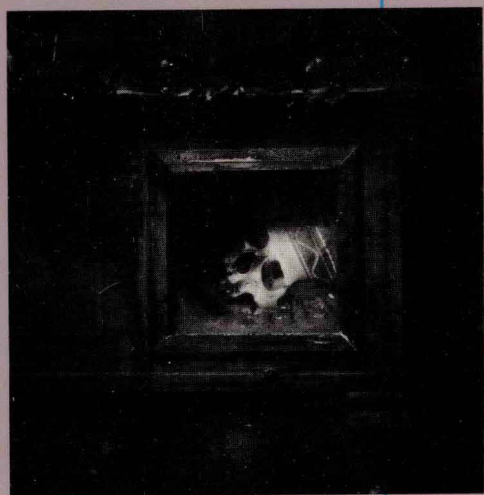


SUSAN SONTAG

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DEATH KIT

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ANCHOR BOOKS



DOUBLEDAY

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY AUCKLAND

AN ANCHOR BOOK

PUBLISHED BY DOUBLEDAY

a division of Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc.
666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10103

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Publishing Group, Inc.

Death Kit was originally published in hardcover
by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1967. The Anchor Books edition
is published by arrangement with Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sontag, Susan, 1933—

Death kit / Susan Sontag. — 1st Anchor Books ed.

p. cm.

I. Title.

PS3569.O6547D4 1991 90-22220

813'.54—dc20 CIP

ISBN 0-385-26711-8

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

FIRST ANCHOR BOOKS EDITION: APRIL 1991

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DIDDY the Good was taking a business trip. The Diddy, his family nickname, was used (now) only by his brother and a few friends left over from schooldays. “Hi, Diddy!” Paul sang out every time he came into town, dropping by the office without warning or turning up unannounced at Diddy’s apartment at three in the morning. Diddy the Good is how he, Diddy, embellished the nickname, sometimes, in his mocking self-appraisals. Also: Good Diddy, Goody Did, and Done-Done. Himself and childhood friends apart, the right name was Dalton.

Dalton Harron, in full: a mild fellow, gently reared in a middle-sized city in Pennsylvania and expensively educated. A good-natured child, the older son of civilized parents who had quietly died. (Now) a rather handsome man of thirty-three. Quieter than he once was. A little fussy, perhaps; somewhat sententious. Used to getting an answer when he spoke politely to someone, and never reconciled to the brutal manners of the metropolis in which (now) he lived. But unresentful. The sort of man who doesn't mistreat women, never loses his credit cards or breaks a plate while washing up, works conscientiously at his job, lends money to friends graciously, walks his dog each midnight no matter how tired he feels. The sort of man it's hard to dislike, and whom disaster avoids.

Diddy, not really alive, had a life. Hardly the same. Some people are their lives. Others, like Diddy, merely inhabit their lives. Like insecure tenants, never knowing exactly the extent of their property or when the lease will expire. Like unskilled cartographers, drawing and redrawing erroneous maps of an exotic continent.

Eventually, for such a person, everything is bound to run down. The walls sag. Empty spaces bulge between objects. The surfaces of objects sweat, thin out, buckle. The hysterical fluids of fear deposited at the core of objects ooze out along the seams. Deploying things and navigating through space become laborious. Too much effort to amble from kitchen to living room, serving drinks, turning on the hi-fi, pretending to be cheerful. But Diddy's difficulties can't be solved by making a bigger effort. Stepped-up effort won't repair his ingenious sense of incapacity, which proceeds from a hallucinated erasure of the present as it becomes past. To supplement effort, Diddy needs faith. Which he lacks (now). Making everything unpredictable. Showing up promptly at ten o'clock at the Lexington Avenue offices of Watkins & Company must be accomplished five times a week in the face of Diddy's suspicion, each morning, that it's never been done before. Each morning he does it. That's a miracle. Yet, lacking faith, Diddy is unable to conclude that the occurrence of miracles guarantees a world in which such miracles take place. Concludes, instead, that to perform something one sets out to perform isn't really a miracle. More like a

gross rupture of the inert, fragile, sticky fabric of things. Or a silly accident; as when somebody carelessly brandishes a pair of scissors and makes an ugly rent in the fabric, or inadvertently burns holes in it with a cigarette.

