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Serenade

Donald R. Marshall

He looked at himself in the bathroom mirror and felt immediately nauseated. "Delton," he started to address himself, but his voice came out hoarse and faint and he had to clear his throat and start over. "Delton Mecham," he tried, more bravely, "you're revolting."

He turned his head slowly from side to side, watching the effects of the overhead light on his pale forehead. At times the almost colorless strands of hair surviving on the shiny expanse of his head seemed to disappear in the glare of the light. "You're *twenty-eight*," he told his reflection, not certain how he expected it to react. "You're *twenty-eight years old*." Exactly what he meant by that he was unsure: twenty-eight seemed too old to be still unmarried; on the other hand, it seemed far too young to be so bald. He touched the tips of his trembling fingers to his cheek. "Fishbelly white," he heard himself whisper, staring incredulously at himself. He had had to reread the first few chapters of *Huckleberry Finn* just that day, and Twain's imagery suddenly seemed more appropriate for himself than even for Pap Finn. "You're fishbelly white." He remembered hearing an older girl in high school once say that someone she knew looked as if he had crawled out from under a rock. Could she have meant him? Had he always looked like that? He stared at himself. It was true: his skin had the unhealthy yellow-gray pallor that reminded him of the underside of a toad or of some grotesque and puffy thing that keels over on its back and kicks its tiny legs in the air when you expose it from under its rock.

He had felt uncomfortable in both of his classes all week. It had been as though the students were studying him, with frowns and a certain evident repugnance, through a pane of glass, like some freakish squid or rare and loathsome snake. It was a wonder

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to him now that they had not laughed. Their comparing his meager abilities—to say nothing of his appearance—to Mrs. Quilter's graciousness and poise was inescapable, he realized that. But how could he bear to face them for the three remaining weeks? Three *days* had been painful enough. He wished that Mrs. Quilter had not had a nervous breakdown, and he wished that Dr. Munson had not asked him if he could take over for the rest of the semester. A month ago the prospects of being a graduate assistant and teaching two sections of freshman composition for the coming fall semester had seemed a stimulating, exhilarating challenge. Now the thought left him weak—like the thoughts of giving blood or letting Dr. Gottfredson grind on his teeth.

The day had been excruciating. For the rest of the world, he decided, it must have appeared to be a day of miracles, a day which, having been cleansed by the warm showers of the evening before, seemed to have risen fresh in a bath of pure sunlight to renounce once and for all the gray dreary winter it was leaving behind and to welcome a promising regeneration. The lawns, freshly green and yet unshaded by barely budding trees, had attracted hordes of students; ice cream cones dripped and peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich crusts dried out while the students sprawled and laughed in the bright April sun.

But for him there had been no miracles, no hope, no promise. He had watched it all from the top floor of the Harold B. Lee Library while he had prepared a short lecture on Dryden, fumbled through the pages of *Paradise Lost*, and, time running short, hurriedly skimmed once again over Huck's first few adventures. Three times during the day, when it had been time to gather up his books and march across campus to his class, he had attempted to descend into that orgy of arms and legs sprawled upon the lawn—at least he had skirted it. But even keeping to his sidewalk and only nodding and feebly lifting his hand a time or two when he passed by someone he knew, he had felt out of place, overdressed, weighted and encumbered by the pull of his tie, the heavy wool of his coat, and the drag of his loaded briefcase.

Once or twice during the afternoon, while he had looked down from his library window, his imagination had leaped away from him, and he had almost pictured himself stepping back into a darkened alcove long enough to strip down to some daring costume—which, like Clark Kent, he would have had hidden under his gray sportcoat and trousers—and hurling himself, all muscles

and bronze amidst envy and awe, down into that chaos of color tangled upon the new green grass. But he was far too much of a realist to allow such fancies much reign, and some thought always sent him shrinking back into his carrel and his books. Not even in imagination, he feared, did such a costume exist that could transform him into what he would really hope for; as far as dress was concerned, he had long ago realized that he was doomed. He had once been daring enough to spend a shameful amount of his savings on a wide-lapeled, flare-legged suit like those he had seen sported by his fellow schoolmates. But his courageous attempt to be part of the mod world had been disastrous: on the first nervous morning he had worn it, an acquaintance had stared at him and then, breaking into a shameless grin, asked him bluntly: "*Where* on earth did you dig *this* up?"

