

"A novel worthy of Balzac."

Philip Marchand *The Toronto Star*

norman mailer charlot's ghost



Ballantine/Fiction/37755/\$6.99

HARLOT'S GHOST

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章
Norman Mailer

BALLANTINE BOOKS • NEW YORK

Sale of this book without a front cover may be unauthorized. If this book is coverless, it may have been reported to the publisher as "unsold or destroyed" and neither the author nor the publisher may have received payment for it.

Copyright © 1991 by Norman Mailer

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Published in the United States of America by Ballantine Books, a division of Random House, Inc., New York, and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada Limited, Toronto.

Portions of this work were originally published in *Rolling Stone*.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to the following for permission to reprint previously published material:

HARCOURT BRACE JOVANOVICH, INC., AND FABER AND FABER LIMITED: Five lines from "The Waste Land," which appear on pages 27 and 28 of *Collected Poems 1909-1962* by T. S. Eliot.

Copyright 1936 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.

Copyright © 1964, 1963 by T. S. Eliot.

Rights throughout the world excluding the U.S.A. are controlled by Faber and Faber Limited. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., and Faber and Faber Limited.

THE NEW REPUBLIC: Excerpts from "Unofficial Envoy" by Jean Daniel, December 13, 1963, and excerpts from "When Castro Heard the News" by Jean Daniel, December 7, 1963.

Copyright © 1963 by The New Republic, Inc.

Reprinted by permission of *The New Republic*.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 90-53152

ISBN 0-345-37755-9

This edition published by arrangement with Random House, Inc.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First International Ballantine Books Edition: March 1992

OMEGA-1 On a late-winter evening in 1983, while driving through fog along the Maine coast, recollections of old campfires began to drift into the March mist, and I thought of the Abnaki Indians of the Algonquin tribe who dwelt near Bangor a thousand years ago.

In the spring, after the planting of corn, the younger braves and squaws would leave the aged to watch over the crops and the children, and would take their birchbark canoes south for the summer. Down the Penobscot River they would travel to Blue Hill Bay on the western side of Mount Desert where my family's house, built in part by my great-great-grandfather, Doane Hadlock Hubbard, still stands. It is called the Keep, and I do not know of all else it keeps, but some Indians came ashore to build lean-tos each summer, and a few of their graves are among us, although I do not believe they came to our island to die. Lazing in the rare joys of northern warmth, they must have shucked clams on the flats at low tide and fought and fornicated among the spruce and hemlock when the water was up. What they got drunk on I do not know, unless it was the musk of each other, but many a rocky beach in the first hollow behind the shore sports mounds of ancient clamshells, ground to powder by the centuries, a beach behind the beach to speak of ancient summer frolics. The ghosts of these Indians may no longer pass through our woods, but something of their old sorrows and pleasures joins the air. Mount Desert is more luminous than the rest of Maine.

Even guidebooks for tourists seek to describe this virtue: "The island of Mount Desert, fifteen miles in diameter, rises like a fabled city from the sea. The natives call it Acadia, beautiful and awesome."

Beautiful and awesome. We have a fjord in the middle of Mount Desert, a spectacular four-mile passage by water between promontories on either side. It is the only true fjord on the Atlantic coast of North America, yet it is but a part of our rock-hewn splendor. Near the shore, peaks rise abruptly a thousand feet to afford sailing craft the illusion of great mountains, and

our finest anchorage, Northeast Harbor, is in summer a dazzle of yachts.

