

1

In the resonant quiet of the library, Saul's pen hung fire as a thought took shape. *Palimpsest*. He wrote the word at the top of his notes, then obliterated it with cross-hatching. Although it seemed an accurate enough description of his work in progress. He considered the pages of neatly handwritten notes and cross-references with vague contempt. To the traces of others' ideas, others' research, he had added his own scratchings, that was all. There was nothing original about it; originality, in fact, was not required. Everything that could be written or thought on the subject had been written and thought. His gaze fell on the open book:

One day I wrote her name upon the strand,
But came the waves and washed it away:
Agayne I wrote it with a second hand,
But came the tyde, and made my paynes his pray...

Agayne I wrote it with a second hand... Even Spenser had been there before him. Frowning, pinching the bridge of his nose between thumb and forefinger, he glanced through what he had written that morning, pausing occasionally to erase a word and substitute another.

Around him, on the mezzanine of the Reading Room, his fellow labourers in the salt-mines of the intellect bent over their books. From his position next to the brass rail which ran the length of the balcony and seemed designed to thwart the self-destructive impulses of its incumbents, he looked down on the balding or greying heads of readers on the lower floor. From time to time one of the heads rose and, propelled by its frail armature of muscle and bone, shuffled a few paces to the librarian's desk to submit a request slip. The only sound apart from the just audible flutter of turning pages was the compulsive coughing which moved around the room like a recurrent theme in a piece of chamber music.

Saul slipped the finished essay into its cardboard folder.

It wasn't the best thing he'd ever done, but it was okay. And whatever he came up with, Richardson would find something to criticize. Screw Richardson. He pushed the folder away and began a letter to his wife.

National Library
Edinburgh
3 November 1976

Baby,

I miss you. The last few weeks have been a nightmare. Professor Richardson is a real bastard. Nothing I do for him is right. The food's terrible. And the rain... did I tell you about the rain?

As he wrote an image rose in his mind, like a photograph emerging from the developing tray, of the way she'd looked that time she'd seen him off at JFK. Already a month ago. Her face had worn a strained expression, the lips trembling, the eyebrows arched with the effort of holding back tears.

The worst thing is, you're not here...

'Say, how about a coffee?'

Suppressing a groan, Saul looked up into the eager, red-bearded face of Robert Fischer. The things they had in common—both were studying sixteenth-century poetry; both were married, American and Jewish—did not in themselves, he felt, constitute grounds for a relationship. Robert evidently felt otherwise.

'I don't have time right now. I'm finishing a paper,' he lied.

Robert shrugged. 'Suit yourself. You going to the party tonight?'

'You mean that departmental thing? I guess so. Maybe.'

A man across the aisle made a fierce sound, as of escaping steam. Robert pulled a face, poked Saul in the ribs. 'See you there, okay?'

After this interruption, Saul found himself unable to resume

his letter. *The worst thing is, you're not here.* Maybe he did need a break. He put the folder containing his essay on Spenser's *Amoretti* in his briefcase and went to get his coat. Descending the stairs, he almost collided with a girl in black.

'Sorry.' Pale eyes flicked across his face.

They performed a little side-stepping dance, from which it seemed, for a moment, neither could break free.

'Sorry.' He saw her lips twitch with amusement as, grimacing, he made his escape.

In the street he felt himself engulfed by the cold air, the soft grey light of a November afternoon. He stood for a moment, uncertain which way to go. There was an hour to kill before his supervision with Richardson. He would have liked a cup of coffee, but was afraid of meeting Robert. Oh God. Robert. A nice guy. Undoubtedly a nice guy. So why did he feel like running a mile whenever he appeared? Perhaps it was no more than the assumption that, as expatriates, they ought to stick together. He decided to skip the coffee.

At the intersection he turned into a broad street of tall, crooked houses, once a mediaeval slum, now the preserve of antique shops and art galleries. His eye was struck by the irregularity of its buildings, the variegation of colour: pale stone, worn brick and painted plasterwork. It had charm, of course; maybe it was just perversity—a refusal to be easily seduced—which made him resistant to it. And to a mind accustomed to the logical grids of North American cities, there was something unsettling about the randomness with which the place seemed to have been constructed. Here, along the volcanic ridge on which the Old Town had grown up, the architecture was Gothic, precipitous, fortress-like; below, the broad spacious streets of Georgian New Town offered a deceptively symmetrical version of the same confusion. Even with the tourist map he had bought on his arrival, he had more than once managed to lose himself, emerging, despite confident expectations to the contrary, in a strange part of the city with all familiar landmarks lost to view.

In front of an archway whose spandrels were twin dragons, he paused to get his bearings. Castle, left. Cathedral, right. God, there were so many damn churches. At first he'd thought he

could use their spires as points of navigation, but he found that, like the spires of Combray, they had a disconcerting habit of shifting their position when least expected. In the end he had given up trying to impose a system on his wanderings. It was only when you accepted the essential illogic of the place that the whole thing started to make sense.

Yesterday I went to the Castle. I guess you'd have enjoyed it. Maybe next spring we can go there together...

He'd lingered on the Esplanade in the rain, looking out over the black and grey city, its buildings as diminutive, from his vantage point, as those of an architect's model. In the distance, the antique silhouette of Calton Hill, with its unfinished temple, its ruined tower. *Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria*, he'd thought, as the sun burst from behind a ragged cloud, illuminating the scene like a stage set. In that moment he'd felt himself entirely alone; an exile, like the eighteenth-century prisoners of war whose cryptic messages defaced the walls of the dungeons he had visited that afternoon. It wasn't such a bad feeling. Cutting loose. Here, if he chose, he need no longer be defined by others' expectations; could remake himself, in fact. It was a liberating thought; although not one he confided to his wife.

