

Three Alone

In Which Nicholas Settles Down in Laura's Old House, Commiserates With Austin About Art and Life, and Attends a Miserable Party At Which Certain Things Are Revealed.

The morning sun in spring is bright; in autumn, it is appalling. From March to November the sunlight thickens, growing heavy and dense, and in the brief space before winter's clouds, the sky becomes fierce and unbearable. Nicholas, dressed in corduroy pants, white cotton shirt, wool muffler, nylon jacket, his knuckles tense and cold around the handlebars, arms stiff, lungs bellowing, face tense and pinched, mustache dewy with condensation, weaved his bicycle through traffic on wet, steamy streets. As his pumping legs pounded slowly with morning fatigue, his mind knuckled to the pressure of the previous night's wine, which pounded feverishly within his warm, sunny forehead.

He rounded the corner onto ninth street to a vision suddenly dreamy: twin elms rise into the mist in Oddfellow's Park, dropping yellow leaves onto the pavements and lawns. English ivy trails up their trunks, winding through crotches and limbs to motionlessly dangle amid twigs and falling leaves. The surrounding air is shiny and mystical, and it seems to Nicholas that he is in an old room, with curved panes and soaring walls.

A half a block from "L" Street he turned his bicycle into a little alleyway that sloped sharply down. He sped down the incline, dodging delivery trucks, thrash cans, and the meandering bums, until he came to a tiny door inside of a keystone arch in the brick wall. He jumped off the bike and rang the bell. Scuffling, scraping sounds came from behind the door, and it suddenly opened. Inside several men moved among huge stacks of books, stacking and restacking them, opening boxes, and making minute notations in cumbersome ledgers. An old man in wool tweed trousers and an immaculate silk tie said, without looking up, "Hello, Nicholas." Everyone else in the room nodded and looked up briefly, and each in turn said, "Hello, Nicholas." Nicholas jumped down into the room and lifted his bike down after him. "Hello," he said to everyone.

"Nicholas," said the older man, "These go upstairs, and please put these on my desk."

Nicholas nodded and set his bike against the far wall. Big brick arches vaulted the room at intervals, and the gloomy light from little bare bulbs gave the large room the appearance of a medieval wine cellar. A fine haze of dust from musty volumes hung suspended in the air, and in the dark corners of the room lay old sacks and crates. Dollies and carts were neatly stacked along one wall, and above them, suspended from a string by clothes pins, were a series of orders and invoices that fluttered and waved in an imperceptible breeze. At the center of the room was a table. Laid out along the longitudinal axis of the table, on butcher paper, were a series of volumes from the Hakluyt society pertaining to the otter trade. Tossed carelessly on top of them was a cookbook.

Nicholas picked up the two stacks of books and weaved through the room between the stacks and tables, and arrived at a little door in the corner. He walked in and started cautiously up a long, dim staircase that wobbled and creaked every inch of the way until, reaching the top, he opened another door and walked onto the sales floor. Here, each wall was covered from floor to ceiling with books. From the front door to the back of the long, narrow room were book covered tables, which were supported by bookshelves that were crammed with books. Over the counter to the

left side of the room was a large black and white portrait of a book. In the tiny office to the rear of the room an old woman sat over a desk, completing a tally of books to be ordered. The chatter of her ten-key adding machine floated into the early morning stillness of the room.

Nicholas set the stack of books on the counter next to a cash register. He looked at his watch and walked out to unlock the front door. He picked up the empty wine bottles in the planter and carried them out to the trash can in the alley. Then he went back to the store for the hand crank with which to unroll the candy-striped canvas awning. Gaily colored books shone at him from inside the little window panes. He looked back at them and studiously cranked out the awning, then returned to the store to go over the stack of books.

On top was Mrs. Riley's copy of Jewett's narrative of his imprisonment among the Nootka indians. Next was the third edition of a textbook for Dr. Gordon. Next came something for Mr. Chaplain, three cookbooks for Mrs. Monk, an atlas, *Alpine Wildflowers*, *Bugs*, *Tax Tables*, *Truss Function and Construction*, *The Mother Book*, *Cities*, *Parisian Nights and Daze*, and a dog book. He filed the books into a stack near the phone. Then he took a small pile of papers and set them on the desk in the office. Jane looked up from the ten-key and nodded. "Lo Nick."

"Hello Jane."

