

THREE STORIES AND A CONVERSATION

by

Ernest Langford

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INCIDENT ON A MOUNTAIN ROAD

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"Damn it!" exclaimed the man. "There goes a tire!" He edged the car onto the side of the rough mountain road and stopped it.

"Which side is it?" asked his wife who sat beside him.

"On my side . . . at the back." He got out and walked to the back of the car.

After a couple of minutes the woman joined him. She puckered her lips and nose. "Do we have to unload?" she asked.

"What rotten luck!" he said. "We've got to take our stuff out of the trunk to get at the spare. Why don't we ever have a flat in front of a gas station?" The woman smiled and looked up at the high ragged peaks that jutted over tree tops and through clouds. Above them was the grey sky. It looked like a heavy nacreous clam shell: unbroken, dense and impenetrable. The man unlocked the trunk, and they began to take out camping equipment, piling everything neatly at the side of the road.

"God almighty! You ever stop to think how much junk we carry around just for a few days of camping?" the man asked. "Sometimes I wonder if it's worth all the trouble. We don't sleep well either, and I always go home with new aches and pains."

His wife, verging on plump middle age, smiled. "You enjoy it," she said.

"Sure I do, but I'd enjoy lying around the house just as much."

"Maybe."

He leaned into the trunk and lifted out the spare tire. "We should have a rack made for the front, or keep the spare inside the car." He squatted beside the deflated tire and pried off the hub cap. "Check the hand brake, will you?" His wife walked to the front of the car to check the brake lever. "Shove a rock against the front wheel." She obeyed without comment. They had been married

almost twenty years and by now had reduced the necessity for conversation to a minimum. Silence didn't bother them. They could go for hours without talking and still manage to be content in each other's company.

The man loosened the nuts, set the jack in position and began raising the car. They did not see the two men emerge from the bush and cross the road to stand behind them. The man was preoccupied with jacking the car up, and the woman with watching the body of the car. Once, when they had been changing a flat tire on a camping trip, the jack had slipped and the car had lurched forward to skim past her husband's shoulders. After that, she was always apprehensive when he was forced to change a tire. She seemed not to breathe until the change was an accomplished fact and the car once more rested on four solid wheels.

Both jumped when one of the men spoke. The woman uttered a quick cry and moved to stand beside her husband who looked around, his hand still on the jack lever. The men were younger than he: one in his mid-thirties, the other probably not more than twenty-five. They wore identical clothing of heavy blue denim and looked as if they had spent several nights in the bush.

"Got a flat, eh?" the older one said again.

"Just one of those things," the man said.

"Want a hand?" the young one asked.

"No thanks. It's no big deal," said the man. "You fellows camping around here?"

"Hiking," said the older one. He leaned forward and put his hand on the socket wrench that doubled for a jack handle. "Let my pal do that. He's a real slick tire-changer."

The man relinquished his hold on the handle. "Okay with me, if he wants to. Go ahead." The young man pumped up the car until the wheel swung freely, then quickly changed the tire. He worked so efficiently that the others were not aware of the tire being removed and another going on to take its place. "You must work in a garage," said the man when the car had been lowered.

"I've worked at near everything," the young one answered, looking at the flat tire and rotating the wheel around. "This tire's shot," he said.

"Seems to me I end up getting a new set of tires every time I take a camping trip."

"Get some heavy duty truck tires. These things aren't made for rough roads."

"Well, thanks for the help. Can we give you a lift?"

"I got a better idea," said the young one. "You give *us* your car."

After a moment the man said, "You're joking."

"You don't need it like we do," the older one said. His companion smiled.

"Who are you anyway?" the man asked.

"Escaped prisoners. We want to go places in a hurry."

"What about us?" the man asked. "It's a long way to the next town."

The young one looked at him and smiled. "You won't have to worry about that," he said. Looking into the small puckered eyes, the man knew he was thinking of killing him and his wife. The young one saw that the man had guessed what he and his companion intended to do. "We got a lot at stake," he said.

"So have we," said the man. He glanced at his wife. She was watching the two men, her face expressionless.

"That's the way it goes," the young man said. He stood by the open trunk, balancing the jack handle across the palm of his right hand.

"Take the car and leave us," the man said.

"Sorry. Another car might come along in ten minutes."

"That's a chance you take, isn't it?"

The young man, who appeared to be the dominant of the two, shrugged. "I don't want to take no chances."

"You know something?" said the man. "There won't be any chance for you at all if you . . ."

The young one smiled and shrugged again.

"What are you talking about?" the woman asked her husband.

"They're going to kill us," the man replied.

The woman moved closer to her husband. "They can't do that," she said.

The older man looked at the woman, and she knew he was imagining her stripped of her clothes. "Hey, you're all right!" he said. He looked at the young man who smiled and nodded. "Plenty of everything in the right places."

"Leave her alone," the man said.

"We bin away for a long time," the young one told him. "Me three years, him five."

"Kill us, and you'll be away for a lifetime."

"No. They won't never catch me alive." The young man's voice was uncompromising.

"Nor me."

"Listen, if we don't get home, people'll start asking questions."

The young one looked at the fingers of his left hand. They were thick and ugly with scars. "Any family?"

"Yes. They expect us back the day after tomorrow."

"We'll be a long, long way from here by then."

"Look, I'll make a bargain with you," said the man. "Leave us a bit of food and a sleeping bag, and I give you my word we won't start out until tomorrow."

"You want to go on living, eh?"

"Sure. We've got two kids depending on us."

"Or maybe you're just plain scared?" the older one asked.

"Not as scared as I thought I'd be. I don't like it though. And I don't like you looking at my wife. But I know I don't stand much of a chance against the two of you."

"You are so right." The young one laughed. The situation seemed to amuse him.

"And you don't stand much chance against men with guns."

"When I get to where I'm goin', I'll have a gun too."

"Sure. But you'll be one against dozens."

"That don't frighten me."

The man heard his wife breathing beside him. He knew she was going to speak and guessed what she would say. He wanted to cry out *No, no, don't say it!* But the words refused to come.

"I'll give you what you want if you'll let us alone afterwards. I mean . . . wouldn't it be easier . . . and nicer ... for you . . . than if . . . you had to fight for it?"

The young one smiled. "I guess it would, I guess it would."

"But you have to promise."

"You don't trust us, eh?"

"Why should we? You offered us help as a trick, and now you say you're going to kill us."
The older one stared at her. "You wouldn't move from this spot? You wouldn't say nothing?"

"We give our word."

"Christ! What does somebody's word amount to? Bugger all!"

"My husband's never broken his word."

The older one looked at his companion. "What d'ya say?" he asked.

"Okay by me. Let's give it a whirl."

"I don't trust you." The husband's voice was ragged with uncertainty.

"We're trusting you, ain't we?"

"Maybe. But look what we stand to lose."

"You think we got nothin' to lose?"

"You could take what you want from my wife, and still go ahead and kill us."

"You risk it. But so do we. It balances, Mac. It balances. So please yourself. I don't give a shit."

The woman went over to one of the piles of camping gear and pulled out a rolled sleeping bag.

"Get yourself some grub," the young one told the man.

"And the Coleman stove?"

"Sure. In exchange for your wallet."

In silence the man took out his wallet and handed it to the young one. Then the man and his wife made their selections from the boxes of food, taking cans of fruit juice and beef stew.

"Here, take these," said the older man and held out a package of dried fruit. "Got matches?"

"Yes."

The older one led the way, pushing through the salmonberry canes and alder bushes until they reached a clump of fair-sized cedars. The ground beneath the trees was clear and reasonably dry. "This do?" The couple looked around, then at each other, and nodded. The woman slowly unrolled the bag and placed it on the ground. She looked at her husband, trying to gauge what he was feeling.

"Do you want to stay?" she asked.

"I don't trust them."

A faint smile appeared on her unpainted wind-wrinkled mouth. "I don't either. But there's not much we can do about it, is there?"

"No."

She turned away from the men and slowly took off her clothes. In the shadow of the trees her rounded body looked like a piece of ivory. The husband heard the hissing intake of breath beside him and looked at the faces of his captors. He could see they were no longer aware of him. They saw nothing but his wife's pale body. She sat on the sleeping bag and looked up at them.

"I'm ready."

"You," said the young one to his companion.

The older one went towards the woman, then stopped. He held out his hands as if about to plead with her. The woman's face subtly altered. The man saw it and guessed what had happened.

She raised a hand and spoke. "Come on," she said, her voice quiet and gentle. The husband

had heard her speak like to their children when something upset them.

The older one hesitated, then knelt beside her. The other men could not see his face; they could see only his clumsy lurch as he moved toward the woman.

During the final convulsive moments they saw her arms embrace him and heard him mutter something to her. Then he moved away, fastened his clothes, and stood with his face averted. The woman lay on the sleeping bag as though alone in the wilderness. After a few minutes, the young man said, "Put your clothes back on."

The woman looked at him. "But I agreed."

"Get dressed, damn you!" He looked around, like someone seeking escape from an intolerable situation. "You hear me! Get dressed!" He turned to the husband. "Wait here until tomorrow morning. Don't forget."

"I gave my word."

The young one laughed, and the laugh racked his body. "Some things are so goddamn easy to give, ain't that right? Like words! Who the hell cares about your word! Come on," he said to his companion.

They left. In ten seconds the man and his wife were alone. He knelt on the sleeping bag and took her hands into his. "My god! My god!" he said. They heard the car start, and the density of the bush between them and the road made the noise seem far, far away. "Are you all right?" he asked.

"Yes."

They sat together on the bag, hands clasped. They were stunned, and their minds could not grasp the nature of what had happened to them. At last he said, "I'll get the stove going and heat some stew." He opened the stove and started it. "It won't be too bad here. I'll make a fire later on."

"They'll never get away," she said.

"I know."

After they had eaten, the man collected wood and made a fire. They lay beside it, together in the sleeping bag. As the fire died, they spoke of the incident again. He touched her face and felt tears on her cheeks. "What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing. Nothing."

"I should have tried to stop them. I should have tried."

"You couldn't. They would have killed you. Anyway, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

"I can't bear to think of those two men running like animals and hating the rest of us."

"Awful, isn't it?"

"There's some decency in them. He thanked me."

"Maybe if they escape, they might come to accept the rest of us," he said after a pause.

"They'll never get the opportunity. That's the horrible part, they'll never get the opportunity."

The man did not reply. Instead he put his arms around his wife, cushioning her head on his shoulder. After a while they slept in the dark, aromatic forest.

The End

PINK AND BLUE

by

Ernest Langford

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Walter Bolus, employee of the city's financial department, is surprised when Mrs. Jonquil calls in to see him. Mrs. Jonquil is a woman of indefinite age who lives next door to Bolus. She spends much of her time in her yard humming and singing to herself. Bolus maintains his distance while thinking that Mrs. Jonquil's contentment may originate in a bottle. He does not approve of women tilting their elbows, especially when they reach middle age. It implies loss of control and disintegrating bodies and morals. Bolus abhors deficiencies of control and makes sure he is always in control of his body, morals and emotions: they are subordinate to his will and to the needs of the city's financial department. Since Mrs. Jonquil is his neighbour Bolus has examined her property assessment and has discovered that her christian name is Pansy and that she pays her property taxes on time with a cheque. Beyond that he does not wish to go, being of the view that a woman named Pansy could hardly be expected to do more than fritter her time away doing inconsequential things.

Mrs. Jonquil smiles at Bolus and behaves as if he were smiling back at her. "Oh, Mr Bolus! I wonder, are you having any trouble with mice?" she asks.

"Mice?" Bolus is shocked. No mouse would dare put its whiskers inside his small monastic home. "No, I am not," he says. (Bolus knows about mice: they are associated with careless living, poor hygiene and unsanitary habits.) From the interior of Bolus's house comes the sound of the CBC TV evening news. By subtle movements of his arms and legs Bolus lets Mrs. Jonquil know he has better things to do than stand at his front door talking about mice. But Mrs. Jonquil is so dense she does not perceive the message he is sending. She has the gall to smile cheerfully while prattling on about the mice which scamper around her house. "Use traps," he tells her.

"They are too clever for traps," replies Mrs. Jonquil as she, by subtle movements of feet and hands, lets Bolus know that she expects him to invite her into his home.

Bolus resists. "Probably the traps aren't placed in the right locations."

"I don't think that's the problem," replies Mrs. Jonquil.

"Poison," Bolus tells her.

"I couldn't do that!" exclaims Mrs. Jonquil.

"Call pest control," Bolus says. "Look under 'Public Health' in the yellow pages."

Mrs. Jonquil looks at her shoes. "I don't think I can do that either," she says, then looks up at Bolus. Her brown eyes are large and her pink-tinged face is set in a frame of neatly arranged black hair. Dyed, Bolus thinks, dyed. "I should explain the situation to you, Mr. Bolus," she adds.

Bolus has lost the opening round. He steps back from the open door. "Come in," he says. He turns off the newscast and offers Mrs. Jonquil a cup of instant coffee which she accepts.

"What a pleasant home you have, Mr. Bolus," she says. "Have you lived her long?"

"Twenty years, five months, two weeks, three days, forty-five minutes..." Bolus looks at his watch. "...and twenty-two seconds." In a job where exactitude is a prime requisite Bolus is renowned for his precision. He tells everyone who will listen to him that a person cannot have dollars without first acquiring cents nor hours, days, weeks, months and years without first numbering seconds. He has one particularly lax subordinate at the office whom he frequently lectures on the importance of conserving cents and seconds and is profoundly upset when she does not heed a word he says. He now asks Mrs. Jonquil why she cannot get the city's pest control department to eliminate her mice. "The department is experienced in eliminating all kinds of pests. Except the human variety," he adds.

Mrs. Jonquil looks down into the cup of weak coffee. "It's too personal, Mr. Bolus," she says. "That's why I thought I'd seek your advice."

"Hm," Bolus replies. He rather enjoys doling out advice, especially when it demands permanent sacrifices from those who elect to follow it. "I don't see how mice can be personal."

"These mice are," Mrs. Jonquil tells him. "They are in my shoes, my stockings, my dresses, and my.... Well, I won't say where else, though I'm sure you know what I'm referring to."

Bolus looks askance at Mrs. Jonquil. His worst fears are being realized. He wonders how much alcohol she has put away before calling on him. "What kind of mice are they?" he asks.

"Oh, ordinary ones. You know, pink and blue ones." She smiles at him and Bolus observes she still has her own teeth. False teeth in women repel him.

"Did you say pink and blue?"

"Yes. That's right. I've no idea where they hide in the daytime, but at night when I take off my clothes they hop out of my...the things I've mentioned." Mrs. Jonquil suddenly lets out an exclamation of distress. "You don't think I'm making this up, do you, Mr. Bolus?" she cries. Her eyes widen in anxiety.

"No, no. No, no," Bolus mutters.

"I mean, I would never make up such a story and tell it to a gentleman like you."

"Of course not," Bolus agrees, "but it does seem odd, don't you think?"

Mrs. Jonquil quickly agrees. "The first time it happened I refused to believe it, Mr. Bolus. I was going to call the police, but then I thought they might laugh and say I'd had one glass too many. I don't deny I take an occasional drink of sherry or port, Mr. Bolus. But I know when to stop."

"Yes, quite so," Bolus mutters. He thinks Mrs. Jonquil is protesting too much. "Yes, well, I

don't think there's much I can do for you, Mrs. Jonquil."

"Oh, don't say that, Mr. Bolus. Please. I know it's asking a lot of a busy man like yourself, but..." Mrs. Jonquil prettily pauses. "...would you come and see for yourself? It would help so much. You might be able to tell me where they come from."

Bolus is trapped. He does not believe in Mrs. Jonquil's mice, but cannot say so since that would imply either that she is a liar or inordinately fond of the sherry bottle. Nor can he tell Mrs. Jonquil to take herself and her improbable tale of a mice plague out of his house because he believes that city hall employees are duty-bound to maintain good relations with residents at all times under any circumstances. Bolus is therefore left with no alternative. He weakly informs Mrs. Jonquil he will be pleased to view her mice.

"When? Tonight?" she asks. When Bolus starts temporizing, Mrs. Jonquil becomes coy and girlish. "Never put off until tomorrow what one can do today, Mr. Bolus," she tells him.

"All right. Tonight," he says.

Mrs. Jonquil rises from the chair. "Thank you so much, Mr. Bolus," she says as she walks slowly and graciously towards the front door. "I knew you would be sympathetic."

"Yes. Quite," Bolus says. Bolus says 'quite' whenever he wants to register disapproval. Each day he says the word about fifty times to his subordinate when referring to her work habits. It never has any effect though, because his subordinate apparently lacks the depth of mind to perceive the intent of his communication. Mrs. Jonquil is the same. She rattles on about not being so afraid of the mice invasion of her intimate garments now that she knows Bolus is on her side. She squeezes his left hand. "Glad to be of assistance," Bolus responds. Using that phrase has become habitual with him too. He even utters it to insects and other noxious creatures while exterminating them.

"I usually retire at eleven," Mrs. Jonquil explains.

"I'll be over then," Bolus says. He politely inclines his head as she exits. He then closes the door and hurries back to the TV, hoping to catch the weather forecast. He gets a situation comedy instead, which he watches while thinking about Mrs. Jonquil and her mice. He decides she has dt's and that he is duty-bound to report the matter to the city health department. A woman who habitually sees pink and blue mice scampering among her underclothes is not an asset to the city, even if she is punctual about paying her property assessments.

