



Arnold Gordenstein teaches American literature as a professor in Dpto. de Língua e Literatura Estrangeiras at UFSC. What follows is about half of the first chapter of his latest novel, Comforted in God at West Chester. The book is presently with a literary agency in New York which is trying to place it with a publisher. The story is about Augustus (Gus) Dodge, once a great photographer who has lost his art due to his long immersion in the anti-Vietnam war movement. Now middle-aged, he has agreed to leave his job on an underground newspaper - the "Whaaa?" - his home in Boston, his friends, son and lover to isolate himself in Bass River, Maine, in the coldly desperate hope that he can regain his eye by shooting the end of the world, an event predicted by a religious group there.

comforted in god at west chester

Arnold Gordenstein *

The end of the world would be on Thursday. He'd packed enough socks and underwear to carry him to that time. After that he'd wash them in the hotel sink. One world at a time. He'd packed a whole carton of film and powdered chemicals. He'd rather not make a habit of going to the local camera stores. Bass River would know who he was eventually and he preferred postponing that until he'd gotten what he was after. And if he did that, and solidly, nothing would disturb him, not even the mail from home, wherever that was.

If the enlarger arrived on time he could have the end of the world pictures done in time for the Sunday photo supplement. After that he's stay around for another round of his socks and underwear while he tried to find out what that strange job offer was all about. If he found pictures to match the urges he felt lurking in the back of his brain they might not want him back at the paper anyway. It would be hard to start up there but it would be hard anywhere. That was the beginning of the slide, the death of his eye. At least up there he might face it as a purely technical problem more squarely than in Boston. And the hardness was part of the process. He was over the crest of his life and there was little left for him to do except look down the other side and see what remained to be done. And what he saw was — everything still. There were many things he would have wanted to do but they were out of reach now. If he'd lived differently he'd simply someone else now. Regretting what he'd missed was denying what he'd done, which wasn't bad. It wasn't all a loss. There were a few books. There were some minds turned around, he supposed. There was Jerry. And Marsha. Ah but there was Jerry. His eyes clouded at his son's name. He

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wanted to increase the feeling as a proof of his concern, then he wanted him there to witness it. But what was down the end of that road? An illusion of immortal love. Mashed potatoes and warm gruel. Lullabies and honied dreams. That was the kind of prop he was trying to kick away. He was the sum of his experiences and no more and now he was out the other side of them. Which didn't give him a license to stop. Was he doing right? How could he do wrong? He had no real choice except to finish out the string. He'd once known a scheme that granted him a feeling of security in return for certain behavior but that scheme had gotten mislaid somehow in his adventures of the past years. He wished there was someone to ask. He touched the stopped underwater alarm watch his father had given him. Oh daddy he said softly. Oh pa. But there was no presence there today and the watch only worked when he worked or for the few minutes after he warmed it with his palm.

He was going to start simply — and he was also going to continue simply. He'd avoid pursuing the memory of what he used to feel. There were emotions some time back, altogether too many of them. But he might discover new ones if he could shift the circumstances of his life thoughtfully and create new circuits. There were a few things he still had time to do. There were a few things that mattered. He'd begin only on the faith that he had something left worth knowing about, then he'd try to jettison the faith as he got in deeper. It was a big gamble, this step, but it was a bigger gamble to not take it. He'd been drifting, drifting. He had to get out front of his life again. If he stayed where he was he risked never confronting his talent in its simplicity. Yet, going, he risked discovering he no longer had any. He had come to believe he was a failure and he wanted to hold still and look at that idea and see if it was true. There was a certain success in seeing the failure clearly.

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He admitted to Jee Jee that he was taking a bus after he accepted the air fare. As if there were planes to Bass River.

What the hell. It was the last time he'd be taking Jee Jee's expense money. He was nominally photographing the story for the "Whaaa?" though he could sell any pictures Jee Jee didn't print. He guessed they were quits after this one, which released Gus from agonizing that job offer, too, if it was a job offer. After the end of the world he would be straight free lance once again. Some lance.