He left the office, straightened the greeting card rack, and strolled out to the front of the empty store. He saw a female head peer in the window briefly from the sidewalk. It was Linda. He beckoned to her quickly, and a slow smile slid over her face. She came from around the corner and crept in the door. Nicholas took a brief look around the room, smiling, then grabbed her by the arm and drew her close, and they smiled at each other as their faces drew together and their lips met. They kissed in a long, slow embrace until a rumble under the floor, and footsteps on the stairs, caused them to draw apart. Nicholas quickly pushed her out the door and blew her a kiss. She vanished around the corner. Three men emerged from the stairwell in single file, each carrying a stack of books. They walked to the counter where each deposited their stack, then two of the men returned downstairs. The older man, Mr. Andersdatter, remained behind the counter to look over the new arrivals. He peered over the stack, straightening the sides and looking at it from side to side. Then he pulled out a monocle and stuck it in his eye. It looked like a silver dollar. He took the first book off the stack and riffled the pages back and forth, then held it out at arms length, squinting one eye and protruding the other, which loomed even larger through the monocle. He examined the book as if it were a corpse. "Not a very attractive volume, is it?" he said, looking briefly to Nicholas. Nicholas agreed. The book was dropped into another stack. The next book was examined, and the next. The remainder of the stack he simply gave the once over, and glanced over the spines. He dumped them all into the same stack and sighed, "You can put these on the shelves now, Nicholas." And he walked back to the office, stopping on the way to straighten out the card rack.

Nicholas took the stack and carried it around the room, putting each book in its appropriate place on the shelf. Then he walked back to the counter. He flipped through a pictorial essay on Yugoslavia from the bargain shelf listlessly and fantasized, in a feeble sort of way, about being in distant places. But his heart wasn't in it, and he soon put the book back and strolled around the store, looking over the gardening books and what-not. He noticed a few books that were not properly shelved and rearranged them. Then he ran his finger over the shelf and flicked the dust through the air.

Eventually he walked over to the windows and stared out at the people passing by on the sidewalk. He watched them without much interest until he saw Laura go by. She saw Nicholas too, and turned into the store. Nicholas walked to the door to meet her.

"I just thought I'd tell you," she said, "There's a party tonight at Margaret's. You should come."

Nicholas grinned. "Sure."

Laura saw his eagerness and dropped her eyes. "I guess I'll see you there then. Linda will probably be there too," she added.

Nicholas scratched the end of his nose, drummed the top of a book with his fingers. Of course she would know about Linda. Perhaps she was jealous! If she would simply give him an unequivocal sign, it would evict the fear in his mind; he would simply take her and--he mentally made a swipe with his hand. Fuck it! He was twisting his mind to pieces over nothing. She would never give him what he wanted, and he would never take it from her.

"Marry me," he said suddenly.

Laura's eyes widened involuntarily. "What?" she said.

"Marry me. We'll leave right now. You'll be so happy you won't be able to stand it. We'll go to Reno."

"You're crazy!" she said. But her eyes were sparkling now, and she laughed.

"Yes," he said, "I'm crazy about you." He took her by the arm and led her towards the door. At the threshold she gently took his hand from her arm.

"You are such a lunatic," she said with an amused smile. "I'll see you later." And she walked out the door.

Nicholas watched her continue down the sidewalk. He felt phlegmatic, and his heart beat heavily in his chest. He began to walk back to the counter. He had immediately felt relief when Laura had taken his idiotic statements as humor. But then he had seen the relief in her face, the unmistakable relief that he could joke about his affection for her, that it wasn't really serious. And that relief was the sign he had been looking for. She had no really powerful attraction for him, as he had for her. And that was that.

He grabbed a step ladder from the floor and brought it behind the counter and sat down. He looked at the counter intently for a moment. And yet, perhaps she does have affection for me, he suddenly thought. After all, he had very strong feelings, and had hidden them from her, and had now even joked with her. Perhaps she was hiding her feelings as well, and what he had seen in her face was a cover-up as ingenious as his. With this thought new hope came into him, and simultaneously the old doubt raised itself again, no longer laid to rest. She is not in love with me; I am an idiot, he thought fiercely to himself. And he picked up the phone to begin calling the customers whose special orders had arrived.

