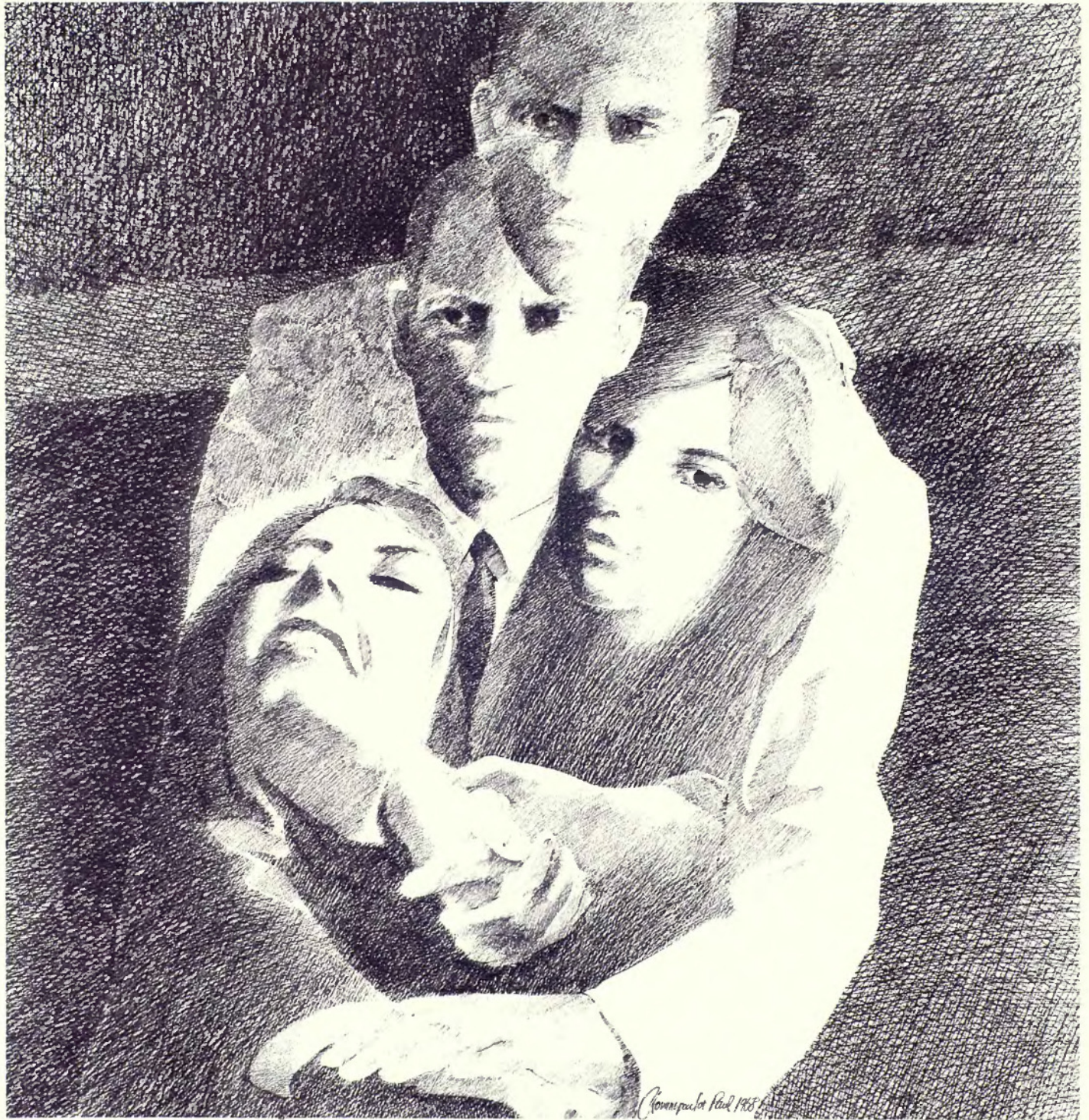


GHOST



the big car, the big office, the big house in connecticut; they all could be his for a small sacrifice—as small as the minuscule bit of grit you can't get out of your eye

fiction By HOKE NORRIS I'M FRIGHTENED. I'm living with a ghost. He is what I once was. I am what he once was. We are ghosts of each other.

