

C. L. GRANT

The Rest Is Silence

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Beware of dreamers: that would be my epitaph if I could have a grave to go to when I die. But all there is now is a rambling, shrinking house, and a fog that wisps away my words as I speak. I have committed suicide (unaware) and have been murdered for it (all too aware); but if I have to shift the unbearable blame for this madness elsewhere, it has to go to Julius Caesar, late of Rome and the Elizabethan state. After all, if he hadn't gotten himself so famously killed, Shakespeare would have never written a play about it nor would I have had to teach it. Yet he did, and I did, so here we are. And now I know all too well just where that is.

After the fact, events have a diabolical way of falling into place that makes a curse of hindsight and hell for the present. Case in point: a Wednesday in October and a perfectly ordinary English Department meeting. Chandler Jolliet, the commandingly tall chairman, was quietly and efficiently razoring our confidence in our collective abilities. Apparently a virgin member of our troupe had decided not to concentrate on Julius Caesar's examination of power, but rather on the in-depth characterization of the conspirators, Brutus in particular. God forbid that we should deviate from the chartered lanes of the courses of study, but this youngster, fresh from college with stars in his eyes, had taken it upon himself to do just that, and we were all suffering for it. Jolliet's sycophants and friends were murmuring and nodding; and the rest of us, who had endured this

brand of tirade before, were daydreaming, planning our Christmas vacations and plotting assassinations of our own. And when the hour-and-a-half tantrum was over, we nodded our heads in sage obeisance and shuffled out, as slaves must have done before the overseer's whip. In the hall, however, the culprit, Marty Schubert, cornered me and Valerie Stem to press his case.

"I don't understand, " he said. " What's so holy about Caesar that I can't tally about something new for a change? I'm not saying Jollie's way is better or worse, but for God's sake, what the hell does he have against me? What did I do that he hates me?"

"Not a thing, " Val said, guiding him gently by the arm away from Jolliet's open office door. "It's just his way of breaking you in." She looked back at me and smiled. "Eddie's been through it. So have I. You just have to grin and bear it."

"Why?" he demanded as anguish and anger gathered in his features like thunderclouds.

"Because we need the jobs, Marty," I said, not liking the sound of my voice, so recently like his, so recently crushed. "'There are too many teachers and not enough jobs. Val, me, and a few others, we've been around much too long to

go hunting for other positions. Who'd hire us when they could have newcomers at half the salary? The only thing we can do is play the game, Sam. Play the game and hope he has a heart attack, or a lingering case of diarrhea. "

Marty stared, not quite sure if I were serious. Finally he decided I wasn't and laughed. But his cheeks were still flushed and his eyes glinting, as if he'd been repeatedly slapped. W

signed out in silence, and in the parking lot Val and I watched him slump to his car and drive slowly away. Val, her eyes hidden by uncut bangs as black as my mood, shook her head. "He's a smart kid, Eddie. It's a shame to see the old bastard do him in like that."

I could only shrug and she accepted that as a sign of the times under which we lived. We parted, silently, and I drove home much faster than I'd intended, for there was nothing for me there. The apartment was still the hospital-white, bare-floored cell I'd resigned myself to when I finally realized there was no place else for me to go. I wasn't clever enough to quit and enter business, nor was I ambitious enough to climb out of the classroom into administration. Sometimes I entertained the spirit of Mr. Chips and envisioned thousands of ex-students tearfully waving goodbye at my retirement. A farce for all that: I could barely remember the names of kids I'd taught the year before, much less those I'd challenged in my virgin year.

It rained that night, if I recall correctly. My unlisted telephone continued collecting dust. The end of a perfect day. And the world kept spinning.

The following morning, however, with the sun barely risen, the telephone scared the hell out of me by working.

"Eddie?"

"Marry, that you?" I was still asleep. I must have been, or his actor's deep voice would have identified him immediately.

"Eddie, listen, I can't go back. Not after what he's done to me."

That woke me up. "Whoa, son, hang on a minute. Don't let that creep get to you like that."

"I'm sorry, Eddie, but I can't do it. I understand your position, really, and I'm not kidding, but I've been thinking it over. In fact, I haven't slept all night. I just can't go back and face him. Would you do me a favor and stop over on your way in? You can take my books and stuff in with you. My resignation too. "

Since I was still rather foggy, all I did was mumble an agreement, take a shower and fix myself some instant breakfast. I made a quick call to the school, telling the secretary I might be a little late, car trouble, and hung up before she could get too nosy. On the way to Marty's rented duplex, I kept the window rolled down. to wake me up. I was worried. Marty was one of the brightest, most dedicated teachers I had known, and somehow I had to keep him with us. If for no other reason than he actually liked the kiss he worked with, and they, in turn, held him in enormous respect.

He opened his front door immediately when I knocked. He was dressed for work, but unshaven, and his breath as he welcomed me told me what he'd been thinking with. He was sober, though, and solemnly waved me to a chair.

"Marry, listen-

"I know, I know, Ed. I'm cutting my career out from under me, right? Nobody's going to hire a teacher who quit before Christmas for reasons like mine, right? You want me to last out the year, find another school and then tell him to shove it. Right?"

All I could do was nod, and he laughed at my confusion and the wind spilling from my best noble speech. To my surprise, he nodded too.

"Well, you are right. I've been sitting here watching the sun and the clock, and I've decided to do just that. I'm going to smile if it kills me, then do what I want when he's not looking. Maybe, " he added, grinning, "I can help drive him to that early retirement you guys are always talking about. "

"I wish you all the luck in the world," I said, returning the grin, though more relieved that he was still with us than responding to his humor.