He drew closer to the mirror and examined the button-down collar of his shirt. It was beginning to fray. The thought increased his melancholy for it was like an announcement that a close friend was moving away. Not that he had any really close friends—but he felt that he knew what it would be like. Actually, he had always found it difficult getting close to people. It was not that he was cold—or that he didn't try. He just didn't have the knack. Once he had admired a fellow he had met in a zoology class—a well-rounded, guitar-playing, sports car enthusiast and track star—who, a year later, had lived on the same floor as he in Helaman Halls. After he had returned from his mission to Oklahoma and the other fellow was home from France, they had bumped into each other occasionally. He had always felt that part of the reason he felt close to this particular individual was that he knew—though he had long forgotten how—when his birthday was. This possession, like some personal secret discovered and guarded in silence, almost seemed to him to insure some intimate friendship. And once, when the time seemed right, he had mustered up—from where, he was later unable to imagine—enough courage to confide this fact to his "friend." In a moment of panic, suddenly not quite sure whether the date was October 30th or 31st, he had decided to keep on the safe side and bumbled out: "Do you want to know something? I don't think there's been a year, when the end of October comes along, that I haven't thought of you."

The fellow had looked puzzled. "Why's that?"

He had swallowed and clung, for support, to his knowledge. "You know—your birthday."

The track star had looked even more surprised. "What do you mean? My birthday's in March."

He never saw him much after that.

He looked now at his collar and sighed. When this white shirt went it would mean giving up the last link with his mission. His roommates four years ago had urged him to give them away to Deseret Industries, but what does one do with a limited budget and a drawer full of a half dozen or so perfectly good—or almost perfectly good—white shirts? He was not sure, not even now that this last was going, that he would rush downtown and buy a red stripe like Scott's or a pink and purple print like Rick's, even though the teaching job would mean some unexpected money. He just wouldn't feel right in them.

He looked at his tie and the old nausea surged through him. How would he ever get that spot off? Worse still, how had he ever been able to face his class? He had retied it so that the spot had been nearly hidden behind the place where his coat buttoned, but he noticed now how straggly and wrinkled it looked beneath the knot and he felt sick all over again. He had had only a few minutes, between his Neo-Classic exam and the second of his two English 101 classes, to find a corner to eat his Franco-American spaghetti. Long weary of baloney sandwiches, he had invested in a little thermos and sometimes took spaghetti or soup. But today had been a disaster. He had promised a student he would go over the comments with him that he had written on the boy's last theme (defending a *D* or an *E* grade was painful enough; why must he be obligated to justify an *A*-?), and finding vacant in A-203 JKB the desk he shared with three other graduate assistants, he had hurriedly gulped down his lunch in the three or four minutes before the boy arrived. The student had stayed for nearly half an hour, but it was what he had discovered just after the boy left that made him squirm now before the mirror. Feeling at least a modicum of victory in standing fast in his defense of the student's grade, he had happened to glance down, just as the boy left the room, and discovered in horror the big blot of tomato sauce and one cold string of spaghetti clinging to his tie.

His afternoon, precariously hanging together at best, had fallen apart. What could be done? Should he have called the student back and reprimanded him jokingly for not having brought to his attention the red blob decorating his chest? It was not his luck to manage situations like that with any degree of casual poise. Should

he simply then have removed the tie and gone to class pretending nothing had happened? He would have felt naked and humiliated—as though the boy were passing notes around the room announcing why the tie was missing. So he had dabbed at the tie as best he could with water and a paper towel from the men's room and then retied it so that the now-glaring stain was hidden under his coat. But he had felt it shrieking at him all during that hot hour in the classroom when the hair had prickled on the back of his neck and he had had the terrifying sensation that there was spaghetti sauce still damp behind his ears and even dribbling down his forehead.

