

Robertson Rice

# The Pursuit

*A novel*

ORIGINAL EDITION



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**T**he heart has its seasons, as anyone past fifty will tell you. As spring follows winter, so the endless summers of youth will fade in the fog of fall. And then you may find yourself counting the loves of your life on your fingers. There are times, though, when the veil of age is raised from a glowing face and the embers of the long-forgotten billow — before, once more, they are buried under the ashes of regret. I call those times the Indian Summers of our souls.

It was autumn in New York, in the year when our story begins. And I was past fifty, past sixty even. The shadows of November were creeping down Park Avenue, seeping through the steel and concrete, casting their sepia glances on the papers on my desk. First drafts, second drafts, manuscripts waiting to be printed, to be read. Autumn made it all look yellow and wilted, the folders and files wasted, the words grey and for naught. With autumn resignation crept into your mind, and the thoughts hung suspended as from a web of doubt. Even Ms. Hastings looked her age that year, when in the past her taut body had always reminded me of a lingering youth, and of passions not yet spent.

It was autumn, within and without. And this is a story within a story, a tale such as only life can tell, without judgment or hope, without comfort. A tale you won't find

in any anthology or textbook, which does not pretend to teach any truth or wisdom, unless it is the wisdom of being true to yourself. For it is an immoral story. It is a tale that *believes*.

“This came registered from Canada,” Ms. Hastings said and put a bulky envelope on my desk. “I signed for it.”

She turned on her heels and looked over her shoulder. The drawn face, normally so alluring, betrayed her fatigue. I asked if there was anything else to be taken care of.

“Nothing that can't wait till tomorrow.”

“I'll see you tomorrow then.”

I was glad to do her that favor. She had covered for me often enough. In a few minutes it would be impossible to catch a cab on the avenue, and the subways would be as crowded as the first circle of hell. But I would go on working, and after a while the phones would stop blinking and, for all that it mattered, Jane Hastings would not remind me of the vicissitudes of life anymore.

“Goodnight,” it came over the intercom.

In a moment, she was slipping out the door, locking the world away with her and leaving me with the faint noise from the street, 23 stories below.

R. A. Roberts, I read. Burnett Publishing Co., Park Ave. South, New York City. I looked at the manila envelope, at the address written with a felt marker. It was from someone who knew my initials — the initials I had not used in ten years — and maybe I should have been intrigued. But I have experience in such matters. The world is full of kooks who prey on innocent editors, stealing their time and taxing their patience. And this person probably thought he had a foot in the door just because he knew my

middle name.

I turned the envelope. It is true that some things stay with you and that some people you don't forget, even after decades, and when they pass your way again, it is as if you'd seen them yesterday or this morning.

And so it was with Jack Thierry, whose name I found on the back of that envelope and whom I had known 25 years before. We had been at college then — I as director of public relations, and he as a student on the GI Bill. It had been a self-styled 'experimental' college within the Michigan State system, a small school with a graduate program in education, which had attracted a fair amount of out-of-state students. I had quit when the experiment failed, and Jack Thierry had been thrown out. He had been a quiet guy, as far as I remembered — quiet but intransigent. Not so much a rebel without a cause, but rather one who had caused his own trouble. Handsome in a rugged sort of way, with slicked-back hair, a square jaw, and a somewhat incalculable expression in his eyes. Working on the student newspaper, he had defied the administration on the very things over which I had resigned.

Jack Thierry  
113, rue de la Barre  
Montreal, Canada

I ripped open the envelope and pulled out a bundled manuscript and a letter. The manuscript was a work of fiction, which made me feel worse and better at the same time. Better, because Burnett did not publish fiction, and so I had a good reason for not reading it. And worse, because it was obvious that this Jack Thierry was trying to tell me something and would expect an answer before too

long. I remembered he had called me a couple of times before he was dismissed, and I had even sent him a letter. But then I had never heard from him again.

And now he was writing in his turn, in a tone that rang faintly familiar, considering the time that had passed. There was a curious appeal to my sensibility, if I may call it that, and to my indulgence. He had reached my wife in Virginia and she had given him my address. If I could read "the attached", etc. He hoped he wasn't wasting my time.