"But listen, Eddie, " he said. "I'll tell you one thing: I'm not going to take that kind of abuse in public again. And neither is anyone else. " And for a frightening moment, his anger returned.

"Sure thing. Whatever you say, Marty," I said, standing quickly. "Just play it safe for a while, will you? See which way the wind blows. I doubt that Jollie's after your hide. He just doesn't like original thinkers, you know what I mean?"

"I think we'd better get going, don't you? The education of our nation's children lies perilously within our hands. "

"Yea, and verily," I said. "Onward. I'll meet you there. I think you'd better shave." ,

"Brutus was right, though," Marty said as he held open the door for me. "We all stand against the spirit of Caesar, but unfortunately, the spirit doesn't bleed."

"Come again?" But the door was shut before I could get an answer. And I didn't remember his remark until after Thanksgiving, when my own classes were destroying Shakespeare's poetry. When the lines Marty had paraphrased came up in the discussion, I became unaccountably nervous, and I kept seeing Jollie draped in a toga. When I passed the fantasy on to those I could trust not to run immediately to the boss, they laughed, and soon enough, Jolliet became Caesar, and Marty was an instant celebrity for inspiring the analogy.

What a blow it was; then, when we received a party invitation from the old man.

I was sitting in my classroom, commiserating with Val over an impossible malcontent who was disrupting her classes, when our department bird watcher and sapling look-alike, Wendy Buchwall, scurried in waving a pink slip of paper. "You're not going to believe this," she said, "but we've been invited to a costume ball. "

"You're right, " I said. "I don't believe it. Who's passing that insane idea around? It sounds like Guidance is on a new kick."

"No, him," she said, holding the paper in front of my glasses just long enough for me to make out Jolliet's pompous scrawl.

"Him?"

"The Man, Val. >'

"You're kidding. Cut it out. It isn't funny."

Wendy, obviously still unbelieving herself, handed her the invitation, and we sat for a quiet moment wondering if we'd stumbled into an alternate universe that delighted in perversity.

"It figures," Val said finally. "A Shakespearean ball, yet."

"That's ridiculous, " I said when Wendy handed the paper to me. I read it, blinked and hoped it would go away. "Hey, this thing is on the Friday over Christmas vacation. Brother, he sure knows how to ruin a holiday."

Wendy perched on the edge of my desk and shook her head. "There is absolutely no way I am going to drag my husband to such a farce. He'll divorce me. He'll have good reason."

"Dream on," Val said. "Unfortunately, I don't see how you can gracefully get out of it. Unless you're dying."

"Says who?"

"Says tenure, dear. We three unholies are bucking for that lovely piece of security. We're stuck. And," she added as Wendy turned to her, "if I remember correctly, we all advised Marty to play the game. What's he going to think of us if we don't go along? We, honey, are on the same team."

Wendy stuck out her tongue and pouted, kicking her heels against the metal side of my desk until I was more than tempted to dump her onto the floor. But Val, as usual, was right. The three of us had drifted into this valley high school at the same time, each running from a city faculty horrific in its brutality. All of us had at least ten years behind us, and it was a wonder that we were hired at all. Now we were facing the final step-no tenure this time and it was back to housekeeping for Wendy, a library for Val, and God only knew what for me. It was times like this that made me want to strangle the wag who said, "Them's that can't, teach."

I began doodling on the desk blotter. A noose first. When drew in a stick man, I couldn't decide who it was.

"I don't want to go," Wendy near whispered, sadly now.

"No choice," Val said. "No goddamned choice."

"It's the principle of the thing," I said, suddenly angry. " don't know why the hell we let that man push us around like this. Christ, we're like children as far as he's concerned."

"Principle," said Val in her maddeningly calm way, "does not put bread on the table."

And silence. I remembered when I had been as idealistic as Marty Schubert, and mourned myself those days. I began to see just why he had reasons for hating me, and I wondered if, in fact, he had. Right then, it suddenly mattered very much. Not only did I care that he understood what I was doing and why I didn't fight` the world as he did, I was also a little frightened. For the last two:, weeks, pranksters of a most unfunny lot had been dumping

mutilated fowl on our doorsteps. Mine (two barn owls) were missing their hearts, Wendy's and Val's their entrails. Jolliet, too, had been similarly victimized, and although we had been passing the incidents off on some kid who was too eager to delve into the literal meanings of the occult in Shakespeare's more gruesome moments, I couldn't help thinking of Marty, his rage, and those tears in his eyes.

"My God," I finally shouted, getting out of my chair and 'w tossing the pencil into the wastebasket. "Whose damnable idea was this in the first place?"

"Mine. "

I looked up and Marty came in, hands clasped in front of him _ like a marching priest. Wendy jumped off the desk and punched him twice on the arm, hard. He laughed and ducked playfully away from her further attack. Val threw an eraser at him, and stalked around until I slumped against the chalkboard and glared: at him. "Traitor," I said.

Marty smiled innocently. "I thought you wanted me to go` along with him."

"Oh, brother," I said. "That was the general idea, yes, but."" did you have to go for assistant god? A Shakespearean ball?` Jesus, Marty, couldn't you have done better?"

He glanced around at the three of us, shrugged and appropriated my chair. Immediately he sat, his feet were crossed on: the desk's top, scattering several papers. "But Willy is his= favorite man. All I did was kind of ease him around until he fell into it himself. He, uh, really didn't care for it at first. It took a lot of talking." He smiled again, but this time there was no mirth, and I knew he was lying. Jollier would have died before going through a year, a goddamned day with Lear, Hamlet and all the rest of the bloody crew. Marry, for his own reasons, knew exactly what he was doing. I didn't know if the women caught on, but I didn't like it and abruptly lost the will to banter any more. The game had turned sour; I wanted to spit.