He'd told Marsha the assignment would move him up and down the Maine coast for two to four weeks, depending. He told her the Bass River "Liberator" would hold his mail if she needed to reach him. He'd send back her money as soon as he had some extra and he'd call so Rex could bark over the phone. He didn't want to make a big production of leaving. He knew how silly he'd look if he made a speech and then returned in a week, cringing and begging for a couch to sleep on, hot soup and a shower, a cuddling. He didn't want to close out that option or make it humiliating. Still, such cowardice only kept him from making his decision and his break. He told her he'd be leaving around 4 o'clock, then he boarded a noon bus, early, to get off the crowded platform where a Negro high school band was bidding some local hero goodbye, and he wanted to listen to Jose.

The sign behind the blind Puerto Rican guitarist said JOSE BLIND PUERTO RICO GENIUS OF MUSIC. His eyes framed the picture but there was no picture there, it was prose. The sign left nothing for the eyes to solve, unless he wanted to be ironic, which he didn't. People surrounded Jose saying their goodbyes, walking on his feet. The bus dispatcher stood before him with his clipboard, hustling people onto buses. In earlier years Gus would have climbed down from the bus and stood before him to create an interference, to protect him, but no longer. The Negro band played "Auld Lang Syne", straight, the Lombardo arrangement, with mutes and quivering reeds, but Gus tried to listen within the sound to Jose. Jose sat on the front inch of his folding bridge chair, picking and listening to his guitar, picking and listening. He was playing Villa-Lobos today, which

was the first time Gus had heard him attempt anything so difficult. He'd improved and Gus urged him on.

A young couple grappled a goodbye in an alcove between lockers. Hands slid and grabbed, moved and squeezed, and Gus alternately hoped she would and would not occupy the next seat, primed, horny and lonesome. But something in the inclination of the heads, in her proprietary air and his clinging told him she was staying, he was departing. Inside the terminal building a TV set glowed between heads. A big rocket stood alone in the pearly-grey immensities of the TV screen. When the door swung in he could hear the stentorian voice of Mission Control announcing another hold. He searched around for a clock but the platform clock was smashed. He wondered if they'd get away before him or if they'd arrive before him. He wondered who was going further. A group of nuns mingled with the brass section of the band, talking eagerly into one another's cowls, nodding and smiling daintily. Nah! he said to himself. He was awash in symbols, inundated and swamped in second meanings, he would die of symbolism without ever touching ground. He wanted to be written out of this one, he just wanted to listen to Jose and watch the space shot. All that thunder, all that force under control, all those gears meshing. He even liked airplane departures and often made excuses to be in the car that took people to their planes. Even after hundreds of flights and goodbyes he still felt strangely moved at airports as beloved people came or left and increased or diminished his life. He understood the peasants in 'Nam who came out on Sundays in their best clothes to crouch in the swamps by the takeoff lanes. Those great silver birds pounding up into the sky rumbled something deep in him, somehow took his powerlessness away.

The driver from Gus's bus looked at his watch, fitted his crush cap down tight over his short hair, combed his moustache neat and told the lovers to cut it short, told the goodbye committee to cut the shit, told the Negro family to hug and shove, it was takeoff time. He used the word takeoff. Gus

realized he must be from the boondock end of the run and going home. The lovers slunk out from their alcove and the man bumped up the aisle of Gus's bus, ticket in hand, reading seat numbers.

"Beg pardon," he said to Gus. "Are you sure you're in the right seat?"

Gus knew he wasn't. He'd taken this seat to listen to Jose. He fumbled out his ticket.

"You're in the wrong bus, fellah."

So he was.

Gus hurried along the platform through the nuns, over Jose's feet, splitting the Negro band, feeling momentarily lost among the dark faces, feeling lost even in his lostness. He read his ticket and also his press card — his only identification — and found some comfort in it.

The dispatcher read Gus's ticket. "Well that's not hard to confuse. Portsmouth and Portland."

"Just point at the right bus and I'll try to take it from there" Gus told the man. The dispatcher held the bus's door until Gus was safely inside. His camera hung around his neck, like a child's mittens, safety-pinned to cuffs. He remembered his favorite image of Jonathan Edwards with lapels pinned with notes to remind him of the day's business. He patted his pockets to be sure he had his ticket, his wallet, that letter. He'd left his book bag in the other bus. He stood up. The dispatcher was still at the door. He sat down. What the hell, it was only an Arthur Gordon Pym, the Voyages of Hendrick Hudson, his cigarettes and a few issues of the "Whaaa?" He'd been trying to swear off both print and cigarettes. This was his chance. He could step over to the newsstand and buy something but he feared his impulses would overwhelm him and he'd flee into the streets, past the familiar shops, through the alleys, up the hills to Marsha's overheated rooms, the great heap of Revere Beach pillows, the safe grapple of her

