

Pennies

In Which Austin and Laura Collide Head-on, to Their Mutual Dismay.

After Austin moved into the house the reports of ghosts increased. But all the reports came from Austin. It seemed that the suite of rooms he moved into were inhabited. He was quite specific about the inhabitants: an old man, perhaps a bum, who lived in a corner of the living room; a middle-aged woman in a dirty blue bathrobe who came out of the bedroom closet at odd moments carrying an empty cup of coffee; and an unseen person in the kitchen who rearranged the dishes, lit candles, and complained about a pain in its chest. And there was something in the stairwell that attracted his attention but defied description: whatever it was, Austin would watch it for many minutes at a time, leaning over the upstairs banister, looking thoughtfully down into the dark shaft.

These were uncomfortable days for Nicholas. Within two or three days after Austin moved in, in the evenings, he heard Austin's door open, heard his footsteps down the stairs, and his knock on Laura's door. At first he heard her door open, then their voices: hers sharp and decisive, his calm and persuasive. The door would close, then more footsteps up the stairs. But at some point, days later, he heard the familiar door opening, the footsteps, the knock; and her door would open quietly, then close. And Austin would not return up the stairs for the rest of the evening.

Nicholas sat upstairs in his rooms during these evenings, feeling the sick worm of jealousy slide through his stomach. This weak, stomach-churning feeling was tempered only by Linda, who came to spend the night two or three times a week. When they lay together in his narrow little bedroom, the light of a small candle flickering over the walls, his absurd passion for Laura was forgotten. And then, over the course of a few weeks, the jealousy slowly faded and was replaced by a nagging restlessness that caused him to walk through the streets at all hours of the night. As he walked down H Street in the empty dark, with the dim globes of the street lights shining through the tree branches, he heard the distant rumble of the cannery near the river, and saw its clouds of steam rising over the streets. And he thought that perhaps he should work there, after all; the pittance from the bookstore went nowhere and the claustrophobia of that little place was a stone around his neck. But there was a dragging inertia that hung about him, preventing him from making a definite decision about anything.

The weeks after Austin moved in became a sliding turmoil that never quite dropped into chaos. Although he had gained the presence and the attention of his friend, he lost something that he had not acknowledged as a force in his life: a love fantasy. As his jealousy waned and his passionate feelings for Laura evaporated, he felt something inside of him began to grasp desperately for lost handholds, to scabble for purchase. This scabble, this desperation, was for something he never had! And yet there was something missing inside of him, and it wasn't long before he discovered the peculiar confusion that had taken place. In its unruliness, his mind had built a figure out of emotion and desire and named it Laura. It had little resemblance to the real Laura, yet it had attached itself to her, made its existence a condition of her existence. He had accustomed himself to it as he would have accustomed himself to the presence of a real person. And now when he could no longer fool himself about Laura becoming his lover, his little phantasm began to shake and shatter, began to evaporate as soon as he realized that it was no more than an elaborate daydream. And Nicholas mourned its leaving like a lovesick adolescent.

He was in love with it, he saw to his amazement and disgust: this funny creation of his wandering mind that he had mistaken for a real person.

If such a confusion were possible, what others were standing in his mind, ready to declare their defiance of the world? How was it that they were able to coexist with him in the same body, the same mind? Perhaps the picture of himself as an autonomous entity was a fiction of the same sort as the fictitious love fantasy named Laura.

This conclusion seemed false and unsatisfying. But who was the real Nicholas? Was he the spoiled mind that chased daydreams of its own creation, or was he simply one of the many creations of that mind?

These persistent thoughts continued to have a field day in his mind. He was so preoccupied, in fact, that he only barely noticed the unusual thing that was happening to his friend Austin. At first it seemed to be something connected with the house; Austin had always been fascinated with the house: first it was the strange mystical appearance of it (as he thought), the ghosts, and now the stairwell. His attention to music had finally begun to waver, exactly as he had desired it to. Into the vacuum fell this sudden preoccupation with ghosts, his interest in stairwells. A slow disintegration seemed to be beginning inside of him.

