

DEDICATION

Stephen King

Around the corner from the doormen, the limos, the taxis, and the revolving doors at the entrance to Le Palais, one of New York's oldest and grandest hotels, there is another door, this one small, unmarked, and—for the most part—unremarked.

Martha Rosewall approached it one morning at a quarter of seven, her plain blue canvas tote-bag in one hand and a smile on her face. The tote was usual, the smile much more rarely seen. She was not unhappy in her work—being the Chief Housekeeper of floors ten through twelve of Le Palais might not seem an important or rewarding job to some, but to a woman who had worn dresses made out of rice-and flour-sacks as a girl growing up in Babylon, Alabama, it seemed very important indeed, and very rewarding as well. Yet no matter what the job, mechanic or movie-star, on ordinary mornings a person arrives at work with an ordinary expression on his or her face; a look that says Most of me is still in bed and not much more. For Martha Rosewall, however, this was no ordinary morning.

Things had begun being not ordinary for her when she arrived home from work the previous afternoon and found the package her son had sent from Ohio. The long-expected and long-awaited had finally come. She had slept only in snatches last night—she had to keep getting up and checking to make sure the thing he had sent was real, and that it was still there. Finally she had slept with it under her pillow, like a bridesmaid with a piece of wedding cake.

Now she used her key to open the small door around the corner from the hotel's main entrance and went down three steps to a long hallway painted flat green and lined with Dandux laundry carts. They were piled high with freshly washed and ironed bed-linen. The hallway was filled with its clean smell, a smell that Martha always associated, in some vague way, with the smell of freshly baked bread. The faint sound of Muzak drifted down from the lobby, but these days Martha heard it no more than she heard the hum of the service elevators or the rattle of china in the kitchen.

Halfway down the hall was a door marked CHIEFS OF HOUSEKEEPING. She went in, hung up her coat, and passed through the big room where the Chiefs—there were eleven in all—took their coffee-breaks, worked out problems of supply and demand, and tried to keep up with the endless paperwork. Beyond this room with its huge desk, wall-length bulletin board, and perpetually overflowing ashtrays was a dressing room. Its walls were plain green cinderblock. There were benches, lockers, and two long steel rods festooned with the kind of coathangers you can't steal.

At the far end of the dressing room was the door leading into the shower and bathroom area. This door now opened and Darcy Sagamore appeared, wrapped in a fluffy Le Palais bathrobe and a plume of warm steam. She took one look at Martha's bright face and came to her with her arms out, laughing. "It came, didn't it?" she cried. "You got it! It's written all over your face! Yes sir and yes ma'am!"

Martha didn't know she was going to weep until the tears came. She hugged Darcy and put her face against Darcy's damp black hair.

"That's all right, honey," Darcy said. "You go on and let it all out."

"It's just that I'm so proud of him, Darcy—so damn proud."

"Of course you are. That's why you're crying, and that's fine... but I want to see it as soon as you stop." She grinned then. "You can hold it, though. If I dripped on that baby, I gotta believe you might poke my eye out."

So, with the reverence reserved for an object of great holiness (which, to Martha Rosewall, it was), she removed her son's first novel from the blue canvas tote. She had wrapped it carefully in tissue paper and put it under her brown nylon uniform. She now carefully removed the tissue so that Darcy could view the treasure.

Darcy looked carefully at the cover, which showed three Marines, one with a bandage wrapped around his head, charging up a hill with

their guns firing. Blaze of Glory, printed in fiery red-orange letters, was the title. And below the picture was this: A Novel by Peter Rosewall.

“All right, that’s good, wonderful, but now show me the other!” Darcy spoke in the tones of a woman who wants to dispense with the merely interesting and go directly to the heart of the matter.

Martha nodded and turned unhesitatingly to the dedication page, where Darcy read: “This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn’t have done it without you.” Below the printed dedication this was added in a thin, sloping, and somehow old-fashioned script: “And that’s no lie. Love you, Mom! Pete.”

“Why, isn’t that just the sweetest thing?” Darcy asked, and swiped at her dark eyes with the heel of her hand.

“It’s more than sweet,” Martha said. She re-wrapped the book in the tissue paper. “It’s true.” She smiled, and in that smile her old friend Darcy Sagamore saw something more than love. She saw triumph.

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After punching out at three o’clock, Martha and Darcy frequently stopped in at La Patisserie, the hotel’s coffee shop. On rare occasions they went into Le Cinq, the little pocket bar just off the lobby, for something a little stronger, and this day was a Le Cinq occasion if there had ever been one. Darcy got her friend comfortably situated in one of the booths, and left her there with a bowl of Goldfish crackers while she spoke briefly to Ray, who was tending bar that afternoon. Martha saw him grin at Darcy, nod, and make a circle with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Darcy came back to the booth with a look of satisfaction on her face. Martha regarded her with some suspicion.

“What was that about?”

“You’ll see.”

Five minutes later Ray came over with a silver ice-bucket on a stand and placed it beside them. In it was a bottle of Perrier-Jouet champagne and two chilled glasses.

“Here, now!” Martha said in a voice that was half-alarmed, half-laughing. She looked at Darcy, startled.

“Hush,” Darcy said, and to her credit, Martha did.

Ray uncorked the bottle, placed the cork beside Darcy, and poured a little into her glass. Darcy waved at it and winked at Ray.

“Enjoy, ladies,” Ray said, and then blew a little kiss at Martha. “And congratulate your boy for me, sweetie.” He walked away before Martha, who was still stunned, could say anything.

Darcy poured both glasses full and raised hers. After a moment Martha did the same. The glasses clinked gently. “Here’s to the start of your son’s career,” Darcy said, and they drank. Darcy tipped the rim of her glass against Martha’s a second time. “And to the boy himself,” she said. They drank again, and Darcy touched their glasses together yet a third time before Martha could set hers down. “And to a mother’s love.”

“Amen, honey,” Martha said, and although her mouth smiled, her eyes did not. On each of the first two toasts she had taken a discreet sip of champagne. This time she drained the glass.

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Darcy had gotten the bottle of champagne so that she and her best friend could celebrate Peter Rosewall’s breakthrough in the style it seemed to deserve, but that was not the only reason. She was curious about what Martha had said—It’s more than sweet, it’s true. And she was curious about that expression of triumph.

She waited until Martha had gotten through her third glass of champagne and then she said, “What did you mean about the

dedication, Martha?”

“What?”

“You said it wasn’t just sweet, it was true.”

Martha looked at her so long without speaking that Darcy thought she was not going to answer at all. Then she uttered a laugh so bitter it was shocking—at least to Darcy it was. She’d had no idea that cheerful little Martha Rosewall could be so bitter, in spite of the hard life she had led. But that note of triumph was still there, too, an unsettling counterpoint.

“His book is going to be a best-seller and the critics are going to eat it up like ice cream,” Martha said. “I believe that, but not because Pete says so ... although he does, of course. I believe it because that’s what happened with him.”

“Who?”

“Pete’s father,” Martha said. She folded her hands on the table and looked at Darcy calmly.

“But—” Darcy began, then stopped. Johnny Rosewall had never written a book in his life, of course. IOUs and the occasional I fucked yo momma in spray-paint on brick walls were more Johnny’s style. It seemed as if Martha was saying ...

Never mind the fancy stuff, Darcy thought. You know perfectly well what she’s saying: She might have been married to Johnny when she got pregnant with Pete, but someone a little more intellectual was responsible for the kid.

Except it didn’t fit. Darcy had never met Johnny, but she had seen half a dozen photos of him in Martha’s albums, and she’d gotten to know Pete well—so well, in fact, that during his last two years of high school and first two years of college she’d come to think of him as partly her own. And the physical resemblance between the boy

who'd spent so much time in her kitchen and the man in the photo albums ...

"Well, Johnny was Pete's biological father," Martha said, as if reading her mind. "Only have to look at his nose and eyes to see that. Just wasn't his natural one ... any more of that bubbly? It goes down so smooth." Now that she was tiddly, the South had begun to resurface in Martha's voice like a child creeping out of its hiding place.

Darcy poured most of the remaining champagne into Martha's glass. Martha held it up by the stem, looking through the liquid, enjoying the way it turned the subdued afternoon light in Le Cinq to gold. Then she drank a little, set the glass down, and laughed that bitter, jagged laugh again.

"You don't have the slightest idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No, honey, I don't."

"Well, I'm going to tell you," Martha said. "After all these years I have to tell someone—now more'n ever, now that he's published his book and broken through after all those years of gettin ready for it to happen. God knows I can't tell him—him least of all. But then, lucky sons never know how much their mothers love them, or the sacrifices they make, do they?"

"I guess not," Darcy said. "Martha, hon, maybe you ought to think about if you really want to tell me whatever it is you—"

"No, they don't have a clue," Martha said, and Darcy realized her friend hadn't heard a single word she'd said. Martha Rosewall was off in some world of her own. When her eyes came back to Darcy, a peculiar little smile—one Darcy didn't like much—touched the corners of her mouth. "Not a clue," she repeated. "If you want to know what that word dedication really means, I think you have to ask a mother. What do you think, Darcy?"

But Darcy could only shake her head, unsure what to say. Martha nodded, however, as if Darcy had agreed completely, and then she began to speak.

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There was no need for her to go over the basic facts. The two women had worked together at Le Palais for eleven years and had been close friends for most of that time.

The most basic of those basic facts, Darcy would have said (at least until that day in Le Cinq she would have said it), was that Marty had married a man who wasn't much good, one who was a lot more interested in his booze and his dope—not to mention just about any woman who happened to flip a hip in his direction—than he was in the woman he had married.