arms and legs, the thudding of their hearts. He urged the idling motor into motion and watched out the window the tall Negro boy submitting to his goodbye, towering over his family, reading travel posters over their heads, shifting a toothpick in his mouth, whistling faintly and ignoring the band which played for he's a jolly good fellow. Gus watched aunts' hands reaching for grandparents' shoulders, grandparents clinging to grandchildren. The mother fruitlessly sought a response from the boy who grew and grew, his head seemingly ascending beyond their reach, escaping from all the lines of force that moved through them and reached for him. Gus's hands unsnapped the camera case, set the opening and the shutter, focussed on a girder the same distance from him as the group and began to track towards him, waiting for the defining gesture, the picture. He saw the boy's pinky go to his ear where it poked and burrowed, then saw him study the fingernail. He saw the twitch in his cheek which ended his whistling but he missed the shot and waited for it again. But it didn't appear. Or he didn't see it. He was confused. Was he even interested in that picture anymore? He had to get out of here before he stopped seeing at all. That wasn't his kind of picture anymore. That was Norman Rockwell, that was an alumni magazine cover, a farm state quarterly, that was his former style. But what was his new style? He blinked hard to erase the image, creating a white flash on his eyes, and he looked away.

Across the yard was a heap of junked bus parts. A mechanic sat on a discarded fender, smoking. A lone sparrow lighted on an upended bumper. Gus sat up. He had the focus and the settings, was about to slide the window stealthily open when, gleaming through the junkyard, came Marsha. The sparrow fled. Somehow she'd figured out the poor deception of his departure information. The moment he saw her he realized he'd expected her and that depressed him more. He slumped down in his seat until only his eyes peered out and he urged the bus to start, praying that she was here for something else but she'd found his bus and was going from window to window until she was .

shading her eyes and peering in directly at him. It was a one-way window but she seemed to have locked him in eye contact. He glanced at his stopped watch. Only a few minutes to endure so he slid the window back, resolving to keep his secrets and hang on.

"Hi" he said. She was hugging closed a long buttonless Afghan coat.

"Ooh Gus. The signs are bad. Can't you wait a week?"

"You know I can't. The world is going to end and I've got to get the pictures back."

"That's why the signs are bad. Can't you even wait until after your birthday? They might get better. Also I'll have this case into the jury by then."

"Good. Then you can get another one."

"Oh Gus. Can't I come up and help you christen the place? I'm not doing anybody any good in Boston. There must be something I could do up there."

"Look Marsha. Let's wait till after the world ends and see." He didn't need her affectionate flakyness further confusing his life.

"Aren't you even going to keep your dentist's appointments?"

"I'll mail him the teeth."

"You're trying to get rid of me."

"You guessed it. That's my secret."

"That's no secret."

The driver signed the clipboard of the dispatcher, saluted him and strode to his bus. Gus smiled grimly at Masha, clinching together his aching, rotting teeth. He'd lasted it out. Now it was only a moment more. But she was fumbling under her long coat for a package which she reached up to him. This would be her final appeal. When the coat opened, into the gap slipped her fine round belly, the shape of her thighs within

the little business grey skirt of her Legal Defenders uniform, her smooth knees and gleaming calves. It was some appeal. Gus was at once grateful for the distance which separated them and suffered the distance which prevented him from reaching inside the coat and stroking the dip of her waist, the sweep of her hips, her pillowed bottom. He'd never been able to photograph that. Warmth was her quality but it wasn't a visual quality and he hadn't found a way to suggest it. He felt himself ebbing toward the warm swamp of her flesh once again as she reached up and touched his beard with kissed fingers.

"I'll miss that" she said.

"Buy yourself a muff."

"I'll miss you" she said, pleading for some concession.

"And I'll miss you," he said finally. "You know that."

But he missed himself more. He missed everything. He missed her even when he was with her. He didn't know what was happening to him lately, some strange reorientation was taking place in him. He had been withdrawing into separate alcoves of himself for the last few years and hadn't been able to gather himself together. He hung his head in sorrow, held himself in and tried to wait it out.

