



# THE YELLOW ROOM

*there is a cure for bad dreams, for gin before breakfast and aimless wandering, and you may find it if you're lucky enough to get lost in the right place at the right time*

*fiction By JOHN CHEEVER*

I WAS BORN out of wedlock—the son of Franklin Faxon Taylor and Gretchen Shurz Oxencroft, his onetime secretary. I have not met my mother for several years, but I can see her now—her gray hair flying and her fierce blue eyes set plainly in her face like the water holes in a prairie. She was born in an Indiana quarry town, the fourth and by far the plainest of four daughters. Neither of her parents had more than a high school education. The hardships and boredom of the provincial Middle West forced them into an uncompromising and nearly liturgical regard for the escape routes of learning. They kept a volume of the complete works of Shakespeare on their parlor table like a sort of mace. Her father was a Yorkshireman with thick light-brown hair and large features. He was slender and wiry and was discovered, in his 40s, to have tuberculosis. He began as a quarry worker, was promoted to quarry foreman and then, during a drop in the limestone market, was unemployed. In the house where she was raised there was a gilt mirror, a horsehair sofa and some china and silver that her mother had brought from Philadelphia. None of this was claimed to prove lost grandeur or even lost comfort, but Philadelphia! Philadelphia!—how like a city of light it must have seemed in the limestone flats. Gretchen detested her name and claimed at one time or another to be named Grace, Gladys, Gwendolyn, Gertrude, Gabriella, Giselle and Gloria. In her adolescence, a public library was opened in the village where she lived and through some accident or misdirection, she absorbed the complete works of John Galsworthy. This left her with a slight English accent and an immutable clash between the world of her reveries and the limestone country. Going home from the library one winter afternoon on a trolley car, she saw her father standing under a street lamp with his lunch pail. The driver did not stop for him and Gretchen turned to a woman beside her and exclaimed: “Did you see that poor creature! He signaled for the tram to stop, but the driver *quite* overlooked him.” These were the accents of Galsworthy in which she had been immersed all afternoon, and how could she fit her father into this landscape? He would have failed as a servant or gardener. He might have passed as a groom, although the only horses he knew were the wheel horses at the quarry. She knew what a decent, courageous and cleanly man he was and it was the intolerable sense of his aloneness that had forced her, in a contemptible way, to disclaim him. Gretchen—or Gwendolyn, as she then called herself—graduated from high school with honors and was given a scholarship at the university in Bloomington. A week or so after her graduation from the university, she left the limestone country to make her fortune in New York. Her parents came down to the station to see her off. Her father was wasted. Her mother’s coat was threadbare. As they waved goodbye, another traveler asked if they were her parents. It was still in her to explain in the accents of Galsworthy that they were merely some poor people she had visited, but instead she exclaimed: “Oh, yes, yes, they are my mother and father.”

There is some mysterious, genetic principality where the children of anarchy are raised, and Gretchen (now Gloria) carried this passport. She had become a socialist in her last year at the university and the ills, injustices, imperfections, inequities and indecencies of the world made her smart. She more or less hurled herself at the city of New York and was hired shortly as a secretary for Franklin Faxon Taylor. He was a wealthy and visionary young man and a member of the Socialist Party. Gretchen became his secretary and presently his lover. They were by all accounts very happy together. What came between them—or so my father claimed—was that at this point her revolutionary ardor took the form of theft or kleptomania. They traveled a great deal and whenever they checked out of a hotel, she



always packed the towels, the table silver, the dish covers and the pillowcases. The idea was that she would distribute them among the poor, although he never saw this happen. "Someone *needs* these things," she would exclaim, stuffing their suitcases with what did not belong to her. Coming into her Hay-Adams room in Washington once, he found her standing on a chair, removing the crystals from the chandelier. "Someone can *use* these," she said. At the Commodore Perry in Toledo, she packed the bathroom scale, but he refused to close the suitcase until she returned it. She stole a radio in Cleveland and a painting from the Palace Hotel in San Francisco. This incurable habit of thieving—or so he claimed—led them to bitter quarrels and they parted in New York. In the use of any utensils—toasters, irons and automobiles—Gretchen had been dogged by bad luck and, while she had been well equipped with birth-control material, her bad luck overtook her again. She discovered soon after the separation that she was pregnant.

Taylor did not mean to marry her. He paid the costs of her *acouchement* and gave her an income and she took a small apartment on the West Side. She always introduced herself as Miss Oxencroft. She meant to be disconcerting. I suppose she saw some originality in our mutual illegitimacy. When I was three years old, I was visited by my father's mother. She was delighted by the fact that I had a head of yellow curls. She offered to adopt me. After a month's deliberation, my mother—who was never very consistent—agreed to this. She felt that it was her privilege, practically her vocation, to travel around the world and improve her mind. A nursemaid was gotten for me and I went to live in the country with Grandmother. My hair began to turn brown. By the time I was eight, my hair was quite dark. My grandmother was neither bitter nor eccentric and she never actually reproached me for this, but she often said that it had come to her as a surprise. I was called Paul Oxencroft on my birth certificate, but this was thought unsatisfactory and a lawyer came to the house one afternoon to settle this. While they were discussing what to call me, a gardener passed the window, carrying a hammer, and so I was named. A trust had been established to provide Gretchen with a decent income and she took off for Europe. This ended her imposture as Gloria. Her checks, endorsements and travel papers insisted that she be Gretchen and so she was.

When my father was a young man, he summered in Munich. He had worked out all his life with bar bells, dumbbells, etc., and had a peculiar physique that is developed by no other form of exercise. In Munich he posed, out of vanity or pleasure, for the architectural sculptor Feldspar, who ornamented the façade of the Prinz-Regenten Hotel. He posed as one of those male caryatids who hold on their shoulders the lintels of so many opera houses, railroad stations, apartment buildings and palaces of justice. The Prinz-Regenten was bombed in the Forties, but long before this, I saw my father's recognizable features and overdeveloped arms and shoulders supporting the façade of what was then one of the most elegant hotels in Europe. Feldspar was popular at the turn of the century and I saw my father again, this time in full figure, holding up the three top floors of the Hotel Mercedes in Frankfurt am Main. I saw him in Yalta, Berlin and upper Broadway and I saw him lose caste, face and position as this sort of monumental façade went out of vogue. I saw him lying in a field of weeds in West Berlin. But all of this came much later, and any ill feeling about my illegitimacy and the fact that he was always known as my uncle was overcome by my feeling that he held on his shoulders the Prinz-Regenten, the better suites of the Mercedes and the Opera House in Malsberg that was also bombed. He seemed very responsible and I loved him.