Martha had been in New York only a few months when she met him, just a babe in the woods, and she had been two months pregnant when she said I do. Pregnant or not, she had told Darcy more than once, she had thought carefully before agreeing to marry Johnny. She was grateful he wanted to stick by her (she was wise enough, even then, to know that many men would have been down the road and gone five minutes after the words “I'm pregnant” were out of the little lady's mouth), but she was not entirely blind to his shortcomings. She had a good idea what her mother and father—especially her father—would make of Johnny Rosewall with his black T-Bird and his tu-tone airtip shoes, bought because Johnny had seen Memphis Slim wearing a pair exactly like them when Slim played the Apollo.

That first child Martha had lost in the third month. After another five months or so, she had decided to chalk the marriage up to profit and loss—mostly loss. There had been too many late nights, too many weak excuses, too many black eyes. Johnny, she said, fell in love with his fists when he was drunk.

“He always looked good,” she told Darcy once, “but a good-lookin shitheel is still a shitheel.”

Before she could pack her bags, Martha discovered she was pregnant again. Johnny’s reaction this time was immediate and hostile: he socked her in the belly with the handle of a broom in an effort to make her miscarry. Two nights later he and a couple of his friends—men who shared Johnny’s affection for bright clothes and tu-tone shoes—tried to stick up a liquor store on East 116th Street. The proprietor had a shotgun under the counter. He brought it out. Johnny Rosewall was packing a nickel-plated .32 he’d gotten God knew where. He pointed it at the proprietor, pulled the trigger, and the pistol blew up. One of the fragments of the barrel entered his brain by way of his right eye, killing him instantly.

Martha had worked on at Le Palais until her seventh month (this was long before Darcy Sagamore’s time, of course), and then Mrs. Proulx told her to go home before she dropped the kid in the tenth-floor corridor or maybe the laundry elevator. You’re a good little worker and you can have your job back later on if you want it, Roberta Proulx told her, but for right now you get yourself gone, girl.

Martha did, and two months later she had borne a seven-pound boy whom she had named Peter, and Peter had, in the fullness of time, written a novel called *Blaze of Glory*, which everyone—including the Book-of-the-Month Club and Universal Pictures—thought destined for fame and fortune.

All this Darcy had heard before. The rest of it—the unbelievable rest of it—she heard about that afternoon and evening, beginning in Le Cinq, with champagne glasses before them and the advance copy of Pete’s novel in the canvas tote by Martha Rosewall’s feet.

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“We were living uptown, of course,” Martha said, looking down at her champagne glass and twirling it between her fingers. “On Stanton

Street, up by Station Park. I've been back since. It's worse than it was—a lot worse—but it was no beauty spot even back then.

“There was a spooky old woman who lived at the Station Park end of Stanton Street back then—folks called her Mama Delorme and lots of them swore she was a bruja woman. I didn't believe in anything like that myself, and once I asked Octavia Kinsolving, who lived in the same building as me and Johnny, how people could go on believing such trash in a day when space satellites went whizzing around the earth and there was a cure for just about every disease under the sun. 'Tavia was an educated woman—had been to Juilliard—and was only living on the fatback side of 110th because she had her mother and three younger brothers to support. I thought she would agree with me but she only laughed and shook her head.

” ‘Are you telling me you believe in bruja?’ ” I asked her.

” ‘No,’ she said, ‘but I believe in her. She is different. Maybe for every thousand—or ten thousand—or million—women who claim to be witchy, there's one who really is. If so, Mama Delorme's the one.’

“I just laughed. People who don't need bruja can afford to laugh at it, the same way that people who don't need prayer can afford to laugh at that. I'm talkin 'bout when I was first married, you know, and in those days I still thought I could straighten Johnny out. Can you dig it?”

Darcy nodded.

“Then I had the miscarriage. Johnny was the main reason I had it, I guess, although I didn't like to admit that even to myself back then. He was beating on me most the time, and drinking all the time. He'd take the money I gave him and then he'd take more out of my purse. When I told him I wanted him to quit hooking from my bag he'd get all woundfaced and claim he hadn't done any such thing. That was if he was sober. If he was drunk he'd just laugh.

“I wrote my momma down home—it hurt me to write that letter, and it shamed me, and I cried while I was writing it, but I had to know what she thought. She wrote back and told me to get out of it, to go right away before he put me in the hospital or even worse. My older sister, Cassandra (we always called her Kissy), went that one better. She sent me a Greyhound bus ticket with two words written on the envelope in pink lipstick—GO NOW, it said.”

Martha took another small sip of her champagne.

“Well, I didn’t. I liked to think I had too much dignity. I suppose it was nothing but stupid pride. Either way, it turned out the same. I stayed. Then, after I lost the baby, I went and got pregnant again—only I didn’t know at first. I didn’t have any morning sickness, you see ... but then, I never did with the first one, either.”

“You didn’t go to this Mama Delorme because you were pregnant?” Darcy asked. Her immediate assumption had been that Martha had thought maybe the witch-woman would give her something that would make her miscarry ... or that she’d decided on an out-and-out abortion.

“No,” Martha said. “I went because ‘Tavia said Mama Delorme could tell me for sure what the stuff was I found in Johnny’s coat pocket. White powder in a little glass bottle.”

“Oh-oh,” Darcy said.

Martha smiled without humor. “You want to know how bad things can get?” she asked. “Probably you don’t but I’ll tell you anyway. Bad is when your man drinks and don’t have no steady job. Really bad is when he drinks, don’t have no job, and beats on you. Even worse is when you reach into his coat pocket, hoping to find a dollar to buy toilet paper with down at the Sunland Market, and find a little glass bottle with a spoon on it instead. And do you know what’s worst of all? Looking at that little bottle and just hoping the stuff inside it is cocaine and not horse.”

“You took it to Mama Delorme?”

Martha laughed pityingly.

“The whole bottle? No ma’am. I wasn’t getting much fun out of life, but I didn’t want to die. If he’d come home from wherever he was at and found that two-gram bottle gone, he would have plowed me like a pea-field. What I did was take a little and put it in the cellophane from off a cigarette pack. Then I went to ‘Tavia and ‘Tavia told me to go to Mama Delorme and I went.”

“What was she like?”

Martha shook her head, unable to tell her friend exactly what Mama Delorme had been like, or how strange that half-hour in the woman’s third-floor apartment had been, or how she’d nearly run down the crazily leaning stairs to the street, afraid that the woman was following her. The apartment had been dark and smelly, full of the smell of candles and old wallpaper and cinnamon and soured sachet. There had been a picture of Jesus on one wall, Nostradamus on another.

“She was a weird sister if there ever was one,” Martha said finally. “I don’t have any idea even today how old she was; she might have been seventy, ninety, or a hundred and ten. There was a pink-white scar that went up one side of her nose and her forehead and into her hair. Looked like a burn. It had pulled her right eye down in a kind of droop that looked like a wink. She was sitting in a rocker and she had knitting in her lap. I came in and she said, ‘I have three things to tell you, little lady. The first is that you don’t believe in me. The second is the bottle you found in your husband’s coat is full of White Angel heroin. The third is you’re three weeks gone with a boy-child you’ll name after his natural father.’ “

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Martha looked around to make sure no one had taken a seat at one of the nearby tables, satisfied herself that they were still alone, and

then leaned toward Darcy, who was looking at her with silent fascination.

“Later, when I could think straight again, I told myself that as far as those first two things went, she hadn’t done anything that a good stage magician couldn’t do—or one of those mentalist fellows in the white turbans. If ‘Tavia Kinsolving had called the old lady to say I was coming, she might have told her why I was coming, too. You see how simple it could have been? And to a woman like Mama Delorme, those little touches would be important, because if you want to be known as a bruja woman, you have to act like a bruja woman.”

“I suppose that’s right,” Darcy said.

“As for her telling me that I was pregnant, that might have been just a lucky guess. Or... well... some ladies just know.”

Darcy nodded. “I had an aunt who was damned good at knowing when a woman had caught pregnant. She’d know sometimes before the woman knew, and sometimes before the woman had any business being pregnant, if you see what I mean.”

Martha laughed and nodded.

“She said their smell changed,” Darcy went on, “and sometimes you could pick up that new smell as soon as a day after the woman in question had caught, if your nose was keen.”

“Uh-huh,” Martha said. “I’ve heard the same thing, but in my case none of that applied. She just knew, and down deep, underneath the part of me that was trying to make believe it was all just a lot of hokum, I knew she knew. To be with her was to believe in bruja—her bruja, anyway. And it didn’t go away, that feeling, the way a dream does when you wake up, or the way your belief in a good faker goes away when you’re out of his spell.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, there was a chair with a saggy old cane seat near the door and I guess that was lucky for me, because when she said what she did, the world kind of grayed over and my knees came unbolted. I was going to sit down no matter what, but if the chair hadn’t been there I would have sat on the floor.

“She just waited for me to get myself back together and went on knitting. It was like she had seen it all a hundred times before. I suppose she had.

“When my heart finally began to slow down I opened my mouth and what came out was ‘I’m going to leave my husband.’

” ‘No,’ she came back right away, ‘he gonna leave you. You gonna see him out, is all. Stick around, woman. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he dint be doin it.’

” ‘How,’ I said, but that was all I could say, it seemed like, and so I kept saying it over and over. ‘How-how-how,’ just like John Lee Hooker on some old blues record. Even now, twenty-six years later, I can smell those old burned candles and kerosene from the kitchen and the sour smell of dried wallpaper, like old cheese. I can see her, small and frail in this old blue dress with little polka-dots that used to be white but had gone the yellowy color of old newspapers by the time I met her. She was so little, but there was such a feeling of power that came from her, like a bright, bright light—”

Martha got up, went to the bar, spoke with Ray, and came back with a large glass of water. She drained most of it at a draught.

