

# CRINKUM CRANKUM

>> MARWAN HASSAN

McMahon gets his tuxedo from the dry cleaners, or more accurately his chauffeur, Eddie Worts, does. The chauffeur drives the Bentley over to the dry cleaners and picks up the suit. Worts then brings it back to the house.

Upon reaching the lounge where McMahon is watching tv, the chauffeur waits, says nothing, at the lounge entranceway he stands and stares at the television.

McMahon glances at Worts the chauffeur, says, Shut off the television. Put the suit and the Gladstone in the trunk I'll be with you shortly. Certainly Mr McMahon. Then McMahon goes up to the bedroom. He dresses in a business suit, nothing cheap here, tailor-made, sewed at same tailor where his father and grandfather had theirs made, but to McMahon the standard thing, to other men it would be considered one of substance.

Eddie Worts drives McMahon over to the Hotel Marlborough.

When the Bentley pulls up at the central hotel, McMahon says to Worts, Eddie I'll no longer be needing you. Take the evening off.

Mr McMahon checks into Hotel Marlborough and is given a room on the nineteenth floor. He likes the altitudes.

A porter takes his bag and suit.

As he makes his way to the nineteenth floor near the elevator he encounters a lawyer, Mr Lerner who appears about to get on the elevator but he does no more than nod his head, it is unclear as to whether Lerner nods in recognition at McMahon or to the elevator operator, and mutters, I forgot something and turns away. But McMahon steps on the elevator, inside is a local doctor. One Dr Henry, he looks away from McMahon refusing to meet his eye or acknowledge him, but says abruptly to the elevator operator, The mezzanine please. Certainly. Dr Henry slips off at the mezzanine but another man slips in. It is Judge Carruthers whose face flushes upon seeing Hal McMahon, he recognizes the biscuit maker but he doesn't acknowledge McMahon, even though McMahon gives a half nod. Judge Carruthers is curt and mutters, Eighth floor. He quickly exits.

McMahon chuckles and remarks to the porter (bellhop) carrying the Gladstone bag and suit, Those three fellows. I mean that fellow wearing the brown fedora we passed in the lobby, and those two who just exited the elevator, that last fellow with the bowler hat. They look vaguely—McMahon pauses allowing the porter to pick it up but the porter stays silent. McMahon goes on, Half recognize those gentlemen, but well can't quite place their names, you wouldn't happen to recall them. The porter yanks his earlobe, adjusts his beaked garnet cap, says, Sir I can't say as I do, infrequent guests at the Marlborough, sir, not regulars like yourself, the porter glances at the elevator operator. McMahon looks at the elevator man as if expecting something. But the operator in the garnet and gray uniform stares straight ahead at the control panel white gloved hand resting on the elevator mechanism.

Mr McMahon gets off on the nineteenth. The porter walks to the room and unlocks the door, sets the Gladstone on the luggage rack and hangs the tuxedo in the closet. He hands the key to McMahon. For once in his life McMahon does not want to give a tip, but he relents, then knowingly gives the man a too generous tip as an insult. The porter smiles and says Thank you, sir. McMahon recognizes something sly and tough in the porter. McMahon

has the impulse to smash the fellow in the mouth, but says, In the Marlborough when I ask for a thing, he pauses, a service, a piece of information, I expect to receive it. Understand. Yes. Where I come from they don't do memory lapses. Understand. The porter nods his head. You know who I am? Yes. Bring me a bucket of ice. Certainly, Mr Langers.

The porter returns with the ice. Sir, those gentlemen, those hotel guests you were asking after. McMahon just stares. They are registered in the hotel ledger as Henry Bailey, Lewis Stroke and Ken Millar. Separate rooms mind you. Sir, I had to be on the careful side. They're well you understand. McMahon waits. Erh they're going to have a private party in one of the guests rooms and do not care to have others know about it. They can't do it without my knowledge. I understand. What floor? The eighth. You're not to go there. Sir, the manager said I am to provide these gues- Stay in the lobby this evening, understand? Yes.

The porter leaves.

McMahon opens the Gladstone.

In the bag are some personal garments, a bathrobe, a pair of burgundy Glastonbury slippers, a night kit, and a small box of Cuban cigars purchased at Ferris's. He has come well stocked, there is a bottle of cognac, one of champagne, Pol Roger Brut Réserve, and a bottle of single cask whisky, twelve year old scotch, Findhorn, which he had received that day from a local brewer who ships in a crate each year from Scotland. The brewer is a Mr Cunningham who he has known since childhood. They attended the same school. Cunningham is the owner of Cunningham and Waters, a national brewery, it weathered the temperance movement and only came out stronger and richer. The McMahons offered cover. Just before the first world war they foreclosed on a worn down bottling plant with a stable of horses and wagons, Springbank Soft Drink Co. They retooled the plant and bought a fleet of trucks. During the temperance era, they bottled Cunningham and Waters' ale, lager, porter and stout under Springbank's various brands, Great Lake dry ginger ale, Cascade creme soda, Cascade dry cola and Niagara Falls root beer in tinted bottles and moved it to drug stores, barber shops, gas stations, and concession stands at dance halls, lake resorts, hockey arenas and sports fields. McMahon does not like Cunningham the brewer any more than he likes Charles Langers, his partner. Although he is married to a Langers.

Estelle..

There is the unstated thing that lingers and lurks between them, it is between a secret and a rumour however no one speaks of it. When they married Estelle Langers was infatuated even smitten with Hal McMahon Estelle Langers had two images of McMahon, one from before the war mediated by the gossip which she heard how some of the workingmen at the factory called him Mac. A robust and obtuse man who was remote but uncanny and unnerving, he appeared to have disposed of words, demolished speech as if it were a useless artifact like a flint arrowhead. Yet others seemed intimidated by him and said that guy's plenty smart. The other image of him arrived after the war. He appeared a man of intimacies, ready to speak strange syllables that revealed disturbing secrets but he withheld his words. The workers at the biscuit factory referred to him, more deferentially and respectfully, as Mr McMahon. In these colliding images, Hal McMahon emerged as a startling figure and a

charming man. She was further swayed by her observations of other women. Some women shifted their clothing before an invisible mirror. He drew women in by the tilt of his head in the act of listening. She had a dash of envy, absurdly a dart of jealousy. After being in his presence they seemed to behold themselves differently as ravishing, his raw physical prowess was kinetic. She felt uncomfortable with the jealousy. She'd never felt such a sensation. Estelle had deceived herself or she sometimes convinces herself that her parents were complicit, her mother, Mrs Langers provoked her daughter to believe that Estelle would come to love him when Estelle became Mrs Harold McMahan.

Just as McMahan thought Estelle Langers was strikingly attractive even at times alluringly beautiful. He was mesmerized by the texture of her skin and the clarity of her cobalt eyes. He would love her once they did it. Because he had been raised to believe that doing it when it had been withheld prior to marriage morphed into love and assured love within a marriage. And doubly so when it involved a beautiful rich woman. That the woman would emerge as even more alluring after the act of love.

He momentarily subdued the word fuck in his vocabulary.

For a few years, it reappeared. Estelle and Hal made intense love until it was demolished through clinging to appearances while craving to go to a higher altitude in the raw robust sexual embrace but not reaching it. Sex cannot abide sameness, yet the body pursues repetition of that fleeting moment of ecstasy, so it divides itself down to oblivion through finite acts pursuing eternity, and loses love and becomes lust, so lovers are lost. The word stale gets tossed around.

However they do their best to keep such sentiments private.

Public discussions of love are like bickering over money in public, a sure sign that a couple does not have any. After the big melt down, he dissimulated loving Estelle. He is congenial, displays himself to other women who he leads on, some who want an affair with him but which he does not allow to happen. He doesn't desire any of the women in their circle, they instill in him a feeling of indifference.

Certainly anyone encountering Estelle Langers for the first time comments on her lustrous beauty. But McMahan is amused, he figures that he made the category error of a lifetime: he mistook beauty and desire, seduced and reduced himself with appearances. He's come to an understanding with himself that what he wanted out of life is to fuck his brains out forever – with no qualifiers – especially after serving in the first world war, after being demobbed, after law school. He no longer has interest in falling in love, a trite notion if ever there was one. For McMahan, a heart is not the high seat of life, it is a hollow chamber of valves and sinew. A pump by which most humans will expire because this knotty organ gives out, and no amount of will power can keep it thumping. Being a man of appetites, he holds his stomach, liver, and kidneys in higher regard, he'll even admit that he holds his genitals in the highest regard, he takes it as a compliment if someone especially a woman implies he's governed by lust.

McMahan's roughest nightmare that tramples him down into the muck and mire is the one in which he is a eunuch. He does not merely appear as one but is one. He had such a

blistering dream one evening on his cot in the officers' field tent when he watched a crew of Chinese workers appear after an attack that had gone on for a day and half. It was near the end of the war. He was so exhausted and feverish, edging towards battle fatigue, peering at them from the cot through the tent opening, it was a hallucination, he raised a shoulder and sputtered to his corporal, W'ha' t'are? Sir water? Nonono no no. he waved away the corporal's offer of the enamel cup of water. Who're thdose strange men out dthere? For Cris'sake mahan tell 'em ta git down. Why sir they're a clean up crew brought in to haul away the dead, thank our lucky stars we aren't obliged to be doing it, that's all I can say. Then he felt the weight of sleep's meshed steel glove thud against his temple, the hiss of serpentine dreams issued fissiparously and he stealthily danced upon the stage of the opera house, wore a lizard mask and was robed in glittering gaudy garb, a hiss and a boo went up, but he heard a sweet tenor voice, Caruso singing in the shadows, McMahon began to sing, but a soldier heckled, Get a load of that castrati. In mid note, McMahon's voice caught and cracked, his hand searched urgently at his groin to find no gonads there. Two enamel balls rolled across the stage apron, he heard in the wings, Caruso's singing laughter trilled upward and downward eeeheeee heee yeee yyyeeyeee, the crowd roared with laughter. He searched for deeper restful sleep but stranded upon this raft, his only option was waking up, the fever had passed, from the cot he saw with clarity the Chinese labourers drenched in sweat, bodies glistening, toiling with the corpses.

As for Estelle she's told him to his face with that tragic Langers's look gracing her vulnerable cheeks, delicious lips, significant cobalt blue eyes near to tears but she holds them back after thirty years rather than show them, to allow them would be to encounter further humiliation and says, Harold, you sometimes lack sentiment. He can view such claptrap, long distance through space, any time on the picture tube of a tv.

What's more ownership changes love.

This evening Estelle is having dinner with her brother Charles's family. Then she intends to go with them to the factory party where she anticipates joining her husband. Keeping up appearances is crucial. Her share in the mighty biscuit factory, McMahon and Langers, is equal to her brother's but slightly less than half of her husband's although only three people know this. People in the city presume concerning ownership of the manufacturer, McMahon and Langers, a privately owned concern, is split equally between the Langers and McMahon families, that that has been the case from when it was established.

That's the outside truth. Full of seemingly reasonable assumptions. Like most external truths it is a straw dog.

The inside truth is a vermilion horse, swift and stealthy. From its founding there has been inequality between the two families. There's never been two riders. The McMahon family has held the reins with fifty-one percent with various options to buy 24 ½ percent of any shares by any member of the Langers family, should they want to or seek to sell. Indeed the Langers are obliged to first offer any shares they wish to sell to the McMahons who have first refusal. The reverse is not the case. With the marriage, Estelle's father remarked with a satisfied smile, There we're finally once and for ever, done with this bastard clause. He

never realized that it was only being reborn in a new form. Her brother Charles Langers as operations manager and chief engineer of the plant is even more anxious but his solution is to never talk about it. All this has made Estelle McMahon née Langers an indecisively decisively indecisive woman.

From the Gladstone bag, McMahon removes the quilted silk bathrobe and burgundy Glastonbury slippers, then the bottles of Findhorn scotch, cognac and Pol Roger champagne. He sets the champagne in the ice bucket. He inspects the label on the scotch. It gains his attention, he just stares at the handwritten ink number It reads No.256. Some years Cunningham gave him bottles numbered. 220 or 238 or 239. Once he received 144. Two years ago Cunningham went to Japan and brought back a case of Japanese whisky, Yamazaki and gave him one of those instead. It took McMahon aback. He passed it on to a partner of the law firm that does work for Cunningham and Waters. Last year he got 248. This year he knows his brother-in-law Charles got No. 240..

He sets the bottle of Findhorn on the table.

McMahon showers and puts on the green robe.

He turns on the television. The news is not happy news, but is not bitter news. On tv the prime minister is congenial but in his dark striped suit as staid and sober as a stock broker, reassuring the public that the Canadian dollar is solid and the economy will be better in the new year. The neighbours are especially happy in their prosperity but Mr Eisenhower is not with Mr Nixon. Then the business news, followed by the local and the national weather. After the news and weather, McMahon watches a regular sitcom that bores him. He likes watching tv, the news and sports, likes the notion of a vigorous body in motion, even if nothing much is happening in the world. The commercials are more interesting. In this programme, he does not like the actors, Wyman and Young. He cannot place himself in their situation. But then this is no surprise. The programme is tedious. Stale dialogue, negligible plot, mingy events, there is the contrived division of action into stingy scenes which however allow for timely breaks and diversion into commercials.

Television will not evolve.

It is unable to renew itself the way speech can through tectonic shifts in sound. It is doomed by sameness.

TV won't become anything more. An endless re-arrangement of commercials, short and long, recycling through a Hamiltonian circuit in a rectangular cube. Vision is arriving. Then departing and disintegrating. Things are particles and molecules, rumours of even tinier subatomic particles, minute dots, even space disappears, there is nothing between everything. There isn't even empty space.

That's alright. Commercials hold McMahon's attention. They have the magic to move product. The ring of addictive reality, add more salt and sugar, hook the consumer with the product. And that's what matters to McMahon. Then it suddenly hits McMahon, he has a new conviction that deposits him in a future: we got to get off the radio and pump our promo dollars into television ads, that's where it's at.

Mr McMahon who went to law school after returning from the first world war, is not a

lawyer who much practised law after articling and being called to the bar. He has spent years with the ledger book, negotiating deals, ferreting through tax law, trade law, patent law, the Combines Investigation Act, and writing commercial contracts that seem transparent almost equitable but are sedulously conceived and composed with innumerable contingent clauses, so cunningly and calculatingly constructed with escalator and de-escalator clauses on pricing and the fluctuating cost of raw materials, calibrated through McMahan's preternatural and nefarious knowledge and speculations in the commodities markets.

McMahan half thrives on his father's dictums and maxims although he was half bored by them when he was young: Some know their knowledge, but others know their ignorance.... Money's deadly nightshade. Information is the cure.... Money's rich but information is far richer.... the virtue of money is the information it attracts.... Being in the know is a pleasurable state of mind, concealing it from others is even more delightful.... When another businessman does not want you to know that is when you must make it your business to be informed, in such a way that he convinces himself that you have utterly no interest in knowing, and to boot are an utter ignoramus and are incapable of understanding.... Never break a contract, but never write a bad one.... Never make a man dishonest, let the other man make himself dishonest.

And the sum of Line McMahan's counsel: collect information.

Which for a long time Hal McMahan treated as trite and dismissible but then he reached a juncture where it was obvious and dismissible until he worked round to seeing it as transparent and indispensable, then arrived at the notion that it was opaque but profound because so many businessmen consumed by the pursuit of money, missed it. He re-parsed it until it came out: if you want to accumulate money, collect information, but it is far cheaper to hire other people to collect the information, until it came out in his head: control information. However the most perplexing statement that his old man made was that he learned plenty about making money from listening to opera. This remains obtuse.

When in the factory McMahan goes to the shop floor at least once a day, it has a hold over him, he has a need, almost bordering on a compulsion, to see the men and women working and make his presence felt. Before the war, his old man, Line McMahan, made him work on the loading docks through high school and university. And told him, Hal, you have to show the workers what you're made of. That you're a man. Believe me, they don't respect any man that can't pull his own weight. It's the rough and tumble stuff, gaining their respect, you'll own this company one day but they'll never respect you Hal if they don't see your strength. They'll own you if they don't respect you. Get it. And don't ever forget it.