I once had a girl who kept saying that she knew what my mother must be like. I don't know why an affair that centered on carnal roughhouse should have summoned memories of my old mother, but it did. The girl had it all wrong, although I never bothered to correct her. "Oh, I can imagine your mother," the girl would sigh. "I can see her in her garden, cutting roses. I know she wears chiffon and big hats." If my mother was in the garden at all, she was very likely on her hands and knees, flinging up weeds as a dog flings up dirt. She was not the frail and graceful creature that my friend imagined. Since I have no legitimate father, I may have expected more from her than she could give me, but I always found her disappointing and sometimes disconcerting. She now lives in Kitzbühel until the









middle of December—whenever the snow begins to fall—and then moves to a pension in Estoril. She returns to Kitzbühel when the snow melts. These moves are determined more by economic reasons than by any fondness she has for the sun.

I graduated from Choate and Yale. In my sophomore year, Grandmother died and left me some money. After my graduation, I moved to Cleveland and invested \$50,000 in a textbook firm. I lost this investment in less than a year. I don't think there was any connection, because I still had plenty of money, but about this time I found my appetite for men, women, children, athletics—everything—mysteriously curtailed and I had begun to suffer, for no apparent reason, from melancholy, a *cafard* or form of despair that sometimes seemed to have a tangible approach. Once or twice I seemed to glimpse some of its physical attributes. It was covered with hair—it was the classical *bête noire*—but it was as a rule no more visible than a column of thin air. I decided then to move to New York. I had majored in Italian literature and my plan was to translate the poetry of Eugenio Montale, but my *cafard* made this impossible. I took a furnished apartment in the East 50s. I seemed to know almost no one in the city and this left me alone much of the time and much of the time with my *cafard*.

It overtook me on trains and planes. I would wake feeling healthy and full of plans to be crushed by the *cafard* while I shaved or drank my first cup of coffee. It was most powerful and I was most vulnerable when the noise of traffic woke me at dawn. My best defense, my only defense, was to cover my head with a pillow and summon up those images that represented for me the excellence and beauty I had lost. The first of these was a mountain—it was obviously Kilimanjaro. The summit was a perfect, snow-covered cone, lighted by a passing glow. I saw the mountain a thousand times—I begged to see it—and as I grew more familiar with it, I saw the fire of a primitive village at its base. The vision dated, I guess, from the Bronze or the Iron Age. Next in frequency I saw a fortified medieval town. It could have been Mont-Saint-Michel or Orvieto or the grand lamasery in Tibet, but the image of the walled town, like the snow-covered mountain, seemed to represent beauty, enthusiasm and love. I also saw less frequently and less successfully a river with grassy banks. I guessed these were the Elysian fields, although I found them difficult to arrive at and at one point it seemed to me that a railroad track or a thoroughway had destroyed the beauty of the place. As often as I saw these places I would, to fend off the *cafard*, recite a sort of incantation or primitive prayer. I would pick the name of

some virtue I had lost—love, valor, compassion or excellence—and repeat the word a hundred times. As in Zen, I would exhale and inhale; for example: "Compassion" (exhale), "Compassion" (inhale), etc. However, this was not like Zen counting; that is to say, there was nothing contemplative in my incantation. It was wrung from me in despair. I suppose I could have organized a church in which the congregation got to their knees and shouted "Valor, Valor" (exhale, inhale) a thousand times. One could do worse.

I had begun to drink heavily to lick the *cafard* and one morning—I had been in New York for about a month—I took a hooker of gin while I shaved. I then went back to bed again, covered my head with a pillow and tried to evoke the mountain, the fortified town or the green field.

I stayed in bed that day until 11 or later. What I wanted then was a long, long, long sleep and I had enough pills to accomplish this. I flushed the pills down the toilet and called one of my few friends and asked for the name of his doctor. I then called the doctor and asked him for the name of a psychiatrist. He recommended a man named Doheny.

Doheny saw me that afternoon. His waiting room had a large collection of magazines, but the ashtrays were clean, the cushions were unrumpled and I had the feeling that perhaps I was his first customer in a long time. Was he, I wondered, an unemployed psychiatrist, an unsuccessful psychiatrist, an unpopular psychiatrist, did he while away the time in an empty office like an idle lawyer, barber or antique dealer? He presently appeared and led me into a consultation room that was furnished with antiques. There were no diplomas on the wall. I wondered then if some part of a psychiatrist's education was the furnishing of his consultation room. Did they do it themselves? Did their wives do it? Was it done by a professional? Doheny had large brown eyes in a long face. When I sat in the patient's chair, he turned the beam of his brown eyes onto me exactly as a dentist turns on the light above his drills, and for the next 50 minutes I basked in his gaze and returned his looks earnestly to prove that I was truthful and manly. He seemed, like some illusion of drunkenness, to have two faces and I found it fascinating to watch one swallow up the other. He charged a dollar a minute.

Doheny was intensely interested in my parents—he seemed to find them entertaining. My mother writes to me from Kitzbühel once or twice a month, and I gave Doheny her most recent letter. "I dreamed an entire movie last night," she wrote, "not a scenario but a movie in full color about a Japanese painter named Chardin. And then I dreamed I

went back to the garden of the old house in Indiana and found everything the way I had left it. Even the flowers I'd cut so many years ago were on the back porch, quite fresh. There it all was, not as I might remember it, for my memory is failing these days and I couldn't recall anything in such detail, but as a gift to me from some part of my spirit more profound than memory. After that, I dreamed that I took a train. Out of the window I could see blue water and blue sky. I wasn't quite sure where I was going, but looking through my handbag, I found an invitation to spend a weekend with Robert Frost. Of course, he's dead and buried and I don't suppose we would have gotten along for more than five minutes, but it seemed like some dispensation or bounty of my imagination to have invented such a visit.

"My memory is failing in some quarters, but in others it seems quite tenacious and even tiresome. It seems to perform music continuously. I seem to hear music all the time. There is music running through my mind when I wake and it plays all day long. What mystifies me is the variety in quality. Sometimes I wake to the slow movement of the first Rasoumovsky. You know how I love that. I may have a Vivaldi concerto for breakfast and some Mozart a little later. But sometimes I wake to a frightful Sousa march followed by a chewing-gum commercial and a theme from Chopin. I loathe Chopin. Why should my memory torment me by playing music that I loathe?