"I wish you hadn't done it," I said.

Marty shrugged his indifference to my opinion.

Val, meanwhile, was mimicking an ultra sensuous walk up and down an aisle, tossing kisses to the pale green walls. "I'm not ashamed to say that Cleopatra would suit me just fine."

"You'll make an asp of yourself," I said.

"You'll go to hell for that, " she said and blew me a kiss, a real one, and I couldn't help but admit to myself that she could easily slay my bachelorhood dragon.

"Too obvious," Wendy said, off on a track of her own. "Why not beat the bastard at his own game and go as the conspirators? Who knows, maybe the Ides of March'll come early this season."

"That's the spirit," Marty said, abandoning my chair and heading for the door, a little too quickly. "I might be Marc Antony. "

"But he was a double-Grosser," Wendy said.

"Yeah," he answered. "How about that?"

After he'd gone, I picked up a piece of chalk and began scribbling what I could remember of the "Friends, Romans, countrymen" speech on the blackboard. It helped me not to think.

A few minutes later, Val picked up her coat and purse and took Wendy by the arm. "Come on, bird girl," she said. "Let's hit the road. Eddie, if all you've got is your famous TV dinners, drop around. I'll see what the larder has hidden from payday. "

I stopped writing and nodded without committing myself. Then I listened to their heels tracing a unison beat down the hall. Outside my window I could hear a snowball fight. From the back of the school came the muffled shouts of an afternoon basketball game, the cadenced pounding of feet responding to a cheer. "I still don't like it," I said to the empty chairs.

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The Christmas break arrived none too soon for my rapidly decaying nerves. Though there had been no repetition of the practical jokes that had stained my doorstep, Marty's increasingly foul temper had strained our not-too-deep friendship. More and more he sniped at me for surrendering my ideals, would then immediately laugh as if to salve the wounds he knew he was inflicting. And there was fury in the dust he raised when he left: school each night.

Since I was without a family, and Val had headed for an aunt's, I treated myself, on Christmas Day, to a gluttonous delight at a nearby restaurant that deserved a better fate than being buried in the hills. The more I ordered, the better the service was; and when the meal finally ended, I was actually laughing with the waitress. It was a good, rare feeling, and I drove home slowly in order to preserve it. There had been a snowfall two days before, and the lawns and fields had not yet been all trampled by children and snowmobiles. The snow had hardened, filmed with thin ice and contoured smooth like unbroken clouds. I grinned; I whistled; and when the telephone rang: just as I was hanging up my overcoat, I even said "hello" instead of the usual "yeah?"

"Marty here, Ed. I just wanted to wish you a merry, and all that. Also, I have a friendly reminder of this Friday's gay, festivities. "

The measure of my good will weathered even this miserable reminder of that costume affair. "Bless you, Tiny Tim, " I said. "Having a good day?" '

"So-so. I'm at my, uh, uncle's place now. Where the party's= going to be, you know? Strange old guy, but he's teaching me a few things, and I'll put up with anything for a free meal. can't complain. You?"

"Just great, just great. But as long as you brought it up, what r are you going as?"

"Huh?"

"Oh, come on. The extravaganza, my boy. What ingenious-; rig have you devised, or is it a secret?"

"Oh, that. Nothing special. Since everyone seems on a Caesar kick"

"I wonder why," I muttered.

`-I thought I would just grab a sheet and go as the south Bayer. " He laughed, but somehow I failed to see the joke. For all the scheming he had done, I thought the least he'd go as was the Poet himself. A soothsayer just didn't seem to fit the occasion. I told him I was thinking of Macbeth, but he didn't seem to care. As soon as he learned I was still going, he chatted meaninglessly for a while, then rang off, leaving me with an absolutely preposterous image of him wandering the halls of this uncle's house trailing a permanent press sheet beneath Japanese sandals and whispering "Beware the Ides of January" into everyone's ears. The image, unbidden, was immediately replaced with one equally unwelcome: of a figure in immaculate white posturing on a rounded dais while all the English Department sprawled at his cloven feet and drank hemlock laced with sulfur. The man's face was in clouds, and I couldn't tell if it were Marry or Jolliet. I held the picture as long as I could, working to eliminate its inexplicably obscene horror by trying to think of an appropriate theme for it. But the only song I could come up with was "After the Ball," in dirge time.

For the rest of the day I had the feeling that, while some entertained the ghost of Christmas Future, I was hosting the Scrooge of Hellsmas Past.

Quickly I grabbed a bottle from my private, not-very-select stock and sloshed out three quarters of a glass, most of which I finished before I'd lost my nerve. At the same time, I delved into my puny knowledge of Freud and attempted to fashion an explanation for the vision, if vision it were; but I was interrupted, gratefully, by the telephone. This time it was Wendy, slightly drunk and wishing slurred season's greetings for nearly five minutes before apologizing and hanging up. I hadn't even had the chance to say hello.

I had dreams after that, belle- forgotten, and finally came the night, the Friday evening when not even the Second Coming would have cheered me up. Feeling as ridiculous as I ever had, I climbed into my car, decked out in the closest approximation of Shakespearean Italian the local theatrical costumer could dredge up. If anyone asked, I would be Romeo, or Petruchio, or perhaps even Iago; at any rate, no one was going to get the same answer twice, and I didn't really care. For the moment all I worried about was being stopped by a local policeman and having to explain, while taking a drunkometer test, why I was dressed in tights, a scarf and a redplumed hat.