He sighed and heard himself make a little sound reminiscent of a wounded puppy. He looked at himself one last time, his eyebrows dropping as if they were about to slide down each side of his face. Was there any hope? He imagined he saw Andrew Carnegie, Charles Atlas, and Norman Vincent Peale, come to collect their books, looking upon him now and shaking their heads with the same despair he saw reflected in the mirror.

Then Rick came home. He heard the bang of the door to their basement apartment almost at the same time that Rick, in cut-offs and BYU T-shirt, barreled into the bathroom.

"Well, hello, gorgeous. Admiring yourself?" Rick stripped off the T-shirt and kicked off his tennis shoes. "What are you doing cooped up in this dark hole on a day like this? Afraid the light outside will spoil 'the light within'—like that El Greco dude?" Rick was in the shower running the water before Delton could get out an answer. He sighed once again and made a motion to leave; his roommate's muscular and suntanned form rotating behind the opaque glass made him envious.

"Hey—can I borrow your transistor again?" he heard him call out above the splatter of the water. "We're going up in the canyon. I'll be careful with it."

"Okay," he said, as he carefully shut the door and walked down the hall to the dark room with the bunk beds. "You're twenty-eight years old," he whispered to himself again. "You don't even have a girl friend"—he threw himself on the bottom bunk—"and you don't even have a tan."

He couldn't remember later if something he had dreamed had boosted his spirits or if it was just the fact that the long nap had the restorative effect of dissipating most of his depression, but when he awoke alone in the apartment about nine o'clock

that evening and sat eating a Twinkie by the kitchen table, he decided that something had to be done. He was not sure where to start on the girl-friend problem; he had never dated at all in high school, had suffered through only three miserable blind dates throughout college, had been mercifully spared the problem during his mission, and then, while in the army, been frightened out of his wits by a buxomy woman with orange hair who had plopped down on the stool next to his and eaten the pickle off his plate while he had tried, terrified and aghast, to choke down the last bites of his pastrami sandwich.

No. He would not start there, just yet. He didn't have the knack. But he could do something about his appearance. At least it would be a start. He finished up his Twinkie and walked around the kitchen with a nervous determination. Tomorrow, he resolved, he would—no, not tomorrow, for tomorrow would be "Y-Day" and students would be up on the mountain whitewashing the block Y. But the next day, if the sun promised to shine, he would climb up to some secluded spot on the mountainside, his bathing trunks hidden underneath his clothes—again the old vision of Clark Kent's transformation glowed briefly in his mind—and lie in the sun until he began to resemble a normal human being.

He was out of school for three days the following week with the sunburn. He cried out whenever Rick or Scott put the cream on him, and when he was alone, he wept with pain. But the worst came when he started to peel. The lobster red had turned a dull rose color, but as it came off in strips—from his back, his legs, and even from under the long mouse-colored hairs he combed in a special way to try to conceal his baldness—it left him looking for a time like some mythological relative, in various shades of pink, to a zebra.

But two things happened during this period. The first, and least significant, was his discovery of what seemed to constitute "the knack." He had been lying in his bed one night, uttering little "oohs" and "ouches" each time he shifted position and the sheet grazed his tender skin. Although the door was only open an inch or two, he was able to see through the hallway to the small front door of their apartment, and at about ten-fifteen he heard the outside door open and watched Scott usher in some tall girl with long dark hair and a maroon pantsuit. Where they finally sat was out of his view, but he could not ignore, much as he tried, the sounds of Carly Simon, Elton John, and Blood, Sweat,

and Tears that soon rocked forth from Rick's stereo and vibrated the print of *The Man with a Golden Helmet* on his wall. Nor was it easy trying to correct the stack of freshman themes left over from the week before while unable to avoid catching bursts of laughter, giggles, and assorted fragments of conversation:

"Oh, really?" "Out of sight, man!" "Hey, that's swingin'!" He found himself counting the times he heard Scott say "really cool" (he lost track, however, and interest as well, after forty-seven) and Linda (was her name Linda? or was Linda the one before Michele threw him over?) tossed around "y'know" so much he hadn't even bothered to count. But sometime after midnight the stereo went off and no more records were put on. The conversation now drifted through the hallway and into his room almost without obstruction:

". . . but why not? Haven't you prayed about it?"

"I *have*. I told you I have."