At twenty seconds to eleven Bolus knocks on Mrs. Jonquil's front door. She promptly opens it and he enters her home. "It's so good of you to put yourself out, Mr. Bolus," she says and invites him to sit. According to Bolus's standards the interior of Mrs. Jonquil's home is untidy, though he grudgingly concedes it is comfortable enough. The furniture is covered in flowered chintz, brightly coloured rugs lie on the floor, paintings and photographs abound on the walls, and half a dozen gaily coloured budgerigars cheep merrily in a large cage. A surprising number of books and magazines lie on the couch and tables. It had not occurred to Bolus that Mrs. Jonquil might read, perhaps even more extensively than he. Bolus himself solemnly plows through one book a month after computing the number of pages in relationship to the number of recreational seconds available to him. Much depends on the book's length. Sometimes when reading a short book he is reduced to a paragraph a night.

"Can I offer you a little something, Mr. Bolus?" Mrs. Jonquil asks. "It's pleasant to have a small drink before going to bed, don't you think?" She prepares Bolus a weak rye and water as directed by him and pours herself a glass of port. Then she sits opposite him in a chair near the

budgie cage. The birds tweet and chatter away. Mrs. Jonquil smiles at them. "Oh, stop your fussing," she tells them. "This is nice Mr. Bolus from next door." She smiles at Bolus. "They get excited when I have visitors," she says. "Do you like budgies, Mr. Bolus?"

Bolus tells her he is not familiar with them.

"They are good company," Mrs. Jonquil tells him. "They understand everything I say to them." She looks up at the birds who twitter and cheep at her. "Oh, what philosophical conversations we have." She leans forward. "Mr. Bolus, I'm going to ask you something, and I do hope you won't be offended." Bolus assures her that he will not take offence at anything she says. "You are sceptical about the mice, aren't you?"

Bolus does what he can to evade giving a direct answer and ends by saying that most people would have a problem taking pink and blue mice on trust.

"That is exactly what I felt when I first saw them," Mrs. Jonquil says. "They don't exist, I told myself. Pansy, I said... That's my name, Mr. Bolus. Pansy, you are imagining things. You've either had a drop too much port or you've been reading too much science fiction. I love science fiction, don't you, Mr. Bolus? And I suppose if I'd seen them only once I'd be comfortable with that explanation. But I've seen them too often not to accept them as real. After all, science can't explain everything, can it, Mr. Bolus?" Bolus agrees that there is a limit to the omnipotence of science. Mrs. Jonquil continues. "I don't blame you for being cynical, Mr. Bolus. I'm sure you thought I'd had a drop too much, didn't you?" Bolus doesn't answer. How can he, when she has so cleverly bared his thoughts? "I'm a realist, Mr. Bolus. I know how people react to the unexpected. I'm the same way. I mean, if you knocked on my door and said there was a herd of elephants in your yard I'd think you were joking, or drunk. Yet you might be telling me the truth."

"Yes. Quite," Bolus says. "I try not to lie."

"So do I," Mrs. Jonquil says. "I don't think it pays to deceive people." She sips away at the port, then stands and says she will behave exactly as she does every night before retiring to her bed. "So, if you will come with me, Mr. Bolus." Somewhat dazed, Bolus follows Mrs. Jonquil into her bedroom. She sits on the bed and suggests that Bolus seat himself in a small armchair. "I'm like most people, Mr. Bolus," she tells him. "A creature of habit. I'm sure you're that way too. I wonder why people are like that, Mr. Bolus. Do you think it makes us feel more secure? Well, here goes."

There isn't much light in the room, just enough for Bolus to see Mrs. Jonquil's movements. She begins by taking off her shoes. She hands each one to Bolus so that he can peer into them. They are very good quality flat-heeled suede leather shoes, the kind Mr. Bolus would expect a sensible middle-aged woman to wear. Mrs. Jonquil takes them from Bolus and places them on the floor.

"Watch, Mr. Bolus," she says. "Keep a sharp eye out. I know the first time I saw the mice I thought I was imagining things." Bolus watches while counting the seconds. He notices that Mrs. Jonquil's toes are twitching on the rug. The seconds pass and Bolus is on the point of scoffing when a couple of mice hop from the shoes and scurry off under the bed. Bolus hardly has time to see them clearly, but he thinks that the mouse which emerged from the right-foot shoe was blue, the one from the left-foot shoe, pink. "Did you see them, Mr. Bolus?" Mrs. Jonquil asks.

Bolus gulps down what is left in his glass. "Where did they come from?" he asks.

"I've no idea," Mrs. Jonquil says, "but I hope we can put our heads together and solve the riddle. Now watch." She proceeds to remove stockings from her shapely legs, saying, "I'm old-fashioned. I prefer stockings to panty hose. Watch, Mr. Bolus, watch." Bolus, distracted by the

movements Mrs. Jonquil makes, remembers the solemn voice of his Sunday school teacher saying 'Watch and pray, Walter, Watch and pray.' Believing it wise to follow advice offered by his elders, at that time Bolus took to praying with eyes wide, though nothing different happened in his life as a result.

Bolus counts the seconds while Mrs. Jonquil negligently cast the stockings onto the shoes. Bolus observes that she has short white toes and that these are twitching on the rug. He gasps when entire families of pink and blue mice emerge from the crumbled stockings and vanish under the bed. "I've never seen anything like it," Bolus manages to say. "It's incredible."

Mrs. Jonquil agrees. "If somebody told me about this, Mr. Bolus, I would have laughed at them," she says as she raises her hips to free her dress which she then carefully slips over her head and drops onto the stockings and shoes. "Keep your eyes on the dress, Mr. Bolus," she says. "Watch." Once more Bolus hears the voice of his Sunday school teacher urging him to watch and pray. He forces himself to transfer his gaze from Mrs. Jonquil, now clad in lemon-coloured panties, matching brassiere and garter belt, to the crumpled dress. He counts the seconds. Forty-three, four, five, six, seven, eight. The dress *must* be empty. How could mice possibly hide inside it while Mrs. Jonquil wears it? He had closely watched her remove her dress and none had fallen out. He has been tricked in some way into believing he has seen mice. He half rises, then slumps back in the chair when he sees hordes of mice pouring from the dress. The entire dress is alive with them: pink, blue and dappled, they rush from the dress and disappear under the bed.

"I...I don't understand," Bolus mutters. "I don't see where they could go." He drops to his knees and peers under bed where nothing is to be seen except an old magazine covered with layers of dust and fluff. Clearly Mrs. Jonquil does not vacuum under her bed. Bolus pulls out the magazine and shakes it to ensure that no mice are hidden inside its pages. He places the magazine on the bed while noting that it is folded open at the centre on a photograph of a beautiful young woman. Bolus is too flustered to read the small print at the bottom of the page which would have informed him that the young woman is identified as a seventh-generation member of the famous Jonquil vaudeville family. "Where did they go?" he repeats and his voice trembles because he is shaken and mystified.

"I have no idea," Mrs. Jonquil says as she removes her garter belt and brassiere. Bolus averts his eyes. Mrs. Jonquil leans forward and places the two garments on the pile of clothes. "Are you watching, Mr. Bolus?" she says.

"Yes," Bolus whispers. In the dim light he sees her breasts sway as she leans over, and he is reminded of large, ripe peaches swinging beneath heavily laden branches. Bolus is from orchard country where rows of trees yield luscious crops of pears, peaches, apricots, and apples to the avid hands of harvesters. He counts the seconds as Mrs. Jonquil crosses her arms and rest her hands on her shoulders. Bolus approves the gesture of modesty. Fifty-one, two, three, four. No. No. He is hallucinating. He will not believe it. The cloth that had moulded Mrs. Jonquil's warm flesh less than a minute ago now swarms with mice. Each brassiere cup must hold at least a dozen. They climb out, and while Bolus watches bug-eyed, they caper in a circle not far from Mrs. Jonquil's toes. Then they too vanish under the bed. For some reason, Bolus is reminded of a circus act where lovely young women enter cages and promptly vanish into thin air. Mrs. Jonquil glances at him and Bolus wonders whether he is going crazy.

"I know just how you feel, Mr. Bolus," she says. "It's hard to believe, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Bolus whispers. He wets his lips and shakes his head as Mrs. Jonquil prepares to remove her last garment.

"That's why I asked you to come here, Mr. Bolus, even though it meant undressing in front of you."

"I understand," Bolus says.

"I'm sure you realize I am a modest woman, Mr. Bolus," she says.

"I do understand," Bolus tells her. "I assure you I have had no immodest thoughts, Mrs. Jonquil."

Mrs. Jonquil momentarily turns and reaches out a hand of friendship. Bolus does not touch it, although he makes a reciprocal gesture by raising one of his hands. He also notes that the breasts revealed by the removal of her hands are remarkably firm for a woman of Mrs. Jonquil's age. "I know I can trust you, Mr. Bolus," she says.

"I have never cheated any person, business, or municipality out of a cent of money or a second of time in my entire life," Bolus tells her.

"You are a remarkable man," Mrs. Jonquil says. "Of course I knew that as soon as I saw you." Mrs. Jonquil moves back. "Shall we conclude this now, Mr. Bolus?" She slips her panties down over her feet and places the garment on the pile. "I regret that you must see me naked, Mr. Bolus. I'm not really worth looking at." Bolus does not know whether to agree or disagree since his knowledge of women's bodies is almost nonexistent.

He finally says, "I'm afraid I'm no judge, Mrs. Jonquil."

"Never mind, Mr. Bolus," she says. "I don't suppose it's your fault. Now just watch." Bolus goes back to counting seconds: fifty-seven, eight, nine. He cries out as mice pour by the dozen from the panties to skip around waving their forepaws before scuttling under the bed. Bolus is stunned. His mouth is open, his eyes vacant, his breathing abrupt and uneven. He is in a state of shock.

"What am I to do, Mr. Bolus?" Mrs. Jonquil asks. Bolus cannot respond. He is without a single idea. The pressure in his skull is almost unbearable. He has been defeated. He, Walter Bolus, the single employee of the city's financial department who is never short of a solution for a problem, is stumped. "I'm sure you'll think of something, Mr. Bolus," Mrs. Jonquil says. "I'll slip on a dressing gown." She leaves the bed and passes close to Bolus on her way to the closet where she keeps her clothes. Before Bolus averts his eyes he glimpses her proudly carried breasts, curvaceous belly and the triangle of thick hair at the base of it. The scent of sun-warmed lavender lies in the air around him. Bolus wants to spring from the chair and run from the house but finds his legs will not move. His mind, his body are numb.

Mrs. Jonquil, now decorously clad, returns to the bedside and gathers the clothes off the floor. "Would you care for another drink, Mr. Bolus?" she asks.

"Yes, yes, I believe I need one," Bolus says. She puts the clothes on the bed, then goes into the living room, Bolus following like an obedient dog to sit on the couch.

"I'm at a loss," he says.

"Sh!" Mrs. Jonquil says and brings a glass to him. The glass is full and the drink inside looks strong. "We won't talk about it now. Let's sleep on it. Though let me say, how grateful I am for your presence, Mr. Bolus."

"It was nothing," Bolus says. He gulps the rye and water, then gets up. "I must leave now. I rise early in the morning," he says.

"Of course. I am forgetting you are a busy person," Mrs. Jonquil says and accompanies him to the door. "Thank you once again." She holds out her hand. Bolus takes it, finds it is warm and soft and feels inclined to retain it. He compels himself to let it go. The door closes behind him and he stands on the porch for a few minutes, breathing deeply of the night air. He is surprised when he hears a sound on the other side of the door. He thinks he hears Mrs. Jonquil laughing but after a moment decides he is mistaken. The sound must be a product of his overwrought imagination due to the stress he has undergone in the past hour.

Bolus does not sleep well that night. He shifts and turns and dreams he is being hunted by an enormous green mouse which has a face like Mrs. Jonquil's and a rack of oversized breasts. The mouse has a bright yellow prehensile tail which it uses to lasso Bolus and wind him towards a maw that pulsates like a jelly fish. By morning Bolus is physically enervated and his nerves raw. He is ten seconds late for work. When he enters the office, his subordinate is already at her station although she's doing nothing except examining her face in a small mirror. The entire day is a severe trial. Bolus finds that he does not enjoy dealing with people who come in to complain about increases in their property taxes, nor is he able to extract any pleasure from lecturing his subordinate on the need to improve her work skills. He finds whenever he looks at her that an image of a naked Mrs. Jonquil rising from the bed becomes superimposed upon her. He is horrified to find himself wishing he could see his subordinate naked so he could compare the two women. Previously he has taken no interest in his subordinate, other than to censure her for her multitudinous defects. She is a terrible chatterbox and is always ready to talk about herself. There is a vague fiance somewhere in the background who, so she has told Bolus, 'gives her the goods' whenever she feels like it. She has told Bolus that she will marry her fiance only when inflation and interest rates drop and a decent home can be procured at an affordable price.

When not busy with tax returns Bolus directs his mind to solving the problem of Mrs. Jonquil's mice. Obviously mouse traps or poison would be impractical due to the placement of the infestation. He is looking for a means by which the mice can be caught after they have left the vicinity of Mrs. Jonquil's clothes. He draws lines and arcs on a sheet of paper and eventually comes up with a satisfactory solution: a corral of closely-meshed wire netting. He envisages Mrs. Jonquil sitting inside the corral removing her clothes and himself killing the mice as they run around and around the mesh perimeter trying to escape. The image pleases him so much that he finds himself humming the music of a fast food chain commercial which claims that everything possible gastronomically is done to satisfy its customers. Bolus reprimands himself and slips the paper in his pocket. He is a vegetarian; a regimen of soups and salads agrees well with his bowels and bank balance.

At the end of the work day, after a brisk walk home from city hall, Bolus prepares himself a Greek salad and eats two pieces of coarse whole grain bread. His dessert consists of half a cantaloupe. The simplicity of his meals not only enhances his bank account but also reduces dish washing to a minimum. Within minutes the dishes are washed, dried and put away and Bolus is sitting in front of the TV ready to receive the evening news and weather forecast. He shakes his head on hearing a report of Canada's economic condition. Bolus is a conservative and is always delighted when more and yet more evidence comes forward each evening to prove the fiscal irresponsibility of governments. He nods with satisfaction on hearing another strike is imminent in BC's forest industry and smiles when the weatherman announces a deep low pressure system is

rapidly approaching the coast. After being informed that unrelenting droplets of rain will fall on BC's coastal region during the next twenty-four hours, Bolus puts on his jacket and walks next door to Mrs. Jonquil's house.

"Mr. Bolus, come in. How nice of you to come by. I'm just having a cup of coffee." Bolus sits in the chair he occupied the previous night and graciously allows Mrs. Jonquil to serve him coffee. It is strong, aromatic and superior to his instant brew.

"I believe I have a solution for you," he tells her. He takes the sheet of paper out and explains his plan to her. "If you approve of it, then I will purchase the necessary materials."

"Get whatever is needed," Mrs. Jonquil says. "I'll pay for everything." Bolus empties his cup and remarks that within a few days Mrs. Jonquil should be mice-free. "I hope so. It's been so trying," she says as she refills his cup.

"The important thing is to formulate a plan and then carefully implement it," Bolus says. "I plan every second of my day," he adds.

"I can see you are a meticulous person," Mrs. Jonquil observes.

"A man has to be. Without careful planning, success is impossible," Bolus says. "So I will purchase the materials tomorrow on my way home from work. No...wait, I think I'll draw up some estimates first. After all it's not my own money I'll be using."

"Oh, don't worry about that, Mr. Bolus. I can afford it."

"That isn't the point." Bolus raises an emphatic finger. "It's the principle which matters. That is what I say to the young woman who works under my supervision. Whatever needs to be done must be carried out with the least possible amounts of cents and seconds."

Mrs. Jonquil agrees that the careful expenditure of time and money are commendable. "I'm sure we were both brought up by our parents to be frugal."

"Oh no," Bolus says. "I am careful of time and money because I was forced to watch my parents waste both. I was forced at an early age to fend for myself."

"You appear to have done very well," Mrs. Jonquil murmured. "You have a very responsible position at city hall."

"If I set what I've accomplished against what I've had to overcome, then I can honestly say I've not done too badly." Bolus begins cracking his knuckles, something he always does when speaking of his early years and his efforts to succeed in life. "I was never able to attend college or university, which I desperately wanted to do. That has meant I've had to overcome educational barriers to my advancement by self-directed study. I've applied myself. But I'm realistic enough to know I'll never occupy a position commensurate with my native ability because I lack formal education."

"That is shocking!" Mrs. Jonquil indignantly says.

"It's a fact of life. I know, for instance, that I would be capable of managing the finances of our city. But our city fathers in their wisdom have decreed that the city treasurer must have a commerce degree or chartered accountant certification."

"I'm sure they couldn't find a more trustworthy man than you, Mr. Bolus," Mrs. Jonquil protests.

"Naturally I agree," Bolus says. "However, I bowed to council's decision when they turned me down for the job of city treasurer, although my merits were recognized by everyone on the search committee. Take it from me, Mrs. Jonquil, if I'd had the necessary educational qualifications

I'd be at the top."

"How unfair," Mrs. Jonquil says. Bolus smiles. He perceives that one of Mrs. Jonquil's more endearing qualities is loyalty to friends. "Please, won't you call me Pansy? It seems a little silly to go on being so formal...Walter."

"I agree. But I must go now before I waste any more of your precious seconds."

"Oh, you're not wasting anything of mine, Walter. The contrary." Mrs. Jonquil waves him back into the chair. "Stay as long as you like."