It wasn't until I reached the house and was getting out of the

car that I saw the still-red heart of a bird lying on the seat next to me. I gagged, tossed it away and leaned against the car hood, .' trying hard to breathe. I told myself to turn right around and go v on home. But I spotted Val's car and decided I'd better stick; around, although I wasn't sure why.

Originally, the house had been a development ranch which; successive owners had bastardized by splicing on additions so often that it sprawled idiotically over a full acre, if not more. I'd passed it often and had never known who'd lived there, but I 'wasn't surprised to learn that it was Marty's uncle's. Somehow it seemed to fit. At least, however, he'd tried to even things off a bit by enclosing two inner courtyards, one behind the other, with a roof of glass, thus providing his guests with green grass and: roof-high shrubbery to hide in while the snow fell and fumed the v sky white. This I discovered not two minutes after I'd rung the doorbell and had been admitted to a living-room-cum-foyer by a woman I didn't recognize and who apparently didn't know that: harem girls seldom appeared at the Globe. She was, however, friendly, and immediately guided me to the first garden, where' most of my

fellow sufferers were rapidly draining the first of seemingly endless punch bowls.

Val, true to her threat, was Cleopatra, so much so that I began at once to make plans for later. Wendy and her husband struggle valiantly, and lost, as Bottom and Titanic. The others were: dressed as I was or were tripping over homemade togas. The masks we wore seemed less to hide than scream our identities, and what laughter there was seemed false.

I squirmed and was uncomfortable, and welcomed Val's, offering of a drink with a smile and a kiss just this side of rape. She grinned.

"Down, whoever you are. We've only just begun to play."

"But, Madame Egypt," I protested, sitting gingerly on a plaster, gingerly because the tights I was wearing were that and more. "This is too much. What are we supposed to do, sit around and drink all night? For that I could have gone to a bar. "

Val coiled beside me, hugging my arm, and we watched as the newcomers were ushered in, grabbed by Wendy and hustled away with filled glasses before we could identify them. I blinked . and shook my head. "I didn't know we had this many in the: department. "

She laughed, making quite sure I noticed she was not about to let go of my arm. "You should see the back patio. Courtyard. Whatever. I guess Marty told Jollie he could have anyone he wanted. It's amazing I didn't think he knew that many people. "

" Speaking of which, where is mine host? It'd be just like him not to come."

"Oh, he's around. He looks like a drip-dry bed with all his sheets. But, Eddie, his beard, his face . . . it looks too real." I frowned and was about to get an elaboration when Wendy staggered over and punched me viciously on the arm. For the first time in months I was in no mood for her imitation heavyweight, and I think I would have hit her back if her husband, Dan, hadn't followed her over. I shook his hand without standing as we passed the usual acquaintances-who don't-really-know-each-other's greetings.

"Where is the creep?" he growled, and I could see, even with his ass's head, that he wasn't kidding. I looked to Wendy, who smiled dryly and waved a hand toward the roof. "I told him about Jollie and Marty. And us."

"Bastard," Dan muttered belligerently. "Men like him shouldn't be allowed to work."

"Smart guy," I said to his wife, but she wasn't listening, staring instead at the glass over our head.

The snow, which had started nearly an hour before I'd left, was powder, and a slight wind was skating it across the glass in swirls and nebulae, which made me think of watching herds of antelope stampeding before a pursuing helicopter. I sensed Val watching me, and I grinned and said without looking her, "Beautiful. Stare at it long enough and you'll forget where you are." There were scratches in the glass, and snow caught and held there, then quickly escaped to be replaced and replaced again. Suddenly Val tugged at my arm. I looked down, with the odd feeling that I was actually looking up and then saw Marty enter from the glass-walled breezeway that divided the two courtyards. I was going to laugh at the preposterous sight, but something about the ancient way he walked stopped me. He nodded at each guest, but

passed them as if they were statuary, stalking rather than winding his way toward us. When he arrived, however, he was smiling, his grayed head bobbing as he looked quickly around.

"Beware-"

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"-the Ides of January," I interrupted, and was surprised at the glare he shot at me.

"How'd you know I was going to say that?" he said, his voice matching his made-up age.

I shrugged. "ESP. Besides, it suits you."

The glare shifted reluctantly to a frown, to a bland smile. "Oh, well, nobody was laughing anyway. How do you like the ball?"

"Where's the music and dancing?" Val wanted to know. "How can you have a ball without an orchestra, or even a radio? I'm disappointed in you, Marty boy, really I am."

Matty said nothing. He only resumed his bobbing. "Don't worry. Everything's all right. All these people are for show anyway. They'll be gone soon, and then the real party begins. By the way, have you seen our fearless leader?"

We shook our heads, and he grinned, yellow and brownblack.

"Caesar," he said without elaboration.

"Why not?" Val said.

"That, " I said, "is the most disgusting thing I've ever heard. The man can't be serious, he just can't be. And before I forget, old man, I found a bird's heart in my car tonight. I don't suppose you know anything about it. "

"So did I," Val said. "Wendy too." She tried smiling, but I saw the way she swallowed convulsively. Fully angry now, I turned back to Marty, but he stopped me with a feeble wave.

"Don't worry about it. Bad joke. Like Jollie's costume."

I wanted to pursue that "bad joke" of his, certain now that he was the one who'd been deviling us, but Val must have known what I was thinking because she placed a gentle finger on my lips and mouthed "Caesar. " "Him? What about him? You know, if you tell me he's wearing a plastic laurel wreath, I'll vomit, if you'll pardon the vulgarity."