After finishing law school, during the temperance years, he ran the Springbank Soft Drink Co before he took over running the biscuit company. The men at the bottling plant were a harder and tougher lot. Only three women worked there, in the office, two older women in their fifties, an invoice clerk, Albertina and a stenographer, Adelaide, both had been with the bottling plant for years, hardworking reserved women who dressed in an Edwardian style. And Clara Turnbull, who had been hired during the war, she was a secretary but it was apparent that she ran the office and half of the bottling plant, to the chagrin of the

old bookkeeper, Leonard Spear, an astringent personality, she knew the plant inside out. She was neither Victorian in manner nor Edwardian in dress. She had chestnut hair and astute almond eyes. At first she seemed a little crude and edging into middle aged, tired and half worn out from over work but after six months of working with her, McMahon thought she was sophisticated, her looks took on an elaborate aspect and were unreadable, her eyes were witty and modern. She was deft and quick but in a way that she did not appear harried or overwhelmed. Her incisive manner and curt speech intimidated the other office workers and more than a few of the shipping and receiving clerks. But her knowledge of the numbers was formidable. The old bookkeeper, Leonard loathed Clara Turnbull.

Her speech startled. The occasional word came off a little odd, she said baddada and tamada. Fresh smelts from the lake became fresh'meltz. Fields became fieldz. Water was backed up to wadder. She clipped lettuce into 'edduz. She said hodomedez instead of odometer. Sometimes she laughed and went further that the Springbank delivery trucks got a hoodomedez or voodomedez. Her talk was economical and concise, she appeared to say nothing stupid, but her speech was littered with hack phrases and clichés and factory jargon picked up from the workingmen: this can be done. Better yet. The thing of it. Long shot in short trousers. Don't become hoddy-doddy. He's murdering that truck. Wanna bet? He's talking through the back of his neck. He starts a three-quarter winner, finishing off as fourth quarter loser. He's a good quarter horse. Down the home stretch and wasted. Neck and neck. Tear up your ticket. That one wants the old needful. He's all wet. Angling after the necessary. Count the empties, they tell the truth. Tall talk, small mind. Tallmen, bad odds. Shake a leg. Tell 'em we want all the crates back not just the broken bottles. But when she spoke the phrases they sounded original even profound. Her body had a peculiar fragrance that McMahon could not get away from but couldn't define.

After a year he had the Springbank building enlarged and the street face renovated in the Art Nouveau style, Clara Turnbull was given her own office, a raise and formally made office manager.

After a week in the new offices, Hal McMahon called in Clara Turnbull. He said, Why haven't you done it yet? There are plenty things to do after the renovation. You know what I mean, you're the office manager. What are you waiting for? I assume you are referring to Springbank's diligent bookkeeper. Patience is still a virtue, she glanced at him, It needs a pretext for action. You got one when the old fucker has his hand sifting books for coin. Proof? Your job is to get the proof, and get rid of him. When Cunningham and Waters see the books, you'll all go down to the malt floor as mash. Wait. She glanced at Hal McMahon. You know why Leonard works here. McMahon laughed, Sure so he can clip the books. This is a soft drink bottling company. Soft drink people are temperance people. Leonard is a Temperance man. He's their inside man. Come on Clara, I've seen the buggger on the boardwalk at Hackett's. He likes a porter. He bought a bottle of Cascade Cola at Hackett's. You know with the temperance people hypocrisy is their virtue, it's only a vice in others. She smiled. Cunningham and Waters will be royally pissed off. Leonard's made himself mister one percent. He's got to go. It's your job to put him outside. We've got to clean up the books.



She stood up. It will be done. But let me tell you something you should have fired the whole lot when you came in. McMahon felt weird with that statement something hit him that was unplaceable but implacable. Clara Turnbull suddenly looked stunning. Then we would have lost you. That would have been a virtue. You can always hire a new secretary. She smiled. You put the old dog back on the factory loading dock. That's where he came from. He won't last a month. Clara Turnbull said, Looks bad. And he could still steal, never put a big thief with a crew of toughs. They'll steal more. Simple solution. Cunningham and Waters pensions him off with beer money. It's cheaper than letting him stay and steal. He can't refuse. He signs a legal document that you draw up, the pension comes from Cunningham Brewery not Springbank bottling. That'll shut up the old oaf forever.

A month later, Line McMahon startled him, Don't fuck with her, understand. Hal McMahon said nothing. His father went on, Are you listening? Clara Turnbull's very experienced, you can't afford her.

It is so: his imagination lives in his flesh. Deep in the sinews. He believes his father was so right. He never felt the prowess of his own flesh the way he did as when he was slogging it out on the factory loading docks, hauling and lugging one hundred pound sacks of salt, flour and sugar off the freight cars, drenched in sweat and soiled, even when the workers played dirty tricks on him, and jerked him around, and made him the butt of their jokes, he never felt such camaraderie as he did in those days. Not even when in the locker room after hockey or football after a winning game, or collapsing on the bench after a solid hit and run the bases for a sliding triple in baseball, or after sculling the river. Not even in the army.

McMahon figures, the highest compliment he was ever paid was when during a lunch break one of the men on the loading dock said, Here lad, and offered McMahon a smoke. Why sure, thanks. McMahon took the hand rolled cigarette from the docker. Struck a match for them to light up. They puffed together and after a pause, the docker said, Well, I guess you aren't a bad sort after all, you can haul your own weight as good as the next fellow, and you don't go off complaining, making a bloody racket, snitching to the boss, do you now, eh? They both chuckled. It was wonderful laughter. The commercial strip mines the screen before it scraps the brain. He stares at the product on the tv screen.

These days, he finds more than usual his mind does tend to drift towards what he craves at any transitory moment. He longs for the woman at the bottling plant, he wishes he had made a move on her. Her complexity intrigues him, the more remote Clara Turnbull's image is in memory the more intricate her personality becomes. These moments are initially intense almost rapturous, with a sensual texture and curve in space, although they then become vague and defuse but still leaves behind a pleasant after effect. These moments he has come to believe in. So he thinks himself endowed with a vigorous and splendid even wonderful imagination that has been unduly stifled by daily circumstances, transactions and demands. He says if only a lot.

He struggles to regain that moment in his flesh, the motion of his muscles, momentum of his body, but the sensations are less keen, spontaneous and quick to return to his flesh. He endures the diminishing of his sexual prowess as some inexplicable magnet force that is

being exercised over him which leaves his body with a depth of longing for his youth, not in its naivete and innocence but in its impulsive but beautiful sexual drive. He fantasizes the sexual act as the most beautiful act on the planet, nothing surpasses it. Before and after it is only nothingness, but inside it, doing it, there is infinity, in that rushing finite instant of orgasm is the infinite, he longs to reach it.

Television settles back into the bliss of Wyman and Young.

Nevertheless, he continues to watch tv waiting for something to happen that might stimulate him. Nothing much does. He has not as yet poured a drink. He is waiting for a choice moment, a moment of inspiration, good liquor deserves as much. He likes to get drunk he thinks it frees him and increases his splendid imagination. When intoxicated, he believes he really knows even reaches an understanding with himself about what he wants.

A telephone rings. But he does not answer it. He expects no phone call. It could not be for him. He tells himself that it would interrupt the moment, the longitude of floating imagination which is carrying him down a stream to a place he wants to arrive at this evening.. But its ringing is persistent, it unsettles him and makes him engage with the programme. He wonders why the sitcom actors don't bother to answer the telephone. It bugs him. The moment the telephone stops ringing however, his engagement with the tv fades. He's missed something. He feels as if his body is slack and has been spliced out of this fourth dimensional world and fused into a two dimensional one. He gazes about the room. The dislocated sensation, mental misapprehension, suffuses the room he tries to let it pass as nuisance. He stares at the black telephone. It rests on the night table. Impatience itself. It used to be sinister. He's not superstitious about cracked mirrors, black cats and the number thirteen but he is with solitary lost gloves, single worn socks and telephones. He figures it is better to lose both gloves rather than just one, wear out both socks at the same time rather than one before the other. McMahon only answers the telephone with his left hand and holds it to his left ear. The ringing brings him up against a childhood fear, once upon a time in his parents' house the black thing frightened him if he was alone in the room its ringing was insistent but he did not have to deal with it, his parents had servants who answered the telephone. They even called up the operator at general, gave the number and often performed the calls. It was a servant thing or so his mother had it. She would dare not answer it herself, that was beneath her, she invisibly circumscribed the acquaintances with whom she was willing to chat with on the telephone. His mother did not do conversations on the telephone. That's a contemptible notion. Conversation is society. The telephone is service, just a messenger. McMahon has never told anyone of this fear from childhood. In the trenches some men butted rats with their rifle butts and stabbed them with their bayonets. He was not afraid of rats, but one time he was worn out and saw restless rats with long tails as telephones with a cord.

But this dislocated instant brings Mr McMahon up against the simple fact that he is not going to the factory party at the Aeolian Hall. As early as the previous New Year's Eve party, he had made a midnight resolution not to go to it anymore. For as long as he can remember from the time of his grandparents, he has been obliged to attend each McMahon and Langers

company New Year's Eve party. He has inherited this task along with the ownership of the biscuit factory from his father and grandfather. As much as he despises having to associate with Mr Langers his partner and brother-in-law who has also inherited the obligation from his own father and grandfather but with more equanimity and pleasure, although McMahon suspects that Langers is not coming clean, that he's holding back, being the phoney son of a bitch that he is. In McMahon's ledger book the Langers are snobs. Including his wife, they don't know how to touch even the simplest thing without letting the whole world know about it. McMahon smiles, a greedy grin, he knows the factory workers despise Langers the engineer, this gives McMahon intense pleasure. He relishes it when he overhears the workers say the word, them.

Instead McMahon is going to the Hotel Marlborough's New Year's Eve party. Or certainly he will make a brief appearance in the hopes of meeting a woman. In an atmosphere of anonymity, he imagines meeting some woman and bringing her back to this hotel room. This is a near certainty as he has enough money for such a thrill, if it does not come about on celebratory momentum through casual circumstances or if he can't make it happen on his own by force of personality and charm, well then money will lubricate the event by appearances and innuendo from the bartender and waiters. It is more a matter of how discrete or indiscrete, how anonymous or pseudonymous he is going to be this evening.

The phone rings again. He ignores it. The sitcom actors don't answer, they appear to peer through the picture tube and stare into the hotel room at the telephone on the hotel table, suggesting that McMahon should answer the phone. McMahon stares back at the tv telephone behind Wyman. It is so loud for a television phone, elevated like the soundtrack on commercials. McMahon leans forward, reaches and lowers the tv volume. But the ringing persists. Sound tugs him back through space into this dimension. The contraption is ringing inside the hotel room. He stares at the black object. Mr McMahon reaches over and lifts the receiver. He feels the odd texture of the bakelite of the telephone. The smoothness. The contour. It has always been odd to his touch. He recognizes the voice at the other end. What's this? Why are you calling over here, Charlie. Can't you respect a man's privacy. Harold I wish you wouldn't do that. Do what? Play this devilish childish game of yours. No game Charlie. Harold, I don't mean this nonsense about not coming this evening. You've already hurt my sister. But I am coming this evening laughs McMahon. Stop it. I mean this foolish game of registering over there at the Marlborough under my name. Pretending to be some one else, someone you are not, anonymous, I mean an alias. Stop it Charlie, I don't need this crapology. Good night Charlie. But this conversation is retread, they've rehearsed it a half dozen times over the years, because it is apparent that they will be tolerant towards one another when back in the factory offices.

Fifty-one percent performs miracles, Mr McMahon smiles setting down the receiver. An odd thing about a telephone is its touch not that it delivers speech over a distance but that he can hold the contraption in the palm of his hand and hear a voice spurting out through the bakelite sieve. Some fellow in the factory told him one day about some guy named Reiss, but for the life of him, McMahon at this moment, can't place the man or full name or the

connection, this mental lapse bugs McMahon who can't figure that out. He stares again at the telephone. It strikes him as such an odd instrument. In an uncanny way he can stare at the voice issuing from the holes. His mind is nowhere with this thought that an idiotic piece of technology held in the palm of the hand has confounded speech emitting from it. Even the voice of Charlie Langers, his partner, Mr forty-nine percent. That Langers's voice with its precision. Clipped cadence. How he hates being called Harold, but he's never divulged to Langers that one petty reason he registers under Charles's name when he wants to screw around at the Marlborough is because Langers insists on calling him Harold instead of Hal. When he told him never to refer to him that way. He can hear in Charlie's inflection of the name Harold, his wife Estelle's voice, he'd told her don't call me Harold, I despise it. But she'll do it when she wants to sing a Wagnerian opera. And McMahon always hated that name. And worse if he wanted opera it would not be a German one. It would be the brevities of Caruso on wax 78s grinding out of the gramophone that he used to hear in the Italian barber shop that his old man took him to, and said, lifting him up from under the armpits and setting him onto the elevation board resting on the red Moroccan leather barber chair, listen to the greatest voice in the universe, my lad, none of that Teutonic technique. The barber a man from Calabria, in his daydreams on a first name basis with the singer said, Don't worry Mr McMahon, Errico has taste, he's no fool, he's only sung one German opera in his life. The barber pauses and makes a horizontal gesture with the first finger toward his own throat, then in gliding motion turns the hand upward with piety, shakes it in disapproval, then declares, If Erri sang Deutsche, it ruins The Voice. A singer can sing many roles, act many characters, but when the cords reach perfection he has but one voice. Hear that, right, my boy, you don't need noisy German philosophy when you're going to inherit the biggest biscuit company in the British Empire. The Italian barber laughed. And Hal's old man Line McMahon winked. Then a smile. McMahon doesn't mind it when one of the long time factory workers gets familiar and has a slip of the tongue and calls him Mac. He loves it in fact. He even likes that name better than Hal. He stares at the telephone, sheesh that guy Bell. The telephone is so Wagnerian. It interrupts things, important things, sex and food. Manufactures melodrama. Never do anything important over the telephone, it'll mess things up. He tried to make it a number one rule, he tried to do business, face to face, by letter, courier, telegraph anything but by telephone but McMahon had to relent. I need it. It does things. Wonders. The telephone makes money, it is a money maker.

Finally McMahon pours a drink. It turns speech, words, utter sounds into money. Go figure. He sips the scotch. Half rough stuff, a single malt, but then it finishes with a brutal burnt oak singe mixed up with a tinge of some dark wine. McMahon lifts the glass and stares at the amber liquid. He turns the whisky bottle and reads the handwritten number on the Findhorn label. Cunningham's an oaf but he sure knows his hooch, cheers to you, shitface. He raises the Gibraltar glass and toasts the hotel window.

Snow is falling.

The thing is Mr McMahon loves money too much to do many impulsive things although he has done more than a few rash things during his life such as marrying Estelle Langers.

McMahon watches the television. In the slow calm of the wintery evening. A commercial comes on, the woman in the commercial is attractive, she is leaning forward. Her posture frees him from the clash of voices knocking around in his skull, Wyman and Young, Estelle and Charles, Line McMahon and Clara Turnbull. The woman in the commercial has a sensuous and seductive voice, it goes straight through him reaches his brain stem. He needs it. Now. He wants it immediately. Now he does what he has done a half dozen times through the rest of the year. Overcome by a disruptive fantasy, he abandons pursuing a woman downstairs in the hotel ballroom and turns to expediency. He calls the front desk and asks for a knowing desk clerk who fixes things. This is a clerk who knows the inside of an envelop and most wonderfully without complaint. In McMahon's mental ledger books this clerk is a fabulous personality, a human being of another order, he can make things disappear without leaving a trace of rumour and make things happen without messing them up and the remarkable thing is these tangible things happen seamlessly under the sign of invisibility. The clerk is gifted.

Twenty minutes later a knock comes on the door. A young woman relative to McMahon's age is at the hotel door. She is thirty-one. Although she tells men that she is twenty-six. This is convincing, she looks no more than twenty-five. When she was twenty-six she told them she was twenty. And when she was twenty, sometimes it was sixteen. She knows how a number can turn a man's head around. A number can achieve immense things where appearances may not. Set up an illusion. Make things progress. She wears a fine green silk dress that shimmers. She is a woman beyond goodlooking. You're not her. I mean I was expecting Cheryl. You're not Cheryl. No. Cheryl's busy tonight. Well come on in. McMahon is not there. His mind is on Cheryl. This is as far as his imagination went. His fixed expectations. He tells the woman, Pretend you're Cheryl. Sure I'm Cheryl. I'll be Cheryl this evening. She smiles. Such a congenial smile on lovely red lips. This turns on McMahon but he doesn't understand. His imagination has not gone this far before. He is with an attractive woman pretending to be another woman. Except Cheryl as attractive as she is is not anywhere near as attractive or as striking as this lustrous woman. This woman is entirely on another threshold. Cheryl had a succinct vivacious manner that immediately turned McMahon on. Cheryl knew how to bring McMahon efficiently to a climax. Then left him in a thoughtless state. And what McMahon wants from sex is to be finished with thinking.