Austin had done nothing for days but sit in his rooms and look through huge stacks of manuscripts: all things that he had written, good things and indifferent things. He flipped through them gingerly, handling each one as if it were on the verge of falling apart in his hands, as if it were an ancient artifact written in an indecipherable language. It was amazing how quickly they were becoming meaningless to him, how quickly his interests had turned around. Even the feeling of hatred was becoming dim---these sheets were still robbers, but he did not think that they were robbing him any longer. When it came down to it, there wasn't a lot left to rob. Laura had said something about that just the other day: something to the effect that he was beginning to seem like a scarecrow. She had only been teasing him about his stiff, straw-colored hair, his intense appearance. But he also knew that he was becoming as silent as a scarecrow as well. Well, there was nothing to say. What was wrong with that? It was exactly what he wanted. He had come here to this town, and finally to this house, to get away from the words, regardless of whether they were the spoken or the musical ones. He wanted to forget about them, or if that was not possible, to only hear them run through his mind, and not have to put them down for others to see or hear, not to have them rob him of what precious time there was left to him. Because after all, one could go at any minute. Lately he had become quite aware of this. It was not that he had any intuition of an impending disaster, or that he had a longing for death. It was simply that he felt that he was approaching a wall of some kind, a place where everything would come to a complete stop.

What a problematic relationship he had with his talent! It had never seemed like a part of him; it had imposed itself on him from outside. It was a big voice that sounded soft and accommodating because it was from so far away. Now, after years of transcribing the results of his conversations with this voice, his mind began to wander. He looked over the stacks of music he'd written and saw what he had been conversing with all the years: something that was not human, not a person. Was it even something that was in the world? It was really possible that all of this material was nothing more than the self-amused workings of his brain. The thought itself was amusing: he had done this to himself; he had cut himself off quite thoroughly from the rest of the world.

Austin sat on the floor with his back against the wall and let his eyes wander around the room. What a place it was! Here he sat on one side of the living room, surrounded by his papers. Across the room under the bay windows was an old pine table with the paint peeling off; on it was a glass of water and a river stone. A stuffed chair on a frame with casters sat near it. This completed the furnishings of the living room. Over the bedroom door was a small index card with a word written on it: S'agapo. And inside the room were box springs, a mattress, and a child's dresser with a bowl full of pennies on top of it. As his eyes played over the bare room he shook his head and absent-mindedly riffled the paper stack nearest his hand. He thought of another room of his, two thousand miles away in an eastern town: a room with a thick rug, a large bookshelf spilling over with books, a comfortable sofa, a large oak work table; filling a quarter of the room was his piano. At the south end of this place was a window that looked out over a small stretch of woods and a stream. That room and the little house surrounding it was probably still exactly that way; he had left it just the way he now imagined it, and each month he sent in the payments. But now it was in a world he couldn't get back to. Somehow he had passed beyond everything that was in that house. And that passing beyond had brought him here: to this stingy little room swimming with paper scraps and broken things.

Austin got up and slowly wandered into the kitchen. He stood in the kitchen in his big work boots, aimlessly passing his eyes over the cupboards and sinks and dishes. He had stuck his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the counter top. He thought that he might as well be standing in the kitchen downstairs, a kitchen that was similar to this: leaning back against the counter with Laura leaning against him, her arms around his waist, her head turned and the side of her face pressed into his chest. And outside the kitchen was a short hall, and at the end of the hall was a bedroom. When they had had enough of standing quietly in the kitchen, and their clothes did not allow them to press more tightly together, they would not need to say a word; they would just go down the little hall to the bedroom and make love with the door open. He could not exactly define the feeling that this thought aroused in him, except that he liked to see her nakedness, liked to see her in passion yet passive. If she were not in a passive mood it became his game to make her become so. And he enjoyed this most of all: toying with her sensations and passions yet making her stay passive throughout it, seeing the results escape through her face and her voice. He smiled faintly at this, because he knew that in spite of his growing distance from music, he liked to play with Laura much as he liked to play a new instrument of great complexity.

Austin slowly wandered into back into the living room and into the bedroom. He stopped in front of his little dresser and looked at the bowl of pennies there; he dipped his hand into it and let the pennies run through his fingers. There was a penny for each pleasant memory, for each remembered moment when the woman he loved paid him a favor he could not forget. He absently felt his pockets for change but he had no pennies, only a nickel and a dime. He smiled. Well, if she came, he would have to use the dime. They seemed a little absurd, these pennies; perhaps fifty of them were for things she said, another ten for the way he remembered that she looked at a particular moment. The largest number were for when she walked up the stairs, which she did every day. But it wasn't every day that he heard her: the moment he did became a special moment, because then he was aware of her; and when he was aware of her she wasn't walking up the stairs, she was walking into him, into his mind... He was not alone at these moments, and would become suddenly aware that for all the time before he had been alone, that a long afternoon had passed. All through this long afternoon she had been gone. And so he gave

her a penny for his thoughts.

