, wearing one of our black and pink, tight looped, French Racer-Backs with breast slits and web bottom. God have Mercy on the Souls of Men."

"Besides extraordinary beauty, she is shy and has that submissive quality so important in apparel marketing, the look that sells the women who want to have men who want them the way they want Kali."

This incongruous association of gorgeous giantess and submissive slave drove Evo crazy.

He went on, "Kim de Vasque is a Chicago girl, who flies with Pan Am and chain-smokes Lucky Strikes."

"That's odd," Morgan said. "Isn't it?"

"I thought she would appeal to the truckers' wives, you know, the hard butt proletariat type. Her resume photo showed her lying naked in a plowed field, her thighs and hips soiled with fresh cut loam. When I saw her picture, my loins ached all day and I knew this meant money."

Evo stared longingly at the picture of Kim de Vasque.

"This one, this is the one, she's here for some fun, I know it, I can tell, what do you think?" Evo asked.

"About what?"

"Kim de Vasque."

"The farm gal?"

"Yes," Evo said, "the farm gal."

"Jimmy crack corn and I don't care."

"You better cop an attitude," Evo railed, hurt by Morgan's neglect. "This catalog better work out or we're in dollar doodoo."

Morgan flipped through Pacific Flyways. There was a picture of a tropical island, small on an aqua sea and a lone palm tree inclined over the desolate beach sands. A couple, the man's arm around the woman's shoulder, reclined on the sand and leaned against the trunk of the tree. Their faces turned toward the vast ocean. The caption read: 'Get Away From It All.'

Evo read: "Kim has one of those composite shapes which taken in part seems unspectacular, but viewed all at once: lying on the beach, arched over a wet rock, splashing in an emerald waterfall, enclosed in tropical verdure seems so wanting, so hungry and starved for passion."

"Evo," Morgan said.

"What?" Evo asked, turning away from the photos of the models, his mouth agape, visibly flushed, nearly panting.

"Would you do me a favor?"

"What, already?"

Morgan looked at Evo. He noticed how much he had aged since those days on the Endurance in the South China Sea.

"Would you get on another track?"

Evo, hurt but pugnacious, looked at Morgan.

"No," he said, "I won't. Not ever."

Evo believed in these women, these women who could make just about any man want them, openly, secretly, even desperately, if only momentarily, and who could, more importantly, make every woman, in some hidden part of her being, want to be wanted as they were wanted, if only long enough to buy something, anything.

"Just three?" Morgan said.

"Just three! You know how much these women cost, thousands, tens of thousands, more than that!"

"But all the way to Tonga? Is that extravagant?" Morgan asked.

"Now, what are you saying? First I don't get enough high priced models for you, then I'm spending too much money on location. What do you want? Fifty beauties in a parking lot? Two canines at the Ritz?"

Evo was becoming rabid, Morgan thought. His language was approaching the brink beyond which lay the vast mire of incoherence.

In those early days Morgan and Evo, like wide-eyed kids, did the interviewing together.

"What's your name?" Evo asked.

"Simone Zenda," Simone said.

"That's a very nice name," Morgan said, genuinely impressed. "Is that your real name?"

That was the first time he saw the look: direct, persistent, penetrating.

"That will never do," Evo said.

"What's wrong with Simone Zenda?" Morgan said.

"With a body like that," Evo said, holding up one of Simone's resume photos, "with a face like that, in our number one swimsuit, on the cover of our number one issue? Simone Zenda sounds like . . . like . . . Simone Zenda."

Eventually Evo got the whole scoop on Simone: born poor, quit school early, real early, married in her early teens, divorced in her late teens, worked around nightclubs, married in her early twenties, divorced in her late twenties, spent time waitressing tables then dancing on them, modeling in department stores, tended to run a little heavy but came into Evo's office sleek as a ship, a black ship laden with spices, trading in deep water.

"That's it, Simone Rio," Evo said.

"That's his name," Simone said, pointing to Morgan without looking at him.

"Following a small formality it can be your name too," Evo said. He chuckled, but it wasn't enough to take the seriousness out of his voice.

"I see you two are all business. Maybe I better go someplace else." She stood up. It seemed like a long time before she reached her full height, so tall was she. And in that unhasty time Morgan watched from his seat her slow growth upward out of reach. Things were not clear then. So much of experience was becoming fantastic. The gross simplicity of marketing bathing suits for profit seemed connected to something vital. He wondered what. He wondered also if the artistry would go out of his photographer's craft. But this kind of thinking was like weeping over lost innocence, this world up and coming was another life all together, the real one. In Simone was the craft to be had.

"You can have any name you want," Morgan said, "and we'll pay you the best rate if you'll work for us." She glanced at Evo who wiggled in his chair and sighed like he had lost something long ago and just remembered what it was, and moved her eyes to Morgan and rested there, steadily and nodded and approved and the deal was done.

Morgan slept with the windows open and the pummel of the surf clear and constant in his ears. He woke up abruptly in the early morning hours before daylight and walked out onto the balcony of his hotel room and looked east toward the point on the horizon from which the first, faint fragrances of rosy colored dawn emanated. He breathed the salt air and the easy, tropical wind.

This was a place in which to be set free, uncut from beyond where unimaginable complexities wound his life into knots.

Before sleep overcame him, Morgan felt himself on a river, light as balsa, carried along by complete faith.

Later he dreamed. He heard the sound of sweeping. He saw himself rise out of bed and flow like a wisp of air out the window. Carried along on a torrent, he walked on the beach until he saw her, the old woman, sweeping. She was bent over with her broom in one hand, her basket in another.

Morgan had his hands in his pocket and walked casually down the beach toward the old woman. The sun reached up deep rose-colored and daybreak shot forth its rays: amber and gold from the center of the sun, moving like fire in the sky.

Then he woke up.

They shot all morning on the beach: Banded Bikinis, Triangle Twist, Hot Black One-Piece suits with big teasing bows, French Riviera bikinis, Lycra Mini-skirts. Early in the afternoon when the sun was too high and bright for good photos, Morgan and Evo sat in the Royal Tonga Hilltop under one of the real coconut palms having lunch together, discussing who would be their cover girl. Evo was scooping up something pink and frothy from a bisected pineapple, slurping it into his mouth. They sat at a table with a sea-blue tablecloth with little tropical islands printed all over it. Each island had one lonely coconut palm growing on it; each coconut palm had one lonely coconut in it. Morgan drank coffee, dark and rich. Behind them a man on a long aluminum ladder was cutting off the little buds of coconuts from the coconut palms because when they got big and ripe they might land on somebody's head.