This Cheryl takes him to another altitude.

When he awakes he does not know where he is that he is high on the nineteenth floor of the splendid Hotel Marlborough, downtown. The young woman has collected her things and departed. Mr McMahon finds himself in a stranger's bed on a mattress with the weirdest contour that does not comply with the shape of his spine, the box springs feel busted and poking into the mattress, he is no where that he belongs and unable to move. He cannot move. Not a limb, not a joint in a toe, not an eyelid, not even the corner of his mouth where the lips meet. But his memory is damned, he can recall the moment of orgasm with the woman Cheryl. A splendid moment that he does not want to forget. Does not want to let go of. Can't let go of. It went right through his spine rippled from his gonads to his brain stem and rattled brains. At once a primitive but such a cerebral pleasure, formerly unknown to

McMahon. That's all there is. Nothing else. Life in its singularity and everything is nothing else but that.

That.

He hopes that she recalls him. The one time in a life that he wishes a woman did so. With Estelle he has regret and remorse and anxiety. He's clinging to the splendid moment with Cheryl though he can't move. He wants to do it again. He wants to see her, to call out to the woman who he knows only as Cheryl. And wants her real name but it is lost. Unreachable. No vowels or consonants or syllables. Her name is smudged in that phrase pretend you're Cheryl. Her compliant response, Sure I'll be Cheryl. He cannot utter a sound, throat and vocal cords (strangled) struggle for speech, although he can hear words in his head, they are distant. A little boy's voice is speaking to him. The little boy's voice seems to be far away. Outside. Even so far away as to be down on the street. In the snowy drift towards midnight, McMahon can hear the little boy speak but he cannot quite understand him.

Mr McMahon can also contemplate Estelle Langers, his wife, sometimes referred to as Mrs Harold McMahon (by shopkeepers and bankers) or Estelle McMahon (to friends and acquaintances) speaking, and speaking directly to her brother Charles Langers, his partner, across the polished mahogany table covered with a tablecloth in the Langers' dining room, that tablecloth mesmerizes, custom-made by a local lacemaker who works for wealthy families because only they can afford her work, an ancient hunched Syrian woman, half hag, half houri, with ten thousand wrinkles laced in a face of incalculable and inconceivable age, skin a dislocating aroma, gnarled hands that look riddled with arthritis until they begin their spellbinding movements knitting and knotting the skein of silk thread into a lace tablecloth, a woman seemingly near deaf, no one understands her but everyone agrees with her, who negotiates the cost with incisive hand gestures and subtle eye quivers, and an odd sequence of sibylline sibilant tongue syllables on the teeth and lips, that seem to cast a spell. But McMahon cannot reach the Langers seated round the table, although he can see the intricate geometry of the lace in all its splendid detail, he thinks it is the network of his brain—histological specimen spliced and Golgi stained with gold (geometry—spread out across the mahogany surface).

He sees Estelle's lips—and she does have a beautiful mouth, a swell tasty tantalizing tongue, an oh so wonderful mouth. Those startling cobalt eyes are so sympathetic and touching, round smooth cheeks curving below those eyes, she is so careful in her appearance, people comment, men remark, he can tell that other men, (even younger men in their twenties and thirties), lust after her, even though she is just over fifty – her lips nicely shaped moving but no sound issues. His own words will not come to his lips. The desire to kiss Estelle is immense. It is the one from when he first saw her, and after he had returned from the war, and told her he loved her and hoped to marry her. So intense but unaccountable.

An aroma comes in waves, familiar and distant, then it hits him, the fragrance of Clara Turnbull from so many years ago in the Springbank Soft Drink office, which he could not identify but in this inert state he can recognize and name but cannot say: Hay. Fresh mown hay. So commonplace to his nose but he couldn't place it when he was around her. He longs

for the proximately of her body to sink into the familiarity of her fragrance.

He wants to speak but he cannot find the words. He cannot call out, but he hears the little boy's voice like a sound track running over the desires to speak. And Mr McMahon tries to speak to the little boy because in the whole wide world of his mind, the only human being who seems capable of speech is the little boy who is saying strange words like geban, thobban, dirl, scheezzee, harrid which Mr McMahon has never heard before but now recognizes even though he has not the faintest clue what these words might mean. His brain is being invaded. They are filling up his brain and devouring it like a virus devouring cellular matter to thrive, survive and replicate, and he is afraid that he is not losing speech but acquiring a speech that is an alien tongue but one that no other human being in the whole wide world will recognize but this odd little boy. This thought terrifies McMahon. And makes him want to kiss Estelle again. Her mouth will rescue him. Her breath will resuscitate him. Makes him want to be inside Cheryl again coming, but kissing Estelle. Sometimes the little boy says thingumajig and crinkum-crankum, thingumabob and whatchamacallit which Mr McMahon instantly recognizes, and his brain clings to, so he asks the little boy to get the thingumajig and call for help and pick up the whatchamacallit and ask for Mr Bobby Thingumabob to please call for help for a Henry Docabob who is a babblingjay in the o o otelamajig and hurry up to come for helpbul with crinkum-crankum. But the little boy does no such thing jig with a rigmajig, however much Mr McMahon pleads with him, urges the child on for assistance, then spurting in his brain, why yare gharr liddle baabazardard yare gharr sumabitchezabobs in gher her hur boobsabobsbible boobleboble babelbobs ghar ghar yar. His mouth drools saliva but can't turn its tongue to tuneful syllables. To no avail. The words won't come out he's lost his language garbled up King Klunk klink klank klunk into King James junk hunk hulk spunk variety version garble of the holy swearing sweet profanities and swollen profundities and it's been replaced by the little boy's indigo lingo going jingo jango lango lingo the indigo tongue going bing bong bung backwards tongue sharp backstabbing. Now he'll never be able to connect with that woman Cheryl again. Please wait. Run an errand. The little boy wanders off down the street just as he pleases to a movie theatre to watch a kid's Saturday matinee, even when Mr McMahon who cannot move a fraction of an inch on the hotel mattress, cannot quiver a pinkie on the bedsheet musters all his intellect, struggles to steady his tongue, trying a calm tact, and calls out now, Now... now... now now, voice prolonging across the brain between a loo-ing cow moomoo and hooty hoot hoot owl hoot, be a good little yap yarr yarr chap there and (perhaps there) pick up the whatchamacallit and please call someonehabob for helpamajig doctor poppingjay the fig thingamafig... don't be a little rudeling you know nyghtgales syngand and papejay's spekend and ducklings faddaling in wader followang mama (ma-anna-maduck) duck (quack quack earthquake ) so please call doctor bobinjay in the boroughmarlelhot villemmand, but the boy is in the movie theatre with the other kids watching a Saturday matinee cheering and jeering and clapping and shouting and hooting and booing at a Mr McMahon and calling him the wickedest man in the whole wide world, and then Mr McMahon is gone going byebye over a cliff and disappearing. No. No, cryand Mr McMahon. The kids are cheering. And then a man dressed in a rough canvas

work apron with shoe-polish smeared on grimy hands holds up his soiled palm and says, This is the end at the Hotel Marlborough.

But he strains to hear, yearning for help.

Her fading footsteps going down the hotel hallway.

A finger with perfectly applied nail polish presses against the elevator button to call it up. The elevator doors sliding open and the grey voice of the elevator operator declares, This elevator going down. The green lady says, Yes. She steps in, the silver stainless steel doors glide shut.

Bye bye gone.

Down in the lobby, the woman in the shimmering green dress known momentarily as Cheryl steps off the elevator she happens to notice a goodlooking man in the hotel lobby. The man approaches the hotel bar. The liquor lounge – as it is usually called, the Maple Leaf Room its actual name that hardly anyone uses, on occasion it is simply referred to as the Lounge at the Marlborough, it is plush but relaxed with mellow lighting, a upscale lounge, a fine suffused amber glowing lamps, amid black upholstery laced with golden and silver touches, the acoustics good. A jazz band is playing, a little too sophisticated for this crowd, the cornet player is eager to raise the tempo towards midnight and leave the crowd behind, but he needs his saxophonist to go full tilt. The sax player himself a man of sharps and flats, high and low moods, sophisticated impulses and high irritations is playing avoidance and indifference with the crowd, is doing his thing, waiting for a pusher in the dressing room, how else to get through such an evening with this local crowd what a drag. Shooting on another trajectory, boy, he'll make it to midnight but jive entirely on another planet. He knows he is so beautiful but doesn't know he's gotta die, he feels infinity when he plays. His lip hurts.

She sees that the young man in the hotel lobby is a good looking fellow, has an interesting smile one that is even charming, what's more he is well dressed in a fine camel hair coat open revealing a finely tailored suit of midnight blue. At the hat check, he hands a brushed felt fedora with a silk band and the fine woolen coat to the young woman. He has a nice easy stroll, relaxed but confident. A lean muscular posture beneath the fine suit, a man so entirely at ease in his flesh, he needs nothing to be laid back. In snow or sun, he'd be easy going, he has such exquisite skin, a gift of his mother, that he'll never suffer a sunburn, he appears dark when it is good to be dark, and fair when it's fine to be fair.

The man sits at the bar ordering a martini while there he notices the woman in green when she enters the lounge from the lobby.

They connect.

He is not the sort of fellow who wants a big time, he wants a relaxed time. They talk about the Marlborough Lounge. The ambience. They talk about the music. They talk about the break in the music. He tells a joke about three men in the world, who count, he says with a laugh get it, who count, and see those who can, and those who cannot. She tells a joke about the height of women's shoes. How men want women shorter than them but with long legs. They talk about elevators and escalators. He says, Did you know escalator and elevator are Otis trade marks, isn't that something. She says, That's funny, how lawyers can trade



mark a name. Make money out of a word, that's too weird. I once knew a trade mark lawyer. He goes on, What's an escalator and your parents got in common? Search me. They both bring you up. That's cheesy. The couple laughs. What do an elevator and your parents have in common? Search me. Love to. They both bring you down. That's your dad wild Otis for you, she remarks. They talk further about what a man needs, what a woman wants. Then in turn what a woman needs and what a man wants. You wanna know what I want this minute? He asks. What? She responds. He says, I want to know your name. After a pause, she says, It's Cheryl. But, Cheryl says, people got to stop wanting, I've seen plenty of wanting in my life. Far too much wanting. The guy says, I don't want to much They get on to talking about money and things, men with money in that city. She asks him what do you know. I know plenty about some of 'em, He says, By their name. I know 'em boys by their faces. He tells her stuff. It surprises her. It sounds real. She's half struck by how much in the know this guy is. How observant he is. It confirms her own opinions of some men she has encountered. She knows them by their wallets. By their careless habits. Their little rudenesses and large displays. Their taste for show to make an impression on a woman. By the fastidious and peculiar customs they carry with them and leave behind on the bedsheets, ruffled in the bathtowels. Even by some of their most private ways and means, gestures and movements, absurd habits and the tricks they pull. He remarks, I can tell a lot by the way they toss a coin, clip open a coin clip, open a wallet, wave a dollar bill. I can tell plenty by the way they weigh a decision over spending a nickle, dime or quarter as a tip. I hear them jamming like that jazz ensemble all the time about the stock market. I can tell a loser from real loser, and real loser from a big loser. Aren't many of them, he laughs. There's plenty of knowing and telling to be done. She laughs. I can tell by their oaths and jokes and the weight of their laughter, after they tell a joke, how funny it is and isn't, and just how much they want other guys to get the joke and laugh. Cheryl laughs, It sounds crummy. Sad. He says, boy oh boy, I can even tell by their cheapest means. Skinflints. Tightwads. Some guys are jerks. And cheapskates. And he'll jerk you round. Or be a jerk off. Sequence is important, smiles Cheryl. He believes although he doesn't say it aloud, that he can tell a few things about a person's character by the sole of a shoe, how they wear out their shoes, run down the heel, tells how they'll run down their life. How they tie a knot in a shoelace. What do you know, she laughs. More than that guy Freud or a high priest in the confessional is gonna hear. You read that stuff? she tilts her head. Which makes him tell Cheryl a cheap joke: What do a doctor and a duck got in common? She smiles, Fat, oil and grease? That's choice. That's good. Almost. But eff oh gee, fog, is what clogs up your arteries, he chuckles. Tell me, she asks. They both quack. She grins. What do you know about priests and them guys like Freud. You mean psychoanalysts? Yeah. Not much I never go where they go. I hear rumours 'bout that stuff all the time, what's that game all about, anyway, some guy said it was all about dreams talking the truth out loud. Cheryl looks at him as if he is a blissful innocent. She smiles, They got an exquisite expression: Probably heard it? Tell me. Go and get your head examined. That guy Freud is talking all about money. Say what's your name? You never told me. Freud. They both laugh. No really what is it, she asks. Johnny Langers. Really? Yeah. It unsettles her but she shoves the name

aside as mere coincidence. But I got to tell you, Cheryl, I only know collars and shrinks by rumour. He repeats aloud the phrase, Head examined. I hear that sometimes. Then remarks, That's something but it isn't gonna happen.

That succinct expression has a certain splendid egalitarian currency, but most people haven't a notion what it means or where it came from. Just phrenology. Just as  $E=mc^2$  has a voluble currency although it means next to nothing to those who can't do calculus. Arithmetic isn't enough to lift you off the planet, get you out of the solar system and reach another galaxy. Such ritualized expressions are intended to keep ignorance at bay. Humans can get thoroughly depressed contemplating the universes of ignorance. So vast forcefields of knowledge are reduced to euphemistic expressions or canny cagey slogans to contain the worst brain damage. Both psychology and physics are difficult, one is doom and gloom, the other is happiness and bliss, and of little help for getting through everyday life, plumbing and carpentry, cooking and baking are far more valuable. The will to be anti-intellectual while pretending to be smart is headstrong. Smart is such a shrewd word for expressing intelligence, there are days of the week when the word intelligence sounds stupid. We die of ignorance (the moment we understand what the universe is about).

She asks him, Were do you work? But Johnny Langers does not tell this woman how he has come to know such money people, he doesn't even get round to her question, the band plays, still without the saxophonist whose searching for a more splendid universe in the back alley. They stop talking, and listen to the band peddling some soft jazz waiting for the saxophonist. The music is nothing special, brushes and a slow tempo with the rare acoustic colon of a trumpet note as punctuation. They both know it. As jazz goes, in its softness, this is avoidance, it's muddling towards mediocre. Not even mellow, just ersatz mellow. The musicians are a little too strung out. The trumpet player went back and forth to the dressing room searching for the sax player. Then came back wet his lip but didn't play hardly a chord, just stood in a cool posture the burnished cornet glowing in his hand held in the air as if ready to blow, as the pianist and bassist play with the drummer he hummed a riff and snapped his fingers a few times, staring off into space until his eye is caught by the shimmering emerald lady, he tilts his head back as if reconsidering the lounge and smiles agreeably. The sax man has still not even crawled back into the dressing room with his sax, he's moving backwards, stranded in the alleyway haggling and bickering with the local lord of smack over his saxophone, declaring, Hey man, I can't man, no way man, I can't do that, dontchya git it. I'd be nowhere. Gimme it. No way. I can't go on. Hey don't jive me, you're nowhere now. After the gig.