Everything running down: suffusing the whole of Diddy's well-tended life. Like a house powered by one large generator in the basement. Diddy has an almost palpable sense of the decline of the generator's energy. Or, of the monstrous malfunctioning of that generator, gone amok. Sending forth a torrent of refuse that climbs up into Diddy's life, cluttering all his floor space and overwhelming his pleasant furnishings, so that he's forced to take refuge. Huddle in a narrow corner. But however small the space Diddy means to keep free for himself, it won't remain safe. If solid material can't invade it, then the offensive discharge of the failing or rebellious generator will liquefy; so that it can travel everywhere, spread like a skin. The generator will spew forth a stream of crude oil, grimy and malodorous, that coats all things and persons and objects, the vulgar as well as the precious, the ugly as well as what little still remains beautiful. Befouling Diddy's world and rendering it unusable. Uninhabitable.

This deliquescent running-down of everything becomes co-existent with Diddy's entire span of consciousness, undermines his most minimal acts. Getting out of bed is an agony unpromising as the struggles of a fish cast up on the beach, trying to extract life from the meaningless air. Persons who merely have-a-life customarily move in a dense fluid. That's how they're able to conduct their lives at all. Their living depends on not seeing. But when this fluid evaporates, an uncensored, fetid, appalling underlife is disclosed. Lost continents are brought to view, bearing the ruins of doomed cities, the sparsely fleshed skeletons of ancient creatures immobilized in their death throes, a landscape of unparalleled savagery. One can redeem skeletons and abandoned cities as human. But not a lost, dehumanized nature. Having been freed for so long from human regard, from the scrutiny and aspirations of people, the barren mountains of Tyrrhenia cannot resemble any known mountains on the planet. How they would shudder and sweat in the unsubstantial air.

So Diddy's life, since the customary opaque medium has begun leaking away. The soft interconnected tissuelike days are unstrung. The watery plenum is dehydrated, and what protrudes are jagged, inhuman units. The medium steadily evaporates; the teeming interlocked plenitude is drained of its sustenance. Dies. All that's left is arbitrary and incomprehensible. Including human speech, which declines into mere sound. Yet, Diddy observes, nobody has yet discovered, or at least dared to admit publicly, the gruesome fall of the water level, the drying up of vital lubricants, the erosion of the littoral of human-scale sense. Shall Diddy be the first to proclaim it? Presumptuous Diddy. Though he's always tried to be honest, he never claimed to be wise. Perhaps there's some wisdom embedded in the lie about life everybody mouths that Diddy doesn't understand (now), if perhaps he once did. So Diddy goes on speaking, just like everyone else. Words like acrid chalk-colored cubes spill out of a rotating cage. After scooping them up, Diddy lays out one implausible word after another, creating the plausible semblance of a line. Signifying ordinary intentions, promises, opinions, requests and denials, agreements and disagreements. Though he no longer understands why. And though it's hard enough just to exhale and inhale, without expending the little breath he retains on speech.

As the water line sinks, mere events loom up—monstrous, discontinuous. Diddy gasps for breath and, wherever he moves, bruises himself. Diddy, a failed amphibian. For whom all tasks have become senseless, all space inhospitable, virtually all people grotesque, all climates unseasonable, and all situations dangerous.

For whom all tasks have become senseless. Diddy's actions take longer and longer, and still never seem properly performed.

For whom all space appears inhospitable. And, more and more, untraversable. Having moved his body from one place to another, Diddy suffers from the knowledge that he hasn't taken a single step. And even if it could be established that some small displacement was effected, there's no telling how much. Suppose someone says, Go over there. Or, more amiably, Please, if you

don't mind, go over there. Where is over there? How would Diddy know when he'd reached the right place? His companion might say, That's right. Perfect! Stay where you are. But perhaps the person giving the directions is mistaken, or wishes to deceive him.

For whom virtually all people appear more grotesque and ugly. Each day it becomes worse. Diddy sees the surfaces of people, deformed and bloated and leaden and crammed with vile juices. Along with this Brobdingnagian eye, he's also cursed (now) with X-ray vision; he can see right through the flesh to the ghastly sorrow every two-legged upright creature conceals. Also, with unnaturally acute hearing. Whenever the volume of mute suppliant suffering in the world is turned up high, perhaps for the delectation of the more detached gods only, Diddy hears, too. The burden of sensing too much that arouses his sympathy is breaking Diddy's heart.

For whom all climates are unseasonable. Overheated during last winter's snows and generally restive in his heavy clothing, he felt chilled by the blaze of this past summer's sun and couldn't dress warmly enough. (Now) autumn has come. Another semi-artificial Manhattan winter about to claim its allotted duration. A too familiar sequence. As September threatens to break into October, Diddy knows what's coming. Something unpleasant. Perhaps he's preparing to defend himself. Is this why Diddy's hands are less under his guidance than usual? In the worst times (now) his hands seem to become ensouled, and want to do what they shouldn't do.