It was some attachment. Some 800 pages written on an old mechanical typewriter, spaced at a line and a half. He was making it sound as if it, too, was just a belated letter, to be kept in a drawer or in a safe, to be published posthumously if anybody cared. And I knew I would have to read it if I cared enough about Jack Thierry, or else I would have to let him know that I did not.

The gloom of evening pervaded the room. On the glass wall facing the avenue, the reflections of the city played as on a silver screen. The neon lights were tantalizing, like the makeup of the prostitutes a few blocks down the street. But the envelope on my desk suddenly brought back the colors of the Michigan fall. That had been the best time when we were there, Mamie and I, and Christina and Johnny. The winters had been long and forbidding, the summers humid and hot, and there was hardly a springtime I could remember. But the Indian Summers of Michigan had stayed with me for some reason, longer than the seasons of any other place.

I had left, as I said, and then the children had grown and we had separated. Mamie maintained our house on the Shenandoah, Johnny had gone to California, and Christina was in Washington, D. C. There was nothing tragic about the situation. All parties were satisfied with the

arrangement, and I remembered their telephone numbers two times out of three. This time, as I reached for the phone, I remembered Mamie's.

"Glad to have caught you. Has anybody tried to get in touch?"

"Not Johnny," she said sarcastically. "He's still out west. It seems he's driving a pickup truck and has moved in with the parents of his girlfriend. Christina told me they're listening to the music of the sixties."

"Boys will be boys. Only the times are changing."

"Yes, but you'd think he was grown by now."

I shrugged silently, and by the silence we understood each other. "Tell me," I said at last. "Did you get a call from Canada for me?"

"No, but one from Michigan. Some former student who wanted to know where you were."

"Jack Thierry."

"Yeah. Wasn't he the one who got some girl pregnant and was kicked out of school? At any rate, I got the impression that there's still a lot of boy in him too."

I asked how the weather was along the Shenandoah. She said that the leaves were falling and that the skies were grey. I told her I might be in Washington for Christmas, and then I would see Christina.

"Let me know when you hear from Johnny."

"Well, he has your number too."

She was right, of course, but that didn't make it any better. We had done an average job of raising an average family, but not good enough to dwell on it at every turn. Perhaps the best thing we had done was to have parted before bitterness got the best of us. Sometimes I even thought that I had left public relations for the same reason. At that small college in Michigan, my job had been to

promote change, while making the existing order look good. But that had been an impossible undertaking. And in a roundabout way I had understood even then why Jack Thierry had chosen the path of revolt.

The sixties, I thought. To hell with the sixties. Some people still referred to them as though they had been some kind of renaissance. But the legacy of the sixties had been the seventies and eighties, and there had been nothing renescent about those years. Protest had quickly turned into presumption, and liberation into licentiousness. Taking drugs had become chic or sordid, depending on the class to which you belonged. To me, the sixties had been a crisis of puberty, an impetuous flowering of something new, but not necessarily of something better.

And now they were still listening to the music, but they could not make it anymore. Not the college kids, nor the punks and junkies, nor the young urban professionals. Because they lacked the passion for it, just as I lacked the nostalgia. I began to think that maybe Johnny should read Jack Thierry's novel, and that he might find in it what he was looking for. Or else he might come to think, as I have, that there'll always be 'sixties' in a man's life, or 'seventies', or 'roaring twenties', but that, a hundred years later, not even textbook writers will dwell on it anymore.

I flicked on my desk lamp and picked up the manuscript again. The sharp angle of light cut through the dark room. "THE PURSUIT", I read and scanned the first pages. They say nothing gets lost in the unconscious, and that some editors develop a photographic memory and register every word they have ever read. I stared at the glass walls of my office. It was there alright, the way I remembered it. The turning leaves, the innocence, the coming of age in the Midwest, the looming conflict. It was all there on

the first few pages already.

#### THE PURSUIT.

Not a bad title, I thought. No doubt it was meant to make me wonder what was being pursued, and why, and to make me go on reading for that purpose. But it made me just curious enough to put it into the bottom drawer of my desk. I stuck Jack Thierry's letter into my pocket and turned out the light again. I walked through the carpeted corridors and waited for the wood-paneled elevator to arrive. It hummed ever so softly, moving up and down the 23 stories in a matter of seconds, so that you never had time to consider that it might be taking you straight to hell.

This time it took me to the lobby, and I stepped out into the autumn air. Looking up, I could see Grand Central and the Pan Am Building disappear in the fog. I hailed a taxi.