When he finished, it was absolutely quiet except for an occasional rustle of paper in the office, and the ticking of the clock. He reached under the counter and pulled out a sack he brought with him, containing a coke, candy bar and a book. He unwraps the candy bar and turns to the book:

the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, with a commentary and notes. He opens it up and begins to read. A dull crunching sound is heard as he munches his peanut-coated candy bar. As he reads steadily along, he is uncomfortably aware that he understands very little of what he is reading. He reads each sentence several times, but even so, when he finally moves on to the next he can only barely remember what he has read. Perhaps his attention is not altogether fixed. True: he often stops to concentrate on his chewing, or to extract a piece of peanut that has become caught between his teeth. And now and again he must take his eyes off the passage to take a sip of his coke. But it also seems to him that this particular text is very obscure. Perhaps it is deliberately obscure. Or perhaps the translation is a botch. He doesn't know. If he were Chinese, he could simply read it as it was in the original. But this is a pointless thought, he tells himself impatiently.

He reads on in dismay. Why is he even reading this, he asks himself suddenly, becoming distracted even further from his book. Why this frustration? He doesn't understand any of this, not a word! It's the bookstore. He can't concentrate because any minute someone might walk in the door and he will have to get up, stop his reading, and... He slowly closes the book and examines the dust jacket absentmindedly, lost in thought, and turns the book over to read the blurb on the back. His eyes wander across the room to the gaily-colored children's books.

A little later in the morning Austin walks in the door. Nicholas gets up from his stool involuntarily. He sees Austin browse around the front of the store without any apparent method to his actions, as if he's not paying any attention to what he's doing. It looks as though he hasn't slept for days: his clothes are wrinkled and mussed, and hang limply from his shoulders. His eyes are bloodshot and sunk deeply into their sockets. He stares intently at everything. His movements are nervous and jerky. Nicholas comes around from behind the counter.

Austin looks up. "How you doing, Nick," he says. "Couldn't think today, so I decided to walk around for a while. Looks dead in here."

"Pretty dead."

"What a lot of lousy books." He picks up a novel from the pile in front of him. "Do you read these?"

"No."

Austin tosses the book down.

"You look like you've been up all week. You look like hell."

"Huh?" Austin looks at Nicholas sharply. "Oh. Well, I couldn't sleep." He picks up another book and puts it back down without looking at it, then walks past Nicholas to the next table.

"There's a party tonight at Margaret's. You ought to come."

Austin makes a brief face. "No thanks."

Pause.

"You know," says Austin, "I'm just in here to look around. I mean, we're friends, but this is also a bookstore. You understand?"

Nicholas swallows hard. "Sure." He walks back to the counter as Austin continues to randomly pick up books here and there, then suddenly puts them down and turns to leave. In seconds, he is out the door and gone, without a word.

Nicholas sits behind the counter and cracks his knuckles. A burning lump wells into his throat. But who cares, after all? Austin didn't have to talk: he can do as he damn well pleases. Nicholas can do nothing but blink for several minutes. What is happening with his friend? He's become nasty; he only sits in a room. He's rejected everything, given up on life. That's the way it seems... But Nicholas does not have the slightest idea of what to do about it.

At lunchtime he walks four doors down to the Merry Magdalene. He is in a somber mood. He slips quietly into a little booth near the door, where he can see the bureaucrats come and go, and watch the women order their food. He drinks coffee and twists the ring around his finger. Linda comes by with a small pad tucked in the belt of her apron. For a moment she slips into the private booth, where Nicholas reaches for her upper leg. Her hand intercepts his and their fingers grasp and push and intertwine. The little skirmish ends with a slap, and she walks away smiling as Nicholas rubs his knuckles. Minutes later she brings his pastrami sandwich and potato salad, and she sits across from him, exchanging small talk while they play with each others' legs under the tablecloth. Her dark hair falls carelessly over her temples, and she brushes it back with her slender hand. Laura walks by and smiles wryly at them. Nicholas feels his stomach flutter briefly, and smiles back, while Linda watches him with an attentive frown.

Laura walks to the kitchen where pizzas and sandwiches are being prepared. She picks up a knife and dips it into the mustard, then spreads it over several pieces of bread as quickly as she can slap them onto the cutting board. She reaches into the little bins full of sliced pastrami and corned beef, cuts cheese, and slices of tomatoes and onions. The knife is dull, and a tomato bursts on the counter. Laura drops her knife and lifts her fingers, which drip tomato seeds and juice onto the cutting board.

"Oh!" she says. "God, these knives!"