For whom all situations seem dangerous. It doesn't matter what Diddy does, and no situation is neutral. Depending upon the composition of his feelings, he's either paralyzed with fear or smothering a convulsive agitation. Those worst times, again.

One of the worst times is late at night, after he's walked Xan and bought the first edition of the *Times*, returned home, and gotten into bed with the newspaper. His fingertips keep insinu-

ating themselves into his mouth. Unlike Paul, who's been a frantic nail-biter since childhood, Diddy never had the habit, and despises it, but (now), throughout his nightly reading, as well as in any movie, has to wrestle with an excruciating desire to offer his nails to his eager teeth. Worn out, he finally tosses the paper on the floor; sleeps; dreams. . . . The nervous raw music filters into Diddy's ears. He opens his eyes and it begins again, for early morning is the other worst time. At the open window, pulling down the blinds before he dresses. In front of the bathroom mirror minutes later, shaving. The lethal invitation of windows and mirrors.

Trying to control his strong hands. For both of these times have begun to present Diddy with a sinister, unnamable temptation.

Eventually, the temptation finds speech. Hands, innocent of language, need the consent of the mind, which is nourished by words. These words, a nomenclature of utmost seriousness. Meaning, seriously, to kill himself, Diddy swallowed half a bottle of sleeping pills one evening; after walking the dog, who sprawls (now) before the fireplace in the living room. It's twelve-thirty; in his bedroom, door closed, Diddy lies back and shuts his eyes. Begins to float down, softly, peaceably. Followed by an interval of undetermined length: some dark time, in which it's hard to breathe. He can hear the moaning, someone making sounds like a donkey braying. Stomach hurts. He falls out of bed, head first. Onto something painfully hard. And on the hard floor, something wet that smells foul. Xan is barking, and his neighbor in the apartment opposite—a pretty, off-Broadway actress—is shouting into his face. He's being shoveled into the rear of a truck. Then a youngish trim-looking Negro in white jacket and pants, reeking of vomit, massaged his stiffened limbs and wheeled a stomach pump to Diddy's new bed; Diddy's guts dried out with humiliation; in three days he was discharged from the hospital, minus twenty pounds of substance. For it's those who know themselves to be merely the custodians or lessors of their lives who make up the roster of prospective suicides. Knowing one has a life induces the temptation to give it up. One is dead. Therefore, one wants to die. Equally, one wants to be born.

In the hope of being born, fierce as the wish to die, Diddy had

always cherished the child in himself. Mary's boy has fallen and banged his head. Kiss it! There! A guileless lively schoolboy with a foolish nickname peered from behind Diddy's soft eyes, eyes that wept without tears over the diligent stoical grownup stationed at a desk: consulting reference books, writing copy, designing layouts, dictating letters, turning out interoffice memoranda. Yet it didn't seem that he could, honorably, discontinue what he'd been doing. Diddy the Done. Death had refused his hectic, inept petition. Anyway, Diddy was also afraid to die. Endowed with vast amounts of irony applied at his own expense, he vowed to go on placing one foot in front of the other. He has to feed his dog, to continue being a helpful older brother who is all the family left for Paul, and to pay Joan alimony. Diddy will meet the demands of the day.

Perhaps reprieved from death, and if that's the case, reprieved either by his own vitality or by the merest accident, Diddy acknowledges that he remains the tenant of his life; and that the lease to which he holds title has some time yet to run. Something of a natural gentleman, he aims to keep the property in decent repair. If only he could feel less, live less inside himself. Isn't that feasible? From this point onward. A posthumous person has certain new resources, new strengths. Isn't the force of Diddy's aversions and horrors somewhat reduced? Drained away, because he did have the courage to attempt, with all seriousness, to destroy himself, and because he's survived the attempt.