"I suppose you think all of this foolish, but at least I don't go in for tarot cards or astrology and I do not, as my friend Elizabeth Howland does, feel that my windshield wiper gives me sage and coherent advice on my stock-market investments. She claimed only last month that her windshield wiper urged her to invest in Merck chemicals, which she did, making a profit of several thousand. I suppose she lies about her losses as gamblers always do. As I say, windshield wipers don't speak to me, but I do hear music in the most unlikely places—especially in the motors of airplanes. Accustomed as I am to the faint drone of transoceanic jets, it has made me keenly aware of the complicated music played by the old DC-7s and Constellations that I take to Portugal and Geneva. Once these planes are airborne, their engines sound to my ears like some universal music as random and free of reference and time as the makings of a dream. It is far from jubilant music, but one would be making a mistake to call it sad. The sounds of a Constellation seem to me more contrapuntal—and in a way less universal than a DC-7's. I can trace, as clearly as anything I ever heard in a concert hall, the shift from a major chord to a diminished seventh, the ascent to an eighth, the reduction to a



minor and the resolution of the chord. The sounds have the driving and processional sense of Baroque music, but they will never, I know from experience, reach a climax and a resolution. The church I attended as a girl in Indiana employed an organist who had never completed his musical education, because of financial difficulties or a wayward inability to persevere. He played the organ with some natural brilliance and dexterity, but since his musical education had never reached the end of things, what had started out as a forthright and vigorous fugue would collapse into formlessness and vulgarity. The Constellations seem to suffer from the same musical irresolution, the same wayward inability to persevere. The first, second and third voices of the fugue are sounded clearly, but then, as with the organist, the force of invention collapses into a series of harmonic meanderings. The engines of a DC-7 seem both more comprehensive and more limited. One night on a flight to Frankfurt, I distinctly heard the props get halfway through Gounod's vulgar variations on Bach. I have also heard Handel's *Water Music*, the death theme from *Tosca*, the opening of the *Messiah*, etc. But boarding a DC-7 one night in Innsbruck—the intense cold may have made the difference—I distinctly heard the engines produce some exalting synthesis of all life's sounds: Boats and train whistles and the creaking of iron gates and bedsprings and drums and rain winds and thunder and footsteps and the sounds of singing all seemed woven into a rope or cord of air that ended when the stewardess asked us to observe the NO SMOKING sign (RAUCHEN VERBOTEN), an announcement that has come to mean to me that if I am not at home, I am at least at my destination.

"Of course, I know that you think all of this unimportant. It is no secret to me that you would have preferred a more conventional mother—someone who sent you baked goods and remembered your birthday—but it seems to me that in our knowledge and study of one another, we are circumspect and timid to an impractical degree. In our struggle to glimpse the soul of a man—and have we ever desired anything less?—we claim to have the honesty of desperation, whereas, in fact, we set up whole artificial structures of acceptable reality and stubbornly refuse to admit the terms by which we live. I will, before I end my letter, bore you with one more observation of fact. What I have to say must be well known to most travelers, and yet I would not dare confide my knowledge to an intimate friend, lest I be thought mad. Since you already think me mad, I suppose no harm can be done.

"I have noticed, in my travels, that the strange beds I occupy in hotels and pensions have a considerable variance in

atmosphere and a profound influence on my dreams. It is a simple fact that we impress something of ourselves—our spirits and our desires—on the mattresses where we lie, and I have more than ample evidence to prove my point. One night in Naples last winter, I dreamed of washing a drip-dry wardrobe, which is, as you well know, something I would never do. The dream was quite explicit—I could see the articles of clothing hanging in the shower and smell the wet cloth, although this is no part of my memories. When I woke, I seemed surrounded by an atmosphere unlike my own—shy, earnest and chaste. There was definitely some presence in the room. In the morning, I asked the desk clerk who had last occupied my bed. He checked his records and said that it had last been occupied by an American tourist—a Miss Harriet Lowell—who had moved to a smaller room but who could then be seen coming out of the dining room. I then turned to see Miss Lowell, whose white, drip-dry dress I had already seen in my dreams and whose shy, chaste and earnest spirit still lingered in the room she had left. You will put this down to coincidence, I know, but let me go on. Sometime later, in Geneva, I found myself in a bed that seemed to exhale so unsavory and venerable an atmosphere that my dreams were quite disgusting. In them I saw two naked men, mounted like a horse and rider. In the morning, I asked the desk clerk who the earlier tenants had been and he said: *'Oui, oui, deux tapettes.'* They had made so much noise they had been asked to leave. After this, I made a practice of deciding who the previous occupant of my bed had been and then checking with the clerk in the morning. In every case I was correct—in every case, that is, where the clerk was willing to cooperate. In cases involving prostitutes, they were sometimes unwilling to help. If I found no presence in my bed, I would judge that the bed had been vacant for a week or ten days. I was always correct. Traveling that year, I shared the dreams of businessmen, tourists, married couples, chaste and orderly people, as well as whores. My most remarkable experience came in Munich in the spring.

"I stayed, as I always do, at the Bristol and I dreamed about a sable coat. As you know, I detest furs, but I saw this coat in great detail—the cut of the collar, the honey-colored skins, the yellow silk with which it was lined and, in one of the silk pockets, a pair of ticket stubs for the opera. In the morning, I asked the maid who brought me coffee if the previous occupant of the room had owned a fur coat. The maid clasped her hands together, rolled her eyes and said yes, yes, it was a Russian sable coat and the most beautiful coat that she, the maid, had ever seen. The woman had loved her coat. It was like a lover to her.

And did the woman who owned the coat, I asked, stirring my coffee and trying to seem unexceptional, ever go to the opera? Oh, yes, yes, said the maid, she came for the Mozart festival and went to the opera every night for two weeks, wearing her sable coat.

"I was not deeply perplexed—I have always known life to be overwhelmingly mysterious—but wouldn't you say that I possess indisputable proof of the fact that we leave fragments of ourselves, our dreams and our spirits in the rooms where we sleep? But what could I do with this information? If I confided my discovery to a friend, I would likely be thought mad; and was there, after all, any usefulness in my ability to divine that my bed had been occupied by a spinster or a prostitute or by no one at all? Was I gifted or were these facts known to all travelers and wouldn't giftedness be a misnomer for a faculty that could not be exploited? I have finally concluded that the universality of our dreams includes everything—articles of clothing and theater ticket stubs—and if we truly know one another so intimately, mightn't we be closer than we imagine to a peaceable world?"

After I had been going to Doheny for a month or longer, he asked me to masturbate when I got home and report my reactions to him. I did as he asked and reported that I felt ashamed of myself. He was delighted with this news and said that sexual guilt was the source of my *cafard*. I was a repressed, transvestite homosexual. The fact that the image of my father supported hotels, palaces of justice and opera houses had intimidated me and forced me into an unnatural way of life. I told him to go to hell and that I was through. I said that he was a charlatan and that I was going to report him to the American Psychiatric Association. If he wasn't a charlatan, I asked, why didn't he have diplomas hung on his wall like other doctors? He got very angry at this, threw open his desk drawer and pulled out a pile of diplomas. He had diplomas from Yale, Columbia and the Neurological Institute. Then I noticed that all these documents were made out to a man named Howard Shitz and I asked if he hadn't picked them up in a second-hand bookstore. He said he had changed his name when he went into practice, for reasons that any dunce would understand. I left.