Margaret, the prep cook, looks over from the meat slicer in dismay. "We really need a system for doing these," she says. "And someone ought to sharpen those knives."

"Well, why don't you invent a system? Leslie invented the tortilla system."

Margaret turns off the slicer and walks over, her hands on her hips. She looks over the counter with a serious frown. Laura looks briefly at her, and then she too begins to examine the counter.

"Hmm..." says Margaret. "We could put something here..."

"Ah."

"Like a tray..."

"Aha!"

"Ha ha ha ha ha!"

"That's it, that's it! Ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

"Now I'll have to get rid of my habit of bending over all the time!"

"I'll say," says Nicholas, looking over at them from his booth.

Margaret frowns. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean," he says, "I mean to say that..."

"Don't put your foot any further into your mouth, if you know what's good for you," says Linda.

Margaret nods at him and smiles. She turns to Laura with a penetrating glance, then turns back to the meat slicer. Laura finishes the sandwiches, smiling faintly as she works. "Linda, you'd better get this pizza," she says. Linda winks at Nicholas and gets up to slice the pizza.

After finishing a few sandwiches and pizzas, Laura hangs up her apron and goes to the back of the restaurant, where a narrow flight of stairs leads to a cubbyhole over the main dining area. She closes the door behind her and walks up the stairs. There is a little desk at the top, covered with sheets of paper, ledgers, a few books, and an old adding machine; over the desk is an opening in the wall with a view over the room where everyone eats and talks. She sits down in a chair and drops her head into her hands, rubbing the back of her skull with her fingertips, and massaging her temples with the heels of her hands. She stares down at the scattered papers on her desk. She sees a pencil there, and suddenly lifts her head, picks up the pencil, and twirls it between her thumbs and forefingers, looking at it intently but absentmindedly. She drops the pencil and leans back into the chair, her eyes wandering blankly over the dining room below. Under a large painting of a dog in an orange grove, Margaret rearranges the tubs of salad fixings. Across from her, Nicholas's back presents itself. He sits alone in the booth, his head occasionally turning to watch as someone passes, or examining something on the table top. A thin curl of smoke rises from an ashtray beside him. Various people come and go through the doors; a few loiter on the sidewalk outside. Laura looks up to the clock, then back to the door. Within several seconds she sees Austin walk through the door. He seems careless, aimless, distracted. He leans over the counter and taps Margaret on the small of the back as she bends over. She jerks up, scowling, then her face breaks into a smile of delight. They talk for a few minutes, and Linda and Leslie both slip up behind him and wrap their arms about his waist. Nicholas, she sees, watches the scene with a frown.

Austin slowly disengages himself to look around the room. Finally, his eyes lift upward to the little hole in the wall behind which Laura sits, and their eyes meet. He smiles at her, then slowly makes his way to the piano, where he sits down and begins to play.

There are only six or seven people in the restaurant, but their conversations slowly stop; their heads instinctively turn up, as if something had descended on them. As one by one they turn their heads to the piano, they briefly see the incongruity of the man sitting there, who looks like a big cowboy or a truck driver; his hair is disordered, his eyes wild and distant. But the incongruity is quickly forgotten; there is no visible connection between him and the astonishing emotion that has accompanied the music into the room. The sounds enter the mind directly from a world unconnected with hands and eyes; they render the present world transparent. And in the moment of clarity, the music takes over, advancing rapidly from a few simple phrases through a series of increasingly complex variations, until it becomes a labyrinth that rises up through the centers of the mind like Atlantis emerging from the waters. It robs one of thought: it doesn't occur to you

whether the music is even good or not; it has reached into your mind so deeply you don't even know where it is. And when the music finally stops, it is still there in your mind, making you stupid. Conversation is slow to resume. People stare at Austin and look at one another, and slowly begin talking among themselves. Even Linda and Margaret look at Austin uneasily; they feel the uncomfortable fear that one feels when a secret or forgotten place within one's self is discovered by a stranger, who then manipulates strings you didn't even know to exist.

