

## Sleeping Birds

*In Which Laura Drags Nicholas Out of the Gutter Only to Have Nicholas Drag Austin Back Into Her Life.*

After midnight, a town in summer enfolds itself like a sleeping bird. The thick heat leaves it and the long sidewalks grow absolutely quiet. Even the trees are quiet. In the quietude and darkness, the trees, buildings and sky intertwine luxuriantly. It was like a house at night, she thought; their footsteps were a night faucet's monotonous drip. She shushed Nicholas and whispered that this was not the time to talk. And so they stopped their conversation and walked together down the empty streets, past courthouses, hotels, and through parks past old benches draped with drifters and bums. From downtown they plunged into the steamy tree-lined streets with monstrous homes and tight little yards. They turned onto G Street, where they were suddenly confronted by a looming structure with tall blank windows, balconies, gables, and a widow's walk perched fifty feet over the street. Laura smiled. "You should see your face," she whispered. "It's not a tourist attraction, it's home." And they walked up the steps.

Inside was a vestibule with Turkish rug carpeted walls. Before the largest rug was a delicate table supporting a crystal ball on a brass stand. At the rear of the room, a broad staircase wound lumberingly up into the darkness. Beside it was a door which Laura opened. "Here's the couch," said Laura, after she'd walked inside. "It's a disaster; I hope you don't have back problems."

Nicholas sat down on it, patted the cushions. "I'm too tired to care about my back."

"How do you like the house?"

Nicholas's eyes followed the soar of the spindly walls to where they met the ceiling; a bare light cord hung from a plaster medallion many feet over their heads. "It's medieval," he said. "It grows on you, I'm sure."

"It belongs to a friend. He bought it for a song, because it's so old and seems to have some problems. He wants to fix it up and eventually sell it, I guess. But he rented me the downstairs in the meantime." She paused. "Anyway," she said, "I like it here. It's huge. There're grapefruit trees in the back yard. This used to be a farmhouse, if you can believe it, when it was built in 1870."

She sat down on a chair opposite the sofa and regarded Nicholas thoughtfully. "You seem awfully bedraggled to pass for a Beethoven. Does your music drip from your mind, since you don't seem to own a pen? Or have you just been suffering prior to preparing a masterpiece?"

Nicholas smiled and looked down at his disheveled shirt and pants. "No music drips. I languish at my ease."

"Yes." Laura picked up an empty wine glass from the end table next to the chair and viewed it idly. She said, "Would you like some wine?"

"Sure."

Laura got up and went to the kitchen. Soon she was back with a bottle and two glasses. She set them down and filled the glasses with red wine. "We might even get drunk, if you like."

Nicholas shrugged and picked up his glass, lifted it. "To the genius of music."

"I will not drink to that," said Laura, but lifted her glass and drank. She set the glass on the table next to her chair and gazed at Nicholas thoughtfully.

Pause.

"So what are you going to do?" she said, still gazing at him.

Nicholas grinned and shrugged. "Guess I'll get a job. Do you need a dishwasher?"

"Just hired one."

"Maybe Austin will lend me enough money to tide me over."

Laura shook her head and wagged her finger at Nicholas. "Neither a borrower nor a lender be."

"Beautiful. You've managed to criticize us both with one phrase."

"Neither of you are difficult to criticize. Austin is a thoroughly self-centered recluse and you are simply a bum."

"But you said the magic word---"simply." I am living simply and that's a virtue. And Austin is definitely a monk of some sort, so you can't get away with the "recluse" business either, as if that were all there was to it."

Laura laughed out loud and slapped her knee. "If Austin's a monk I'm a monkey! He's an atheist! A monk---sheesh!"

Nicholas reddened slightly. "Now I remember---you were that dogmatic, opinionated friend of mine that no one liked."

Laura smiled and picked up her glass. She took a long sip of wine and was still smiling when she took the glass from her lips. "No," she said. "You're mistaken. I was the friend with no opinions about anything that everyone liked. Now I'm the one nobody likes."

"I was going to say that I like you but I've already taken it back."

"I suppose you think that you're a monk too."

"In a manner of speaking."

Laura frowned. "You're using this term "monk" very loosely. As I recall, a monk is a celibate seeking God and you are neither celibate nor seeking God."

Nicholas fingered the stem of his glass. A tiny worm of desire had begun to tickle in the root of his belly, very slightly... He rejected it as quickly as it arose, but it was contemptuous of his mind's feeble directives and tossed them off. A little flame of guilt now flickered up from his belly to the bottom of his mind. "I am," he began, then stopped. "I'm not what you'd call a monk I suppose. But you should not say I'm not seeking God."

"But if I admit that you are then I'd be using the term God as loosely as you use the word monk."