I was no better after Doheny—I was worse—and I began to wonder seriously if the ubiquitousness of my father's head and shoulders, carved in limestone, had not been crippling; but if it had been, what could I do? The opera house in Malsberg and the Prinz-Regenten had been demolished, but I couldn't remove him from his position on upper Broadway and he was still holding up the Mercedes in Frankfurt. I went on drinking—

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## THE YELLOW ROOM *(continued from page 92)*

almost a quart a day—and my hands had begun to shake terribly. When I went into a bar, I would wait until the bartender turned his back before I tried to get the glass up to my mouth. I sometimes spilled gin all over the bar. This amused the other customers. I went out to Pennsylvania one weekend with some heavy-drinking friends and came back on a local train that got me into Penn Station about 11 Sunday night. The station was then being razed and reconstructed and it was such a complex of ruins that it seemed like a frightening projection of my own confusions and I stepped out into the street, looking for a bar. The bars around the station were too brightly lighted for a man whose hands were shaking and I started walking east, looking for some dark saloon where my infirmity would not be so noticeable. Walking down a side street, I saw two lighted windows and a room with yellow walls. The windows were uncurtained. All I could see were the yellow walls. I put down my suitcase to stare at the windows. I was convinced that whoever lived there lived a useful and illustrious life. It would be a single man like myself, but a man with a continent nature, a ruling intelligence, an efficient disposition. The pair of windows filled me with shame. I wanted my life to be not merely decent but exemplary. I wanted to be useful, continent and at peace. If I could not change my habits, I could at least change my environment, and I thought that if I found such a room with yellow walls, I would cure my *cafard* and my drunkenness.

The next afternoon, I packed a bag and took a cab across town to the Hotel Dorset, looking for that room where I could begin my illustrious life. They gave me a room on the second floor, looking out onto an air shaft. The room had not been made up. There was an empty whiskey bottle and two glasses on the bureau and only one of the two beds had been used. I called the desk to complain and they said the only other vacancy they had was a suite on the tenth floor. I then moved to this. I found a parlor, a double bedroom and a large collection of flower pictures. I ordered some gin, vermouth and a bucket of ice and got stoned. This was not what I intended and in the morning I moved to the Madison Hotel.

My room at the Madison was furnished with the kind of antiques Doheny had had in his consultation room. The desk, or some part of it, had once been a spinet. The coffee table was covered with leather that had been tooled, gilded and burned by many cigarettes. There were mirrors on all the walls, so that I could not escape my own image. I saw myself smoking, drinking, dressing and undressing and when I woke in the

morning, the first thing I saw was myself. I left the next day for the Waldorf, where I was given a pleasant, high-ceilinged room. There was a broad view. I could see the dome of St. Bartholomew's, the Seagram building and one of those yellow bifurcated buildings that has a terraced and a windowed front and a flat, yellow-brick backside with no sign of life but a rain gutter. It seemed to have been sliced with a knife. Almost anywhere in New York above the 15th floor, your view includes a few caryatids, naiads, homely water tanks and Florentine arches, and I was admiring these when it occurred to me how easy it would be to escape the *cafard* by jumping into the street, and I checked out of the Waldorf and took a plane to Chicago.

In Chicago I took a room at the Palmer House. This was on the 16th floor. The furniture seemed to be of some discernible period, but the more I examined it, the more it seemed to be an inoffensive improvisation, and then I realized that it was the same furniture I had seen in my room at the Waldorf. I flipped open the Venetian blinds. My window looked out into an enclosure where I could see, upward, downward and sidewise, a hundred hundred windows

exactly like mine. The fact that my room had no uniqueness seemed seriously to threaten my own uniqueness; I suffered an intense emotional vertigo. The fear was not of falling but of vanishing. If there was nothing in my room to distinguish it from a hundred hundred others, there might be nothing about me to set me apart from other men, and I snapped the Venetian blinds shut and went out of the room. Waiting for the elevator, a man gave me that bland, hopeful gaze of a faggot on the make and I thought that he might have been driven by the sameness of the hotel windows to authenticate his identity by unnatural sexual practices. I lowered my eyes chastely to the floor. Downstairs I drank three martinis and went to a movie. I stayed in Chicago two days and took the Zephyr to San Francisco. I thought a train compartment might be the environment where I could begin my new life, but it was not. In San Francisco I stayed two nights at the Palace and two nights at the St. Francis and then flew down the coast and checked in at the Los Angeles Biltmore. This was the furthest from what I wanted and I moved from there to the Chateau Marmont. I moved from there to the Beverly Hills and a day later took a plane to London on the northerly route. I tried to get a room



*"You must learn to sublimate that involuted schizoid regression; you must control your melancholic id complex. And would it hurt to telephone your poor old mother once in a while?"*



at the Connaught, but they were full and so I went instead to the Dorchester, where I lasted two days. I then flew to Rome and checked in at the Eden. My *cafard* had followed me around the world and I was still drinking heavily. Lying in bed in the Eden one morning with a pillow over my face, I summoned up Kilimanjaro and its ancient village, the Elysian fields and the fortified town. It occurred to me then that I had thought the town might be Orvieto. I rented a Fiat from the concierge and started north.

It was after lunch when I got into Umbria and I stopped in a walled town and had some pasta and wine. The country was wheat country, more heavily forested than most of Italy and very green. Like most travelers, I kept stupidly observing the sameness of things, kept telling myself that on the evidence of what I saw, I might be in New Hampshire or the outskirts of Heidelberg. What for? It was nearly seven o'clock when I came down the winding road into the broad valley that surrounds Orvieto.

I had been wrong about the towers, but everything else seemed right. The city was high, its buildings seemed to be a variation of the stone butte and it looked like the place I had seen in fending off the *cafard*. It seemed to correspond to my vision. I was excited. My life, my sanity were involved. The papal cathedral, in its commanding position, excited, as it was meant to do, awe, admiration and something like dread, as if some part of my memory was that of a heretic on my way to be questioned by the bishops. I drove through the lower town up to the city on the butte and checked in at the Hotel Nazionali, where I was given a large, deluxe European room with a massive armoire and a glass chandelier. It was not the room I was looking for. I wandered around the streets and just before dark, in a building not far from the cathedral, I saw the lighted windows and the yellow walls.

I seemed, looking up at them from the sidewalk, to be standing at the threshold of a new life. This was not a sanctuary, this was the vortex of things, but this was a place where the *cafard* could not enter. The door of the building was open and I climbed some stairs. The pair of yellow rooms was on the second floor. They were unfurnished, as I knew they would be, and freshly painted. Everything was ready for my occupancy. There was a man putting up shelves for my books. I spoke to the man and asked him whom the rooms belonged to. He said they were his. I asked if they were for sale or for rent and he smiled and said no. Then I said I wanted them and would pay whatever he asked for them, but he went on smiling and saying no. Then I heard some men in the hallway, carrying something heavy. I could hear their strained voices, their breathing and the object, whatever it was, bumping

against the wall. It was a large bed, which they carried into the second of the yellow rooms. The owner explained to me then that this was his marriage bed. He was going to be married next day in the chapel of the cathedral and begin his married life here. I was still so convinced that the rooms were, spiritually at least, my property that I asked him if he wouldn't prefer to live in one of the new apartments in the lower town. I would pay the difference in the rent and was prepared to give him a large present for his wedding. He was impervious, of course. Like any groom, he had imagined so many hundreds of times the hour when he would bring his bride back to the yellow rooms that no amount of money would dislodge the memory from its place in his mind. I wished him well anyhow and went down the stairs. I had found my yellow rooms and I had lost them. I left Orvieto in the morning for Rome and left Rome the next day for New York.