It might have been on a rainy night that he'd fallen in love, when drops spattered the windows and the wind blew through the elms outside. Or it might have been a sunny day, when the hard sun beat down and baked the trees and sidewalks. For years past he'd thought the feeling beyond him; his mind felt cold as a dead stove, and only his written scores and his spoken voice conveyed comfort. Even now his love was silent though: it took no place in his voice, and it spoke no words to another, existing unknown to the world at large, unknown to his loved one as well. He had waited a month for words to come, but they never came in that time. Something immaculate engendered his great rock of love, and he nourished it with the cold rain that slowly warmed as the night grew long.

Days spent in a restaurant; that's what it was like. You walk in and you sit down among many people, all coming and going doing busy things, while you sit at your table and watch: napkins being arranged on laps, spoons being dipped into bowls, meat lifted on forks into mouths, tongues moving, laps shifting, hands and fingers gesturing, fingers through hair, and after a time the idea slowly dawns that you are not alone in the room, that you are not unnoticed, and someone is paying attention to you. You feel the serene warmth of watching eyes and slowly, very slowly, you begin to search out those eyes because they are not yours, although they might gaze into yours if you play your cards right, and not as they happen to fall. You try, with your imagination if not your will, to bring those other eyes to bear on yourself so that they may meet your eyes; and you know that love isn't blind, but that it is born of the eyes, a tender glance to start with, and then an interested look, and finally a longing stare, then (if all follows well and good) blackness---or, as likely, a small candle of delicate scent in a very dark room.

Words are seldom real. They come to us, and are thrown away, in someone's ear perhaps, or to the empty air, or, worse still, on pages, where they stay for good and torment us with useless communication. Silence is the test of a true, loving mind. He wondered if the others felt the same way too, Laura---if she could see the truth in that. When someone called "Hello Austin," he would often answer "Yes?" Yet at other times he would not answer at all, and these were rare moments, to be savored, because silence is the test of a true, loving mind. Too much babble: words twisted about, pregnant but empty of meaning; a ship of fools; a Roman slum; a busy intersection on the edge of the world. What has love to do with these? What did Laura have to do with these?

He heard footsteps on the stairs. They sounded heavy, but they could as well have been the steps of a tired woman. It was hard to tell. He didn't want to look out the window where he could so easily be seen, looking down at her as she walked up the steps. If she looked up she would see him looking down, and perhaps she would think that he spied on her. Perhaps it wasn't really her. But then: he heard keys tinkling, and a lock being turned and a door opening. Who else lived downstairs but Laura? He walked quickly to the window and looked down, but it was too late. She had already closed the door.

He walked to the dresser and placed a dime on the copper pile of pennies in a dish. So little money, so many thoughts, here in the little dish. Looking at the dish with its pennies that seemed so clean and bright, he suddenly realized why he preferred this room to the others in his life: it was cleaner than the rest. It was more than that; it was immaculate. He looked around the room, absorbed by this thought. He saw the old table with its stone and glass of water, the neat stacks

of the scores on the old rug; the gray wallpaper laced with dim, pink roses, the moldings... He surveyed every little detail from the edge of the living room, then walked slowly to the center of the room and looked everything over once more. His eyes settled at last over the bedroom door where the white card was stapled to the wall, covered with its bold, black letters: S'agapo. He pronounced the word to himself: S'agapo. "I love you," he said to the walls and to the chairs. They did not answer; who would? Silence. The sound of a piano drifted faintly through the floor, and he knew who was playing it, and he smiled, sat down, and listened to the distant music, coming up through the floor.

* * * *

The music, as always, began with a small rainy feeling that reached through the ears and patterned over the outer mind like raindrops. Then the scales commenced to form tendrils and rivulets, until a thicket of sound sprinkled and rippled from the fingertips to ivory keys and felt tabs; a sound, healthy, belled modularity that wavered from the ceiling to the walls to the floor. That it should penetrate the paneled walls to the rooms beyond was a mystery. That it was heard at all outside the confines of a single mind seemed peculiar. Though Laura heard Austin's steps upstairs, her idea of him seemed far-fetched, far away. His steps, like old notes, hovered at a synchronous distance and soon merged with the new notes into resonance. It was in this way that she forgot her long afternoon. Her calves, loins, chest, and arms loosened slowly, sent slow lightning down every nerve end, spent her tenseness through her fingers into the wave laden air.