"God you're pedantic."

"Even an atheist can have respect for the English language, and shouldn't have to listen to itinerant songsters calling them pedantic."

"And now you call me a songster!" But Nicholas was smiling with amusement.

"You are certainly not a composer. I think songster is the appropriate term."

Nicholas smiled faintly.

Pause.

Nicholas finally said, "So where is Austin? You said he was living around here."

"He's slumming. Down around the old port is my guess; skid road and all that. Whatever's fashionable."

Nicholas frowned. "I would never describe Austin as a man of fashion; least of all the sort you're implying."

"Nicholas, why would anyone live down in the dumps if they had a better place to go? Unless they are really a monk and serving the poor or some such. Which Austin is definitely not. I don't see how it could be anything but some perverse fashion. Or romanticism. Misdirected, in any case."

"I couldn't tell you why he's doing it. But it must be for a good reason, and not a trivial one as you're suggesting."

Laura frowned and was silent for a moment. Then she picked up the wine bottle and poured herself another glass. She gestured to Nicholas with the bottle. "Here, drink up; don't let me outpace you."

Nicholas leaned over and extended his glass for a refill. "Are you serious about getting drunk?" he said, grinning.

Laura frowned. "I'm dead serious."

He sat down and they changed the topic to literature; Laura began relating some of the books she'd read recently. Before long their bottle was drained and she opened another. Halfway through the second bottle Nicholas felt as though his head were becoming larger, but strangely lighter. They both sat slumped in their chairs. Laura sat up, grasped the bottle and poured him some more wine. "More wine, senor?" she said, as she filled his glass.

"Yes," said Nicholas. "But did you say 'wore mine'?"

"Yes."

"But that is in reference to what?"

"It's my writing shirt. I got the idea from a book; I'm writing a book. But, no, I said 'more wine,' not 'wore mine'."

"I swear that's what I thought you said."

"That's what I said."

Pause.

Laura said, "God, Nicholas, it's good to see you. It's been a long time."

"Laura, I love you. I'm serious."

"You can't love me. But I do love you too."

Nicholas said, "Laura."

"No, Nicholas. It would never work. Help me up."

"Here." Nicholas stood up and offered his arm. Laura grasped it and pulled herself out of the chair. They stood facing one another and Laura put her hands on Nicholas' shoulders. She looked straight into his eyes for a long moment. "Nicholas," she said finally. "What are you doing here?"

"I don't know."

"I don't either." She suddenly yawned hugely, and closed her eyes. "You're going to have to sleep on that sofa, like it or not. It's a disaster but that's where you have to sleep."

"I already hate it. But it looks comfortable."

"It's very, very comfortable. It's a disaster but it's so comfortable. You can sleep on it."

"I'm pretty tired."

"What are you standing for then. Here; sit down." She took his hand and pulled him back onto the sofa. They both sat down on the sofa at once. "Go to sleep," she said. "I'm going to sleep too." She leaned her head on Nicholas' shoulder and closed her eyes. "Go to sleep," she whispered again. And they slowly slumped over on the sofa together and were asleep.

When Nicholas awoke the room was sunny and Laura was gone. There was a note from her on the kitchen table along with a twenty dollar bill. He picked up the money and examined it stupidly for a moment, felt the slight pressure in his skull from the wine. He looked down at his rumpled clothes, smoothed his shirt with his hands. He went back to straighten up the living room. Then he took a shower, shaved, and tossed his clothes into the washer off the back porch. He took an apple from the refrigerator, and strolled around the house stark naked, poking into various things.

He went to the back window and gazed out at the grapefruit trees. The yard had once been a garden, but had gone entirely to seed. Fat grapefruits hung from sagging branches, or lay fallen on the ground amid the fungus and hovering flies. Extravagant grasses waved sluggishly in the slow morning breeze; yellow dock, milkweed, and mustard grass grew among wandering wild roses and ivy. Innumerable insects rose and fell in clouds that sparkled in the sunlight. The little yard was so heavy with life that Nicholas was slightly repelled. He was not fond of insects, and the leaping profusion of them outdoors unnerved him to the point where he turned from the window and walked gingerly over the floor, on the lookout for anything that might scurry out of

a corner.