The trumpeter whispers to the pianist then steps off the stage, the tempo jumps up. Across the hotel's grand foyer, in the Crane Ballroom, the big swing dance band, Jimmy Nawlins and His Northern Lights, the Hotel Marlborough's house band, locally famous for decades in the Great Lakes' resort club circuit, playing under the slogan: the most divine melody this side of the Milky Way, is blowing its way into oblivion without realizing that its so steeped in nostalgia that it is demolishing itself with every hackneyed phrase being played, the musicians performing each note precisely as printed on the music sheets because

that's the way the orchestra leader Nawlins insists it be played, with no deviations from the divine stardust. During rehearsals he bestows his infamous treatment to the musicians. Even earlier in that day, the guitarist got the treatment, Nawlins stepped off the podium, went to the musician, focussed on the sheet music and pointed a finger at the eighth, quarter, half and whole notes and said insistently, Is that it! Is that what it reads? Is it? The band leader with a baton in one hand, long aged finger finally settled on a quarter note and pressed against the paper almost squeezing and shoving the black note off the scoresheet into space. Hey man, laughed the guitarist, I can read and play at the same time. As Nawlins walked back to the front, the young guitar player murmured, Not cool man. Not cool. Not at all. Then Nawlins whirling around and barking, What did you say? Hey nothing man. I know that jive talk, I don't dig that lingo. I was hep before you were born. Nawlins the bandleader half approaches the young man, And didn't I tell you to get your haircut. Go to the hotel barber and get it done before we perform. You're sending out the wrong impression of the orchestra. The guitarist smiled. Nawlins's voice barked, You look like—like one of them fucking hillbillies. Rockabilly greaseballs. I want my players clean. Get it. Enough, said the guitarist, flipped open the case, unplugged the guitar from the amp. Nawlins lost it, What are you doing? Leaving this solar system, man. There's a better scene elsewhere. This planet is inhabited by zombies.

Nawlins's orchestra has played the Marlborough Crane Room for more than thirty years, and for twenty-five years broadcast live on New Years Eve. The Crane Ballroom's filling up with shining couples in tuxs and gowns who went for the Marlborough's grand ballroom package special wanting to dance and drink champagne, Moët & Chandon's Dom Perignon or Tattinger until midnight.

In the Maple Leaf Room, Cheryl and Johnny sip martinis. The quintet is holding back waiting for the trumpeter and saxophonist to mount the stage and to tear the roof off the lounge. There's a lonesome air to the room.

She has no idea that the man upstairs whom she has left contented, with her shadow name, Cheryl, fell into sleep then awoke, is stranded and speechless searching his skull for her presence. He is engaged in a gargantuan struggle with a little boy wedged in his brain who is jeering at a movie screen in a dark theatre. She sees and hears none of this but the odd sensation returns. The man on the nineteenth floor who checked in the hotel as Charles Langers is far from her. But still there, it is the shadow behind her assumed name. She has not made the connection that Charles Langers is one of the owners of the biggest biscuit and cookie company in the country, more in the British empire. In fact, one of the largest food processing plants in the world. That is a far thing from her mind although she feels spooked, the sensation is returning and subsiding and re emerging momentarily with propinquity. In time, when the jazz ensemble pauses again, she considers Johnny Langers. She allows the feeling to settle in and recognize it, she finds it odd considering who her client earlier in the evening was but makes no remark, it simply causes her to pause and wonder since this younger man is young enough to be the son of the man left upstairs.

Why are we here? Cheryl asks. She smiles. Why, he remarks then pauses then asks Why?

but says nothing more. They drink another drink in silence. He says to her, after the two smooth martinis, and the longest of pauses, which she has really enjoyed, the pause is far more deeply felt and satisfying than the martinis, especially so when she's with someone who not only recognizes silence but inhabits it, she enjoys their presence even more. The silence is so sweet. Upstairs she could have sipped champagne and that expensive whisky offered but thought better of it. That was wonderful. She says, Maybe its time for me to go. Why? He asks. Why ruin the evening. Break this wonderful spell. She lightly touches his sleeve. Let's forget this joint, those two guys went off to do other business. Too bad the saxophonist is a something else. Is he? Yeah, when he's hot he's really hot. That's why I come here. But I heard he's got—He's got. Ah forget, let's make some hot spot. She looks at the band then back at Johnny Langers. Sure why not. What did you have in mind? The 800 Club. Swell.

This goes against a rule.

They take a taxi across town to the 800 Club.

Yellow and blue. Yellow and blue. Midnight blue neon flashing across the snowy night. Yellow and blue cast across the entranceway.

Inside the 800 there is a down to the ground crowd that is hopping. The joint used to be famous for honky tonky. Then furious for boogie woogie. Not no more. Radio city music burst through the doors, Kansas City style shouters. Things clash. There is a band that can kick it out so that a listener's brains can hop across the floor, bounce off the wall and walk on the ceiling. Bop off the electricity. A brain scan couldn't track the energy going on in the 800. The guitarist from Johnny Nawlins and His Northern Lights is there. He's an entirely different creature, only twenty three but changeable, even unrecognizable to most, nothing sedate here, he's not dressed in a dapper tux and bow tie with hair combed, not sitting in the chair diligently reading the sheet music and strumming the guitar chords in interlude or playing underneath delivering a gentle rhythm with the drummer or carrying the melody. He's standing up. He's sweating in an odd looking suit from somewhere else. His fingers are fast and ripping the strings off an electric guitar, playing weird and awful notes, his voice shouting over the piano player, driving the drummer to the wall, the saxophonist is rushing to keep up with the kid. The bass guitarist is there staying inside things. The two guitar amps are cranked up. The music is so loud. The ceiling tiles and lamps are shaking and rattling. The walls are vibrating. On the dance floor dancers are knocking round like molecules. People sometimes are shouting along with it, others shouting at it, other trying to shout it down, others trying to shout over it. It's too loud. Turn down the amp. Turn it down. It's murder. I can't hear myself, I can't hear myself think. But others are up dancing and calling out, I love it. Love it. Do it do it do it. It's hot. From the tables come shouts, Louder, louder, Turn it up, And crank it out. This is another music emerging, demolishing blues, wrecking jazz, doing things to electricity rewiring Einstein's hair out into space to electric ladyland, damaging dance, no one quite sees it coming except for the few kids trashing music and changing their dancesteps. Someone is driving a convertible smashing into a Caddy It'll arrive and stay up late on tv then break through the tv screen. The guitarist sings: You won't know it 'til you die. It's not crying time and tearjerking music, it's a shout and holler to celebrate. The crowd

is off the wall, the guitarists are walking on the ceiling. The pianist has kicked over his stool and he's standing up hammering the keyboard. Some guy at the bar on his twelfth C C of the evening calls out, Hey you raccoons, come on down from there before you fall off the ceiling.

In the crowd, are two working guys they both play guitars, they despair of fiddles and banjos, one of the reasons they come to 800 Club is to hear what they heard one of the drunk rhythm and blues guitarists call fuck off and die music and go to hell and have a whole load of fun, a sweeter place than heaven. One of the guys who used to play hillbilly says, This is it. Get it. Rockabilly boys. Roll in the grass. Rock with your lady. Good time music boys. One of these guys is known as Earl, not a bad looking guy, on the right day or night of the week, when he's not trashed, this guy can come across as swank even smooth. He used to pick guitar like Hank Snow, when a kid in the late thirties, trying to imitate Snow off RCA seventy-eights cut out of Montreal and broadcast on CBC Radio, when he could get hold of them but after serving in the second world war, he got into rhythm and blues because he heard Hank's style changing, and Earl even took a holiday and went to Chicago and Nashville, came back broke but got into trying to imitate Jimmy Reed and Carl Perkins. Earl's even a bit suave, after a shower and shave, hair combed and turned out in his best suit, bought on the sly from a fence who moves high quality garment.

The other guy, Bernie, Earl's good time buddy, is a creep, trimmer and cheat. In most ways Bernie's an all-round fuck-up. He once robbed a corner variety store and forgot to set up a getaway car, he'd made it up in his head that he'd just grab a vehicle outside the variety store's door when he fled, 'cause the corner store he was knocking over, he had cased it before he did the number, he observed that lots of customers driving a car just hop out, run in the shop grab a pack of smokes, leaving their cars idling on the side street, ready for the taking. He thought, That's sweet. It's a juicy situation. I'll just walk in like everyday, no one gonna see it coming. When the variety store clerk went to the back, Bernie snatched the bills from the till, ran out the door, but in the street he stood looking round, no idling car to be had, not even a parked one to hide in the back seat, a trick he had tried once and got away with. He started to run towards a bus stop but three teenagers hanging out in the back playing pin ball chased and tackled Bernie. On that little number, he did a six month stretch in the county jail, the judge went soft on him 'cause, You served your country. You're an honourable war vet. A harder and leaner looking man than Earl but underneath it all even with the nasty lip Bernie's weak, he's too old to any longer be considered vulnerable. He used to play that needy card plenty with women. He'd just as soon hit a woman as kiss her. But he plays a tougher and meaner guitar than anything Earl will get near, he's an impatient guy so he's going nowhere even if he's got talent. Both men are hard and soft personalities. Bernie drinks too much for both his brain and his liver, and both of his kidneys. Bernie even drinks too much for both sides of his hard and soft personality. Simple: Bernie drinks too much. Even more simple to conjugate the verb, drink, concisely, if it can be done: Bernie drinks.

But drink is one of those omnivorous troublesome verbs which is difficult to classify, conjugate or know like the verb go. Except Bernie drinks everywhere and he's going nowhere.

Both work but want a good time most of the time, the assembly line at the appliance

factory is not their idea of a good time. It's a drag. They tend to argue with the other guys in the factory over the small stuff. That's their way of complaining their way out of work. It's cool by them. Earl even snitches on occasion, rats on the union guys, hoping to get inside and on side with the boss, and make it to foreman or supervisor, but it isn't going to happen. Because the shop manager can see that Earl has a lazy streak in him, and the factory manager will only promote to the level of foreman or shift supervisor either a hard nut, a guy who won't take any guff, can lay down the law and stand up for the company, or a hard worker who sets a sterling example, is respected by other workers for his workmanship, the factory manager's problem is that most of the better workers don't want to crawl up the ladder. When it comes to vertical, the workers despise all forms of verticality except for a guy standing up for his rights. They're horizontalists. They've got an oral pack, they'd rather go shoulder to shoulder on the shop floor, support each other, do their jobs, collect their paycheques, then go home and live their lives. At the appliance factory the regular workers label guys such as Bernie and Earl, as stiff and stanck. They only abide them because they're vets and can play music at a houseparty. But some complain, they swallow more booze than their music is worth, it isn't worth inviting.

Earl and Bernie are buddies of a sort as much because of their work habits as their cravings. They play music sometimes. Except Earl's eating up inside, he's jealous of Bernie, he can see women dig Bernie when they hear him play, he's got a strange way of playing and his sound captures a woman's ear. The nasty stuff comes afterwards when the guitar playing stops, and two half shadows crawl into the sack, stalk Bernie, half impotence, half impatience, the charm wears thin.

But mostly they share the experience of being broke, although they only marginally know how to share anything with anyone, being on the look out for the main chance, and number one.

At the 800 Club on New Years eve, they are dressed in suits, which started the evening freshly pressed, now are rumbled and soiled from drinks and smokes, they are broke and busted, having trashed their pay envelopes with holiday bonuses even before they arrived. They wasted their wallets so bad, between the two of them in all of their sixteen suit pockets, neither a kopek nor a pfennig can be found. They even pawned their guitars until the first payday in the new year, just to buy a drink at the 800 Club. The two dollar bill with the new young queen is an extravagant item.

The 800 Club is known among insiders as a liquor lounge where high money conjugates with low coin into action verbs, a club out of bounds to most liquor inspectors, a place with a different kind of grammar, where a worker can punch out a rich guy if the rich guy tries a fast one or shows lip or tries to hustle his chick, and the worker can get away with it – if he is respected by the bartender and manager and pays his bar bill with both coin and info – cause the cops who dig the 800 Club as a saucy source joint will say to the rich guy: hey mac what the devil were you doing in that place, what did you expect walking into that joint. The number one unstated rule among patrons of the 800 Club is: Never go and talk to the cops. There is a second more obscure but transparent rule: there is no second rule. If the 800 Club

were to have a third unwritten rule, the bartender would tell a patron don't go around this joint asking what the house rules are, you're supposed to know. If you don't have the x-ray vision for the invisible ink than you don't belong here. But it wouldn't even go that far, it might come out as an aside, Such ignorance. Or more dismissively, the bartender turns away in disgust. But it is an open liquor lounge where anyone is free to stroll in, people trip into the saucy joint who've heard extravagant rumours about what a hot spot the 800 is but don't know the rules.

This is dangerous certain nights of the week.

Certain doors open for certain customers. Certain staircases lead to certain rooms and are only ascended by certain people. Even the 800 in the name is not what people assume it stands for the avenue number.

There's The Club within the 800 Club.

The 8 and 0 are for the eighty insiders, who are there by invite. This is known as The Club. The other 0 stands for all the other patrons who drink, listen and dance to music, take their pleasure there, or borrow money from the house loanshark or lay bets through the house bookie, but who are not invited deep inside until they are deemed to qualify. The 800 Club is a very egalitarian place, there is no jumping the queue to join The Club. It is also the most elitist club in the city. There are certain millionaires in the city who don't have enough money to qualify to be members. It is such a private club that many rich people don't even know it exists. The chief of police, the head of the LLBO, and city mayor know the 800 Club exists and wonder why its license hasn't been suspended and the liquor lounge closed, but they are not members of the inside 80, and never will be, although they have heard rumours of marvellous things going-on but they refer to it as balderdash, secretly they long to be a member because the action sounds so robust. A certain city police detective a.k.a. the Liverpool Hammer is a member as is his crony, the former assistant chief of police who has retired to the position of chief regional inspector for the LLBO although they rarely enter the Club. They engage in congruent circumspection: be a member but do not be a patron. Their work obliges them to be members. They only go there out of necessity. They are not fearful men, not at all, the Liverpool Hammer has a rep for violence, a copper who relishes using his fists and clobbering any man who makes trouble, but the 800 Club is the one spot in town they are wary of, and approach with due caution and circumspection. There are a lot fabulous things going on inside which they could partake in but they also know the 800 Club and deeper inside The Club itself are high risk territory. A man could put his life at risk there but far worse he could put his reputation at risk but infinitely worse of all his wallet could be exposed. And in this city both men know what a man without a wallet constitutes. It is a wide open club. Both men know why it is open and will stay open, and has not had its licence suspended or pulled, or for that matter despite its many violations of the liquor control act and infractions of LLBO regulations has not been fined.

The magnificent court house is but five blocks away. The central police station ten blocks. But hey might as well be on Saturn and Uranus. In jocular idiom, some police, lawyers and judges refer to the 800 Club as the magistrate's night court or the evening circuit court.

Earl and Bernie are only half way welcome they are part of the 0 crowd. They know the singular house rule but when they drink too much they tend to forget it.

This evening they have moved on to sponging and cadging, complaining and conniving and wheedling but avoiding the house loanshark like a coroner. They've already been through his meatgrinder. Their suit jacket flaps, elbows and sleeves look odd and off and baggy, as if they are reshaping them into canvas. Bernie has torn the cuff of his left trouser leg, jumping out of the taxi catching it on the car door when they were fleeing the U-Need-A cab, jumping the fare. They engage in swell talk and compliments and even irreproachable but unbelievable flattery, anything to wheedle a loan from a regular or plush customer or factory buddy, receive a gift for a service. Or get into position to lift a wallet or purse. Up to a point the 800 Club allows some of this petty action as long as it is not too flagrant and isn't caught by a bouncer or waiter or the main 80 or the house hookers are not clipped. That would be foolishness and dangerous. Then the bouncers would be obliged to act.

The couple, Johnny and Cheryl, arrives at the 800 Club. The joint is packed they are almost turned away but Johnny pays a little extra on the cover so they slip in. In the bar, the guy named Earl checks out, Cheryl, a fetching woman if ever there was one. At the bar Earl sees her companion buying drinks and says, Hey, don't I know you from somewhere? Johnny shakes his head no. Sure I do. Aren't you one of them downtown Ferris boys. Not me, says Johnny very laid back, reaching for the drinks, leaving the bartender a generous tip. Earl notes that. Yeah. You got to be buddy I'd place a Ferris anywhere. You guys look all alike. You must be confusing me with someone else, that's not my name, he smiles easy. Bernie nudges Earl, Earl shoves away Bernie's insistent hand, Listen don't you know an old downtown shoemaker called Ferris. The guy owns that shoe shine palace. Sells swell stogies on the side. Flogs newspapers. You guys lend coin. He's a good sort. Takes a personal IOU. He gave me bread. No way friend. Not me tonight. Johnny looks around, he sees the bartender staring at him and adds, And never here. The bartender nods faintly and nicely, a most sage nod. Johnny returns a polite nod. Maybe tomorrow. Elsewhere. Never here. Hey come on, your old man does it. Johnny Langers smiles. But not me. I don't know what you're talking 'bout

The bartender who seems above it all has nevertheless turned to giving Cheryl a scrutiny, lifts his thick eyebrows, and asks, I believe you are new here? I came with my friend. Johnny hands a drink to Cheryl. Very good I hope you enjoy yourselves, remarks the bartender. Thank you, she says with a warm smile and glances at the bartender.