Bolus does not believe Mrs. Jonquil. Every responsible person has important matters that must be allocated to the seconds available to him or her each day. "It's kind of you to say that," he tells her. "But I have stayed too long. I have much to do and only a limited number of seconds in which do them." Bolus resolutely abandons the chair and makes for the front door. "Tomorrow I shall begin assembling materials for the mice corral."

"Of course. Goodbye for now, Walter." Mrs. Jonquil stands close to him as she holds the open door. The scent of lavender warmed by contact with her body surrounds him. He mumbles a goodbye and escapes to his own arid home where he watches a TV program on juvenile delinquency and disapproves of the conclusions reached by those presenting it. He himself had risen above an adverse home environment. Some of his contemporaries as youths had gone the route of remand homes and penitentiaries; but others -- and he was one -- had worked unceasingly to drag themselves out of the hindering swamp of vicious home lives, brutal and alcoholic parents, and limited educational opportunities. Bolus thought of himself as a crusader, a warrior in the foremost ranks of an army fighting against adverse circumstances. He felt no bitterness towards those more fortunate than himself, only occasionally a regret that chance had not made him, too, one of the favoured ones.

His sleep is once again disturbed by unpleasant dreams in which he is pursued by a very large mouse with Mrs. Jonquil's face. The naked tail of the mouse lassoes him and he trembles as the animal draws him closer and closer to its pulsating maw. He cries out and awakens to find himself entangled in a knot of hot, damp bed linen. When morning arrives he showers, shaves, empties his bladder and bowels, consumes one egg, one piece of toast, one cup of instant coffee, one glass of vitamin impregnated fruit juice, and one iron capsule before walking to city hall.

At the office he is especially stern with his subordinate. As usual, she does little but waste precious seconds and argue with Bolus about the national economy which is a concern of hers. "Do you think the unemployment level will ever come down?" she asks.

"It will when people are prepared to accept lower wages and standards of living," Bolus tells her.

"But how can people accept less when they need higher wages just to make ends meet?" she asks.

Bolus's subordinate belongs to a large group of people who are misguided enough to believe that being a citizen in a free country automatically confers upon them an entitlement of sufficient money to purchase a home, a car and little luxuries such as wine and beer and holidays in Las Vegas and Hawaii. Although Bolus has worked assiduously to remove her delusions, his subordinate persists in maintaining that such privileges are hers by right as a free-born Canadian citizen. "I disagree with you all the way down the line, Bolus," she says. "Workers' rights have been clearly established." She is the corresponding secretary of the local municipal employees union.

"You may have the right to bargain, but not to determine what you will receive," Bolus tells her. "The fact remains in our marketplace economy employers can lock out workers and close their businesses down if they so choose, rather than submit to employee demands."

Bolus's subordinate reiterates her belief that all people have the right to a life free from financial burdens. "Anybody'd think you didn't like unions," she says, accusation rampant in her voice.

Bolus counts ten seconds off, then coldly orders her back to work. She communicates her ire by twitching her hips at him as she walks away. Bolus decides the young man she is engaged to marry will have marital problems. By nature his subordinate resents correction, even of the gentlest kind.

Bolus spends the rest of the day tracking down some lost cents which have ill-advisedly strayed from the city's financial fold. On his way home he acquires estimates for the cost of wire netting from three hardware stores. He eats dinner, which consists of split pea soup, green salad, one bran muffin, and an indifferent pear. After cleaning up, Bolus repairs to the TV and the evening news. Nothing he hears in the newscast surprises him and he is delighted to learn that the trend toward economic recession continues, but is surprised and somewhat irritated to hear that the deep low has been diverted to the north by the sudden appearance of a high pressure area which has slipped up the coast from southern California. Irrationality in weather conditions annoys him.

To soothe his ire he composes a neat list of prices of the wire netting with an accompanying diagram of the proposed corral. Mrs. Jonquil's position in the corral is indicated by a large X. Having done that he crosses the lawn to her house and knocks on the door. Mrs. Jonquil greets him with a smile and settles him into a chair. The coffee table is laid with China cups and in the midst of it stands a cream-filled cake.

"I hope you like cake, Walter," she says.

"I enjoy cake, but it's not something I usually have," Bolus replies.

Mrs. Jonquil slices the cake, serves Bolus a large piece and herself a small one. "How is it, Walter?" she asks. "Does it pass muster?"

Bolus empties his mouth. "Very good," he says. "Very good indeed."

"Thank heavens!" Mrs. Jonquil exclaims. "Now I can relax. My cakes either turn out well or are a total failure. But I'm never sure which they'll be until after I've taken them out of the oven."

"I have an estimate of costs," Bolus says and hands the sheet of paper to Mrs. Jonquil.

She looks over the figures. "They seem reasonable," she says.

"Unfortunately the entire roll of wire netting must be purchased," Bolus tells her. "However, netting keeps and will come in handy should you need to use it again."

"I hope I won't have to," Mrs. Jonquil comments.

"I'll get a roll on my way home tomorrow and we can go to work in the evening if that's agreeable with you."

"Of course. Another piece of cake?"

Bolus eats several pieces of cake and drinks a number of cups of coffee while giving his opinions on local, provincial and federal issues. Mrs. Jonquil nods, smiles and occasionally supplements a point Bolus has made. After an hour and twenty minutes and sixteen seconds, Bolus rises, preparatory to leaving.

"I shall come over at your usual retiring time tomorrow, Pansy?" he asks.

"Oh, is that necessary, Walter? I mean, the mice won't care if I undress at ten or eleven, or even earlier."

"Oh yes, I see what you mean," Bolus says, "Well, an earlier hour would enable me to get to bed at my usual time. So, will eight o'clock suit you?"

Mrs. Jonquil nods and accompanies Bolus to the door where he looks down at her smiling lips and discovers within himself an impulse to kiss them. He resists the impulse and departs. At home he watches a TV movie in which a number of people are murdered by a frustrated young man who is hunted down and shot by a relentless but sympathetic police officer. The movie irritates him. He considers the police officer's sympathy misplaced; he had given the victim none, the murderer a lot. Bolus wonders whether the police officer is the murderer's reverse side. That would explain the officer's attitude. Bolus thinks maybe this is true of all police officers: they are like primitive hunters who go out of their way to placate their quarry. This means victims will suffer double jeopardy; that of criminal assault and negligence by society. Bolus does not understand this, because it almost seems as if victims are being told that being assaulted or murdered is their own fault; if they had not behaved in certain ways they wouldn't have met with harm.

On going to sleep Bolus finds he is once again among the hunted. He dreams he is being attacked by two mice, one with Mrs. Jonquil's face, the other his subordinate's. They beat and lasso him with their tails and pull him in different directions which awakens Bolus with the sensation of being strangled. His head, heart and lungs pound, but after walking around the room and drinking a glass of water he manages to sleep again.

The next day Bolus's subordinate returns to the attack. She has gathered materials to support her position in defense of unions and the rights of citizens in a democratic society. Bolus remembering his dream has little enthusiasm for her arguments. "You're a reactionary," she accuses him, then stalks away to her desk.

Bolus follows and sternly gazes at her. "I believe that you and I are under an obligation to do a fair day's work for our wages."

"Oh phooey!" his subordinate says and turns her back on him.

"What did you say?" Bolus asks.

"I said, 'Oh phooey.' Shall I say it again? Phooey, phooey, phooey!"

"For two pins I'd report you to management," rejoins Bolus.

"Go ahead. Report me. You are a negative man. Phooey to you and everybody else in this awful place!" Having said this, she breaks into loud sobs and lowers her head onto her desk.

"That was just a warning," he says.

"I don't care," his subordinate sobs.

"Stop crying," Bolus urges.

"I can cry if I want to."

"Perhaps. But you shouldn't cry here. Besides, a reprimand from me has never made you cry before."

"Well, it does now."

"All I said was -- "

"I hate you," his subordinate mumbles. "You've made me fall in love with you."

Bolus has never heard anything so unfair in his life. "What nonsense! All I've ever done is urge you to use your seconds wisely."

"You think I want to fall in love with a negative man?" his subordinate asks.

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday...when we were arguing."

"Well, if arguing produces love, we can stop arguing this minute and that'll solve your problem."

"You don't understand anything. You're mean to me," she says. "You treat me like I'm a nothing."

"Tell me when I've been mean to you," Bolus protests. "Other than to correct numerous errors in your work and remind you from time to time that we are here to work, not to discuss the rights of workers to a high standard of living."

"It's just the way you are," she says. "You never smile. You don't even call me by name. Anybody'd think I was contaminated or something."

"I have never deliberately gone out of my way to leave that impression," Bolus says. "And one other point. Until four minutes and sixteen seconds ago I understood you were engaged to be married once inflation and interest come down."

"I don't give a damn about him." She sniffs and raises her head. "Is my mascara running?" she asks. "It's not supposed to. The container says you can wear it swimming and when it's raining." She grabs his hand. "Do you mind me being in love with you?"

"I haven't thought about it," Bolus says. "But I'm worried about your fiancee."

"Oh, he'll find someone else."

Bolus backs away from his subordinate's desk. "I am of the opinion we should get back to work."

"All right. But promise you won't be nasty to me again. Promise?"

Bolus agrees to be amiable provided his subordinate agrees not to waste precious seconds. He then returns to his desk where he checks a list of delinquent taxpayers and contemplates with pleasure the interest which is now accruing to the city from penalties owed by these negligent citizens. Occasionally he glances at his subordinate, now demurely working at her accounts. He tries to observe her when she is unaware of his speculative gaze. She is not wholly unattractive, he observes: a plump body, large brown eyes, and full curved lips. While Bolus watches surreptitiously she stands and leans over the desk to retrieve some papers. Her skirt rises, revealing the back of her thighs, which are comely, though somewhat striated from the pressure of her chair. Bolus averts his eyes. He does not want to observe his subordinate when she is in a position which might cause her embarrassment should she realize she was being watched. He does not see the little smile of satisfaction on her lips as she leans over the desk. She knows Bolus is watching her.

When it is time to go home his subordinate comes to stand before Bolus's desk. "I'm going now," she says.

"All right," Bolus replies.

"Maybe you'll ask me out sometime," she says.

"I'll think about it," Bolus replies, thinking her comment is inappropriate and demonstrates over-confidence.

That makes her laugh. She tells Bolus that people should never think about things like that. They should either just do them, or not. Her good humour has returned and she bounces out. Bolus decides he may be forced to speak to his superior about having her transferred to another

department.

On his way home Bolus purchases a roll of wire netting for which he requests a receipt. By the time he gets home he wishes he had included taxi fare in his cost estimates because the roll is heavy and cumbersome. However, he tells himself he has no one to blame but himself. He showers, dresses in a sport shirt, slacks and loafers. Then he prepares and eats his dinner of salad, bread, cheese and a peach. After the meal he listens to the TV news and weather forecast. He hears that the high pressure system is still holding off the cold low. That settled, Bolus turns off the TV and sets about manufacturing the mice corral. He measures out enough netting to enclose a circle with a two-meter diameter, then weaves pieces of wood into the netting to serve as struts. He examines the finished product and decides it will serve the purpose admirably. Bolus now fashions a short heavy paddle which he will use to slaughter the mice trapped inside the corral. Thus equipped with corral and paddle he crosses the gap between his and Mrs. Jonquil's houses and knocks on her door at five seconds to eight.

Mrs. Jonquil opens the door. "Come in, Walter," she says.

"I have everything ready," Bolus says. He sets down the corral.

"I see you have," Mrs. Jonquil agrees. "But why don't we have some coffee first?" The table is set and the remains of the cream cake stand on it. Bolus falls in with the suggestion although he would rather put off having cake and coffee until after the mice extermination was accomplished. He believes business should always come before pleasure. "Do you think we could set up the corral in here, Walter? There's more space in this room than in the bedroom."

Bolus looks around the room. It is twice the size of the bedroom and would afford ample room for the corral. "You have no objections to....?"

"Undressing here? No. It makes little difference to me."

While Bolus moves a couple of chairs and the coffee table, Mrs. Jonquil fetches her nightgown and bathrobe. Bolus places a chair in the exact centre of the corral. Mrs. Jonquil enters the corral and sits on the chair while Bolus examines the fastenings to ensure no mice can escape. "I feel horribly exposed, Walter," Mrs. Jonquil says. "I wonder if we could turn off some of the lights. You don't mind, do you?" Bolus agrees to reduce the amount of light and turns off three of the four lamps in the room, although he would have preferred a continuous blaze in order clearly to see the mice as they scurried from Mrs. Jonquil's clothes. He returns to the corral with paddle in hand and enters it. Mrs. Jonquil licks her lips. "I feel quite nervous," she tells him. "What if the mice don't appear?"

"Then we have succeeded in driving them away. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Mrs. Jonquil hesitates, then leans over, removes her shoes and places them on the floor. Bolus, like a soldier in the front lines, waits for the mice to appear. The paddle trembles in his hands from the tension he feels. He places a forefinger against his lips to indicate silence, then creeps up to the shoes and peers inside them. He mouths the word 'empty' at Mrs. Jonquil and she mouths back 'Shall I go on?'. Bolus nods and watches as she raises her skirt and unfastens the garters holding her stockings. The flesh of her thighs is white with a tracery of tiny blue veins patterning it. Slowly she removes one stocking, then the other, and places them on the shoes. Her toes twitch and Bolus's paddle trembles. Seconds adding up to a minute pass before Bolus moves to lift one stocking, then the other. He shakes them out and holds them up by their toes.

"Nothing," he whispers, "nothing."

Mrs. Jonquil gestures towards her dress. Bolus nods. She raises her hips, pulls up the dress, slips it over her head and drops it onto the stockings and shoes. Bolus waits. Sixty seconds, ninety. One hundred and ten...one twenty. He lifts the dress and shakes it. He feels the residual warmth of Mrs. Jonquil's body in it and smells her lavender scent. But no mice fall from it. "They're gone," he whispers.

"Shall I?" Mrs. Jonquil gestures towards the articles of clothing she still wears. Bolus nods. After all the mice may have retreated to the innermost garments.

Mrs. Jonquil smiles at him as she removes her bra, garter belt and panties and collectively drops them onto the pile. Bolus stares at the clothing and waits: two, three, four minutes. Then he reaches out and raises the garments piece by piece. Never before has he held an intimate female garment in his hands. He looks at each garment before handing it to Mrs. Jonquil. "There's nothing," he says, "nothing."

"I'll put my nightclothes on, Walter," Mrs. Jonquil says. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to hand them to me." Bolus does so, and becomes dazed as her proximity to him compels him to become acutely aware of the brown rings that encompassed her red nipples and the delta of thick black hair (surely she would not dye that too) at the base of her capacious belly. He hurriedly passes the white nightgown to her and watches as she raises her arms to slip it over her head and unsheathe herself. He then hands her the rose-coloured bathrobe, and his sense of security grows now that she is chastely clad. "I feel we deserve a drink, don't you, Walter?"

"What happened to the mice?" Bolus is bewildered and aggrieved.

"You frightened them away, Walter." She waits for Bolus to unfasten the mice corral.

"But I spend a lot of time...and there's the outlay of money." Bolus thinks about the many thousands of seconds he has spent puzzling over Mrs. Jonquil's problem and coming up with a solution to it.

"But the idea was to get rid of the mice and we've done that. Well, haven't we, Walter?" Mrs. Jonquil fixes their drinks while Bolus dismantles the mice corral. "Now come and sit down, Walter." Bolus does so, and she hands him a large rye and water. "Congratulations, Walter." She raises her glass to toast him and crosses her legs, managing briefly to expose large areas of her inner thighs. "For a while I thought I was fighting a losing battle with the mice, but you have saved me, Walter. Thank you for everything." She uncrosses her legs and reveals the inside of her thighs again. "But quite apart from your intelligence, your moral support and understanding has truly sustained me through this very difficult period."

"Glad to be of assistance," Bolus replies as he rises from the chair. "I will leave the corral and extra netting with you."

"Of course." Mrs. Jonquil follows him to the door, a fixed smile on her face.

"Good night," Bolus says, as he exits.

"Good night," replies, Mrs. Jonquil.

That night Bolus's mice dream returns: he is now pursued by Mrs. Jonquil and his subordinate, both wearing mouse heads, one pink, one blue. They grab him and commence swallowing him, like snakes engulfing a helpless animal; but they aren't swallowing him down their throats; instead they are dragging him into unseen chasms hidden in their vast rotating buttocks. Bolus, racked with exquisite, pulsating pain, wonders what will happen when the roiling rumps collide, like errant

planets. Before that happens he awakens in a state of horrible anxiety that drives him from his sweat-laden sheets into a cooling shower and from there to the kitchen table where he sits, waiting for the seconds to succeed each other and for the night to pass.

His subordinate greets him with a smile when he enters the office the next morning, two seconds late. She has on a short, tight yellow skirt and an equally tight orange sweater; a combination which emphatically outlines every curve in her youthful body. Throughout the day she behaves in a manner designed to draw Bolus's attention to her, posing beside his desk while asking him silly questions about property taxes. In the middle of the afternoon, who should appear in the reception areas but Mrs. Jonquil.

"Good afternoon, Walter," she calls. "Beautiful day, isn't it?" Bolus mumbles a response while his subordinate, hackles raised, advances to the reception counter to deal with the invader. From behind a raised tax form, Bolus observes his subordinate blaring at Mrs. Jonquil, while Mrs. Jonquil coldly and analytically appraises the subordinate. "Goodbye, Walter," Mrs. Jonquil possessively calls as she leaves. "I'll see you this evening."