“Better?” Darcy asked.

“A little, yeah.” Martha shrugged, then smiled. “It doesn’t do to go on about it, I guess. If you’d been there, you’d’ve felt it. You’d’ve felt her.

” ‘How I do anythin or why you married that country piece of shit in the first place ain’t neither of them important now,’ Mama Delorme

said to me. 'What's important now is you got to find the child's natural father.'

"Anyone listening would have thought she was as much as saying I'd been screwing around on my man, but it never even occurred to me to be mad at her; I was too confused to be mad. 'What do you mean?' I asked. 'Johnny's the child's natural father.'

"She kind of snorted and flapped her hand at me, like she was saying Pshaw. 'Ain't nothin natural about that man.'

"Then she leaned in closer to me and I started to feel a little scared. There was so much knowing in her, and it felt like not very much of it was nice.

" 'Any child a woman get, the man shoot it out'n his pecker, girl,' she said. 'You know that, don't you?'

"I didn't think that was the way they put it in the medical books, but I felt my head going up n down just the same, as if she'd reached across the room with hands I couldn't see and nodded it for me.

" 'That's right,' she said, nodding her ownself. 'That's the way God planned it to be... like a seesaw. A man shoots cheerun out'n his pecker, so them cheerun mostly his. But it's a woman who carries em and bears em and has the raisin of em, so them cheerun mostly hers. That's the way of the world, but there's a 'ception to every rule, one that proves the rule, and this is one of em. The man who put you with child ain't gonna be no natural father to that child—he wouldn't be no natural father to it even if he was gonna be around. He'd hate it, beat it to death before its foist birthday, mos' likely, because he'd know it wasn't his. A man can't always smell that out, or see it, but he will if the child is different enough ... and this child goan be as different from piss-ignorant Johnny Rosewall as day is from night. So tell me, girl: who is the child's natural father?' And she kind of leaned toward me.

“All I could do was shake my head and tell her I didn’t know what she was talking about. But I think that something in me—something way back in that part of your mind that only gets a real chance to think in your dreams—did know. Maybe I’m only making that up because of all I know now, but I don’t think so. I think that for just a moment or two his name fluttered there in my head.

“I said, ‘I don’t know what it is you want me to say—I don’t know anything about natural fathers or unnatural ones. I don’t even know for sure if I’m pregnant, but if I am it has to be Johnny’s, because he’s the only man I’ve ever slept with!’

“Well, she sat back for a minute, and then she smiled. Her smile was like sunshine, and it eased me a little. ‘I didn’t mean to scare you, honey,’ she said. ‘That wasn’t none of what I had in my mind at all. It’s just that I got the sight, and sometime it’s strong. I’ll just brew us a cup of tea, and that’ll calm you down. You’ll like it. It’s special to me.’

“I wanted to tell her I didn’t want any tea, but it seemed like I couldn’t. Seemed like too much of an effort to open my mouth, and all the strength had gone out of my legs.

“She had a greasy little kitchenette that was almost as dark as a cave. I sat in the chair by the door and watched her spoon loose tea into an old chipped china pot and put a kettle on the gas ring. I sat there thinking I didn’t want anything that was special to her, nor anything that came out of that greasy little kitchenette either. I was thinking I’d take just a little sip to be mannerly and then get my ass out of there as fast as I could and never come back.

“But then she brought over two little china cups just as clean as snow and a tray with sugar and cream and fresh-baked bread-rolls. She poured the tea and it smelled good and hot and strong. It kind of waked me up and before I knew it I’d drunk two cups and eaten one of the bread-rolls, too.

“She drank a cup and ate a roll and we got talking along on more natural subjects—who we knew on the street, whereabouts in Alabama I came from, where I liked to shop, and all that. Then I looked at my watch and seen over an hour and a half had gone by. I started to get up and a dizzy feeling ran through me and I plopped right back in my chair again.”

Darcy was looking at her, eyes round.

” ‘You doped me,’ I said, and I was scared, but the scared part of me was way down inside.

” ‘Girl, I want to help you,’ she said, ‘but you don’t want to give up what I need to know and I know damn well you ain’t gonna do what you need to do even once you do give it up—not without a push. So I fixed her. You gonna take a little nap, is all, but before you do you’re gonna tell me the name of your babe’s natural father.’

“And, sitting there in that chair with its saggy cane bottom and hearing all of uptown roaring and racketing just outside her living-room window, I saw him as clear as I’m seeing you now, Darcy. His name was Peter Jefferies, and he was just as white as I am black, just as tall as I am short, just as educated as I am ignorant. We were as different as two people could be except for one thing—we both come from Alabama, me from Babylon down in the toolies by the Florida state line, him from Birmingham. He didn’t even know I was alive—I was just the nigger woman who cleaned the suite where he always stayed on the eleventh floor of this hotel. And as for me, I only thought of him to stay out of his way because I’d heard him talk and seen him operate and I knew well enough what sort of man he was. It wasn’t just that he wouldn’t use a glass a black person had used before him without it had been washed; I’ve seen too much of that in my time to get worked up about it. It was that once you got past a certain point in that man’s character, white and black didn’t have anything to do with what he was. He belonged to the son-of-a-bitch tribe, and that particular bunch comes in all skin-colors.

“You know what? He was like Johnny in a lot of ways, or the way Johnny would have been if he’d been smart and had an education and if God had thought to give Johnny a great big slug of talent inside of him instead of just a head for dope and a nose for wet pussy.

“I thought nothing of him but to steer clear of him, nothing at all. But when Mama Delorme leaned over me, so close I felt like the smell of cinnamon comin out of her pores was gonna suffocate me, it was his name that came out with never a pause. ‘Peter Jefferies,’ I said. ‘Peter Jefferies, the man who stays in 1163 when he ain’t writing his books down there in Alabama. He’s the natural father. But he’s white! ‘

“She leaned closer and said, ‘No he ain’t, honey. No man’s white. Inside where they live, they’s all black. You don’t believe it, but that’s true. It’s midnight inside em all, any hour of God’s day. But a man can make light out of night, and that’s why what comes out of a man to make a baby in a woman is white. Natural got nothing to do with color. Now you close your eyes, honey, because you tired—you so tired. Now! Say! Now! Don’t you fight! Mama Delorme ain’t goan put nothin over on you, child! Just got somethin I goan to put in your hand. Now—no, don’t look, just close your hand over it.’ I did what she said and felt something square. Felt like glass or plastic.

” ‘You gonna remember everythin when it’s time for you to remember. For now, just go on to sleep. Shhh ... go to sleep... shhh... .’

“And that’s just what I did,” Martha said. “Next thing I remember, I was running down those stairs like the devil was after me. I didn’t remember what I was running from, but that didn’t make any difference; I ran anyway. I only went back there one more time, and I didn’t see her when I did.”

Martha paused and they both looked around like women freshly awakened from a shared dream. Le Cinq had begun to fill up—it was almost five o’clock and executives were drifting in for their after-work

drinks. Although neither wanted to say so out loud, both suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. They were no longer wearing their uniforms but neither felt she belonged among these men with their briefcases and their talk of stocks, bonds, and debentures.

“I’ve got a casserole and a six-pack at my place,” Martha said, suddenly timid. “I could warm up the one and cool down the other ... if you want to hear the rest.”

“Honey, I think I got to hear the rest,” Darcy said, and laughed a little nervously.

“And I think I’ve got to tell it,” Martha replied, but she did not laugh. Or even smile.

“Just let me call my husband. Tell him I’ll be late.”

“You do that,” Martha said, and while Darcy used the telephone, Martha checked in her bag one more time just to make sure the precious book was still there.

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The casserole—as much of it as the two of them could use, anyway—was eaten, and they had each had a beer. Martha asked Darcy again if she was sure she wanted to hear the rest. Darcy said she did.

“Because some of it ain’t very nice. I got to be up front with you about that. Some of it’s worse’n the sort of magazines the single men leave behind em when they check out.”

Darcy knew the sort of magazines she meant, but could not imagine her trim, clean little friend in connection with any of the things pictured in them. She got them each a fresh beer, and Martha began to speak again.

*

“I was back home before I woke up all the way, and because I couldn’t remember hardly any of what had gone on at Mama Delorme’s, I decided the best thing—the safest thing—was to believe it had all been a dream. But the powder I’d taken from Johnny’s bottle wasn’t a dream; it was still in my dress pocket, wrapped up in the cellophane from the cigarette pack. All I wanted to do right then was get rid of it, and never mind all the bruja in the world. Maybe I didn’t make a business of going through Johnny’s pockets, but he surely made a business of going through mine, ‘case I was holding back a dollar or two he might want.

“But that wasn’t all I found in my pocket—there was something else, too. I took it out and looked at it and then I knew for sure I’d seen her, although I still couldn’t remember much of what had passed between us.

“It was a little square plastic box with a top you could see through and open. There wasn’t nothing in it but an old dried-up mushroom—except after hearing what ‘Tavia had said about that woman, I thought maybe it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and probably one that would give you the night-gripes so bad you’d wish it had just killed you outright like some of em do.

“I decided to flush it down the commode along with that powder he’d been sniffing up his nose, but when it came right down to it, I couldn’t. Felt like she was right there in the room with me, telling me not to. I was even scairt to look into the livin-room mirror, case I might see her standin behind me.