When his clothes were washed and dried, he ironed them and decided to leave. But first he decided to examine the rest of the house, so on the way to the door, he stopped in the dark stairwell and looked up the big winding staircase. He walked up. At the top he stepped onto a railed landing and was confronted by two doors which opened on each side of a long, dark hallway. The hallway fixed his attention for some moments. It had a remarkably high vaulted ceiling, and a feeling of stifling narrowness. There were no doors or windows---just smooth walls, and it was so dark at the end that he could not tell whether it simply stopped, or whether there was a door there. Nicholas entered the door to the left. It opened into a bare room with high, elaborate bay windows facing west; the walls were covered with faded wallpaper embossed with roses and lilies intertwined. On the wall opposite the door was another hallway; next to it was what appeared to be a large pile of rags. The hallway led to a tiny kitchen with a low window looking onto the back yard, and a battered table and chair. A bathroom led off the wall opposite the window. Nicholas frowned and felt vaguely uneasy. He returned through the hall and saw one last door on the other side of the main room. He went over and looked into a peculiar, narrow little room that he felt reluctant to enter. He also noticed a cloying, sweet smell in the room that he disliked. He shrugged and walked out into the hall.

The door to the right of the hall opened into another large room with bay windows facing south. Giant elm trees filtered the morning light entering the room through the enormous windows. The ceilings were lofty and distant. A doorway to his left led to a large, sunny kitchen with more windows, these looking east over rooftops, plumtrees, and gardens. Sunlight streamed in onto the floor. In the bathroom, which opened off of the back of the kitchen, were a large claw foot tub, a sink, a toilet, and a little window trellised with roses. He sat on the edge of the tub and looked calmly around the room. He suddenly knew that he liked it here: the sun, the trees, the big kitchen. The high ceilings gave it a feeling of great space. He stood and walked back to the living room. He noticed another door that he hadn't tried and discovered that it led to another strange, narrow room. He walked in. Narrow as it was, it would be plenty wide for a bed. And a closet opened to the back of the room.

Nicholas pondered on the suitability of the rooms as he walked back to the stairs. There was a feeling about the place that he liked: he could imagine himself sitting up here with a cold beer on a summer evening, polishing up his music, or having a few people over to play music and talk. He walked down the stairs, his mind going over variations of a possible future here. He carefully locked the big front door on his way out, then made his way over the morning streets downtown.

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The old brownstone storefronts assumed a cadenced rhythm even at the slow pace of a walk. Largo, perhaps. And yet the pace of one's steps suggested a march. A very slow one--a funeral march. A butcher. Slow pace, slow pace, slow pace, slow. A storefront for rent. Slow pace, slow. A bean counter, slow pace. A baker. A music store. Here Austin stopped and smiled faintly, slowly shaking his head. He'd bought a lot of music recently, but for what? He'd given up on music! And so he stood in front of the music shop, debating whether or not to go in. He stretched and shrugged his shoulders, then tilted his face upwards to roll his head back and forth against his neck, feeling the comfortable crack of the neck bones as his head rocked slowly back and forth. He flexed his hands and forearms, and felt his elbows and knuckles crack softly like the

distant break of pool balls. He smiled faintly. Of course, music would not give up on him. In the brief moment since he'd stopped at the shop's door, unbidden whispers of strange progressions that might become music already teased through his mind. That's how his music began, with whispers that crept with insect fingers in random patter, their tappings wholly faint and microscopic, like atoms of noble gases pin-balling through space. The faintest patterns of song upwelled everywhere throughout this abstract stew. Their musical structure, on the other hand, was imposed only through a tentative process he thought of as marriage. In his mind, it was the cadences of sensory life that married the unformed musical substratum to bring forth creations of musical thought. The rolling of his head across his shoulder assumed a certain musical rhythm, likewise the pace of his footsteps on a sidewalk: fast or slow, measured or sprung. Some of these rhythms were not his own: the toss of leaves and branches in a sudden breeze, the progression of shapes of the music books behind the glass from left to right, the click and squeak of the door opening in front of him and the pause of the woman who emerged from the store, her eyes fixed on Austin, her expression a mixture of surprise and annoyance, the sweep of the door as it shut behind her and the click of her shoes as she walked quickly down the sidewalk. The turn of his head as he watched her walking form become a progression of ever smaller shapes as her body was reduced by the perspective of distance. But some rhythms could not even be seen. These were rather rhythms of the mind as it contemplated its connection to a life beyond the world. This was a life that was simultaneously known and unknown, and its rhythms were always a sad and gay affair. The music that came of it was therefore a paradox, but it was a fine paradox, a paradox in step with the foundations of life. But Austin was a man out of step.