In the dining room was a cup of cold tea, poured as a mechanical afterthought the moment she had walked in the door. It seemed funny to her how the endless repetition of days could solidify into such articles as tea cups, jam jars, and porcelain bowls. Her attention began to waver, with a sudden inattention to the movement carefully wrought between herself and the piano, and just slightly her gaze wavered too; from a point in time her eyes began to focus in space, and the conditions of the room began to dawn in reds and greens. The tea cup snapped into focus, and her heart slightly sunk, and began to sink again, and it occurred to her that the tea was probably cold, and must somehow be rewarmed. And so the sound began to change, slipping from the shining of a strong healthy light to the cluttered and the vacuous: empty melodies composed of notes and scribbles that seemed to fill a warehouse. Her fingers now found their place at the keys by hand and eye, and she felt her dim connection to the music stretch and sag like an old stocking, until there was not a shred of it left to be found in her. She finally stopped to take the cup of tea.

She stood next to the piano and fingered the tea cup. Days spent in a restaurant: certainly that is how her days were spent. And how was it that this man upstairs spent his days? She heard his steps and his easy movement over the floor that was her ceiling, and he came to be a figure of fantasy moving in a different world, an unknown world except for the rhythmic noise that floated over her head. But then she heard his knock at her door evenings, saw his face with its intensity and eagerness to see her and to touch her, to talk and lay together on the sofa or in the bed. And then his eagerness became hers.

She watched the tip of her index finger trace the painted pattern over the cup's curve, saw the delicate clasp of her fingers around the cup's handle. The cool tea sparkled in little waves as her movements stirred it. As she raised it to her lips to drink, she felt its coolness pass through her lips and go over her teeth to her tongue, where she swirled it slightly before swallowing. This

train of small motions calmed her, made her suddenly aware of herself and the sensations of the skin she wore. She shrugged her shoulders, and felt the thin rasp of her cotton blouse brush over her breasts. She felt the snug grip of her belt slide over the tops of her hips. And before she quite realized what had happened, she felt a thick voluptuousness rise through her so powerfully that she unthinkingly followed its path up into her with widened eyes. The cup quivered in her hand and she set it quickly down.

She breathed deeply for several minutes, feeling her swamped skin tingle with lust. She laughed suddenly, then breathed deeply again to catch her breath. She sat down on the piano stool. The voluptuousness was now permanently inside of her, it seemed; it made her sigh as it moved through her organs like an eel. She looked down at her stomach and legs and they seemed suddenly foreign and newly inhabited. She ran her hands slowly over the tops of her thighs, then up over her stomach and breasts and shoulders. How odd it was, that this strange life pumped through her. She sat for several minutes on the stool, feeling the sensations climb through the interstices beneath her skin. The music had suddenly gone, she thought; it passed out of her head in a moment of inattention, and in its place, seemingly in cahoots with her inattention, this powerful lust poured into her thighs and loins and belly. Her weak knees and fluttering stomach disturbed her with their weakness, yet the sensation was equally exquisite because of its overpoweringness. When she sat with these sensations that passed at intervals through her body, she felt behind them the presence of a void so frightening and seductive she could barely think of it coherently, so fluttery was the dense comminglement of pleasure and terror and anticipation that accompanied it. It seemed to her Austin also walked around the periphery of this void, both in his life and as a presence in her life. Certainly he was an instrument that manipulated these feelings in her. Whenever she thought of him she felt the pressure of her desire begin to grow, and the attraction of him became something that seemed to be inescapable. But she didn't try to escape it. Each time he came near her she felt the sudden fear of the power of her feelings, and she formed around herself a little barrier of coldness and indifference. He seemed to see this as nothing more than a pose, the first act of a seduction play; it was merely an amusing formality of the little game they played together. And truly he spoke to the deeper part of her. Even as she spoke and moved through the coldness she put around herself in her moments of fear, the voluptuous part of her would respond to his touch so quickly and eagerly that she always showed herself a liar.