Perhaps it is the nearness of our mountains to the sea, but silences are massive here, and summers have an allure not simple to describe. For one thing, we are not an island to attract people who follow the sun. We have almost no sand beach. The shore is pebble and clamshell strand, and twelve-foot tides inundate the rocks. Washed by incoming waves are barnacles and periwinkles, rockweed mussels, Irish moss, red seaweed, dulse. Sand dollars and whelks lie scattered in the throw of the surf. Kelp is everywhere and devil's-apron often winds around one's ankles. In the tide pools grow anemone and sponge. Starfish and sea urchins are near your toes. One walks with care over sharp stones. And the water is so cold that swimmers who did not spend childhood vacations in this icy sea can hardly bear it. I have lolled in the wild green above the reefs of the Caribbean and sailed over purple deeps in the Mediterranean, I have seen the inimitable mist of hot summer on the Chesapeake when all hues blend between the sky and the bay. I even like slate-brown rivers that rush through canyons in the West, but I love the piercing blue of Frenchman's Bay and Blue Hill Bay, and the bottomless blue of the Eastern and Western Way surrounding Mount Desert—indeed, one's affection for the island even shares the local accent. As decreed by the natives, one spells it Mount Desert, but the pronunciation is Mount Dessert. The view is as fine as sugar frosting to a New Englander's eyes.

I speak in hyperbole, but then who cannot on recalling such summer beauties as the astonishing color of our rocks at water's edge. They are apricot, then lavender, and pale green, yet in late afternoon they become purple over the whole, a dark royal violet is the color of the twilight shore seen from the sea. That is our island in August. Beach heather and wild rose grow near the salt marsh grass, and in our meadows white-throated sparrows spring from one decaying stump to another. The old hayfields smell of redtop and timothy, and wildflowers bloom. The northern blue violet and the starflower, the wood sorrel and the checkerberry, painted trillium and wild geranium, golden heather and Indian pipe grow in our bogs and fields and on the sunny slopes of our mountains in the seams between ledges of rock. Down by the marshes are swamp candles and jewelweed. Once, when I was a boy (for I studied the names of wildflowers then) I found the white-vein orchid in some swampy woods; it was greenish-white, and lovely, and as rare as the moon entering eclipse. For all its tourist traffic come July, Mount Desert is still possessed of a tender yet monumental silence.

If one would ask how the monumental can ever be tender, I

reply that such words recall us to the beautiful and awesome. So am I tempted, when caution deserts me, to describe my wife, Kittredge. Her white skin becomes luminous in any pale meadow; it also reflects the shadows of the rock. I see Kittredge sitting in such shadows on a summer day, and her eyes have the blue of the sea.

I have also been with her when she can seem as bleak as the March storms that strike this island. Now, in March, the fields are dun, and the snow, half-gone, will be stained in the morning with the stirring of the mud. In March, the afternoons are not golden but gray, and the rocks are rarely burnished by the sun. Certain precipices become as grim as the endless meditations of granite. At winter's end, Mount Desert is like a miser's fist; the dull shell of the sky meets a leaden sea. Depression sits over the hills. When my wife is depressed, no color stirs in my own heart, and her skin is not luminous but hooded in pallor. Except for snowy days, when island lights still dance off the frozen rock like candles on a high white cake, I do not like to live in late winter on Mount Desert. The sunless sky weighs over us, and a week can go by when we do not speak. That is loneliness kin to the despair of a convivial drinker who has not poured a glass for days. It is then that ghosts begin to visit the Keep. Our fine dwelling is hospitable to ghosts.

The house sits alone on an island, not ten acres of spread, just a stone's throw—literally one long throw—off the western shore of Mount Desert. Called Doane, after my great-great-grandfather, it is subject, I suspect, to visitations. While islands, according to my wife, are supposed to be more acceptable to invisible spirits than to such peculiarly apparent manifests as ghosts, I think we break the rule.

Out on Bartlett's Island, somewhat to the north of us, is the all-but-certified ghost of Snowman Dyer, an eccentric old fisherman. He died on Bartlett's in 1870 under the roof of his spinster sister. Once, as a young man, he had bartered five lobsters for a small Greek tome that belonged to a classics scholar at Harvard. The work was the *Oedipus Rex* and it had an interlinear trot. The old fisherman, Snowman Dyer, was intrigued so much by Sophocles' words in literal translation that he attempted to read the original Greek. Not knowing how to pronounce the alphabet, he contrived nonetheless a sound for each character. As he grew older, he grew bolder, and used to recite aloud from this unique tongue while wandering over the rocks. They say that to spend a night in the dead sister's house will bring Snowman Dyer's version of Greek to your ear, and the sounds are no more barbaric than the claps and groans of our weather. A corporate executive from Philadelphia, Bingham Baker, and his

family now inhabit the house and seem to thrive on the ghost—at least, all the Bakers look pink-cheeked in church. I do not know if they hear the moan of winter in Snowman Dyer's voice.