"Well, so have I—and I'm sure—in fact, I know beyond a shadow . . ."

"Please. Can't we just, you know, sort of—I mean, what's wrong with just going out?"

"Why don't we both pray. . . ."

"Look. I've made a promise, y'know, and . . ."

"A promise not to pray?"

"Of course not, silly. Just wait—I mean, I've just got to wait until he at least, y'know, comes home. I just want to *see* him first."

"But that's four more months! Look: We've got something really cool going, right? *You* told *me* last night that . . ."

Delton was ready to get up and shut the door. He had been staring at the same misplaced semicolon for fifteen minutes. But his legs burned when he tried to move, and as he sucked in his breath to keep from crying out, he heard sounds of a different sort coming from the other room.

It was a hymn. Scott's voice, without accompaniment yet steady and clear, began to fill the quiet apartment and spill through the doorway:

*Sweet hour of prayer,
Sweet hour of prayer,
That takes me from this world of care . . .*

Delton was shocked. He felt he had missed some transitional conversation, and the song struck him now as rather odd and out

of place. Yet, after Scott had finished two verses and finally stopped, he thought he heard Linda sobbing quietly, and then, for the next hour until they finally passed within his view, their arms around each other as they left the apartment, he heard almost no sounds at all except an occasional sigh and what vaguely sounded like some muffled endearments.

He felt melancholy after they left and couldn't get his mind back to the stack of themes beside him. He feared he would be losing both roommates—Rick was already unofficially engaged—and the thoughts of living alone next year as he waded through stack after stack of freshman comma splices and dangling modifiers made him long for some nebulous feminine creature to listen to his *own* song, although he didn't have the slightest idea what that song was or would ever be.

At one-thirty in the morning, the themes untouched by his side, Delton was still sitting up in bed and staring at the wall when Rick burst into the room, bright-eyed and doing a little dance as he tossed off articles of clothing. "June 6th," he announced. "June 6th, babe, is going to be the big day."

Delton couldn't resist the question: "Rick," he tried, his voice a little hoarse. "Would you tell me something—something personal?"

Rick stopped, his fingers in the air, in the middle of some step borrowed from *Zorba the Greek*. "Well—that depends. . . ." The look he gave Delton made him feel he had overstepped his bounds.

He got it out as fast as he could: "What I mean is, did you ever sing to Cheryl? *Hymns*, that is?"

"Hymns?" He looked puzzled. "Boy, you *are* getting personal!" he chided. Then he broke into a grin. "Sure—once a few months ago when we were parked up by the temple. That always gets them."

He didn't feel that he dare ask anything more, but his mind immediately became a vast darkened parking lot in which earnest young men, each warbling his own hymn to his own girl friend in the dim privacy of his own car, became a part of a gigantic chaotic choir performing nightly at the mouth of Rock Canyon. And after the bedroom light was finally turned off and he had tossed for an hour or more, it was this cacophonous choir that eventually sang him to sleep.

The second event that happened during this period was clearly the most momentous of the two: at the beginning of spring term,

he met Lois. She was tiny and fragile, with pale skin, a slightly pointed nose, and a frail little voice; but within a week after he met her working in the reserve room of the library, he was certain she was the love of his life.

It was already May, and in the evening the smell of the lilacs made him dizzy. He found himself taking nervous walks around the block in the fresh night air—not the desperate melancholy walks he had taken earlier while the ground had been frozen in muddy ridges and patches of snow had crunched crustily under his feet—but walks that sent him striding, almost leaping, excitedly down the sidewalk, checking his watch at every streetlight until ten-thirty arrived, and then racing up the hill and across the quad to the library, his determination to be on time always assuring his arrival at least twenty-five minutes before the reserve room closed.

He was not entirely certain that *she* was certain he was the love of *her* life, however. She had not openly demonstrated any overwhelming warmth—something which, he concluded, probably prevented his fleeing in terror from the whole idea—yet she was decidedly civil and had never, as he recalled, betrayed any sign of being about to burst into laughter whenever he appeared, his face still mottled in various shades of pink from his Y Mountain episode. In fact, he often thought to himself, elatedly, “If she likes me now—just wait until I’ve *completely* peeled!” And when, after nearly a week of walking her home, stopping once for onion rings and once for root beer floats, she asked him to reserve a date for dinner at her apartment, he felt quite sure that the world was becoming for him a rather different and marvelous sort of place.