“In the end, I dumped the little bit of powder I’d taken down the kitchen sink, and I put the little plastic box in the cabinet over the sink. I stood on tiptoe and pushed it in as far as I could—all the way to the back, I guess. Where I forgot all about it.”

*

She stopped for a moment, drumming her fingers nervously on the table, and then said, “I guess I ought to tell you a little more about

Peter Jefferies. My Pete's novel is about Viet Nam and what he knew of the Army from his own hitch; Peter Jefferies's books were about what he always called Big Two, when he was drunk and partying with his friends. He wrote the first one while he was still in the service, and it was published in 1946. It was called Blaze of Heaven."

Darcy looked at her for a long time without speaking and then said, "Is that so?"

"Yes. Maybe you see where I'm going now. Maybe you get a little more what I mean about natural fathers. Blaze of Heaven, Blaze of Glory."

"But if your Pete had read this Mr. Jefferies's book, isn't it possible that—"

"Course it's possible," Martha said, making that pshaw gesture herself this time, "but that ain't what happened. I ain't going to try and convince you of that, though. You'll either be convinced when I get done or you won't. I just wanted to tell you about the man, a little."

"Go to it," Darcy said.

"I saw him pretty often from 1957 when I started working at Le Palais right through until 1968 or so, when he got in trouble with his heart and liver. The way the man drank and carried on, I was only surprised he didn't get in trouble with himself earlier on. He was only in half a dozen times in 1969, and I remember how bad he looked—he was never fat, but he'd lost enough weight by then so he wasn't no more than a stuffed string. Went right on drinking, though, yellow face or not. I'd hear him coughing and puking in the bathroom and sometimes crying with the pain and I'd think, Well, that's it; that's all; he's got to see what he's doing to himself; he'll quit now. But he never. In 1970 he was only in twice. He had a man with him that he leaned on and who took care of him. He was still drinking, too,

although anybody who took even half a glance at him knew he had no business doing it.

“The last time he came was in February of 1971. It was a different man he had with him, though; I guess the first one must have played out. Jefferies was in a wheelchair by then. When I come in to clean and looked in the bathroom, I seen what was hung up to dry on the shower-curtain rail—contenance pants. He’d been a handsome man, but those days were long gone. The last few times I saw him, he just looked raddled. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

Darcy nodded. You saw such creatures creeping down the street sometimes, with their brown bags under their arms or tucked into their shabby old coats.

“He always stayed in 1163, one of those corner suites with the view that looks toward the Chrysler Building, and I always used to do for him. After awhile, it got so’s he would even call me by name, but it didn’t really signify—I wore a name-tag and he could read, that was all. I don’t believe he ever once really saw me. Until 1960 he always left two dollars on top of the television when he checked out. Then, until ‘64, it was three. At the very end it was five. Those were very good tips for those days, but he wasn’t really tipping me; he was following a custom. Custom’s important for people like him. He tipped for the same reason he’d hold the door for a lady; for the same reason he no doubt used to put his milk-teeth under his pillow when he was a little fellow. Only difference was, I was the Cleanin Fairy instead of the Tooth Fairy.

“He’d come in to talk to his publishers or sometimes movie and TV people, and he’d call up his friends—some of them were in publishing, too, others were agents or writers like him—and there’d be a party. Always a party. Most I just knew about by the messes I had to clean up the next day—dozens of empty bottles (mostly Jack Daniel’s), millions of cigarette butts, wet towels in the sinks and the tub, leftover room service everywhere. Once I found a whole platter of jumbo shrimp turned into the toilet bowl. There were glass-rings on everything, and people snoring on the sofa and floors, like as not.

“That was mostly, but sometimes there were parties still going on when I started to clean at ten-thirty in the morning. He’d let me in and I’d just kinda clean up around em. There weren’t any women at those parties; those ones were strictly stag, and all they ever did was drink and talk about the war. How they got to the war. Who they knew in the war. Where they went in the war. Who got killed in the war. What they saw in the war they could never tell their wives about (although it was all right if a black maid happened to pick up on some of it). Sometimes—not too often—they’d play high-stakes poker as well, but they talked about the war even while they were betting and raising and bluffing and folding. Five or six men, their faces all flushed the way white men’s faces get when they start really socking it down, sitting around a glass-topped table with their shirts open and their ties pulled way down, the table heaped with more money than a woman like me will make in a lifetime. And how they did talk about their war! They talked about it the way young women talk about their lovers and their boyfriends.”

Darcy said she was surprised the management hadn’t kicked Jefferies out, famous writer or not—they were fairly stiff about such goings-on now and had been even worse in years gone by, or so she had heard.

“No, no, no,” Martha said, smiling a little. “You got the wrong impression. You’re thinking the man and his friends carried on like one of those rock-groups that like to tear up their suites and throw the sofas out the windows. Jefferies wasn’t no ordinary grunt, like my Pete; he’d been to West Point, went in a Lieutenant and came out a Major. He was quality, from one of those old Southern families who have a big house full of old paintings where everyone’s ridin hosses and looking noble. He could tie his tie four different ways and he knew how to bend over a lady’s hand when he kissed it. He was quality, I tell you.”

Martha’s smile took on a little twist as she spoke the word; the twist had a look both bitter and derisive.

“He and his friends sometimes got a little loud, I guess, but they rarely got rowdy—there’s a difference, although it’s hard to explain—and they never got out of control. If there was a complaint from the neighboring room—because it was a corner suite he stayed in, there was only the one—and someone from the front desk had to call Mr. Jefferies’s room and ask him and his guests to tone it down a little, why, they always did. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s not all. A quality hotel can work for people like Mr. Jefferies. It can protect them. They can go right on partying and having a good time with their booze and their cards or maybe their drugs.”

“Did he take drugs?”

“Hell, I don’t know. He had plenty of them at the end, God knows, but they were all the kind with prescription labels on them. I’m just saying that quality—it’s that white Southern gentleman’s idea of quality I’m talking about now, you know—calls to quality. He’d been coming to Le Palais a long time, and you may think it was important to the management that he was a big famous author, but that’s only because you haven’t been at Le Palais as long as I have. Him being famous was important to them, but it was really just the icing on the cake. What was more important was that he’d been coming there a long time, and his father, who was a big landowner down around Porterville, had been a regular guest before him. The people who ran the hotel back then were people who believed in tradition. I know the ones who run it now say they believe in it, and maybe they do when it suits them, but in those days they really believed in it. When they knew Mr. Jefferies was coming up to New York on the Southern Flyer from Birmingham, you’d see the room right next to that corner suite sort of empty out, unless the hotel was full right up to the scuppers. They never charged him for the empty room next door; they were just trying to spare him the embarrassment of having to tell his cronies to keep it down to a dull roar.”

Darcy shook her head slowly. “That’s amazing.”

“You don’t believe it, honey?”

“Oh yes—I believe it, but it’s still amazing.”

That bitter, derisive smile resurfaced on Martha Rosewall’s face.

“Ain’t nothing too much for quality ... for that Robert E. Lee Stars and Bars charm ... or didn’t used to be. Hell, even I recognized that he was quality, no sort of a man to go hollering Yee-haw out the window or telling Rastus P. Coon jokes to his friends.

“He hated blacks just the same, though, don’t be thinking different ... but remember what I said about him belonging to the son-of-a-bitch tribe? Fact was, when it came to hate, Peter Jefferies was an equal-opportunity employer. When John Kennedy died, Jefferies happened to be in the city and he threw a party. All of his friends were there, and it went on into the next day. I could barely stand to be in there, the things they were saying—about how things would be perfect if only someone would get that brother of his who wouldn’t be happy until every decent white kid in the country was fucking while the Beatles played on the stereo and the colored (that’s what they called black folks, mostly, ‘the colored,’ I used to hate that sissy, pantywaist way of saying so much) were running wild through the streets with a TV under each arm.

“It got so bad that I knew I was going to scream at him. I just kept telling myself to be quiet and do my job and get out as fast as I could; I kept telling myself to remember the man was my Pete’s natural father if I couldn’t remember anything else; I kept telling myself that Pete was only three years old and I needed my job and I would lose it if I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

“Then one of em said, ‘And after we get Bobby, let’s go get his candy-ass kid brother!’ and one of the others said, ‘Then we’ll get all the male children and really have a party!’

” ‘That’s right!’ Mr. Jefferies said. ‘And when we’ve got the last head up on the last castle wall we’re going to have a party so big I’m going to hire Madison Square Garden!’

“I had to leave then. I had a headache and belly-cramps from trying so hard to keep my mouth shut. I left the room half-cleaned, which is something I never did before nor have since, but sometimes being black has its advantages; he didn’t know I was there, and he sure didn’t know when I was gone. Wasn’t none of them did.”

That bitter derisive smile was on her lips again.

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“I don’t see how you can call a man like that quality, even as a joke,” Darcy said, “or call him the natural father of your unborn child, whatever the circumstances might have been. To me he sounds like a beast.”

“No!” Martha said sharply. “He wasn’t a beast. He was a man. In some ways—in most ways—he was a bad man, but a man is what he was. And he did have that something you could call ‘quality’ without a smirk on your face, although it only came out completely in the things he wrote.”

“Huh!” Darcy looked disdainfully at Martha from below drawn-together brows. “You read one of his books, did you?”

“Honey, I read them all. He’d only written three by the time I went to Mama Delorme’s with that white powder in late 1959, but I’d read two of them. In time I got all the way caught up, because he wrote even slower than I read.” She grinned. “And that’s pretty slow!”

Darcy looked doubtfully toward Martha’s bookcase. There were books there by Alice Walker and Rita Mae Brown, Linden Hills by Gloria Naylor and Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down by Ishmael Reed, but the three shelves were pretty much dominated by paperback romances and Agatha Christie mystery stories.