I spent one night in my apartment, during which I drank almost a quart of whiskey. The next afternoon I drove out to Pennsylvania to visit a classmate of mine—Charlie Masterson—and his wife. They were heavy drinkers and we ran out of gin before dinner. I drove into the little village of Blenville and bought a fresh supply at the liquor store and started back. I made a wrong turn and found myself on a narrow red dirt lane that seemed to lead nowhere. Then on my left, set back from the road and a little above it, I saw the yellow walls for the third time.

I turned off the motor and the lights and got out of the car. There was a brook between the road and the house and I crossed this on a wooden bridge. A lawn or a field—the grass needed cutting—sloped up to a terrace. The house was stone—rectangular—an old Pennsylvania farmhouse, and the yellow room was the only room lighted. The walls were the same color I had seen in Orvieto. I went up onto the terrace, as absorbed as any thief. A woman sat in the yellow room, reading a book. She wore a black dress and high-heeled shoes and had a glass of whiskey on a table at her side. Her face was pale and handsome. I guessed she was in her 20s. The black dress and the high-heeled shoes seemed out of place in the country and I wondered if she had just arrived from town or were just about to leave, although the size of the whiskey glass made this seem unlikely. But it was not the woman but the room I wanted—square, its lemon-yellow walls simply lighted, and I felt that if I could only possess this, I would be myself again, industrious and decent. She looked up suddenly, as if she sensed my presence, and I stepped away from the window. I was very happy. Walking back to the car, I saw the name Emmi-

son painted on a mailbox at the end of the driveway. I found my way back to the Mastersons and asked Mrs. Masterson if she knew anyone named Emmison. "Sure," she said. "Dora Emmison. I think she's in Reno."

"Her house was lighted," I said.

"What in the world were you doing at her house?"

"I got lost."

"Well, she was in Reno. I suppose she's just come back. Do you know her?" she asked.

"No," I said, "but I'd like to."

"Well, if she's back, I'll ask her for a drink tomorrow."

She came the next afternoon, wearing the black dress and the same high heels. She was a little reserved, but I found her fascinating, not because of her physical and intellectual charms but because she owned the yellow room. She stayed for supper and I asked about her house. I presently asked if she wouldn't like to sell it. She was not at all interested. Then I asked if I could see the house and she agreed indifferently. She was leaving early and if I wanted to see the place, I could come back with her, and so I did.

As soon as I stepped into the yellow room, I felt that peace of mind I had coveted when I first saw the walls in a walk-up near Pennsylvania Station. Sometimes you step into a tack room, a carpenter's shop or a country post office and find yourself unexpectedly at peace with the world. It is usually late in the day. The place has a fine smell (I must include bakeries). The groom, carpenter, postmaster or baker has a face so clear, so free of trouble that you feel that nothing bad has ever or will ever happen here, a sense of fitness and sanctity never achieved, in my experience, by any church.

She gave me a drink and I asked again if she would sell the place. "Why should I sell my house?" she asked. "I like my house. It's the only house I have. If you want a place in the neighborhood, the Barkham place is on the market and it's much more attractive than this."

"This is the house I want."

"I don't see why you're so crazy about this place. If I had a choice, I'd rather have the Barkham place."

"Well, I'll buy the Barkham place and exchange it for this."

"I simply don't want to move," she said. She looked at her watch.

"Could I sleep here?" I asked.

"Where?"

"Here, here in this room."

"But what do you want to sleep here for? The sofa's hard as a rock."

"I'd just like to."

"Well, I guess you can if you want to. No monkey business."

"No monkey business."

"I'll get some bedding."

She went upstairs and came down 219



with some sheets and a blanket and made my bed. "I think I'll turn in myself," she said, going toward the stairs. "I guess you know where everything is. If you want another drink, there's some ice in the bucket. I think my husband left a razor in the medicine cabinet. Good night." Her smile was courteous and no more. She climbed the stairs.

I didn't make a drink. I didn't, as they say, need one. I sat in a chair by the window feeling the calm of the yellow walls restore me. Outside I could hear the brook, some night bird, moving leaves and all the sounds of the night world seemed endearing, as if I quite literally loved the night as one loves a woman, loved the stars, the trees, the weeds in the grass as one can love with the same ardor a woman's breasts and the apple core she has left in an ashtray. I loved it all and everyone who lived. My life had begun again and I could see, from this beginning, how far I had gone from any natural course. Here was the sense of reality—a congenial, blessed and useful construction to which I belonged. I stepped out onto the terrace. It was cloudy, but some stars could still be seen. The wind was shifting and smelled of rain. I walked down to the bridge, undressed and dove into a pool there. The water was buoyant and a little brackish from the bogs in which it rose, but it had, so unlike the disinfected sapphire of a pool, a strong and unmistakably erotic emphasis. I dried myself on my shirttails and walked naked back to the house, feeling as if the earth were paved for my contentment. I brushed my teeth, turned out the light and, as I got into my bed, it began to rain.

For a year or more, the sound of the rain had meant merely umbrellas, raincoats, rubbers, the wet seats of convertibles; but now it seemed like some enlargement of my happiness, some additional bounty. It seemed to increase my feeling of limberness and innocence and I fended off sleep to listen to it with the attention and curiosity with which we follow music. When I did sleep, I dreamed in this order of the mountain, the walled town and the banks of the river, and when I woke at dawn, there was no trace of the *cafard*. I dove into the pool again and dressed. In the kitchen I found a melon, made some coffee and fried some bacon. The smell of coffee and bacon seemed like a smell of newness and I ate with a good appetite. She came down later in a bathrobe and thanked me for having made the coffee. When she raised the cup to her lips, her hand shook so that the coffee spilled. She went into the pantry, returned with a bottle of whiskey and spiked her coffee. She neither apologized nor explained this, but the spike steadied her hand. I asked her if she wouldn't like me to cut the grass. "Well, I would, frankly," she said, "if you don't have anything

better to do. It's terribly hard to find anyone around here to do anything. All the young men leave home and all the old ones die. The mower's in the tool shed and I think there's some gasoline."

I found the mower and gasoline and cut the grass. It was a big lawn and this took me until noon or later. She was sitting on the terrace reading and drinking something—ice water or gin. I joined her, wondering how I could build my usefulness into indispensability. I could have made a pass at her, but if we became lovers, this would have meant sharing the yellow room and that was not what I wanted. "If you want a sandwich before you go, there's some ham and cheese in the refrigerator," she said. "A friend of mine is coming out on the four o'clock, but I suppose you'll want to go back before then."