He walked into the music store, ferreted out a few scores, paid the man at the counter brusquely and left. He didn't feel like going home so he wandered into a little coffee shop. He chose a table by the window and set the package of scores in front of him. He sipped the coffee and watched the people walk by on the sidewalk. But he didn't see people. He saw objects in motion rising and falling in his mind; objects that he'd put there and objects that had arisen mysteriously. And he saw their dust rise and fall as well. He opened the package and took out scoring paper and the scores he'd purchased. There they sat on the table in front of him. So what now was the rhythm of his life? He'd ditched the music world along with nearly everything else. His theory was that such clutter had become a distraction from his real life, which lay elsewhere undiscovered. He'd removed the clutter but whatever real things lay beneath were not revealed. In fact, there was no sign of them. Somehow he'd escaped the bounds of his life and found a wilderness. At first he reasoned that God was somewhere in there but now he admitted he wasn't really sure of who or what God might be. And so the rhythms of his life remained as they were: the silly rhythms of a man with the appearance of a lumberjack or a boxer who lived among cellists, pianists, conductors, agents, and audiences of lovers and critics; the rhythms of a man who didn't believe in God but couldn't stop looking for him anyway, and who the longer he looked the more senseless the world became. And finally who'd given up on his music but wouldn't kick the habit of it. Therefore this musical impedimenta which sat neatly in front of him, quietly requesting attention. He finished his coffee, gathered his things, and left.

He strolled down the street. It was still early in the day; heat rose off the sidewalk in waves, and the sky was a merciless blue-white, without a single cloud. People languished in their cars as they drove slowly past on the crowded streets, their arms hanging limply from open windows. The sidewalks themselves were largely vacant, and Austin felt nearly alone as he wandered idly, looking into store fronts, slipping into reveries. He passed restaurants and banks, cigar stores and

offices, and after a while he passed into capitol park. He dropped the package of scores onto a bench in the shade and sat down.

He sat in the cool shade and wondered if he might be at the end of his life. Not that he was about to die, but nevertheless he felt at the end of things. Perhaps there was some sweeping up to do, but beyond that, what? His fingers drummed the package in his lap and he passed an hour in thought. Squirrels dropped from trees and fought for berries at his feet, and he did not notice. A grizzled man in a plaid shabby shirt came by and stood uncertainly near the bench, caught between sitting down and leaving. But the man turned and left, walking slowly and muttering to himself. When he was some distance away Austin got up and left. He continued his stroll, wandering up L Street, observing the shoppers and watching the bureaucrats make for the posh watering holes surrounding the park. He passed the time in this vein for a couple of blocks, and when he finally turned onto twelfth street he ran into Nicholas.

They were both so surprised that for a few seconds neither of them did anything but gape. Then they threw their arms around each other, pounding each other's backs, and drew apart suddenly, still grasping each other's shoulders and grinning.

"Speak of a son of a bitch!" Austin said incredulously.

"Let's not."

"Where've you been?"

"I don't know. Around and about, rootless and dead broke."

"Of course. Listen, you want a drink?"

"Sure."

"You're doing all right?"

"Absolutely."

"You know, I bet I can bet you a job," Austin said seriously.

"No, I just got one, I'm working in a bookstore."

"That's asinine; you're joking."

They passed a little flight of stairs leading down and descended into a Greek bar and restaurant. They found a table near the wall and sat down. A swarthy man in an apron came over and they ordered whiskeys.

The man nodded. "A funny thing for boys like you to be ordering. My name's Nicholas. You want a tab?"

"Sure. His name's Nicholas too." Austin gestured with his thumb.

The man lifted an eyebrow. "No foolin'? Is he Greek?" He looked at Nicholas with interest. "Eísai Éllinas?"

Nicholas smiled uncertainly.

"Naw, you aren't Greek. That's too bad, amigo." He walked back to the bar.

Austin held his big hands clasped on the table in front of him, looking down slightly at Nicholas who was half a head shorter. Austin was muscular and trim, with broad shoulders, high cheekbones, and violent, luminous eyes. His stiff, straw-textured hair stuck out from his scalp. He watched Nicholas fondly and intently. "You're not still writing music?" he asked, frowning.

Nicholas shrugged and did not meet his eyes. How would he answer that? Was he afraid that his music wasn't any good? Of course it wasn't. But he didn't care that it wasn't good, except for giving account to Austin---more than that, he felt better for it, good or not, and there was always the chance that he would improve. He looked up from the table at Austin, who was observing him with good-natured attentiveness.

"Yes," said Nicholas. "I've written a little book full of it. You really ought to see it."

Austin smiled faintly, still fixing Nicholas in his gaze. "Maybe sometime. I feel a little distracted."

"You look distracted. What's the problem?"

Austin merely shrugged. Nicholas the Greek set the drinks on the table.

Pause.

Austin said, "Are you really going to work in a bookstore?"

"Yes."

"Why not go down to the cannery? You'd make four times what you'd make in a bookstore. One of the clown foremen is an old student of mine; he could get you on."

"I think the subjects closed."

Austin grinned.

"So what are you doing now?" Nicholas asked, after a moment.