I pause in the elevator and let it close on my floor. I will ride up and then down. I need a moment in which to ponder and adapt. For only just now do I recognize the voice that I have been hearing. It is the voice of the ghost. It speaks to me from a point about a foot above my head.

The elevator sways slightly and sighs. The doors open and close as if by instinct. Pretty girls and middle-aged men abandon me. With the descent, the floor falling away beneath my feet, I feel a faint nausea as viscera rise in my body and my ears pop and ache. I touch the number of my floor again. The cold dry light (continued on page 102)

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comes on. It is activated by the heat of the body. What if the tip of my forefinger had been cold? But the light did come on.

So now: The ghost accepted, there is a certain confusion of terms that I must resolve. Think: When I say *I, me and myself*, I refer to the present occupant of the body that bears my name. This occupant is now the real *me*, or so I prefer to believe. Yet it was not always the tenant therein. Once it dwelt without, and then *it* was the ghost. When now I say *ghost*, I refer to the *former* occupant of that body. This one now dwells without. At some time in the past, these two ghosts—beings, essences—exchanged roles; one moved in, the other moved out. How or when that bartering, that eviction and occupation, occurred, or why, I do not know. But (the doors of the elevator opening on my floor) I am grateful for it. If I am to succeed in life, as I must (down the corridor, turn left, unlock office), the present tenancy must be permanent; the present occupant must predominate.

For the present ghost, the entity now without, is the maker of mischief, the giver of evil counsel, as he was when he was the entity within. The present tenant is the gentler, the placater, the voice that warns against the act of rashness and peril. When *he* was the ghost, dwelling outside, he saved me from many a catastrophe. "Watch it, boy; cool it," he used to say, from that point above my head. "Remember which side of the bread the butter's on, what hand feeds you, where your hay comes from." He knows all the fat, dumb, happy admonitions. "You want to get ahead, don't you?" he'd say. "Wouldn't you like to be the big chief someday?" The present big chief would be unwittingly, stupidly planning to destroy us all. I would almost say, "It stinks; it'll be a disaster." Almost. Not quite. "Is it any skin off your nose?" my former ghost would say. "Even if you're right, you're wrong. You're never right with the big chiefs of the world." And so I would say to the chief, "I like it." I would say, "You've done it again, chief." And somehow, by subtly altering his concept, turning it upside down, inside out, diluting it with just the degree of mediocrity that it required, I'd pull the thing through and the chief would say, "Well, you were right. I did it again." I would feel my lips stirring, my tongue trembling, my throat marshaling its tissue. "You idiot, if you had any brains, you'd be dangerous. . . ." I'd almost say the thing. Almost. Not quite. "Watch it; cool it," the old ghost would say. "Remember, the one and only transgression in your world is to be right when the boss is wrong. That is the one unforgivable tribal sin." "Yes, chief, you did it again. . . ." Sincere, rather

sad smile, ineffable, really, near tears, hands clasped across his desk (the thing too big for either of us to voice). How many catastrophes did that former ghost of mine spare me? I'll never know.

But now. Now. I sit at my large desk in my pleasant office and sweat in air conditioning. Somehow, the present situation of my two persons—conformer within, rebel without—is the more perilous. I am naked, exposed, abandoned, an infant upon the Spartan hillside. The ghost is the cold and the wind that would prove me a softling, unfit for life. "Tell him it stinks; tell him, you coward." Just so my present ghost taunts me. Just so he counsels disaster. Someday—this is my real fear—he will stuff the suicidal words into my mouth. Tongue and throat will actually speak them, as once they heeded the cautious warnings. Then, oblivion for me; an acid laugh, no doubt, for the ghost.