I was frightened. Go back, go back, go back to the greasy green waters of the Lethe, back to my contemptible cowardice, back to the sanctuary of my bed, where I cowered before thin air, back to anesthetizing myself with gin in order to eat a plate of scrambled eggs. I wondered about the sex of her visitor. If it was a woman, mightn't I stay on as a sort of handy man, eating my supper in the kitchen and sleeping in the yellow room? "If there's anything else you'd like me to do," I said. "Firewood?"

"I buy my firewood in Blenville."

"Would you like me to split some kindling?"

"Not really," she said.

"The screen door in the kitchen is loose," I said. "I could repair that."

She didn't seem to hear me. She went into the house and returned a little later with two sandwiches. "Would you like mustard?" she asked.

"No, thank you," I said.

I took the sandwich as a kind of sacrament, since it would be the last thing I could approach with any appetite until I returned to the yellow room, and when would that be? I was desperate. "Is your visitor a man or a woman?" I asked.

"I really don't think that concerns you," she said.

"I'm sorry."

"Thank you for cutting the grass," she said. "That needed to be done, but you must understand that I can't have a strange man sleeping on my sofa without a certain amount of damage to my reputation, and my reputation isn't absolutely invincible."

"I'll go," I said.

I drove back to New York then, condemned to exile and genuinely afraid of my inclination to self-destruction. As soon as I closed the door of my apartment, I fell into the old routine of gin, Kilimanjaro, scrambled eggs, Orvieto and the Elysian fields. I stayed in bed until late the next morning, performing my incantation. Courage. Inhale. Courage. Exhale. I drank some gin while I

shaved and went out onto the street to get some coffee. In front of my apartment house I ran into Dora Emmison. She wore black—I never saw her in anything else—and said that she had come into town for a few days to do some shopping and go to the theater. I asked if she'd have lunch with me, but she said she was busy. As soon as we parted, I got my car and drove back to Blenville.

The house was locked, but I broke a pane of glass in the kitchen window and let myself in. To be alone in the yellow room was everything I had expected. I felt happy, peaceful and strong. I had brought the Montale with me and I spent the afternoon reading and making notes. The time passed lightly and the sense that the hands of my watch were Procrustean had vanished. At six o'clock I went for a swim, had a drink and made some supper. She had a large store of provisions and I made a note of what I was stealing so that I could replace it before I left. After dinner I went on reading, taking a chance that the lighted windows would not arouse anyone's curiosity. At nine o'clock I undressed, wrapped myself in a blanket and lay down on the sofa to sleep. A few minutes later I saw the lights of a car come up the drive.

I got up and went into the kitchen and shut the door. I was, of course, undressed. If it were she, I supposed I could escape out the back door. If it were not she, if it were some friend or neighbor, they would likely go away. Whoever it was began to knock on the door, which I had left unlocked. Then a man opened the door and asked softly, "Doree, Doree, you sleeping? Wake up, baby, wake up, it's Tony, the old loverboy." Climbing the stairs, he kept asking: "Doree, Doree, Doree," and when he went into her bedroom and found the bed empty, he said, "Aw, shit." He then came down the stairs and left the house and I stayed, shivering in the kitchen until I heard his car go down the road.

I got back onto the sofa and had been there for perhaps a half hour when another car came up the drive. I retired again to the kitchen and a man named Mitch went through more or less the same performance. He climbed the stairs, calling her name, made some exclamation of disappointment and went away. All of this left me uneasy and in the morning I cleaned up the place, emptied the ashtrays and drove back to New York.

Dora had said that she would be in the city for a few days. Four is what is usually meant by a few and two of these had already passed. On the day that I thought she would return to the country, I bought a case of the most expensive bourbon and started back to Blenville, late in the afternoon. It was after dark when I turned up the red-dirt road. Her lights were on. I looked in at the window



and saw that she was alone and reading, as she had been when I first found the place. I knocked on the door and when she opened it and saw me, she seemed puzzled and irritated. "Yes?" she asked. "Yes? What in the world do you want now?"

"I have a present for you," I said. "I wanted to give you a present to thank you for your kindness in letting me spend the night in your house."

"That hardly calls for a present," she said, "but I do happen to have a weakness for good bourbon. Won't you come in?"

I brought the case into the hall, tore it open and took out a bottle. "Shouldn't we taste it?" I asked.

"Well, I'm going out," she said, "but I guess there's time for a drink. You're very generous. Come in, come in and I'll get some ice."

She was, I saw, one of those serious drinkers who prepare their utensils as a dentist prepares his utensils for an extraction. She arranged neatly on a table near her chair the glasses, ice bucket and water pitcher, as well as a box of cigarettes, an ashtray and a lighter. With all of this within her reach, she settled down and I poured the drinks.

"Chin, chin," she said.

"Cheers," I said.

"Did you just drive out from New York?" she asked.

"Yes," I said.

"How is the driving?" she asked.

"It's foggy on the Turnpike," I said. "It's quite foggy."

"Damn," she said. "I have to drive up to a party in Havenswood and I hate the Turnpike when it's foggy. I do wish I didn't have to go out, but the Helmsleys are giving a party for a girl I knew in school and I've promised to show up."

"Where did you go to school?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

"Well, I went to Brearley for two years. Then I went to Finch for a year. Then I went to a country day school called Fountain View for two years. Then I went to a public school in Cleveland for a year. Then I went to the International School in Geneva for two years, the Parioli School in Rome for a year and when we came back to the United States, I went to Putney for a year and then to Masters for three years. I graduated from Masters."

"Your parents traveled a lot?"

"Yes. Dad was in the State Department. What do you do?"

"I'm translating Montale."

"Are you a professional translator?"

"No."

"You just do it to amuse yourself."

"To occupy myself."

"You must have some money," she said.

"I do."

"So do I, thank God," she said. "I'd



hate to be without it."

"Tell me about your marriage," I said. This might have seemed importunate, but I have never known a divorced man or woman unwilling to discuss his marriage.

"Well, it was a mess," she said, "an eight-year mess. He drank and accused me of having affairs with other men and wrote anonymous letters to most of my friends, claiming that I had the principles of a whore. I bought him off, I had to, I paid him a shirtful and went out to Reno. I came back last month. I think I'll have another little drink," she said, "but first I'm going to the john."

I filled her glass again. We were nearly through the first bottle. When she returned from the toilet, she was not staggering, not at all, but she was walking much more lithely, with a much more self-confident grace. I got up and took her in my arms, but she pushed me away—not angrily—and said: "Please don't, please don't. I don't feel like that tonight. I've been feeling terrible all day and the bourbon has picked me up, but I still don't feel like that. Tell me all about yourself."

"I'm a bastard," I said.

"Oh, really? I've never known any bastards. What does it feel like?"

"Mostly lousy, I guess. I mean, I would have enjoyed a set of parents."

"Well, parents can be dreadful, of course, but I suppose dreadful parents are better than none at all. Mine were dreadful." She dropped a lighted cigarette into her lap, but retrieved it before it burned the cloth of her skirt.

"Are your parents still living?"