"Nothing. Really nothing. I just rented a little place a few blocks from here; you should see it. The entrance is off a little alley: there are beautiful views of bricks in four directions. If you didn't know exactly where to look for the place, you'd never find it." He frowned. "I have a strange feeling about myself and the music. It's all changing. It's been changing so much that all of a sudden I'm feeling a bit jealous. Don't want to show it to anybody, that sort of thing."

Nicholas swirled the ice cubes in his glass. He knitted his forehead unconsciously. "But it's music. If nobody hears it, what's it worth?"

"I hear it. I'm somebody. It's pouring through my head all the time. And really, what's the rest of the world? Music doesn't pour into their heads, and why should it? Even when I write my music down and people hear it, I don't believe it pours into them. It thumps them on the head, maybe, but if it penetrates more than a centimeter I would be amazed."

"But if you don't write music, what are you going to do?"

"I don't really know what I want to do. I feel scattered."

Nicholas nodded tentatively.

"You nod as if you understand."

Nicholas looked at his friend uncertainly. He wasn't sure he did understand, but he felt compelled to help in spite of his incomprehension. "You're at loose ends; you're sick of what you're doing. You just need to give yourself a little time, it'll come back."

Austin looked at him with sudden contempt. "You sound like a talk-show biddy. What do you take me for?"

Nicholas flushed. "Then what I said isn't true?"

"What do I need to give myself time for? I've got time---I just don't like what I'm doing with it. I'm going to do something else---not write the music anymore, at least. Maybe I'm just going to listen to it. Maybe it's telling me something I haven't heard, because I've been too busy putting it on paper."

"You're going to sit in a room and think all day? You can't do that."

"You're wrong. Until I know exactly what I'm going to do from here out, that's what I'm going to do. Sit in a room."

"And when your money runs out?"

"I've got plenty. And when it runs out, God will provide."

Nicholas looked at Austin in open astonishment. He shook his head and laughed, not knowing what to say.

Austin looked at Nicholas, saw his perplexity and frowned. "I thought you would understand this but maybe I'm wrong." He looked down into his hands and began rubbing his big knuckles. He said quietly, "I've been walking around town all day. People are so busy around here; everyone has something to do that seems so important. But it's pure sham; it's caca. Don't you ever get the feeling that there is something else you should be doing? Why are you here? Well, now the scales are off and I finally accept the fact that I'm here. Now what? Write a quartet?"

"Of course it sounds ridiculous, if you put it that way."

"How should I put it?"

"You can write stinking music like nobody's business. Isn't that enough?"

"No. And as far as that goes, I can't help writing music. I don't even work at it. I'm always doing it, only from now on it's just never going to leave my skull."

Nicholas stared moodily into his glass and felt his anger arise. Here he was, completely uncertain of his talent, struggling along with his music by feeble starts and stops, eagerly nursing each scrap of song that trickled unpredictably into his head. And yet, aside from the feelings that certain women aroused in him, he couldn't think of anything he took more seriously than music.

It seemed a strange joke that sitting across from him was a man whose hair stood on end from the force of the music in his skull, who talked of sitting alone in a room until he could think of something better to do. Nothing could be more idiotic.

Austin suddenly looked up and said, "You said you were broke."

Nicholas frowned. "Broke?"

"Yes, you know---without money. Or so you said."

"Yes, that's right, I am broke," he said. "I'm completely broke. I need you to loan me some money. I can pay you back pretty quick now that I've got a job---like in a couple of months."

"Why do you waste your time in a bookstore? You could go down the street to the cannery and pay me back next week."

"Who's to say it's a waste of time."

Austin considered this and nodded. "That's true. Who knows. How much do you want?"

"Couple of hundred."

Austin took out his wallet and extracted three hundred dollar bills.

"Jesus Christ, you're loaded."

Austin shrugged and handed the money to Nicholas.

"Thanks, Austin."

"Give me your new address."

"I haven't actually moved in, or even talked to the guy who owns the place." Nicholas wrote down the address. "But there's a woman I met who rents the downstairs. I met her yesterday---stayed at her place last night--- she told me the upstairs was vacant, and cheap."

"Ah."

"She owns a restaurant a couple of blocks from the bookstore where I'm going to work."

"Aha. You're talking about Laura."

"Yes."

"You beat around to that point in an untruthful though interesting roundabout way. Aren't you being a little impetuous?"

Nicholas laughed shortly. "You think there's something going on between us? Fat chance."

"You're hot on her trail."

Nicholas said nothing, shook his head and smiled faintly.

"What qualifies you to work in a bookstore, anyway?"

"Why not? I have degree in English."

"Geology, I thought."

"Same difference. It's a degree. And I can read." He shrugged.

"You've really got the degree?"

Nicholas grinned. "A few units short, actually."

"How am I going to come to visit you with Laura around? She'll have a fit."

