

NOVELS / FICTION
3

ⓑ 'The Hole'

Hard copy manuscript

ⓒ 'The Hole'

Hard copy manuscript

Handwritten notes

THE HOLE

ⓑ 'The Hole'

1.

Because I've changed so much since that time (little more than a year ago) it won't be easy for me to describe the events that wrecked my six-month marriage, robbed me of my inheritance and drove us insane.

My name is John Bloomfield and before all this hit me I was a successful New York lawyer of thirty-two. I'm now thirty-three but see my former life across a mighty black chasm which I dare not cross (I mean I no longer have contact with old friends, law colleagues etc). I'm writing this in an exclusive clinic in Wiltshire, England, which is devoted (to put it politely) to mental care. John Bloomfield isn't my real name, nor are the other names in this story. The fact is that I have to protect the identity of Arthur Warren, as I'm going to call him, and the group of people round him who are leading double lives. If I revealed his real name, or mine, the cat would be out of the bag. Or would it? Who would believe my story? You don't topple the status quo that easily. And this particular group has been under cover for no fewer than six centuries, believe it or not. Like the freemasons they did well to infiltrate the upper echelons of power---the government, the City, the church, the best homes. Instead of fearing justice you administer it---this is the way to survive with a treasonable secret in your heart. And Arthur Warren, to name the current

cock of their walk, is a JP, apart from being one of the wealthiest landlords in the country. And this is as near the wind as I'm going to sail.

I ought to add that unlike the freemasons this group has never been heard of, much less named. Not bad going for six centuries of ceaseless fervent activity. So in a sense this story is an exposure.

Anyway, we agree to call it a story, a tale, whereas it is God's truth if ever there was truth.

It was Arthur Warren who brought all the tortures of the last year on us, or so I believe, and so I shall write. He seduced my wife (we were married hardly six months before in Beaufort, South Carolina) and deprived me of my English inheritance or what was called in my mother Elizabeth's will 'the Suffolk lands', of which Cawne Manor was the centre jewel so to speak.

Cawne Manor lies about twenty miles from the Suffolk coast, and the same distance from the Norfolk border, surrounded by its own moat which is now largely dried up and full of slanting alder trees which have a strange luminousness at night. Its banks are so clustered with oaks, yews, birch and poplar that it provides the garden and the magnificent many-roofed house with a sort of protective faery wall, as well as a baffle-board against the roar of the six-lane highway not half a mile away.

That was where Suzie and I spent our second honeymoon, after my mother's death. My mother Elizabeth stipulated quite clearly in her will that I was to reside for at least three months at Cawne Manor during the year of her decease.

So the plan was laid quite neatly, you see. Or should I say the trap?

I always remember Cawne Manor in sunlight, yet it became the darkest place on earth for ^{me} dark and fascinating and hypnotic, and how I survived its terrors physically I shall never know. As I write this I see the islands of shrubs and flowers on the smooth rising lawn, with the thick trees of the moat as a background, and it looks

like a glittering enclosed jewel as I gaze out of the latticed lounge window, everything so still, an island if ever there was one. On warm days I would take one of the armchairs out of the house and sit on the lawn staring at the house in a peculiar daydreaming mood that was quite unlike me, or so I thought.

I was capable of moving from one point to another of that bewitching garden all day until the sun went down behind the circle of tall trees. The sunlight seemed to belong just to us and I was always absurdly surprised to see it shining elsewhere, beyond the wide wooden gate. All day I might sit and gaze while the blackbirds and sometimes a nightingale or two sang, and the blue tits picked at the pork fat I hung for them under the porch. The rooks squawked, the magpies floated down in heavy black-and-white bundles to steal something (if it's true they steal).

Then there was the rose garden with its little wooden pagoda painted golden and red and aquamarine at one end. It was doubly sheltered, an island in an island with neatly clipped hedgerows and holly, its strips of black earth freshly hoed, and there was every sort of rose, Sonyas and tea-pinks and deep purples. They were so vivid they all but hurt the eyes.

I said above that the lawn visible from the lounge-window glittered and this was especially so early in the morning when I took my coffee. I could see the grass flashing minutely with dew, millions of tiny flashes, and it many times crossed my mind that I'd been watching this ever since I was born or even before. Sometimes my excitement at being the owner of Cawne Manor was so overwhelming that tears came to my eyes.

Which brings me back to my earlier self, before I set foot in the house and knew it only from my mother's brief and infrequent references to it over the years. I always knew she'd inherited an English property but it seemed no more to her than a useful source of rent. I realise now that her reticence was all part of the design that wrecked my life. As a matter of fact before her death I was quite a

hustler, though my clients rarely saw it. It was my mother who taught me how to worry a brief to death, never give up on it. Once I had my claws on a case a kind of white-hot energy got hold of me. But she also taught me charm. So I was trusted (and underrated, which can be a professional asset). My successes were looked on as amiable accidents, which meant that they excited little envy within my firm, which was riddled with internal politics. Sometimes I overdid it. The year before my mother died I received threatening phonecalls after having an indictment slammed on a man for 'irregularities' in real estate which my father had practised without blinking. As the case touched on the inviolability of contracts I dug up a Supreme Court ruling dated 1810, the Fletcher versus Peck case, and got away with it by means of sophistry. But I nearly paid for it with my life. Yes, my mother gave me my dangerous gift for exposure, which is why I suppose I'm writing all this.