Laura stares down at the main floor of the restaurant from her perch. The desktop in front of her is ignored as she follows Austin through the room with her eyes. He walks from the piano through the maze of tables towards the front of the restaurant, where he stops for a moment at Nicholas's table. They talk quietly for several minutes; Nicholas begins gesturing with his hands. Whatever he is explaining requires him to suddenly stand up and walk around in a little circle, gesturing with wild arm motions. He sits back down and Linda walks over, also talking animatedly and gesturing heatedly with her arms. Austin stands there. All she can see is his back, but he is shaking his head. He throws back his head and laughs, but it is forced: she sees the uneasy distraction in his eyes as he turns, sees him suddenly look at her and catch her watching. She sees him smile at her as he slowly turns back around. He knows she's been watching him; it's as if he can feel her eyes doing their little dance up and down his back. As he turns back to Nicholas and Linda, he is almost smiling. "Well," he says, stretching his arms, "I've got to go."

Linda frowns absentmindedly, then smiles up at him. "You know there's a party at Margaret's tonight. You really ought to show up."

"Hmm. Laura's going to be there, I assume."

"That I don't know."

"Well. We'll see." He smiles thoughtfully and walks down the aisle and out the door. Linda sits down at Nicholas's table.

Nicholas and Linda sit quietly for a moment, then Nicholas smiled slowly and inched his fingers across the table spider-fashion. Linda watched his hand and mimicked it, and their fingers met mid-table and caressed. A tiny surge of pleasure went through the pit of Nicholas's stomach and fell swimmingly into his groin. The skin around his fingers became swamped with the feel of every soft pore and crease on Linda's hand, filling each square inch of his flesh with sick lust. His hands felt weak. He looked at Linda and saw her smile drop and her skin flush a slow, deep red. With bizarre incongruity, looking him straight in the eye, she asked what time it was.

"Downstairs," said Nicholas, unwilling to comprehend her question.

"We can't," she whispered. "I can't. I've got work to do."

"Work can wait."

Linda pulled her hand away. "You're crazy!" she said, smiling. But the rich color was leaving her face. She leaned forward and whispered to him intimately, her eyes bright. "We're just going to have to wait, you clown."

Nicholas shook his head and said nothing.

"Let's get together later. I'll come over after work." Pause. "Or rather after the party. You're

coming to the party, aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose I'll make it," he said with a disappointment that made him feel childish. It embarrassed him that he could not contain this petulance at being thwarted.

Linda saw his disappointment and felt a wash of irritation. Surely he did not expect her to drop what she was doing, while she was at work, and run off to some chilly little cubbyhole to make love!

"What's the matter with you?" she said, with some impatience.

"What do you mean?"

"You seem irritated."

"No, there's nothing," he said, brushing away any suggestion that he was disappointed. He smiled thinly. "I've got to go back to work, but I'll see you later. Come home with me after the party. Would you?"

She smiled back hesitantly. "That sounds good."

"See you then." He got up from the table and walked out the door after paying Margaret at the register.

Linda sat at the table and watched him go. Her irritation remained in spite of herself---she could not understand his disappointment, although she was certain that it existed. She finally shrugged and got up to finish her tables. The restaurant was mostly empty now, and the dirty dishes cluttered the tables; napkins were scattered over the floors. Linda walked between the tables, picking up the napkins and scraps of paper, and put the litter in the trashcan behind the counter. Then she picked some pepperoni slices out of the steam tray and nibbled at them thoughtfully.

Margaret stood a few feet away, scraping out one of the pizza ovens. She closed the oven doors and came over to the sandwich counter. "Would you like your sandwich now?" she asked Linda.

Linda looked up uncertainly. "Sure," she said. "The usual I guess."

Margaret nodded.

"Have you got your party all taken care of? Are you going to need any help later?"

"I might. But I doubt it." Margaret smiled. She was a tall woman with slim shoulders and deft, sure movements. "Everything's covered, really, except for what I forgot, and I haven't remembered that yet." She looked up with a frown. "I'm not sure that last sentence came out right."

Linda stared at her in amusement.

Pause.

Margaret said, "So how's it going with Nicholas?"

Linda looked down at the counter thoughtfully. "Well, I'm madly attracted to him, but it's not going to last."

"Why not? Or rather, why should it?"

Linda frowned and Margaret laughed. Linda said, "It's because I think he must be afraid of women---I never have the slightest idea what's going on in his head."

"Maybe there's nothing."

"Hm. Maybe you're right. But here's something going on; he's just not saying what. And I'm not really sure how interested he really is." She frowned.

"Well, he certainly seems interested. Here is your sandwich, my dear."

"Thanks." Linda picked it up and began to nibble at it. She watched Cindy and the busboy clearing the tables, and noticed that the light was not on in Laura's cubbyhole over the dining room. Soon Laura came out, walking slowly across the floor. Her eyes were fixed intently on a spot a few inches in front of where her feet met the floor. She came up to the booth in front of the counter and sat down.