"Eighty-second, between Riverside and West End. If the park is open, go through the park."

"Alright."

I knew already what the evening would bring. When you end your day reading a mystic letter, the night will not tender reality. We entered Central Park at 60th Street and followed the winding road uptown. As I turned, I could see the skyline of Central Park South. It was splendid as always in the night. It could fool you into thinking that all of New York was like that, a glittering skyway, with trees lining the concrete like so many works of art. Whereas, in reality, it was a nightmare, with ogres and hyenas glowering in the dark.

I believe that you have to be awfully young, or awfully seasoned, to get anything out of living in New York. And what you will see then is not its beauty, but its courage and misery — its sublimity, if you wish. A friendly chestnut ven-

dor, a hardnosed cabbie with a soft touch, a whore with a brittle heart. You will say that you have all that in St. Paul or Placid City, and that you have it as a matter of course. But I will tell you that it is the rarity of such things that makes life special in New York.

"Go through the park," I told the driver.

"We're in the park, mister."

"Go up to 110th Street and come back down."

"Anything you say."

I rolled down the window and let the air blow into my face. It was hardly the type of weather to go out on the town. I would have to settle for what I found in my refrigerator, and watch the evening news. The news, of course, would be all glitz and simplification. But that wasn't the fault of New York. It was the same all over the country, and maybe all over the world. It was the same with the canned pea soup I would take from the shelf, and with the stick of French bread in the freezer. I would taste more of the can than of the peas, and of the bread I would taste nothing. I would add some Canadian bacon in honor of Jack Thierry and open a bottle of California wine in honor of my son. And as I thought of the bread and the wine, I thought again of the letter in my pocket.

"Where are you taking me?"

"You wanted to go around the park."

We had gone full circle and missed the turn-off to the West Side. The buildings of Central Park South were looming in front of us again.

"Alright," I said. "Get off at 72nd."

"I can't. I can go up Broadway, if you like."

"Just drop me off on the corner then."

"You're sure where you want to go, mister?"

"I'm sure," I said. "I just forget sometimes where I

am.”

We reached Seventh Avenue, and he dropped me on the corner. I tipped him generously and continued along the park. I was going in the wrong direction, but I consoled myself thinking that you can't do right all the time. Jane Hastings lived just a few blocks away, and in front of the Savoy Plaza there was a phone booth to call. It was my last chance to retrieve the evening from the throes of autumn.

“Hi, Jane,” I said after she'd said hello.

She wanted to know if I was still at the office.

“No, I'm stomping at the Savoy. Want to go out for dinner?”

“The weather's supposed to be awful.”

“It will get better after a martini or two.”

“Ah,” she said, “but you can always come to my place for those.”

It was what I had gambled for. We rarely met socially, and what transpired on those occasions had never been more than an unspoken sympathy. And now she was offering me a shoulder to cry on, even when there were no tears to be shed.

“A late visit from a mysterious gentleman,” she joked as I entered.

“It's not late and I'm not mysterious, you should know.”

She put two martini glasses on the table and brought out a bottle of Gordon's gin. Then she disappeared in the kitchen for the olives, the ice, and a spoon to stir. She was competent in every way, and I was pouring the gin on the assumption that I was not the first gentleman she had entertained this way. The last thing she brought out was the vermouth.

“You know what you remind me of after all these

years?”

“I hope it's not your college girl friend.”

“No. You remind me of Indian Summer, that's what. Have you ever been to Michigan in the fall?”

She paused. She could not have expected anything like that.

“You may have read the wrong manuscript,” she said.

I shrugged. “I only looked at what you gave me. It's by someone who knew me 25 years ago — in Michigan, precisely. He thinks he can get me to read it for that reason.”

She raised her glass, as if to change the subject, and we drank and chatted for a while. In the end, she was loose enough to talk about herself. It was the kind of stuff you don't mention when you apply for a job — a sidetracked marriage, an unscrupulous gentleman, a grown son. One day, the gentleman was gone, and she'd had to fall back on secretarial work. She had met another man, this one more scrupulous and older, and she had been a good companion to him.

“He wasn't just old, but old-fashioned. But he could afford not to accept the changes that had taken place. In some ways I even think that those were the best years of my life.”