These thoughts continued to pass slowly through Laura's mind, and after a while she heard the door upstairs open. She looked over to the clock on the wall: once again he was nearly to the minute. It began when she came home from the restaurant. Whether it was true or not, she felt that he watched her as she turned up the sidewalk and walked up the steps. From that moment on she entered a ritual. She felt Austin's presence upstairs; she was required to bring him down. She would deposit her things on a chair and enter the dining room. She would sit down at the piano. After a moment or two of clearing her thoughts she would begin to play---always a short classical prelude of some sort, followed by a suite. But she would never get far in this, because now the purpose of the ritual would commence: a struggle initiated in her between the music and the man. She would resist the thoughts of the man as hard as she could, but eventually her attention to the music would waver. And when, sooner or later, the music finally left her mind for good, the ritual was at an end. Within a few minutes Austin would come down the stairs. She smiled faintly at this. It was little like the old belief of her childhood: that if you thought of something hard enough, it would happen, sooner or later. And here she was an adult with what

was nothing less than a variation on this old theme. Yet already she had heard the door open. And the sounds she heard were his accustomed footsteps, coming down the stairs.

Austin was standing in the corridor when she opened the door. He smiled at her and said nothing. Laura turned from him and began to walk back through the living room, leaving the door open; she heard his steps behind her as he entered, then she heard the door close. She got as far as the piano in the dining room when she realized he hadn't followed; she turned and saw him standing in the light that poured in from her bay windows; he looked out onto the street. She frowned, then turned decisively and walked into the front room, where she took the shade cord and pulled it sharply, covering the windows with drapes. Austin turned to her and smiled derisively.

Laura stood in front of him, frowning, still holding the shade cord in one hand. "You're supposed to look at me," she said.

Austin continued to smile and stepped in front of her, to where their faces were only a few inches apart. "Yes," he said, "That's true. But what if I won't look at you all of the time?" And he held out his hand and touched his finger to the end of her chin, then ran it down the front of her neck until it caught on her shirt near the hollow above her breast bone; she lifted her chin up as he did this, tightening the skin along which his finger ran.

"I won't let you come here any more."

"Nonsense!"

She took his finger and lifted it gently from her throat; his hand remained suspended in the air above her neck. She began to turn around but he took her gently by the shoulder and turned her back around to face him. "You see," he said, "You didn't even notice that I was just looking at you. Or that I'm usually looking at you."

"Oh, I noticed it. But I didn't like your expression. I think you're a little too casual about this whole thing, and it's beginning to show in that smug face of yours."

He smiled delightedly and laughed. "So you think I'm smug?"

"I certainly do."

"I have absolutely nothing to be smug about except you. So why shouldn't I look smug when you're around?"

"You've got nothing to be smug about where I'm concerned. I'm not yours and I don't even want to be yours."

"Yes you do. And I want you to say it."

"No! Not when it's not true."

"But you know that it is!"

She quickly shrugged his hand off of her shoulder and began to back slowly out of the room.

"Why are you so childish? You talk as if you should own me and I'll not be owned."

"Why should you care how I talk? Talk is cheap. You should pay more attention to how I act."

"You act as if you already do own me."

Austin frowned. "You should know that that works both ways. You don't own anything before it owns you."

Pause.

Laura stood at the threshold of the dining room and looked back to where Austin stood in front of the drawn drapes. She smiled at him tentatively. Her voluptuousness still moved about in her: in spite of herself a slow flush crept over her face. "Sit down," she said, "And I'll get you something to drink." As she said this she began to walk out of the room, trying not to hurry.

Austin watched her as she walked quickly into the kitchen. He turned and walked back to the closed drapes and opened them a crack. He looked out onto the narrow lawn and sidewalk; the huge oaks leaned over the houses up and down the street and high over the little yards their leaves rustled faintly. Here and there people walked up and down the sidewalks; here and there a car drove by. He closed the drapes and stood in the middle of the living room thoughtfully for a moment. He heard sounds in the kitchen: the clink of a glass, the wet purl of liquids poured from containers, the dry knock of footsteps on a wooden floor. He was aware that all of these sounds had a distant familiarity. He lifted his hands and looked at them, turning them over in front of his eyes. Yes, they were his hands; he knew this. They had a distant familiarity too. He wiped his palms over the front of his shirt and felt the cloth's friction against his skin. He ran his fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp and leaving his hair tousled, up-ended in all directions. He walked into the dining room to the piano and stood over the keyboard, studying it carefully. It was not that all of these things were completely foreign; he knew who he was, knew that in front of him was a piano, and that there was a woman in the next room. But what did any of it mean? This piano, for instance---he could play it. Here; he would do it now. He felt his finger tips on the ivory and felt in his mind the confident flow of the music through the instrument he had perfected with such confidence. There were sounds in the room, which were the result of the music---or which were the music, depending on how you looked at it. Either way, what did you have? Music was music. And now he could hear the footsteps of the woman in the next room as she entered the dining room and stood next to the piano. What would she think if she had the slightest suspicion of what was going on in his head? He looked up at her as he played, saw her expression and the moistness in her eyes as she looked from his hands to face in slow succession. He smiled at her and stopped, but inwardly he shook his head. What did any of this amount to?