"That's right."

Austin looked into his empty glass for a long moment, slowly shaking his head. Nicholas the Greek appeared with a tray. "Another?"

Austin looked up and shrugged. "Guess not."

They paid the Greek and without speaking further walked out of the restaurant.

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Nicholas moved into his new house. At first it was something of an adventure; within a short while, however, he slipped into a merely mundane appreciation for the roof over his head. In the end he took it for granted. It was not even a particularly good roof, he eventually noticed: a small summer shower sent rivulets dripping into the living room in several places. It did no damage to his things because he had none. But he viewed the roof with increasing dissatisfaction as he began to acquire things over the course of the summer: a sofa, a set of packing crates, a couple of books. He happened on a guitar through the friend of an acquaintance. Occasionally, when he stopped playing in the evening, he was pleased to hear the sound of piano notes floating up through the floorboards, and he began to think of Laura.

He was afraid of his attraction to her: he could not mistake the feeling of fear. But did fear entirely explain the falling elevator feeling in his stomach, his stumbling for words? Perhaps it was his natural deference to Austin, although Austin's relations to Laura were part of a dead past. Laura seemed to accept his infatuated behavior with grace, but he could not be certain that she was even aware of his feelings for her; he had certainly never mentioned them seriously and had even gone to some lengths to hide them. And he was plagued by the possibility that she might even share his feelings and was waiting for him to tip the balance. He waited for a sure sign from her but the signals vacillated wildly. She helped him get settled into the house in an abstracted, businesslike manner. On the other hand, she often followed him with her eyes, and when he caught her at this, she widened her eyes and smiled brilliantly.

On some days he would wake up with the resolve to set his doubts aside and approach her openly. He went over several possible ways of how she might react, and what he would say for each instance. When he decided on a plan of action, he rehearsed it in his mind all the way to work. When noontime arrived, he observed her with careful nonchalance, attentive for openings as she rushed between the kitchen and various tables, supervising the prep cooks and delivering food, while the restaurant filled up with a jostling lunchtime crowd. He invariably returned to the bookstore without having said a word to her. In the evening when she returned home he would

wait until he felt that she had had time to rest, and would be more receptive to him. But hours would pass in which he could not decide if the moment was opportune; a friend of hers might drop by at some point, and Nicholas would be left on edge all evening, perhaps finally walking downstairs and catch her just as she was preparing to go to bed, and in his hesitation only borrow something he didn't need, then go up to bed himself.

His days were spent between the bookstore and the restaurant. He met Linda, the head waitress. She wore long skirts and tank tops, and carried herself with a calm assurance such that Nicholas felt soothed when she approached. Her curly black hair had a tendency to fall carelessly over her temples and eyes, and as she talked it would waver and fall, and she would brush it back with her slender hands. She had a mole beside her nose that she habitually touched in an absent-minded way. Nicholas would come in to sit down at eleven, when the restaurant opened. Things were slow until twelve. Linda would set the tables, prepare beds of lettuce and mustard pots, and then sit down with a glass of apple juice and talk to Nicholas. She would usually talk about films---she had been studying with a local film maker for the last couple years, and in November she had plans to leave for Argentina where she would work on her first full length documentary. Nicholas would sit in his booth, drinking his coffee and eating a piece of fruit or a carrot, as the people wandered in by ones and twos. Unemployed students and dilettante were the first to arrive, and they filled up the first several booths. They immediately began to argue among themselves, and Linda would enthusiastically join into the discussions.

Nicholas would rarely condescend to enter the fracas however. Ladies would begin to arrive for cottage cheese salads and wine. Then the male bureaucrats. The wave of petty officials divided itself between the dilettante and the women in roughly equal halves, but before this inevitable division occurred Nicholas was preparing to walk out the door.

Once in a while Laura would sit down to talk. This was usually grim. Once she sat down his intention was invariably to turn the conversation along intimate lines. But it seemed that something always happened to prevent this: she would suddenly have to leave, or would begin a conversation about something so innocent of sexual overtones that Nicholas would stumble through the conversation like an inept con-man, racking his brains for an opening through which to thrust his intentions upon her. Laura was quite aware of Nicholas's predicament; she was very fond of him but she had no thought of intimacy. And then, even if she had such thoughts, every guarded, circuitous attempt he made towards her would have driven the thought of intimacy even farther from her mind. If he had simply been direct with her to begin with she might not have felt this way, nor would she have felt bothered by the fact that no man had taken the trouble to seriously approach her in a very long time. And so her feelings for Nicholas were touched with a mild sort of contempt. Occasionally she would ask why he never took women out. He would say, "Because there's no one that I..." then catch himself, because he wanted to take Laura out but didn't have the courage to ask her on the spot. And it seemed to him that Laura looked at him in faint surprise, as if she wondered why he should take such an idle question seriously. Luckily she would soon get up to attend to some problem and Nicholas would be left alone, twisting the ends of his mustache in nervous silence.