"I suggest Karissa in the Royal Monaco, she has a classic face," Morgan said.

"Nobody's going to look at her face. What about Tuffy Strokes?" Evo said, juice shimmering on his chin.

"Who's Tuffy Strokes?" Morgan asked.

"She was in that dynamite Hot Pink Tonga Bottom back in the States," Evo slurped.

He said, "We'll do a double cover with Tuffy and Missy. Inside we'll do a couple of provocative, orgasmic type shots: a little cheek showing, some sand on the butt, you know, the girls can wreathe a little on a beach and . . ."

"You mean writhe," Morgan said.

"Yeah, wiggle around," Evo said. "We'll pull in the lower-middle-class-repressed-housewife market. You know, the little hard bodies who married truckers and deranged vets and found out about four-wheel drive romance and who are now just looking for some relief. We'll teach 'em how to spell it: S E X Y. That's what got 'em into the mess they're in and that's what'll get 'em out. Get looking good. Get those breasts surgically augmented and show one of those cerebral types with a good job--and your typical All-American hunger for a wild, wet woman--what lust, what passion lies hidden, untouched, untapped under a Sliding Tri-Top and a Pink Tonga Bottom. You can look just like Tuffy Strokes and get any guy you want. Dump that greasy slob snoring next to you in the projects; get a horny egghead with colossal bucks."

"This is a radical departure from our initial objectives," Morgan said.

"You're too polite Morgan," Evo gurgled between slurps of passion fruit. "What's an initial objective anyway?"

"We were going to start out with well-stated, provocative issues and progress to something more artistic, with first class models and women who appeal to a finer nature. Not women as objects but as people."

"Ah shucks, you know I hate talk like that. I don't recognize any of those words anyway. And I hate women who appeal to a finer nature." Evo snorted and chortled and reached for his white linen napkin; various South Pacific fruit juices gleamed on his chin and drizzled down onto his wild floral shirt. Evo was getting on in years; his body began to show dents and protuberances here and there, evincing the struggle within like something inside having a messy time getting out.

"That's how we used to talk about the business," Morgan said. "Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember, sort of, that was years ago. I was different. You were different. The earth's gotten closer to the sun, the stars are farther apart, we're all nearer to death, everything has changed. Now I want some respect, some affection, a little love. Missy and Tuffy are regular gals; they come over after work; we have a few drinks; we hot-tub together, we even talk."

"So now this business has become an extension of your libido?" Morgan said. He was leaning back in his chair, away from the table, getting distance between himself and this guy who, though he looked familiar, was someone he was sure he didn't know.

"Poor insatiable Evo," Morgan said. Evo went on his torrential way, unheeding.

"I like what I'm doing."

"What are you doing?" Morgan asked.

"I'm just following the path of least resistance, going where my instincts tell me to go."

"What do you want?"

"What do I want?" Evo said and paused and said again: "What do I want? I want, I want, I want, I want." He was pounding his fist on the sea-blue tablecloth with little tropical islands printed all over it, each island with its one lonely coconut palm growing on it, each coconut palm with its one lonely coconut in it. Morgan's eyes sailed among the sea-blue cloth from one identical island to the next while Evo pounded the table. Each declaration, no matter how emphatic, nor with what seismic intensity it shook the islands and the palm trees, the lonely coconuts would not fall out of the trees.

"You know something, Evo?" Morgan said, lifting his eyes from the coconut tablecloth debacle. "You're crazy."

"For god's sake what ever happened to tolerance; what ever happened to compassion. I'm not hurting anyone. I don't bother you. You're not indispensable to this business; I am. Do I ever hear 'Evo, you're doing a good job; Evo, you look tired; you need a rest. Or, Evo, take a couple of weeks off and go bang some chicks; I'll fill in for you?' No, you take your pictures and you go home to a wife and some kind of family life that I don't have. You have time to think, to wonder, to contemplate the meaninglessness of life for all I know. That's a luxury to me. I can't afford to take the time. I'm killing myself just keeping this thing alive for God's sake. And then you come to work and climb all over me about my girls. What's wrong with you anyway? You having trouble at home or something?"

"I've been having strange dreams lately."

"Yeah well, we all dream and we all probably dream strangely. That's no big deal. I mean real problems like love and desire and death, like wanting and not having, like insatiable lust, like craven loneliness, real problems."

In the late hours of the day, when twilight scattered before nightfall, Morgan sat on a straw-backed, beach-chair, on the balcony of his room at the Royal Tonga Hotel, with his feet up on the railing. He sipped a wild-tropical, fruit-drink, with dark rum poured over clear, white ice, and looked toward the west, where the sun had sunk into a deep, endless, shimmering, gray ocean.

His marriage seemed far away not only in distance but in substance and meaning so that he could not begin or know how to start to rediscover the beginning. That afternoon at lunch he had looked at Evo distantly, as a stranger looks at another for interesting details but passes by indifferently, having found nothing. How could things have accelerated and come to such a precipitous edge? Twenty years had vanished like a turgid sunset. Time, or at least its rapid loss, was something he had not counted on. At this pace it would all be over sooner than later and there was no way as far as he knew to wring any more essential life out of these moments, these minutes that kept turning over and over, indifferently or not, but over again into and out of meaning and memory as if nothing had ever happened.

"It's just your ordinary existential dilemma," Rockette said, kicking off her black pumps into the corner where naked Antoinette was sleeping. This was back in the days between the Navy and the Business when Evo and Morgan tried to make it in a rock band in New York. Rockette sang; Antoinette played the drums; Evo bass. They called themselves: 'Lido Libido and the Outraged.' They were ahead of their time. Evo had a Mohawk and wore a dirty T-shirt with no sleeves and a string of raw chicken hearts around his neck. Rockette wore a black leather mini skirt, an old maiden-form bra dyed chartreuse under a Levi jacket eight sizes too large; she dyed her hair too--yellow--and could really belt out a song. Antoinette wore a confederate cavalryman's hat with a white feather plume like Jeb Stuart used to wear and nothing or not much else. This caused problems with the police. No one remembers what Morgan wore.