“Stories about war don’t hardly seem like your pick an glory, Martha, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course I know,” Martha said. She got up and brought them each a fresh beer. “I’ll tell you a funny thing, Dee: if he’d been a nice man, I probably never would have read even one of them. And I’ll tell you an even funnier one: if he’d been a nice man, I don’t think they would have been as good as they were.”

“What are you talking about, woman?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Just listen, all right?”

“All right.”

“Well, it didn’t take me until the Kennedy assassination to figure out what kind of man he was. I knew that by the summer of ‘58. By then I’d seen what a low opinion he had of the human race in general—not his friends, he would’ve died for them, but everyone else. Everyone was out looking for a buck to stroke, he used to say—stroking the buck, stroking the buck, everyone was stroking the buck. It seemed like him and his friends thought stroking the buck was a real bad thing, unless they were playing poker and had a whole mess of em spread out on the table. Seemed to me like they stroked them then, all right. Seemed to me like then they stroked them plenty, him included.

“There was a lot of big ugly under his Southern-gentleman top layer—he thought people who were trying to do good or improve the world were about the funniest things going, he hated the blacks and the Jews, and he thought we ought to H-bomb the Russians out of existence before they could do it to us. Why not? he’d say. They were part of what he called ‘the sub-human strain of the race.’ To him that seemed to mean Jews, blacks, Italians, Indians, and anyone whose family didn’t summer on the Outer Banks.

“I listened to him spout all that ignorance and high-toned filth, and naturally I started to wonder about why he was a famous writer...

how he could be a famous writer. I wanted to know what it was the critics saw in him, but I was a lot more interested in what ordinary folks like me saw in him—the people who made his books best-sellers as soon as they came out. Finally I decided to find out for myself. I went down to the Public Library and borrowed his first book, *Blaze of Heaven*.

“I was expecting it’d turn out to be something like in the story of the Emperor’s new clothes, but it didn’t. The book was about these five men and what happened to them in the war, and what happened to their wives and girlfriends back home at the same time. When I saw on the jacket it was about the war, I kind of rolled my eyes, thinking it would be like all those boring stories they told each other.”

“It wasn’t?”

“I read the first ten or twenty pages and thought, This ain’t so good. It ain’t as bad as I thought it’d be, but nothing’s happening. Then I read another thirty pages and I kind of ... well, I kind of lost myself. Next time I looked up it was almost midnight and I was two hundred pages into that book. I thought to myself, You got to go to bed, Martha. You got to go right now, because five-thirty comes early. But I read another forty pages in spite of how heavy my eyes were getting, and it was quarter to one before I finally got up to brush my teeth.”

Martha stopped, looking off toward the darkened window and all the miles of night outside it, her eyes hazed with remembering, her lips pressed together in a light frown. She shook her head a little.

“I didn’t know how a man who was so boring when you had to listen to him could write so you didn’t never want to close the book, nor ever see it end, either. How a nasty, cold-hearted man like him could still make up characters so real you wanted to cry over em when they died. When Noah got hit and killed by a taxi-cab near the end of *Blaze of Heaven*, just a month after his part of the war was over, I did cry. I didn’t know how a sour, cynical man like Jefferies could make a body care so much about things that weren’t real at all—about things he’d made up out of his own head. And there was something else in

that book ... a kind of sunshine. It was full of pain and bad things, but there was sweetness in it, too... and love... .”

She startled Darcy by laughing out loud.

“There was a fella worked at the hotel back then named Billy Beck, a nice young man who was majoring in English at Fordham when he wasn’t on the door. He and I used to talk sometimes—”

“Was he a brother?”

“God, no!” Martha laughed again. “Wasn’t no black doormen at Le Palais until 1965. Black porters and bellboys and car-park valets, but no black doormen. Wasn’t considered right. Quality people like Mr. Jefferies wouldn’t have liked it.

“Anyway, I asked Billy how the man’s books could be so wonderful when he was such a booger in person. Billy asked me if I knew the one about the fat disc jockey with the thin voice, and I said I didn’t know what he was talking about. Then he said he didn’t know the answer to my question, but he told me something a prof of his had said about Thomas Wolfe. This prof said that some writers—and Wolfe was one of them—were no shakes at all until they sat down to a desk and took up pens in their hands. He said that a pen to fellows like that was like a telephone booth is to Clark Kent. He said that Thomas Wolfe was like a ...” She hesitated, then smiled. “... that he was like a divine wind-chime. He said a wind-chime isn’t nothing on its own, but when the wind blows through it, it makes a lovely noise.

“I think Peter Jefferies was like that. He was quality, he had been raised quality and he was, but the quality in him wasn’t nothing he could take credit for. It was like God banked it for him and he just spent it. I’ll tell you something you probably won’t believe: after I’d read a couple of his books, I started to feel sorry for him.”

“Sorry?”

“Yes. Because the books were beautiful and the man who made em was ugly as sin. He really was like my Johnny, but in a way Johnny was luckier, because he never dreamed of a better life, and Mr. Jefferies did. His books were his dreams, where he let himself believe in the world he laughed at and sneered at when he was awake.”

She asked Darcy if she wanted another beer. Darcy said she would pass.

“Well if you change your mind, just holler. And you might change it because right about here is where the water gets murky.”

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“One other thing about the man,” Martha said. “He wasn’t a sexy man. At least not the way you usually think about a man being sexy.”

“You mean he was a—”

“No, he wasn’t a homosexual, or a gay, or whatever it is you’re supposed to call them these days. He wasn’t sexy for men, but he wasn’t what you could call sexy for women, either. There were two, maybe three times in all the years I did for him when I seen cigarette butts with lipstick on them in the bedroom ashtrays when I cleaned up, and smelled perfume on the pillows. One of those times I also found an eyeliner pencil in the bathroom—it had rolled under the door and into the corner. I reckon they were call-girls (the pillows never smelled like the kind of perfume decent women wear), but two or three times in all those years isn’t much, is it?”

“It sure isn’t,” Darcy said, thinking of all the panties she had pulled out from under beds, all the condoms she had seen floating in unflushed toilets, all the false eyelashes she had found on and under pillows.

Martha sat without speaking for a few moments, lost in thought, then looked up. “I tell you what!” she said. “That man was sexy for

himself! It sounds crazy but it's true. There sure wasn't any shortage of jizz in him—I know that from all the sheets I changed.”

Darcy nodded.

“And there'd always be a little jar of cold cream in the bathroom, or sometimes on the table by his bed. I think he used it when he pulled off. To keep from getting chapped skin.”

The two women looked at each other and suddenly began giggling hysterically.

“You sure he wasn't the other way, honey?” Darcy asked finally.

“I said cold cream, not Vas eline,” Martha said, and that did it; for the next five minutes the two women laughed until they cried.

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But it wasn't really funny, and Darcy knew it. And when Martha went on, she simply listened, hardly believing what she was hearing.

“It was maybe a week after that time at Mama Delorme's, or maybe it was two,” Martha said. “I don't remember. It's been a long time since it all happened. By then I was pretty sure I was pregnant—I wasn't throwing up or nothing, but there's a feeling to it. It don't come from places you'd think. It's like your gums and your toenails and the bridge of your nose figure out what's going on before the rest of you. Or you want something like chop suey at three in the afternoon and you say, ‘Whoa, now! What's this?’ But you know what it is. I didn't say a word to Johnny, though—I knew I'd have to, eventually, but I was scared to.”

“I don't blame you,” Darcy said.

“I was in the bedroom of Jefferies's suite one late morning, and while I did the neatening up I was thinking about Johnny and how I might break the news about the baby to him. Jefferies had gone out

someplace—to one of his publishers' meetings, likely as not. The bed was a double, messed up on both sides, but that didn't mean nothing; he was just a restless sleeper. Sometimes when I came in the groundsheet would be pulled right out from underneath the mattress.

“Well, I stripped off the coverlet and the two blankets underneath—he was thin-blooded and always slept under all he could—and then I started to strip the top sheet off backward, and I seen it right away. It was his spend, mostly dried on there.

“I stood there looking at it for ... oh, I don't know how long. It was like I was hypnotized. I saw him, lying there all by himself after his friends had gone home, lying there smelling nothing but the smoke they'd left behind and his own sweat. I saw him lying there on his back and then starting to make love to Mother Thumb and her four daughters. I saw that as clear as I see you now, Darcy; the only thing I didn't see is what he was thinking about, what sort of pictures he was making in his head... and considering the way he talked and how he was when he wasn't writing his books, I'm glad I didn't.”

Darcy was looking at her, frozen, saying nothing.

“Next thing I knew, this ... this feeling came over me.” She paused, thinking, then shook her head slowly and deliberately. “This compulsion came over me. It was like wanting chop suey at three in the afternoon, or ice cream and pickles at two in the morning, or ... what did you want, Darcy?”

“Rind of bacon,” Darcy said through lips so numb she could hardly feel them. “My husband went out and couldn't find me any, but he brought back a bag of those pork rinds and I just gobbled them.”

Martha nodded and began to speak again. Thirty seconds later Darcy bolted for the bathroom, where she struggled briefly with her gorge and then vomited up all the beer she'd drunk.

Look on the bright side, she thought, fumbling weakly for the flush. No hangover to worry about. And then, on the heels of that: How am I going to look her in the eyes? Just how am I supposed to do that?

It turned out not to be a problem. When she turned around, Martha was standing in the bathroom doorway and looking at her with warm concern.

“You all right?”

“Yes.” Darcy tried a smile, and to her immense relief it felt genuine on her lips. “I ... I just ...”