Old Snowman may be the ghost of Bartlett's Island, but we have another on Doane, and he is not so agreeable. A sea captain named Augustus Farr, he owned and occupied our land two and a half centuries ago. There are allusions to his habits in an old sea-diary I have found in the library at Bar Harbor, and one voyage is cited "durying whych Farr ingaged in practize of piracie" and boarded a French frigate in the Caribbean, took its cargo of Cuban sugar, put the crew to sea in an open boat (except for those who would join him), and beheaded the commodore, who died in naked state because Farr had appropriated his uniform. Then Augustus was so bold in later years as to have himself buried on his northern island—now our island—in the Frenchman's dress apparel.

I have never seen Augustus Farr, but I may have heard his voice. One night, not long ago, when alone in the Keep, I came out of a dream to find myself conversing with the wall. "No, leave," I said boldly, "I do not know if you can make amends. Nor do I trust you." When I recall this dream—if it was a dream—I shiver in a way I cannot repeat at other times. My flesh shifts on my back as if I am wearing a jacket of lizard skin. I hear my own voice again. I am not speaking to the plaster in front of me but to a room I feel able to see on the other side of the wall. There, I visualize a presence in a tattered uniform sitting on an oaken and much-scarred captain's chair. An odor of corruption is in my nose. Out on the mud flats, or so I hear through the window—I do not dare to look—the sea is boiling. How can waters boil when the tide is out? I am still in my dream but watch a mouse streak along the floor, and feel the ghost of Augustus Farr on the other side of the wall. The hair stiffens on the back of my head as he descends the stairs to the cellar. I hear him going down to the Vault.

Underneath the cellar, it was originally a dugout built by my father after the Second World War when he still owned the Keep. He prided himself on being the first American to take in the consequences of Hiroshima. "Everybody needs a place where he can get under it all," said my father, Cal Hubbard, two years before he sold our property to his second cousin, Kittredge's father, Rodman Knowles Gardiner, who in turn gave it over to Kittredge on her first marriage. In the time Rodman Gardiner had it, however, he decided to go my father one further and was the first man, so far as I know, in this part of Maine to have a cinder-block fallout shelter complete with canned goods, bunks, kitchen, ventilation fans, and at the entrance, two corridors set

at right angles to one another. What that ninety-degree turn has to do with keeping off nuclear radiation I cannot say, but there were curious fashions in early fallout shelters. It is still there for us; a family embarrassment. Up in Maine you are not supposed to protect your life that much.

I despised the shelter. I let it molder. The foam rubber of the bunk mattresses has gone to powder. The stone floor is covered with nothing less than an old slime. The electric light bulbs, long burned out, are corroded in their sockets.

Let this not give too false an idea of the Keep. The floor of the Vault—so the fallout shelter came inevitably to be named—is ten feet below the main cellar, which is, itself, a large, clean, stone chamber. The main floor and second story and full attic of the Keep are kept in reasonable order by a Maine woman who comes in every day the weather permits when we are there, and once a week when we are gone. It is only the Vault that is left untended. That is my fault. I cannot bear to let anyone go down to it. If I open the door, a mad dank odor comes up from below. It is no rarity for subcellars to be dank, but the odor of madness is another matter.

On the night when I emerged from my dream to encounter Augustus Farr, on that night when I became convinced I was not dreaming and heard him descending the stairs, I got up from bed and attempted to follow. This was not an act of bravery so much as a product of endless conditioning in the special art of converting one's worst fears to fortitude. My father told me once when I was an adolescent, "If you are afraid, don't hesitate. Get right into the trouble if that is the honest course." It was a hypothesis on the art of courage that I had to refine considerably in bureaucratic wars where patience was the card to play, but I knew when fear proved paralyzing that one had sometimes to force a move or let one's soul pay up. The honest course on encountering a ghost was clear: Follow him.