"No," Marty said. "It's real. He said it took him two hours to get it right. He didn't want to use any string. Authenticity, he said. "

I had a comment, several of them, but suddenly there was a crackling, ripping flash of lightning, followed hard by a deafening explosion of thunder. The entire house quieted, and a couple of women shrieked. Only a few times before had I ever

witnessed such a phenomenon, and each time, the feeling of watching snow falling while thunder and lightning played out of season was as close to

staring dead on into an open grave as I'd like to get. There was an encore as eerie as the first, but this served to shatter the silence and everyone began talking at once, the noise rapidly regaining its former level until, without realizing it, I found myself listening to some canned music. Quite accidentally, I discovered the speakers hidden within the huge, jungle like thickets of forsythia that lined the garden's perimeter and served to screen most of the house from those in the center. Curious it was, and impulsively, I grabbed Val's hand.

"Come on," I said. "There's something I want to see."

"Hey, wait a minute," Marty said. "Don't you want to see Jollie?"

"No, thanks," I said. "That can wait, if you don't mind."

Many frowned until he appeared to make a decision. "Oh, well, you can see him later, I guess. It won't make any difference. Where are you going?"

I pointed. "The other courtyard."

"Oh. Well, look, try not to wander around the house, okay? Even with a single floor, all those additions make it too easy to get lost." He laughed. "I ought to know. I came through the back door once, and it took me two hours to get to the front. You know, when I told my uncle about this party, I thought he-

"Many," I said, not altogether politely, "you have other guests. Val and I'll talk to you later on, after you've done the host bit. I'm sure you wouldn't want to offend anyone."

"Now what was that supposed to mean?" I could see it then, the reason why he looked so old, weighted, weary-the rage was still there, and no longer merely directed at Jolliet. The old saying "If looks could kill" came disturbingly to mind, and I involuntarily stepped back.

"I didn't mean anything, " I said. "Forget it. Come on, Val. " And once into the corridor, I pulled her close to me, felt her shivering. "Sorry, love, but I have a feeling I'm not exactly in the spirit of things."

"Relax, Eddie," she said as I guided her into the back garden. "I think I'm going to develop a splitting headache in a few minutes. In fact, as soon as Jollie sees us and we smile a little."

"Z have this odd feeling I'm going to have to be chivalrous. Coincidence. "

We laughed quietly as we stepped onto the grass and looked around. Except for a slightly denser crowd, there seemed to be no difference between the two party areas. Then I noticed the red and purple streamers, and the red balloons dangling from string taped to the glass roof. If the idea was to make the room more festive, it failed miserably. All it did was make a pleasant garden look tawdry.

"Notice something?" I asked.

..teat?"

"Except for spaces cleared for doors, you can't see into the house from here. And vice versa, I imagine. I wonder why someone would bother to make a place like this if you couldn't see it unless you were in it?"

Val stepped in front of me then, crossing her arms over her barely covered

chest. "Why don't you really relax a little, Ed? Try to enjoy. Worry about something else besides the architecture. Like my dry throat, for instance."

I stared dumbly for a moment. And I wondered. None of this—the bizarre party, the birds' hearts and entrails, the people

who now seemed to be leaving—none of it affected her. As I

her to the refreshment table, I began to think I was far too susceptible to atmosphere, especially when it seemed to be of my own creation.

"You're so cheerful," Val said suddenly. "I don't think I can stand it."

"Try," I said, nearly choking on a swallow of cheap whiskey. "And if you want entertainment, turn around and blink rapidly before it goes away," As she did, I added, "Jesus Christ, I never thought I'd live to see the day."

Both of us indulged for a moment in the cinematic cliché of allowing our mouths to drop open. Entering the garden through a door in the back was Jollier, all six-plus feet of him so elegantly swathed in a toga laced with purple that he actually commanded a slight bow. His longish brown hair was combed straight back and held by a laurel wreath twined with some kind of gold

metallic thread. Big in a suit, he was huge in that costume, and no one, least of all myself, laughed. For some reason, we didn't dare.

"My God," Val said weakly. "That's spooky."

"It's downright unnatural," I said sourly. I had expected to find the man a supreme source for derision, and he had double-crossed me. I became furious and pouted myself another drink while Val waved and sent him striding regally toward us. The still-thinning crowd parted wordlessly, and when he stood before us, he took Val's hand and bowed over it, his lips barely brushing her skin.

"Caesar," she said, easing her voice up from her throat in a way I'd never heard before.

"My dearest Cleo," he said, ignoring me, but not her cleavage. "Egypt misses you, I've no doubt. The serendipity of your countenance entices me. Would you care to join me in a devilish concoction I invented myself?"

Val laughed and gently disengaged her hand while holding up her still-full glass with the other. "I have one, thanks. Romeo, here, makes a good servant."

"Thanks," I said, extending my hand to my boss, who barely touched it.

"Grand celebration, isn't it, Eddie? I really believe the old man would have been delighted to be here."

The "old man" was Shakespeare. The way Jollier talked about him, I've often thought they were roommates in boarding school.

"Marty's done a fine job," I admitted. "And if you don't mind me asking, where in God's name did you get that costume? You could have been born in it."

"I've often wished I had, Eddie."

"Surely not as Caesar," Val said. "Your life would have been shortened considerably."

Jolliet smiled wickedly. "Not mine."

All I could say was, "Oh." Then, "Did you ever find out who's been playing those jokes?"