"Who's she?" his subordinate demands when the door closes.

"My neighbour," Bolus admits.

"You been to bed with her?"

"Certainly not," Bolus indignantly replies.

"Well, she's after you. I can tell."

"You are wasting valuable seconds for which you are being paid by the city." His subordinate replies by sitting on the corner of his desk, a move which hoists her skirt to the point where the curve of her bottom is showing.

"Want to bet? " she asks.

Bolus coldly informs his subordinate that he never bets.

"Scared you'll lose, eh?" His subordinate mocks him, smiles, twists on the desk and hoists her skirt even higher. "Go back to your station," Bolus frigidly orders. "You are forgetting yourself and your position in this office."

"I'm just a ground-down female clerk, eh? 'Go back to your station,'" she angrily imitates Bolus, then flounces to her desk, bottom churning. "Go back to work," she calls. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself, talking to me like that?" Bolus does not reply. He is too busy trying to sort out the evolving nature of his relationship with these two women. He stares down at a NSF check (how could any respectable individual knowingly write a cheque for \$643.21 on an empty bank account?) and tries to sort out his chaotic thoughts. Why, after a life of celibacy (except for one lapse) does he suddenly find himself pursued by two women? It does not make sense. His subordinate has to be mistaken about Mrs. Jonquil. Apart from enlisting his services to get rid of her mice plague, she has shown no interest in him, outside of the usual neighbourly nods and greetings. True, she had done something middle-aged women usually don't to with middle-aged neighbourly men. That is, she had removed her clothes and allow him to see her naked. But that had been necessary, so that he could confirm the existence of the mice. She had always been circumspect and had never behaved in any way that suggested anything improper. Besides Bolus had let her know that he had no physical interest in her. He had made that quite clear, just as he had made it clear to his subordinate that their relationship would always be that of superior and inferior. He now looks up to find she is standing by his desk.

"I know I'm cheeky," she says, "but that doesn't mean I don't have oodles of respect for you and think you deserve to be city treasurer. Now, will you eat dinner with me tonight at the Greek restaurant?" Much to his surprise Bolus agrees.

After work they walk to the restaurant, formerly a hamburger and steak joint, where Bolus orders the meal while his subordinate orders a bottle Greek wine. He is surprised by the way the restaurant owner treats his subordinate (he kisses and strokes her back and bottom) until he learns that the restaurant owner is his subordinate's uncle and that her uncle is the mayor's brother. The mayor gets around his nepotism by telling people that guys in his extensive family are ten times smarter than other citizens, which explains why they occupy important positions at city hall. It also explains the appearance of a second bottle of wine on their table and a succession of ouzos after they finish their meal. "Since I fell in love with you, I've discovered you're very attractive," the subordinate says over her ouzo. "Before, I thought you were skinny and peevish."

"I am," Bolus earnestly advises her.

"No, you're not," his subordinate emphatically states. "You are slender and handsome."

When Bolus receives the bill he discovers they have drunk enough wine and ouzo and eaten enough food for six people and though he knows he's being rooked he is too tipsy to argue with the restaurant owner. All he wants is to lie down. His subordinate makes sure he does that, in her bed. She activates him with kisses and by rubbing her breasts against various parts of his anatomy. He is surprised to find that nibbling his subordinate's nipples elicits moans of pleasure from her and that each thrust he makes into her body produces cries of ecstasy. He also takes time out to note that his first copulation with his subordinate lasts seven minutes and eighteen seconds and the second (this time with his subordinate striding him) lasts nine minutes and six seconds, giving him an average time of eight minutes and nine seconds for the two events.

His subordinate urges him to remain the night. "We can do it again in the morning," she says. But Bolus escapes from her arms and legs and hurries home. He is opening his back door when he hears a voice: "Walter, I thought something had happened to you."

Bolus turns and sees the outline of Mrs. Jonquil's bathrobe-clad figure in the darkness. "I worked late," he says.

"I was quite worried," she says, then laughs. "Silly of me, because nothing could happen to you, could it?" Mrs. Jonquil moves closer, surrounding him with the scent of lavender. She sighs. "But I'm like that. I worry about people I'm fond of." She moves even closer. "You must have guessed I'm fond of you, Walter." Bolus mumbles something that could be taken for concurrence. "You don't mind?" He mumbles again, and she reaches out to take his hand. "I'm glad," she says.

"I must get to bed," Bolus mutters. "It's late."

"I made a pot of coffee and the cake you like so much." Bolus, slack from the alcohol he has swallowed and the expenditure of energy in his subordinate's bed, is unable to dig up sufficient courage to tell Mrs. Jonquil to go away. Instead he allows her to lead him to her house where, after closing and locking the door, she puts her arms around him and kisses him. She opens her bathrobe and draws him into a close embrace, and Bolus, after telling himself that a city official of his standing must always respond to a citizen's request, finds the energy to kiss back. At the same time he thinks it is ironic that a man who has made a point of systematically avoiding involvement with females should within the space of a few hours find himself in the beds of two women, mouthing their responsive nipples, then rhythmically pumping away between their broad smooth thighs, and

receiving as much satisfaction from listening to the sounds of moaning delight coming from their open lips as he is from his own few seconds of gasping ejaculation. He then looks at Mrs. Jonquil's practical bedside alarm clock and notes that copulation with her has occupied ten minutes and twenty-seven seconds of his time, giving an average time of eight minutes and fifty three seconds for the three copulations.

"Oh, you are good, Walter," Mrs. Jonquil murmurs. "I had no idea you were so proficient."

"I do my best to satisfy taxpayers," Bolus says.

Mrs. Jonquil laughs. "Does that mean you go to bed with every female taxpayer who comes into your office, Walter? And something you should know, Walter, that young woman who works in your office is after you."

"Nonsense," Bolus says. He leaves the bed and puts on his clothes. "How could you tell? You've only seen her once for a few minutes."

"Intuition doesn't need more than a few seconds, Walter." Mrs. Jonquil leaves her bed and in naked majesty follows Bolus to the door uttering warnings about his subordinate's predatory nature. "Do be careful, Walter. I mean, her clothes were no better than what a common streetwalker wears. Do be careful, Walter, dear. That young woman could eat you, whole."

Bolus escapes, and from a high of self-congratulatory bliss at discovering he possesses the masculine capacity to copulate with and satisfy two women within two hours, forty-two minutes and twenty-nine seconds, he falls into the pit of worrying over what might happen during the days ahead. Why, he asks himself, do these two women want to possess him? And even more to the point, why had he succumbed? He sleeps and dreams that he is surrounded by myriad naked, pink and blue mouse-headed women. Some consume him, while others watch, cheering their compatriots on. Bolus hears himself scream: "No! No! No! I'm not going to! No, no, no!" He awakens, trembling, and wanders the house, asking himself what he must do to escape. The sun rises, and he is still prowling around the house, asking himself how he can get out of the clutches of Mrs. Jonquil and his subordinate women who (he is certain) are in the process of trying to devour him. He knows they will do this because he has learned that for the female the copulatory act is one of consumption. He projects the seconds -- millions of them -- during the days ahead in which the two women will systematically drain him, until nothing is left of him but a husk.

His subordinate, who has gone to the office in expectation of spending hours with Bolus, wallowing in the mud of amatory memories, is worried over his non-appearance and during her lunch hour decides to visit his house. Mrs. Jonquil is in her front garden tending her petunias when she shows up.

"Good afternoon," Mrs. Jonquil says. The tone of her voice and the manner in which she smiles informs the subordinate she is not wanted in the vicinity of these houses.

"Good afternoon," the subordinate's smile lets Mrs. Jonquil know she (the subordinate) means to stay right where she is, even if it means fighting with and ultimately slaughtering Mrs. Jonquil. "Mr. Bolus didn't come to work and I've come to find out if he's ill," she says.

"Dear me!" exclaims Mrs. Jonquil. "He was fine last night when I saw him." She smiles. "He was filled with energy."

Bolus's subordinate smiles back. "He was filled with energy when he was with me too," she says. They glare at each other, while Bolus, who has heard their voices, watches them from behind a kitchen-window curtain.

"Perhaps we'd best go see Walter and settle a few things," Mrs. Jonquil says. Bolus, seeing them coming to the front door, races through the house to make sure the door is locked. Then he crouches behind it, listening to them talking.

"This is quite worrisome," Mrs. Jonquil says when Bolus does not answer the knock.

"It certainly is," the subordinate agrees. "He was full of bounce last night. We had dinner together at my uncle's restaurant."

"Oh, you mean that place that serves up overpriced greasy food?"

Bolus's subordinate ignores that insult because she is about to devastate Mrs. Jonquil with a knockout punch. "Then we went to my apartment and made love. *Twice!*" she says.

But Mrs. Jonquil refuses to stay down. "No doubt Walter had to do it twice in order to...how shall I put it?...feel that he had got his money's worth."

"Bitch!" the subordinate hisses.

"Now I fully understand why he came to be completely satisfied with me in one total act of love."

Bolus listening intently hears what sounds like somebody delivering a whack across the face, followed by a cry and some scuffling. This is followed by Mrs. Jonquil quite breathlessly saying, "This is ridiculous. We're supposed to be finding out if anything's wrong with Walter," followed by the subordinate, equally breathless, saying, "It sure is stupid. But listen, did he really come back here and do it with you?"

"Hm-hm."

"Boy, oh boy! And I thought I'd wore him out." It was clear to Bolus that they had reached an armistice and were now engaged in postwar reconstruction. "Is there a back door to this place?" Bolus leaves the front door and races through the house to make sure the back door is locked. They arrive and try the handle. "I'm beginning to get worried," the subordinate says.

They call his name, they try the door handle and rattle the door to no avail. "Let's think this through calmly," Mrs. Jonquil says. "We can't be sure Walter's inside. He may have gone somewhere."

"No. He's incapable of missing a single day at the office," the subordinate says. "Hey, do you think the workout we gave him last night finished him off? He's not used to it y'know." She goes on. "Haven't I seen you somewhere before?"

"Yesterday, in your office," Mrs. Jonquil replies.

"No...some place else."

"You may have seen me a few years ago when I was part of a family vaudeville team. We appeared on TV."

"That's right. The Jonquil family. I knew I'd seen you before. You did conjuring tricks."

Bolus hears Mrs. Jonquil proudly laugh. "Seven generations of jugglers, magicians and illusionists." She laughs again. "I played one of my little tricks on Walter to get acquainted with him. Perhaps you saw a form of it on the TV. It was a combination of illusion and strip tease. When I removed my clothes, cats jumped out of them. With Walter I changed the act and used pink and blue mice." Bolus hears the subordinate giggle.

"He fell for it?" she asks.

"He had little choice. I'd prepared him carefully. What would you do if you were a man and pink and blue mice were hopping from a pair of panties a woman had passed to you. Poor Walter. I hated

tricking him. But it was the only way I could get inside his shell."

"I invented a fiance to do the same thing. How do you work the trick?"

"That's a professional secret. My daughter Marigold's performing it now. Only she uses snakes. Cobras. They're a big audience sensation. Men freak out when they see cobras wriggle out of her panties."

Behind the door, Bolus listens and writhes with rage. He has ben tricked by two malignant women.

"So, what shall we do?" the subordinate asks.

"Why don't we wait awhile, then try the doors again? If they don't open, we'll call the police. Come and have supper with me."

Bolus listens to their voices fading away. Oh, vile conspiracy. Every bit of it had been planned. Hateful, loathsome women! How they schemed and deceived! Was it any wonder that no matter where you went, in every clime and culture, women from the beginning of the world to the present were associated with evil and devilry. "Fool. Fool. Fool," he snarls at himself, beating his head against the door. Finally, exhausted, he collapses on the floor and stares up at the ceiling. After a while, a slight smile appears on his lips. He stands, unlocks the door, then goes to the bedroom to lie motionless on the bed, waiting. Light is beginning to fade in the room as Bolus hears the women whispering outside the door. "It's unlocked," Mrs. Jonquil says.

"Then he must be here," the subordinate whispers.

"Walter!" Mrs. Jonquil calls. "Are you here, Walter?" They wait a moment, confer again, then agree that they must enter and look around the rooms.

"He sure doesn't have much in the way of furnishings, does he?" the subordinate says.

"When you live by yourself you get set in your ways," Mrs. Jonquil replies. "Balance goes."

"That's what I like," the subordinate nervously giggles. "You think he might be dead?"

"He unlocked the door, didn't he?"

Bolus hears them crossing the living room. Their heads appear around the door jamb, and for a second Bolus is tempted to laugh at the expression in their eyes and the way their mouths hang open.

"Walter?" Mrs. Jonquil calls as they cross to stand on either side of the bed. "Is something the matter, Walter?"

"Shall we call a doctor?" the subordinate says.

"Not yet." Mrs. Jonquil smiles down at Bolus. (Ah! The treachery of it!) "Would you like something to eat, Walter? A piece of cake perhaps? Some coffee?" Bolus steadfastly maintain his rigid posture and silence.

"You think he's had a heart attack?" the subordinate asks. "He looks like my grandfather did when he had a stroke."

Mrs Jonquil picks up a stray feather that had sneaked out of Bolus's pillow and tickles Bolus's nose with it. Bolus responds with a sneeze, while the subordinate giggles and suggests they try tickling another part of Bolus's anatomy. Somehow Bolus remains silent. "I don't think we should leave him alone," Mrs. Jonquil says. "You stay here while I get something for him to eat and drink. I'll try not to be too long."

She leaves and the subordinate leans over Bolus. "Poor Bolus," she whispers. "I'll bet doing it with her upset you." She takes up the feather and tickles his chin. Bolus fights an impulse to

hysterically laugh by gritting his teeth. The subordinate moves the feather over his chest and onto his belly to tickle the organ Bolus which had twice afforded her pleasure the previous night. Bolus, like most men, has little control over what happens in the genital area of his body.

"Oooh! Look!" the subordinate says as Mrs. Jonquil returns carrying a tray. "Look at that!" she triumphantly says. "That must prove something."

"Oh, that's just a reflex, like a morning erection," Mrs Jonquil comments.

"Well, I just wish I had a few of those things around when I wake up in the morning," the subordinate remarks.

"Damn it, I forgot the cream!" Mrs. Jonquil exclaims. "I'd better get run home and get it because Walter likes cream in his coffee. Listen, I promised Marigold I'd call her this evening. Do you mind being alone with him for ten minutes or so?"

"No, I don't mind at all, " the subordinate says.

"See if he'll eat something," Mrs. Jonquil orders and the subordinate agrees to that. But after Mrs. Jonquil leaves, instead of feeding Bolus, she kisses and caresses him.

"There'll be no harm in it," she says, "Will there, Bolus? Besides it might even help. Anyway, I'm sure it'll help me. You want to help me, don't you, Bolus?" She removes her shoes and panties, climbs onto the bed to straddle and join herself to him. "Oh Bolus," she whispers, "you don't know how good that feels. Have you ever wanted to pee so badly you were scared you'd wet yourself? Then finally you get to a toilet, sit down and let everything go? I'm going to come, Bolus, I'm going to come." She closes her eyes and ecstatically rocks, which means she is unaware that Bolus is reaching out to clasp and break her neck so that she dies in the midst of her orgasm. Bolus notes that it took his subordinate one minute and nineteen seconds to reach orgasm but only forty seconds to die. He arranges her on the bed and lies back in his former position to await Mrs. Jonquil's return.

"Well, how's it going?" Mrs Jonquil says as she enters the room. "Any sign of improvement?" Then she sees the still body of the subordinate lying on the bed and cries out, "Oh no, oh no!" as she turns to run from the room. But to no avail. Bolus catches Mrs. Jonquil before she reaches the kitchen door. She screams and struggles as Bolus strangles her, then she dies, and Bolus drags her body back into the bedroom to place it beside the subordinates. He also notes that from the moment he sprang from the bed and returned with Mrs. Jonquil's body, six minutes and fifty-two seconds have elapsed.

He waits until dawn, and when it arrives he showers, shaves, empties bladder and bowels, drinks his cup of decaffeinated coffee, eats his toast and departs for his office where he arrives with five seconds to spare.

The End

NEVER COUNT CHICKENS

by

Ernest Langford

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BATTLE STREET BOOKS

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It was generally agreed around the town and countryside that Ethel and Margaret Johnstone were way off centre. Mental aberration was evident in their opaque blue eyes, eccentricity of manner and speech, and in the weird conglomerations of rummage-sale clothing they habitually wore.

The sisters lived a few miles outside the town on a large chicken farm. From their sheds came unquenchable streams of herring-flavoured eggs and stringy fryers, all unreservedly damned by those people who innocently purchased them. The sisters never grasped that while piscatorial flavour is wholesome and delightful in a fish, it does not enhance the eggs and flesh of chickens. In fact, most people find it quite repellent. The Johnstone sisters maintained the defect lay with their customers, who gagged when they opened a Johnstone egg or speculated using Johnstone chicken breasts to sole their shoes.

"There ain't nothing wrong with our products," Ethel would state dogmatically. She was Margaret's senior by eighteen months and their spokesperson. "We give our hens the best available diet. Fact, Margaret?" To this Margaret nodded fervent agreement.

There was a close physical resemblance between the sisters, but Margaret was temperamentally softer and lacked Ethel's militant attitude toward the world. Not that they were avid feminists. No, it was nothing as intellectual as that, for in fact they were apolitical. Ethel and Margaret merely saw the rest of the world as being out to cheat them of two cents on a dozen eggs, or a cent on every pound of old hen.

"Look, Ethel. I've had no end of complaints about your eggs," a storekeeper might tentatively say.