I tried. My feet as cold as a winter corpse, I started down the stairs. That was no dream. In front of me, doors slammed in a fury. "I will not return until I do," I thought I heard a voice cry. By the time I descended to the first cellar, my resolve had run out. At the entrance to the Vault a presence as malevolent as any dark creature of the sea seemed to be waiting below. My courage was now not large enough to take my legs down the last ten steps. I stood there unmoving, as if some part of honor would be safeguarded if I did not flee, but stood in place to accept the wrath of whatever it was. I will say it. I lived in the intangible embrace of that malevolence. Then, Augustus—I assume it was Augustus—withdrew into the depths of the Vault and I felt free to retreat. I went back to my bed. I slept as if

drugged by the most powerful of tranquilizers. Since that time I have not gone to the Vault nor has Augustus come to me.

Nonetheless, the Keep was altered by his visitation. Possessions get broken now at an alarming rate, and I have seen ashtrays slide off tables. It is never so dramatic as in the films. Rather, it is sly. You cannot say to a certainty that your coat sleeve did not brush the object nor that the old floor does not have a tilt. It could all have happened through natural causes, or just about. Dealing with such phenomena is like trying to ascertain the facts when talking to a consummate liar. Things keep turning into other things. The wind outside our windows seemed quicker than ever to show its cardinal points: sinister, or saintly, soft or shocking. I never listened to the wind so much as after the visit of Augustus Farr, and the sound of oars would come to me although no boatman was visible. Still, I could hear oarlocks groaning, and bells rang out from chapels on the main island where, so far as I knew, no towers stood to hold the bells. I would listen to the gate swinging in a high wind and plaster falling behind the laths. Small beetles with shells as hard as 12-gauge shot came out of the sills. Every time I went through my books in the library, I could swear a few had moved, but of course the cleaning woman often passed through, or Kittredge, or even myself. No matter. Like a chill pool in a warm hall, Farr was about.

Yet, for all this, the Keep was not spoiled. A ghostly presence is not always dire. Kittredge and I, being childless, had space to let in so large a house. Farr was a mighty diversion, not unequal to living with a drunk or a crazy brother. If he remains as a phantom I cannot swear I have seen, still I would speak of ghosts as real. Some ghosts may be real.

EMBARKING A YEAR later, in March of 1984, on an overnight flight from Kennedy Airport, New York, to London, with a connection to Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow, I kept reading and rereading the dozen pages of typescript that described my former home on Doane Island in Maine. I did not dare to cease. I was in a state of anxiety that gave promise of growing unmanageable. Those dozen pages were the first chapter of what I had come to call the Omega manuscript. I had another, an Alpha manuscript, which once took up twelve inches in a locked file cabinet next to my desk at the Keep, a work that could boast of more than two thousand typewritten pages, but it was formidably indiscreet, and so I had committed its bulk to microfilm, and consigned the original sheets to a shredder. The Alpha manuscript was with me now, all two thousand frames of microfilm on two hundred strips of ten frames each which, laid by sets into glassine sleeves,

were packed snugly within an eight-by-eleven-inch manila envelope. I had concealed this slim, even elegant, package, not a quarter of an inch thick, in a recess of a special piece of luggage I had owned for years, said medium-sized suitcase now riding in the cargo hold of the British Airways plane that was taking me on the first leg, New York to London, of my flight to Moscow. I would not see it until I was ready to unpack the bag in Russia.

My other manuscript, however, the Omega, a moderate one hundred and eighty pages, so recently written that I had not converted it to microfilm, still existed as typescript in the attaché case beneath my seat. If I had spent the first hundred minutes of this trip in limbo, which is to say, there in the middle of Economy, dreading my arrival in London, my change of planes, and, most certainly, my eventual terminus in Moscow, I felt unable to explain to myself why I had embarked in the first place. Like an insect rendered immobile by a whiff of poison spray, I sat in my chair tilted back all three inches of rearward slant available to the Economy tourist and read the first fourteen pages of the Omega manuscript one more time. I was in that half-stupor where one's legs are too massive to move. All the while, nerves jumped like light-up buttons in an electronic game. Nausea was my neighbor.