Immediately he stiffened. "I'm sorry, Ed, but I'm afraid I cannot call that a joke, especially when I discovered the severed head of an owl in my automobile this evening. No, not a joke. Some misbegotten prankster, perhaps. More likely someone deathly afraid of facing me himself, and therefore he uses less direct, less committed means of expressing his displeasure. You, possibly?"

"Not me," I said, laughing. "That's too original for me."

"Hardly original, Ed. The disemboweled chicken, the owls, are straight out of the so-called occult literature available in any shoddy paperback. The child obviously has problems and has decided to use me as a focus of his aberration."

"That so, " I muttered into my glass, not bothering to note that the "old man" himself was not above employing the so-called occult. The conversation, continuing with Val while I sulked, might have been funny to someone unused to his instant analyses, but having been subjected to them several times myself, I was definitely not amused. And during a pause, I said, "How do you figure it's a kid? One of your students?"

He waved an arm and a yard of cloth, gathering both Val and me into a circle of apparent great confidence. "My students? Absolutely not, Eddie. They know better. I've taught them better. They all have come to realize the value of reason, and this is hardly the act of a reasonable man. No, I rather think it's the result of an over imaginative mind that somehow feels I've wronged it. As much as I dislike those things, however, I must admit I'm intrigued. I can't wait for the next manifestation. "

"Oh?" I said. "Very interesting, really, I'll hope you let us know what happens next. I really hadn't looked at it your way before. "

Jolliet nodded, smiling too much like a shark to please me. "Of course I will. Glad to see your interest. We should talk about this sometime. I'd like to hear what you think about these occult things. Rosemary's Baby, and such."

"Great," I said. "It's a date."

Someone called his name, then, and when he looked up, it was Marty, beckoning from the doorway. "Ah, excuse me, Eddie, Val, Marty has a surprise for me. A contest or something, I imagine. I'll talk to you later."

When he disappeared through the rear door, Val snatched away my empty glass and slammed it onto the table. "I hope you'll let us know what happens next," she mimicked. "I really hadn't seen it that way. Oh, brother, Eddie. " And she rolled her eyes skyward.

Doing my best to imitate her slinking walk, I sidled up to her and grabbed her hand. "Oh, Caesar, baby, " I said as huskily as I could. "Oh, Caesar, darling."

We stared at each other for a long second, and we didn't laugh. The music grew, then, as did the voices, the laughter and not a few high-pitched shrieks. People were moving as if in a quiet panic from garden to garden. I looked for Wendy and Dan and saw only sequined masks and faces like raccoons. I found myself staring at mouths, since eyes were forbidden to me,

and their grotesque writhings made me dizzy. I started to curse the whiskey and looked feebly around for a chair. The room had become perceptibly colder, the snow fell more heavily and seemed now to be freezing on the glass roof despite the warmth beneath. I shook off an impression that the house was beginning to move, ignored another ghostly display of thunder, and watched as the people began to leave, with none replacing them. Val, unaware of my gathering nightmare, hugged my arm and whispered something about Wendy and Dan. I nodded mutely and, when she left, renewed my friendship with Miniver Cheevy, cursing the fates and drinking.

Through a slowly descending curtain, then, I lost vision of the rest of the evening. I wandered. I drank. I shook off a woman in a harem costume who wanted to see what my codpiece was hiding. I tried to vomit, and couldn't.

I do remember standing at a window and watching the snow fall.

I do remember standing by a speaker and listening to muted trombones.

And when next I opened my 'eyes and could see without falling, I was in a bed in a hideously dark-blue bedroom. A single light burned on a wrought-iron night table. I struggled to sit up, then waited for dizziness to pass. There was a constant pounding at the back of my head, and my mouth was dry to rasping.

And still the house was silent.

In a foolish moment, I searched the bed for my hat, realized what I was doing and laughed, stopping immediately when my throat burned.

Carefully, I pushed myself off the bed onto my feet and, using the walls for support until I was sure I wouldn't fall, I made my way to a dimly lighted hallway. Ruefully remembering Marty's warning about too much unguided wandering I left the door open and walked to the nearest corner. I could hear snatches of mournful music, and I tried to locate its direction. When it became obvious I was losing it, I headed back the other way,

staring without seeing the paintings on the dark-papered walls. None of them were striking enough to recall individually, except for their color: night. 'I cannot even now remember seeing one brush stroked sun or noon-drenched meadow. I'm sure there were no people, no animals, no houses. Just . . . night.

I've since tried to locate that hallway again to verify these vague impressions. But I'm unable to.

Maybe later.

But I doubt it.

And then, quite by accident, I found a corridor I knew led to the gardens. Immediately I began to hurry, uneasily imagining some humiliating scene when Marty and Jollier discovered I'd missed a fair portion of the party. It was all I needed to end a perfect evening.

But the gardens were empty, the tables, refreshments, folding chairs gone. The balloons were broken, the streamers shredded and hanging loosely. I called out for Val, half expecting my voice to echo. Then I called for Marry. Wendy. Even Dan. But when there was no response, I went into the front room where I'd met the harem girl. It was a small room, heavily paneled in walnut with an ugly moose's head perched over the front window. After a quick look around, I opened the door, shuddered at the shock of the cold and looked out. There was

snow yet, and an oddly gathering fog. I could see, just this side of that wall-like mist, a couple of cars, including my own, still in the drive; so at least I wasn't alone. Under the circumstances, that was the greatest comfort I'd known in ages.

But when Marry snuck up behind me and whispered, "Beware the Ides of winter," I immediately lost everything I'd drunk onto the front stoop. Marry became solicitous at once and helped me back into the house.

"Now that was a stupid thing to do," I snapped, yanking my arm from his grip. "What the hell are you trying to do?"