“I know,” Martha said. “Believe me, I do. Should I finish, or have you heard enough?”

“Finish,” Darcy said decisively, and took her friend by the arm. “But in the living room. I don’t even want to look at the refrigerator, let alone open the door.”

“Amen to that.”

A minute later they were settled on opposite ends of the shabby but comfortable living-room couch.

“You sure, honey?”

Darcy nodded.

“All right.” But Martha sat quiet a moment longer, looking down at the slim hands clasped in her lap, conning the past as a submarine commander might con hostile waters through his periscope. At last she raised her head, turned to Darcy, and resumed her story.

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“I worked the rest of that day in kind of a daze. It was like I was hypnotized. People talked to me, and I answered them, but I seemed to be hearing them through a glass wall and speaking back to them

the same way. I'm hypnotized, all right, I remember thinking. She hypnotized me. That old woman. Gave me one of those post-hypnotic suggestions, like when a stage hypnotist says, 'Someone says the word Chiclets to you, you're gonna get down on all fours and bark like a dog,' and the guy who was hypnotized does it even if no one says Chiclets to him for the next ten years. She put something in that tea and hypnotized me and then told me to do that. That nasty thing.

"I knew why she would, too—an old woman superstitious enough to believe in stump-water cures, and how you could witch a man into love by putting a little drop of blood from your period onto the heel of his foot while he was sleeping, and cross-tie walkers, and God alone knows what else ... if a woman like that with a bee in her bonnet about natural fathers could do hypnotism, hypnotizing a woman like me into doing what I did might be just what she would do. Because she would believe it. And I had named him to her, hadn't I? Yes indeed.

"It never occurred to me then that I hadn't remembered hardly anything at all about going to Mama Delorme's until after I did what I did in Mr. Jefferies's bedroom. It did that night, though.

"I got through the day all right. I mean, I didn't cry or scream or carry on or anything like that. My sister Kissy acted worse the time she was drawing water from the old well round dusk and a bat flew up from it and got caught in her hair. There was just that feeling that I was behind a wall of glass, and I figured if that was all, I could get along with it.

"Then, when I got home, I all at once got thirsty. I was thirstier than ever in my life—it felt like a sandstorm was going on in my throat. I started to drink water. It seemed like I just couldn't drink enough. And I started to spit. I just spit and spit and spit. Then I started to feel sick to my stomach. I ran down to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror and stuck out my tongue to see if I could see anything there, any sign of what I'd done, and of course I couldn't. I thought, There! Do you feel better now?

“But I didn’t. I felt worse. I knelt down in front of the toilet and I did what you did, Darcy, only I did a lot more of it. I vomited until I thought I was going to pass out. I was crying and begging God to please forgive me, to let me stop puking before I lost the baby, if I really was quick with one. And then I remembered myself standing there in his bedroom with my fingers in my mouth, not even thinking about what I was doing—I tell you I could see myself doing it, as if I was looking at myself in a movie. And then I vomited again.

“Mrs. Parker heard me and came to the door and asked if I was all right. That helped me get hold of myself a little, and by the time Johnny came in that night, I was over the worst of it. He was drunk, spoiling for a fight. When I wouldn’t give him one he hit me in the eye anyway and walked out. I was almost glad he hit me, because it gave me something else to think about.

“The next day when I went into Mr. Jefferies’s suite he was sitting in the parlor, still in his pajamas, scribbling away on one of his yellow legal pads. He always travelled with a bunch of them, held together with a big red rubber band, right up until the end. When he came to Le Palais that last time and I didn’t see them, I knew he’d made up his mind to die. I wasn’t a bit sorry, neither.”

Martha looked toward the living-room window with an expression which held nothing of mercy or forgiveness; it was a cold look, one which reported an utter absence of the heart.

“When I saw he hadn’t gone out I was relieved, because it meant I could put off the cleaning. He didn’t like the maids around when he was working, you see, and so I figured he might not want housekeeping service until Yvonne came on at three.

“I said, ‘I’ll come back later, Mr. Jefferies.’

” ‘Do it now,’ he said. ‘Just keep quiet while you do. I’ve got a bitch of a headache and a hell of an idea. The combination is killing me.’

“Any other time he would have told me to come back, I swear it. It seemed like I could almost hear that old black mama laughing.

“I went into the bathroom and started tidying around, taking out the used towels and putting up fresh ones, replacing the soap with a new bar, putting fresh matches out, and all the time I’m thinking, You can’t hypnotize someone who doesn’t want to be hypnotized, old woman. Whatever it was you put in the tea that day, whatever it was you told me to do or how many times you told me to do it, I’m wise to you—wise to you and shut of you.

“I went into the bedroom and I looked at the bed. I expected it would look to me like a closet does to a kid who’s scared of the bogeyman, but I saw it was just a bed. I knew I wasn’t going to do anything, and it was a relief. So I stripped it and there was another of those sticky patches, still drying, as if he’d woke up horny an hour or so before and just took care of himself.

“I seen it and waited to see if I was going to feel anything about it. I didn’t. It was just the leftovers of a man with a letter and no mailbox to put it in, like you and I have seen a hundred times before. That old woman was no more a bruja woman than I was. I might be pregnant or I might not be, but if I was, it was Johnny’s child. He was the only man I’d ever lain with, and nothin I found on that white man’s sheets—or anywhere else, for that matter—was gonna change that.

“It was a cloudy day, but at the second I thought that, the sun came out like God had put His final amen on the subject. I don’t recall ever feeling so relieved. I stood there thanking God everything was all right, and all the time I was sayin that prayer of gratitude I was scoopin that stuff up off the sheet—all of it I could get, anyway—and stickin it in my mouth and swallowin it down.

“It was like I was standing outside myself and watching again. And a part of me was saying, You’re crazy to be doing that, girl, but you’re even crazier to be doing it with him right there in the next room; he could get up any second and come in here to use the bathroom and see you. Rugs as thick as they are in this place, you’d never hear

him coming. And that would be the end of your job at Le Palais—or any other big hotel in New York, most likely. A girl caught doing a thing like what you're doing would never work in this city again as a chambermaid, at least not in any half-decent hotel.

“But it didn't make any difference. I went on until I was done—or until some part of me was satisfied—and then I just stood there a minute, looking down at the sheet. I couldn't hear nothing at all from the other room, and it came to me that he was right behind me, standing in the doorway. I knew just what the expression on his face'd be. Used to be a travelling show that came to Babylon every August when I was a girl, and they had a man with it—I guess he was a man—that geeked out behind the tent-show. He'd be down a hole and some fella would give a spiel about how he was the missing link and then throw a live chicken down. The geek'd bite the head off it. Once my oldest brother—Bradford, who died in a car accident in Biloxi—said he wanted to go and see the geek. My dad said he was sorry to hear it, but he didn't outright forbid Brad, because Brad was nineteen and almost a man. He went, and me and Kissy meant to ask him what it was like when he came back, but when we saw the expression on his face we never did. That's the expression I thought I'd see on Jefferies's face when I turned around and saw him in the doorway. Do you see what I'm sayin?”

Darcy nodded.

“I knew he was there, too—I just knew it. Finally I mustered up enough courage to turn around, thinking I'd beg him not to tell the Chief Housekeeper—beg him on my knees, if I had to—and he wasn't there. It had just been my guilty heart all along. I walked to the door and looked out and seen he was still in the parlor, writing on his yellow pad faster than ever. So I went ahead and changed the bed and freshened the room just like always, but that feeling that I was behind a glass wall was back, stronger than ever.

“I took care of the soiled towels and bed-linen like you're supposed to—out to the hall through the bedroom door. First thing I learned when I came to work at the hotel is you don't ever take dirty linen

through the sitting room of a suite. Then I came back in to where he was. I meant to tell him I'd do the parlor later, when he wasn't working. But when I saw the way he was acting, I was so surprised that I stopped right there in the doorway, looking at him.

"He was walking around the room so fast that his yellow silk pajamas were whipping around his legs. He had his hands in his hair and he was twirling it every which way. He looked like one of those brainy mathematicians in the old Saturday Evening Post cartoons. His eyes were all wild, like he'd had a bad shock. First thing I thought was that he'd seen what I did after all and it had, you know, made him feel so sick it'd driven him half-crazy.

"Turned out it didn't have nothing to do with me at all ... at least he didn't think so. That was the only time he talked to me, other than to ask me if I'd get some more stationery or another pillow or change the setting on the air-conditioner. He talked to me because he had to. Something had happened to him—something very big—and he had to talk to somebody or go crazy, I guess.

" 'My head is splitting,' he said.

" 'I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Jefferies,' I said. 'I can get you some aspirin—'

" 'No,' he said. 'That's not it. It's this idea. It's like I went fishing for trout and hooked a marlin instead. I write books for a living, you see. Fiction.'

" 'Yes, sir, Mr. Jefferies,' I said, 'I have read two of them and thought they were fine.'

" 'Did you,' he said, looking at me as if maybe I'd gone crazy. 'Well, that's very kind of you to say, anyway. I woke up this morning and I had an idea.'

"Yes, sir, I was thinking to myself, you had an idea, all right, one so hot and so fresh it just kinda spilled out all over the sheet. But it ain't

there no more, so you don't have to worry. And I almost laughed out loud. Only, Darcy, I don't think he would have noticed if I had.

" 'I ordered up some breakfast,' he said, and pointed at the room-service trolley by the door, 'and as I ate it I thought about this little idea. I thought it might make a short story. There's this magazine, you know ... The New Yorker ... well, never mind.' He wasn't going to explain The New Yorker magazine to a pickaninny like me, you know."