Because the date set for the dinner was a whole week away, he anxiously began making plans for the weekend at hand. He found, however, that she was going home (to Afton, Wyoming) and would not be back until late Sunday night. The weekend was devastating. Friday night he loitered around the library just to be near the place that reminded him of her, but the couples flocking to the Varsity Theater and walking arm in arm across the moonlit campus depressed him. And on Saturday night he wandered through the streets downtown; but here again the couples, hugging and laughing as they waited in lines in front of the Academy, the Uinta, and the Paramount, made him melancholy and impatient for his love’s return.

On Sunday evening, he walked by her house every half hour until, from where he stood in the shadows of the trees across the

street, he saw a car drive up and watched as someone let her out and removed her suitcase from the trunk. In order not to seem too eager, he paced back and forth under the trees for ten more minutes, then rushed to her door, and, after some time, convinced her to go out for a little walk while the weather was so nice. All weekend he had held imaginary conversations with her, yet he had difficulty now remembering even one of the polished and eloquent things he had imagined saying. Earlier in the weekend he had even thought of preparing a long letter that he could leave with her roommates or slide under the door, since a written explanation of all that was presently churning inside him would have allowed him to select just the right words and arrange them in just the right way. He dismissed the idea, however, when he recalled what had always seemed to be his fate: he always managed to inadvertently bumble up the key words. Once, when he had entered a short story contest in junior high, his disappointment at not having placed at all (out of only five entries) had been embarrassingly magnified when he discovered, on the final page of his rejected entry, a gross typographical error in the last sentence: “. . . and he lay there on the cement, his heart thorbbling.”

And so, as they walked slowly up the hill in the dark, beyond the lights of Heritage Halls, then Deseret Towers, and finally Wymount Village, he fumbled for the proper words to explain the emptiness he had felt in her absence:

“How was the weather in Afton, Wyoming?” he managed.

“Just fine.”

“Oh. Well, I guess it wasn’t so bad here either,” he found himself saying. “Anyway it didn’t rain or snow or anything like that.”

And on they walked, mostly in silence, up the road to where the golden spire rose out of the white temple, luminous against the night sky. Four or five cars had pulled off the road. From one he thought he heard a squeal, and then a high-pitched voice shrieked, “It’s absolutely fantastic! How on earth did you ever find out my ring size?”

Lois snickered, and Delton reached out impulsively in the dark for her hand. He caught her shoulder bag instead, and not knowing what to do, clung to it. They were both out of breath from the long climb up the hill, and he stopped now to lean back against the wall surrounding the temple, panting in the darkness and still clinging to the strap of her purse.

His heart was pounding. He felt his free hand move almost instinctively to his mouth, but he resisted the urge and left it clenched stiffly by his side: he had already bitten his fingernails down to the quick while pacing under the trees waiting for her return. Once he had started saving the little half-moon-shaped slivers that would fall on his books and papers as he gnawed away at first one hand and then the other while he studied. He had kept them all in a little envelope. But then it occurred to him that if he could remember to save the nail-bitings, then he could remember not to bite them at all. So he had thrown the envelope away and gone on nibbling unconsciously at various moments of the day. He had wished since that he had kept his little collection; it had made quite a little lump in the envelope. Besides, what else did he have as a monument to his suffering?

The pounding in his chest seemed to have risen to his throat and he found himself swallowing over and over to hold it back. His hand, still attached to her shoulder strap, suddenly started to quiver. He clutched tighter. Lighted by the moonlight as well as the glow from the temple, her long hair excited him. He was almost close enough to it to get a faint shampoo smell. He swallowed. He had never been this close to a girl before. He knew that he had to do something. He couldn't just go on sniffing her hair and gripping the vibrating strap. A hymn, he thought anxiously. What hymn? He tried frantically to concentrate, but the only things that would come to his mind were "When We're Helping, We're Happy" and "Give, Said the Little Stream."