As the bus began to back away she walked alongside the window.

"Will you keep in touch?" she said.

"You know I won't. I don't dare."

"Just think of me at four. Every day at four."

That cost little enough. "I'll do that."

"I will too. Just concentrate. Stop what you're doing and concentrate. We'll communicate."

That might be better than what they'd been doing recently. "Let's see," said Gus.

"You don't believe it. Oh Gus. Will we last?" she blurted out. "I have to know. I've got a life to live."

"Sure we'll last," said Gus. "How can we wear out? No moving parts."

"Oh Gus. Cut the crap."

The bus paused as the driver found the forward gears, then it swooped slowly forward across the terminal yard and he was safe. He felt her fingertips still denting his beard and already it seemed like a memento of his last life. He found himself momentarily opposite the Negro grandparents whose eyes said that this might be the last goodbye for one of them. And perhaps for him too, which Marsha seemed to sense. They were at a second stage of negotiations. If they wanted to go on they'd have to open up with one another all over again at the new level and make accommodations and forsake their personal goals an inch at a time. But no matter how inviting life with Marsha might seem Gus was too far along to still be making concessions. He'd made enough concessions and had frittered away his talent in his timidity and his love and his ideals. It was time to forget them and find his own work. He was making his last run with most of his strength intact and all of his faculties that hadn't been burned out by booze. It was time to see how far his mind would go unimpeded. It might be his last chance. In fact it might already be too late. She knew he wasn't just going up the coast on an assignment. He was passing into another time zone where he had to travel alone.

So goodbye Marsha. Goodbye dear and amen. Goodbye to all that, goodbye, goodbye. He reached inside the back of his shirt for a difficult place between his shoulder blades and vainly ~~sent~~ ~~in~~ thumb and finger for the flea. And goodbye Rex he thought. Goodbye Fido Rex Spot Dog. He'd named him Rex for Marsha's sake. Jee jee called her Princess and the dog's name was Gus's way to tell her how he treated her. Now he was ashamed of those games but relieved to be rid of them. By the end of the world he might even be rid of the fleas.

Gus watched her recede in tableau against the wall of the station platform, dear Marsha in her decent lawyer's greys, not concealing one of the great bodies of all time and one of the kindest hearts. But he never managed to give back much to that heart and was no longer unwaveringly fascinated with that body. She'd do anything for him and that was the problem. He

remembered damping one of her sheet - rumpled post-mortems by saying no, their sex had not become mechanical since it had no moving parts, and he remembered the awful silence that had produced.

Feeling a dark presence descend on the next seat Gus shifted cheeks to starboard. Now he only had to wait out the early lonesome weaknesses and he might begin to look for himself beyond them. Everyone made such a deal of loneliness. Loneliness was nothing big. You could survive it and even prefer it, especially if you had yourself and Groucho and other dear friends to talk to. Silence was Gus's natural element, his music. It was the delicate placement of the silences that he listened for in Mozart, just as it was the arrangement of bare patches he looked for in Sargent, the omissions he heard in Hemingway. They had taken a decision against the silence; you could hear and see the silence behind their art which made it clearer what they'd wagered against it. He remembered Jee Jee's only half-facetious reaction to a Berg concert: when I pay my good money for a concert I at least expect to hear them playing all the time. What Gus really regretted leaving was the playing of John Havlicek. He could look at the tapes of the Celtic games later but they would be over, all that beauty would be lost from the earth without him having witnessed it. That was something to regret.

Out the bus window he watched the Negro family mingling with the members of the band. How he envied Negroes, at times. And Jews. And Southerners. And, nowadays, Wasps. Always reacting to their birthright, never free from it. What a burden! What a relief!

Everyone in the Negro family supported everyone else until the whole group moved after the bus, then it crumbled apart. Then they stood before the sooty concrete blocks of the station yard, a row of faces going from coffee to near-white to jet-black. Composition in blacks and greys. Whistler's Mothah. And all of them staring gloomily at the window just before Gus where, above the top of the seat, the head of the

boy floated. Safely hidden by the translucent glass Gus saw the boy's hand go to his eyes.