One night after they played they got smashed on 'Big Mouth Mickeys' and ended up in the Phatoosee Tattoo Parlor.

"I wanna tattoo," Evo slurred. "I wanna tattoo a 'no exit' on my cock."

"Oh my God, that's just sooo existential," Rockette screamed.

"I want 'no exit' in big letters on my cock right now," Evo yelled, and stood up, and fell over.

That evening they met in the hotel bar.

Evo said, "We'll compromise, even though I don't believe in it. I think everybody should just let the whole thing keep rolling along. I call it my 'Ol Man River' philosophy."

"What whole thing?" Morgan asked.

"This whole thing," Evo said, indicating the endless open space at the end of his outstretched arms. They paused, both sensed an impasse.

"Is this the crisis of our relationship?"

"I suppose so," Evo said.

"It's not what I expected."

"It is kind of low key."

"I guess it's the nature of the dialectic."

"I just love it when you talk like that."

"It can't be helped."

"What can't be helped?" Evo asked, losing his way.

"This," Morgan answered, indicating all the tangled matter of the barroom, the rooms of the hotel, and beyond.

"What's the solution?"

"Synthesis."

"There you go again, reading books. But if you mean compromise, I don't believe in it. I think everybody should just let the whole thing keep rolling along. I call it my 'Ol Man River' philosophy."

"You sell the swimsuits your way: with your sunsets and 'finer natures.' I'll sell swimsuits my way: with Missy and Tuffy," Evo said after dinner, tight now as a new clock.

"We'll run it like separate businesses and your money will go into your catalog and my money will go into my catalog. We'll have lawyers and contracts and accountants and ledgers. You can work out your shots right now. After all, what do we want; what does everybody want?" he asked, leaning back in his chair, engorged with food and drink.

"Grandeur," Morgan said.

"Nope."

"A challenge?" Morgan asked.

"Wrong again."

"To be envied," Morgan said.

"Try again."

Morgan thought, "What does everybody want?"

"Give up?" Evo asked, bursting with his secret.

"I give up."

"Vindication."

"Vindication of what?" Morgan asked.

"What difference does it make?"

"I don't know," Morgan said.

"That's what I mean."

Later, on the white beaches of Tonga, in the gathering and deepening shades of twilight, when the breeze from the sea seemed like a warm arm, hugging the shore, Evo coaxed and wheedled each of the elite models into staying for a few more shots, just a few more shots. He flattered; he lied; he even dropped to his knees in abject humility until he got the shots Morgan wanted.

"I wouldn't do this again for anybody," he said.

"I thought you liked this kind of stuff," Morgan said.

Evo looked at Morgan. Morgan looked at Evo and sensed in Evo's eyes the lengthening distance between them, stretching away like a thin line to the horizon's verge and vanishing.

He would never know.

Morgan looked at Evo's hands, shaking. He looked at Evo, his friend since God knows when: since the war, at sea, roving the world, with Rockette in New York, Vicki in Titusberg, with Simone in Wanton Shores, most importantly dreaming together, linked by youth and dreams, an unbreakable bond, now growing old together, losing their way, the American Way.

"Did you ever think it would be like this?"

"I didn't know what it would be like," Evo said.

"I didn't think it would be like this," Morgan said.

"I know."

Evo went back to work on his knees in the sand as the tropical sun nested ablaze on the horizon, pleading, pleading: "Oh, beautiful, beautiful Kali, oh exquisite Kim, oh lovely, lovely Karissa . . . . ."

The next day Evo flew Missy and Tuffy in for the cover shots of his catalog. They stayed on with him in their Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms for a few days. They hot-tubbed together, they had a few drinks, they talked.

The orbits of Evo's eyes widened as the days went by.

Morgan flew home.

Morgan came home from Tonga and his key wouldn't fit in the front door lock and he actually thought for a while that he had the wrong key. So he thought the lock must be stuck, so he rang the doorbell and he knocked on the doo. Then he banged on the door; then he sat on the front step and rested his chin on his fist like Rodin's Thinker and waved with the other hand at the Gumps going by in their white Rolls Royce.

Morgan got up and went into the four car garage, which was open and empty except for a few boxes and suitcases--his clothes and belongings--piled up next to the pickup truck he and Evo had used to start the business with and that Morgan had kept and worked on once in a while over the years.

His body was moving way ahead of his thoughts, which outpaced his feelings so that looking back he would see that these moments had been passed in a medium wholly different, in which there was a kind of liquidity to time and a softness to space.

A red Porche pulled up and a heavy-set, middle-aged woman in a mauve jumpsuit rebirthed herself from the tight womb of the car. She opened the trunk and took out a sign, a post, a cross piece that seemed to go with the post and a big hammer. She set up at the end of the driveway and started to work.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the portly woman said, extending her hand, "Samantha Johnson is my name. My friends call me Sam. You may do so. And you are?"

"Morgan Rio. I live here. What's with the sign?"

"Oh, yes, quite right, quite right," Sam said, pounding the post into the ground with thudding hammer blows.

"This is a 'For Sale' sign," Morgan said, shocked.

"Yes, that is as it appears," Sam said, giving the post a couple of final whacks. She then nailed the cross piece to the post. She worked up a sweat, her breathing became laborious, her great mass seemed a trying encumbrance.

"This can't be real," Morgan said, as Sam took the 'For Sale' sign and began attaching it to the cross piece by means of two chains that gave it a quaint, rustic look.

"Let me assure you, this is quite real, quite real indeed. Nothing, I may say, is more real than Real Estate."

Morgan despaired, "I don't believe any of this."

"I refute your philosophy thus," she said, and gave the post a violent kick that vibrated the sign like a tuning fork. Morgan watched it sing back and forth on its chains, feeling--as it slowed gradually and came to rest--the full weight of the irrefutable: that this was first and foremost and perhaps only a world of matter, of flesh, of bone.

Morgan opened the garage door, backed out the driveway and rumbled along the fine roads of his neighborhood--his soon to be former neighborhood--to Amelia's, where he would be woven back by her warm, deliberate love.

The window pane on the driver's side rattled so much Morgan had to roll it down. The cold ocean air flowed into and whipped itself up in the cab. He turned the heater on and a dense, pungent fog rolled out of the vents. He turned on the heater fan and smoke blew out wildly, fogging the windshield so that he had to drive looking at the road ahead through a small, crescent of clear glass at the bottom of the windshield just above the dashboard. He squinted and peered through the crescent, making out familiar landmarks, slowing to a rumbling idle so that, every now and then, he had to let out the clutch and gun the engine to keep it from stalling.