"Shut up," he said, glaring. "We're waiting for you in the back garden."

"Oh, now wait a minute," I said, one hand to the wall to aid my abruptly uncooperative legs. "As soon as I can, I'm leaving, fella. This bullshit has gone on long enough."

Marry only stood there. I shook my head in a vain effort to clear it, then rubbed my face vigorously.

"If Val is still here," I said, "tell her to come out if she still needs a ride."

Marty shook his head. "The back garden. Come on, Eddie, you're holding up the works. "

"What the hell are you babbling about?" I demanded, but he had already turned to leave. At the door he switched off the lights and looked back at me. Right then I was tempted to leave, even without my coat, but curiosity more than his heavy-handed manner made me follow him.

Through the first, still-empty garden. And the second.

"All right, all right, Mr. Barrymore, where is everyone?"

"I said the back garden, " Marty said without turning around. "The back garden."

I was too frustrated and confused to be apprehensive about the way Marty spoke to me, and I had to hurry to catch up with him as he made a sharp left through the rear exit and strode rapidly along a corridor that felt as if it had been carpeted in velvet. Another turn, and yet another before we stood in front of a glass wall streaked with dust and through which I could see what at first I refused to believe.

Here the house was two stories high, and in the courtyard framed by walls of stone were Val, Wendy and Dan, Jollier and a man I'd never seen before. They were sitting on the sparse grass, but far from comfortably. As soon as Val spotted me, she ran into my arms before I realized they were open to receive her. Dan was dazed, his plaster ass's head broken on the ground beside him, his wife huddled in the protection of his arm.

And Jollie. I saw then that he wasn't sitting at all. He was propped up against a white stone bench, and there was more than purple on his toga. There was blood, drying like rust, pooling at his twisted legs. In his left hand he clutched the laurel wreath.

Before reason returned and all the scene's implications penetrated my own daze, I said, "I'm ashamed of you, Marry. That's hardly original. "

Val, not understanding, gave a cry like a struck bird and backed away to stare at me, horrified. And while she did, I admitted to myself that I wasn't sorry. That he was dead, it grieved me because he was human and deserved better, but because he was Jollier, I felt nothing but morbid curiosity.

Marry, meanwhile, had come around to face me, grinning.

Beneath the beard his teeth seemed yellow-aged, and his eyes only echoed his grin. That look, more than anything else, snapped something I didn't quite catch, and the old man placed himself in front of the door. He was shorter than I, and easily forty years beyond me, but I checked myself and stared at him. Val, who had slumped wearily to the ground where she'd been standing, said, "That's the uncle, Eddie."

I nodded; he nodded back. And suddenly I began to laugh. Ludicrous: a murdered man, five teachers and an eccentric. And still I laughed. The hero's image I'd had of myself in fantasies that had lifted me from my more than prosaic life shattered like a twisted mirror with all the pieces shredding my eyes. I fumed back to Marry, gagging now at the sight of Jollie's blood. He gestured and I sat, heavily. Val crawled slowly over to me, and we huddled, reflections of Wendy and Dan. I think I said "It's going to be all right" a few times, but neither Val nor I were listening or believing. One of us was shivering.

At last Marty seemed to tire of watching us and dragged a folding chair from behind a bush. The old man stayed where he was.

"You're going to die, you know," Marty said. "But not like that, " and he nodded toward Jollie's body. "It's not the way you want to, is it? Do you like uncle's place, by the way? He used to be an illusionist; that's why the house seems bigger than it really is. He doesn't talk; so don't ask him any questions. The snow's coming down a bit more than earlier. Bad driving, not that you'll care. "

"Okay, pal," I said, tired of his rambling. "Just get to the point and stop this . . . this . . . whatever."

"Why, Eddie, you're frightened."

"No kidding."

At that moment, Dan came out of his stupor, and Wendy began crying. When Marty saw it, he waved a hand at his uncle, who hurried crablike to the Buchwalls and stood over them. Dan scowled, Wendy tried to crawl behind him, but the old man only looked until Dan eased himself to his feet and pulled Wendy up beside him. The former illusionist must have also been a mesmerist because they didn't speak, didn't see us, only followed the old man out of the garden.

"Where are they going?" Val asked, straightening and pulling out of my arms. "To hell," Marty said flatly.

"And what are you, an angel?" I said.

He laughed. "Oh, my God, no. Is that what you're thinking? That this is the end of the world and I'm Gabriel in drag? Oh, Christ, Eddie, no wonder you've never gotten anywhere."

"Then where are they going?" Val repeated, her matter-of fact tone the only sane thing in the world at the time.

"Nowhere, " Marty said. "Nowhere at all. " And he grinned, and that grin was

rapidly fraying my nerves, or what was left of them.

"So what do we do now?"

"Wait. "

That did it. His damnable calm and refusal to let us in on his cosmic plans infuriated me to the edge and over. I jumped to my feet before he could raise a hand to stop me. Head down, I struck him dead on the chest, my hands scrabbling for his neck. We fell off the chair and were separated when the ground struck us. Quickly I got to my feet, but not soon enough. Marty was waiting, swinging. There was no pain at first, nor did some magical part of my brain tell me I didn't know how to fight. I just stood there, trying to hit him while he pounded me to my knees. When sensation came, tears carne and I fell to my side, sobbing, aching and utterly humiliated. There was salt in my mouth and one eye was closing. Val cradled my head and murmured nothings until my agony extended beyond the physical. I pressed my face into her breasts and continued to sob.