In the three weeks following his return to work, everything does seem less sharp and less painful. On weekends he stays in and reads and listens to music. Hardly eating at all. Taking naps, rather than aiming at a full night's sleep either Friday or Saturday. Though on Sunday night, trying to get in bed at a reasonable hour. On weekdays Diddy gets up at eight o'clock as he always has. Alarm clocks make too brutal a sound; he's awakened by a clock radio turned to WOR/FM, eternally ascending and descending among the Top Forty. Then performs morning tasks, which rarely include breakfast. Walks the dog; when he comes back, cleans up a little. He's got the apartment under control; none of the objects present themselves as too slimy or too repulsively dry, nor the

space as too big to move in or too small. Arrival at the office. His jellied porous boss, Michael C. Duva, advances across the floor with a file of correspondence between Watkins & Company and *The Review of Scientific Instruments* that needs Diddy's attention. Why does Duva tilt his head to the left when he speaks, why does he smile, and why does he allow those drops of saliva to collect at the corners of his mouth? Riding out the tide of nausea, Diddy fingers the scuffed aluminum of his desk and stares urgently at the water cooler. His cardboard secretary is at her post, surreptitiously adjusting her stockings. Diddy doesn't mind handling papers. But, immaculate always, he dislikes changing a typewriter ribbon. Is frustrated to the point of tears while making a sketch for a new layout, when a narrow line drawn with India ink arbitrarily thickens or swells into a stain. Once Diddy had prided himself on being fastidious, and found it easy to be neat. These days, he suspects all that to be sham. Despises himself for being squeamish and thin-skinned. "He who despises himself esteems himself as a self-despiser." Diddy the Despicable. But he is, he is. Don't laugh.

And Diddy the Delicate, too. As a boy, Diddy had the normal amount of confidence in his body. At least, so he remembered. Paul, spending all his after-school hours at the piano, suffered more keenly than Diddy from the shameful anguish of early adolescence, envying his brother, only a year older, his precociously sinewy arms and stout chest. Paul never liked sports, while Diddy the Unmusical had gone out for athletics in high school, and made his mark. Because of his skills as an athlete, Diddy's manner of treating his younger brother was for a long time quite patronizing—despite his secret esteem for Paul's independence of character, which Diddy knew to be far more potent than physical strength. Still, Diddy was strong, too. And knew it. When had his physical confidence begun to wane? In the grim last years with Joan? But women liked him, always had. Their verdict counted for something. Yet Diddy didn't want to deceive. There was no reason for his body to go on being muscular and vigorous, while he only moves from taxis to the swivel chair in his office to chairs in restaurants to seats in theatres and concerts to the living-room couches to bed; his only exercise walking Xan. What's true should show.

Since it's felt anyway. And whether or not anyone can see it, he does feel less substantial. The bony skull under the slightly graying hair, which he kept short, felt vulnerable. So did the slender fingers with fine nails, the highly arched feet.

Until finally Diddy's appearance did begin to testify to the physically inert, becalmed life he led. Then came that irresistible vertigo which climaxed in the ordeal of September, the decision of September 30th, the stay in the hospital, and the four frightened days afterwards he spent alone, without going out of his apartment. (Now) he really is too thin. While keys, wallet, cigarettes, coins, pocket knife, pencil flashlight, the Phi Beta Kappa key have put on weight. He's sleeping only a few hours each night and, when he does sleep, waking exhausted from his strenuous dreams. Also, hardly eating. Extra flesh, fat on the soul, is difficult to restore. A visit to his tailor is necessary, since Diddy notices (now) the space between his clothes and his moist skin. Diddy shouldn't be continually aware of the loosely defined but ample space existing there from neck to ankles, except where the contents of his pockets slam against his ribs and thighs, should he? But something is dilating, a wall is opening out.

The firm has convened a week-long conference at the main plant, upstate. Rising competition from abroad had the New York office worried. An old established firm was not to be allowed to rest on its laurels. Seeking new ideas from the departments of research and development, production, advertising, and sales. Diddy, assistant director of advertising, was asked to go up for the entire week. Duva might or might not come up by Wednesday.

A flattering assignment, Diddy supposes. And something of a vacation. After packing his bag before he went to bed Saturday night, October 26th, Diddy's sleep, sounder than usual, was traversed by a dream. Paul and he are hiding in a forest, gathering logs, stacking them; when he stumbles or is pushed into a hole. What next? A foolish agony. Paul yells, "I can't help you." Goddamn it, I'm so fragile a hard wind can topple me, Diddy thinks as he falls. Paul is leaning over, looking down, screaming "Diddy! Diddy!" Frightened, crying. Diddy can't reassure Paul, or save himself. Joan

is waiting at the bottom of the hole. Has she come back? But that part of the dream gets dark.