At that moment, he imagined he felt her pulling away from him, and in desperation he grasped at whatever words offered themselves. He almost jumped when the sound of his own voice cut through the darkness:

The spirit of God like a fire is burning . . .

He detected a warble, a sort of unintended vibrato that unnerved him; but he tried to make up for the unsteadiness of his voice by an increase in volume that surprised even himself. He went on with the verse and into the chorus—

*We'll sing and we'll shout
With the armies of heaven,
Hosanna, hosanna to God and the Lamb!*

—hoping that the tune was close enough. It sounded right to him, but he had been told before— usually by frowns, but once verbally

and explicitly by an acquaintance—that he had a tendency to stray somewhat from the actual melody. Caught up in the fiery momentum of the hymn, he almost decided to go on with all four verses, but something in her look—something akin to awe—finally made him stop after the last line of the chorus.

For him it was a triumph. He wasn't sure what to make of the little patter of applause that came from one of the nearby parked cars after he'd finished, or the fact that someone had rolled down a car window and shouted "Encore!", but whatever uneasiness accompanied him as they walked back down the hill in the dark was overridden by an almost thrilling sense of accomplishment. The hair tingled on the back of his neck and his clothes felt damp, but for him it had been a demonstration of almost unprecedented bravery.

Neither of them said much on the way home. But he felt that her remark—"Do you—uh—sing very much?"—was not without some warmth, and at least demonstrated an interest in his daring performance on the hillside. And he hoped that the sense of triumph running through him was warranted—that he had not only become victor over his own trembling self, but had conquered as well the fearful territory that had separated him and the love of his life. Not daring to risk what was beginning to seem an auspicious advance in the right direction, he refrained from kissing her goodnight when they reached her porch. Ahead of him glowed the Saturday dinner date, and he determined that, by then, he would be prepared for anything.

He was not, however, prepared for what happened. It turned out to be an unsettling week; with final exams looming ahead, he found himself buried in note cards and rough drafts of papers he had to complete for his own graduate classes, and inundated at the same time with the fresh deluge of freshman research papers, most of them either plagiarized or just honestly badly written. He tried to allow time to be at the reserve room of the library, but the room was overrun now with the semester's procrastinators and he could barely see Lois over the heads of the students that flocked to the counter with their book requests scrawled on tiny white slips. After work she begged to flee home to study for her own exams and he was left to go back to his dreaded note cards and rough drafts and research papers. The only near-bright spot in the week happened one evening when he was buying a Twinkie at Carson's Market: waiting at the checkstand, he heard someone

call out his name and looked up to see a large freckled girl waving a chubby hand and standing in line at another cash register. "I hear you're coming to dinner Saturday," she said, and evidently noticing the startled look on his face, added quickly, "I'm Phylma—remember? One of Lois' roommates." He felt embarrassed as he left the store that he hadn't remembered her at first, yet this feeling was gradually replaced by one of elation when it occurred to him suddenly that the anticipation at Lois' apartment somehow miraculously rivaled his own.

By Friday night his excitement for the following evening was so strong that he could hardly contain himself; but he finally resisted all temptations to make his usual nightly pilgrimage to the campus at ten-thirty, and restricted himself, instead, to the narrow asceticism of the kitchen table, assiduously filling the margins of the students' papers like a monk illuminating ancient manuscripts. And on Saturday, he burst out of his basement cloister to regain contact with the world, getting first a haircut, next buying some new shave lotion (although if *Hai Karate* really accomplished what the advertisements promised, he determined to use it sparingly), and finally splurging at The Emporium on a gift-wrapped box of chocolate-covered raisins.

But he was not prepared for what happened. Even when he stood ringing the bell in the shadows of the porch and a massive silhouette loomed up against the drawn shade of the front room window, even when Phylma opened the door in her turquoise taffeta dress and he saw the tiny rhinestone earrings clinging to her ample lobes and the matching necklace lying on her moist and freckled neck, he failed to realize what had taken place. As she ushered him in, Phylma smiled a self-pleased smile, like a little girl who knows she has done something special, and he caught a glimpse, beyond her towering figure, of a small table—complete with a long white tablecloth, a bowl of orange flowers, and matching ostentatious candlesticks—set, very meticulously, just for two. She plopped herself down on the creaking sofa and patted heartily the cushion next to her for him to sit down. He did.