A new radiator and heating coil had been on the agenda of things to repair in the truck when Morgan and Evo struck it big.

"I can't keep up with these orders," Evo said. "We need a secretary, maybe two."

"We can't afford them," Morgan said. "Aren't we broke."

"We were," Evo said. "Now we're loaded."

"What about the truck? Shouldn't we get it fixed?"

"Hell, let's buy a van. Let's go get a van and hire a couple of secretaries. Let's start expensing some of this money. Let's have some fun."

"What money?" Morgan asked.

"This money," Evo said, scooping up a pile of mail and tossing it up and everywhere. "Mail order money. There's twenty, thirty dollars an order. Must be a couple hundred coming in every day, twenty-four hours a day. We might as well be oil barons, pumps working while we sleep. It's a good thing too because we got this advertising bill as big as Nevada, maybe Texas." Evo stopped and stared off into space, dreaming.

"All those women out there pouring their money in for a chance to make it in a Sliding-Tri Top and a Pink Tonga Bottom; for a chance to feel good; to get out and party; to feel good and party the American Way," Evo said.

"We've turned the corner, Morgan. Now it's going to be all about money, real money. We broke the ice with that last layout. Did she look good or what? Simone: like some kind of divinity, like forbidden fruit."

Morgan had a sentimental attachment to the truck. One night a month or so after they met, he picked Simone up and went out for Chinese food and a movie. He talked about his family over dinner. His Irish father: a tough, quiet, traditional man, and his mother, Cantonese: a small woman, polite, clean and suffering. Both dead. No sisters or brothers. Simone talked also. She had no family. No one.

It may have been the evening: city lights subdued by mist from a slate gray night; the feeling of isolation that rain and night provoke; the soft radiance of the marquee lights and stores and shops and passing cars; the wet sidewalks and having to huddle together, holding on to one another. That's the feeling he got from Simone: of someone coming out of isolation, long and ridden with unannounced hardships and hidden tragedies and grief and things that could not be released, or if released could not be conveyed, or if conveyed could never be redeemed. By the end of the evening they were back in the condominium he shared with Evo, overlooking the city and its breadth of light. He held her--a lovely, beautiful woman with a lonely weight of unspoken words. They held each other for a long time in front of the window as the city spread out below them, distant, sparkling, its lights forming and glowing like lava, like the living presence of beauty and danger, now less dangerous because they had each other.

It was all so slow and tender and careful as if he was unwrapping a treasure he had put away years ago, carefully--his own aloneness. She was lovely. Their loving was careful.

Morgan, after a respectable dalliance of several months, proposed. She accepted. They were married in a small church that stood among pines trees in a little valley by a river. It was the kind of setting he had always imagined; the kind she had always imagined too. Morgan moved out of the apartment and bought a house; business was good. Pretty soon it was all business.

After that it was his business, then hers, a new house, another new house, new cars, clubs, then the charity work. She was never home; he was never home. Once in a while out of sheer coincidence they would find themselves together at home with nothing to do. Sometimes the sexual distance was funny, it made him feel like they were buddies, that they had a separate life someplace else and this was where they got together to relax, no problems, no grave encounters.

Other times it was like a leaden death, and each would summon resolve to cover the distance and go through the required steps for different reasons: to keep things as they were, to cover up the obvious by making a botch of it and acting like they do in movie; that it was great; that it was just great and what they needed; that 'Jesus Christ that was damn great and what we needed.' In time this pretense too fell away, leaving distance, silence and memory of how it was one rainy night.

"What the hell happened?" Morgan asked himself, driving down the road, slouching over, looking out a tiny crescent of clear glass. The road narrowed, parked cars lined the road on each side, the sun shone brightly off the metal, the chrome, the glass of all the cars parked along the road. Morgan drifted, his thoughts, drawn like blown cloud, roved.

He broad-sided a red Honda and wiped out one side of the little Japanese car from bumper to bumper. The truck had a few dinks and dents already and it was hard to account for any new damage. It looked like his front bumper just ran down the side of the Honda like a knife gutting a fish.

Morgan thought about going to find a phone and calling the police. He thought about leaving a note and driving off. He thought about waiting and decided to wait. To keep from going nuts he looked around the truck, took a kind of inventory. There was his suitcase. There was Amelia's tapestry. In the glove compartment, there was an old pack of Lucky Strikes with a couple of very old cigarettes inside. There was his old Leica, his first camera, still a good camera. He opened the case and fiddled with it, examining the body, the lens, the shutter mechanism. He had it apart when the police came.

"Out of the car," one cop said. "Hands in the air."

"Up against the car, spread your legs," the other cop said.

"What's your name? Whose truck is this?" the first one said again. She was tall, slender with a sharp voice.

"Let's run a check on this license. You been drinking? It's broad daylight for Christ's sake," the second one said as she frisked him. Pausing around his hips, she pressed her hand momentarily against his groin.

"Hey," Morgan said.

"Stand still, mister," she said. "I'm checking for weapons and I can see you ain't carrying much of anything."

The first and the second cop had a good laugh. They ran his license number through the computer, checking for parking tickets, standard procedure. There was a problem.

"There's a problem," the first cop said.

"What's the problem?" Morgan asked.

The accumulation of events were taking on a strange and novel existence, each new event by some means would diminish the gravity of the previous ones, until threadbare and in tatters, a vivid present would appear without his ever having a sense of how he had arrived.

"They want you downtown to answer a few questions," the second cop said.

"What kind of questions, what about?"

"An accident."

"This accident?" Morgan exclaimed.

"No," the first cop said, "another accident. They'll give you the details downtown."

"What about?" Morgan asked, seeking order and sequence.

"We'll write this up. You have insurance, don't you?"

Morgan thought of Amelia, missed her, needed her.

The detective put her feet up on the desk and pulled out a cigarette, offering one to Morgan. Morgan declined.

"Coffee?" the detective offered.

Morgan declined.

The detective pulled out a file. Morgan couldn't read the title. The detective opened it, spread out some papers, scanned them. Morgan couldn't read them either.

"You've been paying the rent on 25400 Paradise Drive for the past nine months?"

"Why?"