Sightseeing's not much fun on your own. In fact, the more I see, the more I realize how much I miss having you there to see it with me...

Descending towards Canongate, turning his face from the sharp wind, he read the inscription on the wall of a ramshackle house, birthplace of the Calvinist zealot. LVFE GOD ABVFE AL AND YI NYCHTBOUR AS YI SELF. There seemed, to his mind, to be a contradiction between the generosity of the words and the dogmatic exclusivity of the system which had placed them there. On the pavement at his feet was a spattering of blood, the trace of some recent violence, each drop as round and distinct as a small coin. For a while he wandered, irresolute, glancing in the windows of shops selling items he had no intention of buying and at

the faces of passers-by: people rushing in and out of restaurants and shops, or hurrying to keep appointments. Secret lives, thought Saul.

He bought a newspaper, stepping into a shop doorway out of the wind as he folded it open at the appropriate place. Rooms to Let. He scanned the column with a practised eye, noting with grim satisfaction that *Vegetarian, Non-Smoker* was still open to offers and that *Sunny Studio Flat, Morningside* hadn't yet been snapped up. As he took out his pen to circle the numbers—*Ring After Six*—his attention was caught by the adjacent window display, an arrangement of record sleeves featuring the leering faces of the latest punk band. What a bunch of assholes. Of course the name didn't mean a thing to him. He wasn't interested in street fashions. Especially not this one. In the dark glass he caught sight of his own reflection, its features distorted by a scowl. His clothes—flared jeans, slim-fitting jacket—struck him, suddenly, as out of style. Maybe he could use a haircut.

'Hey, Saul...'

Crossing the street towards him came Magda Czynski. With her long black cloak streaming behind her her tousled hair streaked with grey falling around her shoulders, she resembled Saul thought, some initiate of the Order of the Golden Dawn. Of all the people he had met since his arrival, she was the one he had warmed to most, despite—or perhaps because of—her raffish appearance, her clothes smelling of patchouli, her smoker's cough.

'So how's it going?' she said, as she caught up with him.

Another compatriot. Edinburgh was full of them. American Shakespeare scholars, American Joyce specialists, American devotees of D.H. Lawrence. It did nothing to mitigate his feelings of dislocation, giving him, rather, the sensation of having strayed into some colonial outpost of his native land, in which familiar structures had undergone a subtle metamorphosis.

'So, so.'

They began to walk back together, in the direction from which Saul had come, Magda setting the pace and doing most of the talking—a litany of complaints about the weather, the food, the deficiencies of British universities—in which Saul was able

to join without much exertion.

‘Did you find a room yet?’

‘No.’ He patted the folded newspaper in his pocket. ‘I was just taking a look.’

‘Still living with the dentist, eh?’

‘You make it sound as if we had something going...’

‘With a good-looking guy like you anything’s possible,’ said Magda sardonically.

‘Thanks, but Stuart’s not my type. Are you going to this Eisenberg thing tonight?’

‘Don’t say it like that. It’ll be great. He was Writer in Residence at Brown when I was there. Half the women were in love with him.’

‘What about the other half?’

‘You’re just jealous.’ They stood in front of the modernist facade of the National Library. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘this is where I get off.’

‘Guess I’ll head on up to the university. Give Richardson another chance to rip me to shreds.’

‘Have fun.’

Magda blew him a kiss and was lost to view within the glass blades of the revolving doors.

Displaying an unpredictability Saul was beginning to see as characteristic, Richardson was full of praise for his Spenser paper. At the end of his hour Saul left the glass and teak-veneer box of his supervisor’s office with his faith in what he was doing restored. His research was of value; Richardson had said so and Richardson—for all his sarcastic humour—was one of the best in his field. As he traversed the broad expanse of the Meadows with its network of crisscrossing paths, he redrafted the letter to Virginia in his head, sustained, despite the cold and a sudden awareness that he had eaten nothing since breakfast, by his elated mood.

Saw Richardson today. He seemed pretty pleased with my work so far. Coming from him, that means a lot...

He wondered if his wife would appreciate the significance of

Richardson's approval. It was the kind of thing that could make a lot of difference when it came to getting a job. If Richardson would agree to write him a reference... Of course, it was stupid to build his hopes on one essay...

Who knows? It might be useful when I start looking for university appointments in a couple of years...

And Virginia was the one who was so hot on finding him a job. She's even tried to talk him out of Edinburgh, on the grounds that it would delay his chances of doing so another year. It had taken him a while to convince her that all the best appointments in his field went to guys who'd done at least a year of their research in Europe. And he had no intention of settling for anything but the best.

He bought himself a smoked cheese roll from the Italian shop on Melville and wolfed it down as he walked along. The consumption of food was one of several pleasures prohibited in his present accommodation. On the cracked chessboard path of a turn-of-the-century terraced house, he searched for his keys. Coat pocket. No. Trouser pocket. Damn. Briefcase. Aha.