Due for arrival in London in another few hours, I felt obliged to read the rest of Omega, all of one hundred and sixty-six pages of typescript, after which I would tear up the sheets and flush away as many of them as the limited means of the British Airways crapper on this aircraft would be able to gulp into itself, then save the rest for the sturdier gulleys in the men's room attached to the Transit Lounge at Heathrow. Visualizing the whirl of these shreds and strips of paper revolving into the hound's gurgle of a near-to-choking bowl came close to carrying me off on the good ship vertigo.

My anxiety was from pain of loss. I had spent my last year working on Omega. It was all I had to show for a twelve-month of inner turmoil. If I had reread Omega a hundred times during the months of advancing its chapters, page by slow and daily page, I would now be reading such work for a last time. I was saying good-bye to a manuscript which, in the past year, had accompanied me through hints and recollections of some of the worst episodes of my life. Soon, in but a few hours more, I would have to dispose of the contents, yes, paragraph ripped through the middle after paragraph, these pages, drawn and quartered, flushed into sewer pipes. If I dared not get drunk, I did order a Scotch from the stewardess, and swallowed it at a gulp while offering a toast to the last of Omega.

OMEGA-2 On that moonless night in March, returning to the Keep, I took the road from Bath to Belfast, the road that goes by Camden. In every cove was fog and it covered one's vision like a winding sheet, a fog to embrace the long rock shelf offshore where sailing ships used to founder. When I could no longer see anything at all, I would pull the car over; then the grinding of the buoys would sound as mournful as the lowing of cattle in a rain-drenched field. The silence of the mist would come down on me. You could hear the groan of a drowning sailor in the lapping of that silence. I think you had to be demented to take the coast road on such a night.

Past Camden, a wind sprang up, the fog departed, and soon the driving was worse. With this shift in the weather, a cold rain came. On some curves the highway had turned to ice. Going into skids, my tires sang like a choir in a country church surrounded by forest demons. Now and then would appear a shuttered town and each occasional streetlight would seem equal to a beacon at sea. Empty summer houses, immanent as a row of tombs, stood in witness.

I was full of bad conscience. The road had become a lie. It would offer traction, then turn to glass. Driving that car by the touch of my fingertips, I began to think once more that lying was an art, and fine lying had to be a fine art. The finest liar in the land must be the ice monarch who sat in dominion on the curve of the road.

My mistress was behind me in Bath, and my wife awaited me near the island of Mount Desert. The ice monarch had installed his agents in my heart. I will spare you the story I told Kittredge about small transactions that would occupy me in Portland until evening and so cause my late return to Mount Desert. No, my business had been done in Bath, and in the merry arms of one of the wives of Bath. By acceptable measure, she did not have much to offer against my mate. The woman in Bath was agreeable, whereas my dear wife was a beauty. Chloe was cheerful, and Kittredge was—I apologize for so self-serving a word—distinguished. You see, Kittredge and I, while only third cousins,

look much alike—even our noses are similar. Whereas Chloe is as common as gravy and heartening to taste. Buxom and bountiful, she worked in summer as a waitress in a Yankee inn. (Let us say: a Yankee-inn-type restaurant run by a Greek.) One night a week, on the hostess's night off, Chloe was proud to serve as *pro tem* hostess. I helped her funds a bit. Perhaps other men did, too. I hardly knew. I hardly cared. She was like a dish I was ready to consume once or twice a month. I do not know if it would have been three times and more a week if she lived just over the hill, but Bath was considerably more than a hundred miles from the backside (our word for the backshore) of Mount Desert, and so I saw her when I could.

A liaison with a mistress that is kept so infrequently tends, I think, to serve civilization. If it had been any marriage but my own, I would have remarked that a double life lived with such moderation ought to be excellent—it might make both halves more interesting. One could remain deeply, if not wholly, in love with one's wife. My occupation offered wisdom on such matters, after all. Did we begin by speaking of ghosts? My father commenced a family line that I continue: Spooks. In Intelligence, we look to discover the compartmentalization of the heart. We made an in-depth psychological study once in the CIA and learned to our dismay (it was really horror!) that one-third of the men and women who could pass our security clearance were divided enough—handled properly—to be turned into agents of a foreign power. "Potential defectors are at least as plentiful as potential alcoholics," was the cheerful rule of thumb we ended with on that one.