The detective looked at him. This was a new look: bored, condescending, impatient, waiting.

"You want a lawyer?"

"Do I need one?"

"You tell me," the detective said.

"Have I done anything besides sideswipe a car?"

"Sober in broad daylight," the detective added. She set her feet back on the floor and glared at Morgan.

"What about the 'accident' on 25400 Paradise Drive?"

Morgan noticed the amount of gray in the room, the various shades of gray and some white and some black. It was a colorless room, like a photograph in black and white, just as flat and as still.

"Did you know those girls?"

"What are you talking about?" Morgan asked, quickly, sitting up.

"Where were you early morning, May the fifteenth?"

"I was in Tonga," he said. "No I was home asleep. It was the morning I left for Tonga."

"Can you verify that?"

"My wife can."

"There was a fire."

Morgan heard a clock ticking.

"We think it started by accident in the bakery, but until we get the fire marshall's report, I'm checking things. It's odd that a married man pays the rent on an apartment for a couple of single women, don't you think?"

Morgan listened harder, tick-tick-tick. It never stopped, did it?

"Maybe it isn't odd," the detective said.

"What about Amelia?" he asked.

"That's her name? What's her last name? What about the other girl? What was her name?"

"They're dead, aren't they?"

"Definitely."

The detective, a professional woman relying as much on hunches as hard facts, didn't have all day to pussy foot around with this guy and sensed a degree of bewildered innocence in Morgan. She lightened her prosecution, leaned back in her chair and put her feet back up on the desk.

"The place went up like tissue paper. Fastest fire in the city since I've been here. It was so hot, it melted the ovens. There must have been a lot of volatiles upstairs. The top went off so fast the place was gone by the time the fire department got there. The only way we know some women were in there was from the landlord. He led us on to you. Their bones were burned to a crisp." She paused, considered.

"Okay, look, I can see you don't have anything to do with this. It was probably just an accident, an electrical fire. We're just checking."

They stood together, two people who didn't know each other from Adam and Eve, wouldn't meet again in a thousand lifetimes and would have cared less and couldn't wait to be relieved of the other's 'heavy weight of hours, chained and bowed.' They faced the facts of the matter together.

"What about the names?" she asked.

He told the detective that the other woman's name was Amanda. No last name. Amelia? He didn't know her last name either. From? He didn't know. Family? He knew of none.

"What about the bodies?" Morgan said.

"I'm telling you, there's nothing left."

"How can there be nothing?"

The detective reached for her coat and started putting it on as she walked to the door. She had to get on with business, but she picked through a pile of newspapers on a chair and pulled one out and ruffled through it, rustling the papers like she knew exactly what she was looking for. She folded the paper over, folded it in half, and then quarters and tapped a column with her finger.

"Here's all the details. I suppose you should know."

Morgan took the paper.

"As for burial, if no relatives claim the remains, the city will take care of it as usual. I got work to do. You know, suicides, homicides, the usual. You'll be around won't you?"

Morgan looked at her, bewildered, nauseated. "I don't know."

"Better hang around a week anyway," the detective said with some kindness in her voice, not a lot, but some, more relaxed than kind, more turning away from this hunt to the next.

Morgan left the police station and walked groggily out into unrelieved gloom, into dismal weather, low clouds, and threatening rain. The hills, the trees, the houses were washed in the low gray cloud cover. It didn't help that nature reflected his mood. A sunny day, clear blue sky, how would that have changed him? Nature didn't commiserate. People had known this for thousands of years, he just learned it, his sense of progress was primitive.

He read the newspaper article in his truck; he read it again. He was surprised it was such a long article. It explained the fire at the bakery. It explained that two bodies had been recovered from the blaze. It explained that the landlord said two women had shared the apartment, one for just a short time, maybe a few weeks. It explained that the bodies were found together; that they died in bed together; that the apartment had been leased to Morgan Rio who was out of town on business. His wife, when asked, didn't know anything about it. He read it again and it was all there again. "The remains of the bodies were found together in the remains of the bed." He started the truck up and headed out towards Amelia's place. It was late afternoon with no sign of sunshine, no chance of clearing.

The building site was deserted and cordoned off with orange plastic ribbon. There was a low block wall intact, a few pipes twisted up above the charred rubble, hardly any distinguishing features to tell him this was a place he had known. A misty rain began to fall. Morgan slipped under the plastic ribbon and walked in the ash and rubble. The sky turned dark, the rain increased, turning the ash to a gray, slippery mud. One of the baking ovens lay in a collapsed state, the door melted into a formless mass by the inferno. There were no resemblances on which to moor a thought. The apartment they had shared was now ten feet above him invisible in the thick air.

So, Morgan thought, this world was one in which existence could actually disappear without a trace.

Wet and cold, he stood in the rain, in the ruins, feeling sorry for himself and for Amelia's beauty turned to ashes; for Amanda's haven turned to rubble; for Simone's pride turned to humiliation; for Evo's desire turned to obsession.

"Can't we discuss this?" Morgan asked, standing on the granite steps of the Finny Mansion.

"Talk to my lawyer," Simone said. There was no hesitation, no hint of deliberation in her answer.

"So tell me," he started, "it was over long ago and this is just an excuse to get out?"

"As you say."

"Did you ever love me?" he asked quickly.

"Did you ever love her?" Simone asked.

He looked at her looking at him and was reminded of that presence long ago like the weight of an immense continent he had seen from the deck of an enormous ship that tossed on a vast, seemingly endless ocean, and felt fully the degree to which he had lived immersed in the those early images: the ship, enormous; the sea, boundless upon which he tossed and was girded by the multitudinous earth like the reclined form of one great body--a woman's body, unfathomable.

"I can't answer that," he said, "and I don't think it matters anymore." He thought, as her hand, holding open the door began to move--that life held riddles--and closed it slowly, slowly--that it would not divulge--so slowly he heard a hinge whine, the latch snap in, even her faint footsteps fade away into the enormous rooms of the enormous house.

Morgan walked down the long stone path that wound through luxuriant border shrubs of hyssop and ended at a wrought iron gate that automatically swung open for him as he approached. He looked back at the Finny Mansion and saw all at once how large and white and how widely it ranged over the broad, sweeping lawns and grounds.