The ground-floor room into which he let himself had been at one time the living room, to judge from the items with which it was furnished—a clumsy deal sideboard, a standard lamp with a pleated parchment shade, an armchair upholstered with a design of molecular structures. It also contained Stuart's bed, the table on which he worked, the bookcase where he kept his medical books and the divan on which Saul himself had been sleeping. he was relieved to find his room-mate out, if only because it meant there was space to turn around.

After showering—the word was not an accurate description of his ten minutes' naked shivering beneath a rusty trickle of water alternately scalding and icy—he ironed a shirt, then put on the dark suit he had worn for his graduation and, after a moment's hesitation, the tie Virginia had given him as a leaving present. As he combed his (slightly too long) hair, his eyes met those of his reflection in the cracked shaving-mirror. Their sombre glow betrayed his earlier euphoria. A man of potential, he told himself.

He met Stuart McLeish in the hall as he was going out.

‘Hallo there.’ Stuart’s fairness was such that the slightest change of emotion suffused his freckled skin with colour. He’s going to remind me about the money, Saul thought.

‘Hi. Say, about that rent I owe you...’

‘No bother,’ said Stuart, holding up his hands. ‘Give it us when you can.’ His colour deepened. ‘Ah... did I happen to mention that Linda would be staying the weekend?’

‘As a matter of fact you did.’

‘I mean, don’t think I’m hassling you, but...’

‘Hey, listen, I understand. Three’s a crowd, right? Don’t worry, I’ll fix something. Leaved it to me, okay?’

Conveying by his shrug a decisiveness he had not, so far, displayed, Saul edged out of the door and into the dark blue November night.

A little after seven he crossed the square in front of the university, which was surrounded on two sides by Georgian terraces and on the remaining sides by the concrete and glass monoliths with which, in the early seventies, it had been thought fit to replace them. He glanced up at the lighted windows on the ninth floor of the David Hume tower, his destination. Behind the locked gates of the park a man and a woman rearranged their clothing after an act of love. On the far side of the square the lights of the University Library were still burning. The air had a bitter, autumnal chill.

Arriving at the foot of the black granite and glass tower he waited for a few minutes for an elevator which seemed to have stopped between floors, then began to climb the stairs, two at a time. On the first landing he barely had to pause for breath. By the third his heart was beating strongly and he felt the blood moving rapidly in his veins. At the sixth he rested for a minute, leaning his forehead against the cold glass, his gaze moving across the darkened city with its network of lights, the broken reflection of a star in deep water.

Reaching the ninth floor, he removed his raincoat and folded it over his arm. He walked down the corridor until he came to a door, behind which the sounds of talk and laughter could be

heard. Smoothing his hair with the palm of his hand and squaring his shoulders in the narrow-waisted jacket of his new suit, Saul opened the door.

As he walked into the room he had the sensation of moving from silence and obscurity into a blaze of light. An explosion of faces. Someone was laughing loudly, a booming note above the general buzz of sound.

A voice said close to his ear, 'My God you didn't... what did he say?'

He looked round, startled to find himself addressed. The dark-haired girl who had spoken was looking at someone else however. A bearded guy in black.

'He didn't say anything. He wasn't too pleased, though.'

'Silly old fool,' said the girl, dragging deeply on her cigarette.

Smiling apologetically, he edged his way between them towards the drinks table. He hung his coat on an overflowing rack and selected a drink from the array of little glasses already set out. The room was full, or almost full. Latecomers like himself were still arriving. *A desultory gathering of dons*, he thought, describing the scene for Virginia.

It was easier now than it had been on his arrival to distinguish members of the English faculty from research students, although there were confusing similarities. A fondness for the wearing of tweed jackets and corduroy pants was not in itself indicative of status. Several of his fellow post-graduates were indistinguishable from the dons in this respect, while a couple of the lecturers had adopted leather jackets and tight jeans as their preferred uniform. In America, academics dressed like the heads of corporate organizations. Saul wondered at the strange British capacity for blurring certain distinctions, while simultaneously creating new ones. He sipped his drink. Christ—what did it taste like? Distilled mothballs. If this was sherry, he must remember to avoid it in future.

Across the room, Richardson was talking to Leo Eisenberg. The two men made an arresting couple. Tall, gaunt Richardson, with his shabby corduroy suit and his Nietzschean moustache, stooping a little to catch what the other was saying; short, powerfully built Eisenberg, with his grizzled mane swept back over the collar of his velvet jacket, his saturnine actor's face, his

booming laugh.

Everyone, Saul thought, had read at least one of Eisenberg's books. The Pulitzer prize-winning one about his childhood in New Jersey, or the one about his first marriage to the woman who'd ended up living with Lowell—or was it Schwartz? That was a great book. Although on reflection the last one he'd read, the one set in Budapest or Prague or someplace like that, hadn't been up to the standard of the earlier novels. There'd been a coarseness in the writing, a cynicism about his characters and about life in general which the writer had been unable to disguise. As if he were sick and tired of the whole performance.

Saw Eisenberg, Saul mentally scribbled in the margin of his wife's letter, *looking pretty good for an old guy. Wish I could say the same for his books. Maybe writing is like sex: the older you get, the harder it is to get it up...*

'Wasn't Leo great tonight?' Magda appeared from the crowd, exuding cigarette smoke. 'He really made the bastards sit up, didn't he?'

'Well, as a matter of fact...'

'I know, I know, you're going to say he's a reactionary old fart. He *is* a reactionary old fart. But you have to hand it to the guy, he knows what he's talking about. I mean, he has connections everywhere. Washington, the Pentagon...'

'I missed the lecture.'