"Yes, they're in Washington, they're very old." She sighed and stood. "Well, if I'm going to Havenswood," she said, "I guess I'd better go." Now she was unsteady. She splashed a little whiskey into her glass and drank it without ice or water.

"Why do you go to Havenswood?" I asked. "Why don't you telephone and say there's a fog on the Turnpike or that you've got a cold or something?"

"You don't understand," she said hoarsely. "It's one of those parties you have to go to like birthdays and weddings."

"I think it would be better if you didn't go."

"Why?" Now she was bellicose.



"I just think it would be, that's all."

"You think I'm drunk?" she asked.

"No."

"You do, don't you? You think I'm drunk, you nosy son of a bitch. What are you doing here, anyhow? I don't know you. I never asked you to come here and you don't know me. You don't know anything about me excepting where I went to school. You don't even know my maiden name, do you?"

"No."

"You don't know anything about me, you don't even know my maiden name, and yet you have the cheek to sit there and tell me I'm drunk. I've been drinking, that's true, and I'll tell you why. I can't drive safely on the goddamned Jersey Turnpike sober. That road and all the rest of the freeways and throughways were engineered for clowns and drunks. If you're not a nerveless clown, then you have to get drunk. No sensitive or intelligent man or woman can drive on those roads. Why, I have a friend in California who smokes pot before he goes onto the Freeway. He's a great driver, a marvelous driver, and if the traffic's bad, he uses heroin. They ought to sell pot and bourbon at the gas stations. Then there wouldn't be so many accidents."

"Well, let's have another drink, then," I said.

"Get out," she said.

"All right."

I went out of the yellow room onto the terrace. I watched her from the window. She was reeling. She stuffed some things into a bag, tied a scarf around her hair, turned out the lights and locked the door. I followed her at a safe distance. When she got to her car, she dropped the keys in the grass. She turned on the lights and I watched her grope in the grass until she recovered the keys. Then she slammed the car down the driveway and clipped the mailbox post with her right headlight. I heard her swear and a moment later I heard the noise of falling glass, and why is this sound so portentous, so like a doomcrack bell? I was happy to think that she would not continue up to Havenswood, but I was mistaken. She backed the car away from the mailbox post and off she went. I spent the night in a motel in Blenville and telephoned the Turnpike police in the morning. She had lasted about 15 minutes.

My lawyer arranged for the purchase of the house. I was able to get the place and eight acres of land for \$35,000. Her mother came up from Washington and removed her personal effects and I moved into the house three weeks later, but during the time the house had been empty, it had filled up with mice. Mice ran across the floor while I tried to work, kept me awake at night and ate my provisions. I asked about getting a cat in the village and the druggist said that he had a mouser I could have. He produced a

black cat named Schwartz and I took Schwartz home with me.

I never found out much about Schwartz' past. I guess he was a middle-aged cat and he seemed to have a cranky disposition, if such a thing is possible in an animal, but he was an excellent mouser. I fed him canned cat food twice a day. There was a brand of cat food he disliked and if I forgot and gave him this, he would go into the yellow room and shit in the middle of the floor. He made his point and so long as I fed him what he liked, he behaved himself. We worked out a practical and unaffectionate relationship. I don't like having cats in my lap, but now and then I would dutifully pick him up and pat him to prove that I was a good scout. He rid the house of mice in a week or so and I was proud of Schwartz, but at the height of his efficiency as a mouser, Schwartz vanished. I let him out one night and in the morning he failed to return. I don't know much about cats, but I guessed they were loyal to their homes and I supposed that a dog or a fox had killed my friend. One morning, a week later (a light snow had fallen), Schwartz returned. I fed him a can of his favorite brand and gave him a few dutiful caresses. He smelled powerfully of French perfume. He had either been sitting in the lap of someone who used perfume or had been sprayed with it. It was an asstringent and musky scent. The nearest house to mine was owned by some Polish farmers and the woman, I happened to know, smelled powerfully of the barnyard and nothing else. The next nearest house was shut for the winter and I couldn't think of anyone in Blenville who would use French perfume. Schwartz stayed with me that time for a week or ten days and then vanished again for a week. When he returned, he smelled like the street floor of Bergdorf Goodman's during the Christmas rush. I buried my nose in his coat and felt a moment's nostalgia for the city and its women. That afternoon I got into my car and drove over the back roads between my place and Blenville, looking for someplace that might house a bewitching woman. I felt that she must be bewitching and that she was deliberately tempting me by dousing my cat with perfume. All the houses I saw were either farms or places owned by acquaintances and I stopped at the drugstore and told my story. "Schwartz," I said, "that cat, that mouser you gave me, he goes off every other week and comes home smelling like a whorehouse on Sunday morning."

"No whorehouses around here," said the druggist.

"I know," I said, "but where do you suppose he gets the perfume?"

"Cats roam," said the druggist.

"I suppose so," I said, "but do you sell French perfume? I mean, if I can find who buys the stuff. . . ."

"I don't remember selling a bottle since last Christmas," the druggist said. "The Avery boy bought a bottle for his girlfriend."

"Thank you," I said.

That night after dinner, Schwartz went to the door and signaled to be let out. I put on a coat and went out with him. He went directly through the garden and into the woods at the right of the house, with me following. I was as excited as any lover on his way. The smell of the woods, heightened by the dampness of the brook, the stars overhead, especially Venus, seemed to be extensions of my love affair. I thought she would be raven-haired with a marbly pallor and a single blue vein at the side of her brow. I thought she would be about 30. Now and then Schwartz let out a meow, so that it wasn't too difficult to follow him. I went happily through the woods, across Marshman's pasture and into Marshman's woods. These had not been cleared for some years and the saplings lashed at my trousers and my face. Then I lost Schwartz. I called and called. Schwartz, Schwartz, here, Schwartz. Would anyone, hearing my voice in the dark woods, recognize it as the voice of a lover? I wandered through the woods calling my cat, until a tall sapling dealt me a blinding blow across the eyes and I gave up. I made my way home feeling frustrated and lonely.

Schwartz returned at the end of the week and I seized him and smelled his coat to make sure that she was still setting out her lures. She was. He stayed with me that time ten days. A snow had fallen on the night he vanished and in the morning I saw that his tracks were clear enough to follow. I got through Marshman's woods and came, at the edge of them, upon a small frame house, painted gray. It was utilitarian and graceless and might have been built by some hard-working amateur carpenter on Saturdays and Sundays and those summer nights when the dark comes late. I had seriously begun to doubt that it was the lair of a raven-haired beauty. The cat's tracks went around the house to a back door. When I knocked, an old man opened the door.

He was small, smaller than I, anyhow, with thin gray hair, pomaded and combed. There was a white button in his right ear, connected to a cord. From the lines and the colorlessness of his face, I would guess that he was close to 70. Some clash between the immutable facts of vanity and time seemed to animate him. He was old, but he wore a flashy diamond ring, his shoes were polished and there was all that pomade. He looked a little like one of those dapper men who manage movie theaters in the badlands.