On the surface Cheryl remains unruffled, she has listened to these exchanges. She considers the man she came with, Johnny Langers, he rolls his head in half amusement with the bartender. Then her gaze shifts, takes a fleeting second look at the two men, Earl and Bernie. Bernie is staring at her breasts. She glances away, notes Earl's crumpled suit flap, tie twisted all wrong, shirt button missing and collar crimped, and then downward and sees Bernie's torn trousers. Bernie's still staring at her. She turns away. They look off. They leave a bad taste. These two are jerk offs. Knowing men as Cheryl knows men, she sees the dumb and the dubious, the stingy and the generous, even if it is rare to get the sum of a man,



there is his display. She looks for it. She never goes with a man unless he is well dressed. No way, these aren't marvelous mallards that can take flight and cruise the length of a lake in feathered display. Not these two sponges, lightning rods for trouble and complaint. Not even bold bantams, these are flipped out capons. Thoroughly unappetizing.

Johnny says, Watch my drink I got to go make a phone call. She looks at him, says, Sure but don't be long. I won't.

Bernie comes near, suddenly she feels his breathe on her collarbone, she shifts away, but he moves to face her, his face is closer, he smiles, How 'bout a dance.

She figures she can tell so much more about a man by the way he dances. Even among some clumsy guys who can hardly jive but crave the pleasure of a dance, there's some honesty there, the thrill. She knows enough to know that dancing is not mating. Only mashers and manipulators, leeches and hip-grinders carry such cliches, trying to put a squeeze on a woman when dancing. She knows it takes more, so much more, to dance than to make love. Dance goes deep, it saves her from her trade. She recognizes these two louches even sees their avenue and does not want to be strolling it. She wants to be far away from them, far from their sorry style and tough swagger. So many guys out of the army with a mickey and pack of smokes are trouble, they still think they're working London and Paris after V day where a pack of smokes gets a roll in the hay. She smiles and says, No thank you, I'm with someone special this evening. Lady it's New Years. Bernie gives a wide grin, You gotta dance with everyone. Celebrate. I said no thank you. The bartender is there, Bernie mutters, Lady, you're a good looking chick but one helluv a snob. You're so clueless you don't even know the bum you're with. The bartender says, Be polite.

Bernie wanders off to a table and tries to cadge a loan from a guy he recognizes.

At the bar Earl still lingers. The man gives Cheryl worse than the creeps.

Earl has an itch. Earl wants to get laid, Earl can sometimes swing it, but tonight he can do nothing, he's blown any chance with each woman he's encountered. He's between every and any.

Between hot desire and stone cold failure. A flop. It's been one of those sorry sad drifting days and nights that commence so ebullient then dwindle as dusk approaches, because now an unfamiliar creepy feeling is crawling upon Earl, it seems the evening is going to wind down without meeting and finding a woman. This is the first new year that this has ever happened to Earl. Each fresh possibility desiccates to zilch, where he almost wishes that he'd stayed in his marriage to his good looking wife, Angela who hates his guts.

The trawl started early with Bernie and a couple of other single buddies from the appliance factory. Earl puts himself above them takes them for losers when it comes to women. Going from club to club, table to table, from woman to woman, drink to drink, from turndown to turndown, going from: Sorry, Earl, I'm with somebody, to, I don't know you but I'm sure you're a very charming man but I have a date, to, I said enough scram jerk, to, get lost you fucking asshole you can't talk to me like that, not a syllable of persuasion to his gab. There's a howling in his head that he's never heard before, that is beginning to scare Earl. He's coming close to something, approaching a beast that he's never seen or heard, but he is so

unknowing he can't tell if the beast is in him or outside of him or he is becoming it.

He's a guy whose gone pretty much from getting laid to getting laid when ever he wants it, that is how Earl thinks of it, since he was sixteen, sweet talking who ever he wanted whenever he pretty much wanted to please himself, until he was demobbed and ran up against the woman who became his wife for a brief time, Angela, who he couldn't persuade to the sack no matter which angle or line he deployed unless they married, something to which he finally persuaded her and himself to, agreed to do it, inwardly reluctant, a capitulation, while outwardly an extravagant celebration, only to be cheating on her six months later and demolishing the marriage, the so-called love-of-his-life, the woman he had been waiting for his whole life as he had sworn to Angela, begging her to marry him, pleading with her, declaring that it would be different with her, that he was only waiting for a woman like her. Angela was more reluctant than Earl, a most quiet woman but somehow overwhelmed by Earl's boldness. An attractive woman who thought all through high school that she was homely even unattractive, no boy dated her for that matter even asked her for a date, she came from a Pentecostal family that was poor. She read the bible but didn't like religion, never felt at home in the church, the older men at First Reform Pentecostal Mount Zion Church frightened her. She couldn't tell if no boy was interested in her because she was homely or because she was poor, or because her family was as she heard some say too religious. Earl was four years older than her, before the war they went to the same high school. Angela in grade nine had seen him from a distance as someone unusual, a guy who played wild music on an electric guitar, he seemed handsome and the most popular guy, the other girls commented on him. He seemed unreachable. Through the war, she worked at the biscuit factory, McMahan and Langers, Earl was introduced to Angela by a friend's wife. After the war he seemed even more unusual and more experienced. He was polite to her. Her parents said you can't go out with him, he has no respect for work or for you. She moved out of the house into a bachelor apartment with a murphy bed, so she could see him because she did not want to argue with her parents or be a hypocrite.

Her parents never came to their wedding. Earl's parents and friends came and everyone got drunk, except for Angela.

Angela wept when she found out Earl went with another woman from the factory. She said to him, Earl, you're not supposed to do that. He called out, What! Fuckin' amazing, Angela. I only slept with her. It don't mean a thing. You can't love another woman that way and love me. In the factory she looked at the other women and thought they all know. She saw the other woman, who smiled at her when she saw Angela. It was almost a kind even friendly and eager smile. Angela was so confused. She was afraid to see the woman again, she thought the woman was laughing at her and that all the other women in the biscuit factory could see it in broad daylight. One day in the cafeteria, the other woman sat down and said, Heck, it was nothing just for the weekends, he's all yours.

Angela kept saying, I don't understand. I don't understand. She wept when they divorced. Everything was unfathomable. She was so sad she could hardly speak for weeks, she thought she was losing her voice. One day in the street on the way home from the biscuit

factory, she saw an old grey woman with small pinkish grey eyes, she was half hunched up like the troll under the bridge in a fairy tale, the woman gave her a most peculiar look. The old woman looked as if her face had been folded in half then rubbed with chalk to conceal her features, it appeared the face of a sorceress, it had a powerful magnetic pull over Angela, but she was repulsed by it, she thought that sorceress could cast a spell over her and take her to an ancient land and lock her up in a high stone tower. Then she recognized that the woman was her own mother, and she approached her and said, Mum, I so badly want-. Her mother said, - Angela, I can't speak to you. Your father disapproves. You went with an evil man. Your father believes you got what you deserved. You committed a terrible sin. Disobeying god. Disobeying your parents. You haft to lay down in the bed you made. That night Angela got a headache, like an earthquake split her skull asunder. Her brain became a boulder. She fell into a wretched sleep then awoke as if she was a stranger in her own body. She went to the biscuit factory in the middle of the shift she went to the washroom. Another worker who she had worked with for years but wasn't that close to came in, at Angela but said nothing then left. Angela stared in the mirror said aloud, I can't work here anymore. She enrolled at the local secretary college, took courses at night school and learned to type, to do Penman shorthand and take dictation. She got a job with the divorce lawyer who had worked her divorce. After three weeks, he said to her, You know something, you're a pretty smart cookie. She smiled and was amused. He asked, What is it? She said, Oh nothing much. Do you want this in duplicate? I think it should be in duplicate. That was a compliment.

And here Earl finds himself late in the evening crawling towards midnight, at the 800 Club where drinks are expensive on a New Year's eve, he snuck in without paying the heavy cover charge. If the 800 Club bouncers knew they'd thrash him in the back alley, declare, Just for future information. His buddy Bernie is down to his shoe laces. He'd even hock his socks for a snort of three feather rye, and Bernie being Bernie he'd even lick booze spilt on the bar, splashed on shoes. After paying for their first drink, they got another but haven't paid the waiter. The waiter is trying to grab them for payment whenever he coasts near them. The thirst is on Earl but it is mixed up he desperately wants to connect with a woman. Earl tries a rudimentary hustle. He leans towards Cheryl, How 'bout a turn on the floor.

Listen, I already told your friend that I am with someone. She glances away as if Earl is all surface.

Earl considers the woman's green dress, brushes his hand against the fabric, takes a measure of it, yes it's silk. By the way the woman handles her purse, he figures the lady has some of the good stuff. Earl's main thing switches. He figures since he can't get into her pants and bed her, he'll get into Cheryl's purse which is what he does on occasion with women when he figures he cannot manoeuver them to crawl in the sack. Being just good enough looking to hustle some women simply on his good looks and worn down charm, he calculates neither money nor looks will carry him to the mattress with this woman. But he calculates the odds that she's in the know, and if she is, she's way too up-scale. Something pricey. But he's confused and uncertain just who she is. It only confirms that the guy she's with is a Ferris a guy with coin, otherwise she wouldn't be with him. But he doesn't quite

know her kind, he's never been to the Hotel Marlborough or any of the other classy hotels downtown, he's at best heard stories. Earl's a man who trades in rumours and gossips, which means he's got his ear to the ground, he counts himself in the know, yes he has a big eardrum but a poor filter, this means he's alarmingly gullible, prone to deluding himself, generalizes about people, worse he overstates his experience. Earl's been with a few middle class women, was able to hustle them because they were vulnerable or divorced or their husbands cheated on them or they were momentarily out of stride, taken with the combination of his seeming good looks, sharp tongue and even momentarily exotic aspect, but they dumped him pretty quick once they got sober or when they found out he worked in a factory and was chronically broke, and tagged him as a sponger, they got tired of paying the tab. All this thrashes Earl and trashes his brain. He hates his class but despises the middle class and is jealous of it although he knows it from a distance, he wants money but loathes those who have got it, and worse any time he is with a woman who has pleasant manners it pisses him off because it's a social habit of his former wife, Angela, and this woman in an odd off kilter way, standoffish manner and aloofness, reminds him of his former wife whose family was poor working class, grew up in the tough working class district like Earl. This woman at the bar is in a different but dual register, which doesn't allow him to read her as he puts it. He's all mixed up about where she might come from, her class. He sees it but doesn't know it. Class is everywhere for Earl, it permeates things, supersaturates, but it is a beast he never names, if someone calls him working class, he gets furious and shouts, Fuck off and die asshole. With guys like Earl and Bernie, there's cunning but words are laughing matters and fumble jumble but not for thought. Words waste thought and are a barrier to action. Earl and Bernie really hate those guys at the appliance factory, who are skilled workers, most meticulous, do their job with pride, say very little while they work or even during break time but are quite particular in the few words they chose to use. One guy, a mechanic, that he asked for a smoke at break, but is a guy, he can't budge or intimidate, told Earl one day, Listen Earl. I say what I mean and I mean what I say. Hey hey don't go and get heavy, I only asked for a smoke. Listen, Earl, I only put up with you on account of one thing, you went through the war. I respect that. The man held out a cigarette. Here's a smoke. But don't talk to me. Don't eat up my break. Earl grabbed the smoke, Thanks, hey take it easy.

Earl shrugs his shoulders and moves in closer. You want to know something? Cheryl only half looks at him, You're not talking to me. But I am sweetheart. That guy you came with do you know who he is? She says nothing but is half listening, half unwillingly. I gonna tell you something 'bout 'im lady. What'ver you think. You think wrong. Earl gives a gloating come-on smile. Cheryl turns her head away as if to dismiss Earl. But Earl presses on. That boy's not whoever he told you he is. You should beware of little fibbers and big liars. Cheryl looks back at the sharper but she immediately regrets it. Say what's that boy's name? It doesn't matter. He's in the dough, I guess that's what matters. She looks away. Sweetheart, he's a Ferris. Do you know what that name means? Keep your sweet hand resting on his coat sleeve, don't let another lady in this room steal 'im, boy oh boy, he's in the dough.

Why do you speak this way with people you don't even know. Don't you get the picture?

I don't have my Kodak. Hey this is the 800 Club lady. Anything goes. This isn't a CP high hat joint. Ferris comes from cheapskate coin, dirty downtown dough but owns blue chip real estate. A little of this and a lot of that goes a long way. Want one? Earl offers a smoke. Cheryl shakes her head, taking a cigarette from certain men can be a very dangerous step, and turns away looking round the bar for Johnny Langers, he's holed up in a faraway phone booth. She can smell Earl's stale stoat scent, through and through despite his looks. Earl lights up and breezes smoke.

He's made the decision, he inwardly declares: screw you, you snobby bitch, I'll bring you down a notch. But he says to Cheryl, Sweetheart, you know something. I got to confess. I really do. You are daringly beautiful. The most wickedly beautiful woman in this room. Way too classy for this joint. But Cheryl ignores this patter. Okay don't take a compliment. Earl tilts his empty glass. He shifts at the bar, picks up Johnny's drink and knocks it back quick before Cheryl or the bartender see it.

The 800 Club's New Year's eve crowd presses in on the bar, Earl swings his arm around the woman's body as if to momentarily shelter her from the crush, and says, Listen here baby, to confide something momentaneous to her. He has learned a few quick finger tricks in the army during the war in London, Hull and Liverpool. A navy buddy who knew the touch and feel of some five finger tricks, a petty thief who kept mostly to pickpocketing but who would do the odd b & e when no one was home, calling it, I like the odd rare steak now and again, but would never roll a guy, taught Earl plenty, because Earl did the sailor a mighty favour one time, alibied him out of a jam with a woman and a Liverpool constable. The light finger artist even taught Earl how to apologize to the constable when put under suspicion. How to talk his way out of a jam with a copper. Earl's not as good as his master, but still a promising apprentice plenty dexterous, who just needs more training and opportunities. Half the theft in slight of hand is in calculating the right time, location and angle, posture is crucial, the other quarter is getting in the right squeeze between a measure of innocuousness and incidental brushing up against the prey, and the last quarter to embroidering the edge of the wallet or purse, doing a diversion, is the slippery slip digits into the space and back out to normal normal as if both hands were always in view before the victim. Earl's worked his hands in his gloves and makes as if they are resting folded on the bar, but has stuffed one up with a hankie, his left arm out of the sleeve but appearing still in the sleeve is all slithering action, then he waits for the diversion and crush of the crowd at the bar clamouring for drinks which delivers a nice opportunity to feel up the lady's purse and become searchingly familiar but with swift withdrawal. Earl likes to think it is sex, a quicky. This is assisted by accident because from behind, one drunk gent presses up too close against Cheryl, and she responds abruptly by pushing away the strange man, accusing him of trying to feel her up, rub up against her. That's vile, you can't do that. The man looks sheepish, and mutters, I didn't do nothing, I only wish I had.

It was Earl's roving right leg while Earl's right hand fingers are nimble out of Cheryl's purse with the roll of new bills which she had got from McMahan.

The other man grins, Hey it's new years.

Earl slips the roll in his inside jacket pocket then swift slips his right arm back in his empty sleeve on the bar as if playing with his gloves. She shifts away from the other man. Suddenly Earl's suit coat sleeve rubs against Cheryl's arm. Cheryl glances at Earl's hands resting in full view on the bar surface. None of that, she brushes away Earl's arm resting against hers. That rough touch clinches it for Earl because he knows that touch confuses the shill. He even wants it. A jumble of horny gestures misleads to confusion. Even with a wary woman and knowing prey. It helps him perform the clip in some cases. Way different than the smooth flowing gesture with a stranger on a crowded streetcar, bus or train where nothing touches. Mr Leitmotif waiting for the most opportune moment just goes silently and swiftly into action. The little in and out with frivolity but without friction. Further follows, to Earl's advantage, a couple of more guys from behind shove up against Cheryl and she pushes back with a scowled look at the lechers, who leer and grin and say, beautiful how about a kiss for New Years Eve. She just says, Infants. And she really knows how to give a clipped look and say a word with meaning to men: so that they back off and dare not try another form of trespass. She looks at the phone booth for Johnny Langers but he's not there, she surveys the 800, then she spies him, one of the bouncers has cornered him. The man is doing all the talking and Johnny Langers is saying nothing.