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The bus moved through concrete canyons of insurance buildings, past the Common and into the market section where it crept down narrow cobbled streets lined with mock colonial shops. People walked alongside the bus, touching it, tapping the sides. He wondered how long these streets would survive without widening. He urged the bus forward but not too fast, humming the Villa-Lobos, trying the texture of the music against the images of the streets. He wanted to watch the transitions and the intersections.

The pushcarts were out today and he could smell the fish even with the windows shut, fish from Bass River, perhaps. The trash was already waist-deep between the pushcarts where cats and winos scavenged. He had often roamed for whole days here, shooting the venders, the bums and the bocce bowlers, stopping only when the light ended and having a glass of wine, a plate of spaghetti. He could see the peak of Old North behind a shop sign in Italian. From the bus window everything looked like a stage setting for a puppet show. The bus circled Faniel Hall and moved toward the expressway ramp. Down Winter Street he saw Boston Garden, draped with flags and bunting for the war rally. The "Whaaa?" was covering it big and the picture assignment would have been his if he wanted it. "Do it! Do it!" Jee Jee had said. "It's a you assignment. You could do it with your eyes closed. It's right up your alley." But that was the alley he'd turned out of. He'd drained his eye on crisp blonde youths with swastika armbands, fat cops, saintly protestors. He saw them everywhere. And, by now, so did everyone. For one moment as they swung around the old meeting hall he saw it and the Garden juxtaposed. Somehow the country had gone from one to the other and no one had noticed. Somehow the exhilarating clarity of that original vision and the energy of those pushcart streets had produced the later madness, although the possibility of the second must have been slumbering in the first all along, awaiting its time. And he had been swept up in the tide. Only now he had to break free, recover his own eye

and find the residue of himself. He'd begin by looking for the intersections. If he could find them he might trace and see what America had come from and so what had survived from the original string that was essential. The move might make it more clear.

As the bus moved along the expressway he framed picture after picture between his hands without hesitation.

He was trying to commit it all to memory but he knew his memory scarcely existed in some ways because it didn't have to. His pictures replaced his memory. There was O'Sweeney's Storage, an Ufiizi Palace in whitewashed brick, with onion cupolas and a golden rooster pointing the wind. He hadn't photographed that yet to his satisfaction but he'd be back and with luck it would still be there. If the world didn't end, he smiled to himself.

The bus passed above the hospital complex. Emergency Entrance Blood Bank. Eye Clinic. One of Jee Jee's inspirations was for Gus to donate his eyes to them at death. 'That way your inimitable way of seeing things would be immortal,' he crowed, 'your only part worth a damn. Think about it.' Gus had thought about it and it made his hollow teeth twinge. He couldn't think about the death of his own eyes any more than he could think about the hollowness of his teeth. He hadn't yet recovered from his last look at his X-rays and he was fleeing that plastic pastel tilting agony seat where they would surround him with machines which would gape into him, bore at him, vibrate his head, cook his brain.

As the bus swung northward out of town the warehouses became tenements with clotheslines and back stoops. Somewhere in there was Marsha's office, where bright, superbly educated young middle class lawyers in mod gray Legal Defenders uniforms labored endless hours to prevent slum landlords from raising rents or harangued town officials into garbage pickups. He was watching for the next transition in the neighborhood when they entered the tunnel. He became aware of an undertone in his humming. The nun in the next seat was humming along. On the other side of the

tunnel would be the amusement park and honky tonk section north of Boston, then the suburbs. Out the window he saw only the tunnel's tiles, like an immense filthy bathroom. He debated whether to allow sleep to come. He'd wanted to watch the transitions, but he would only feel cheated again when they went directly to the lined-up subdivision houses and then to the countryside with nothing in between. It looked like rain so there would be little to see besides the window itself, his reflection and rain drops rolling down. If he slept now he might remain awake all night with no work to occupy his hands, but his unreliable body was making its demands. The nun had taken over the Villa-Lobos so if Gus wanted to join in it would be as accompanist.