He had died, this gentleman, and left her some money. And when her son was grown, Jane Hastings had gone to work for a second time. Not with a sense of liberation, as she insisted, but because she had been bored. And for two years already, she had sorted the mail in my office and processed the words and placed the phone calls, and had always looked trim and pleasant and never been indiscreet.

It encouraged me to revert to my time in Michigan, to the turning leaves and the blizzards, to Kennedy's death

and the war in Vietnam. To the sixties. And this time she listened attentively to me.

“Yes, that’s pretty much how it was. Even in Massachusetts. And this boy is bringing it back to you?”

“He’s not a boy anymore. He must be your age or older.”

“Then why did he wait so long to write?”

I shrugged and stirred my martini.

“I’d read it, if I were you,” she said. “Just out of curiosity. There must be something he wants you to remember him by.”

“Yes,” I said. “But I think I know pretty much what it is.”

She laughed gingerly at this and offered me one for the road. When she finally got my coat, I turned to kiss her on the cheek, as I’d done on occasion. But she raised her head this time and put a hand on my shoulder, and for a second her knees touched mine.

Downstairs, the doorman hailed a taxi. This time I made no mistake about where to go. We took the 66th Street transverse, and when we were safely on the West Side, I pulled Jack Thierry’s letter from my pocket. In the dim light and with the movement of the car, I could not read very well. But I held on to it as I climbed the stairs to my apartment and glanced at it as I warmed the French bread. I passed up the pea soup that evening, but tasted the Canadian bacon, and it went well with the letter, and also with the wine.

‘Dear Mr. Roberts,’ the letter went. ‘The attached is for your attention. I had a conversation with Mrs. Roberts 25 days ago — or was it 25 years? At any rate, whether you receive this will remain a mystery unless

you reply.

‘Just to reassure you — I have been out of journalism since our days in the Midwest. You went east, as far as I remember, and I went west. I could have gone east, too, to attend to the family business. But I’m not a good businessman, and there wasn’t much of a family either. In short: You can’t go home again.

‘Perhaps you want to know what I’ve done more recently. Last night I was on the poor side of town. A girl who was out slumming said that I looked like a “sixties person”. It took me 20 minutes to explain that I regretted the sixties — the way one regrets a broken promise, or a lost cause. It stays with you and becomes part of you, whether you like it or not. But I don’t know if that was what she noticed about me.

‘The fact remains that we also met during the sixties, and I regret that you disappeared so soon. But you still had a future then, whereas I, in short order, found myself living in the past. The enclosed manuscript is an effort to find out what it was all about.

‘Only you can tell if it’s for publication. I’ve changed all the names of course, but I’m afraid it will still ring true. I thought for a while of calling it “Jacques and Jill”, at the risk of making it sound like a love story (which at bottom it is). But mostly it is a story without a moral, even without an end, and you may just have to add a page or two when you’re through.

‘As you said once yourself, you will only get out of it what you’ve put in. Let me know what it is in your case, and if it’s of redeeming value to either of us.

‘High regards,  
Jack Thierry’



## Prelude

I was tired all of a sudden, as I had been more often of late. The radio was playing something for background, an eerie, electronic version of the classic, “In the Hall of the Mountain King”. It made me think of Michigan again, but this time in winter, and I began to wonder what had really happened to Jack Thierry after I had left.

**B**y noon they had crossed Mackinac, and now the flaming scenery was turning to pastel with every hour they continued south. The fall of Upper Michigan was fading into a Midwestern summer, and for miles on end it didn't seem that another school year was just around the bend. Yet they would be back at Jefferson State in the afternoon.

"Paula's probably just as fast," P. T. was saying.

"She's probably home by now," Jacques said.

He smiled. For a while now, ever since he'd returned from Vietnam, he had fallen into the habit of calling Jefferson State his home.

"I bet you she's sleeping it off, too."

"God," P. T. said, "she ought to be. She's been going three, four days in a row."

"She's going to wear you down."

The grey band of road unwound before them, parting patches of orange and leafy green. P. T. was driving, and Jacques was watching him out of the corner of his eye. He was vaguely amused that Paula had run off in his '53 Buick, rather than in P. T.'s Volkswagen, and that she hadn't even cared to say goodbye. They were supposed to

be going steady after all. But he also knew that she enjoyed playing the tomboy and that in a few days it would have blown over again. What he did not know was that in the stillness, beyond the translucent sky, the storm of his own life was brewing and that it would sweep down and break him, just when he thought that he had it made.