"Now," she announced, and held up one fat palm as if to prevent him from suddenly fleeing, "everything is almost all ready." He felt the prickles on the back of his neck—the old spaghetti sauce dripping down behind his ears and under his collar. He saw the tip of her pink tongue peek out quickly and dart along the edge of her lipsticked lips; her eyes had the sparkle of a child about

to pull a Halloween prank. "There's been one teensy-weensy change," she began. "Something came up and Lois had to go home. To Afton, that is. She had this ride, you see, and she meant to call you, but, anyway, she didn't and she asked me to, and I guess I should of, but anyway, *I* ended up not calling either. The stuff was all bought and in the fridge so I just figured, what the heck, with you already planning and all, why not just go ahead and enjoy ourselves? I probably would've been the one that had to cook it *anyway*." She hesitated a moment, as if for his approval; and then, as if fearing she might not get it, she leaped up and put a record on the phonograph. He was still stunned, but he recognized the music as the overture to some opera.

Towering above him in her rhinestones and turquoise taffeta, she reached down one shapeless hand, the fingers like pale and puffy sausages, offering to help him up. "Should we?" she asked with a bounce in her voice. For a moment he feared she was asking him to dance around the room with her, but then decided she was taking him toward the table with its carefully folded napkins and shiny goblets. He imagined the warm spaghetti sauce dripping down his icy neck again and he almost collapsed at the table.

"Could I—uh—wash my hands first?" he managed to ask, hoarsely, as she pulled out a chair for him to sit on. She beamed and led him through a doorway to a darkened hall. But as she pushed ahead of him and moved through the partially opened door he became terror-stricken: he had a frightening vision of her accompanying him to the sink and, like some robust and helmeted Athena out of a painting by Rubens, taking charge of the situation—running the water, lathering him amply with soap, then drying him lustily with some mammoth fuzzy towel. Instead, however, she flipped on the light and immediately swept down with a swishing flourish a blur of nylons and other things he tried not to see that had been hanging on the shower curtain rod. She beamed at him, a perceptible pinkness momentarily obscuring her freckles, and then she swooped past him, leaving him leaning against the sink, stunned and drained by the events of the past few minutes, and unable to blink away the fluorescent image of her lingerie.

The whole thing was a joke. He still felt limp and partially numb, but he began to sense that the surrealistic shock of Lois' absence and Phylma's towering presence was wearing off, and he was able to see clearly what had taken place. He was the victim of some mean joke. He gripped the basin and closed his eyes to

shut out the thought. They had played a trick on him. "How can I get out of it?" he imagined Lois wailing, and then he pictured her, her eyes widening as she said, "I know! I just won't be here and *you* can dress up in . . ." It was true. The evening was too grotesque, too bizarre, to be anything but a joke. Perhaps Lois had been in the bedroom watching everything through a crack in the door. He imagined Lois and Phylma both even now, their hands clasped over their mouths to stifle guffaws, retching with laughter in the hall. He felt dizzy and noticed that he still clutched in one hand the box of chocolate-covered raisins tied with a gigantic pink bow. He felt humiliated and he looked for some place to discard it. He finally propped it up on the back of the toilet between the Noxzema and the Clearasil.

He was still weak when he left the bathroom and stepped out into the darkened hall. He had taken a deep breath before opening the door and had decided to announce quite bravely that he could not stay. But he hesitated when he saw the darkness of the front room. Not only had his foot become entangled in the telephone cord, but he also fancied for a moment that the lights might suddenly flash on and Lois would shout "Surprise!" and the nightmare would be over. It was not, however, as dark as it had seemed to him at first. The candles had been lit, and Phylma and her rhinestones glittered in the flickering light. He could smell incense burning, and a gypsy violin whimpered from the phonograph.