"This is really a big step up for her," he thought to himself, with a strange sense of conciliation in the meaning of the words, as if he felt proud of her for successfully moving on to encompass a larger measure of her desires. Morgan could no more fathom the reasons behind Simone's quest than he could fathom Evo's exhaustive obsession or his own strange dreams and deep doubt.

Out on the street, down the road, he had parked his truck--distant and red like the dull reminder of an unanswered emergency.

The whore reached back and unfastened her bra. Her breasts were small, very smooth, the skin of youth.

"How old are you, anyway?" he asked.

"I'll be nineteen," the whore said and stood up, slipping her pants off in one motion. They were black pants made of imitation velvet. The whore walked over and tossed them together with her blouse onto a chair next to the bed and strode indifferently back to the bed and stretched out on her stomach on the mattress and took her panties off.

"I'm ready now," the whore said. Morgan winched. He put his hand to his eyes like he had a headache.

"Jesus," he said.

"Aren't you ready?" the whore asked. The whore said this while she lifted her buttocks slightly. The whore knew that the arch of her back and the rise of her buttocks was attractive to men.

"I want you to fuck me now." The whore also knew that men liked women to talk like that. The whore reached back with her hand and spread the folds of her labia and put one finger and then another inside her and moved them in and out. She knew men liked this.

"Please come and fuck me," the whore said. Morgan looked at her and grit his teeth.

"Oh hell, why not?" he said.

"No, I can't," he said.

Rosy and Gilda were twins from Denmark. Morgan sent them on assignment one day to England and they never returned. He heard many years later that they were acting in Theater of the Absurd revivals, and played twins from Denmark who were sent to England and never returned.

"We have to talk about this."

"Please, I want you," the whore said now. The whore's voice, gaining in pitch, had a faint plea in it that Morgan thought he recognized as real. This struck terror in him. He took his glass of scotch off the bar and walked over to the bed. He sat down on the edge of the bed and looked at the flawless back, the small, soft buttocks.

She rolled onto her side, facing him, and put her hand on his knee and slowly worked her hand up his thigh toward his groin as she had seen actresses do in foreign films.

"When will you be twenty?" Morgan asked.

"Pretty soon." Her hand reached his zipper.

"Look, this isn't. . . ."

The whore opened his zipper slowly so that he could hear each click as it reverberated through the room: "Click . . . click . . . click . . . click. He stood up abruptly.

"I'm not sure about this," he said.

"You don't like me," the whore said quickly.

"Of course I do," he said. "I just don't . . . it's just that . . . well . . . you're so young."

"Most men like young woman," the whore said, recriminatingly. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing's the matter with me," Morgan said, defensively. "At least I hope not."

"You don't like me," the whore said again. Her voice whined. Morgan recognized the familiar tone of a woman on the verge of tears. He thought about the absurdity of a whore crying in his wife's bedroom and had a glimpse of what must be attractive about infidelity, what made it desirable. It was cosmic living in miniature, here we had sorrow, deceit, affection, remorse and untold, unnamed feelings played on a scale comprehensible to the average Jackie or Jill. It made you feel bigger. It made you feel important. It made you feel like you were living. The world didn't exist beyond this small deceitful drama. Evo's life, Simone's, Amelia's life, his own, the whore's life made up a drama complicated enough to redeem the truth: that in a cosmic dimension, they mattered not at all.

"But you have to like me. We have to do it."

"I'm sorry."

"You have to do it," Jackie screamed. "You have to."

"I can't," Morgan said.

"No," the whore screamed and stood up and started to cry and the scream had such a loud, shrill, desperate tone that Morgan ran up to her and held her. This scream was so filled with reckless abandon that as soon as Morgan heard it he knew it would always remain vivid--a scream of absolute terror.

In Dr. Superio's waiting room Morgan read: "Wealth, its accoutrements and consequent style of life are virtually an obstacle to self-fulfillment. If we all seek that sense of life in which we feel and know we are alive, wealth can serve as a lifelong distraction from that pursuit. The purpose of wealth is to reduce the amount of chance operating in one's life. But chance is what we want, chance and the experience of pursuit. We can still incrementally fashion an image of the world in things made, but the authenticity of that form has to be derived, not from circumstances, but from vision. Disorder and randomness are representative of fearlessness. Only terminal consciousness needs order. It has to make sense of things; nonsense is unacceptable. Disorder is not deliberate; it is merely the result of a lack of conscious ordering. This neglect of conscious ordering stops feeding the desire--unremitting and visceral--to find meaning, to give solace, to perpetuate the illusion of self-importance in the universe at large. We are less important than we think, and whatever importance can be attached to our being lies in the area of compassionate intentions, the only true anomaly in the universe. Whatever may be otherwise praised is like praising the glass for the effect of the wine."

Claudette Lash wrote this. She was a Jewish princess from the Bronx who adopted Zen and moved to Ulan Bator.

"You should have taken care of things on the home front. That Simone, what a bitch. Women are all bitches. All except Missy and Tuffy."

Morgan stared off into space. He mentally added: "You should have taken care of things on the home front," to his growing list of most hated words and phrases. He would take what little money he had and go to some tiny village in the Andes, or a small island in the Malay Archipelago, or a miniscule hut in some Tibetan mountainside and write a book titled: Most Hated Words and Phrases. "We give to the needy and not the greedy" would be in it, not to mention standards like, "It's the American Way," and "That's what everybody wants."

Morgan dreamed awake.

"Morgan, Morgan, Morgan," Evo called to him over the dreamland distance, "snap out of it."

Morgan came back from his reverie. He shifted in his seat. He found something to focus on. He focused on the similarity between Missy and Tuffy. His eyes went back and forth between them. Their bare breasts swayed synchronously as they continued to rub and massage Evo's shoulders, back and neck like he was made of dough or clay and they were shaping him, getting him just right.

Missy and Tuffy had similar figures: large and yet shapely buttocks in which the cloth of the Tonga Bottoms disappeared up the hemispheric divisions. They had smallish breasts, flat stomachs, long, slender arms. Missy's belly-button was higher than Tuffy's. They wore the same lipstick and eye shadow on faces whose features were similarly shaped, not unattractive, pretty in a plain sort of way. Their tan had a similar tawnyness to it, and of course their bikinis were the same--Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms. Each was wearing an identical diamond on her ring finger. These rings, huge and flashy, looked a lot like engagement rings.