"I'll catch up with her one of these days," P. T. was saying. There was a lot of bravery in his voice, as well as some resignation. Deep down he surely had to know that he was no match for Paula, even though he was intent on making her his wife.

Poor P. T., Jacques thought, for he liked to be called that, rather than Peter or Tom. He was an affable fellow with a pink face and a crew cut, and he would have looked like any other guy from the suburbs of Toledo, Ohio, had it not been for the black-rimmed glasses he liked to wear. It was those glasses that made him look like P. T., editor-in-chief of the Jefferson Journal, student newspaper at Jefferson State University. Still, in a relaxed moment, or to make fun, Jacques and the others broke protocol and called him Petie, or simply Pete, and watched his pink face darken to red. He usually came back by calling them jackasses and what not. But that didn't bother them nearly as much.

P. T. was hoping to graduate that year. He liked to get on with the "business of real life", as he called it, and deal with the real situations. But he liked Paula as well, and she was only a sophomore. She was also a boozier, a daredevil, and about ten times smarter than either of them could ever hope to become. It was a vicious combination for anyone trying to get her number, and there were rumors that even after a year of going with P. T. she was still a virgin.

Perhaps it was for that reason that a good dozen stragglers who had hung around campus for the long summer had followed her call to the wild. They had trekked north to her parents' cottage, which stood by a lake surrounded by maples and pines. They had gone boating and barbecued, and the hardy ones had even gone for a swim. The water had been a shimmering blue in the morning, but pitch-black in the afternoon, and it had been ice cold.

From the beginning Paula had set a blistering pace. When she announced plans for a bonfire in the forest, it prompted one group to return home, and when a bear was seen at a nearby trash dump, she set out on a motorcycle with a pail of honey on the back seat. P. T. had been alarmed, but he had not tried to follow. Nor had he tried to hold her back.

"Can you see me chasing Paula while she's chasing a grizzly?" he had asked.

"For some honey, yes," somebody had said, provoking laughter.

They had laughed and drunk beer and some of them had drunk gin straight out of the bottle until they passed out. They had slept that night in the cottage, wrapped in blankets against the chill, and when they woke, the sun had squinted through the pines and Jacques' car had been missing. Somebody had seen Paula drive off in the misty morning, but nobody could say if she would be back.

Then P. T. had said in his anodyne manner that it was Monday and that the party was over, and that in case anybody had forgotten, classes would start later in the week. He had made them take in the barbecue and pull the canoes ashore, and they had all smiled obliquely, for they

knew that it was his way of showing that he not only had the confidence of Paula, but of her parents as well.

When everything had been stored and locked, he had said to Jacques: "Let's go. Maybe we can even get a paper out this week."

The paper — that was the one thing they had in common. Jacques had worked on it since he'd arrived at Jefferson State, and in the spring term he had even been named managing editor. On account of his experience in Vietnam, as P. T. liked to point out. For P. T. was not only a political science major, but a registered Democrat as well, and he liked to tap anybody for any possible argument that President Johnson should be reelected that fall.

But that was one thing Jacques could not care less about. In the army he had written press releases for the U. S. command in Saigon. He had interviewed the wounded and the maimed before they were shipped stateside, and sometimes he had written about the dead. And after he had come back, he had enrolled at Jefferson State on the GI Bill. But now, after a year of playing by the rules, he was waiting for something to happen — something that would give him a new lease on life. He wasn't sure of what it might be, but he told himself that he would know it when he saw it. It was the middle of the 1960s and he was biding his time.

"Maybe we can get some help from the frosh," P. T. said.

Yes, Jacques thought, the freshmen. Maybe there would even be some decent girls among them this year. A few more romps like Paula, but prettier than her. A few more nonconformists. For that was one thing, after Viet-

nam, that he had trouble getting used to — the curfews in the dorms, the clandestine drinking and sex. In those days you had to be twenty-one to buy a beer in Michigan, and some girls acted as if you had to be that old to get laid. It all seemed rather silly to a veteran of the bars and brothels of Saigon who had seen 19-year-olds die for their country. In Vietnam, there had been curfews to keep you from getting shot at, but not from getting laid.