"I thought you were going to get me something to drink," he said, still smiling.

"I was doing that. Why did you stop?"

He shrugged. "I'm too thirsty to play any more." He got up from the piano bench and stuck his hands in his pockets. He frowned and pulled one of his hands back out, ran a finger over the top of the piano thoughtfully.

"Oh, it's the dust," Laura said absently. "I never dust it." Austin beckoned to her with his finger.

"No, I have to finish in the kitchen," she said.

He took her gently by the sleeve and she hesitated slightly, turning to face him. He reached out to her face with his other hand, brushed it against the side of her face and ran his fingers through

the hair over her temple. She took two steps forward and put her arms around his waist, resting the side of her face against his chest. He put his arms around her. The two of them stood this way for several moments.

Finally Laura said, "Do you know that you come down here at exactly the same time every day?"

Austin smiled absently, looking down into the hair on the top of her head. "I'm sure it's not at exactly to same time."

"You know what I mean. All right, at practically the same time. But it's pretty damned near exactly."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Well so what? What if I do come down at exactly the same time?"

Laura buried her face a little deeper into Austin's shirt, and rubbed her cheek softly back and forth against his chest. She considered this for several moments although she had already come to her conclusion about it. But what was the hurry? She wrinkled her nose. With each movement of her face against his chest she held him more tightly. Finally she pressed against him as tightly as she could, holding her arms around him with all of her might. It was so delicious to stretch one's muscles in this way---she relaxed and then did it again. It caused her voluptuousness to grow all the richer and tighter inside of her; each little contact with the body made the little eels she felt quicken their pace. "Oh," she said softly as she relaxed for the second time, letting the air out of her lungs.

Austin released his arms from around her and pushed her back. She looked at him puzzledly until he began to undo the first button on her blouse. He quickly slipped the little disk of bone from its hole and moved down to the next. As he did so he noted the button's color: gray shot with brown, like a flake of soapstone or an old man's hair. His fingers felt the rasp of the coarse cotton of the blouse, and he saw the pinkness of her skin peeking through the weave. When he reached the last button his lips pursed critically and he tugged the shirttails out from beneath the belt. Her blouse hung open and dangling about her; the belt buckle suddenly seemed dull and stubborn, standing down beneath her navel, amid the wrinkled folds of her blouse. He stared at it for several seconds, then slowly raised his eyes to Laura's face, which was open and staring with a childish sort of dazedness.

"Hello," she said tentatively. "What have you done now?"

He shook his head and said nothing, only parted the open blouse with his hands and felt along her sides, down to her hips, then back up to her breasts, which he felt and cupped in his hands. Suddenly he took hold of the shirt and began to remove it from over her shoulders; she lifted her arms to help.

"I still have drinks in the kitchen," she said.

"Good; I want one. Let's get them."

"What, now that I'm half-naked?" she said, frowning.

"It's much better than being fully clothed, it seems to me. You're not cold, are you?"

"No, but... Oh, for God's sake!"

He laughed at her and she frowned again, a little half-heartedly. Then she got up and walked into the kitchen. She came back a moment later with two drinks; she sat down in a chair across from the piano bench and leaned over to hand Austin his drink. They each sat across from each other, holding their drinks, each surveying the other. After a moment Laura said, "You could at least take your shirt off, so that I wouldn't feel so odd."

"All right," he said, immediately setting his drink down and pulling at his shirt tails, then hoisting the shirt off over his head and shoulders. This left his stiff hair even more up-ended than before, and Laura laughed at the sight of him.

"God, your hair! You look like a puffin-fish---the ones with all the spines!"

"Well, my hair's always been that way." He tried to smooth it down with his hands but finally he just sat back and picked up his drink again. Laura looked at him over the top of the glass she held near her lips. "For being such a big muscular fellow," she said, "It's surprising you don't have more muscles between your ears."