Darcy grinned.

" 'But by the time I'd finished breakfast,' he went on, 'it began to seem more like a novelette. And then ... as I started to rough out some ideas ...' He gave out this shrill little laugh. 'I don't think I've had an idea this good in ten years. Maybe never. Do you think it would be possible for twin brothers—fraternal, not identical—to end up fighting on opposite sides during World War II?'

" 'Well, maybe not in the Pacific,' I said. Another time I don't think I would have had nerve enough to speak to him at all, Darcy—I would have just stood there and gawped. But I still felt like I was under glass, or like I'd had a shot of novocaine at the dentist's and it hadn't quite worn off yet.

"He laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard and said, 'Ha-ha! No, not there, it couldn't happen there, but it might be possible in the ETO. And they could come face-to-face during the Battle of the Bulge.'

" 'Well, maybe—' I started, but by then he was walking fast around the parlor again, running his hands through his hair and making it look wilder and wilder.

" 'I know it sounds like Orpheum Circuit melodrama,' he said, 'some silly piece of claptrap like Under Two Flags or Armadale, but the concept of twins ... and it could be explained rationally ... I see just how...' He whirled on me. 'Would it have dramatic impact?'

” ‘Yes, sir,’ I said. ‘Everyone likes stories about brothers that don’t know they’re brothers.’

” ‘Sure they do,’ he said. ‘And I’ll tell you something else—’ Then he stopped and I saw the queerest expression come over his face. It was queer, but I could read it letter-perfect. It was like he was waking up to doing something foolish, like a man suddenly realizing he’s spread his face with shaving cream and then taken his electric razor to it. He was talking to a nigger hotel maid about what was maybe the best idea he’d ever had—a nigger hotel maid whose idea of a really good story was probably *The Edge of Night*. He’d forgot me saying I’d read two of his books—”

“Or thought it was just flattery to get a bigger tip,” Darcy murmured.

“Yeah, that’d fit his concept of human nature like a glove, all right. Anyway, that expression said he’d just realized who he was talking to, that was all.

” ‘I think I’m going to extend my stay,’ he said. ‘Tell them at the desk, would you?’ He spun around to start walking again and his leg whanged against the room-service cart. ‘And get this fucking thing out of here, all right?’

” ‘Would you want me to come back later and—’ I started.

” ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ he says, ‘come back later and do whatever you like, but for now just be my good little sweetheart and make everything all gone ... including yourself.’

“I did just that, and I was never so relieved in my life as when the parlor door shut behind me. I wheeled the room-service trolley over to the side of the corridor. He’d had juice and scrambled eggs and bacon. I started to walk away and then I seen there was a mushroom on his plate, too, pushed aside with the last of the eggs and a little bit of bacon. I looked at it and it was like a light went on in my head. I remembered the mushroom she’d given me—old Mama Delorme—in the little plastic box. Remembered it for the first time since that

day. I remembered finding it in my dress pocket, and where I'd put it. The one on his plate looked just the same—wrinkled and sort of dried up, like it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and one that would make you powerful sick.”

She looked at Darcy steadily.

“He'd eaten part of it, too. More than half, I'd say.”

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“Mr. Buckley was on the desk that day and I told him Mr. Jefferies was thinking of extending his stay. Mr. Buckley said he didn't think that would present a problem even though Mr. Jefferies had been planning to check out that very afternoon.

“Then I went down to the room-service kitchen and talked with Bedelia Aaronson—you must remember Bedelia—and asked her if she'd seen anyone out of the ordinary around that morning. Bedelia asked who I meant and I said I didn't really know. She said ‘Why you asking, Marty?’ and I told her I'd rather not say. She said there hadn't been nobody, not even the man from the food service who was always trying to date up the short-order girl.

“I started away and she said, ‘Unless you mean the old Negro lady.’

“I turned back and asked what old Negro lady that was.

” ‘Well,’ Bedelia said, ‘I imagine she came in off the street, looking for the john. Happens once or twice a day. Negroes sometimes won't ask the way because they're afraid the hotel people will kick them out even if they're well-dressed ... which, as I'm sure you know, they often do. Anyway, this poor old soul wandered down here ...’ She stopped and got a look at me. ‘Are you all right, Martha? You look like you're going to faint!’

” ‘I'm not going to faint,’ I said. ‘What was she doing?’

” ‘Just wandering around, looking at the breakfast trolleys like she didn’t know where she was,’ she said. ‘Poor old thing! She was eighty if she was a day. Looked like a strong gust of wind would blow her right up into the sky like a kite ... Martha, you come over here and sit down. You look like the picture of Dorian Gray in that movie.’

” ‘What did she look like? Tell me!’

“‘I did tell you—an old woman. They all look about the same to me. The only thing different about this one was the scar on her face. It ran all the way up into her hair. It—’

“But I didn’t hear any more because that was when I did faint.

“They let me go home early and I’d no more than got there than I started feeling like I wanted to spit again, and drink a lot of water, and probably end up in the john like before, sicking my guts out. But for the time being I just sat there by the window, looking out into the street, and gave myself a talking-to.

“What she’d done to me wasn’t just hypnosis; by then I knew that. It was more powerful than hypnosis. I still wasn’t sure if I believed in any such thing as witchcraft, but she’d done something to me, all right, and whatever it was, I was just going to have to ride with it. I couldn’t quit my job, not with a husband that wasn’t turning out to be worth salt and a baby most likely on the way. I couldn’t even request to be switched to a different floor. A year or two before I could have, but I knew there was talk about making me Assistant Chief Housekeeper for Ten to Twelve, and that meant a raise in pay. More’n that, it meant they’d most likely take me back at the same job after I had the baby.

“My mother had a saying: What can’t be cured must be endured. I thought about going back to see that old black mama and asking her to take it off, but I knew somehow she wouldn’t—she’d made up her mind it was best for me, what she was doing, and one thing I’ve learned as I’ve made my way through this world, Darcy, is that the

only time you can never hope to change someone's mind is when they've got it in their head that they're doing you a help.

"I sat there thinking all that and looking out at the street, all the people coming and going, and I kind of dozed off. Couldn't have been for much more than fifteen minutes, but when I woke up again I knew something else. That old woman wanted me to keep on doing what I'd already done twice, and I couldn't do that if Peter Jefferies went back to Birmingham. So she got into the room-service kitchen and put that mushroom on his tray and he ate part of it and it gave him that idea. Turned out to be a whale of a story, too—Boys in the Mist, it was called. It was about just what he told me that day, twin brothers, one of them an American soldier and the other a German one, that meet at the Battle of the Bulge. It turned out to be the biggest seller he ever had."

She paused and added, "I read that in his obituary."

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"He stayed another week. Every day when I went in he'd be bent over the desk in the parlor, writing away on one of his yellow pads, still wearing his pajamas. Every day I'd ask him if he wanted me to come back later and he'd tell me to go ahead and make up the bedroom but be quiet about it. Never looking up from his writing while he talked. Every day I went in telling myself that this time I wasn't going to do it, and every day that stuff was there on the sheet, still fresh, and every day every prayer and every promise I'd made myself went flying out the window and I found myself doing it again. It really wasn't like fighting a compulsion, where you argue it back and forth and sweat and shiver; it was more like blinking for a minute and finding out it had already happened. Oh, and every day when I came in he'd be holding his head like it was just killing him. What a pair we were! He had my morning-sickness and I had his night-sweats!"

"What do you mean?" Darcy asked.

“It was at night I’d really brood about what I was doing, and spit and drink water and maybe have to throw up a time or two. Mrs. Parker got so concerned that I finally told her I thought I was pregnant but I didn’t want my husband to know until I was sure.

“Johnny Rosewall was one self-centered son of a bitch, but I think even he would have known something was wrong with me if he hadn’t had fish of his own to fry, the biggest trout in the skillet being the liquor store holdup he and his friends were plannin. Not that I knew about that, of course; I was just glad he was keepin out of my way. It made life at least a little easier.

“Then I let myself into 1163 one morning and Mr. Jefferies was gone. He’d packed his bags and headed back to Alabama to work on his book and think about his war. Oh, Darcy, I can’t tell you how happy I was! I felt like Lazarus must have when he found out he was going to have a second go at life. It seemed to me that morning like everything might come right after all, like in a story—I would tell Johnny about the baby and he would straighten up, throw out his dope, and get a regular job. He’d be a proper husband to me and a good father to his son—I was already sure it was going to be a boy.

“I went into the bedroom of Mr. Jefferies’s suite and seen the bedclothes messed up like always, the blankets kicked off the end and the sheet all tangled up in a ball. I walked over there feeling like I was in a dream again and pulled the sheet back. I was thinking, Well, all right, if I have to ... but it’s for the last time.

“Turned out the last time had already happened. There wasn’t a trace of him on that sheet. Whatever spell that old bruja woman had put on us, it had run its course. That’s good enough, I thought. I’m gonna have the baby, he’s gonna have the book, and we’re both shut of her magic. I don’t care a fig about natural fathers, either, as long as Johnny will be a good dad to the one I’ve got coming.”

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“I told Johnny that same night,” Martha said, then added dryly: “He didn’t cotton onto the idea, as I think you already know.”

Darcy nodded.

“Whopped me with the end of that broomstick about five times and then stood over me where I lay crying in the corner and yelled, ‘What are you, crazy? We ain’t having no kid! I think you stone crazy, woman!’ Then he turned around and walked out.