Diddy slept late. Brought his reluctant dog down to the basement and handed the super ten dollars to board him for a week. Xan was behaving the way he did when Diddy brought him to the vet. Whining, dragging his nails along the green linoleum that covers the entire floor of the super's tiny apartment, as Diddy, coaxing and threatening, led him into the kitchen. The super's small children want to start playing with Xan immediately. "It's all right, Mr. Torres," said Diddy to their father, who looked as if he already regretted the transaction. "He'll calm down as soon as I go." Would that Diddy were as confident as he sounded. The animal's whine nauseated him.

Then he caught a cab to the station, and boarded the third car from the end of the Sunday afternoon Privateer. Special new luxury express train, each car divided, European style, into compartments accommodating six people. One improves on the new by returning to the old.

On time. We left the city heading northwest. Diddy in a window seat, finding what comfort he could for his narrow haunches on the prickly upholstery, occupied himself for the first hour with the heavy *Times* he'd bought in the station. No obligation to look. Besides, he'd taken this trip often, was familiar with the strip of sights available from the window as we bolted through the outskirts of the city. If each factory has a smokestack, if all the housing projects are unadorned boxes built of brick, if a power station is a power station, and a prison always confines—what point is there in looking? To fabricate differences, discern nuances, is the job of those seeing for the first time. On other trips, Diddy's highly compromised desire for confrontation had permitted more looking at the houses seen through train windows—houses he could accept and refuse, as in a daydream, without ever inhabiting them. This time, Diddy refused the organized looking offered by the window.

What else? All the ideas he ought to be thinking, typed out on legal-size yellow paper and clipped together, were stored in his briefcase on the rack over his head. The rest were unthinkable. Diddy settled behind the newspaper, grateful to be able to wall himself off from his traveling companions. A compartment is public space, open to anybody. Yet it has a certain intimacy, too. A maximum of six persons are shut up together, temporarily sealed off from everyone else. A little cell of travel. Forced neighboring, which increases the reign of order.

Diddy bored (now). He's finished the newspaper. Hungry, which always happens on trains. Restless. A conductor comes to collect everyone's ticket. Whose tickets? Our tickets. In an express train which is rapidly passing many stations without stopping, each station identical with the last, Diddy is cooped up among interchangeable people. But being a fellow traveler of life, incorrigibly hopeful though sharply disillusioned, he will make the effort to tell one from the other. He casts a moderate, diffused look at the others in the compartment: to stare wouldn't be polite.

Occupying the window seat opposite, a woman in a faded woolen suit, with untidy gray hair and small sharp eyes, mistress of two bulging shopping bags at her feet. Perhaps the bags contain food. But the journey wasn't that long. Gifts for rowdy indifferent grandchildren? Whatever the contents of the bags, Diddy guessed, this was a woman who tried too hard and habitually gave what was not wanted.

She is whispering with congested urgency to an extremely pretty girl on her right. The girl seemed to be listening, but it was as if something, perhaps the large sunglasses she wore, exempted her from having to reply. The lenses were greenish-black; so dark the girl's eyes couldn't be seen, and Diddy wondered how well she could see through them. There's a wall for you!

Next to the girl, on the outside seat opposite Diddy, was a paunchy cleric whose plump face had been lowered toward his breviary since the train started; his underlip trembled systematically as he read. A breviary

can't be used up like a newspaper; it's to read and re-read forever. What a system! Could Diddy the Good ever have been a priest, with something worthwhile and always the same to read? Not the right sort of goodness, maybe. Too much Done-Done.

Sharing Diddy's seat, on his left, was a ruddy, heavily built, ostentatiously clean-shaven man in a tweed suit, smelling of cheap after-shave lotion or eau-de-cologne. About Diddy's age. Who had spread a large magazine on his knees at the start of the journey, but instead of taking it up, plucked a handkerchief from his pocket, spat quietly at it; then remained quite still, looking into the handkerchief. The magazine didn't slip off his lap even when the train tilted, swooped round a curve.

The gray-haired woman was the first to speak, asking if anyone minded her opening the window. Not a bad day. Rather warm. Diddy the Good did it for her, dirtying the tips of his fingers. "Do not lean out of the window." We exchanged comments about the improved service on this line since the new trains had been installed, and about the refinement of traveling, six together, in a compartment, rather than being lined up and paired off in an open coach. The man in the tweed suit said he'd heard that the railroad, long rumored to be virtually bankrupt, was pulling itself out of the red. Diddy felt his mind getting gluey, his palate becoming furred. Conversation is always a trap for those who love the truth, isn't it? Yet common sense said Don't fret, Don't waste your integrity on a situation that isn't serious. A hard rule. Who cares about the condition of the railroad, its innovations, its finances? Does anyone here really care? Oh, but have pity upon people, poor soft-tongued creatures who should be kissing flowers but find, instead, that toads are leaping out of their mouths. Though irritated by the man's nervous way of speaking, Diddy has pity. Here's a toad, too. (Now) that the trains were punctual, Diddy remarked, they-ought-to-be-washed-down-more-often. He grimaced at the streaked windowpane, the dusty ledge, the trampled cigarette butts on the floor. The gray-haired woman found Diddy a paper napkin in one of her bags—a food bag, then—that he could use to clean his

hands. Diddy thought the woman looked unwashed. Probably not dirty at all, but soiled by age.