Reluctantly he covered himself with his coat to conserve his energy for his arrival. He patted his breast pocket to assure himself the letter was still there. He'd keep it near for when he was hard-up. He wondered if it was a job offer. It was that but it was also much more if he could break its code. Phrases from the letter swam in his brain, as he dropped down into sleep. The eye of his generation indeed. But he only wanted to be the eye of his I. As his mind fled downward he became aware of a pressure gradually increasing against the back of his hand. In the darkness he could only tell that it was coming from somewhere within the voluminous folds of the nun's garments. Hips touched and the hint of a knee. The velvet hum of the highway beneath, the promise of secret flesh, globular muscles, thighs working, dampened hair and who knew what else? It had its appeal, though its end would have to be frustration. Memories of teenage necking, the backs of cars, of theaters, of family dens, limitations and safeguards, as well as stimulations, built in. Nah! he said to himself, rolling himself in a tighter ball and turning away. He didn't want to be a party to her confession. Out the window the tunnel went on and on and he had the sense he would be in it all the way to Bass River. He felt vaguely the absence of the book bag which he'd left on the other bus.

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The driver pulled to the curb, left the motor running and swung open the baggage port. He heaved out two new red aluminum bags which were snatched up by the tall Negro boy. Gus only remembered his own suitcases when he saw them and he reached into the yawning baggage port himself. He didn't want the heavy one dropped. And he didn't want to make an entrance. The nun had gotten off somewhere while he slept. Was she really a nun, he wondered, or was she in costume? Or was there a difference? And what if Holy Mary was wholly merry? Might she even be religious?

When the bus pulled away he was left standing in a cloud of exhaust smoke and dust and he was confused whether he'd just left or just arrived. He felt a great vacantness and he remained in the feeling, looking out at the square, waiting for new images to fill him up. In the center of the windstorm of dust and exhaust fumes a bearded and grand looking old man stood on a kitchen stool in the square, gesturing upward. Above him a Civil War statue continued the gesture with a sword and, flanking it, the steeple of the Congregational Church and the Widow's Walk of a Captain's house. Below his stool a long serpentine banner reading END OF THE WORLD VIGIL was supported by four men ramrod-stiff and bespectacled, wearing identical white short sleeved shirts and black ties. Gus held his breath against the exhaust fumes and started up the stairs of Lord's Hotel. One of the bags was far heavier than the other and he veered and staggered.

Two tall boys in warm up jackets and a middle-aged man in a hooded sweatshirt and a baseball cap passed him on the stairs, then welcomed the Negro. Names were being exchanged as he entered the lobby. The local college had found their 6 and a half foot cool Negro basketball star from an urban ghetto. Somebody in the college was up to date. They were going big-time. He hoped the town wasn't. The hotel lobby had many small rugs, tiny tables with doilies and clumpy chairs holding two sleeping men. A TV played silently in a corner. Did the end of the world come to places like this? How did you know when it

arrived? A man in a plaid shirt and hunting cap sat in front of a tiny desk reading a slim newspaper. Gus felt like he was in an old movie. He should be wearing a snapbrim hat, dangling a cigarette and wisecracking about the room service.

"Got a room?" Gus said.

"Got a reservation mister?" the man said.

"Can't say as I do." He found himself using what he thought would be the appropriate speech rhythm.

"Then you took a big chance coming up here like this. Sometimes we get full-up for two months running ."

"How about now?"

The man folded his newspaper. It was only two big sheets folded in half — 8 pages — and flipped pages in an old ledger book. Behind him 24 keys nestled in their boxes. "You going to be staying with us very long?" He rubbed his jaw, tracing the line of Gus's beard.

Only until the end of the world, Gus thought. "Why?" he asked.

The man shrugged. "That might tell me what room to put you in. See, the elevator is disconnected off-season so I don't want to make the nigger run all the way up to heaven to change your sheets."

Gus considered leaving but from here it went to guest houses. And there was the heavy bag he'd have to lug. He knew about that fine work room on the top floor, under the eaves. "I'll be staying awhile," he snapped, feeling the briskness. Even when you rejected their style you adopted a style of rejection.

"Waal, I think you're in luck. You got your choice of 23 rooms. We always hold one in case the guvner comes through. Last time we filled up like I mention was 7 years ago when a whale washed up and everyone came up from the city to look at it. Though come to think of it we might fill up the middle of

the week when all the tours start coming in. You in one of our package tours?"

"No, I'm not in any package."

"Reason I ask is because we can save you some money on one of them. Buy a round trip bus ticket and we'll give you a discount on a room and throw in a meal ticket at the best restaurant in Bass River and a shuttle bus out to Salvation Village on Thursday."

"No thanks," said Gus.

"Suit yourself. Well then, the best room here, except for the gunner's, is the one right over here."