"Good morning," I said. "I'm looking for my cat."

"Ah," he said. "Then you must be the



master of dear Henry. I've often wondered where Henry was domiciled when he was not with me. Henry, Henry, your second master has come to pay us a call." Schwartz was asleep on a chair. He did not stir. The room was a combination kitchen and chemistry laboratory. There was the usual kitchen furniture and, on a long bench, an assortment of test tubes and reports. The air was heavy with scent. "I don't know anything about the olfactory capacities of cats, but Henry does seem to enjoy perfumes, don't you, Henry? May I introduce myself. I'm Gilbert Hansen, formerly head chemist for Beauregarde et Cie."

"Hammer," I said. "Paul Hammer."

"How do you do. Won't you sit down?"

"Thank you!" I said. "You manufacture perfume here?"

"I experiment with scents," he said. "I'm no longer in the manufacturing end of things, but if I hit on something I like, I'll sell the patent, of course. Not to Beauregarde et Cie, however. After forty-two years with them, I was dismissed without cause or warning. However, this seems to be a common practice in industry these days. I do have an income from my patents. I am the inventor of *Etoile de Neige*, *Chou-Chou*, *Miguet de Nuit* and *Naissance de Jour*."

"Really," I said. "How did you happen to pick a place like this—way off in the woods—for your experiments?"

"Well, it isn't as out of the way as it seems. I have a garden and I grow my own thyme, lavender, iris, roses, mint, wintergreen, celery and parsley. I buy my lemons and oranges in Blenville and Charlie Hubber, who lives at the four corners, traps beaver and muskrat for me. I find their castors as lasting as civet and I get them for a fraction of the market price. I buy gum resin, methyl salicylate and benzaldehyde. Flower perfumes are not my forte, since they have very limited aphrodisiac powers. The principal ingredient of *Chou-Chou* is cedar bark and parsley and celery go into *Naissance de Jour*."

"Did you study chemistry?"

"No. I learned my profession as an apprentice. I think of it more as alchemy than as chemistry. Alchemy is, of course, the transmutation of base metals into noble ones and when an extract of beaver musk, cedar bark, heliotrope, celery and gum resin can arouse immortal longings in a male, we are close to alchemy, wouldn't you say?"

"I know what you mean," I said.

"The concept of man as a microcosm, containing within himself all the parts of the universe, is Pythagorean. The elements are constant. The distillations and transmutations release their innate power. This not only works in the manufacture of perfume; I think these transmutations can work in the development of character."

A young woman then came into the room. "This is my granddaughter Gloria," he said. "Gloria takes care of me. Gloria, this is Mr.——"

"Hammer," I said. "Paul Hammer."

"How do you do," she said. She lighted a cigarette and said: "Nineteen."

"How many yesterday?" the old man asked.

"Twenty-two," She frowned, then brightened. "It was only fifteen the day before. What do you want for supper?"

"Oh, some sort of meat," he said. "A chop."

The grace with which she moved seemed so accomplished that I wondered if she hadn't had some theatrical training or some theatrical ambitions. I don't mean that she moved like a dancer. I don't like the way serious dancers move. They have a toe-heel, toe-heel way of progressing that gives me the creeps. I mean she moved with the grace of an actress—nothing spectacular—an ingénue in the national company of Figs & Thistles. Six weeks in Chicago. Her hair was yellow and naturally so, I guess, although it's hard to tell, now that they've got the bugs out of hair dye. Her hair was short and straight, with two modest pieces of hardware on either side, which were meant, I suppose, to produce spit curls for the evening. Teeth have never played any discernible part in my romantic or erotic life, and yet her teeth filled me with tenderness. They were very small and set apart. I don't mean there were gaps, but you could see where they were divided. They stirred me like music. Her mouth was small and very pretty, but what I remember most about her then was her brightness, her fairness; she seemed as she moved her arms and legs to generate luminousness, although when I got to know her better, I discovered that she was not especially fair-skinned and that her face, when she was disturbed, provoked or amorous, could seem quite dark and opaque. Her eyes were blue and very bright. The effect of beautiful women on me is first to make my knees weak and then to give me the feeling that their coloring and features—all their charms—form a kind of liquid in which I swim like a goldfish in a bowl. I seemed to lose my head while she talked with the old man about the groceries. I was really swimming. This sensation, powerful in any case, was heightened by the heavy air of the kitchen.

"Well, I'll get some chops, then," she said. "I'll get some lamb chops and something for a salad."

"Where do you do your shopping?" I asked.

"I go to the UP Supermarket in Readwell," she said. "It was nice to have met you." She took the hardware out of her hair, gave her hair a shake and went out the door.

"Well, I'll leave Schwartz with you,"

I said to the old man. "Goodbye, Schwartz." I said to the cat. "Come home whenever you feel like it."

I walked and ran and walked through the snowy woods to my house, got my car, drove to Readwell and parked at the supermarket. I found her picking over salad greens. "Gloria," I said, and I held out my arms. She stepped, one, two, three, into my embrace. Her kiss was light and dry and she pressed lightly against me those parts of her that meant she was serious. I took her hand and led her toward the door. "But I have to get the chops for Grandpa," she said insincerely.

She came along with me to my car, where I kissed her several times, but people going to and from the market could see us there. Readwell is a small town and you might think it easy to find some privacy there, but it wasn't easy. First I drove over the hill by the wire-works, but there was lots of traffic there. Then I went up Chilton Avenue past Main Street, heading for the Roman Catholic cemetery, and got stuck in the middle of a funeral procession. The road was narrow and I had to stay in line until we got past the cemetery gates. From there I went down Chilton Lane, where the houses are set far apart but not far enough apart to afford any privacy. I stopped the car, anyhow, and gathered her up in my arms. "We can't do it here," she said. "Everybody can see us. We'll get arrested." I started the car again, turned right on Townsend Road and left on Shinglehouse Lane, but there was a development there. Then I turned onto 114, took the Eastlake exit and parked in the driveway of what seemed to be an empty house. I won't go into the anatomical details, which were complicated by the fact that my car is a two-seater Jaguar with a stick shift. I then drove her back to the supermarket to get Grandfather's chops and she promised to come to my house at five.

So that's the way it is. Beginning with a *cafard*, I ended up with a girl, a part-time mouser and my yellow walls. It's spring now and I wake early, swim in the pool, eat a large breakfast and settle down to my translation at a table in the yellow room. I work happily until one or sometimes later, when I eat a bowl of soup. I've bought some tools—an ax, chain saw, and so forth, and spend the afternoons clearing the woods around the house. She comes every day at five to make the rain fall, scatter the ghosts and mend the wreath of hair. What a kingdom it is! After supper I study German until half-past ten, when I go to bed, feeling limber, clean and weary. I no longer have any need for the mountain, the valley and the fortified city, and if I dream at all, my dreams are of an exceptional innocence and purity.