Magda laughed. Barbaric chunks of hammered and twisted metal swung from her earlobes. Her wrists jangled with amulets and bracelets and her chain-smoker's hands (the index finger stained a deep yellow as if it had been dipped in dye up to the knuckle) glittered with rings in a variety of esoteric designs.

'You didn't miss anything new. The usual stuff about the death of the liberal humanist ideal. The new realism. Gillian, hi.' They were joined by the dark-haired girl in the tight velvet pants Saul had glimpsed on his arrival. 'So what did you think?'

'Hello, Magda,' the other said coolly. 'If you mean the, ah, talk, I thought it was quite good. Of course, it's not my period. Robin enjoyed it, though.'

'Oh yes,' agreed the tall, bearded guy in the black polo-neck. 'I thought some of the things he said about the failure of

Modernism were quite, um, *provocative*.'

'The fact is,' Magda said amiably, 'there's no one to touch him. The guy's a genius.'

Gillian smiled unpleasantly, flicking away a fragment of ash from the front of her sweater. 'Oh, I wouldn't go that far,' she said.

'One has to admit,' Robin murmured, 'that last book of his was pretty awful.'

'It was a great book,' said Magda. 'Saul agrees with me, don't you, Saul?'

He was conscious of three pairs of eyes swivelling in his direction. The dark girl was frowning at him, her straight black brows drawn together in a way he found alluring. She had a pale skin, faintly marked with acne scars. A sullen mouth. He felt inclined to agree with her and her bearded boyfriend. The last book had been bad. But Magda was his friend.

He took refuge in prevarication. 'I, uh, certainly didn't feel it was the best thing he's done. But, uh, a writer of his calibre can get away with a bad book every once in a while.'

Magda frowned and shook her head, although whether at his judgement or his betrayal of her he could not be sure. The slight movement was enough to set up a chain reaction of clashing earrings and bangles.

'Autobiography,' Gillian said with a triumphant sneer. 'Neither more nor less. Straight autobiography, with the names changes.'

'Bullshit,' said Magda pleasantly.

Saul noticed to his surprise that he had finished his drink. On the table beside the half-full tray of sherry glasses some bottles of wine had appeared. He edged away from the debate on Eisenberg's genius. As he stood looking for a clean glass, fragments of sound broke like waves around him.

'Whatever you say about Nixon, he was a professional. This guy's a compete jerk...'

The speaker was one of the American contingent, an irascible Chicagoan named Rakowicz, who was doing research into the novels of Thomas Love Peacock. It seemed incredible to Saul, for whom politics held little interest, that anyone could get so ex-

cited about the new incumbent of the White House. He found himself a glass and filled it with cheap red wine. As he extricated himself from the crush around the drinks table, the glass was almost swept from his hand by the gesticulation of a fierce-eyed Scot who was haranguing a small group of listeners on the iniquities of cultural imperialism.

'Look around,' he was saying angrily, 'and what do you see? Nothing but bloody Americans. And bloody English. All doing bloody English Literature.'

There was someone talking to Magda. A blonde girl in a red blouse, through which the outline of her small, high breasts was dimly visible. The horizontal creases of her tight skirt were like the pencillings of a nervous artist, suggesting the pelvic contours beneath. She glanced in his direction as he joined them, and he recognized the girl he had seen in the library that afternoon.

'He's married, of course,' Magda was saying. 'But they're kind of separated. Every time he talks about getting a divorce, Muriel lays this guilt trip on him about the kids and the traumas he's putting them through.'

'It sounds messy.' The blonde girl lit a cigarette.

'It is. Sometimes I wonder why I got involved in the first place. I mean, he keeps saying he'd going to leave her, but then she has another of her breakdowns and...' Magda broke off suddenly, noticing Saul.

'Don't let me interrupt,' he said.

'Catherine, this is Saul. He's from New York. Another expatriate,' Magda said, with what seemed to him a somewhat pained expression. Clearly she hadn't forgiven him his equivocation on the Eisenberg question.

'Hi.'

She returned his greeting with a cool nod.

'Catherine gave a very good paper on the debate between Space and Time in the *Wake* and the parallels with Wyndham Lewis's *Time and Western Man* at the Joyce seminar last week,' Magda said, by way of a parting shot. They watched as she crossed the room to join the group around Eisenberg.

'Are you a Joyce scholar too?' Saul said, clearing his throat.

'God no. They're all Americans. It must be a national industry,

don't you think?'

The faint condescension with which this was said filled him with resentment. In the same moment he realized how attractive she was. The mixture of sensations was confusing, like biting into a ripe peach and inadvertently lacerating your own tongue. He felt himself grow hot with annoyance and desire, of which annoyance was the greater part. Supercilious bitch. Sexy, supercilious bitch.

'I've no idea. I'm studying Spenser's allegory,' he said.

'That's a relief. I thought I might be in for an evening of intertextual parlour games. How many Dublin street names can you spot in the *Wake*. Name fifty species of insect in the fable of the Ondt and the Gracehoper.'

She smiled at him teasingly. Instantly he forgave her everything.

'You get a lot of that kind of thing in Spenser. Arcana, I mean. Numerology. Kind of like a Gothic cathedral. All these symbols relating to other symbols. The whole intelligible only to God. Or to the reader.'

'I hadn't realized Spenser was such a Modernist.' When she smiled, he caught a glimpse of white, slightly pointed teeth. The hand that held the cigarette was tipped with nails painted the same shade as her blouse.