At home, on evenings that cooled as the summer progressed, Nicholas sometimes saw Laura and often saw Austin. But Austin never saw Laura, nor Laura Austin. Austin took care to show up only when Laura was not around. Austin took a great interest in Nicholas's house the instant he saw it. He and Nicholas had walked there from a nearby coffee house one evening, and it seemed

to Nicholas that Austin was actually frightened of it. They had walked up to it on the sidewalk and Austin stopped.

"My God," he said, "look at it."

"That's the place."

"It's a monstrosity."

"It's better on the inside."

Austin peered at it intently, not moving from the sidewalk. "It's almost as if there were a light around it, pouring off in all directions. Can you see it?"

Nicholas looked at Austin, and only briefly at the house. "I don't see it."

Austin stood looking at the house for some moments as if mesmerized. Nicholas felt his peculiar intensity and remained silent. What did he see? He looked up at the house but could see nothing extraordinary; he looked in each direction down the empty street instead. Far down the street, a mile away, he saw the clouds of steam and heard the empty rumble of the tomato cannery. Finally he slowly began to stroll into the yard and Austin followed. They walked up the steps.

"What is that?" Austin asked when they walked onto the landing at the top of the stairs.

"It's the hallway to the back of the house."

"It's strange, don't you think?"

"It seems that to you, everything is strange."

Austin nodded, "That's true," He walked down to the end of the hallway. "But you'll have to admit that it's peculiar that this hallway just leads to a back stairwell." He peered down. "That's a long flight of stairs."

Nicholas unlocked his front door. When he decided to move into the house he learned that the upstairs was divided into two separate apartments. He had chosen the sunny east facing rooms, although he used portions of the other apartment for storage. The owner had no intention of renting any of the upstairs to begin with, but Nicholas and Laura had persuaded him that no harm would be done to the house and that he would get a little money for the space as well. So he had finally given in.

Austin prowled around other parts of the hallway and Nicholas prepared a few tortillas and a concoction with beans. He also opened a couple of beers and Austin joined him in the living room to drink. They sat on the floor while the little pot of beans bubbled and spat in the kitchen.

The living room was pleasant and airy. A cool breeze blew through the windows, carrying rich smells of wet plants and upturned earth. The late afternoon sunlight scattered through the elm leaves and danced in rapid patterns over the floor. A half dozen flies congregated in the center of the room and spun lazy circles around each other. To Nicholas it seemed as if all earthly activity became suddenly concentrated into these movements of shadows and flies, and they filled his mind with preternatural vividness.

"I feel like I'm in China," he said.

Austin turned his head slowly and frowned. "China?"

"In the old imperial days---I feel like one of the old sages must have felt, sitting in the mountains, in a little sub-tropical glade, suddenly feeling as if the earth had opened its pores and that I was the breath, and seeing the flies who are the dust motes scattering as the breath goes out, and the shadows shift as it goes in."

Austin looked at Nicholas in astonishment and said nothing for a moment. Then he smiled and shook his head. "Good God," he said softly.

Nicholas said nothing, and Austin looked at the floor meditatively. There seemed to be a consensus that any other sound would be an intrusion, and as if on cue, a car drove swiftly past down the street, and a gust of wind rattled the leaves. The voices of shouting children carried up from a distant alleyway, mingling with the soft bubbling of the beans. Birds flew over the house, calling and answering. Nicholas got up to stir the beans.

"You know," he said, "The Pythagoreans would not eat beans. They believed in transmigration of souls, and condemned beans because they would capture the soul and prevent its release."

Austin looked at Nicholas wonderingly. He said, "You're beginning to sound like one of those street corner lunatics--- you know, who have each of their fingers planted firmly in the asshole of the cosmos---that's where the pulse is strongest, or so infants believe."

Nicholas nodded, "Yes, that's what they say."

"And what do you say?"

"I say that it's all the same to me, because I have found the answer, and there are no further questions."

"What piss."

"So it would seem."

Austin looked around the room. "Personally, I don't even think this room even barely resembles China."

"Not the room, the ambience of that particular moment."

"Tell me, have you been to China?"

"No."

"Good. Then this conversation is only for our amusement. I've been there, at least, and I can tell you that you're completely mistaken. And don't start talking about 'ambience' because you make my skin crawl, so let's stick to something we can at least sink our teeth into."

"Whatever you say, that was a Chinese moment."

"You've never been there so you don't know what you're talking about."

"But you're not me so how do you know I don't know what I'm talking about?"