"Hah! Crap!" Ethel invariably snorted, jabbing a filthy, implacable finger at the store owner. "Tell those guys to wash out their mouths and have themselves a dose of salts. Next time some stoopid sonofabitch complains about eggs, you ask to see his tongue and I'll bet you two dozen eggs you'll see more fur on it than on a mink in a North Saskatchewan winter. Fact, Margaret?"

"Yes, sir," said Margaret.

"Show him your tongue, Margaret." Margaret obliged by poking out two inches of unpolluted pink tongue.

"See that!" Ethel gestured like a fairground huckster. "You notice anything wrong with our eggs, Margaret?"

"No, sir."

"Neither do I. And look at this." A thick red ribbon of flesh would shoot from Ethel's mouth and stop just short of the embarrassed store owner's nose. What the devil can you do with people who resolutely deny something as elementary as fishy eggs and chicken flesh? Though you had to admit the ingenuity of Ethel's defence. Storekeepers found it difficult to rebut, because many of their customers were in fact mink-tongued and polluted of breath. So they raised arms of despair and continued selling the Johnstone sisters' products.

People had to argue with the Johnstone sisters before appreciating the extent of their madness. At first -- or even second -- glance, the sisters were undeniably attractive, despite their ragamuffin clothes. They were short, and becomingly buxom of breast and hip. Ethel was almost forty, and Margaret thirty-eight, yet their bouncing walk was suggestive of the nubile potentiality of adolescence. In repose, their faces looked almost childish. They seemed to be surrounded by an air of innocent expectancy, an ingenuousness of expression, such as is often seen on the faces of women painted by early Flemish artists. It was something of a shock when this impression was violently contradicted by their business methods. They had no qualms about palming small eggs as mediums or getting rid of dowager hens as broilers after the poor old dears had died a natural death.

Once there had been an older brother; a thin, morose, unpredictable character who bore so little resemblance to Ethel and Margaret that people had difficulty believing he'd come from the same set of parental loins.

He drank. And when drunk he proved himself an authentic Johnstone, staggering from beer parlour to beer parlour raving about the imminence of the second flood. "Repent, you bastard!" he'd yell at some innocent who was probably committing no greater crime than wondering where he could borrow five bucks to buy a few more beers. "You're going to drown, by Christ you are. And if you think I'll be sorry for you, then you're bloody well mistaken. No, sir. I'll be laughing my head off."

No one mourned his death; that is, with the exception of his sisters. They were angry, since his removal (by drowning in the local river) meant they had to clean the henhouses and slaughter old hens who refused to do their duty. Betrayal. That's what it was. Out and out betrayal.

In a way their brother's death was due to divine intervention. He staggered from a beer parlour late one afternoon, looked at the brooding sky and announced the wrath of God was imminent. When three pedestrians, two dogs, and one crow flagrantly ignored his warning he lost his temper, ran to his battered truck, raving that he'd have the last laugh on the high ground at the back of the town. He then tore off in second gear.

In the Johnstone family it was considered a moral crime to buy anything new when the same

article could be bought second-hand. The truck Johnstone drove had been traded by its original owner because of defective steering. The Johnstones paid two hundred dollars for it and congratulated themselves on getting a magnificent bargain. That afternoon it raced down a little hill to a rough wooden bridge which spanned a narrow but comparatively deep stream. The moment the front wheels hit the raised planks, the steering rods snapped. The old truck hit the curb, reared, turned over, smashed the rails, and dropped into twenty feet of water.

The coroner was kind. He told the sisters their brother hadn't suffered. His neck was broken before he disappeared beneath the water. Ethel and Margaret were anything but consoled. It cost them a hundred and fifty dollars to bury their sodden, weak-necked brother. Even more infuriating, from their point of view, was the fact that they had taken some perfectly good crates to the funeral parlour and suggested that the undertaker knock up a coffin from them. His refusal to oblige enraged them.

"What the hell's wrong with 'em?" Ethel barked.

"Nothing," replied the undertaker. "As crates they're fine, but they won't do for a coffin."

"He won't know the difference," said Margaret.

"I'm sorry, Miss Johnstone." The undertaker unwisely smiled, hoping to appease the sisters.

"Do you think you can set the rules just because you're the only sonofabitching undertaker in town?" screamed Ethel.

The undertaker's benevolent smile rapidly vanished. It so happened this was what he did think. He muttered something about the law, escaped to enlist the aid of the police, the mayor, the bank manager, and the minister who had condescended to read the burial service over the defunct Mr. Johnstone for twenty prepaid bucks.

Ethel and Margaret capitulated, although at the funeral they let their brother know that putting him six feet underground was costing them a pretty penny. They really castigated him.

"You know how much this cost us?" Ethel began, glaring at the face on which the undertaker had fixed a fatuous grin. Margaret promptly brought out a slip of paper and read off the following impressive list.

"One coffin - \$150

Beer for getting drunk - \$15

Wrecked truck - \$120

Towing - \$30

Minister - \$20

Total \$335."

"What's so funny about it?" demanded Ethel, noticing her brother's grin for the first time. "Take that stooped grin off your face, or so help me God, I'll knock it off."

"And now we have to work fifteen hours a day to get things done," added Margaret.

It's difficult to say how long the list of recriminations would have continued. Fortunately the undertaker intervened to slap down the coffin lid and organize the walk-past.

Later in the day he unequivocally stated that the sisters were completely nutty and should be locked away. The silly man. He did not appreciate that Ethel and Margaret had valid reasons for complaint. After all, they'd lost money on their brother's death and were also doing his jobs. If that doesn't call for firm protest, then what does? As Ethel put it to Margaret, "He done it on purpose. If he wanted to drown hisself why the hell didn't he go some place where they couldn't find him?"

The death of their brother disrupted the sisters' lives. They never finished a task, and all work was done on the run. It finally dawned on them that they'd either have to reduce stock or hire someone. The alternatives were depressing. They discussed the question for several months and eventually decided to look around for help.

"We got to be careful," said Ethel. "We don't want a guy that knows bugger-all about hens."

"Fact," agreed Margaret, immediately envisaging ghastly things happening to their hens if placed in the care of an ignorant nincompoop.

They soon discovered that although hired help was plentiful, cost was prohibitively high. It appalled them.

"What're you offering?" a quarry, lured from the beer parlour, would ask.

"Fifty a month. Board, and a day off a month," replied Ethel.

"Thanks all the same, but I'm too busy."

Weeks of fruitless searching thoroughly discouraged them. It didn't matter where they went, the reception was the same. Men blinked, politely turned down their offer, and scurried off to guzzle beer.

"I dunno what the world's coming to," said Ethel.

"Nor me," agreed Margaret.

"Guys got too much. The government gives people everything they ask for."

Margaret nodded and suggested that perhaps they could get a woman to do the cooking and housework.

"I ain't paying no woman to clean this joint," said Ethel. "There ain't no profit in it for us." An observation Margaret accepted.

Behind all their condemnations of moral laxity and general laziness lay the vague hope that circumstance would ultimately force the beer-drinking bums to beg for work at a nominal wage, or even for food. They waited for the great day to arrive.

One evening while they were preparing feed for the next day, a man wandered into the shed. He raised a flat, benedictory hand. "Evening. Your name Johnstone?" Ethel nodded, and Margaret coyly fluttered dust-weighted eyelids. "The name's Ulysses Tack. You'd best switch off that mill. The hopper's empty, and there's no point to wasting power." To save them trouble, he strolled over and flipped the switch. The driving belt slackened, wobbled, and continued to whine. U. Tack looked at the rig and shook his head. "Best get this motor shifted over or you'll have trouble. It's out of line. Way out." As if to demonstrate his point he touched the slowly revolving belt, which forthwith abandoned the wheels and clouted Ethel across the head.

"Goddamn it," she yelled. "Ain't you got no sense?"

"A lot," replied Ulysses Tack. "If that come off when the mill was going full blast it'd flatten you, maybe kill you. So move your mill or your motor. Me, I'd move the motor. It ain't so heavy. Now I hear you're looking for help."

"We was," said Margaret cautiously.

"Well, if you're still looking, I'm here to offer it. And it looks like you need help," said U. Tack.

"Maybe we do," agreed Margaret. "We asked lots of guys, but nobody don't want to work nowadays."

"You have a point there," agreed U. Tack. "Though the willingness of guys to work depends

on the amount they receive for it. You'd be surprised."

The sisters looked at each other before Ethel replied. "Seventy-five a month, and keep."

U. Tack pursed his lips and nodded. "Seventy-five a month'd be fine, if we knocked fifty years off the date."

"I wish somebody'd pay me seventy-five a month clear," Ethel snapped at him. "Let me tell you"

U. Tack held up a hand and interrupted her. He seemed adept at it. "Suppose I decides to get a halfways decent pair of boots, a couple of shirts, some socks, and a windbreak for the winter. I put that seventy-five in my pocket, go to town, and select 'em. Now what do I find?" He raised a spatulate finger and held it in the region of his nose. "I get my package done up real nice, and then the clerk says, polite as always, 'That'll be one hundred eighty-five dollars and fifty-three cents, sir.' Now, what does this show us?"

Margaret smiled, nodded understanding, and supplied the answer. It meant you should never buy new clothes and boots when there was a second-hand store in town. U. Tack acknowledged her point, but added that she had missed the larger one. Unfortunately Ethel prevented the edifying discussion from continuing.

"You out of work?" she asked.

"I ain't never out of work," said U. Tack. "I got a real nice job. But I thought I'd come around to see what you ladies had to offer. I can see there's plenty to do here. That's what I like. The place I'm at is good. Nice folks. But I have to spin one chore into a day's work."

"What did you say your name was?" Ethel asked.

"U. Tack. U. for Ulysses."

"That's a funny name," said Margaret.

"I wouldn't know if it was or not," replied U. Tack. "Course, I've lived with it for a few years, which makes a difference."

"How much are you asking a month?" demanded Ethel.

"Well, as to that. There's a few considerations comes into the picture. I don't reckon to work nowheres if the food and the bed ain't halfways decent."

"There's nothing wrong with our food, and we don't have no trouble sleeping."

"Nor does a hog in a pen, or a dog on a hard floor. But I ain't neither. Then I like to be paid on the dot. I don't want no boss buying stuff for me and deducting it from my wages. That's the way to end up without wages. If them conditions is met, I'll be happy to reduce my usual price and accept two hundred and fifty dollars a month."

There followed a pause. U. Tack filled it by gazing with professional interest at the feed bins and pursing his lips in the manner of a TV physician. Ethel sufficiently recovered her breath to caustically reply for Margaret and herself. "I guess you would be happy if you got that."

"I wouldn't say so unless I meant it," said U. Tack. He smiled amiably. "I'll take a stroll around the place while you ladies discusses it."

"You think we're nuts?" Ethel demanded.

"No, sir," was U. Tack's smooth reply. "Anybody who can run a chicken farm this size's got to have a lot of horse sense."

"You don't have to tell us what we already know," Ethel said. "And anyways, how much do you think we make, eh? A million a month?" Ethel's chin wobbled, and she had difficulty keeping

her voice steady. The guy had no right to suggest they made a lot of money. It wasn't fair.

"I've got a good idea what you make a month, and I know you can afford what I ask," said U. Tack.

"Not to you, we can't," snapped Ethel.

"Too bad," said U. Tack and strolled towards the door.

"Couldn't we split the difference?" asked Margaret. She found U. Tack's friendliness and knowledgeable ways very fetching.

Ethel rounded on her with demonic fury. "We couldn't split nothing! So keep your mouth shut, Margaret."

"Now, now. Don't you ladies quarrel," said U. Tack, momentarily halting by the door. "It ain't worth the trouble. Remember you got to live together a long time yet." He walked out of the shed.

But quarrel was precisely what Ethel and Margaret did. By evening of the next day they had argued and screeched themselves into refusing to recognize the other's existence. Each sister prepared her own meals and went around the shed feeding, cleaning, and behaving as if responsibility for the umpteen thousand squawking hens lay solely on her particular set of shoulders.

On one occasion they met head-on in a doorway, and with commendable resolution each refused to back up an inch. They were like a pair of tortoises which on meeting continue to stare at each other until death from starvation terminates the contest. Possibly the sisters would have shared the same fate, but for the opportune arrival of a fuel-oil truck.

The next day being egg-delivery day, each sister put a full consignment of eggs and chickens in the old station wagon. Then both tried to occupy the driver's seat while simultaneously shrieking "Get out of my way!"

What they lacked in pugilistic skill, they replaced with an abundance of indignation and energy. Ethel had the opening advantage. She grabbed Margaret's head and clouted the car with it. The car and Margaret rattled, though it was impossible to say which produced more noise, owing to Ethel's vindictive exclamations and Margaret's protesting shrieks.

This continued until Margaret turned, butted Ethel in the stomach with her elbow, snatched her shoe-string-bound hair, and jerked at it like a tipsy verger sounding a toll for a dead tomcat. But Margaret unwisely moved too close to her enemy, and Ethel's hands shot out and fastened like a hawk's talons onto the abundant flesh beneath her sister's blouse. Margaret whimpered with agony.

"Let go my hair, or I'll pull 'em off," yelled Ethel. She increased the pressure, demonstrating the extent to which she was prepared to go unless Margaret unconditionally surrendered. Margaret promptly released her hair, and leaned towards the centre of pain.

"Now, are you letting me get into the wagon first?" demanded Ethel. She could not keep the jubilation from her voice. Margaret's reply was to bite her sister's thick forearm and kick her shin with a heavy shoe. Ethel yelped and skipped around while examining her arm and trying to decide if she was about to have an attack of rabies. Margaret ran after her, ineffectually whacking at her and behaving like a drummer who suffers from a nightmare in which he is trying to beat an elusive snare drum.

At last Ethel recovered sufficiently to turn and rush at Margaret. Her impetuous charge carried the pair over, and they rolled on the ground pummeling each other and themselves.

Margaret even managed to give herself a magnificent swat in the eye.

The end was unexpected and inconsequential. Ethel straddled Margaret, demanding capitulation. When Margaret refused, she raised her right fist to administer the *coup de grace*. As she did so, Margaret jerked her hips up, doubled up her legs, and catapulted Ethel over her head. Margaret got to her feet and saw Ethel kneeling on the ground with her round rump high in the air, her nose firmly wedged between two large rocks, sniffing and gurgling and giving a perfect imitation of a beagle trying to dig out a rabbit.

"Oh . . . oh . . . oh," she moaned.

"What's the matter?" asked Margaret.

"My nose is bleeding." Ethel made no attempt to move.

"Let's see." Margaret's concern was as real as the terror in Ethel's voice.

Carefully Ethel raised her head and presented it for Margaret's examination. One side of her nose was slightly abraded, and a few spots of blood dripped from it down onto her lips.

"It don't look too bad," said Margaret, patting her sister's head. She assisted Ethel to her feet and supported her while Ethel returned to the house where she carefully examined her nose in the cracked bathroom mirror.

"You think it'll be all right, Margaret?"

"I think so." The sisters' concern for so small a thing as a bleeding nose originated in their belief that blood coming from the nose washed brains from the skull. Ten nose bleeds, and you were empty-headed.

"Well, I guess we'd best get going," said Ethel, dabbing cough mixture onto her arm; after all, medicine was medicine. They combed each other's hair, took turns on the toilet, and left for town in their usual manner. Ethel steered the car there in second gear, while Margaret piloted it home in first. The car's high gear lived in aristocratic ease.

They roared along the main street and came to a racking halt in a convenient spot.

As they climbed from the car an extremely tall policeman marched purposefully from a doorway to stand with the toes of his brilliantly polished boots drooping over the curb.

"Hi, there," said Ethel. She opened the tailgate preparatory to loading egg flats onto Margaret's arms.

"Good day," said the policeman.

"How do you get your boots so shiny?" Margaret asked.

"Elbow grease," said the policeman. "Can you ladies read?" He indicated two signs on which were printed the words FOR POLICE USE ONLY.

"Can you manage a chicken farm?" asked Ethel.

"I've never tried it," said the policeman. "And I don't see what it has to do with reading these signs."

"Dope," Ethel commented. "Do you think we could follow instructions on feed bags if we couldn't read?"

"Okay, so you can read," said the policeman, who didn't enjoy being called a dope. "Now maybe you'll read those signs."

Ethel and Margaret read both signs for him in unison, enunciating the words carefully, as people do when reading to the mentally deficient.

"Splendid," remarked the policeman, who thought he was making progress at last. "Now tell

me what the words mean."

"Mean?" said Ethel. "The only use I can see for them posts is for you to piddle on."

"Ethel!" Margaret protested. "That ain't polite."

"So what!" Ethel reached into the wagon for a flat of eggs.

"Hey, wait a bit," snapped the policeman. "The words FOR POLICE USE ONLY refer to the space occupied by your car. D'you get it?"

"Mister, don't you talk to me like that," Ethel said. "You got two rusty poles with signs on top saying they're yours. So what! You can have them."

"That's a fact," Margaret chirped. "We already got plenty of old iron, ain't we, Ethel?"

"Madam, any person with a grain of sense would know the signs don't refer to the poles." The policeman could not understand why the conversation had taken this turn. It was like a dream in which actions and conversations are turned inside out.

Ethel's finger moved below his nose, emphasizing irrefutable points. "They would, eh? Okay. If I see a chair with a reserved sign on it, I know the chair's been reserved and not the space around it. Fact?"

"Yes," the policeman conceded. "But this isn't the same."