'So are you a big fan of Eisenberg's, or what?' he was conscious of sounding aggressive. Well, what of it? He felt aggressive. All these people, with their pretentious talk, had soured his earlier mood.

'Do you mean the man or his novels?' She seemed unperturbed by his deliberate discourtesy; seemed rather, in fact, to have expected it.

'The books, I guess.'

'I like some of them. The early ones. His later stuff just seems like a projection of his public persona.'

It was what Saul thought himself. But for some reason he allowed himself to feel aggrieved on Eisenberg's behalf. 'That's unfair, surely? The guy can't help being a star. Why do you think he got asked to this little festspiel in the first place? Because he's a famous writer. A famous American writer.'

‘That’s just what I don’t like about his books,’ she said, with the faint note of condescension he had detected earlier. ‘They’ve got Famous American Writer stamped all over them. Or right through them, like a stick of rock. If you know what that is.’

‘*Brighton Rock*. Sure I do,’ he said, affronted. ‘I studied Greene in high school.’

‘Of course.’

He was aware that he was being mocked and was unsure how to counter it. There was a moment’s silence. Her glass, he saw, was empty.

‘Can I get you another drink?’

As he entered the vortices of the crowd, he saw Eisenberg talking to the girl in the velvet pants who’d hated his books. They seemed to be getting on fine. Reaching the bar, he refilled Catherine’s glass and his own and made his way back towards the centre of the room where he had left her. He saw, with a flash of annoyance, that she was talking to the bearded guy.

‘How’s the book going, Robin.’

‘Slowly.’ He looked pained. ‘You know how it is...’

‘What’s it called again? Bleeding Hearts or something...’

‘*Open Wounds*. It was meant to be out in September but there’ve been some problems with the printers. Apparently the publisher owes them money and they’re refusing to go ahead with the book until it’s been paid. It’s all very aggravating.’

‘Tedious for you.’ She glanced at Saul, by way of thanks, as she took the glass of wine from him. Again, he felt a slight but unmistakable *frisson* of desire.

‘I sent a proof copy to Flynn.’ Robin looked distractedly around as he spoke. ‘I was hoping he might do a preface. Just a paragraph or two, you know, on the new wave in poetry.’

‘So what kind of poetry do you write?’ said Saul, irritated by the guy’s languid gestures, his air of world weariness.

It’s, ah, hard to say exactly. How does one characterize one’s own work, after all? I suppose you could say they were, ah, geometric exercises. Approximations.’

‘I’d be interested to read them sometime. I used to write poetry myself. It’s a phase you go through, I guess,’ said Saul, with what he hoped was a veiled contempt.

‘Possibly.’ Robin’s tone was icy. In the momentary silence, Leo Eisenbeg could be heard telling an anecdote about John Updike. ‘If you’ll, um, excuse me, I ought to have a word with old Hobson,’ Robin said, catching sight of the Professor of Modern Literature. ‘Gilly thinks he might be able to get us some part-time supervision work. She thinks it’ll look good on the CV when we start looking for jobs in a year or so. Talk to you later, Catherine.’

‘You were a little cruel, I thought.’ Catherine smiled at Saul. ‘He writes very nice poetry, as a matter of fact.’

‘I couldn’t care less what kind of poetry he writes. I just wanted to get rid of him,’ he said with a sensation of recklessness.

She looked at him. ‘Do I know you from somewhere?’

‘The steps of the National Library. We almost ran into each other.’

She held his gaze for a moment. ‘What brings you to Edinburgh? Apart from Spenser’s allegory.’

‘Oh, you know...’ Out of the corner of his eye he saw his adversary, the poet, conferring with his girl. Both glanced in his direction. He grinned. ‘Great climate. Terrific people. How about you?’

‘It was the only place that would take me.’ She scanned the crowd with an expression of boredom. ‘It was either this or get a job.’ It was impossible to tell from her tone whether she was joking or not. That was the trouble with the British, Saul thought.

‘I know what you mean,’ he said, thinking fleetingly of his wife, his commitments.

‘Where are you staying?’

‘Do you know Bruntsfield? I’m rooming with a guy from the School of Dentistry. it’s kind of a temporary arrangement. I guess you don’t know of any rooms for rent, not too far from the centre? I’m willing to pay extra for running water and an inside bathroom.’

‘I might know of something,’ she said with a shrug. Her eyes, he saw, had flecks of lighter colour around the central whorl of the iris. Smoke-coloured eyes.

‘Say, Catherine, come and meet Leo, won’t you?’ Magda appeared out of the crowd. ‘He says he didn’t fly three thousand

miles to talk to a bunch of Americans. So I told him we had some people here from Cambridge, England.'

'Thanks a lot, Magda,' said Catherine, making a wry face. She looked at Saul. 'See you later perhaps.'

'Sure.'

He watched her cross the room, her slender figure, elongated by the narrow skirt and high heels, appearing like some fabulous sea-creature, nymph or mermaid, amongst the drab shoals of academics. Grizzled Leo Eisenberg seized her hand as Magda introduced them, and held it between his, as if about to read her fortune. Saul thought, momentarily, about joining them. Maybe he should tell Eisenberg his latest book was crap. Instead he went over to the drinks table and poured himself another glass of sour red wine.

'Ah, Meyer, there you are.' It was Richardson, beaming mildly at him over his bifocals. 'Enjoying the party?'

'Sure.'