Austin shrugged agreeably. "It's true---I've never thought of my brain as a muscle. But other people seem to think of theirs that way."

"Yes---we're all muscle-brained."

"Present company included?"

"Why not?" she said, her eyes shining with a metallic edge.

"But if you think of yourself that way then you truly are, aren't you?"

"I suppose so."

Austin frowned and shook his head. "That's something I'll never understand, thank god."

"You mean the feeling is purely for us yokels, the "untermensch?"

"I mean the whole idea that someone could think of themselves as inferior."

"Naturally, with your untold superiority, you wouldn't understand."

"No, you don't understand. I don't think of myself either way. Superiority or inferiority---what have either got to do with you? What you are and what you do can't be measured by someone else---you have to do it yourself. Once you let another person do the measuring, you've had it---you've thrown yourself to the sharks."

"But that's ridiculous! How do you measure yourself then, unless it's against other people?"

"Only people who don't know what to do measure themselves against other people."

"And how do you know what to do---God tells you, I suppose?"

Austin laughed. He looked into his glass and swirled the ice slivers around.

"Oh, why do we even talk about this," Laura said.

"Because you like to."

"I don't know why, but it's always been true---you make me feel so stupid; it happens within minutes of when we're together."

"If you really feel that way, then you are stupid. I can imagine that being around a particular person could make you want to become smarter. But how could it ever make you feel stupid?"

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's the way I am." She set her glass down on the arm of the chair and grabbed her shirt, pulled it over her shoulders and covered her breasts. She sat with her arms tightly crossed, her eyes hard and moist.

Austin said nothing. He sat on the piano bench with his ankles crossed, his glass cradled in his lap. His big shoulders were slightly hunched, his head turned down slightly, and he looked into his lap.

After a moment they heard the small sound of steps in the leaves outside the dining room window, then the meow of a cat. Austin looked up at Laura, a faint smile on his face. "There's that cat," he said.

Laura looked up, frowning, then glanced out the window. "Yes," she said, "It's been making a lot of noise lately."

"He's lonely."

"Now how would you know that?"

Austin smiled and shrugged.

Laura looked down into her lap. "He could at least go be lonely down the block."

"Maybe he's in love with you."

Laura continued to look down in her lap, then turned back up to Austin with a faint sidelong smile. "Maybe he is."

Austin stood up. "Maybe he just wants to come in."

"Of course."

He walked over and leaned down to take her hand; she offered it up to him. He took her other hand and lifted her gently out of the chair. She leaned her face up to him and kissed his face and lips while she put her arms around his neck. She gripped him more and more tightly as they kissed; she closed her eyes tighter and tighter. Finally she broke away from his lips and held her face tightly against the side of his. She felt his arms and hands play slowly about her blouse, finding the opening again and meeting her skin. She felt them move up her sides and over her back again; she felt them again tugging at the sides of the blouse, and she let go of his neck and held her arms out so that he could slip the blouse off of her. She stood a foot away from him, her

hands moving restlessly over his chest and shoulders as he unworked the buckle and opened the belt, popped open each of her buttons, and opened the front of her dress to where it slid gently to the floor. He looked at her perfect nakedness and the naked smoothness of her skin, risen here and there with gooseflesh, and when he reached out to run his fingers over her breasts and neck he felt her skin slightly jump in the first instant, then surge smoothly with a tight silkiness. He felt the senseless motions of her hands on his shoulders and neck, their carelessness that was an expression of her self-absorption in the little sensations that entered her. She felt his hands move over her but they were not hands. They were radiant injections that filled each passing patch of skin with an exquisite, ever increasing pressure. The pressure so filled her that she jumped slightly with each new contact, until finally she felt herself become stiff and jerky with pleasure; she was unable to breathe smoothly, and her stomach filled with butterflies. She felt his hands move to her hips, where they gripped her firmly and lifted her up. She cried out involuntarily and felt the small of her back pressed against the firm wall, felt Austin's lips brush gently over her stomach. As he kissed her belly and hips, he heard her soft, jerky breath and felt the soft brush of her hair against his neck and jaw. After several moments he felt her stiff hands begin to run through the hair on his head, here and there at first, then in fitful little strokes, and slowly at length in strong rhythmic strokes, unconsciously stroking in time to the sounds of her sighs. And once again their long pleasure-game began, and after a while even Austin became oblivious to the long shadows creeping down the streets, the silence of the yards, and the night's darkness filled with the noise of insects and the light of the white-haloed moon.