Ethel's arm shot out until one dirty, hen-scratched finger almost touched his nose. "Jesus, are you ever stoopid!" she told him. "If there's a pole here with a reserved sign on it . . ." The forefinger of her right hand swung down to point at the road. ". . . and a chair there with a reserved sign on it, then them two signs must mean the same thing. Well, mustn't they?"

"No, they mustn't," yelled the policeman. That was all he could do in the face of such devastating logic. "Get that car out of here, or I'll impound it!"

"Having problems?" a bland voice asked.

The policeman jerked around as if expecting an attack from the rear. Instead he found himself looking at the smiling face of U. Tack.

"Hello there, ladies," said U. Tack. He was neatly dressed in brown pants, red windbreaker, and an orange hunting cap. He carried two large packages which he suggestively rattled.

"Boots. What a price!" He turned to the policeman. "I'll see to it. I'm their foreman."

"Get that car out of here!" said the policeman and hurried back into the building from which he had emerged minutes ago in order to assert the prerogative bestowed on all protectors of law and order.

"You ain't no foreman of ours," said Ethel.

"I know, I know. But listen . . . The police keep this space for themselves. Makes them feel important. Know what I mean? So you give me the keys, and I'll shift your wagon away down the road. Oh, they're still in the ignition." He slipped into the car and adroitly maneuvered it between two cars farther down the street. Ethel and Margaret watched as he walked back to them, casually throwing the car keys into the air and dextrously catching them behind his back. Both were impressed, though Ethel managed to hide it behind a mask of glaring disapproval. Margaret was openly envious. "Gee! That's neat," she said. "How do you do it?"

"Practice, practice . . ." replied U. Tack. He flipped the keys over his shoulder, caught them in his teeth, and dropped them into Ethel's hands. "Y'know, you shouldn't leave your keys in the wagon. Somebody might drive off with all them eggs and fryers. What a loss that would be." He shook his head as if shocked by the sisters' neglect. Ethel, who had been chewing her lips and

muttering to herself, now abruptly barked.

"Two hundred and twenty-five?"

"Okay. Provided the food and bed's halfways decent. And it's understood I'm paid on the first of the month. I'll be along in a couple of days. Now, you wait here a bit while I stash these boots in my wreck, and then I'll give you a hand with the eggs and fryers."

For two days the sisters discussed their newly-hired man. They mapped out a daily schedule to recompense them for the agony of parting with two hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. They also examined their dead brother's clothes and decided U. Tack could buy the lot with his first month's wages.

He arrived late in the afternoon. In the back of his mud-encrusted car was one canvas bag and a cello case. "I didn't stop in town for a meal," he informed the sisters who'd come from the feed shed to greet him. "I figured you'd give me one. Then I'd help with the chores."

"What's that?" Margaret pointed to the cello.

"An overgrown fiddle," said U. Tack. "You eaten yet?"

"Do you hold it under your chin?" Margaret asked.

"You can if you want. You guys eaten yet?"

"It'll be another hour," said Ethel. "Show him the room, Margaret."

"Will you teach me how to play that?" Margaret asked as she preceded U. Tack up the steep, narrow stairs.

"I sure will," replied U. TACK, bending forward a little in order to get a closer look at the back of Margaret's thighs. They were plump and deliciously white, like young corn ears.

In the dusty bedroom, U. Tack set the cello in a corner, put his canvas bag on a chair, and pressed the bed from head to foot. "It's a consolation to know I've come across one or two that was worse," he commented. From the bed he went to the closet. Ancient suits, which had journeyed from dead men's closets to second-hand clothing shops, and then to rummage-sale racks, hung there. "I guess you'll be taking this stuff out," he said.

"We thought you'd like to buy them," Margaret told him.

"That's mighty thoughtful of you," said U. Tack. "But I like my clothes new. They last longer and smell sweeter."

"I'll tell Ethel."

"Do," agreed U. Tack. "Having to leave my stuff in my bag makes me feel like I'll be here today and gone tomorrow."

"What did you say to him?" asked Ethel when Margaret told her the news.

"I said I'd tell you," said Margaret. "He wants some place to put his clothes."

"Goddamn it," said Ethel. "What'll he want next! Go tell him supper's ready."

"Well, I guess it's lucky I ain't unpacked my stuff," remarked U. Tack after sampling the food Ethel dumped before him. "I'd only have to pack it all again." He carefully placed his fork on the side of his plate, put his elbows on the table, and set the stage for a lecture by giving a preparatory shudder. "If one forkful does that, what effect would ten have?" he rhetorically asked, directing his question at Margaret. "Maybe you ladies don't recall what I said about decent grub?"

"There's nothing wrong with our food," Ethel said. She was so combative that it was almost possible to hear the stamp of heavy boots as the guard marched up to arrest U. Tack.

"True," agreed U. Tack. "The basic ingredients is as good as any you'd get at the finest drive-in. What's wrong is the cooking."

"I don't pretend to be no cook."

"That's as well," said U. Tack. "Because all the pretence in the world couldn't hide the horrible truth."

Ethel became red in the face, while U. Tack continued smiling and nodding his round, balding head. Margaret followed the exchange like an engrossed Athenian sitting in on a Socratean debate.

"I ain't spending my time cooking fancy meals for you," Ethel finally said. "I got too much to do."

"Wait a bit." U. Tack's broad, spatulate-fingered hand compelled respect and silence. "You can't cook. You ain't got time to learn. That's fine. I'll do the cooking."

"You wasn't hired to cook."

"I wasn't hired to eat this stuff either." He stirred the mess on his plate, then raised his fork. Slowly a nodule of viscous matter accumulated on the bottom tine. It cumbrously wobbled on a rapidly extending thread of gelatine, then detached itself, fell to the plate, and soddenly exploded. It was a most depressing and repulsive sight. U. Tack pointed his fork at them. "The difference between a slave and a free man is that a slave's got to eat what's put before him, but a free man can get up and protest. Now, the question is, am I a free man?"

The question was directed at Margaret who felt inadequately prepared to deal with so abstruse a subject. Ethel was no help. She merely glared at U. Tack. Margaret instinctively felt the question was loaded: a trick, like one of those questions asked by salesmen who came to attack the sisters with magazine subscriptions, cosmetics for every area of the female anatomy, and brushes of all conceivable size, colour, and shape. They set the sisters up like nine pins, eyed them, aimed, then blasted their bemused wits in every direction with one devastating shot. "Well . . ." said Margaret, hopefully smiling at him.

"I know just what you're going to say," said U. Tack. "You was about to say a free man bargains, a slave surrenders. Wasn't you?"

"Yes, I was," said Margaret.

"How right you are. When a man surrenders there ain't no agreements made. But when a man bargains, agreements is laid, deep and lasting as the foundations of a jail."

"What the hell are you talking about?" demanded Ethel.

"This." U. Tack pointed to the cooling mess on his plate. "You said you'd cook."

"I didn't."

"You didn't say you couldn't. Which is the same as saying you can. That's fraudulent misrepresentation."

The sisters looked at U. Tack, the inability to handle verbal juggling plainly written on their faces.

"Where'd you get the recipe?" asked U. Tack.

"I made it up." Ethel's defense was muttered . . . the confession of guilt.

"I knowed it and knowed it. Mind you, there ain't nothing wrong with making things up."

Some guys gets thousands of dollars for making things up on canvas with a few cans of dime store paint. Some rakes it in with stuff they wrote down with a two-bit pencil . . . two hundred bucks a shot. But they got skill and the recipe for success. See what I mean?" Ethel and Margaret nodded. The truth of U. Tack's exposition was apparent; obvious even to them. "Now, like I said, I could easy get up and leave. I'd be justified in doing so because you was guilty of misrepresentation. But since I gone to a lot of trouble getting here, I may as well stay a while. That's why I'm offering here and now to cook for myself, and I'll cook your meals too since you don't like the job. Well? Okay?"

They agreed, lacking wit to see holes in U. Tack's blandishments. Of course, they were uneasily aware he was exploiting their ignorance, but knowledge is of no assistance during the heat of debate, any more than hindsight justifies cowardice during the pitch of battle.

They went over the business in Ethel's room, sitting on the brass-knobbed bed whispering opinions and condemnations. They dug up some surprisingly good arguments for not allowing U. Tack to do as he wished. The only trouble being that enforcement was out of the question.

Probably the consultation would have continued until the early hours, but for the entry of a unique sound into the room. From the direction of U. Tack's quarters came a long drawn-out, wavering moan, comparable to the sobbing of a love-sick cow. U. Tack was rendering down Handel's immortal Largo in D. And so profound was its effect on the sisters that the termination of its final, off-pitch note saw them creeping silently to bed.

The sisters kept close watch on U. Tack, determined to get a good two hundred and twenty-five dollars worth of hard labour out of him each month. For this reason they followed him around, eyeing him with the intensity of a kingfisher following the meandering course of a plump bullhead.

One day U. Tack disappeared behind a shed in which he should have been shovelling chicken droppings. After him they went, tearing around the corner to all but fall over U. Tack, who was aiming a stream of urine at the wall. He smiled and informed them he was trying to outline an elephant. "Always have trouble with the trunk," he said. "My hand ain't as steady as it should be." He fastened his pants and walked past the red-faced sisters to continue his shovelling. That ended their surveillance.

They admitted he was a splendid worker, the kind who manages to cut corners off circles. His competence produced awe in the haphazard sisters. They'd never encountered such precision before, and compared to Ethel's cooking, his was masterly. The sisters now thought of meals with pleasure, instead of regarding them as hateful necessities.

However, there was a fly in U. Tack's bland ointment. Food bills rose. Ethel complained and received a lecture.

"There ain't no point to cooking if the food ain't cooked good," he told her, hand pontifically raised. "Bad food gets chucked into the garbage pail, but it don't cost less at the store."

His rationale was impeccable as always. Ethel ended by getting a bottle of sherry from the government liquor store. U. Tack used one cup to make a delicious chicken fricassee. The rest he drank, for as he told them, "Sherry don't keep well. And we don't want to waste nothing, do we?"

Margaret was surprised to find U. Tack in bed with her. She couldn't remember having invited him. U. Tack listened, nodded his head in the darkness, and proceeded to clarify and elucidate and confuse various issues and points.

"A good question deserves a good answer," he said. "And I ain't never heard you ask a question that wasn't good, though mind you, some of 'em's been asked before and some of 'em'll be asked again. Still, there ain't nothing wrong with that. But getting back to your question. What was it now? It kind of slipped my mind." Margaret patiently explained again. "Well, I know you wouldn't tell me a fib," commented U. Tack after Margaret had stated the only guy she invited into her bed was Ethel. "But a person should never get in a rut. That's why I took up the cello."

Margaret turned toward him, lying on her side. When she spoke U. Tack could feel warm air on his face. "Will you teach me to play it?" she asked.

"I surely will," said U. Tack. "Though it won't be for a while yet. I got a lot of studying to do."

"It sounds lovely," said Margaret.

"It is," agreed U. Tack. "And nothing 'd give me more pleasure than teaching you the basics, once I've finished my course in bank management."

"Thanks ever so," yawned Margaret, and asked when he was returning to his own bed.

"Have you ever thought how much a guy has to know to be a bank manager?" asked U. Tack.

"Bugger-all, that I ever seen. They just stand around and look smart," said Margaret. "Don't you like your own bed?"

U. Tack sighed. "It's a nice enough bed," he answered. "Bumpy in spots, like a dirt road after a freeze-up. But that don't prevent a guy from getting along with it when he has to. No sir, I ain't got nothing against the bed. Nothing. But it's lonely, y'know . . . lonely."

"Then you oughtn't to leave it," said Margaret.

"What I mean is, it ain't the bed that's lonely. It's me. I like to lay around gossiping, don't you?"

Margaret agreed, although she pointed out that sleep was necessary if a guy was going to get up early in the morning.

"But don't you think a guy sleeps better if he gets things off his mind before going to sleep? Just think of all the guys that's lying awake staring into the darkness, wishing they had somebody alongside 'em they could talk to. Mind you, it ain't the big things they wants to talk about, things like whether to buy a new automobile . . . but the little things, the things that makes life worth living."

U. Tack's smooth somnambulistic voice effected Margaret. She lay on her back, warm and comfortable, drifting with the inflections of U. Tack's voice in that mindless, delicious sea which lies somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

She decided U. Tack's fingers which had scratched and idled their way from her knees to the base of her stomach were lost, and actually thought they were scratching their owner's skin.

"Some folks think you got to have possessions to be happy," U. Tack told her. "Or that you got to be a millionaire. I've knowed folks that was convinced you had to go places - shows, hockey games, bingo - before you could have a good time. And then there's the real brainy sort as thinks you have to attend political meetings, read books, or go to church."

"Let's go to sleep," said Margaret.

"Sure, let's," said U. Tack, and established himself upon her.

The initial discomfort Margaret experienced was soon replaced by an aura of warmth and contentment which increased the longer U. Tack remained in occupancy.

"Another thing," U. Tack later said, as he appreciatively stroked Margaret's rich curves. "Don't say nothing to Ethel about you and me. She might feel left out." He planted several kisses on her soft lips to emphasize the point. "And don't expect me tomorrow night. I got a lot of work to catch up on. Okay? But the night after that, I'll be along for a little chat."

After kissing Margaret again, he departed, leaving her to straighten the bed covers, pull down her ruckled nightgown, and slide away into easy contented sleep.

Ethel's response on finding U. Tack in her bed was anything but placid.

"Scram," she said.

"You mean, out of the house?" asked U. Tack.

"I mean out of my bed."

"That reminds me of a guy I knowed once. He was forever telling people to get out of buildings. Thought they was on fire, and he couldn't bear to think of all them people being trapped in the smoke and flames."

"Damn fool," said Ethel.

"No sir! He wasn't no fool," U. Tack averred. "He was a real smart man. All brain you might say. You know how he done his best thinking? He stood on his head."

"Goddamn idiot," said Ethel.

"He was a real brilliant man. A college professor. His mommy and sister was the same. When they had a decision to make they stood on their heads. Said it cleared the brain. If they was out buying a washing machine or a refrigerator, they'd stand on their heads ten minutes before making a decision."

"You mean right in the store!"

"Yes, sir. Right in the store. Mind you, they was always respectably dressed. You knowed by the cut of their pants that they didn't go for no hanky-panky."

"I should hope not."

"No sir. A person shouldn't never judge the world by hisself."

"I didn't say I did."

"I seen right away as you get everything straight the first time," he said. "You know what? It worries me, knowing you're out there on the hump. I'm scared you'll fall off."

As Ethel shifted away from the dangerous edge, U. Tack jerked her nightgown up and slipped an arm around her waist.

"Move your arm," said Ethel.

U. Tack did not reply. Instead he slid over her thigh, and dextrously adjusted himself to her curves.

"Hey, what the hell d'you think you're doing?" Ethel demanded.

"Well now, that's a good question. And I got a good answer to it," replied U. Tack. Before

Ethel could ask what the answer was, U. Tack's mouth descended onto hers and remained firmly clasped there, while his rump began a questing, urgent wriggle.

Ethel's hands beat a tattoo on his back. They tore his shirt and scratched his well-padded rump, but the only effect of these protests was to make U. Tack tighten his grip on her waist and increase the speed of his wriggling. Ethel let out a muted squeal, like the sound made by a pig when it awakens from sleep to find a knife slitting its throat. Moments later the hands which had sought to repel were gripping and striving to bind his lunging body closer and closer.

"There's times when it's necessary for a guy to act," remarked U. Tack afterwards. "Just think," he continued, waving a hand towards the shadowy window, "There's millions of folks out there as don't know how pleasant it is to be nice and cosy."

"I ain't got no sympathy for them," said Ethel.

"Now, now. You has to be charitable in this world. You has to think the best of everybody, not the worst. Gee!" he remarked, passing an exploratory hand over her, "You sure ain't short of nothing, are you?"

"Why should I be?" Ethel was very sleepy.

"I think the best of you," said U. Tack. "Though that's the way I am. If it's a choice between the worst or the best, then I plumb for the best. Listen, before you go to sleep . . . just keep this between us, eh? I got a feeling if your sister knowed we was lying here free and easy, she'd be real upset."

"I couldn't care less," said Ethel.

"Well, I do. I don't see no point to upsetting folks. So mum's the word. And I won't be along tomorrow night because I have to get down to studying." Unfortunately the remainder of U. Tack's explanation was lost on Ethel. She was asleep, though that did not prevent him from completing it. "I'm set to be an accountant, y'know. And to do that I have to study real hard. Yes, sir. It ain't easy. So you do as I say, and me, you, and Margaret'll live happy as three old ducks in a puddle." The sisters followed U. Tack's instructions implicitly, though their childish secretiveness of manner was hair-raising. However, U. Tack rapidly accommodated himself to the conspiracy, when he noted that neither paid the slightest attention to what the other said or did, unless money or farm chores were mentioned.

Their response was gratifying. They swallowed platitudes and rationalizations like babies merrily gulping poison. It made him feel like a high-minded missionary disseminating salvation and adequate underwear to naked savages. He could do no wrong.

Days and nights flowed with oily, unimpeded smoothness. He alternated the sisters, and voluptuously enjoyed that which they now obligingly offered. They were so physically abundant. It amused him to compare them with his favourite foods. Margaret he likened to strawberry shortcake heaped with whipped cream, while Ethel, for some odd reason, suggested plates of steaming spaghetti covered with a lava of rich, spicy sauce. The effect was one of gluttony, with U. Tack wallowing from sister to sister, like a contented hog rolling in sun-warmed mud.