"You look like a cyclone hit you," said Linda.

"You could probably use a beer," said Margaret.

Laura looked up. "You two look like Mutt and Jeff. Why are you standing behind the counter? Why don't you sit down?"

Linda looked at Margaret and shrugged. "You want a beer, Laura?" she asked.

"Sure."

Linda and Margaret brought a beer for Laura and one each for themselves. They all sat down. Laura took a sip of her beer and thoughtfully drew lines with her finger through the moisture on the table top. "I really don't understand it," she said. "That man simply walks in here for a few minutes and I feel as if my legs have been pulled out from under me."

"You mean Austin?"

Laura nodded. "I don't seem to have any feeling for the man, but suddenly I'm a nervous wreck. I'm not sure that I even want to look at that."

"Oh, it's the playing---the music," said Margaret. "I like it, but I always feel uncomfortable after hearing it."

"No, it's not the music, it's him. I feel distinctly nervous when he comes around."

They all sat around the table for a moment and said nothing.

"Where's Katrina, by the way?" Laura asked finally.

Margaret and Linda looked at each other, then Margaret looked back to Laura. "I don't know. Was she supposed to be here?"

"She was going to pick up the new meat slicer for me and bring it down."

Margaret shrugged. "I haven't seen her for days. She's been out pounding the pavement, looking for a job."

Everyone was silent. Laura looked around the room to see who was left. She saw only one person in the back, reading a book and drinking coffee. She looked back. "When she's gone we leave. Lock the door."

The person in the back must have overheard this, and finished her coffee in a gulp and left.

"At last," Laura sighed, after the door was locked. "Is there any leftover pizza, or something?"

"Sure," said Margaret. "Ill get you some."

"Thanks, Margaret. You know, I've been telling a lot of people about your party. But I didn't know what time it was supposed to be, so I said midnight."

"You're kidding."

"Well, eight o'clock."

"Really, what did you say?"

"I can't remember. I probably didn't say anything. Actually I just talked to Nicholas. I didn't mention a time because I figured he would show up on the dot."

"That's not true!" said Linda.

"Doesn't he seem that way to you?"

"No, not at all! You make it sound like he is fussy and punctual. I don't think he's like that."

"Well, who knows. I guess he probably isn't."

"You should know; I mean you both live in that house together. I would imagine that you know each other pretty well."

Laura raised an eyebrow and smiled. "You make it sound as if there were hanky-panky going on." Pause. "Anyway," she sighed, and did not finish the sentence.

Linda looked at the table and her lip curled slightly, "You mean there isn't?"

"Isn't what?"

"Hanky-panky going on."

Laura looked at Linda in astonishment. "For God's sake, Linda. Yes, that's what I mean."

Linda's eyes gleamed sullenly. "He seems to be interested in you, at any rate."

"If he is, he's being exceptionally poker-faced about the whole thing. But I'm not in the least bit interested in him as a partner so there's no reason to be jealous."

"I'm not jealous!"

"Well you're certainly acting as if I hit a sore spot."

"I can't believe you're saying this."

Laura belatedly saw that the nature of the conversation had changed without her being aware of it. She backtracked cautiously. "Linda, for some reason this has been a bad day. I didn't mean anything. I've been talking off the top of my head; I'm just unwinding."

Linda took a swallow of her beer. She looked up to see Margaret avert her eyes. Linda looked back to the table. "Oh, well..." she said.

Pause.

Cindy walked out from the kitchen. "Well, I'm through," she said. "See you all tomorrow---or Monday, rather."

"Good night, Cindy," said Laura. She sighed and put down her glass. She stood up. "Well," she said, "I guess it's time for all of us to go. I'll probably see you both later at the party."

Linda and Margaret got up also. After they locked the door they walked with Laura down the street to the bus stop, where they continued to talk as the evening traffic rolled by in the twilight.

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Thin branches of hackberry and oak interlace their silhouettes over the orange evening sky. Cars wait at stoplights with steaming exhausts. Few people walk up and down the streets; those that do wear coats and mufflers: their breaths drift out in little clouds. Neon lights flash alternating colors at intervals down the street: red, blue, white, pink, green. On the corner, a line of people wait outside a Japanese restaurant. The windows are thick with condensation, which occasionally gathers into rivulets that run awkwardly down the glass. The smell of ginger and egg batter wafts out the door.