The man in the tweed suit stuffed the handkerchief back in his pocket, cleared his throat, picked up his magazine. We could read the cover (now). *Philately Annual*.

"A collector, I assume." We hadn't seen the priest look up. The suave voice issued from a mouth that moved without rendering any more expressive the face surrounding it. A face such as psychoanalysts acquire early in their training. Veiled, nerveless, relatively immobile.

"Yes, I am. And a dealer, too." The man in the tweed suit seemed to need to cough or to spit again.

"Have you seen this issue?" said the priest. "Very rare, I believe." From his vest pocket, the priest produced a pair of tweezers; then from another black pocket on the inside of his jacket, withdrew a walletlike case, opened it, lifted up a flap with his thumb and forefinger, and cautiously extracted a block of blue stamps with the tweezers.

So the priest and the man in the tweed suit both turn out to be collectors of stamps, valuable paper miniatures of a country, a king, a building, a tree, a face; both took out and compared their latest acquisitions. At tweezers-length, the joys of common interests. Diddy, if he wanted to talk, was left to the gray-haired woman and, he hoped, to the pretty girl with whom she was traveling, silent so far. The woman needed little encouragement. She explained that she was accompanying the girl, her niece, who was going to have an eye operation at the renowned medical center upstate. Is the girl totally blind? Diddy wondered. Seemed rude to ask. The woman launched into a description of her niece's prospective surgery, how much it will cost, its hazards, its chances of success. She insisted on using, but kept mispronouncing, words like "corneal" and "ophthalmic" and "choroid." Diddy annoyed. He became restless when people spoke imprecisely, or didn't get things right.

"Hester, isn't that so? Isn't that what the doctor said?"

Thus far, the girl had refused to confirm anything. Perhaps she is embarrassed or angry. Or was she inured to her aunt's volubil-

ity? The aunt, as she babbled on, kept touching the girl's cheek, shoulder, and forearm in a proprietary dull way. Diddy wished he could tie up the aunt's hands. But didn't feel like silencing her, blocking off the stream of information. Since the events of a month ago, he had more patience with people addicted to recounting their illnesses and operations. No, not only that. Subjugated to some bolder desire he'd not yet acknowledged to himself, he floated down the old woman's river of discourse. Aimed his own words at the aunt, kept his eyes on the sightless girl. A blind person couldn't see Diddy, emaciated from his abortive closure with death and the hospital regimen. But the girl could talk, if she would; and Diddy felt sure it would be, unlike her aunt's talk, clean and unlit-tered. Diddy wanted to touch her, too.

Then, suddenly, the day failed. So did our conversation. Diddy remembered this tunnel, approximately two hours out of the city. But why didn't the lights in the compartment and the corridor go on? No? All right then. From the instant the compartment went dark, no one spoke. We wanted to wait, to be in silence as well as darkness. Then, after an endurable pause, resume our desultory conversations on the far side of the tunnel, at the exact point at which they'd broken off. The train charged through the darkness, it seemed to go faster, dangerously fast, its motion like a horizontal fall. But, just about when, according to Diddy's memory, we should have thrust the tunnel behind us, the train convulsed, shrieked, and came to a stop. Sighs, scrambling hands, exclamations. Anyone hurt? Instantly we all began to talk. If darkness had silenced us, darkness minus motion loosened our tongues. New situation, new behavior. Well, not *so* new. We weren't worried. Trains are reliable. Diddy consulted the luminous dial of his watch. We had been in the tunnel at least seven minutes. Then we saw a light jogging along the corridor, heard the neighboring compartment's door rattle open. A deep voice spoke briefly, words we couldn't make out. When the door was slammed shut, Diddy braces himself for a nearer, harsher sound. Officialdom calling has its distinctive noises and movements. And Diddy was something of an experienced traveler. What was happening (now) was just like a border control in funny old Europe, but this is a big country, too