Morgan realized that this kind of stuff had been going on forever, before Turkish Sultans walked the balconies of their harems on warm, Persian nights; before the Pharaohs; before history. Somehow this made him feel better.

Morgan said: "I suppose your catalog was a hit?"

"Blockbuster," Evo said.

"I'm happy for you, really," Morgan said.

"I believe you."

"What's next?" Morgan asked.

"I'm selling the business, retiring," Evo said. He reached out and took Missy's hand and then Tuffy's hand. They stood beside Evo like mascots, dressed in their Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms, bare breasted as in the old days. This was ludicrous, Morgan thought.

"Aren't you ladies cold wearing nothing?" he said.

"No," Missy giggled. "Not really," Tuffy added.

Morgan looked at Evo with a perplexed expression. Evo looked at Morgan with a serious, concerned, deliberate look.

"I've found it, Morgan," he said.

"What?"

"I've found true love. That's what everybody wants. We're going to be married."

Morgan had to laugh. This hurt Evo, who grimaced noticeably. Missy and Tuffy were huffy together.

"I'm sorry," Morgan began, rubbing his temples with his hand, concentrating. "Where might the weddings take place?"

"We're gonna be married in Nature," Tuffy said.

"I know a gal who does these natural marriages, you know like at beaches and stuff," Missy said.

Morgan looked down at the floor to the cover of Evo's catalog, showing Missy and Tuffy, naked belly to naked belly, wearing their Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms right up the crease in their butts and their Emerald Sliding Tri-Tops just barely covering the lower half of their breasts. He contrasted this with the picture on the cover of his catalog, lying right next to Evo's, of a brilliant tropical sunset in front of which Kali Pickett stood: rigid, aloof, with her elegant neck, dressed in a white, neoprene wet suit, zipped down to reveal only a suggestion of cleavage. She was staring off to the left with a cool, clear gaze that implied an inner preoccupation that no guy who sweats bullets for a living would ever want in a woman and no woman would ever want in herself because no guy would want a woman like that. Morgan must have been nuts when he had thought this up. It was apparent that he was out of touch with essential reality. He wondered why?

"Why?" he wondered.

There was no answer forthcoming.

"I'd like you to be my best man," Evo said, his voice had a trembling sound to it, a rattle of emotion. It was the frightened, cautious sound of emerging care. Morgan looked at him and saw Evo's eyes were moist. There was a long silence.

"Then we're leaving for someplace else," Tuffy said.

"Where people don't care about things like how many husbands or wives you got," Missy said.

Morgan heard this and wondered and said: "Where?"

Evo looked at him, stared right into his eyes and became the old Evo, the Evo of his youth, when they had stood together on the deck of the Endurance and watched the stars come out over the Bight of Benin and the lights of the ports of Accra, Porto Novo, and Logos twinkle and shine. When they had felt the dense, mysterious presence of that colossal continent.

"Africa," Evo said.

He slapped his hand on the desk like a kid.

"Africa."

Morgan worked late, developing pictures of:

Sonia in the Pink & Green Splash,

Angie in the Royal Tonga,

Evette in the Black Tonga,

Cleo and Clare in the Royal and Black French-cut Briefs,

Carmine and Carla with their huge breasts stuffed into
all kinds of bikini tops:

the Coral Ribbed Loop Top,

the White Sliding-Tri Top,

the Pink Twist,

the Bandy Bunch Blue Strapped Chamois.

There was April in the Black Loop Top,

May in the Coral & Black & Royal Bandeau Top,

June in the Hot pink Tango Top,

And July in the Royal Blue Brazilian Bottoms.

Morgan worked late in the studio, developing pictures.

After leaving the studio, he would stop off at the Adagio, a coffee house located on the cusp between the old run down and crime ridden and the new pristine and secure parts of town. Morgan would sit at a table in the corner and order a cappuccino and listen to live jazz, the low and lachrymose notes easing the long, taunt loop of tension that had tightened over the long hours of work that was no longer a labor of love, nor may ever have been such.

The wedding took place on a bar of immaculate, white sand that jutted out into the absolute blue water of a place called La Playa de Los Hijos. The weather was hot; the sky was cloudless, lapis and azure colored like a king's jewels.

Missy and Tuffy, all dressed up in their Hot Pink Tonga Bottoms and Emerald Sliding Tri-Tops, introduced Imogen. She was "the gal who does these natural marriages." She looked like a shaman, dressed in a leather tunic and some kind of linen pants: baggy, Mediterranean looking, like Greek peasants wear. She wore all kinds of jewelry, a huge turquoise necklace around her neck like penance, wrist bracelets that clattered and tinkled when she shook hands with Morgan. Her hand was tan, sinewy, leathery. Her skin darkened by sun. Her face, deeply lined, tough.

She seemed to move with deliberate, formal motions through the ritual. She would look at the blank, barren, ubiquitous sky as if for signs; or look out, way out to the horizon with eyes squinting. The lines at the corners of her eyes folded together tightly as she gazed seaward, as if for some ship to come in with news from the gods. Morgan thought to himself, she could have been here five hundred years ago. She could have been the first to see the white-billowed sails of a black-hulled, Dutch ship and the doom carried with it on the waves, shuttled in on the unresisting tide.

Carla and Carmine were there as maids of honor, and each wore a Bandy Bunch Blue Strapped Chamois Top, their breasts overflowing the scant cloth and Hot Pink Brazilian Bottoms. All the girls had flowers in their hair. Flowers had been strewn on the beach. Evo wore a white, three piece suit, white shoes and socks, a white Panama hat, a white shirt and tie. He looked dazed a little, his eyes glazed a little. He smiled a lot. He smiled when he saw Morgan and shook his hand, pumped his hand, then spontaneously threw his arms around him, hugged him, tears came up in his eyes.

Morgan hardly knew what to say and said nothing. He returned the embrace but not with the same eagerness. How could he? Evo and not he was the one getting married twice in the same day. Why shouldn't Evo be happy? He hadn't lost a lover in an inferno. He hadn't been thrown out of his own house. He hadn't gone bankrupt. He wasn't at loose ends. No, Evo was happy. He was actually happy.

Then Evo handed Morgan a jeweler's box, covered with soft, brown velvet, that could easily fit into his hand.

"The rings," Evo said, giddily, "the rings."