They would have to hustle, he knew. Wednesday was the deadline for the printer. Thursday they would have to paste up the pages for the offset machines, so that Friday the paper could be delivered. It was a clumsy process, but Bates, their business manager, had told them that the alternative was a cut in their salaries, and nobody wanted that.

P. T., Bates and Jacques, and a self-styled genius named Dylan — that was what had been left of the staff at the end of the previous year. And a few poets from the English department contributing on a random basis. P. T. got \$60 a month, which also covered his photographic work. Jacques and Bates got \$30. Poets and geniuses got nothing, but it was assumed that they had other gratifications.

“Let them go through orientation first,” Jacques said with regard to the freshmen.

“I’d scout them beforehand. Who knows, there might be some more veterans among them.”

“Fuck you.”

P.T. laughed. “Some WAVES or WACs. Some cunts who are tired of sucking wind. Isn’t that what you were used to?”

“Not really,” Jacques said. “I like my pussy lubricated.”

**T**he day had lost none of its splendor when they reached the Five Points intersection on the north side of campus. The red-brick buildings studded the rolling hills, and in the parking lots the roofs of the cars were gleaming. It seemed as though time had stood still in their absence and that they might rouse some sleeping beauty now that they were back. Jacques was willing to bet that it would be Paula.

“See if you can find her,” P. T. said as he dropped him off. “I’ve got to catch Bates in a hurry.”

It was vintage P. T. He liked to feign business as usual when things went wrong, and now he was pretending that he was concerned about getting out the paper, when in reality he was avoiding his girl.

Jacques went down the patio of the Student Center. In the underground diner that was called “The Grill”, some freshmen were seeing off their families, sipping soft drinks to usher in their new lives. And there was Sparks, the manager, perched behind the cash register and shouting at the short-order cooks. She was a sparkling bitch, moving with the undaunted ease of a black woman who knew what she had to offer, in smartness as well as in looks.

“What’d you do, Sparks?”

“Not much. Did you see my new Impala?”

“No. What color is it?”

“White, with a black vinyl top.”

Jacques went over to the jukebox, sipping his Coke. Sparks wanted to hear “Too Far Gone to Turn Around”, and after he had pushed the right buttons, he sat down and took in the expanse of the diner, the aluminum chairs with the plastic cushions and the broken light that glanced off the tables. It was not a bad place when it wasn’t crowded, and it was even better when they played the right tune.

But then the music stopped, and he crushed his paper cup and walked out in the direction of the dorms. From some distance already, he could see his Roadmaster hulking in the sun. He had picked it up for a \$100 the year before. It was black, with rust on the edges, and the engine had been knocking ominously of late. But it was by far the most comfortable car on campus, with power steering and power windows, and buttons to tilt the front seat.

The dorms were liable to be crowded this fall. A new residence had not been completed, and there were plans for installing bunk beds and cramming the freshmen three to a room. Jacques thought that it would renew the calls for relaxing the curfew, or for doing away with it for good. For that was one experiment that Jefferson State had not yet conducted. If you were a girl, you had to be in by midnight, and if you were a freshman, you had to be in by ten.

On this day, though, the customary rules of propriety had been suspended. People were moving out and moving in. Nobody was paying any attention as Jacques entered the long corridor that led to the resident quarters of Monroe Hall. A girl was standing outside the laundry room, an orange blouse in her hands. She wore loafers and bobby sox and a push-up bra, and she gazed at him as he walked past. But she didn’t say a word.

Jacques knocked on door number 19.

“Come in,” a tired voice called.

He opened the door and found Paula in bed, evidently nude under the sheets. She extracted an arm to point at the car keys on the dresser.

“P. T. is looking for you.”

“So he can find me.” Her voice was hoarse from the hangover. “Is there a curfew tonight?”

He shrugged. “What do I care? I live off campus.”

“Fuck you. I want to go back to sleep.”

She was bold within the confines of Jefferson State, Jacques considered, and if she was a virgin, she covered it up pretty well. But in either case, that was P. T.’s problem. And he took the keys and walked back down the hall.

The girl in the laundry room was now ironing the blouse. As he passed, he took in her hips and the well-set shoulders and the white straps of her bra on the tanned skin. He was studying the way her auburn hair fell on her shoulders, when she turned suddenly and looked at him.

“Hi,” he said, but she did not answer.