The sisters never tired of extolling his virtues, carolling their antiphony from each side of the egg-sorting table, and completely ignoring each other's anthem of praise. Of course, they still had to produce two hundred and twenty-five dollars on the first of each month. It hurt, even though Ethel had calculated how many dozen small eggs in the mediums and mediums in the large it would take to produce two hundred and twenty-five dollars. So far they'd done quite well, saving around

one hundred dollars a month . . . which, as Ethel pointed out to Margaret, meant they were paying U. Tack one hundred and twenty-five dollars a month from the real profits of the farm.

"We sure did the right thing taking Ulysses on," said Margaret during one conference among buckets of eggs. While saying this she slipped several mediums into a box of jumbos.

"Take them out," snapped Ethel. "A blind guy could see as they ain't graded proper." Margaret dutifully removed the eggs, and two minutes later was condemning Ethel for doing the same thing.

"He sure plays his cello good," said Margaret. "I'll bet he could be famous if he wanted."

"Hah! He don't play more than one tune," said Ethel.

"What's wrong with that? A bird don't sing more than one song, does it?" Margaret protested.

"He ain't no bird." Ethel carefully arranged a cracked egg in the middle of a flat.

"I'm not saying he is. I'm just saying he could be famous if he'd a mind."

They worked away in silence until Margaret speculated on whether Ulysses would continue to live with them when he became a bank manager.

"He ain't going to be no bank manager. He's studying to be an accountant."

"He told me he was going to be a bank manager."

"When?"

"That's my business," said Margaret after a pause.

"Bloody liar!" Ethel threw a small egg at Margaret, who promptly grabbed a jumbo and threw it at Ethel. She then ran out before Ethel could retaliate. Ethel spent the remainder of the day telling herself that she must ask U. Tack why her sister thought he was studying to become a bank manager. The necessity to concentrate was so exhausting that all Ethel wanted to do on getting into bed that night was sleep. If U. Tack hadn't mentioned his studies, Ethel would probably have forgotten Margaret's casual reference to his future glory.

Instead she jerked violently back to life and demanded to know if he'd ever told her sister about his plans.

"No sir," said U. Tack and set about diverting Ethel's attention from the dangerous subject. Ethel flipped him off and repeated the question.

"Now look," said U. Tack from his position on the far side of the bed. "Would I tell her something that I've told you in confidence and asked you never to repeat?"

"She knows."

"She knows because you probably told her. Don't say nothing for a minute," said U. Tack as Ethel released a preliminary grunt. "Don't say nothing, and let me have my little say. You ladies are chatterboxes."

"I ain't."

"Oh, but you are. A real chatterbox."

"She said you told her."

"How could I have?"

"I dunno. But that's what she said."

"When did I tell her? Did you ask her that?"

"Course I did. Do you take me for a fool?"

"No sir. I take you for a real smart person," said U. Tack. "But that don't mean as you can't

make mistakes. Everybody makes them, even geniuses that's capable of multiplying three columns of figures in their heads You just think what it would be like having to multiply 695 by 596."

Ethel did not reply. She lay quite still and appeared oblivious when U. Tack returned to the throne of masculine supremacy. When she finally spoke he was so astounded he flopped over onto his back and placed his hands behind his head.

"It's 414,220."

"Oh, it is, is it?"

"Yes, it is," said Ethel. "Didn't you know?"

"Of course, but I'll have to check it."

"Okay," said Ethel, and rolling on her side, went off to sleep.

Before returning to his bed, U. Tack decided to steer clear of multiplication with Ethel. Some oddities in nature were best avoided. You never could tell where you might end, and anyway he had quite enough on his plate already.

But he did reproach Margaret for violating the pact. She was apologetic, though anxious to know how Ethel had been informed of U. Tack's ambitious plans.

"How would I know?" said U. Tack. "You're the one that's going around chattering, not me. Now, if you can't keep a secret, then I'll just have to stop talking to you."

Margaret earnestly promised never to transgress again, and was promptly forgiven and consoled by U. Tack.

Although the sisters believed U. Tack, suspicion and jealousy increased as inevitably and as imperceptibly as their waistlines. Having nothing but suspicion to go on made them very possessive. When arguments developed at the dinner table, each appealed for U. Tack's support with the coy dominance of a pet wife. When pressure became too high, he left the table to stroll the hen sheds, peacefully smoking hand-rolled cigarettes amid the cackles and squawks of ten thousand hens. The noise there didn't worry him. It was the sound of productivity, and besides he was of the opinion that any creature that spent its entire life in a cage was entitled to an occasional squawk. He would have done the same himself.

One day while U. Tack was in town delivering eggs and fryers and spending far too much money on groceries, Ethel walked into Margaret's room and found her letting out darts in a pair of jeans.

"They're getting awful tight around the middle," she said, when Ethel asked what she was doing.

"Don't eat so much," said Ethel who was experiencing identical constriction of clothing.

"It's Ulysses's cooking," said Margaret. "He sure enjoys putting things in the pot and stirring them around."

Ethel, who had started for the door, abruptly halted and turned. "What was that you said?" she asked.

"I just said Ulysses likes stirring things around." Ethel walked back, sat on the bed, and stared at her sister.

"What's the matter?" asked Margaret.

"What ain't the matter! Are you still getting the curse?"

"Oooh! I never thought of that," said Margaret.

"Sure he's been stirring things around, and in our pots. It ain't his cooking makes you fat; it's

what he does when he gets into this bed with you. And don't tell me he ain't been here with you, because I know he has."

Margaret's mouth opened until it was perfectly ovate. She looked down at her own stomach, and then across at Ethel's.

"You mean" she began, and then stopped.

"I mean, we're in the family way. That's what I mean."

"Ulysses said not to tell you because you'd be upset," Margaret finally said.

"That's just what he told me, the goddamn sonofabitch."

"But it's nice, isn't it?" said Margaret.

"Nice, hell!" snapped Ethel. "Are we paying him two hundred and a quarter to put us in the family way?"

"I guess not."

"All right then, don't talk like a damn fool."

"What'll we do?" Margaret asked.

"I dunno. But so help me, we'll do something. And it won't be nothing like that guy expects." Having made this incontrovertible vow Ethel marched from the room and went out to eviscerate old hens and package them as healthy young fryers.

The marriage of Miss Ethel Johnstone and Mr. U. Tack took place in the local United Church, and was a family affair. U. Tack dug up two seedy individuals, one to serve as best man and the other to give Ethel away. Miss Margaret Johnstone acted as her sister's bridesmaid.

A week passed, then a civil marriage between Miss Margaret Johnstone and Mr. U. Tack was performed by a registrar in the nearest city. The witnesses at that marriage were Miss Ethel Johnstone and a clerk in the registrar's office. Everything went off well, and the wedding party returned immediately to do the evening chores.

Regularizing their position simplified matters without producing matrimonial harmony. The difficulty arose over the question of honeymoon precedence. When U. Tack pointed out that he was their husband, they told him to go to hell and continued arguing. The sisters had agreed to exclude U. Tack from their rooms until he made honest women of them both. Now they rigorously denied each other the privilege of bedding with him first, and took steps to prevent him sneaking into each other's room. They patrolled the house at night and argued over possession during the day, leaving U. Tack to do all the work around the place.

Ethel maintained that as the oldest she had the primary right, while Margaret held hers was first choice since U. Tack had invaded her bed before attacking Ethel's ramparts. Both were adamant, talking simultaneously and refusing to listen to a word the other said. They drove U. Tack to the edge of distraction.

"Goddamn it!" he would shout. "Come to some agreement, or I'll pack my bags and get out." Their response to this threat was a blank stare.

"He come to my room first," Margaret reiterated for the thousandth time.

"He married me first."

"I got my baby first."

"How'd you know? You ain't had it yet."

"He likes being with me more than anybody else."

"That's what he said to me."

Deprivation of conjugal rights, physical exhaustion from overwork, and sheer nervous irritation at hearing asinine statements endlessly repeated made U. Tack despair of ever living contentedly again. He even stopped his renditions of Handel's Largo, his fingering being quite haywire.

There came the day when he could stand their bickering no longer. He stood up and bellowed in a way completely at odds with his usual soft, persuasive manner. "I'm fed up with this racket. Why the devil don't you divide me in half and have done with it!" His outburst resulted in a prolonged silence, during which his wives stared fixedly at him.

U. Tack made use of the pause to solemnly lecture them. "I want us to live together happy and contented. We got the potential, but we ain't never going to get no place so long as you girls sit here and fight over who gets me first. Just you remember that there's thousands, millions of people out there . . ." At this point he waved an emphatic finger towards the outer world. The sisters' eyes followed the quivering finger, then returned to dwell with omnivorous eagerness on his face. ". . . millions of guys that ain't so lucky as us, nor ain't got our potential. Just you bear in mind that the longer you quarrel, the quicker we'll all be dead. That old guy with the scythe don't wait while you snarl at each other. No sir. He'll reap whether you been happy or not. Yes sir! If it's so important, then we'll make a first-night party all together and split the difference the next nights. But there's one thing you two got to remember. I'm your husband. I got rights, and you got responsibilities. I love you equal. There ain't no preference with me. But I got to be boss. So, you think over what I just said. Talk things over quiet and friendly, then let me know what you decide. I'll be in the feed shed."

Having delivered this discourse, U. Tack donned the cloak of offended marital dignity and departed. He moved around the feed shed, periodically refilling the mill hopper and setting the bins in order for the morning feeding. He regretted not having taken a resolute stand immediately after the trouble began. He now felt his firmness would result in agreement and lasting harmony. The weeks of marriage had been a misery. The endless bickering and the dismal room in which he had been forced to sleep made him feel as if he had accomplished nothing. The return to a celibate bed was especially trying after weeks of voluptuous pleasure in the sisters' concave beds. Each night he tossed and twisted, burning with the satanic itch of concupiscence. Tonight he intended to repeatedly apply a soothing balm.

U. Tack was a voluble, devout rationalist. He admitted degrees of men and women existed but resolutely denied the possibility of differences in kind. The gratuitous and the irrational could not exist. The life of every individual was anchored to the vision of a goal. An Eldorado. This was the line holding people and their actions together. Furthermore, the idea of an anchor could be applied to every conceivable object. Examine what you pleased and you would find it was anchored to something else. Even the stars were anchored to each other by flexible, magnetic chains.

A rationalist had only to decide what it was he sought, explore far enough with unrelenting persistence, and he would uncover his Eldorado. Others might see U. Tack as a drab, vagrant farm worker, but U. Tack regarded himself as an explorer; a Fraser or MacKenzie. He was a capable and hard worker. No one had ever told him to get a move on. U. Tack did not object to slaving twelve hours a day, any more than an explorer whined about the miseries of an impenetrable forest. Adverse conditions are incentives, not deterrents.

A casual reference to the Johnstone sisters was the origin of U. Tack's descent upon the Johnstone's farm. The information was no more than an exchange over a glass of beer; but to U. Tack it was the glimpse of his Eldorado, the break in the formerly implacable mask of cloud.

A conqueror has to do something. U. Tack spent the next half-hour walking around the sheds, making plans that would allow him to live prosperously in the future. The first thing he'd do would be install automatic feeders. Nothing was wrong with the sisters' hen husbandry, but their methods were antiquated. He intended to revolutionize the cleaning system which at present involved a considerable amount of hard labour. He might even go in for turkeys. In a few years he would have a splendid, productive kingdom.

He walked back through the hen houses to the feed shed, impatiently waiting for the sisters to appear. All lighting on the Johnstone farm was dim, since Ethel disapproved of unnecessarily paying good money to the Power Corporation. As U. Tack opened the door and passed through into the feed shed, he heard a slight click, which was familiar though not immediately identifiable. He halted, turned his head to the left, and beheld Margaret standing behind him. "Hi," he said. "Where's Ethel?"

Margaret smiled and continued to look at him in a manner he could not understand. It was expectant, full of girlish embarrassment and an unknown element which jolted U. Tack out of his soft blanket of complacency. His head swung to the right. Behind him stood Ethel, bearing on her face an expression identical to the one he'd seen on Margaret's.

"What the hell are you two . . . ?" he began. He did not have time to complete the question before Ethel raised the humane killer, once used to slaughter hogs and the occasional steer, and neatly shot him just where his rationalist skull met and joined his thick, plebeian neck.

The Mrs. Ulysses Tacks used their occupational skills to dismember, eviscerate, and de-bone their husband. Bones went to the side, the rest was packaged and placed in the cleaning-room freezer. They did not believe in waste, and hens are not overly discriminating. They cleaned the bones with habitual meticulousness, and afterwards stood, one on each side of the stainless steel table, and scrupulously divided U. Tack's skeleton, bone by bone; even the skull, which Ethel cut with an electric saw. They then placed their collection of bones in separate plastic bags, washed their hands, and returned to the house, where each went contentedly to her honeymoon bed.

The End

BREAKING THE SILENCE

by

Ernest Langford

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BATTLE STREET BOOKS

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The Voices

Male

The voice of a middle-aged man who has always been in a position of authority and invariably modifies words and tonal quality to manipulate others: it is the voice of a man who allows those with whom he deals to come to the conclusion that he thinks very little of them; the voice of someone who, while never openly lying to others, never wholly commits himself to telling the truth, especially about himself; the voice of a man who senses his own inner emptiness and who spends a lot of time defending himself by attacking other people, attempting to undermine them, suggesting they suffer from multitudinous defects. In the voice there is the suggestion of a man who knows that other people find him physically attractive.

Female

The voice of a woman who verges on middle age: it suggests a person who has had varied life experiences; one who is as quick to express anger as to forgive offenses. More than anything else the voice suggests a woman who has long sought love but understands she has yet to find it.

The Set

A darkened stage. Figures of man and woman seated, but separated by what appears to be a wall.

The man and woman are holding books. When the scene opens there is a slight but significant pause between what the man and woman say to each other.

MAN: I suppose

WOMAN: Yes? What?

MAN: What?

WOMAN: You said *I suppose*, then stopped.

MAN: Oh, did I? Yes, so I did. Hm! I wonder what I was about to say?

WOMAN: I have no idea.

MAN: Hm. I must have been about to say something.

WOMAN: You probably were.

MAN: I mean, I wouldn't have said *I suppose* if I hadn't been about to say something.

WOMAN: Well?

MAN: Well what?

WOMAN: You could have said *I suppose* for the same reason that a dog barks when there is nothing for it to bark at.

MAN: And just what does that mean?

WOMAN: Nothing really.

MAN: It must mean something.

WOMAN: I probably meant that you spoke simply to break the silence.

MAN: You mean because I can't bear silence?

WOMAN: I'm not sure what I mean.

MAN: Silence between us?

WOMAN: I don't know. Perhaps.

MAN: That makes matters even worse.

WOMAN: When you're away I sometimes say a few words to drive away silence.

MAN: What words?

WOMAN: I don't know. Anything that's a sound. Blah blah. (SHOUTS) Blah blah! (SCREAMS) Blah blah blah!

MAN: And that drives away silence?

WOMAN: For a while. It cleaves the silence that tries to suffocate me.

MAN: And I said *I suppose* for the same reason a dog barks at night? And for the same reason you say -- what was it you said?

WOMAN: Whatever pops into my head.

MAN: Oh, so the words you spoke just now aren't the words you actually use to break the silence when I am not here?

WOMAN: No. They're meaningless sounds.

MAN: There's something I'd like to point out. I don't object to silence.

WOMAN: Oh.

MAN: I have no objection to silence. None whatsoever. In fact, I quite like it.

WOMAN: I see.

MAN: It follows then that your point about my wishing to break the silence must be a mistake.

WOMAN: I guess it must.

MAN: From that we can conclude that I was on the verge of saying something, which may or may

not have been of some importance, when you interrupted me.

WOMAN: I'm not concluding anything. And I didn't interrupt you. You stopped talking.

MAN: Are you sure?

WOMAN: Yes. You said 'I suppose,' then stopped. Then I waited a bit and said 'What?'.

MAN: But you're forgetting something. When you said 'What?' no doubt you interrupted my train of thought.

WOMAN: Maybe. Although if you did have a train of thought, surely you would have remembered it.

MAN: Not necessarily. It would have been just emerging when you squashed it with your arrogant *What?*.

WOMAN: I don't see how you can hold me responsible for your failure to remember what you were going to say.

MAN: You are mistaken. I may say you are responsible if I choose. But whether you are prepared to accept responsibility is another matter.

WOMAN: And furthermore my *What?* wasn't arrogant. It was a normal question.

MAN: It was an imposition, an arbitrary seizing of my right to collect my thoughts and express them.

WOMAN: But you asked me what you were going to say.

MAN: Did I?

WOMAN: Though I couldn't possibly have known what you were about to say.

MAN: You could have deduced it . . . you could have made suggestions. You could have said *You were about to say that war in Albania will break out tomorrow, or an earthquake might occur in Peru later today.*

WOMAN: I don't see how I could possibly have said either of those things.

MAN: Or you could have said that I was going to say *I suppose it will rain tomorrow. Or, I suppose you plan to spend time with your lover tomorrow.*

WOMAN: And if you had said *that* I would have replied I don't have a lover and you're crazy to suggest I do.

MAN: To which I can now reply that I know you have a lover. And have had one for over a year.

WOMAN: I don't see how such a conversation can have developed from you saying *I suppose* and me saying *What?*

MAN: It could if we recognize that you have a lover.

WOMAN: Even assuming I have one, which I don't, I'd be a fool to put such words into your mouth.

MAN: No, no. You wouldn't choose those words. You'd suppress them, because you guessed what I was going to say.