'That's the ticket. Quite a good turnout, don't you think? Of course, Leo's always good value. Amusing fellow.'

There was an element of derision in the remark, Saul felt—a suggestion that being amusing was all Leo Eisenberg—an American, after all—was good for. Maybe, he thought, it was just another facet of the language problem. The famous British irony. A sort of cultural freemasonry by which the initiate could subtly mock the uninitiated. He made a non-committal sound.

Across the room, Eisenberg said something to Catherine which made her laugh. Richardson followed the direction of his gaze and said drily, 'Very amusing.'

'Yes.' Saul's grin felt frozen in place. He cast about for a suitable topic of conversation. His *Amoretti* paper. *Fayre eyes, the myrroure of my mazed hart*. He wondered whether Richardson, with his dry laugh, his ironic look, had ever been in love. Unlikely. 'What did you think of his last book?' he said.

Richardson raised an eyebrow. 'One doesn't have to read Leo to appreciate him,' he murmured. His attention was momentarily diverted. 'Excuse me, Meyer, there's someone I ought to...'

'Go ahead.'

Saul edged closer to the group around Eisenberg. From what

he hoped was an unobtrusive position, he gave himself up to looking at Catherine. Her gestures, her smile. *Fayre eyes*. From time to time the buzz of conversation around him subsided, and he caught a fragment of Eisenberg's talk, delivered in his sonorous actor's voice.

'Death,' he was saying. 'All my books are about death.'

'Oh, but surely...' An intense young woman in black twisted the stem of her wine glass as if about to snap it in two. 'A recurrent theme in your work is the nature of love...'

'Love and death, if you like,' Eisenberg agreed with a shrug. 'After all, it's the same thing. What does Mann say? *Le corps, l'amour, la mort, ce trois ne font qu'un*. I always meant to use that in one of my books, somewhere. Maybe the next one, who knows?'

'What's the problem, Saul? You're looking depressed.'

'Oh, hi Robert.'

'Pressure of work getting to you?' Robert said sympathetically.

'Kind of...' Robert was blocking his view of Eisenberg's acolytes. All that was visible of Catherine was the outline of her shoulder in its red blouse, the curve of her hip.

Robert nodded eagerly. There was nothing he liked better than talking about work. 'I did an all-night session a week or so back. The lecturer for renaissance Poetry was sick, so they asked me to prepare a paper on the Elizabethan love lyric to fill in. Went down pretty well.'

'Terrific.' Saul shifted his position in time to see Eisenberg murmur something in Catherine's ear. Horny old bastard.

'Carol and I were saying,' Robert's nasal drone broke into Saul's consciousness once more, 'you should really come to dinner one night.'

'I... That would be...' Saul cast around for reasons why this would not be possible and found none. 'It's a really nice idea, but...'

Eisenberg was on the point of leaving. Escorted by gaunt Richardson on the one hand and squat Hobson on the other, he made a leisurely progress towards the exit, stopping to talk to any woman that struck his fancy.

'Did you find a place yet?' said Robert. 'Because the offer's

still open, if you want to crash at our place for a week or two.'

'Why thanks,' said Saul. 'I'll keep it in mind.' He felt a touch on his shoulder. It was Catherine, in the black, full-skirted coat she had been wearing when he'd seen her for the first time.

'Shall we go?' she said.

'Right away.' He threw an apologetic look in Robert's direction—'See you around, Robert,'—and moved away before the other had a chance to name a date and time. Catherine began to push her way through the crowd that had gathered around the door, as people collected coats and briefcases and exchanged valedictory remarks.

Saul caught up with her. 'You saved my life back there,' he said.

'Really? It was unintentional. I just thought you might like to have a look at the room. You did say you were looking for a room?'

'You mean now?'

'Why not? Unless you've got other plans, of course.'

'Isn't it a little late?'

'Oh Liz and Guy won't mind. They're the people I live with. Liz was saying only the other day she wanted to get someone for the spare room. To help with the rent. Liz worries a lot about money.' The door closed behind them, shutting out the sound of voices. They stood face to face in the dark corridor. 'But if you'd rather come some other time, that's all right...'

'Oh no,' he said quickly. 'Tonight would be fine.'

On the stairs they passed Magda in conversation with the red-haired Glaswegian Saul had noticed earlier. 'It's a creeping menace,' he was saying loudly. 'All the more insidious because it's invisible...'

'Okay, okay, you've convinced me.' Magda acknowledged Saul's greeting with a faint grimace. 'You don't have to convince the whole building.'

'I mean, take the Scots...'

'Take the Scots. Take the Irish. Take the whole damn lot...'

'You're talking about an oppressed people. A subject race...'

'Who *is* that?' Saul said. 'Is he a student?'

'Who, Donald? God no, I shouldn't think so. He must be at

least forty, wouldn't you say? I don't know what he does for a living. Probably nothing. Magda met him in a station buffet on her way back from Dublin. She spent a week there, following in the footsteps of Leopold Bloom.'

'Sounds like fun.'

'I believe it involved a good deal of drinking. Magda was keen to experience the authentic atmosphere of Dublin in 1904.'

'I could use a little authentic atmosphere myself right now.'

'It can be arranged.'

They crossed the dark square, skirting the railings of the park. The air was cold, with a smell of frost. Beneath their feet the stones rang like iron. In the blue-black sky the stars were cold points of light. As they reached the junction of Lawnmarket and George IV Bridge Street she touched his arm, barely grazing the sleeve. He jumped as if a live current had earthed itself along the nerves and tendons of his body.