Before he could react, she had swept a chair under him, shaken out her napkin, and was ladling steaming onion soup, complete with croutons and shredded cheese, into his bowl. He ate as if in a trance, listening at any opportunity for some sign that Lois was hiding in the bedroom. Phylma herself ate heartily—two helpings of soup, ample proportions of what she announced was *champignons au gratin* and *coq au vin*, and an unaccountable number of twisted, sugared breadsticks—but she never once allowed the conversation to lag: she talked of Goshen, of her family (nine brothers and sisters), of how she wanted to be a nurse then an opera singer and finally just a first-rate wife and mother, of her interest in Rudolph Nureyev and volleyball, of her collection of salt and pepper shakers, of her longing to visit Venice, Italy, and Gallup, New Mexico. But she showed an equal interest in him: what foods did he like, what did he think of Maria Callas, had he ever had a longing to teach school in Pago-Pago?—and dozens of other questions. Finally, as they were eating *pot chocolate au*

creme, she dabbed quickly at her mouth with her napkin, swooped off to find her *Treasures of Truth* albums which she showed him at the table, and then ushered him over to the piano where she seated herself and announced, "Lois tells me you like to sing."

He had never regained his strength from the time he had stood on the porch ringing the doorbell almost two hours earlier, and now he felt all of the blood draining from his head. The spaghetti sauce again. But Phylma saved the moment by sweeping across the keys with a music-hall flourish and, in a startling tremulous contralto, breaking into the "Habanera" from *Carmen*. He quickly took the opportunity to sit down on the sofa nearby—partly because his legs seemed rubberized but also because it offered him the role of spectator rather than performer. He felt it his duty to look at her from time to time while she sang, but whenever his eyes met hers with her pale eyelashes surrounded by ample lavender eye shadow, he felt his own eyes twitch away and seek out the cording along the edge of the couch or the tassels on the corners of the satin pillow he found scrunched up in his hands. But when it occurred to him that her voice was dissolving into a whistle, he was compelled to focus his attention on her. It was true. She was whistling. It was a whistle unlike anything he had ever heard. While her shapeless fingers trilled and rolled a grand accompaniment up and down the keys, she whistled the melodies of one tune after another in a low, birdlike warble that reminded him of water filling a plastic dishpan.

It was impossible now to look at her, but he was not sure how long he could go on staring at the pillow in his hand. He finally let his eyes steal a quick glance at the swaying figure looming over the piano by his side. Under pale brows squirming with expression, the lavender eyelids were closed now on the large upward-tilted face as her head rocked dreamily back and forth in time to the music. From her puffing freckled cheeks and the mouth shaped into a tiny O, came the whistled strains of the theme from *Romeo and Juliet*.

He swallowed nervously. It was a joke after all; it had to be. He stared earnestly at the pillow for confirmation. But suddenly the song had ended and he felt one of her hands slip from the keyboard and fall lightly on his knee. His glance ricocheted from the pillow to her face but his stare remained the same. She had removed her hand now and had folded both her hands across the

top of the small piano, her face coming forward to rest on them just a matter of inches away from his own twitching face.

"Delton," she began, her voice frighteningly soft. "I've never said this before to a boy in all my life." He felt his back go suddenly very straight, and he was certain now that the spaghetti sauce was streaming coldly down his spine.

"I feel very oddly moved," she went on, and he thought he saw her chin quiver slightly before his eyes switched back to the pillow. "What I mean is—well—I feel that our—uh—getting together tonight was—somehow—*meant* to be."

He could feel no strength at all in his body. Something ran through his veins that made him feel he was being embalmed.

"I mean," she went on, "God *does* move in mysterious ways."

His own moving was a mystery to him, for the next thing he knew he found himself back in the bathroom leaning against the door, his chest heaving rapidly as though he had run there from a great distance. He could not remember what he had said to excuse himself or how much more she had said, but his mind raced now and his temples throbbed as he tried to think of what must be said when he finally had to go back through that door. His eyes sought the tile walls pressing in on him but they found no window. Instead they rested on the box tied with the pink bow. Maybe he could give her the box of chocolate raisins and leave. It had not been a joke. He almost pitched forward and fell against the sink. Gripping it with both hands, he glared at himself in the mirror. "Delton," he whispered with a hoarse earnestness, "what are you going to do?" He waited for the reflection to answer; but it only stared back at him with a new terror of its own.