It made him think that she might be like Paula, brazen and shy at the same time. But he was wrong, as it turned out later, and right only on one minor point: She had to be a freshman, for he had never seen her before.

he office of the Jefferson Journal was located in Foundation Hall, in the bowels of the administration

T

September

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building. It was a large room without windows and with only one door. In the back, a storage room had been converted into a darkroom, and the rest was divided into a compartment for the editor and managing editor, and an open area for the reporters and Bates.

Jacques knew right away that nobody had returned. The atmosphere was that of a morgue. The pinups, the mess, the STAMP OUT SMUT sign tacked to the blackboard – everything was still the same. No mail had been delivered, no janitor had swept the floor. "World's Biggest Waste Basket", said another sign above the opening to the editorial cubicle. It had never looked as appropriate as now.

He dusted off his typewriter, then went to clean the blackboard and consolidate the trash. He was pondering whether he should set a deadline, for he could not imagine that they'd really come out with a paper that week. But then Bates and P. T. came walking through the door.

They had enough advertising for six pages, Bates said. And if they didn't know how to work under pressure, they should just look for another job. P. T. had learned that the campus minister would address the freshmen in Monroe Hall that night, and since he really didn't want to take a chance of running into Paula, he asked Jacques to cover. He might also keep an eye open for the new director of student housing, he said. She was supposed to be a looker and have some very progressive ideas at that. Between her and the campus minister enough should be happening that would make for a story.

"Just remember to get the facts straight," he said.

Yeah, the facts, Jacques thought. For he really did not

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mind going back. It was a chance, after all, to see if there weren't any more uninhibited girls among the freshmen. Girls a bit more forthcoming than the one he had seen in the laundry room. Girls who said "Hi" when you looked at them and smiled when you gave them a play.

And so, after a hamburger and another Coke, he drove his Roadmaster back to the dorms. Wilson and Monroe Halls were old brick buildings squatting on the edge of a ravine. They were less comfortable than the modern Hamilton Hall, which had been built on the other side, and as a consequence, most of the freshmen were placed there. But they looked pretty from the outside, embellished, as they were, by evergreen ivy and yellow fire escapes. A few upperclassmen, among them P. T., had actually insisted on remaining there for historical reasons. And so it was a blend of the jaded and the green that gave these places their distinctive flavor.

In the lounge of Monroe, the Reverend Lamb was telling the story of the girl who had gone to college on her parents' money and returned pregnant for the spring break. Jacques remembered it from the year before. He had dismissed it then as a piece of mandatory moralizing at an institution of state, and he did not feel any different now.

"We want rebels with keen minds and abrasive edges," the reverend was saying. "We want rebels *with* a cause. But I ask you which cause is served if you have to quit school because of illegitimate conduct."

The cause of life maybe, Jacques thought and scanned the crowd. The freshman girls were sitting on the floor or leaning against the wall. O'Keefe was there, too, the jocular dean of students. But he didn't see anybody looking like a

progressive director of student housing. And when, after a while, he spotted the girl from the laundry room, he stopped listening altogether. She was wearing the blouse now that she had ironed, and he stared at her long enough to catch her eye. But when she did not blink, he tried to concentrate on the reverend again.

Afterwards, they served coffee and donuts. Working his way through the crowd, Jacques saw that O'Keefe was now talking to the girl in the blouse. He figured that it was as good an occasion as any to interview him, and an even better one to meet the girl.

This time she smiled as he approached. It was a vague and somewhat diffident smile, but it was better than nothing. If he'd seen her in another place, he would have guessed that she was a salesgirl or a professional babysitter. But he wasn't sure.

O'Keefe, on the other hand, was his gregarious self. He was of the old school and couldn't help it, and it was with old-fashioned paternalism that he now introduced them.

The girl said "Hello", and as they kept talking, Jacques looked into her brown eyes and searched for something behind her appearance and name, which was Jill Pennington and suited her almost as well as the blouse. It sounded like a mix of the staid and the easy, a suggestion of better days to come.

"Did you like the reverend's message?" he finally asked.

"I think I got the main points."

O'Keefe laughed jovially and said he couldn't have put

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it better. It was just too bad that he wasn't a rebel anymore, but a dean and a father. And with that he excused himself and moved on to the next group of students.

"So you work on the newspaper?" Jill Pennington said.