I groan and say aloud, "What if I should ever call them by their nicknames?" I refer to the nicknames for the chief and his wife, nicknames suggested, of course—nay, urged—by that rebel ghost of mine. The chief is Laughing Boy; his wife, Minnehaha. With splendid reason. They laugh. They are laughers. They laugh and laugh and laugh. "Mr. Cranebottom ha-ha-ha meet Mr. ha-ha-ha Llewellyn." "Nice weather ha-ha-ha we're ha-ha-ha having, isn't it?" "How ha-ha-ha are you ha-ha-ha fixed lunchwise?" Their laughter explodes, it detonates, it rattles and clanks and clatters through all the offices and corridors, through all our lives, through all time and space. I have seen Laughing Boy laughingly receive a summons from the IRS and then burst into tears, still laughing. I have seen Minnehaha laughingly announce that she had just smashed one of the company cars and then (in her turn) collapse in tears, still laughing. One pities them and escapes to an unlaughing bar. Why do they laugh? I do not know. Were they both laughers from birth? Was that inane bray what brought them together? Or did one learn laughter from the other? Unfortunately, I am not privy to their early lives, though I know they both came from Scranton, Pennsylvania. But I can guess: Minnehaha is the original of the laughers; Laughing Boy, her pupil. Minnehaha is the daughter of the owner. Laughing Boy is not only his son-in-law, he is also his president of the firm. In the good old American tradition, Laughing Boy worked hard, saved his pennies and married the boss' daughter. In the beginning, as a tactic of courtship, he joined in her laughter. In the end, it overwhelmed him. The guess is so good that one can state it as a fact.

Buzzer. A rattler rattling. Warning. About to strike. I leap. "How ha-ha-ha are you ha-ha-ha fixed lunchwise?"

"Free. Absolutely."

"You slob," says the ghost.

"My wife ha-ha-ha and her sister ha-ha-ha are joining us. . . ."

"Imagine what the sister looks like," the ghost says. "Imagine, if you dare."

I call my Marie, who can never help me with my career but whom I vastly love. I can't meet her at Sardi's for lunch. So very sorry.

"You know what they want, don't you?" the ghost says. "They want to marry her off on you, that's what they want."

"But," I say to Marie, "a large matter has come up. I promise, yes, we'll have dinner together."

"No you won't. Guess who you will have dinner with," the ghost says.

It'll cost the chief \$10 in tips just to get us to our table at The Four Seasons and it'll cost him \$120 to get us away from it, except that it doesn't *really* cost him a dime. During lunch, he'll say to me, "What're we going to do about that Simpkins account?" and I'll say, "It does need a little refurbishing, doesn't it?" And that'll be the end of the Simpkins account; but it's now a business luncheon and so expense-account and tax-deductible, and it'll not cost anybody anything at all except the stockholders and the taxpayers, and who cares about them? "I do," says the ghost. "Quiet; down, boy," I say, and the chief (ha-ha-ha) introduces the sister.

The ghost names her instantly: "Smiley." She smiles with big teeth. She looks like a horse coming down the homestretch, in last place. She is not a large matter. She is a small matter. She is bony and angled, and below her short skirt she looks like two shillelachs. "So they've given up in Scranton," says the ghost, "and they've brought her to the big town to find a husband. Guess who's to be the husband." But she is another daughter of the owner, the second and only other, and Laughing Boy won't last forever, if I'm lucky. I join the throng.

Palms placated. Table. "What'll we ha-ha-ha do about the Simpkins account . . . ?" We perform the rite, the first of the rites, for there are now others. Getting acquainted. We chat, with much smiling and laughter. Laughing Boy sprays gin on the white linen and Minnehaha's laughter bubbles and gurgles through the foam and fruit of a whiskey sour, and Smiley bares her molars at the lettuce, and at me, and is about to devour us both.

What can I do about Marie?

"Ah, yes, Marie," says my ghost upon his perch. "Remember sweet Marie of the downy evenings and the warm soft nights. Remember her, you fool and knave."