Earl lights a smoke, Hey want one, sweetheart, he waves the pack towards her. She gives only the briefest of glances, I told you before no thanks. She looks back, Earl follows her gaze to the back of the corner.

Earl smiles and half laughs, You're a little touchy and rude. I judged you to be pretty classy. And mister I know the mold you grew off. Earl gives a lascivious grin, Where's the action, sweetheart. She says nothing. Hey I got news for you that boy you come with is nothing more than a Ferris. Strictly down market. Strictly shoe shine material. Works leather. Nothing but a shoe shine boy. Get lost will you. Sure, Lady Disaster. Keep on trucking. Earl is pleased, an insult is such a compliment to theft, a choice way to shove off into the darkness.

She says nothing but shifts a little restlessly at the bar watches the 800 bouncer seeming to be questioning Johnny, then the bouncer calls over another fellow, heftier in a somber suit. Earl lets it all slide. Time to move on. The last thing he wants to leave behind is a clear impression. He does not hang around, he gets straight out of the 800 Club, fast. He doesn't even signal to his buddy Bernie that he made a clip. He leaves him nagging with the waiter over payment of the two drinks they took without paying. Bernie's saying I'll pay. I'll pay. Take it easy.

Earl walks swiftly almost in a trot for two blocks, except the snow is piling up on the sidewalk slows him down, he flags a taxicab to take him over to the Moonlight Hotel. A local in the factory part of town. Familiar territory to Earl. But only a block from the Moonlight, at a red traffic light, on a corner where the local billiard hall Taffy's is situated, on impulse Earl jumps out of the cab, he feels restored luck. He glimpses in the front window. Earl's sometimes cool with a cue. Though tonight he is more than half cut and should avoid the table. But booze instigates, what's more with a tidy roll in his pocket, he has the itch for a game the more cash the more elevated his self-confidence. He conflates desires, when he can't

get laid, he'll settle for a game of pool. Plays a good game of snooker and even billiards, if he's sober and patient. He rides mostly on quick reflexes and intuition. He has good eyesight and swift digits. He has an adroit sense of surface geometry but it is more a sort of rote training from play and practice, trial and error, more repetitious recognitions of various possibilities that arise from multitudinous configurations and arrangements of the snooker balls spread across the felt. He lacks powers of calculation. Or any patience for deeper geometry. Problem with Earl is that sometimes when he's inclined to get into a billiard game he isn't necessarily sober or patient. He often has unusual even fabulous winning streaks that make him appear a much higher calibre of player than he is, almost edging into the professional hustler class. If he happens to get lucky enough beating a better player which does happen at Taffy's, he scoffs at all theoretical calls and replays, and lectures losers, Listen. With the green slate, it isn't how sharp you think you are. It sure isn't what you think, buddy, it's what you do on the table that counts. Make them balls disappear. But if Earl happens to lose it was strictly luck on his opponent's part, bad luck on his part, the atmosphere, too much noise in the background..... Earl is just good enough that many regulars or casual players at Taffy's shy away from getting into a game except for pleasure, he can destroy any lesser players if there is money on the table, players that are even, he can out psyche by his posture and attitude, he shows no mercy once any money is on the table and if he knows he can thrash a guy, even if the guy is older, a pensioner, or half broke, he does it to maintain his status, send a message round the billiard hall. Some young toughs who are even in ability like to play Earl, they figure give them a few years they'll take him out. Indeed a few are starting to do it without Earl quite recognizing them as having emerged from below to emerging as equal to now holding the edge.

On this snowy night, peering through the window, he spots some action. Inside, he nods to old Taffy, who has a cigar jammed in his mouth and is going over a racing form like it is numerology in the qur'an. Earl stands near the entrance, just watching, he likes but doesn't like what he observes, some truly beautiful shots, powerful combinations, wicked caroms, caution abruptly overtakes Earl, these are boys beyond his ways and means, doubly so because they are strangers, and at this hour past eleven on a snowy new year's eve, ever suspicious of strangers who appear in the local pool hall, he counts them as only one species, sharks, and he decides to pass up any temptation, though he dearly would relish shooting a game with his newly acquired earnings. Taffy, more somnolent than a mullah, doesn't even look up when Earl leaves and the little bell ting-a-lings. While heading down the deserted snowy street towards the Moonlight Hotel, he figures, heck maybe he can sweet talk one of the ladies at the local and squeeze into the Ladies and Escorts Room.

Earl is rolled by two punks.

He wakes up slowly in the snow bank, lucky it is not a deep freeze New Year's eve. He even momentarily feels it is a splendid night, luminous, has a cosmic sensation, the snowflakes wonderfully soft and gentle and slow in falling to earth, this is but a transitory sensation, that lasts no more than ten seconds, displaced by an ache, his head is splitting. What a throb. When he was knocked out he had someone else in his head, it wasn't his head he thinks, he

was out totally, stone cold, but what he saw could not have been a dream, he figures he wasn't anywhere near sleep, being knocked out, his head so sore, it probably was not a dream, it was some other state that Earl can't identify, even if he weren't so sluggish and groggy, Earl still wouldn't have the ability to name what he saw. He struggles to find another word, some word he heard one of the other guys in the men's beverage room toss around, he pauses naw not guys, come to think of it, more likely one of the women in the ladies and escorts room. The women do that, show off, pulling one of their dingbat watchmacallits words out of thin air like cats and dogs, but he can't recall any word he was told that would match the state he was in, so he settles on recognizing it and calling it a dream. He has no other word to describe it. Earl is not stupid, but he can be dumb, that's almost his speciality, yet he's too selfish to be intelligent, although he'd never consider doing anything which he has done as dumb, he thinks himself smart, quite clever, sharp, even his school teacher while he was flunking him in grade eight said, Earl the problem, here, is you're too clever for your own good. For the life of me I don't understand why you cheat off other students' assignments and exams. It isn't that you can't do the work. You most certainly can. You just won't. Near the end of high school, in the industrial arts class, as the students were leaving, the shop teacher, a middle aged man who was a carpenter and had seen service as a sergeant in the first world war, called out to him, Earl, a word. Earl turned round. The teacher was standing by the display of the final projects. He went reluctantly over. Listen to me, have you got anything to go on to? I'm working on it. Well, how are you with your other subjects? Earl shrugged his shoulders. Well? Nothing much. You probably know. But I'm out of here. Can't stay on. Despite your poor academic grades, there's a chance. The man paused. Earl said nothing. You could get an apprenticeship. Earl still said nothing. You have a deft hand, a close eye. As an apprentice in the proper trade, you could use those traits to good advantage. This is nice work. He touched Earl's piece of woodwork. I know a master cabinetmaker who will take you on. The teacher stopped speaking and waited. Earl said nothing, just rubbed a bit of shavings on the long plane. The teacher went on, I mentioned this, remember, I said that this particular gentleman would be round to inspect the students' work. Naw, I must have missed that class. Well, he visited the other day. This cabinetmaker has a topnotch furniture workshop. The very best of tools, uses the finest of woods, precision dowel joints and tongue-and-grove, exquisite inlay and detailed marquetry. Does only custom-made jobs, finest workmanship, first class furniture, settles for nothing less. He has a wealthy clientele. He's an old school craftsman wants to start apprentices when they're young, train them up to his methods. This gentleman was here in the school as he comes each year looking for promising material for apprentices. Some years he has no interest in a single student. Sees no evidence of promise in the projects. He's most particular. Quite choosy who he's willing take on. He surveys all the students' year end work. He saw your wood work and drafting. The man told me, Splendid. Splendid. Fine joinery. The boy who did this has potential, shows an exquisite hand. To boot, I say I do like a boy who can draw, has good draughtsmanship, an additional advantage. His very words, Earl. The teacher paused. Earl said nothing. Listen Earl, that man can make you something. It's a prize opportunity. He chooses but I recommend. He wants a character



reference. I can recommend you if you say you genuinely want it. Earl laughed, Shplendid. Shplendid. The shop teacher looked at Earl. Earl went on, I'm not interested in choosey guys. Particular people. Earl listen, this depression is killing people. Don't I know it, talk to my old man, my old lady. Don't throw it away. This cabinetmaker'll start you at seven-and-a-half dollars a week that's near a right proper grown man's wage. Wages have slipped badly. I can't recommend you if you speak this way. An apprentice in a craft has to show respect for the master training him. I aren't interested. Think about, it's a living wage. A right decent wage. Earl I'm on your side. This man is on your side, upon my recommendation, he'll over look weak grades, past problems, he's a man looking for a boy's substance. The teacher's voice became brittle and exasperated, My boy, listen to me, decent opportunities like this aren't coming round—Don't boy me. I'm not material. Decent, that's a dirty word. Confound it! You perplex me. I got lads in this class that would give their eyeteeth for such an opportunity. Mark my word. Seven years with such a craftsman, you'll be set for life.

When he was knocked out, he heard the industrial arts teacher's voice, Mark my life.... set for words.

But in the knockout, Earl heard one thing but saw another. He was rich and an old man or a man who was rich and old, he wants nothing more than to sever the two states and be only rich without ever being old, still he's not sure and really confused by the idea of being rich, seeing himself as rich something he always desired, who went in the Hotel Marlborough for a New Year's Party in the Crane Ballroom, gussied up in a tails, and a fine camel hair overcoat and some odd looking hat, baby lambskin, an Astrakhan, and that he checked in at the front desk, and then quite a pleasant surprise once settled in the hotel room, an astonishing woman showed up at the door. He had a desire and it was fulfilled as by some impelling power. Then he was doing it. Earl was screwing with that hot woman in the green silk dress who he had met back in the 800 Club who he had lifted the dough off of. He told himself inside his head or inside the dream, I'm not going to tell her that I ripped her off, no way. I'm just gonna screw the chick. Let her figure it out. This time she's gonna pay. He leered a lustful leer of satisfaction. But the rocking and rolling, reeling and rambling, it was all odd and out of shape, like losing coordination when riding a bike and the bike going wobbly, giving out and ramming against the curb and flipping over the handlebars and banging up, his body was going crinkum-crankum, that was a word that his cronie in England the little sneak thief, burglar and five-finger artist in the army told him, when you get the clap you get crinkum or grincome, the guy laughed and laughed and laughed until Earl laughed but didn't know why. Then said, you want a rich secret, I hear the bloody Yanks army quacks got themselves a secret cure for grimcome. But up in the Marlborough, on the mattress with this striking hooker, he wasn't enjoying it and he could hardly believe it, just as he was about to climax, myoclonic jerk came to his left leg, a spasm hit the arch of the foot, he started to have a stroke, it was lights out, and he was calling out to her to help him, struggling to make speech but she was out of the equation with his body as it grew inert, sagged and just went flat and flaccid, then simultaneously in smooth synchronization, she was rolling out from under his old decrepit body and rolling him off her own, he couldn't tell which was happening, her abandonment

and dismissal of his flesh seemed so cruel and callous, he just couldn't move and make his flesh rise up to complete the orgasm, laying inert on his side, in a state of paralysed he saw her shifting to the edge of the mattress, getting up in the most leisurely way, lovely naked arm languidly reaching for her clothing draped across a chair, working on her bra, panties and garter belt, slipping on her nylons, clipping them to the garter belt, then shimmying into that silk dress. Then her graceful lean arm bending at the elbow, and she said aloud, Say it, elbow, you are such a beautiful word, you can do things. A splendid smile smoothed her lips. And then her arm kinked and worked round behind her back and reaching upwards in such a sophisticated escape artist gesture, her acrobatic hand, nimble fingers working up from the bottom button to the top button of the dress slipping each button into the button hole with finesse, then easing her feet into the high heels, all the while Earl could see and feel his body giving out as an ancient man, a shudder and paroxysm of pain racked his bones, a former young form of his body flew through his flesh in departure, Fair thee well, bye bye old buddy, it was splendid inhabiting you while you was fresh but now you're just a toil, trouble and tribulation. Gone to turmoil. Fuck off and die old man. And he wanted to cry out to her, ask for her help, plea with her to save him from what was overtaking his old flesh. But something worse followed, the young form twisted and turned at a hotel door, the old man watched as it disappeared through the wood, he struggle for speech, finally reached sound and called out, Come back. And indeed he came back. A knock came upon the door, the old man sputtered, Come in. A key was heard to slip in the keyhole, it twisted in the lock, the inside deadbolt rotated. The door opened. A bellhop dressed in Hotel Marlborough uniform of garnet and grey stepped in the room. He strolled about the room rifling through clothing and drawers, took things and stuffed them in his pockets. He picked up a bottle of scotch, peered at the label, opened it, gave a sniff and took a long guzzle. Took another. He stared at a bottle of champagne sunk in melting ice. He picked it up, said, Celebrate you old fart, have a drink on me, aimed the bottle at Earl and twisted the wire and popped the cork, shot out and hit Earl's liver. Then the bellhop approached the bed where old man was stranded. The paralysed old man saw the young man whose facebones were a sackful of sticks. He stared down upon the prone figure on the mattress. Where's the real dough? Eh? Earl struggles for speech but nothing comes. Answer me you old fuck. Still nothing comes to his tongue. Tell me or I'll beat it out of you. Earl could not find speech, there was only leftover sputtering, bacon grease spattering across a steel griddle, sizzling of syllables that wouldn't link to the ligaments of his tongue. The bellhop swore, See, I've travelled well above the eighth grade. Then he took a swig from the champagne bottle, abruptly swung the bottle down on the old man's skull, smashed away at it, and shouted, Fuckin' 'ell, I'll teach you to speak when spoken to

Rolled and dumped on a snowbank left by the snowplough, Earl just sits there dumbfounded.

Then high on snow Earl wonders, Fuck is that how it ends, is that how I'm gonna go down. What a friggin drag. Die screwing my brains out without enjoying it. You get rich and then you get clobbered. Don't get to enjoy it. Head bashed to a pulp by some hotel flunky.

Suddenly he checks his pockets. The roll of dough filched. Gone. A sort of weepy feeling

sets in. Earl certainly indulges in feeling sorry for himself, it's a crown moment, he thinks it is his entitlement, but he doesn't like anybody to think that he feels sorry for himself, he wants others to see his life has been tough but he does not want pity, no way, yet Earl doesn't think he is feeling sorry for himself, he sure wouldn't call it that. He even thinks he's no complainer, even calls it facing up to The Things, facing up to the tough stuff. He regularly denies it if someone remarks that he complains too much, is feeling sorry for himself, like his ex wife used to reproach him, for lack of love and unwilling to think about others. Or the middle aged divorced woman who had a good job as a manager, enjoyed sex, and paid for things without complaint, but who abruptly told him not to come round any more, because he was too needy, she'd put up with a lot from men but she really disliked needy people. And even accused him of whining. And Earl's response was, Listen, babe, if you'd been through what I've been through you'd understand. I went through hell. I'm not feeling sorry for myself, alright. I've seen the worst stuff. I'm staring the ugly beast in the face. Most people don't have the guts to face it the way I do. An ugly unhappy look overcame his half handsome face. She listened then said, Listen I enjoy sex, but I prefer my men to stand on their own two feet. Get over it the war's over. I don't need your crap. Get out. He wanted to slug her but that woman got a look on her face, one that Earl had never seen before on a woman and could not fathom, it was harsh and hard, and most peculiar above intimidation, he wasn't sure where a blow against her would lead, he glowered trying to make her back down. But she was calm and certain, and said, You heard me. Get out. Don't come round.

Worse he hears the manual arts teacher's voice nagging him about the apprenticeship with the cabinetmaker. Earl is half and half. He hates to half admit that he half regrets not trying it. Then that teacher preached like a presbyterian, Earl I'm on your side, but you can't help those who won't help themselves. You're a man. But you're on the way to making a life of constant struggle. Life is two paths. Half of life is finding a path by which to do things simply. The other half, is making a path that helps avoid troubles. I fear you'll never amount to anything. Although you'll be one of those young fellows who will have a dozen opportunities come your way. And you'll right properly trash each and every one. Toss them in the rubbish bin. Because you'll count yourself too good. Fuck off. Earl really wanted to slug the man. He was waiting for a bit of action. Then quite suddenly the manual arts teacher got a peculiar look on his stern face, and acted out of character, he half smiled, I heard such expeditious orders in the ditches but it didn't necessarily save a fellow. When I heard a man speak that way to another man, I used to think that was challenge. Now I understand that when a fellow uses foul language that he is only speaking to himself. Screw you old man, you're so full of shit.