"Yeah. I could brief you on some things the reverend didn't mention."

She laughed demurely. "Thanks, but I think I've had enough orientation. I'm actually beginning to feel disoriented."

"Did you know that there was an open house today?"

"I gathered it when I saw you."

"Don't worry," Jacques said. "Open houses weren't invented for illicit purposes. They're meant to make you keep your room clean."

"Oh, you can always check mine."

"No, not always."

He thought of what P. T. had told him — to get the facts straight and look for the director of student housing. But the fact now was that he was talking to one of the residents, and he could not imagine that anybody was better-looking than her.

"Okay," he said then. "You can show me. I can keep it off the record if you like."

They went past the laundry and past the toilets. In her room, Jill Pennington removed some clothes from her bed and invited him to sit down. Then she stretched out on the bunk on the other side.

"Where's your roommate?"

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“I don’t know. I haven’t seen her.”

As Jacques lit a cigarette, she got up again and handed him an ashtray.

“Do you live on campus?”

“No. Off campus. Five miles down the road.”

He watched her as she lay down for the second time and propped herself up on her elbows. She was still wearing the loafers and the bobby sox, and her calves were swinging in the air. He thought that she was relaxed alright, and that maybe she was even tired. And his eyes strayed from her brown eyes down to the curve of her butt.

“What’s your name again?”

“Jack. As in ‘Jack and Jill’.”

“It can’t be. I think the dean said something else.”

“He said ‘Jacques’. But you have to know French to say that.”

“So it’s *Jacques* and Jill,” she intoned.

“If you speak French.”

“I had two years in high school. But I don’t want to go up that hill again.”

They kept up a dangling conversation. He told her that he was Canadian by birth and American by virtue of his father. His mother was in Haiti, where her third husband was building a dam. But he still had a half sister in Montreal.

Jill was from Pennsylvania, from a small town called Slippery Rock. Her father was in real estate, she said, and

he was also the vice president of the Chamber of Commerce. He had wanted her to go to the Calvinist college in Grand Rapids, which her sister had attended. But she had balked and enrolled at Jefferson State instead.

When Jacques wanted to know if she was really eighteen, she said, “Sure, why not?” And when he mentioned that he had spent three years in the army, she said that her brother-in-law was a captain in the air force and had also been to Vietnam.

Then it seemed that her fatigue was passing, and he asked if she wanted to go for a ride. They would not lock the doors until midnight, he assured her. And anyway, everybody was having coffee in the lounge.

“As long as you bring me back,” Jill Pennington said. “I don’t want to get into trouble my first day here.”

In the driveway, the Roadmaster was gleaming in the night. You couldn’t see the rust now, and when they’d got in and were settled, Jacques played with the buttons on the armrest and tilted the front seat. Jill said that was really comfortable, and he said, yeah, you could stretch out and make love without getting your foot caught in the steering wheel.

That made her laugh some more, and she pulled her knees up and laid her arm on the backrest. She wasn’t too close, nor too far away, and it made him think again that she obviously knew how to play it. He took Squirrel Road toward the south end of campus, and when the road forked, he steered through the oaks onto a hill. They could see the lights of the dorms in the distance.

“They told us that it was a land-grant college,” Jill Pennington said.



“Yeah. There are places where you can really get lost. But you can’t go there in a car.”

“You’ll have to show me some time.”

He kissed her too long and too hard, but again she was playing it demurely, congenially almost — as if this was the thing to do when you had just arrived at college. And as his mouth grazed her neck, he caught himself wondering whether she moaned when she fucked.

In the end, though, he let go of her. There wasn’t enough time anyway. It was too late, and perhaps too early, and he decided that another day he would take her to a place where they could make love properly and without haste. And then he would know if she really was just a small-town girl or a salesgirl, or if her demureness was a cover for something else. At least that was how he painted it in his mind.

“What’s your program tomorrow?”

“More orientation. They told us to bring our bathing suits. So I guess we’ll go to the pool.”

She said she had just spent half the summer with her cousin in Virginia Beach. They had swum in the ocean and lain in the sun for days on end. And Jacques thought, so that’s where you got your tan, but he did not say it. He figured he would tell her when he saw her in a bikini, or when he had her completely in the nude. And then she could explain what she had done the rest of the summer, and why she was so congenial and not worried about a thing. At least that was how he painted it in his mind.