After so many years of work with imperfect people I had learned, therefore, to live a little with the lapses of others so long as they did not endanger too much. Yet my own defection from the marital absolute left me ill with fear. On this night of blind driving to which I have introduced you, I was half certain I would soon be in a wreck. I felt caught in invisible and monstrous negotiations. It seemed—suspend all logic—that dreadful things might happen to others if I stayed alive. Can you understand? I do not pretend: I think something of the logic of the suicide is in such thoughts. Kittredge, who has a fine mind, full of *aperçus*, once remarked that suicide might be better understood on the assumption there was not one reason for the act but two: People may kill themselves for the obvious reason, that they are washed up, spiritually humiliated down to zero; equally, they can see their suicide as an honorable termination of deep-seated terror. Some people, said Kittredge, become so mired in evil spirits that they believe they can destroy whole armies of malig-

nity by their own demise. It is like burning a barn to wipe out the termites who might otherwise infest the house.

Say much the same for murder. An abominable act which, nonetheless, can be patriotic. Kittredge and I did not talk long about murder. It was a family embarrassment. My father and I once spent close to three years trying to assassinate Fidel Castro.

Let me return, however, to that icy road. There, if my sense of preservation kept a light touch on the wheel, my conscience was ready to crush it. I had shattered more than a marriage vow. I had broken a lovers' vow. Kittredge and I were fabulous lovers, by which I do not intend anything so vigorous as banging away till the dogs howl. No, back to the root of the word. We were *fabulous* lovers. Our marriage was the conclusion to one of those stern myths that instruct us in tragedy. If I sound like the wind of an ass in whistling about myself on such a high note, it is because I feel uneasy at describing our love. Normally, I cannot refer to it. Happiness and absolute sorrow flow from a common wound.

I will give the facts. They are brutal, but better than sentimental obfuscation. Kittredge had had but two men in her life. Her first husband and myself. We began our affair while she was still married to him. Some time after she betrayed him—and he was the kind of man who would think in terms of betrayal—he took a terrible fall in a rock climb and broke his back. He had been the lead, and when he went, the youth who was belaying him from the ledge below was pulled along. The anchor jerked out of the rock. Christopher, the adolescent killed in the fall, was their only child.

Kittredge could never forgive her husband. Their son was sixteen and not especially well coordinated. He should not have been led to that particular rock face. But then, how could she forgive herself? Our affair sat over her head. She buried Christopher and watched over her husband during the fifteen weeks he was in the hospital. Soon after he came home, Kittredge chose to get into a warm bath one night and cut each of her wrists with a sharp kitchen blade, after which she lay back and prepared to bleed to death in her tub. But she was saved.

By me. She had allowed no communication since the day of the fall. News so terrible had divided the ground between us like a fissure in earth that leaves two neighboring homes a gaping mile apart. God might as well have spoken. She told me not to see her. I did not try. On the night, however, that she took the knife to her wrists, I had (on a mounting sense of unease) flown up from Washington to Boston, then to Bangor, and rented a car to go on to Mount Desert. I heard her calling to me from caverns so deep in herself she was never aware of her own voice. I

arrived at a silent house and let myself in through a window. Back on the first floor was an invalid and his nurse; on the second, his wife, presumably asleep in a far-off bed. When her bathroom door was locked and she did not reply, I broke in. Ten minutes more would have been too late.

We went back to our affair. Now there was no question. Shocked by tragedy, certified by loss, and offered dignity by thoughts we could send to one another, we were profoundly in love.

The Mormons believe that you enter into marriage not only for this life but, if you are married in the Temple, will spend eternity with your mate. I am no Mormon, but even by their elevated measure, we were in love. I could not conceive that I would ever be bored in my wife's presence either side of the grave. Time spent with Kittredge would live forever; other people impinged upon us as if they entered our room holding a clock in their hand.