Silently I say "Shut up," and the ghost laughs. "Smiley is all hard bones and dry
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meat," he says. "Remember Marie, all tender and moist, round and enveloping."

"Marie is not the daughter of the owner."

"Marie is the daughter of nobody. She is the daughter of earth, sun and fine round passion."

"I cannot live without wealth, power and position."

"Spoken like a real red-blooded Amurcan. You will learn that you cannot live with them."

"It is as easy to love a girl who can help you as a girl who cannot."

"You said that about Jeanette, before we changed roles. Remember Jeanette?"

I pause, laughing with the laughers and ordering my third manhattan. For now I remember when the eviction occurred, when *in* and *out* reversed their abodes. They did so at the moment I rejected Jeanette.

"But instead of Jeanette, you chose the daughter of the office manager," says the ghost, "and she rejected you and chose a broker from Scarsdale. She left you stranded at Forty-second and Broadway."

"She got me into the firm."

"So she did. And look at you now."

I look. I am doing very well, indeed. I am having lunch at The Four Seasons; the future promises.

But the ghost says, "Is it important?" I decline to reply. "Ah," he goes on, with a sigh, "the trivialities we must pretend are momentous. How much detergent one sells, whether the Yankees win or lose, what tooth paste the Dubuque milkman buys. . . ." I throttle him, for he is subversive; he is un-American, destructive of all we hold dear. So I listen, I listen well, to the table talk.

"And now ha-ha-ha," Minnehaha is saying, "we have a little surprise. We are staying in town this evening and having a little dinner party for a few ha-ha-ha friends and then ha-ha-ha we are going to the theater."

"And guess," says the ghost, "guess what she is about to say. They just happen to have two extra tickets."

"We just happen ha-ha-ha to have two extra ha-ha-ha tickets."

"And guess who's going to use those two extra tickets."

"And we thought ha-ha-ha," says Laughing Boy, "that you two ha-ha-ha

might join us. Are you free ha-ha-ha this evening?"

Smiley nods and I nod. "Delighted."

"I'm sick," says the ghost; and at the office, I call Marie and again make my apologies and promise never again. Marie likes Shakespeare in Central Park, *The Merchant of Venice* beneath the stars, this side of skyline and moon. She likes Times Square at night. She even likes the fruit juices they sell there.

"Who drinks all this juice?" I asked her once.

"People like us," she said. It sets my teeth on edge.

But my ghost says, while I gaze, on this lovely afternoon, out at 10,000 glass eyes and the smoke from the generators of Consolidated Edison. "Remember Times Square. It rained and you both walked barefooted past the record shops and the sex movies and the fruit-juice stands, and on to her place and warmed your feet under a pink blanket, on her pull-down bed. Remember?"

He sinks into a bog of memory and is silent. The glass eyes fade and dull in Edison smoke and in the evening I say to Smiley, "You are lovely."

My ghost returns. "The present fashions are very cruel to your Smiley," he says. "They expose her." We see, of course, *The Odd Couple*. I saw it first with the office manager, his wife and their daughter. I've never taken Marie. She wouldn't care for it. But *they* do. Smiley smiles and the laughers laugh. They might as well stay home. They laugh, no doubt, in the shower. But the tickets are both expense-account and tax-deductible, for there is a client from Chicago in the party; it is all for sweet business and it's another costly costless entertainment. My ghost only grunts and I say, "Go away or I'll take on enough of the sauce to drown you," and he says, "So it's coming to that, is it?"

Thus he silences me. The lush could never be son-in-law and president of the company. I must destroy my ghost by other means, before he destroys me.