Pause.

Nicholas finally brought out two bowls of hot beans, a plate of tortillas, and a dish of chili peppers. He set everything on a makeshift table and they both sat down and began to eat.

Austin swallowed a mouthful of beans and said, "You know, I'll bet this house has ghosts."

Nicholas lifted an eyebrow and said nothing. They ate quietly for several moments. Finally Austin said: "So what are you going to do with yourself, Nick?"

Nicholas' mouth was full; he frowned angrily and shook his head.

"You're going to work in a damned bookstore for the rest of your life."

Nicholas swallowed, still frowning. "Don't start in on the bookstore again. I've been there for all of a couple of months and you act like it's been years."

"It seems like it's been years. But the point is that you're stalling."

"Stalling---that sounds as if there's some big job I ought to be doing, that I'm putting off." He shook his head. "Besides, I'm not just sitting around. I'm thinking."

"Ha. And what's the difference between that and stalling?"

"What does it matter? What makes you think that I ought to be doing something special? I don't see what else I could be doing at the moment other than what I'm doing. And I happen to be enjoying myself."

Austin frowned.

"I think," Nicholas said, "That it's you who feel like you ought to be doing something special, but you don't even know what it is."

"That's funny. I thought you're the one who's always saying that I am doing something special."

"If I was doing it it would be special; you don't give a damn about it."

Austin looked at Nicholas thoughtfully for a moment, then shrugged and continued eating.

Nicholas chewed his food mechanically for several moments, then put his fork down. "I don't know why it always comes down to this with us. Why do I have to do something special? Why isn't just being here enough? And why do you have to always needle me about what I'm doing? The only person who should possibly care about whether I'm doing something special or not is me."

"I'm not needling you. We're friends, aren't we? Besides, who else am I going to talk to?"

Nicholas took a sip of his beer and frowned. And what did "something special" even consist of? Could it consist of anything, as long as it was done in the right frame of mind? But what was the right frame of mind? What about that frame of mind that desired the attention of women and at odd moments became lost in musical abstractions? Could such a mind ever do "something

special" with itself? These thoughts, combined with Austin's questions, conspired to feed a dull anger that Nicholas ascribed solely to what he felt was Austin's presumptuous needling. It rose up behind his teeth unbidden. As always he could not understand it and sought to hide it. The anger lay in him as it would in a cluttered filing cabinet that had never been organized, never been looked at. He knew enough of himself to not want others to read the emotions in him, but not enough to be able to read those emotions himself.

They both looked at their unfinished meals silently. Nicholas got up and put a few more beans on his plate, then thought better of it and dumped everything back into the pot. He grabbed a couple more beers from the refrigerator and walked back into the livingroom. He tossed Austin a beer and said "Let's sit on the porch."

Austin got to his feet. They walked downstairs. The rest of the house seemed silent and empty, but when they stepped outside they heard birds and the buzz of insects. Couples strolled up and down the sidewalk talking softly.

They both sipped their beer. Austin said, "You're not really in love with Laura, are you?"

Nicholas looked up, surprised, and shook his head. "No. Well, I don't know."

Austin nodded. "I know what you mean. I loved her too, but it was quite a mess."

"Whatever I feel is entirely in my head. Laura is not at all inclined towards me."

"You never know."

Nicholas frowned. "On the other hand, she seems quite unhappy with you."

Austin looked at Nicholas with an ironic smile. "It's not unhappiness; she hates me. But she also loves me."

Nicholas said nothing; he wanted to say nothing. In a few moments a car pulled up in front of the house and Laura got out. But rather than walking up the steps, she looked up at them from the sidewalk uncertainly. Nicholas waved. After a moment she slowly began to walk up the steps. She stopped when she reached the porch and looked at Austin frowningly. "Hmm," she said. "So you finally ended up on this doorstep."

Austin smiled and shrugged. "Yes, but I don't know that this is the end. Why don't you sit down and have a beer with us?"

"It's in the refrigerator," said Nicholas. "Help yourself." He said this quickly, impulsively, as if to assert his presence before he was forgotten. With incredible suddenness, he felt like a third wheel.

She glanced briefly at Nicholas and nodded to Austin as she started up the stairs. "I'll be right back," she said.

Austin watched her go up the stairs, then looked at Nicholas. "She really is beautiful, isn't she?"

Nicholas nodded sullenly and said nothing. What was there to say? He supposed that it was true enough. In a few moments Laura returned, and together they sat on the steps and talked as the sun went down. At first all three of them talked but in a short while it was only Austin and Laura

that talked. In the growing dusk, the couples slowly vanished and bums began to wander up and down the roads and sidewalks. The night insects gradually increased their chirruping din, and the birds became silent and invisible.