The ceremony began. Imogen stood facing landward. Evo, with Missy and Tuffy on either side of him, and Carla and Carmine on either side of Missy and Tuffy, stood facing the open sea. Morgan: hot, uncomfortable, feeling awkward in his gray, three piece suit, with jewelry box in hand stood in the no man's land between the shaman and the brides and the maids and Evo. Beads of perspiration formed on his brow; he felt light-headed. His mind drifted as the incantations from the lips of Imogen, like strange sounds from a somnambulist, rose up over the waves. The white sand reflecting up into his eyes, the bright blue sky, dazzling blue sea, the tones of crashing waves, the murmur of words, the flowers strewn, the wind, then somebody said, "The rings, the rings," as Morgan drifted, floated, eased away into an eclipse of consciousness like falling asleep in clouds.

When Morgan woke up he was lying on a lounge chair beside a swimming pool. The shaman lady Imogen was pressing a cold cloth on his head, a woman's laugh came from the pool area, splashing. Morgan sat up.

"Where am I?"

"You fainted," Imogen said. "How do you feel?"

"Dizzy," Morgan said looking around. Two woman who looked liked Missy and Tuffy were lying on towels next to the pool, sun bathing. He hardly recognized them without their Hot-Pink Tonga Bottoms. They were rubbing oil over each other's bodies, rubbing, rubbing. Carmine was splashing in the pool with a beach ball, holding it in her arms and kicking her feet, making regular gulp, gulp sounds as she kicked. Across the other side of the pool, Morgan thought he saw Carla on her hands and knees, naked, and Evo, similarly undressed, mounting her like a dog.

"What the hell is going on here?" Morgan said, looking at Imogen. He was startled when he turned to look at her. Was this Imogen? She looked like the woman of his dreams, haggard, old. He thought he heard her say: "Sweep, sweep, make clean, make nice."

"I'm really worried about my dreams," Morgan said.

"Why?" Dr. Superio asked, briskly.

"They're becoming more real."

"In what way?"

"I can't tell if they're dreams anymore or if they're reality."

"Is there a difference?"

Morgan sat up from the couch and turned to face Dr. Superio. He looked at her carefully. She was as neat as a pin. Her hair was pulled back and tied behind her head so that she looked like she was wearing a slick, tight helmet of black hair. She had big hoot-owl glasses that gave her the large, inquisitive expression of Athena's bird of wisdom. Her lips were clearly outlined by a pale, shiny lipstick. Her blouse was crisp and clean. Her legs were sheathed in dark nylons and crossed tightly. The hem of her dark skirt rode responsibly on the ridge of her knee. She took notes on a white pad with a sharp pencil.

"If you don't know if there's a difference between dreams and reality, who does?" Morgan asked, desperately.

"Who does?"

Morgan explained: 'I stood up and called to Carmine, who didn't hear me and went on swimming. I called to Missy and Tuffy who did not hear me either and kept rubbing oil on each other. I yelled across the pool to Carla, to Evo, they went on like dogs. I got up and walked around the pool to where Missy and Tuffy were lying. Imogen followed behind me, watching everything.

'What's going on here?' I asked. 'They went on rubbing oil on each other like they didn't hear me, their arms entwined, moving, roving over the mass of each other's oiled and scented hair like animated Hindu goddesses, oblivious to everything, intoxicated.

'I asked Imogen why they couldn't see me, why they couldn't hear me? Was I dreaming?'

'"They have gone over to the other side,"' Imogen told me in the voice I recognized as the voice of the old woman of my dreams, my other dreams, the low throated rattle of the old sweeping woman.

'What other side?' I asked her. I thought this must be a real, vivid, actual dream unlike anything I had ever experienced, but still a dream, and somehow, redeemable as a dream and in a way safe.

'"Where bliss is,"' she said.

Morgan went on: 'Then Imogen, behind me now, began to cry softly in a muffled, sobbing way that gathered volume slowly and rose up steadily to a immense venting of sadness, a wailing--steady and windlike. This sound began to overthrow her staccato sobs of human tears until it became a noise resembling the wind itself, as though it was being forced into a narrow space as between rocky clefts or the tight alleys that separated tall buildings, whistling abruptly, gaining a rhythm that was sharp, almost shrill, a cleansing sound, a sweeping sound, familiar now. I turned around and saw the distant figure, the eerie old woman with the broom and her dark bag.'

Morgan sat bolt upright in bed. Simone lay beside him in deep sleep. The sound of waves came through the French doors, opening onto the balcony that faced the ocean.

"We'll push back the envelope a little bit like those guys in space. That's what everybody wants."

"What?"

"Something different, something else, the unexpected."

"Why? What's wrong with the way things were?"

"How were they," Evo asked, "and when?"

"Simpler. Before."

"Before what?"

"Before they changed," Morgan said, exasperated. "Don't you see how perfectly simple things were at the beginning?"

"That's not what everybody wants," Evo said. "Everybody wants something else, something different, the unexpected."

"I see," Morgan said.

"I thought you would eventually."

"So what do you think of that?" Morgan asked.

"I hardly know what to make of it," she said. "Perhaps we should start over at the beginning."

"Again?"

"Yes."

"Do you think it will help?"

"I think so."

Morgan leaned back. He tried to go back over what had gone before.

"What was the last thing you remember?" she asked.

He tried to talk.

Questionnaires

Question Sheet #1: Please answer the following questions by circling your choice.

1. Did you read all the pages? Y N
2. Did you read some of the pages more than once? Y N
3. Did you read the piece in the order presented? Y N
4. Did you feel there was a sense of continuity in the order of events? Y N
5. Was there a point in the story that you felt was the climax? Y N
6. Did the piece have a plot? Y N
7. Did you feel the story was: Complete Incomplete
8. Do you think you could imaginatively reconstruct the events in chronological order? Y N
9. Which word best describes the piece:
Story Chronicle Narrative History

Question Sheet #2: Please answer as many of the following questions as you can. You may use the margins, the back of the manuscript pages or your own paper if you wish.

1. In what sense would you say the narrative did or did not have continuity?
2. In your opinion, what event was the climax of the narrative?
3. Give your reasons for feeling that the narrative was or was not complete.
4. In what sense did this narrative have or not have a plot? What motivated you to continue reading?
5. What structural features of the narrative did you find most interesting or most disconcerting?
6. Give reasons for feeling the piece was either a story, chronicle, narrative or history.
7. Please make any general or specific comments or criticisms you like.

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