'This is the quickest way back,' she said. 'or we can go down Cockburn Street. There's a pub along there that isn't bad.'

'Let's go the slowest way, by all means,' he said.

A cold wind tasting of salt stung their faces as they turned into the gallows-haunted street, its blackened tumbledown tenements and broken paving stones giving it the look of an etching printed with too much ink.

'So what did Eisenberg have to say?' They were descending the worn steps into Fleshmarket Close. 'You seemed to be enjoying it.'

She laughed. 'He told me I had the face of a depraved Madonna, whatever that means. He wants me to visit him in New York.'

'Will you?'

'I shouldn't think so. Not unless he pays my fare.'

Halfway down the narrow passage, scarcely wide enough for two people to pass in comfort, was the pub, its entrance set at an oblique angle to the alley. Inside was a smoke-filled parlour, walled with mirrors.

'What do you want?' She stood at the bar, tapping her foot on the brass rail.

'Whisky, I guess. No, give me some of that beer they have

here. Bitter, or some name like that.'

'What do you make of the English department?' she said, as they waited for the drinks to arrive. There was nowhere to sit down. The few small tables, whose cast-iron bases were bare-breasted caryatids, were occupied. The atmosphere's dense nicotine haze was pierced by blasts of cold night air every time the door opened.

'It's okay,' he said warily. 'I mean, Richardson's good. He's the main reason I applied here, as a matter of fact.' Catherine watched as he took a sip of his drink, winced, and set the glass down on the counter.

'Not much improvement on the wine, is it?' she said. 'You should have stuck to whisky.'

'It's not so bad. Really.' He managed another mouthful. 'It just takes some getting used to. I was thinking about your question. The thing is, everything's so unstructured here, after NYU. I don't know where I fit in, or if I fit in.'

'Everyone feels like that.' She lit a cigarette.

'Do they? I'm not so sure. What about Magda? She knows what she's doing, all right. or your friend, whatshisname, the poet...'

'You really took a dislike to poor Robin, didn't you?'

'He was just so damned superior. "*Approximations*"... Christ!'

'Robin's a very nice person.'

'He's got a good-looking wife. A little hard to take, maybe...'
In the mirror he caught a flash of malicious amusement on her face.

She met his eyes in the glass. 'I suspect you find us all a bit hard to take.'

'That's not true, believe me.' he signalled to the barman. 'Whisky, with ice. The same again for my friend here.' The clouded mirror threw back an image of her blonde head next to his dark one. They made a handsome couple, he thought. 'I have no right to criticize people I hardly know.'

'Why not? Superficial impressions are always the most accurate, don't you think?'

'Oh, sure.'

The drinks arrived. he sipped his whisky thoughtfully. In that moment, he saw himself as if at a distance: a good-looking young man in a new suit, sitting with a girl in a bar in a foreign city. Really, things were not so bad. The whisky slipped down his throat like a tongue of fire.

‘Tell me about these people I’m going to meet tonight,’ he said after a short silence, during which he made a pretence of studying the other occupants of the bar. From time to time he stole glances at his companion. her averted face—‘depraved Madonna’ was good, he thought—was partly concealed by the gleaming fall of hair. Her red lips left a faint image of themselves on the rim of the glass.

‘Liz and Guy? They’re nice people. That’s to say, I hardly know them.’

‘Are they graduate students too?’

‘They both work. Liz teaches. Guy’s an architect. He’s still doing exams, I think. I don’t see much of them. it’s the perfect arrangement.’

‘Are they married, or what?’

‘I think so.’ She stifled a yawn. ‘They’re trying to have a baby. Liz keeps going for check-ups to see if everything’s okay. At the moment they think it’s Guy’s sperm-count that’s to blame.’

‘Poor guy.’

‘I suppose it is unfortunate, if you want kids. Although I imagine sterility has its compensations. No more messing about with inter-uterine devices and bits of rubber.’

Saul blushed. ‘Another drink?’ he said.

‘God no. I’ve had enough. There’s some whisky back at the flat if you want it. shall we go?’

They descended the slippery steps into the vaulted reaches of Market Street. High above them, the traffic whirred and shrieked over North Bridge. On Waverley Bridge images of the night city converged. below them, the arterial branching of tracks, the subterranean roar of trains arriving and departing. looking east, the slender columns of the pseudo-Parthenon. Westward, the squat fortress on its rock. In Princes Street crowds were laughing and shouting. Lighted shop windows displayed claymores, tartans.

Bald, dismembered mannequins, their torsos chastely swathed in sacking.

As they walked down Dublin Street, Saul had the sensation that the houses were rearing up on either side, their dark shapes threatening to overwhelm the puny figures in their midst. Tall tenements with lighted windows loomed like cliffs of stone. He thought, 'You could get really lost around here...' They reached London Street.

Halfway along a terrace of large stone houses, once fine, now a shade dilapidated, Catherine paused in front of a door from whose fanlight the glass was missing. Black paper had been pasted over the gap. 'This is it,' she said.

The stairwell was poorly lit. He heard her miss her footing on the first-floor landing and put out a hand to save her, but encountered only air. She fumbled for a moment with her keys and there was the sound of a lock sliding back. He followed her inside, conscious as he stood there in the darkness of an expansion in the volume of space above his head. She snapped on the light and he found himself in a large hall, with doors opening off it on three sides. A large gilt-framed mirror reflected what light there was from the street door. On a high shelf a carved stone head of some classical deity—Hermes? Dionysus?—stared down at the intruders with blind disdain.