We had not begun in so inspired a place. Before the disaster on the rock face, we were taken with each other enormously. Since we were third cousins kissing, the tincture of incest enriched the bliss. But it was—on the highest level—qualified stuff. We were not quite ready to die for one another, just off on an awfully wicked streak. Her husband, Hugh Montague—"Harlot"—took on more importance, after all, in my psyche than my own poor ego. He had been my mentor, my godfather, my surrogate father, and my boss. I was then thirty-nine years old and felt half that age in his presence. Cohabiting with his wife, I was like a hermit crab who had just moved into a more impressive carapace; one was waiting to be dislodged.

Naturally, like any new lover in so momentous an affair, I did not ask for her motive. It was enough that she had wanted me. But now, after twelve years with Kittredge, ten in marriage, I can give a reason. To be married to a good woman is to live with tender surprise. I love Kittredge for her beauty and—I will say it—her profundity. We know there is more depth to her thought than to mine. All the same, I am frequently disconcerted by some astonishing space in the fine workings of her mind. Attribute it to background. She has not had a career like other women. I do not know many Radcliffe graduates who went into the CIA.

Item: On the night twelve years ago when we first made love, I performed that simple act of homage with one's lips and tongue that a good many of our college graduates are ready to offer in the course of the act. Kittredge, feeling some wholly unaccustomed set of sensations in the arch from thigh to thigh, said, "Oh. I've been waiting years for that!" She soon made a point

of telling me I was the next thing to pagan perfection. "You're devil's heaven," she said. (Give me Scotch blood every time!) She looked no older on our first night than twenty-seven, but had been married already for eighteen and a half of her forty-one years. Hugh Tremont Montague was, she told me (and who could not believe her?), the only man she had ever known. Harlot was, also, seventeen years her senior, and very high echelon. Since one of his skills had been to work with the most special double agents, he had developed a finer sense of other people's lies than they could ever have of his. By now he trusted no one, and, of course, no one around him could ever be certain Harlot was telling the truth. Kittredge would complain to me in those bygone days that she couldn't say if he were a paragon of fidelity, a gorgon of infidelity, or a closet pederast. I think she began her affair with me (if we are to choose the bad motive rather than the good) because she wanted to learn whether she could run an operation under his nose and get away with it.

The good motive came later. Her love deepened for me not because I saved her life but because I had been sensitive to the mortal desperation of her spirit. I am finally wise enough to know that that is enough for almost all of us. Our affair commenced again. This time, we made an absolute of love. She was the kind of woman who could not conceive of continuing in such a state without marriage. Love was a state of grace and had to be protected by sacramental walls.

She felt obliged, therefore, to tell her husband. We went to Hugh Tremont Montague and he agreed to divorce. That may have been the poorest hour of my life. I was afraid of Harlot. I had the well-founded dread one feels for a man who can arrange for the termination of people. Before the accident, when he was tall and thin and seemed put together of the best tack and gear, he always carried himself as if he had sanction. Someone on high had done the anointing.

Now, stove-in at the waist, conforming to the shape of the wheelchair, he still had sanction. That was not the worst of it, however. I may have been afraid of him, but I also revered him. He had not only been my boss, but my master in the only spiritual art that American men and boys respect—machismo. He gave life courses in grace under pressure. The hour that Kittredge and I spent together on either side of his wheelchair is a bruise on the flesh of memory. I remember that he cried before we were done.

I could not believe it. Kittredge told me later it was the only time she ever saw him weep. Hugh's shoulders racked, his diaphragm heaved, his spavined legs remained motionless. He was a cripple stripped down to his sorrow. I never lost the image. If

I compare this abominable memory to a bruise, I would add that it did not fade. It grew darker. We were sentenced to maintain a great love.

Kittredge had faith. To believe in the existence of the absurd was, for her, a pure subscription to the devil. We were here to be judged. So our marriage would be measured by the heights it could climb from the dungeon of its low beginnings. I subscribed to her faith. For us, it was the only set of beliefs possible.