"What about the one on top?"

Actually it was the attic, converted.

"You stayed here before?"

"Yah, a couple of years ago."

"Oh, you're that one?"

"What one?"

"Fellow who stayed up top."

"Yah, I'm that one."

"Your missus going to be joining you?"

He remembered. He'd come with Marsha to cover the primary campaign for the "Whaaa?"

"You'll be the first to know."

"Your affair," the man said, sliding a single sheet of check-in stationery across the desk.

"Can I leave the time space blank?" That way he could leave when he wanted.

"Well if you're going to be here Thursday you better say so now to be sure you have a room."

"What if I leave early?"

"Can't imagine anyone doing a thing like that, but that's allright if you do. We won't have any trouble filling up your room. We'll just charge you for the time you're here."

"I mean will I automatically get a weekly rate if I stay seven days?"

"Nothing's automatic in Bass River. Not even the washing machines. But I'll go you one better. If you stay a year I will personally guarantee you the monthly rate. Now how do you like that?"

"Swell," Gus said. He realized that his humor had just been tested and found wanting. He filled out the sheet, changing a few facts.

"From Boston, ay?"

The man was reading upside-down.

"You might find things a little quiet around here after next week."

"That's good."

Gus slid the sheet back across the desk.

"If you're up here to look around you might go out and take a gander at our college. We're mighty proud of our college. See that dark fellow got off the bus with you? He's some sort of a basketball hero up here for early practices. And if you want to be out nearer to all the goings on I can fix you up right here. We've got a nice new motel unit out that way that all those religious folks are going to take over. Here. Take a card. Only let me know early. By Tuesday or Wednesday I expect we're going to be pretty full up all over town."

The card showed a long low whitewashed building like a line of shower stalls, glaring in overexposure, the handle of the mason's wheelbarrow cutting across one corner of the picture, a huge sign by the road:

MIRACLE MILE MOTEL (NO) VACANCY

Gus wondered why the man had given him a card. Did he have the smug and stricken look of a religious seeker?

"Anything else I can do for you just say so," the man said.

"You can tell me the whereabouts of the bus station in town."

"Planning to leave already?"

"Ah forget it." He'd find it himself.

"No, wait. My friend you are standing in it. Also the Notary Public, the Certified Public Accountant, major realtor and developer, dispenser of pews at the Second Congo Church. Congo. That's Congregational, in case you didn't know. I am also a Justice of the Peace and if you need a marriage license I can fix you up in a minute, get you a preacher in fifteen. Why do you ask?"

"Ask what?"

"About the bus station."

Gus had forgotten already, in his bewilderment at the man's repertoire. "Oh, I wanted to turn in a bus ticket."

"Give it right here my friend and let's have a look at it. Looks allright to me, looks legitimate, tell you what, I don't have exact change this calls for \$ 14.88 will you settle for \$ 15 cash? You say you will now ain't that fine and neighborly of you, just fold up them three crisp ones then in your billfold and let's hear no more about it. Planning to stay awhile ay?"

"I don't know that." Although he'd just burned that bridge he didn't want to admit it, yet.

"Suit yourself. But any time you want to sit down and talk about long term we can go in there." He nodded toward the corner of the lobby where a small real estate office had a

window in the lobby. In the window were some strikingly bad photos of houses for sale. "We maybe could fix you up with something good. Save you money in the long run."

"Let's see if there's going to be a long run first."

The end of the world was beginning to condition his arrangements. It might as well be true.

"Suit yourself. Lord's the name."

There was a hand out for shaking which Gus could hardly avoid. It was surprisingly flexible and it moved within Gus's hand. "The good Lord. My brother Jim, he's the bad one."

Gus started. Wasn't that the name on the letter in his pocket? Was that the only name they used up here? He hefted his bags.

"Anything else I can do for you?"

"Do you pick up the laundry?"

"Yah" said the good Lord, grinning still. "Once a month."

Gus frowned. "Wait that long and you won't be able to pick it up."

He started up the stairs.

"I can get you some help."

But it was too soon to make peace. He might want that tension one day. "Never mind. You've been help enough."

"You'll like it here Mr. Dodge. That back room will be just fine to fix up them pitchers of yours."

Gus stopped on the stairs, startled. Where had he said that? For a stranger he was pretty well known.