Time, day, night, day, night, day, night. Frequent lunches with the family. Long, overstuffed, alcoholic. If you are in, say, Toledo, and must call an executive in New York, do so before noon our time. You'll seldom get him after the sun's on the decline. If you do, he'll be incapable of rational negotiation. All that gin, potatoes, bread and meat. If he does make it back to the office, he's only waiting for the second round. I join that busy, befuddled throng. I am quite happy. The ghost lies quiet. And the chief, with sly side-looking eyes, says to me, "Pleasant girl ha-ha-ha, isn't she? Make somebody ha-ha-ha a fine little helpmeet ha-ha-ha someday." Yes, indeed. And that evening I kiss Minnehaha's cheek and I kiss Smiley's brow. "You were never



"That's Carruthers . . . an angry young man to the end!"

lovelier," I say, and the ghost, returning, says, "Tell her to for God's sake keep her mouth closed, her teeth are on the brink." So they are, as I discover when finally I kiss her on the lips, with grim and dry determination. It's like kissing a horse. But remember, remember who she is! what she is! where I can go with her! So now she assumes that proprietary air of the girl who believes she's about to be spoken for, the girl who is about to accept, who has begun looking into the windows of jewelry and furniture stores with more than casual attention. "So she's engaged, even if you aren't," says the ghost, with sardonic laughter. "She owns you now: she's got her hooks into you deep and hard, old chap, hasn't she now?"

"What if she has? She can get me what I want."

"And what do you want?"

I'm afraid to answer. I try. What *do* I want? For answer I get, before me, a future endlessly populated with family, with many little Laughing Boys and Minnehahas and Smileys, and Smiley there smiling and breeding and neighing and grinding the hooks deeper, ever deeper into my quivering flesh. And house. House in Scarsdale? Connecticut? Jersey? Long Island? House to separate myself from and rejoin myself to daily five days a week at the end of an elastic umbilical cord; three cars and four servants and two clubs in the country, bridge with the in-laws and summer tours *en famille* to all the places that everybody visits and nobody sees. I feel it, I smell it, I live it, through the mocking voice of the ghost. But I see also—through my own self, the present tenant of this mortal shell—the *presidency*. A divinity, of sorts, in the world I have chosen. Four secretaries, two offices, apartment in Manhattan, house in—in Bucks county?—house in Palm Beach, yacht, intimacy with men of large and important affairs, interviews by renowned, respectful journalists upon—well, upon the affairs of the day, whatever they are—and clubs in town, secret alliances, tips on the market that whisper the way to fortune. All I have to do is make one tiny sacrifice. . . .

"Tiny?" the ghost says. "Yes, tiny. Tiny as a grain of sand you can never get out of your eye."

"I'll get it out."

"Others have tried and failed."

"I'll be different."

"Who wouldn't, if he could?"

"I'm going to destroy you someday."

"Marie," he whispers, "Marie."

I could weep. I do not. *We—we all—* have another evening together.

Smiley smiles; she flourishes; she glows; she shines with the inner light of the female who's got her a man. She even at times looks somewhat lovely. Laughing Boy nods and laughs and hints of

added responsibility for my capable hands. The sisters exchange sly glances and withdraw into that place prepared in heaven for women who know something that men don't. Suddenly I feel surrounded, smothered, buried, assumed, taken over, trussed up, fattened for the kill, drawn and quartered for the cooking. The ghost laughs the long, hard laugh of the amused cynic and I seek an exit. The house, suddenly, is on fire. "Run, don't walk," my ghost calls to my fleeing back.

Marie says, "You look terrible. You've been working too hard."

She has nothing that Smiley has. She has no father at all, so far as I know. And she has everything that Smiley doesn't have and she has it where Smiley will never have it. Perhaps in a few years she'll be only short and fat. But now she's— "Ripe," the ghost furnishes the word, with joy and hope. "Now you're making it, man," he says. "Now you're blasting off the right pad. Just don't force me to spend the rest of our lives with old Toothy Smiley."