She moved ahead of him, flicking switches. 'They must be out. Christ, it's cold in here.'

She flung open the door of a large room, lit only by a swathe of light from the hall and the colder illumination of street-lamps outside its two tall windows. There was the sound of a struck match as she lit the gas-fire. Its blue flames shot up and huge shadows reared on the ceiling. He saw a gleam of scales, a coiled and massive shape emerging from the dark.

'Jesus, what's *that*?'

He found himself shuddering, not entirely from the cold.

'That's the snake. It lives here.'

She was laughing. He heard the soft rasping of her indrawn breath. She moved past him to switch on the lights. In the sudden glare the thing in the glass case looked smaller than he had at first thought it its dusty coils poised in a simulacrum of menace.

On the twisted branch which formed the substructure of the arrangement feathery bodies—jays, kingfishers, tanagers, orioles, wrens—were poised within striking distance of the serpent's head. Tropical species clustered next to native woodland birds without regard for verisimilitude: bowerbirds consorted with magpies, drab finches wore the borrowed plumes of bee-eaters, starlings those of the painted halcyon.

'You see, it's quite harmless.' Her long white throat rippled with laughter.

'It depends what you mean by harmless.' He stared at the thing behind the glass, masterpiece of the taxidermist's art. In the electric light it seemed almost pathetic, ridiculously unstable, the heavy case balanced on barley-sugar legs which trembled with each slight movement, thin Victorian glass shivering beneath his touch. 'Why would anyone want a thing like that in their house?'

'I rather like it.'

'It suits the room, I guess.' He felt his display of nervousness had lost him some subtle advantage. 'Nice place. how did you find it?'

'Oh, you know, a friend of a friend.' She handed him a glass of whisky. 'Aren't you going to sit down?'

'Oh. Sure.' He perched uneasily on the edge of the sofa, shifting his glass from hand to hand. In spite of the room's icy temperature, against which the gas-fire seemed to be making little headway, he found he was sweating. Behind him, just out of his range of vision, Catherine crouched over the record player, like a young witch putting the finishing touches to some complicated piece of sorcery.

'Have you lived here long?' His voice cracked with the effort of trying to sound relaxed.

'A couple of months. Since the beginning of term in fact.'

The shimmering cadences of the overture from *Die Zauberflöte* drowned his next remark.

'What did you say?' She sat down next to him, crossing her legs with a whisper of nylon against nylon.

My God, he thought. I'm a married man.

'I said, you seem to know the place pretty well.' he gulped

his whisky without thinking. In the lamplight, her hair was a gleaming web of tiny filaments.

*Zu Hilfe! Zu Hilfe! sonst ich bin verloren!
der listigen Schlange zum Opfer erkoren!*

She smiled at him. It was the way he had seen her look at Eisenberg. A teasing look. He found his glass was almost empty.

‘I like it here. I can’t think how I ever lived anywhere else,’ she said.

*Barmberzige Götter! Schon nähbet sie sich!
Ach! rettet mich, ach! schützet mich!*

‘Really?’ His voice seemed to him a strangulated squeak. ‘Don’t you find it depressing? Nothing but grey stone houses. And those terrible churches. Like rockets on a launch pad. And the rain.’

‘I agree it’s something of an acquired taste. But I’ve never found it depressing.’ She yawned, stretching her arms above her head.

He caught a whiff of sweat and perfume. Warm skin. Oh God. ‘I guess it’s okay if you like rain.’ He was tense with the effort of talking about the weather. Christ. What would they talk about next? Maybe he should ask her what books she liked. ‘Nice room,’ he said.

In the light of the single lamp, the room’s proportions seemed exaggerated, the ceiling impossibly high, the floor space improbably wide. Or maybe it was the effect of the whisky. He noticed his glass was now full. The impression of elegant austerity achieved by painted panelling, high windows and ornamental plasterwork was softened by the faded romanticism of the room’s furnishings. the walls were papered with a design depicting birds of paradise in an enchanted forest. Lyre birds and parrots flew screeching through imaginary groves. Everywhere you looked there were birds, perching in the heavy folds of curtains and on the backs of armchairs. Their colours—pale orange, dull rose, verdigris, cobalt—were picked up in the worn threads of the carpet and reflected in the mirror over the fireplace, which threw

back its warped images as if from the depths of a forest pool.

Catherine did not reply. He found himself intensely aware of her physical presence: the slight shifting of her weight on the sofa next to him, the movement of her hand as she brushed a strand of hair away from her face. The Queen of the Night began her aria. He closed his eyes, ravished by the voice's sinister beauty, its swooping coloratura. When he opened them again, she was bending over him.

'I thought you'd fallen asleep.'

With a feeling of recklessness he pulled her to him, knocking the rest of his drink onto the carpet.

'It doesn't matter,' she murmured, but whether it was the accident or the embrace to which she was referring he could not be sure. When they kissed her body twisted in his arms like a large fish, a mermaid. Strands of her seaweed hair fell across his face, her wet mouth tasted of salt.

'God, I feel drunk,' she said pleasantly, pulling away from him. 'I'd better show you the room.'

He stared at her. 'Oh, the room.' He got up unsteadily. Under the cold eye of the grinning snake, they swayed together on the threshold.