But worst of all, Earl hears Angela's voice more and more not less and less, the more remote the divorce becomes. Once he did hit his wife, Angela, when she said fighting in the war didn't make everyman a man. What'd you mean by that? Just what I mean, fighting in the war didn't make you a man. Then he smacked her across the face so hard she went down to the floor. He was surprised she didn't cry although when she got up, she said, One of the women at McMahon and Langers warned me. What do you mean? Nothing that's it. Look

I'm sorry baby. That's it I've had it. Then she was gone, she went out that evening with just her purse and coat. The movers came and took away her things. It shook Earl that she left after only one smack and a little screwing around. She went and got herself a lawyer

Earl washes his hands over his face.

Earl shakes himself out of the knock out, just sits there for a further long moment staring at the snow, it looks wonderful, then pulls himself off the snowbank. The pain has eased off. He swears. He stares at his pointed black shoes. An odd smile trickles across his features. Earl does not lament immediately, it is a cunning quality of his, he's on to the next thing, next want, scam, the bad quality of stewing over things comes later, he laments a thing later and it comes later and lasts longer, like with his wife, who he at once dismisses as a bitch and a snob, but then he longs for her, wants her back again for her raw innocence and naivete, but without the marriage.

It is still snowing, he slogs through the snow.

Reaches the Moonlight Hotel, he slips in and stands in the lobby. Good evenin' Alf, Earl greets the concession booth man who doubles as desk clerk. Alf only half grunts, Uerrl. Earl leans across the desk. Alf mind if I use the house phone. Sorry not tonight. Weekend rules apply. Com'on, it's new years. That's when it happens. Boss says it's off limits applying the weekend rule. Had long distance charges on this phone. Sheesh, I'm a regular. You dial the number, okay. Off limits Uerrl, across the board, applies to everybody, not open to discussion. Earl digs around in his trouser pockets, finds a few left over coins, change from breaking a ten dollar bill for the taxi ride, plugs one into the pay phone and dials Angela's number. It rings. But no one answers. He hangs up. He listens to the voices drifting from the beverage rooms, the Moonbeam Room, the Men's and the Starlight Room, Ladies and Escorts. His head presses forward against the telephone. He picks up the black headpiece, he feels the weight of it, a number is scratched in the black bakelite It looks ugly. A pay telephone booth has a bad habit of reminding Earl of patrol constable's police box. He plugs the coin in again. He dials. But no one answers. Alf mind if I slip in, he jerks a thumb towards the Ladies and Escort room. Can't allow it. Just a look see. That's a problem tonight. You got to have an escort. Inspector's sniffin' 'n' snortin' 'roun' hotel like a hound after a raccoon.

The door to the Ladies and Escorts swings open, the noise from inside the Starlight Room suddenly amplifies, then is muffled as the door swings shut.

A woman comes out, she's a little tipsy. Earl recognizes her, she's about five years older than him. The woman has a lovely mouth but sad eyes. Her mascara smudged. She works at McMahon and Langers the biscuit company. Many patrons of the Moonlight work there. She bursts into greeting, Earl. Earl. Happy New Year. He's searching to remember her name, then it clicks. He grins, Deb, how you doing. Wonderful. Wonderful. Off to the powder room. She pats his cheek. She goes through the foyer. On her way back, Earl says, Hey can I join you. Sure come on baby. Any time. Gorgeous Earl. The lobby is no spot for a handsome man. She looks at Alf, But certainly a place for an ugly one. They both laugh. A good lookin' guy is my kinda guy. She loops her arm through his and escorts him toward the Starlight Room. He says, I always thought you were devastating Deb. Get lost, get lost, she laughs. It's true. Then

why'd you go 'n' marry that hoity-toity snob whatchamacallit Angela whatshername. I heard she works for the same shifty eyed lawyer who worked the divorce. She's trying to fuck her way to the top. Men make mistakes. I love it I love it, men make mistakes. That's a prize line. I just love it lovey dovey. Boy something else, when a man admits a mistake in this end of town. That's choice. Very exquisite like a McMahon and Langers puff cream biscuit. Earl says, Wisdom comes after a mistake. I'll buy you a drink on that. Not the wisdom the mistake. Let's hear it for mistakes, they make life interesting, friggin exciting. She affectionately touches the back of his neck. She feels a dampness, then Deb stares at her hand, baby, you're bleeding. It's nothing. I got waylaid. Two punks rolled me, stole my paycheque. That's crummy. Staring at her hand, her face gains an almost sudden sober look. Then Deb pulls out a hankie wipes her hand and pats his head with it, You should take better care of yourself. Tonight I need a sweet woman like you to take care of me. Come on lets get a drink. Before they go in they embrace and exchange a deep kiss.

They push into the Ladies and Escort and are greeted by smoke and ruckus, the howling sound of the band. A guy is trying his best to sing like Hank Snow or Hank Williams, it isn't clear cause his voice is hoarse and slurs lyrics, the guitars playing are uneven. The two popular singers' styles are garbled up by this local country and western band. C & W being commercial corn-pone, it'll now and again be canned kernels. It'll spook rock 'n' roll, outlive jazz and blues, visit the cemetery, stroll over the green graves, stand before their tombstones, whisper a prayer about downhome music. Earl, Earl cries the bunch at the table, most of them line workers from McMahon and Langers. Where you been all evening. Round and round. Give this man a chair. Let 'im be elevated. The couple sit down. Earl says to Deb, I can play better than that friggin beefcake. Deb says, Baby, I sure know you can. She leans closer towards Earl, slips the tip of her tongue in his ear then whispers, Uhhh don't you know it, I'm so horny, and I bet you can screw better than that loser. Go up there and grab that boy's guitar. Earl laughs, I'll plant a boot on his ass and kick his butt clean off the planet. You do it. You do it, Earl.

Deb jumps up and calls out to the guitar player, Get down from there and give my man your guitar. The crowd laughs. Someone says, Deb sit down. She says, Earl really knows how to play. He can do Carl Perkins. He knows how to rock, don't you sweetie. Deb's friend yanks her arm and pulls her down to the chair and says, Christ, Deb watch it. That boy up there ain't right regular. Got no sense of funning. He's a fumer. That guy's got a right royal mean streak, he takes no guff. You heckle 'n' he'll come down off that stand 'n' pull a number.

Earl wraps his arm around Deb, says, Forget that punk. How 'bout a drink. They grab a passing waiter with a loaded tray of draft.

Finally, the conversation with Johnny Langers and two 800 men breaks off, they shake hands, he strolls through the crowd to the bar. He smiles at Cheryl. She asks, What was that all about? Nothing really. Bouncers. They get bored an' got to talk to sump'body for en'ertainment. Just a lot of what do you call it furiosity? He looks for his drink on the bar. He lifts a glass and sees it's empty. Gone. She looks at it, she tilts hers showing a still half full glass, I never drank it. One of those creeps. Sure. Johnny, I don't feel exactly comfortable

here. Cheryl, the 800 is cool but you hafta kinda get use to it. I heard of this place. I heard the wrong stuff. He glances at her. What did you hear? I heard it is run by a tough crowd. That you got to be inside to be treated right. That even certain police detectives are afraid of this club, won't even walk in the door. I'd rather be back at the Lounge in the Marlborough. Really? Yes, I would, even if you wouldn't. I'm going to the ladies'. Cheryl gets up and squeezes through the crowd. The women's washroom is stylish and spacious. Two women are there chatting. Cheryl washes her hands, she opens her purse to get out her comb and make-up, she sees her money is gone. She stops for a split second, considers the other two women, they are very stylish, one of them almost looks like a movie star, she has her blonde hair done in the most current fashion, it is an expensive cut. Cheryl asks the two women, Anything happen here? You new here? They check out Cheryl while she combs her hair and applies fresh make-up. No. Well what do you mean then? Is this place safe for women? Both women smile, Honestly honey, this is the safest bar in town. A lot safer than the street. You got a problem just tell an 800 bouncer, he'll rubber ball any guy who tries anything. They like to see good looking women patronize the lounge without trouble. There are some very fine gentlemen here. Cheryl closes her purse and smiles, I noticed.

Cheryl goes back to the bar. She considers Johnny's hands which are rough, although scrubbed spruce clean, they appear to have some sort of odd discolouration as if a persistent stain. He smiles. She asks, What's your name? I tol' you Johnny. Dontchya 'member. Johnny what? Langers. Then why did those two crumbbums take you for someone else, call you Ferris? 'Cause those two crumbbums are crumbbums. He laughs. Mooches, trying to find a mark, pry loose a coin. Cheryl says, I'm getting my coat and leaving. We just arrived. But she's heading towards the hat check, got her coat swiftly and asks for a cab. Pay the hat check, she demands. Johnny does, grabs his hat, coat and scarf, and is following her into the street. They are standing in the snow. Cheryl, I don't understand this at all. Why are you so upset. Did I say sumpb'thin'? Tell me if I did. She says nothing, gives him a dirty look. Hey com'on, I want to have a good time with you. I like you. You're a really nice person. But some people aren't. That place is creepy. Someone stole my money. Sheesh, that's no good. That's right rotten. Let's go back in and tell the bouncers, they straighten it out. She looks at him as if he is daft. She stares at his hands, then considers his fine camelhair overcoat. Mr Langers you're not who you say you are. But who is? He half laughs. I see it everyday. We're always someone else different, we wake every morning a different person, he laughs. Mr Ferris you are not to be trusted. See somebody stole all my money, Mr Ferret. That's good and funny, but I'm no sneak. Not me. Never. I don't need no money. Not at all. I got plenty. I tol' you you're a nice person. I like you I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't do that to nobody, not even to sum'budy I don't like. Doggone it, I especially wouldn't do it to a nice lady like you. Why do you go around telling people you're Mr Langers when you're not. She looks down the street for the taxicab. Listen. Listen. Cheryl, it's nothing, it's just a little game I like, I done it since I was kid, I don't' know why I do it, it gives me lift. Fun. Kills the boredom. Pleasure. Hey, dontchya ever want to be someone else? Don't you like to pretend you're sum'budy else. What do you really do? Okay, Okay, he tilts his head half way in an almost pathetic way of

beggary, You wouldn't be with me if I tol' you what I really do, who I really am. I'm not with you now. A cab is arriving at that moment, gliding through the snow to a slow stop. Please Cheryl, listen. I'm going goodbye. It started out nice but now its just an evening shift turning crummy. He opens the cab door for her, Can I come with you. No. She leans and grabs the inside doorhandle, Hotel Marlborough. Sir close the door. Cheryl can I see you again, back there at the Lounge? I swear on my mother's grave I never took your dough. Let go of the door. You got no money, let me pay for the cab. He pulls out a roll of bills. Here. Here. She grabs the twenty and slams the door. The cab takes off.

Johnny Ferris walks back towards the downtown apartment located in an old block that houses Ferris and Sons, the shoe repair and cigar emporium on the ground floor, where he works with his father and brothers. Along the way Ferris thinks about things, what he does, what he doesn't do, what seemed so nice, turned so upside down, he figures if he weren't dressed swell it wouldn't have happened that way, but then she wouldn't have given me a second look and I wouldn't have met her. When he dresses up swell and goes out on the town he half passes himself off as one of the customers who patronize where he works – now and again known as Johnny Langers or Jackie Langers or Freddy McMahan or Johnny McMahan or Bobby More or Johnny Carruthers or Jack Carruthers, Johnny Cunningham or Johnny Waters – he takes a pick, whatever name pops into his head and happens to amuse him at the moment, real or fake, that stimulates his imagination, fulfills his mood. He likes it but now he reproaches himself, she would not have believed me. Naw it was those crumbbums. Those bouncers looking for trouble, I shouldn't have talked to 'em. I should never have gone to the 800 Club. I got my own money. I don't need this.

In his apartment, he switches on the radio. While standing by the window staring out at the falling snow, he sips two neat shots of Canadian Club and listens to the CBC Radio's New Year's Eve programme.... Folks isn't that just The most divine melody this side of the Milky Way, you're listening to Johnny Nawlins and His Northern Lights. This is CBC Radio broadcasting live from the fabulous Crane Ballroom in the Hotel Marlborough. Now a word from our national sponsor, McMahan and Langers, for more than one hundred years, the finest cookie manufacturer in the Dominion of Canada, the largest biscuit company in the British Commonwealth, bringing to Canadians from coast to coast, the finest tea biscuits, crisp soda crackers and distinguished selection of cookies McMahan and Langers, a Canadian company. Canadian made biscuits, cookies, crackers, that's right, Canadian made for Canadians, made from the finest ingredients, under the most modern hygienic manufacturing conditions, always fresh, never stale ... McMahan and Langers supplier to the Royal Canadian Navy... the Canadian merchant ...He is not quite drunk, he does not like the sensation of being wasted. He does not like drinking too much, he does it occasionally. But he is tired from polishing and repairing shoes and flogging cigars and newspapers all day to the likes of Mr Cunningham, Mr McMahan, Judge Carruthers, Mr Lerner, the evening had started out as a wonderful diversion than drove in a ditch.

Johnny flicks on the tv.

He slouches on the sofa. He's not too keen on tv. It's in his head but also in his eyes.

They have not gotten accustomed to the cathode-ray tube: His eyeballs feel like they dry out, might roll out of the sockets and tumble on the floor like silver pinballs. He prefers film at the movie theatre where he can relax in the dark, sink into a subdued almost sedate state, where his brain is not under suspicion the way it is with the elevated television voices that screech and scream and shout through the screen. They accuse the viewer. The lights are turned down low to watch the beast, the room grows gloomy becomes a solemn crypt. Spectral images flicker in the picture tube, flit about in the dark. The eye of the viewer meets a blown up face, skin surface pitted terrain of some far off demon planet, on the screen. TV images crowd in. The cathode ray penetrates the eyeball and performs an interrogation on the brain. He figures: fine: TV what are you good for: nothing much. The weird way it is preparing people for the future, not to see it or be photographed, but to be taken into a quiet room and be interrogated by the cops. In television sitcoms he can just manage to staple together cheap continuity between action and boredom. Most things on tv drag on and leave him dizzy, druggy, and dozy until the images freeze, frizzle and flee. His flesh fossilizes like a trilobite. He hears a customer say, The tv is something else, I tell you it's a wake up call for the next generation. He can't quite focus on the tv tonight, his eyes glaze over, his imagination is drifting over the surface of the picture tube until it goes elsewhere, he sees himself back at Taffy's Billiard Hall located in the East end. He goes there about twice a week alone or with one of his brothers. He never goes in the back rooms to play craps or poker although on occasion a couple of his older brothers do. He sometimes encounters customers from work. He shoots pool with Mr Lerner a lawyer and Dr Henry regular customers who come by the shoe repair for a shoeshine. Sometimes they go to the Taffy's to bury themselves from themselves. Johnny Ferris sees it in their wrinkled careworn faces. There is a recognition. They crave a diversion. If he or one of his brothers encounters them, such gentlemen'll say, Well Johnny got time for a game? They play for a dime a point, sometimes two bits and the table time is picked up by the loser. They lose. He wins. He sees himself win. He lets them stay in the game just long enough to feel competent and capable, even fantasize that they might have won if a couple of combination, rebound and cushion shots had gone the other way, he brings them along, cultivates them, sets up shots for them which they sometimes can make while in the end defeating them with a more rigorous geometry and trigonometry performed with the cue. Sometimes going to the edge of defeat, peering over the precipice, he then pulls out of it with a swift run. Snooker is about the future the allocation of time and space in the present split second, molecules slipping into holes in the head. Johnny counts the holes in his head. In a game of snooker, he especially relishes winning against educated men who sometimes patronize the shoe repair shop. Such men are polite, put on a good face when they lose a game, when they show up at the shoeshine, they remain polite, sometimes aloof, Johnny doesn't overstep, returns the politeness with a deferential manner, and only brings up the poolhall if first they mention it. He got that from his father, who tells them: Never talk about what a man has lost unless he brings it up himself. Remember, if the guy does bring it, be tactful. Listen. Don't say much. His oldest brother teases their old man when ever he brings up being polite or tactful to customers: Hey dad did you learn to be tackful



from hammering all those tacks in leather. On the snooker table, clobbering an opponent is not wise policy, especially an educated guy who is a customer at the shoe repair. A competitor needs a break to retain self-esteem, feel a sense of equality, an excessive victory and a guy turns shy to play. Players of his own limited schooling Johnny meets any day at Taffy's, some good, aggressive and keen to win, others mediocre, moody and mean when they lose. And Johnny unlike some guys does not evidence desperation to win, he wins often enough to stay laid back and easy going when he loses, but what's more he makes such good tips at the shoe repair, the winnings at the snooker table are pocket change. He and his brothers have an understanding never to discuss money at Taffy's although they could talk about it all day at the shoe repair. He doesn't even mind when some guys, sore losers normally used to winning, try to jerk him around call his play lucky. It comes from his dad, who says fun's fun but take pride in your work here at the shoe repair, understand. That's what counts. That's how we make our living. Then he and his brothers would cry out, Dad you're brainwashing us. That's right. I'm making you boys skilled workers that's what your mother wanted.