How, then, could I have spent my most recent hours this gray March day slopping and sliding on the over-friendly breast and belly of Chloe? My mistress's kisses were like taffy, soft and sticky, endlessly wet. From high school on, Chloe had doubtless been making love with her mouth to both ends of her friends. Her groove was a marrow of good grease, her eyes luminous only when libidinal. So soon as we subsided for a bit, she would talk away in the happiest voice about whatever came into her head. Her discourse was all of trailer homes (she lived in one), how ready they were to go up in flames, and of truckers with big rigs who ordered coffee while sitting on enough self-importance to run the Teamsters. She told anecdotes about old boyfriends she ran into at the town lunch counter. "'Boy,' I said to myself, 'has he been shoveling it in! Fat!' Then I had to ask myself: 'Chloe, is your butt that far behind?'" I put the blame on Bath. There's nothing to do here in winter except eat, and look for hungry guys like you," at which she gave a friendly clap to my buttocks as if we were playing on a team together—the old small-town sense that you heft a person's worth—and we were off again. There was one yearning in my flesh (for the common people) that she kept at trigger-trip. Skid and slide and sing in unison, while the forest demons yowl.

I had met her in the off-season in the big restaurant where she worked. It was a quiet night, and I was not only alone at my table but the only diner in my section. She waited on me with a quiet friendliness, much at home with the notion that a meal that tasted right for me was better wages for her than a meal that tasted wrong. Like other good materialistic people before her, she was also maternalistic: She saw money as coming in all kinds of emotional flavors. It took happy money to buy a dependable appliance.

When I ordered the shrimp cocktail, she shook her head. "You don't want the shrimp," she said. "They've died and risen three times. Take the chowder." I did. She guided me through the meal. She wanted my drinks to be right. She did it all with no great fuss—I was free to stay in my private thoughts, she in hers. We talked with whatever surplus was in our moods. Perhaps one

waitress in ten could enjoy a lonely customer as much as Chloe. I realized after a while that on pickup acquaintance, which was never my style, I was surprisingly comfortable with her.

I stopped off again at the restaurant on another quiet night and she sat and had dessert and coffee with me. I learned of her life. She had two sons, twenty and twenty-one; they dwelt in Manchester, New Hampshire, and worked in the mills. She claimed to be thirty-eight, and her husband had broken up with her five years ago. Caught her cheating. "He was right. I was a boozier then, and you can't trust a boozier. My heels were as round as roller skates." She laughed with enough good humor to have been watching her own pornographic romp.

We went to her trailer. I have an ability developed, I believe, by my profession. I can concentrate on what is before me. Inter-office flaps, bureaucratic infringements, security leaks, even such assaults on the unconscious as my first infidelity to Kittredge, can be ignored. I have a personal instrument I think of as average, a good soldier, a dick as vulnerable as any other. It throbs with encouragement and droops with the oncoming of guilt. So it is testimony to the power of my concentration and to Chloe's voluptuous exposures (call it a crime against the public pleasure for her to be seen in clothes) that, considering the uniqueness and magnitude of my marital breach, there was only a hint of sag from time to time in the fine fellow below. I was starved, in truth, for what Chloe had to offer.

Let me see if I can explain. Lovemaking with Kittredge was—I use the word once more—a sacrament. I am not at ease trying to speak of it. Whereas, I can give all away in talking about Chloe; we were like kids in the barn; Chloe even smelled of earth and straw. But there was ceremony to embracing Kittredge.

I do not mean that we were solemn or measured. If it did not come to real desire, we might not make love for a month. When it happened, however, it certainly did; after all our years together, we still flew at each other. Kittredge, indeed, was as fierce as one of those wood-animals with claws and sharp teeth and fine fur that you can never quite tame. At its worst, there were times when I felt like a tomcat in with a raccoon. My tongue (once key to devil's heaven) was rarely now in her thoughts—rather, our act was subservient to coming together, cruelty to cruelty, love to love. I'd see God when the lightning flashed and we jolted our souls into one another. Afterward, was tenderness, and the sweetest domestic knowledge of how curious and wonderful we were for one another, but it was not in the least like getting it on with Chloe. With Chloe it was get ready for the rush, get ready for the sale, whoo-ee, gushers, we'd hit