So that's his fear. "If you don't like the prospect, go away," I tell him. "How can I?" he says. "You and I have a common destiny. Now kiss her, you cretin." So I kiss Marie. I kiss her on her sweet moist lips. I try to remember that she wears smocks that look like Jackson Pollocks. I try to remember that she likes to go to movies in the afternoon and to Sardi's for lunch and sit upstairs. *Upstairs*. At *Sardi's*. Upstairs, the only other people are in the portraits on the walls. You sit with the crowd downstairs, your elbows in each other's ribs, and meet the beautiful people. I remember—it ought to teach me about Marie. And though she could afford better, she lives in one of those moist, smelly, decaying brownstones in the east 40s that are soon to be destroyed, near the United Nations and the smokestacks. Nothing fashionable for Marie. How could I introduce her to the office? What would she do at The Four Seasons?

So I kiss her again; the ghost sighs with pleasure. In the night, at some time late and silent, beside her on her pull-down bed, I realize: This is more pleasant than ever. Why should it be? "Because you're stealing it, you fink," the ghost whispers in my ear. And, by God, he's right. I am the husband with a night off, a night on the town; a husband with a delicious mistress. This is a gift from Smiley and the laughs, and I am grateful to them, though I can never thank them; to thank would be to confess. I see a long life of such stolen nights, altogether sweet and restoring. . . . "Marry both of 'em," my ghost says, with that sardonic laughter of his. "I'd compromise for that. Then you'd be *stealing* from both of 'em. Maybe that'd make even Smiley palatable." I am tempted. It is night, I am half

asleep, temptation and yielding come easy. I draw Marie's splendid little body to mine and kiss her delicious left ear. In the morning, at my desk, I am lazy and dreaming. But the buzzer buzzes, the rattler about to strike, and I leap. How ha-ha-ha am I fixed lunchwise? "Lunch," cries the ghost, "not lunch, not today!" "Delighted," I say, now fully awake and bereft of all dreaming.

At lunch the chief, quickly, his mind not on his work, mumbles through the rite. Simpkins account, what do about it, something, course. . . . I squirm. They're *looking* at me. Not smiling now, not laughing. *Looking* at me, I realize that they've been *looking* for me for several days now. They have decided: It's time for me to *speak*. The first act is running somewhat too long; time for intermission, to go into the lobby and smoke and ask each other how the play's going, or even call the whole thing off, go home and try another night. Well—so I resolve—the play is going to turn out just dandy; we can all stay in the theater and enjoy the end. I'll *speak*. "Oh, my God, not yet, not yet," cries the ghost; and, for once, I agree. Tomorrow, perhaps, or the day after, I'll *speak*. I squeeze my beloved's bony hand and give her one of my sweet promising smiles. Now she smiles again and once more laughter is heard in the honeysuckle.

"And how will you *speak*, you silly ass?" the ghost shouts above the din. "I can just hear you *speak*. For some time now, as must have been obvious to you, my intentions have begun somewhat to transcend mere friendship. Though they indeed started with friendship, lately they have blossomed into something far more profound and precious. In a word, my dear, if I may make so bold as to presume that you reciprocate the deep feeling that I have for you. . . ."

I order another Manhattan and drown him in it, for the moment.

And I go off to steal another night—one more! at least one more!

Marie lets me in, for once silent and undemonstrative, and leads me to her sofa. The room is lighted only by the bulb in the bath. I peer at her. It occurs to me that for everybody but Marie, the ghost has given me a nickname. Marie is only herself, Marie—playful and innocent as a kitten. But now her face is melancholy. She looks at me. I take a quick breath. She is *looking* at me. I have had enough of being *looked* at for one day. I am annoyed and prepare for a short and uneventful evening. But she embraces me and clings. She presses her head upon my shoulder. Suddenly she is weeping. Suddenly she speaks, briefly but urgently. For a moment I am numb and uncomprehending. Then her words come like an echo, clear and undoubted. With terrifying suddenness the world reels and blackens, the future writhes