"You all played the game, you see," I could hear Marty saying, his disgust no longer hiding. "Too afraid to be even the slightest bit idealistic outside your own private ravings. You rationalized your powerlessness against a single man until you actually believed it. You convinced yourselves that you could do nothing but teach, and marked that damned school as the ends of your lines. Tell me something, Eddie: how many new teachers have you wiped out in the past three years? And how many at the school before that? And the one before that? How many teachers have you murdered?"

"Go to hell," Val said. "And leave him alone."

"Oh, I intend to do just that, Miss Stern."

"All right, then, you've made your point, little man. Now how about letting us go?"

"I'll think about it."

"What's to think about? You've murdered a man, and I doubt you'll get away with it. You've destroyed Eddie here, and you've made me harder than I thought I could be. What more do you want?"

Marty righted his chair and sat, crossing his arms over his chest while I rolled over and pushed myself up. I knew I was hurt, but whatever pain there was had dulled to a permanent, background throbbing easy to ignore. And while he was busy tormenting Val, I finally realized what had happened, what was going to happen, and I knew I wasn't man enough to fight it, or even explain it to Val. She was right. I was finished.

Marry, the soothsayer, had taken to himself the standard of the dreamers against the realities of the world. He had ranted more than we had, raged and railed until he had literally accumulated for himself a massive vortex of powered righteous indignation. Gully Jimson, Don Quixote and every dream of perfection and transformation twisted around him until he could, finally, strike back. Once. That was all he needed. And he paid, dearly.

"That man," I finally said, not stronger but more sure. "Nickels to dimes he's not your uncle."

"You know," he said, and I nodded. "This battle is very tiring, you see. He tried it when he was twenty-six. You'd never believe it, but he's thirty-four

now. I met him last summer and thought he was crazy until he explained how it could be done and showed me a newspaper clipping of an unsolved disappearance. When that department meeting was over, I knew I could do it but was undecided until just before you came over to pick up my resignation. I wasn't mad enough until I saw you. He won't live much longer, though. It takes a lot out of you."

"Then why bother?"

"Because sooner or later--"

"What are you two talking about?" Val demanded.

She was frightened now, her shell pierced and peeling. Marty reached for her shoulder to comfort her, but she twisted away, shuddering.

"Sooner or later what?" I pursued. "All us cynics and realists will be gone, and the world will become a better place to live? The dreamers will march, the sunrise will come, and all God's children will be free at last to roam among the flowers?" I trembled, wanting to yell, feeling more like weeping. "When this is over, you'll be as aged as your friend, and just as useless. Don't you think you'll do more good by inculcating your students than destroying your so-called enemies?"

"What enemies?" Val said. "Eddie, this isn't funny at all. Please help me."

I reached out and took her hand, softly, and fumed back to Marty. "I'm sorry to say there are more of us than there are of you."

"Bastard," he said.

At that, Val leaped to her feet, her face streaked and shining. She was naked now, and her exposure belied the clothes that covered her. "I want to go home, and damn both of you," she said. "Many, damn you, let me out of here."

Marty looked at me, then behind me. The old-young man shuffled in, stood silently by the door while I wondered how many he had banished in his pitiful moment of glory.

"Take her out," Marty said.

The old man nodded, and Val, after a wild, almost feral stare at me, hurried after him. I made no move to stop her, called no reassuring words after her. I had been vampirized, and could only wait.

Many stood, then, and slowly followed them. I turned on the ground. I thought of jumping and killing him, but dismissed it. Many would die sooner than he thought, and would live to regret it. His friend must have learned how to harness and focus that rage/power from others before him; Many had obviously learned it from him, and I suppose now that it must take a special kind of fury that only dreamers can muster. But why he didn't learn, why he didn't take the warning of the after effects, I still don't know. I don't even know if that other man had been a teacher, a preacher or a young-and-coming politician. Not that it matters.

And I have to admit he did try to warn us with those Shakespearean omens, to remind us of the Prince's caution not to take lightly that which we do not know.

"The house is yours," Many said. "Take care of it, while it lasts. "

"Hey, mind if I ask you something? How many places like this one are there?"

"As many as there are people like me. And him."

"Do we all get a house?"

"No. Some just walls. Others float. One or two fly. It's all the same, Eddie. It's all the same."

And he left, and I rose to my feet and staggered around until my legs decided they'd work for a while longer. I explored and found food, though I didn't think I'd need it. I decided this must be a thing . . . a something about time and space displacement, a nondimensional locus of a dreamer's rage. There's probably an empty field now where the house was. And as long as Many lived, I knew I'd be here. And when he died, the hold on the house and me, and all the others, would be gone; and thus would I die.

I did wonder, though, who had the worst of this nightmare Marty, I often thought, because he could only call upon this power once and is even now trapped in the world of the living to watch his dreams shred like so much yellowing cloth. Of course, I've also collapsed in self-pity, repenting my cynicism and worldliness to all the walls of his house, promising the sky and apple pie. But never for long.

If I am doomed to be a cynic, then he is doomed to be a romantic. What comes after, I don't like to consider. If it's more of the same . . .

And the end cometh. Many is dying. The lights begin to fail room by room, and there is cold. Outside, where there is nothing but fog, the light turns black. I have a radio that had somehow

thanks, Marty, for that anyway-kept me in touch with the musical world, but the bands fade one by one. I can find only a single station now, and I wonder if Val can hear it, floating, walking, encased in her own fog, and dying. I still twiddle around until I can finally catch it, then hold the radio close to my ear and listen as if it were the laugh of little children. But all I can hear is `After the Ball. "

The rest, dear Hamlet, is silence.