“I laid there for awhile, thinking of the first miscarriage and scared to death the pains would start any minute, and I’d be on my way to having another one. I thought of my momma writing that I ought to get away from him before he put me in the hospital, and of Kissy sending me that Greyhound ticket with GO NOW written on the folder. And when I was sure that I wasn’t going to miscarry the baby, I got up to pack a bag and get the hell out of there—right away, before he could come back. But I was no more than opening the closet door when I thought of Mama Delorme again. I remembered telling her I was going to leave Johnny, and what she said to me: ‘No—he gonna leave you. You gonna see him out, is all. Stick around, woman. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he dint be doin it.’

“It was like she was right there, telling me what to look for and what to do. I went into the closet, all right, but it wasn’t my own clothes I wanted anymore. I started going through his, and I found a couple of things in that same damned sportcoat where I’d found the bottle of White Angel. That coat was his favorite, and I guess it really said everything anyone needed to know about Johnny Rosewall. It was bright satin... cheap-looking. I hated it. Wasn’t no bottle of dope I found this time. Was a straight-razor in one pocket and a cheap little pistol in the other. I took the gun out and looked at it, and that same feeling came over me that came over me those times in the bedroom of Mr. Jefferies’s suite—like I was doing something just after I woke up from a heavy sleep.

“I walked into the kitchen with the gun in my hand and set it down on the little bit of counter I had beside the stove. Then I opened the overhead cupboard and felt around in back of the spices and the tea. At first I couldn’t find what she’d given me and this awful stifflin panic came over me—I was scared the way you get scared in dreams. Then my hand happened on that plastic box and I drew it down.

“I opened it and took out the mushroom. It was a repulsive thing, too heavy for its size, and warm. It was like holding a lump of flesh that hasn’t quite died. That thing I did in Mr. Jefferies’s bedroom? I tell you right now I’d do it two hundred more times before I’d pick up that mushroom again.

“I held it in my right hand and I picked up that cheap little .32 in my left. And then I squeezed my right hand as hard as I could, and I felt the mushroom squelch in my fist, and it sounded... well, I know it’s almost impossible to believe ... but it sounded like it screamed. Do you believe that could be?”

Slowly, Darcy shook her head. She did not, in fact, know if she believed it or not, but she was absolutely sure of one thing: she did not want to believe it.

“Well, I don’t believe it, either. But that’s what it sounded like. And one other thing you won’t believe, but I do, because I saw it: it bled. That mushroom bled. I saw a little stream of blood come out of my fist and splash onto the gun. But the blood disappeared as soon as it hit the barrel.

“After awhile it stopped. I opened my hand, expecting it would be full of blood, but there was only the mushroom, all wrinkled up, with the shapes of my fingers mashed into it. Wasn’t no blood on the mushroom, in my hand, on his gun, nor anywhere. And just as I started to think I’d done nothing but somehow have a dream on my feet, the damned thing twitched in my hand. I looked down at it and for a second or two it didn’t look like a mushroom at all—it looked like a little tiny penis that was still alive. I thought of the blood coming out of my fist when I squeezed it and I thought of her saying, ‘Any

child a woman get, the man shoot it out'n his pecker, girl.' It twitched again—I tell you it did—and I screamed and threw it in the trash. Then I heard Johnny coming back up the stairs and I grabbed his gun and ran back into the bedroom with it and put it back into his coat pocket. Then I climbed into bed with all my clothes on, even my shoes, and pulled the blanket up to my chin. He come in and I seen he was bound to make trouble. He had a rug-beater in one hand. I don't know where he got it from, but I knew what he meant to do with it.

” ‘Ain't gonna be no baby,’ he said. ‘You get on over here.’

” ‘No,’ I told him, ‘there ain't going to be a baby. You don't need that thing, either, so put it away. You already took care of the baby, you worthless piece of shit.’

“I knew it was a risk, calling him that, but I thought maybe it would make him believe me, and it did. Instead of beating me up, this big goony stoned grin spread over his face. I tell you, I never hated him so much as I did then.

” ‘Gone?’ he asked.

” ‘Gone,’ I said.

” ‘Where's the mess?’ he asked.

” ‘Where do you think?’ I said. ‘Halfway to the East River by now, most likely.’

“He came over then and tried to kiss me, for Jesus' sake. Kiss me! I turned my face away and he went upside my head, but not hard.

” ‘You're gonna see I know best,’ he says. ‘There'll be time enough for kids later on.’

“Then he went out again. Two nights later him and his friends tried to pull that liquor store job and his gun blew up in his face and killed

him.”

“You think you witched that gun, don’t you?” Darcy said.

“No,” Martha said calmly. “She did ... by way of me, you could say. She saw I wouldn’t help myself, and so she made me help myself.”

“But you do think the gun was witched.”

“I don’t just think so,” Martha said calmly.

Darcy went into the kitchen for a glass of water. Her mouth was suddenly very dry.

“That’s really the end,” Martha said when she came back. “Johnny died and I had Pete. Wasn’t until I got too pregnant to work that I found out just how many friends I had. If I’d known sooner, I think I would have left Johnny sooner ... or maybe not. None of us really knows the way the world works, no matter what we think or say.”

“But that’s not everything, is it?” Darcy asked.

“Well, there are two more things,” Martha said. “Little things.” But she didn’t look as if they were little, Darcy thought.

“I went back to Mama Delorme’s about four months after Pete was born. I didn’t want to but I did. I had twenty dollars in an envelope. I couldn’t afford it but I knew, somehow, that it belonged to her. It was dark. Stairs seemed even narrower than before, and the higher I climbed the more I could smell her and the smells of her place: burned candles and dried wallpaper and the cinnamony smell of her tea.

“That feeling of doing something in a dream—of being behind a glass wall—came over me for the last time. I got up to her door and knocked. There was no answer, so I knocked again. There was still no answer, so I knelt down to slip the envelope under the door. And her voice came from right on the other side, as if she was knelt

down, too. I was never so scared in my life as I was when that papery old voice came drifting out of the crack under that door—it was like hearing a voice coming out of a grave.

” ‘He goan be a fine boy,’ she said. ‘Goan be just like he father. Like he natural father.’

” ‘I brought you something,’ I said. I could barely hear my own voice.

” ‘Slip it through, dearie,’ she whispered. I slipped the envelope halfway under and she pulled it the rest of the way. I heard her tear it open and I waited. I just waited.

” ‘It’s enough,’ she whispered. ‘You get on out of here, dearie, and don’t you ever come back to Mama Delorme’s again, you hear?’

“I got up and ran out of there just as fast as I could.”

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Martha went over to the bookcase, and came back a moment or two later with a hardcover. Darcy was immediately struck by the similarity between the artwork on this jacket and that on the jacket of Peter Rosewall’s book. This one was *Blaze of Heaven* by Peter Jefferies, and the cover showed a pair of GIs charging an enemy pillbox. One of them had a grenade; the other was firing an M-1.

Martha rummaged in her blue canvas tote-bag, brought out her son’s book, removed the tissue paper in which it was wrapped, and laid it tenderly next to the Jefferies book. *Blaze of Heaven*; *Blaze of Glory*. Side by side, the points of comparison were inescapable.

“This was the other thing,” Martha said.

“Yes,” Darcy said doubtfully. “They do look similar. What about the stories? Are they ... well ...”

She stopped in some confusion and looked up at Martha from beneath her lashes. She was relieved to see Martha was smiling.

“You askin if my boy copied that nasty honky’s book?” Martha asked without the slightest bit of rancor.

“No!” Darcy said, perhaps a little too vehemently.

“Other than that they’re both about war, they’re nothing alike,” Martha said. “They’re as different as ... well, as different as black and white.” She paused and then added: “But there’s a feel about them every now and then that’s the same... somethin you seem to almost catch around corners. It’s that sunshine I told you about—that feeling that the world is mostly a lot better than it looks, especially better than it looks to those people who are too smart to be kind.”

“Then isn’t it possible that your son was inspired by Peter Jefferies... that he read him in college and ...”

“Sure,” Martha said. “I suppose my Peter did read Jefferies’s books—that’d be more likely than not even if it was just a case of like calling to like. But there’s something else—something that’s a little harder to explain.”

She picked up the Jefferies novel, looked at it reflectively for a moment, then looked at Darcy.

“I went and bought this copy about a year after my son was born,” she said. “It was still in print, although the bookstore had to special-order it from the publisher. When Mr. Jefferies was in on one of his visits, I got up my courage and asked if he would sign it for me. I thought he might be put out by me asking, but I think he was actually a little flattered. Look here.”

She turned to the dedication page of *Blaze of Heaven*.

Darcy read what was printed there and felt an eerie doubling in her mind. This book is dedicated to my mother, ALTHEA DIXMONT JEFFERIES, the finest woman I have ever known. And below that, Jefferies had written in black fountain-pen ink that was now fading, “For Martha Rosewall, who cleans up my clutter and never

complains.” Below this he had signed his name and jotted August ‘61.

The wording of the penned dedication struck her first as contemptuous ... then as eerie. But before she had a chance to think about it, Martha had opened her son’s book, *Blaze of Glory*, to the dedication page and placed it beside the Jefferies book. Once again Darcy read the printed matter: This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn’t have done it without you. Below that he had written in a pen which looked like a fine-line Flair: “And that’s no lie. Love you, Mom! Pete.”

But she didn’t really read this; she only looked at it. Her eyes went back and forth, back and forth, between the dedication page which had been inscribed in August of 1961 and the one which had been inscribed in April of 1985.

“You see?” Martha asked softly.

Darcy nodded. She saw.

The thin, sloping, somehow old-fashioned backhand script was the same in both books ... and so, given the variations afforded by love and familiarity, were the signatures themselves. Only the tone of the written messages varied, Darcy thought, and there the difference was as clear as the difference between black and white.