Nicholas skirts the queue scattered along the sidewalk and makes his way down the street. He wears a big suede jacket with a pile lining. His hands are thrust deep into his pockets and he walks quickly. His nose and cheeks are red from the chill. Farther down the block he reaches inside his coat for his cigarettes; he pulls one out and lights it up, puffing vigorously. Soon he is out of the busy section of downtown and back among the dark homes and distant lights twinkling through leaves.

As he walks along the dead streets his stomach tightens. He is nervous about parties: they always make him feel as though he must say something unusual, if not clever, in order to make his presence known. But aside from the attention of women, he really doesn't care if he's noticed. He walks the cold streets, his feet crunching the fallen leaves. And then, everyone will be pouring with chatter, which he has no patience for. But what would he do at home? As aimless as he feels at work, it is nothing to what he feels now. To feel so dead and companionless, and to be at home, upstairs, in the dark house, would be more than he could stand tonight. And so he continues to walk to the party. He peers through the shrubbery and tree branches at the addresses that he sometimes cannot see. But he knows he has a couple of blocks to go.

Finally he comes to a narrow section of street where parked cars pile up crazily against the sidewalks, lean over the curbs, and force themselves around the driveways. The yard of

Margaret's house is vacant but little lights shine from inside the house. He walks over the lawn, missing all the concrete steppingstones, and hears the sounds of voices and laughter from inside the house. He steps onto the porch and knocks on the door; it opens and he sees a short woman with frizzy, pale brown hair, a large-lipped smiling mouth, a white frilly blouse, and a floor length plaid wool skirt. "Hello," she says, with a gay expression on her round face.

"Hello," says Nicholas, who walks into the room. He nods to the woman, smiling, and moves on farther into the room among the people. He does not even ask her name.

He quickly bumps into another woman, who turns towards him as if towards a disturbance. Their eyes meet. "Excuse me," he says smiling. The woman's eyes brighten, and she smiles, but before she can say anything, Nicholas has already moved farther into the crush. He moves purposely, as if towards a rendezvous further on. There are so many people, none of whom he knows, that he briefly wonders if he is in the right place. But then he sees Margaret in the kitchen. The counters are filled with bottles of liquor and glasses.

Margaret sees him approach and she smiles. "Nicholas," she says. "What would you like?"

"Oh, I guess I'll have some whiskey," he says. He does not feel comfortable, having nothing to say to her but feeling that he ought to say something. "Do you actually know all of these people?" he says finally.

"If you mean really well, then no," she says, "but I know who most of them are." she peers around the door. "Well, there're a few..." she says, frowning, and hands Nicholas his whiskey. "But," she says absently, "they're always a lot of strangers that show up. Where's Linda?" She does not wait for an answer, as her attention is suddenly focused on something very short that appears to be meandering through the crowd. Then Nicholas sees that Margaret's dog has wandered in from the back yard and licks at the peanuts in the various guest's hands. "Oh, by the way," she suddenly says, "Your friend's here someplace. He's quite the center of attraction, but he's disappeared."

Nicholas nods to Margaret and walks to the door that opens onto the backyard terrace. In spite of the chill, twenty or thirty people congregate outside on the lawn, talking and drinking and smoking. No one seems to take any notice of Nicholas as he wanders through the little knots of people. He is not wandering purposefully now---there is no one here who seems to want to talk to him, and so he does not feel the need to look as if he is going someplace else. As he walks over the grass he feels it crunch slightly beneath his shoes: it is covered with frost. He turns to look back at the house. Warm light streams from the windows; the sounds of loud conversations, the clinks and rattles of glasses and ice, the clicks of heels on tile, all mesh into a pleasant image of warmth in the midst of the cold evening. Nicholas turns and walks farther back into the yard; in the darkness he sees a raised patio with an awning; in the middle of it is a covered swimming pool. The sounds of the party grow slightly more distant, but he sees that there are people sitting out here: one person, at least. This person sees him approach and shifts his position on the bench.

"Hello, Nick."

Nicholas recognizes the voice and walks up to the bench. "Austin," he says, "What are you doing out here? I didn't think you were coming."

"Just sitting. It got a bit too close in there for me so I came outside. It looks like you just got

here."

"I didn't want to show up on time."

Austin laughed and shook his head. "God, Nick."