ment and I leap across a curb and to a sidewalk. I turn to curse a cursing driver and see a human body in the air, turning, cartwheeling, spread-eagled. I watch for an instant of icy numbness. The instant is interminable; the body slowly turns, tie and coattail flying, and slowly descends to the hood of the taxi and slowly rolls off and lies at my feet. The driver is at my side, cursing and disclaiming fault. In another instant—this one as quick as the tick of a watch—a crowd has gathered. Voices are raised in alarm and accusation. A cop pushes through. He leans over the still and bloody form. He looks into the face. I see it, too, now, for the first time. The tie beneath the chin is like mine—exactly like it, same dark blue, same tiny gold anchor six inches below the knot; the suit is mine, same black silk, snugly fitted. The face . . . bloodied. Mine? I drop to my knees and peer close. The cop thrusts me aside and I fall to the sidewalk. Quickly I get up and again bend over the face. I must see! But the cop again thrusts me aside, with a curse and an order, and the crowd mutters and stits. "You some kinda ghoulish or other?" the cop shouts at me. I shrink away and melt into the crowd.

"Marie," I cry to myself, "it'll be all right. I'll have two families, I can manage it."

An elbow prods my ribs; a citizen wants a closer look. Already here is the ambulance; already the form is upon a stretcher. It disappears into a vast dark interior, a door closes and it is gone. I find myself giggling. Remarkable resemblance.

"All right," the cop shouts, "any of you see this? We need witnesses."

The crowd dissolves. I am alone on the darkened street with the cop and the driver. The cop turns to him and I turn away. Again I walk. Fifth Avenue. Turn left down 44th, back to the strollers, the leather-jacketed, long-haired kids, among the fruit-juice stands and the sex movies. I pause, listening for a voice. What voice? From what lips? I do not know, and feel, briefly, a loss. I buy apricot juice in a paper cup. It sets my teeth on edge. I pour it out into the gutter. Again I walk. Before the Rexall drugstore I pause once more, once more waiting and listening for an expected voice. I stand still in another throng, my head turned to one side, blinded and deafened. I hear laughter—the laughs are abroad in the land again—and in a tremendous animated sign on the square, I see teeth embedded in an equine smile. But still I hear no voice. Now, too, I smile; and in a moment I laugh. I walk on, a little insane, perhaps, for the moment, but free, with a dry cold hard bitter bright acid aching joy.

and strangles there on that smelly, over-stuffed sofa.

The ghost cries in joy. "We're going to be a father, we're going to be a father."

"Shut up!" I yell, looking up to seek him out, for once replying aloud. Marie believes, of course, that I have shouted at her. She weeps no more. She sits apart, straight, chilled and coiled. Her eyes are bright as diamonds with her recent tears and hard with reproach and accusation. "Now see what you've done," the ghost says. "She carries your child and you're prepared to strike her." He is unfair, as usual. I have never struck anyone in my life. I could never strike Marie. I want to bring her back to me and kiss her eyes. But we sit apart, staring at each other.

Finally I say, with a hard, dry throat, in a croaking voice, "Marie, we can't do this, we can't have this." The ghost cries out in unintelligible protest and condemnation. Marie stands.

"You have destroyed everything," she says, "everything."

"We can," I say, and pause, forcing

my way, "we can do something, take measures, there are doctors."

The ghost wails, long and chilling, in the grief and despair of the dying. Marie throws things—an empty picture frame, two books, a chianti bottle. The bottle breaks within its mesh, like a skull within its scalp, and hemorrhages wine-dark upon the wall. I am walking (when next I am aware of my surroundings) upon the east side of Times Square. The first editions are out. I buy a *Times*; I like to work the crossword puzzle before retiring. I place it beneath my arm. They've taken down the old *Times* building (I note with surprise, though I'd known it was gone), but it's still called Times Square. How odd. The *Times* falls from beneath my arm and I go on only half aware of its loss. "Marie," I say to myself, limply grieving, "I'm dreadfully sorry, but plans have been made, the future is arranged, it is inalterable, it is secure and rich."

I walk on, out of the lights. I am blind and unaware. A taxi horn blows, taxi tires complain and whine upon pave-