The billiard hall makes Johnny lonesome for his mother.

He figures it is the too many men hanging round.

He loves it when a woman comes in the shoe repair.

Johnny Ferris really wants to love a woman. But Johnny Ferris thinks a woman can't really love him because he misses his mother and that scares women who see it in him, but he has trouble remembering her because she died when he was so little. He won't look at photographs of her because he's been trying for years to keep fresh what she did look like, retain a memory of her body's fragrance. He can no longer distinguish between what he remembered of her and what he makes up in his imagination. So he sees her like a movie star on the big screen, in his head, but television is scorching that movie picture.

Then kathunk boom boom out go the lights.

And he is sound asleep having a crummy dream about some villain near a cliff who comes down off the movie screen and begins to chase him through the rows of seats in the movie theatre, almost catching him but then tripping and tumbling over the cliff. Almost gone but at the last split second the villain's fingertips clasp the cliff edge. The bad man is coming back. In the movie theatre, the one he knows from childhood, The Nickelodeon, which he used to go to with his mother and four older brothers, he's watching a movie at the Saturday matinee in the movie theatre. He sees his mother dying on the movie screen and says. Mum. Not now. You're so beautiful. Don't do a Jean Harlow on us. Wait please. Stay alive. Stick around. His father who was crazy about her is weeping. The old man is rubbing his runny nose. Mucous dribbles from his big hooked nose. He rubs it again with the back of his hand. The image of a hand floats on the screen, his father's old hand worn like a piece of tough leather, abraded, nicked, thickened with callouses and shaped to both delicate work and endurance. Then the dream moves to cruise control and goes deep. But Johnny Ferris is not himself Johnny Ferris as he wishes to be, first he is a raccoon climbing head first down the trunk of an oak tree. Then he is the oak, his striped fur merges into bark. Then he is the oak leaf fluttering to the ground, then a red and white spotted toadstool, then a lonesome

green fern swaying. He can't see how he can be so many things, but he does see that he is. Then the tree is felled and milled and worked until it becomes the burnished front desk of a hotel. Johnny is leaning on it, the desk clerk says, Sir, your signature here, offers the guest registry book, Hotel Marlborough. Riding an elevator up to the nineteenth floor, in the corridor, he sees three regular customers that visit the shoe shine parlour, Judge Carruthers, a lawyer named Lerner and Doc Henry but they don't register under their names. They have registered as Albert Hayes, Kirk Nielsen and Willy More. He sees Judge Carruthers' brogues under a bed. Then he sees them in the hotel corridor waiting to be picked up by valet service for a polish. They are in a hotel room playing cards. He nods to them. Here, says Taffy the master of the spheres, handing Johnny something. At first Johnny mistakes it for the punch-card for table-time. But it is no such thing, he is studious leaning over a clay tablet deciphering it, reading it. Hand merges into clay then is reshaped and emerging as living flesh out of limestone, his hand scribbles Mr Langers across the hotel ledger. He goes into the hotel room the tv is still on. He shuts the door. He sits down to watch, there is a glaring man's face on the screen, it's that old rhino city detective who everyone on the street fears and calls the Liverpool Hammer, peers and sneers: alright buster who are you? And don't lie. We got your name and number. A hand changes the channel a Saturday afternoon boxing match, two boxers in the ring pummel each other, then fatigue, clinch and roll on the mat wrestling. The dethead shouts, Against the rules, no clinch and hold, none of that dirty stuff, he busts in between the two men and pushes them apart. There's a rap on the hotel door. Watching television by himself feels like solitary confinement during a prison sentence. Maybe it's somebody calling to watch tv. Come on in. The door opens. It is Cheryl. I changed my mind, come on let's do it. Sure, let me change. No need to. But I don't want to do it as old king biscuit. They are on the bed, Johnny Ferris is struggling to escape the old stale body of Mr Langers, and enter a voluptuous embrace, calling out, Wait, wait Cheryl. A car rolls on the television screen during a commercial, then continues on, drives straight through the screen and on through the hotel bedroom, out the hotel window, through the clouds and ends up in front of Ferris and Sons. A voice on the tv, and now a word from our sponsor, a flashy car appears on the screen, The car of the future now. A car that is so comfortable your family will feel they are driving on cloud nine.... Nine. Nine. Nine. Johnny Ferris recognizes the driver behind wheel, Eddie Worts. They're equals but unequals. They both service big money. But Worts does not own the car, whereas Johnny Ferris, who cares only so much about money, knows another life, doesn't worry about money. Worts strides into Ferris's and issues a demand, Gimme a box of 'em Cuban Cigars, put it on McMahon and Langers account. Right. No one challenges. Everyone recognizes Worts the chauffeur. The limousine backs up through the tv screen and disappears, a little boy holding an empty Cuban cigar box is standing on the sidewalk in front of Ferris & Sons shoe repair, staring through the window. Johnny says to Cheryl, This is wonderful but I don't want to do it as him. As who? As that old guy, Langers. Cheryl smiles, But Johnny don't worry, you're no Langers. Then who am I? Who are you now, don't you know who you really are? Cheryl tell me, you know me, tell me who I am, I don't know who I am anymore. Why you're uou. Uou.

Who? You're uou, Johnny Ferris, you're young. Cheryl's shapely lips form round smooth sounds, And you're uou. O o o o O o o O o beautiful uou. Uou're uou, Johnny, beautiful uou. No I'm not, I made a big mistake, I'm him, that old creepy guy. That old coot, that slobbering rich fart. I don't want this beautiful experience pretending to be him. Wait, wait, please wait. It's too beautiful. But it's too late and he comes. He hears a sound on the roof or wall. Paws or claws. What's that? he stares upward. The ceiling is cerulean blue. A raccoon is crawling across it upside down. The man and woman on the mattress both laugh. Isn't that a hoot. How does he do that. Yeah isn't that amazing. Those guys, man oh man, can walk every which way. Cheryl grins and watches the upside down raccoon. Go to sleep, willya. The raccoon is staring down at the naked couple on the mattress. It's masked face a burglar's inspects. Johnny that creeps me out. Hey Cheryl, you recognize that guy up there? It's that crumbbum we met at the bar in the 800, Cheryl says I'm getting my coat and leaving. I'm out of here. Cheryl wait. Johnny gets up. Bernie leaps from the ceiling, bounds off a wall and adroitly lands on the floor. He stands at the bed, Not so fast mister. We track your sort I'm gonna teach you a fucking thing or two. Then he pummels and knocks Johnny to the floor. Then he sets into delivering kicks to the face. From the ground, his eyes are so battered from kicks they begin to shut from swelling, Johnny can barely glimpse Cheryl as she gets up from the bed and dresses. She gathers money off the night stand, rolls up the bills and is about to slip them in her purse. But Bernie confronts her. Hey sweetheart, just a sec there, gimme that. His raccoon paw claws the roll of bills. It's mine, I worked for it. Bernie smiles, Lady, now it's mine. Bernie leaps to the wall rebounds upward to the ceiling and crawls upside down and escapes through a hole in the corner. Cheryl flees the hotel room going down the corridor towards the elevators. Johnny fades. But his eyesight penetrates through the hotel room wall like in a panel in the Saturday funnies and he sees her glide down the hotel corridor, swift, elegant and smooth. She encounters three men coming down the hall towards the hotel room she has just left. She recognizes one of the approaching men, her head turns away so he catches her face in a sliver profile. Johnny watches her disappear, in the distance the silver doors glide open, she steps out of a dream and steps on the elevator.

Through the snowy night the Hotel Marlborough reappears. The U-Need-A-Cab pulls up in front, the doorman opens the cabby door, Cheryl steps out of a car.

She knows she has to hustle another trick rather than relax. She lets what has happened slide, she finds the zone of forgetfulness sometimes beneficial, memory can be useful up to a certain point but it is unwise to cling to bad experiences, they soil things. What's more she is not an angry person, one of her resilient features is that she does not over indulge in petty emotions. The doorman at the Hotel Marlborough, Joe, seems surprised to see her. The doorman says, Hey Donna. What's up? Work. I thought you were finished for the night considering who you left with. She looks dubiously at the doorman, How's that? That guy half talks like I don't know what and has the brains of a, she finished with, He doesn't even know who he is. She pauses is a bit perplexed then conceals it, with a laugh. Donna, that guy you left with is a Ferris. So. The shoemaker people downtown. I figured you knew. She stares at Joe. Joe leans forward, Sure the guy's a working stiff, a little rough around the edges, but

ever polite, a little well you know, I can never quite tell if he's putting it on or just that way. People say the Ferrises are a bunch of characters. Simple, Joe. The man's a simpleton. Joe smiles, the Ferris family has real dough. Owns some major real estate downtown. The old man is rumoured to have made a bundle through the depression. The old shoemaker bought up property cheap, for next to nothing, pennies, nickels, dimes made from newspapers, cigars and shoe repairs. You know the line, better a fast dime than a slow buck. Those brothers're gonna inherit a bundle, all those building blocks. Real estate. Donna I figured you're set for the night, you'd have a swell time, take it or leave it, a soft one. He doesn't even try to put on a fast move. And is rumoured to be generous. How charming. Very funny. It turned into an expensive night. I'm available let them know. Sure sure. No cheapo please. Sure sure. You deserve the best. The doorman gives a knowing nod and opens the lobby door.

In the lobby she happens to see a well dressed late middle aged man with a carefully trimmed moustache, dressed in a midnight blue woolen coat and perfectly blocked Homburg hat. His coat is open and reveals that he is wearing evening dress for the New Year's eve bash in the Crane Ballroom. He checks his coat and hat. He looks way above dapper even close to refined, reminds her a little of the previous client on the nineteenth floor, she hesitates a moment, considers him as possible since he is not going into the Crane Ballroom but rather heading towards the Maple Leaf Lounge, she smiles inwardly, Yes one of those. First pleasure then respectable, and follows the well dressed late middle aged man with the trim moustache..

But her path is cut off by a stolid man dressed anonymously in a brown fedora and beige drab baggy tweed overcoat. Six two but he's a homely get, somewhat solemn, and the colour brown extols his homeliness. She says, Excuse me. Her intonation goes nowhere with the guy in the suit. It falls like an egg on pavement. It doesn't even dent his bearing. His colosso feet in brogues stay planted on the lobby granite, blocking her way, the guy says, Miss Sloane. It's not even a question. It's a dull declaration. She gives him a glance has no recognition of his face. Nor does he appear to be the sort whose company she would enjoy. She says, I think you are mistaken. She moves to go round him. Sec Miss Sloane. He blocks her way. That's not my name. You are Miss Sloane? Excuse me. That is your name. My name is Cheryl. Cheryl who? Cheryl Turnbull. The man gives a swinish grin, Well Miss Turnbull we'd like a word with you. But this is no request. His voice has a matter of fact tone. He tilts a badge towards her and gives a name, Detective Pincombe. Concerning what detective? Let's step over there for a moment. He motions to where the hotel's house detective is sitting with another man in an alcove between arched marble columns away from the lobby traffic. The other man is a knock off of Detective Pincombe but a version in gray. They go to the alcove.

Staples, what's this lovely woman's name? Cheryl glances with recognition at the chubby hotel detective. I understand it to be Miss Donna Sloane. Miss Sloane, how 'bout if we step back across the lobby to where we were. I think you dropped your name back there somewhere. Lets go back there, step back into the past. Rediscover just who you are, and heck maybe we can pick up your name along the way. Then we can return to the present. What do you say to that? She says nothing. She looks at the fat man Staples. Okay. Miss

Sloane? You do know Mr Staples here? Yes. But you don't appear to know who you are? Detective Pincombe, you're a stranger to me. I had no idea who you were. I'm not obliged to talk to just any stranger. Or respond to just any man I encounter. For that matter give my name to just anyone who demands it. Miss Sloane, I heard from Mr Staples here that you're, Pincombe glances at Staples then back at her with lecherous admiration, A very charming woman. How's your evening been Miss Sloane? I just happen to have arrived. It's New Years, I'm hoping for a splendid evening. Pincombe has a look. Okay, Staples. Tell her. Say your two bits. Then get lost. Go play with yourself in the men's room. Maybe if you're a good boy, Miss Sloane here will join you later and change your diaper. Pincombe nods towards the hotel detective. Miss Sloane, these two gentlemen from the police force are making inquiries concerning a hotel guest you entertained this evening. The management'd appreciate it if you'd be cooperative. The house detective a fattish man pushing sixty-five, inexplicably gives a light grin and then gets up, hauling himself awkwardly out of the leather chair. He was not aware of himself cracking a smile. The other cop says, Staples take that shitfaced grin off your pussy eating face, this isn't what you think it is. She stares at the men but says nothing. Okay Staples, scram. And keep your yap shut. Remarks Pincombe. I leave you with these two gentleman from the city police. The fat man trawls off towards the night manager's office.

Miss Sloane, this is my partner, Detective Gompers. Gompers nods at her. He looks grimmer and more lecherous than Pincombe, even his face is gray. We can keep this simple Miss Sloane. He scans her form. That's a remarkably fine dress. Did you happen to be wearing it earlier this evening? Asks Pincombe. Pardon? The dress. Just answer the question. We're doing them, not you. Were you wearing that dress around eight pm? Yes. Why? Miss Sloane, who did you spend time with this evening in this hotel? What's this all about? Let's have some fucking cooperation. Skirts can be cunts but a skirt that doesn't unzip, can be out of humping luck. I happened to briefly visit a gentleman on the nineteenth. We shared a drink together in his room. We agreed to meet again downstairs. Then I came down to the Maple Leaf Lounge. But he did not show up. What did you do when the gentleman didn't show? I happened to share a few martinis and listen to music in the Maple Leaf Lounge with an acquaintance. Then he suggested that we go out to listen to some music. Where Miss Sloane? She looks at the two detectives. Where? We visited the 800 Club. The 800. Pincombe glanced at his buddy in gray, they both consider this statement. Then Pincombe asks, How long were you at the 800? No more than an hour and hour half. I'm not quite certain. I just arrived back from there. Who was the man you visited on the nineteenth floor? What is this all about? What was the man's name? Mr Langers. Charles Langers. He told you that was his name? She blinked. Well? I think so. Yes, he said that was his name. Had you ever met him before? No. Do you believe that that is his name? Yes. I had no reason not to. He told me his name was Charlie. And what did he call you Miss Sloane? Donna. And who was the man who you picked up in the Maple Leaf Lounge and went to the 800 Club with? I didn't pick up any man. I happened to share a drink and listen to some jazz. What was the guy's name who you met in the Maple Leaf Lounge? Johnny Lan—. I mean—. She halts and stares at Pincombe. Well what was it? The gentleman said his name was Johnny Langers. Didn't you just tell us that

Mr Langers didn't show up. He didn't show up. I mean. She glanced at the two detectives. The second man told me that his name was Johnny Langers. You aren't exactly swell with names. Which is it? Charlie or Johnny Langers? You don't quite understand. I can explain. Sec, let's go back to the hotel room on the nineteenth. You stepped into something up there. Do you know what it was? I haven't a clue. You tell me Detective Pincombe. Since you seem to know more about things than I do. Really? He grins, I guess I'd call it a? Hey Gompers what would you call what Miss Sloane here stepped into on the nineteenth floor.

Gompers grins with yellow teeth, I suppose you might consider it kinda nasty bit of, Gompers half-laughs, taps his temple, crinkum-crankum on the wrong side of the skull.