* * * *

In the deep of the night thin moonbeams cut through cracks in the lace drapes and fell through the room, making a bamboo thicket of slanted light. The round beams lit patches of bedcovers, the back of a chair, a piece of floor on which a discarded stocking lay. Everything was silent in the house except for the small night sounds: the distant drip of a drain, the pop of an old board slowly cooling in the night air; the soft, mysterious murmur that underlies all silence. Laura lay on her stomach atop the bed covers, her naked skin patched with moonlight. In her semi-sleep she heard the night murmurs that were like distant voices in the house. These voices moved slowly through the rooms like slow-strolling conversations, the murmurs recognizable as voices but too soft to separate as words. Laura felt herself at the center of these discussions. The voices surrounded her pleasantly in the night. One of them she recognized as Austin's. He talked on and on. She could not quite make out what he said, but he kept on in great seriousness. Perhaps he was explaining to someone about Laura; perhaps he was talking about music. He talked with two or three other people: she could hear their occasional voices interject and comment. Their voices droned on and on. She turned over in the bed onto her back and moved her legs and arms into more comfortable positions. The voices continued. She opened her eyes a little and saw the faint shafts of moonlight, the rumpled bed. She suddenly knew that she was alone in the room. She turned over to where Austin slept and felt the empty sheets. They were still warm. She sat up in bed and rubbed her eyes; suddenly she stopped and sat very still, listening. Certainly these were voices she heard in the house, and Austin's was among them. Who on earth was he talking to in the middle of the night? Nicholas? She leaned over to look at the clock. It was nearly three a.m. She sat very still on the bed and tried to pick out the voices. She listened so hard that suddenly she became unsure of herself: perhaps there were no voices at all. But then where had Austin gone? She slowly got out of the bed and pulled on a nightshirt. She heard the boards creak as her feet pressed the floor. She walked slowly into the hall and then into the dining room. The

moonlight streamed into the quiet room through the tall windows and she could not hear a single sound. And then suddenly she heard the soft voices again, a little louder than before. She walked into the living room and saw that the front door to her apartment was slightly ajar, and it was from outside that the voices came. She hesitated in the living room for a moment, not moving. She suddenly felt quite alone in the big house; alone and unprotected. A chill slowly moved up her back and she felt the gooseflesh break out along her arms and chest. She was alone, and yet someone was talking out there. She walked across the living room floor as quietly as she could and opened the front door. She saw that the door onto the front porch was also open, and the moonlight poured in. There was no one in the entryway except Austin. He sat in the corner at the bottom of the stairwell, looking up into the darkness. A cat sat curled in his lap. Laura suddenly felt a horrible terror come into her chest and for a brief moment she was absolutely paralyzed. What on earth... She could not even speak. It was a long moment before she said, "What are you..."

Austin interrupted her. "I'm just sitting here. I'm all right. Really. Go back to bed."

The little scene was so unexpected and terrifying that she could do nothing for a moment. She stood across from Austin stupidly for a long moment. Finally she said "But why? Why are you sitting here?"

She could see that he looked up at her but his face was expressionless in the dark. "I'm doing nothing. Talking to the cat." He stopped for a minute then resumed. "I don't want to talk right now. Please go back to bed."

Laura took a couple of steps back, uncertain and confused. "All right," she said, backing slowly and uncertainly into the living room.

"And leave the door open a crack."

"All right," she said again. She walked back into the dining room and stood there in confusion for a moment, then walked back into the bedroom. She sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling fearful and uncertain. He had terrified her! But as she sat on the bed and thought, she slowly became less frightened, and she realized that perhaps there was nothing so frightening about it; after all, she had been half asleep and had probably been hearing things, which had probably caused her to feel terrified minutes before she saw Austin. She pulled off the nightshirt and lay down in the bed, covering herself with the blankets. He was obviously just sitting out there thinking about things, whatever those things might be. But still she felt the chills pass over her and she thought: but he looked so strange out there! She burrowed further down into the covers and closed her eyes. She lay for long minutes and tried to sleep, although her eyes remained open. She listened to the darkness and kept herself perfectly still, until after long drowsy moments she heard the distant rush of blood in her ears, and then soft voices once again, once of which was Austin's. She lay quietly on the edge of sleep for a long time, listening to the confused, mysterious voices drone on and on into the night.