WOMAN: In other words, your silence was a manipulative trick to get this conversation going.

MAN: Oh no. My silence may have heightened your apprehension and fear, but it certainly was not used to trick you into an admission.

WOMAN: That's ridiculous. Anyway, I have nothing to admit.

MAN: Then why object to my silence?

WOMAN: Why don't you go back to silence now? And I'll return to my book.

MAN: I'd like to do that.

WOMAN: All right, let's do it.

MAN: But I don't see how we can.

WOMAN: Of course we can, because whatever's been said was manufactured by you to break the silence.

MAN: Well, assume that's true. Mightn't we also assume that there is some truth in the words I've spoken? I mean words that convey the reality of physical acts?

WOMAN: No. That's not possible.

MAN: Acts occurring between two people.

WOMAN: I understand what you mean.

MAN: Specifically between a woman married for eight years and childless and a man married for ten years and the father of two children.

WOMAN: You could also say a man married for eight years and childless and a single woman who cleans his home.

MAN: You could.

WOMAN: And would it be true?

MAN: That particular example would not be true.

WOMAN: How am I to know that?

MAN: For the same reason which leads you to conclude that my suppositions may or may not be true.

WOMAN: I think we should return to silence.

MAN: Or to the beginning.

WOMAN: Why? Nothing will be gained from it.

MAN: Nothing lost either.

WOMAN: But if

MAN: What?

WOMAN: No. I didn't intend to say that.

MAN: Nevertheless you did say it.

WOMAN: What I meant to say --.

MAN: -- Yes? What did you mean to say?

WOMAN: Oh, why start up again?

MAN: I don't want to start anything. All you need do is to complete your sentence beginning with *But if*.

WOMAN: I can't remember what I was going to say.

MAN: Could it have been something meaningless to ward off fear of silence?

WOMAN: Why would I need to ward off silence when we've been talking?

MAN: Then maybe because you wanted us to continue talking.

WOMAN: No, I didn't want that.

MAN: Why not?

WOMAN: I'd rather have silence than your insinuations.

MAN: To silence me all you need do is complete your thought.

WOMAN: I think I was going to say that if nothing has been gained or lost by anything we've said, then everything is the same as it was before we began.

MAN: But how can it possibly be the same when certain things have been revealed by what has been said?

WOMAN: Those things were said only to break the silence.

MAN: But they *were* said...and that has altered everything.

WOMAN: No. What was said had no meaning.

MAN: I disagree. Every sound has meaning, depending up where and when it is made and who hears it. You said a dog barks without meaning in the night. But how can you be sure of that? The dog may be expressing horror at having watched its owners being brutally murdered while it was chained and unable to protect them. It may have witnessed the rape and murder of a child.

WOMAN: True, it may have seen all that, but still it has no meaning for me.

MAN: Neither does the sighing of a woman for her lover have meaning for a dog.

WOMAN: How would you know when a woman sighs for a lover?

MAN: When she sighs in sleep.

WOMAN: I've never heard a sleeping woman sigh.

MAN: But perhaps you know of one who one sighs in a dream.

WOMAN: Including one who sighs for you?

MAN: Oh no, oh no. Never for me. Never for what you already have. Never for who lies still beside you.

WOMAN: Or for what I once hoped might lie beside me.

MAN: There is always incompatibility between what we've hoped for in life and what we actually receive.

WOMAN: You, I take it, are an authority on that subject?

MAN: No. I am one of hope's victims.

WOMAN: Is that a complaint?

MAN: No. It's an acknowledgement of a truism.

WOMAN: About what?

MAN: About the foolhardiness of love . . . and trust.

WOMAN: See? You *are* complaining.

MAN: Not really. I'm admitting I was mistakenly optimistic.

WOMAN: That's quite an admission. I can hardly believe it. You have always been incapable of admitting anything that smacks of failure.

MAN: Unless forced to do so by circumstance. And at this moment I'm like a person in the middle of the desert who has to acknowledge that death is inevitable unless water is made available.

WOMAN: You always come up with such appropriate comparisons.

MAN: This one fits the occasion.

WOMAN: So you feel that, emotionally speaking, you are in a waterless desert?

MAN: Yes, or the equivalent.

WOMAN: Do you want to end this conversation?

MAN: Do you?

WOMAN: It's not taking us anywhere.

MAN: Is it supposed to?

WOMAN: I thought every conversation was supposed -- .

MAN: -- Ah! There's that word again. *Suppose!* It's a dangerous word.

WOMAN: -- to lead to something more.

MAN: To what? Enlightenment? Revelation? A new beginning? You think conversation is like the act of love in that it must necessarily result in fulfilment? If you do, then you're wrong. Most love-making -- like most conversations -- is sterile, often unsolicited. A pointless barking in the night.

WOMAN: But that says more about the people who engage in it, than about what they say or do.

MAN: As for example, a conversation between you and your lover after you have ended making love?

WOMAN: I have no lover.

MAN: Oh yes, you do. For over a year. A lover who first kisses your lips before he strokes your --.

WOMAN: -- No, I said. No! No! No!

MAN: -- body...and afterwards in conversation tells you about himself...and speaks of the things you might do together...places you could visit...lands you might wander in...oceans you could sail across.

WOMAN: What do you want from me?

MAN: An answer.

WOMAN: I've already given you one.

MAN: The wrong one.

WOMAN: It's the only one I know of.

MAN: The only one you can think of, which isn't quite the same thing.

WOMAN: Are you sure there is a right answer?

MAN: No. However, I'm sure there is an explanation.

WOMAN: For what?

MAN: For what you've done.

WOMAN: Tell me what I've done.

MAN: I've already told you.

WOMAN: And I've said it's not true.

MAN: If that's so, then one of us is badly mistaken.

WOMAN: Yes. You are.

MAN: Or one of us is engaged in a prolonging a game.

WOMAN: You're the one doing that.

MAN: In order to put off the final moment...the moment of recognition.

WOMAN: I don't have to do that.

MAN: Then you have nothing to worry about, have you?

WOMAN: That's what I have been telling you all along.

MAN: I know what you have been telling me. You've been reiterating . . . denying . . . categorically asserting I am in the wrong. That is what I know.

WOMAN: You *are* in the wrong.

MAN: I have always been in the wrong with you . . . from day one of our marriage.

WOMAN: That's something you have chosen to believe.

MAN: And belief confers reality upon it?

WOMAN: No. Belief deceives you.

MAN: In other words, I am making a fool of myself. Right?

WOMAN: You upset yourself unnecessarily.

MAN: What you're really saying is that what I feel and believe produces a sense of inadequacy, which in turn produces my feelings and beliefs, which in turn

WOMAN: You really enjoy torturing yourself, don't you?

MAN: Do I?

WOMAN: Almost as much as you enjoy reviling me and insinuating things which aren't true.

MAN: What things?

WOMAN: Why, that I have a lover.

MAN: Oh, I don't see that as being an insinuation. That's a fact.

WOMAN: No. No. No. No.

MAN: I wish

WOMAN: Wish what?

MAN: How stupid it is for an adult to wish for something.

WOMAN: I don't think so. I think it is quite natural.

MAN: Oh, surely not. Look at us. Here we sit in this elegantly furnished room, but when we look around do we see the charming paintings on the walls? When we look through the windows, do we see a garden filled with beautiful flowers? Or birch trees poised against a blue sky? No. We see none of that. We see an aggrieved person crouched in a chair on the other side of an impassable

crevasse.

WOMAN: I don't see that.

MAN: A gap that widens and deepens as the years pass.

WOMAN: I see a man who isolates himself. A man dominated by suspicions.

MAN: I see a wall that hides a woman who is a stranger to me.

WOMAN: How can I be a stranger when we've been married for eight years? When you've held and touched me and are familiar with every part of my body? When you've done with me everything a man and woman can do together?

MAN: Excepting one.

WOMAN: What? What?

MAN: You can guess.

WOMAN: Why should I? Excepting one! What one? What else is there for us to do? You have passed your eyes, hands and lips over every inch of my body. There is nothing more for you to see or touch.

MAN: I've been like a traveller who has walked the perimeter of a forbidden city.

WOMAN: I've forbidden you nothing. Nothing. Even in the beginning when upbringing imposed modesty upon me, I withheld nothing of myself from you. I exposed myself wholly to you and asked for nothing in return except

MAN: What?

WOMAN: What? Something I expected, but never received.

MAN: How foolish of you.

WOMAN: Yes, it was.

MAN: Besides, what you are saying is not true. I, like the traveller, walked the outer wall, believing I would be allowed entry into the city.

WOMAN: But you were! Tell me what I denied you. Go on, tell me. Because I gave you far more

than you ever gave me.

MAN: I gave as much as I received.

WOMAN: Oh, what a lie! What a lie!

MAN: At first I didn't understand it. I thought the failure was mine.

WOMAN: It was.

MAN: Then slowly I came to realize that you were withholding from me what you preferred to give your lover.

WOMAN: Oh, my lover! My mythical lover! Who is he? Where is he? Come on, tell me his name.

MAN: Why should I?

WOMAN: Why? Because you seem to know more about him than I do. That's why.

MAN: And that is why I shall eventually

WOMAN: What? What? Oh, I get it. You'll divorce me. What a laugh. You know something? I thought of divorce myself years ago. Two years after we married I was so fed up I thought of divorce. You must have been more slow-witted than I imagined not to have thought of it before. Or maybe you didn't want to lose the security of having me around until you'd established yourself in the world. Is that it? You're so bloody crass! After using me for eight years, you're now getting ready to dump me because I haven't given you what you wanted . . . that I've deprived you of my inner self in order to have a lover. Oh, you are so despicable! How you must have suffered for eight long years living with a woman like me! A woman who scrimped and saved and let you do what you pleased with her and bent over backwards to please you. Oh, I feel so humiliated! So ashamed I ever allowed it to happen! What a fool I was . . . giving myself to you . . . and allowing you to use me...it sickens me even to think of it.

MAN: Have I ever said anything like that?

WOMAN: You don't have to say anything. It's evident in the way you look and behave.

MAN: And you actually contemplated divorcing me?

WOMAN: Why not, since I had married a man I hardly ever saw and who rarely spoke to me?

MAN: But it was you who suggested . . . insisted . . . that I pursue my career. I remember you said

that.

WOMAN: I don't want to hear what I said eight years ago.

MAN: You said *I can't stand people who settle for half a loaf*. So you mustn't blame me if certain things in our life were neglected when I set out to get the whole loaf for you.

WOMAN: I didn't realize the effort would consume so much of our lives.

MAN: But that is what I thought you wanted. I thought you understood that getting the whole loaf extracts a high price.

WOMAN: I've just told you. I didn't realize.

MAN: You could have said something to me.

WOMAN: I thought it was what you wanted.

MAN: I? No. I have always been attracted to the principle of compromise.

WOMAN: Well, I am sorry if I compelled you to do something you really didn't want to do.

MAN: Oh, I don't regret it. I recognize that I wouldn't have got as far or done as much if I hadn't been goaded on by you.

WOMAN: Goaded! Goaded! How dare you say I goaded you!

MAN: You deny it?

WOMAN: I refuse to go on with this! I can just see you sitting there in the chair, gloating. You're enjoying this because you think you'll be able to trap me into admitting something about myself.

MAN: Admitting something?

WOMAN: I've said I will not go on with this.

MAN: And I'm gloating?

WOMAN: Yes. You can't see the expression on your face. You enjoy finding somebody's sensitive spot and then jabbing a pin into it. You're sadistic.

MAN: Am I? Odd isn't it? What we imagine ourselves to be in contrast to the way others see us?

WOMAN: I've a good idea how you see yourself. As superior to other people.

MAN: Now, that is truly revealing, because I see myself as being something of a lost soul. I see myself as a person desperately looking around for something -- or someone -- to support him.

WOMAN: You expect me to believe that?

MAN: Why not?

WOMAN: Because I don't. I know too much about you. I know how you operate. I know how you cling to people when you want something from them. There's something parasitic about you.

MAN: Surely not.

WOMAN: You're like one of those tropical fig trees that encloses its host and suffocates it.

MAN: I had no idea I was so terrible.

WOMAN: Why didn't I see it before! You're destructive!

MAN: When I spoke of support I meant knowing there was a person I could completely trust.

WOMAN: I foolishly believed I was that person.

MAN: I thought so too, until....

WOMAN: Until what?

MAN: Until a year ago when -- .

WOMAN: Oh god! Where did you pick up this crazy notion?

MAN: I heard you sigh in your sleep.

WOMAN: Sigh! So what!

MAN: Yes. So what! What's a sigh or two between a wakeful man and the woman who sleeps beside him? If he reaches out to touch her, will she dream that her breasts, belly and loins are being caressed by her lover?

WOMAN: You are quite mad.

MAN: I thought so too . . . at first. But then I decided to eliminate suspicion by watching you during the day.

WOMAN: Oh, my god!

MAN: I followed you.

WOMAN: I have to meet clients.

MAN: In motel rooms?

WOMAN: Yes, sometimes . . . when it's unavoidable, or if the client is staying there.

MAN: The same client on the same day of the week in the same motel room at the same hour of the day?

WOMAN: Yes. Because that is the only open time each of us has. You can come to the motel with me next week. Will that satisfy you?

MAN: Oh no, oh no. Do you think I'm prepared to stand in some shabby room watching you and your lover act out a carefully prepared script for my benefit?

WOMAN: You'd see nothing more than what you've already seen many times. I've never refused to strip them for you. Well, have I?

MAN: I'll grant you that.

WOMAN: You'll grant me! My god! Just like that? Casually grant that I've done everything for you?

MAN: No, never casually.

WOMAN: When I gave you everything a woman can possibly give? I was fool enough to believe you honoured and valued me.

MAN: I did.

WOMAN: No. If you honoured me, you'd trust me.

MAN: I did once.

WOMAN: Once?

MAN: Yes. Until I saw a video of what happens in the motel room.

WOMAN: Well?

MAN: Well?

WOMAN: Do you expect me to defend myself? Do you expect me to provide an explanation for something that happened once and will never happen again?

MAN: Do you expect -- seriously expect -- me to believe that?

WOMAN: Yes.

MAN: I might accept that what I saw in the video only happened once, except that I know no woman can ever look at a man she'd once enjoyed and not want to find out if she would enjoy herself as much, or more, if they sampled each other another time.

WOMAN: I'm not like that. I don't tempt fate.

MAN: But you *are* like that. You've done just that.

WOMAN: And I suppose you have personified fidelity?

MAN: I've never secretly met a woman in a motel room.

WOMAN: That's right. You prefer to push her down on the bed in your own house. You think I don't know about the woman who cleaned house for us? She tried to get money out of me! And Faith! You think I don't know about Faith? Faith, who was my friend long before I met you? You know what you are? A sanctimonious hypocrite! And something else -- I wouldn't have gone to bed with -- no, I won't tell you his name -- if I hadn't known about Faith. What a deceptive bastard you are! Quite prepared to crucify me, aren't you?

MAN: So that's why Faith . . . ?

WOMAN: Yes, that's why. I'll never forgive her.

MAN: Aren't you being necessarily vindictive?

WOMAN: Me! Vindictive! I went to school with her. I shared experiences with her.

MAN: But not your husband?

WOMAN: You know something? I didn't give a damn about that cleaning woman. Did you actually sneak in the bedroom and push her down on our bed while she was changing the sheets?

MAN: Something liked that.

WOMAN: God! How disgusting!

MAN: As I recall she was leaning over the bed.

WOMAN: You saw her ass and couldn't resist, right?

MAN: Are you really interested in what happened?

WOMAN: No. I'm only interested in you knowing that she got money out of me to compensate for lost wages on the day she had an abortion . . . and of course, for the cost of the abortion too.

MAN: Oh!

WOMAN: Yes, oh! Actually I didn't care how many cleaning women you pushed over onto our bed, but I wasn't going to put up with you pushing my oldest friend onto it and laughing at me while you did it.

MAN: We never laughed at you. In fact, Faith hated herself for doing it.

WOMAN: Is that right? I suppose she liked hating herself so much she had to go on getting into bed with you so she could continue hating herself?

MAN: Well, she *was* masochistic, although more likely it was her feelings of guilt that pushed her along the path to suicide. And still you can't pity her?

WOMAN: No. She elected to go where she wasn't wanted.

MAN: That's not completely true. I wanted her. In fact I loved her.

WOMAN: You expect me to believe that?

MAN: No. Although if I'd suspected she would tell you, I'd have walked out of this house for good. I thought she was tired of me.

WOMAN: She was ashamed of what she was doing to me.

MAN: Once she said she loved me.

WOMAN: I told her I hated her and never wanted to see her again.

MAN: I hate you for that.

WOMAN: Do you think I care for what you feel?

MAN: You should, since it means I will probably kill you.

WOMAN: No. It means I'll divorce you.

MAN: You can't sue for divorce after you're dead.

WOMAN: I'm not going to die.

MAN: But you are. That is what I was about to tell you when we began this little conversation. I was about to say 'I suppose I will have to kill you.' As you can see, my supposition was correct. I do have to kill you.

WOMAN: I've as much right to kill you as you do me.

MAN: No. In all the recorded conversations of you and your lover in the motel room, the word 'love' was never once uttered. But Faith whispered it to me once...and I many times to her. So, you see, I have reason to kill you. (SOUND OF A SHOT.)

WOMAN: Two can play that game, you know. (PAUSE) Well, can't they? (PAUSE) It's funny, though. I didn't know about Faith. I didn't know.

The End