Nicholas smiled and said, "Well, at least you're in a better mood than you were this morning."

Austin frowned, puzzled. "How's that?"

"You seemed testy when you came in the store this morning."

"Is that right? I don't remember. But I haven't really been myself the last few days. I feel a bit scattered." He stopped to look at Nicholas; Nicholas could see the faint black smudge of his face a few feet away. He could tell by his posture that Austin was nervous, uneasy. The nervousness of his movements and his posture dovetailed strangely with the inherent feeling of confidence projected by his large, muscular body. "This party," Austin continued, giving a short, nervous laugh, "I really shouldn't have come here. I don't even know what to say to any of these people. They all seem to know me! But everyone here is a total stranger; I don't know them at all."

"Maybe they don't know you, but they've heard of you. They just want to talk to you because of your music."

"I know; I can't seem to get away from that. But it's really very strange. It doesn't matter where I go." He laughed nervously again. "I'm just hiding here; that's why I came to this town---it's so far from the people I know. Do you know, I'm so sick of the music I could spit? But there's no getting away from it---it's in my head, running through everything, continually. And so I thought I'd get away, at least, from all the talk of music: you know, the musicians, the agents, all the analysis and the chatter. That actually seems to make it worse. Well, I don't know what else to do. I come to this little party, a stranger," he stopped again, shifted his position on the seat and picked up his glass off the bench. He took a sip of it. "No one here has ever heard my music. Which is all right---I'm sure they wouldn't like it. But they insist on talking about it anyway. That's odd, don't you think?"

Nicholas shrugged. "That's not really true. I know that Margaret and William are pretty familiar with your music. William can even play a few things on the piano. Why should you care about the rest?"

"No," he said absently. "No, I don't care about any of them. Only look at me---you too, for that matter--we're at a party! And within a half hour we're in the farthest corner of the yard, in the cold, as far as we can get from the party while still keeping up the pretense of being here. Is it because the party in there is shallow, and we're too deep for it, or is it the other way around? Who knows. There are a lot of things I used to enjoy that I don't anymore, but the more I try to dig into my life and get to the bottom of things, the more I seem to be skimming the surface. It all seems to get shallower and shallower."

"But your music..."

"No, that's the worst part of it all. You only think it's deep because you want to write music, and admire me. But the music is what robs me of life. Maybe I am seeing something through it---though I don't know what it is--but it seems to me that with the music, as good as it might be,

I've made the world smaller."

"I don't think anyone who has heard it would ever say that!"

"No, smaller for myself---it's made my world smaller."

"Well naturally, in a way, because it's an abstraction, but whatever you are experiencing that's beneath the music is obviously something very deep."

"Is it? I'm glad you're so sure. Can you tell me what this thing is that I'm experiencing?"

"Well no, I don't know what it is..."

"Then why do you sit there talking about it as if you did? If anyone should know what it is my music is all about, don't you think I should? But I'm telling you that I don't. I've painted myself in a corner over it. I've done nothing but write music for the last four years---I've done absolutely nothing else. I have no friends. Do you know that I can see music? Yes, I can actually see it! I don't even know if I'm hearing it or seeing it any more; there doesn't seem to be any difference... Whether it's in front of my eyes or in my mind, it all seems to be the same. But I'm not sure that I'm seeing anything else; I don't seem to be able to tell any more. That's why I came here. To see you and Laura. I want to see her again. In fact, I want to move into the apartment next to yours---the vacant one. I've had it with my place. I've got to live with some people, talk to people more. I've got to stop thinking about the music for a while. You wouldn't mind if I moved next to you for a while, would you?"

Nicholas sat on the bench and listened to Austin as he spoke. He heard and understood Austin's question, and answered "No, of course not." But he felt deeply uneasy about his friend. There was a time not too long ago when Austin had done him a favor he could not forget: he had given Nicholas a new direction in his life, at least for a time. He had done it quite unobtrusively, even innocently; he had merely noticed that Nicholas had a musical talent. And he mentioned it to Nicholas. That's all he'd done; that was enough. Somewhere inside of himself, Nicholas had known of his music, and knew that it might provide some direction for him. But it was as if his compass had been spinning uncertainly, and Austin damped the spin, stopped the wobble, with his few off-hand words. Nicholas had no off-hand words for Austin. He suddenly felt that it was his turn to provide them, that the debt had now come due. But he was empty handed.