If it hadn't been for my mother's sudden death I would have had my own firm by now. I had wealthy clients as far afield as South Carolina, and it was this that took me to Columbia one evening to a client called Clive Rembold who introduced me to the loveliest girl I'd ever seen, the daughter of a sales rep in pharmaceutical products in Beaufort. She was nearly as tall as I was, extremely dark, and well---we didn't stop looking at each other all evening. The next day we flew to New York together. But still I waited two years before marrying her. And I didn't tell my mother Elizabeth one thing about her. She, my mother, always used to joke about my girlfriends, how I changed them like socks. And until then I used to tell her about every one of them, down to intimate details, which made her laugh so long as what I said didn't sound vulgar or cruel. She wouldn't stand for smut. I suppose she was extremely old-fashioned. My father respected her so much that he talked about her in a hush even when she was just one room away. That was an amazing love. I was terribly jealous if any man

other than my dad so much as glanced at her. Dad and I sort of threw a male security net round her, which sometimes produced hostility when there were other men around, especially if we overdid it: I mean sometimes they had no intention of trying to seduce my mother. It was a chivalry thing. She inspired that. Anyway, I didn't tell her about Suzie Besant.

Elizabeth Bloomfield was a remarkable woman. She had the softest body I ever knew in a human being. I still think my dad was the luckiest man ever born. He visited Suffolk, England, in '38 or '39 and they met at Arthur Warren's house, or rather his father's as it was then. In a year they were married and she emigrated to New York. Dad went back to his real estate business and started making big money for the first time in his life. When he died (just eighteen months before Elizabeth) he left me sizeable chunks of New Jersey and Florida, which is why I could afford to take a three-month sabbatical at Cawne Manor after a long honeymoon in the Bahamas.

I never expected her to die. No one else did either. Her doctors were baffled. The director of the clinic in Stanford Conn. where she spent her last weeks saw no pathological reason why she should die, and in fact he gave me a date for her release a few days before it happened. Her blood count, blood pressure, heart performance, metabolism were exemplary. She was hardly sixty. She'd never been sick---just the usual colds and flu and, once, glandular fever.

She stopped eating one day and told me she couldn't hold her food down. But her digestive system was OK. In the last weeks she didn't even drink. With my permission she was fed intravenously but to the astonishment of the nursing staff she continued to fade away. Her mind was clear to the last moment, so was her speech. She gave me precise instructions about her apartment on 62nd Street should she die but I took this as a joke, and she let me.

One bitter December morning I drove over to Stanford

as usual and walked across the gravel forecourt to the clinic entrance. There were two nurses waiting for me.

"I'm afraid she died a few minutes ago," one of them said.

I felt the ground float away from under my feet and the next thing I knew a doctor was standing over me in the entrance hall patting my cheeks.

One of the staff put a call through to Suzie in Beaufort and she took a plane to New York that day. I was helpless. She found me in the bathroom of my mother's apartment crying like a baby. A man should have a measure of control over his grief but the tears poured out of me even in my sleep. I realised that almost every thought I had was in some way addressed to my mother. If I came off well in court or found a stunning new girl the first thing I did was call her up and tell her about it. She was my constant audience of one. Now suddenly the theatre had gone dark. I was crying about that too.

Anyway, Suzie had to work a sixteen-hour day to get things straight for me. My mother's will stipulated that she was to be buried at the church of St Clement's in Tarnley Green, Suffolk, England, and that Mr Arthur Warren of 'Wilmers', Walpole, Suffolk, England, 'my lifelong friend and agent', already knew of this desire and would complete formalities for the burial at his end. So Suzie had to start working on the highly complicated task of expatriating my mother's remains despite the fact that she was an American citizen. She solicited help from my firm and, well, it really is marvellous what lawyers can accomplish when they pull together. In two days flat my mother's remains were travelling Pan Am in an expensive coffin with enormous brass handles which Suzie chose. I had to go to the mortuary for two identifications (there was talk of an autopsy but it didn't happen, due I think to my firm's influence) and each time I broke down, to my shame. I didn't

give a damn what the mortuary officials thought, it was Suzie I was worried about. She was only twenty-five and no less impressionable than most girls of her age. I was supposed to be the one man in her life whom no emergency could ruffle. My mother had taught me an unnerving calm but it died with her, I think. When I got on the plane to London (I had sufficient presence of mind to spare Suzie the funeral) I thought I was never going to get myself straight again.

I couldn't understand why my mother didn't want to be buried at my father's side in Georgetown, Washington, where he'd been born. I felt some jealousy on his behalf, a suspicion that she had deeper loyalties than he'd known about.

I arrived at London airport sedated to the eyeballs and it took a man called 'Tiny' Petersham (he was actually vast) over an hour to find me. He drove me to Suffolk in complete silence, sucking on a dead pipe which sent off a sickening smell far worse than smoke. The moment we drove over the narrow bridge into the Cawne Manor property, clattering on the steel rollers put there against cattle, a change came over me. I believe it was then, at that very moment, with that metallic clatter in my ear and the misty, green but shadowy island before me, so different from the rest of the world, that I became the man I am now, and my previous life separated from me like the warm placenta at birth, once necessary to growth but now discarded.

We drove the length of the curving drive to the front porch and I was surprised to see how many cars were gathered on the gravel forecourt. The house was crowded, even festive, with the front door open. I couldn't understand this. In forty years my mother hadn't revisited Suffolk once. I believe she was in London once or twice changing planes. So who were these people?

It was a chill afternoon, just before dusk, and rainwater was dripping from the bare black branches. Light streamed from the lounge windows, yellow in the mist

and with a peculiar glow that seemed to extend all round the property as far as the dark curtain of trees in the moat. I glimpsed people kneeling in prayer.

Then I had a sensation which was both pleasureable and chill. I felt my mother behind me. She was urging me to enter the house. More than that, she was looking at everything through my eyes, quite as if she had needed to die in order to revisit the property she'd inherited at the age of nineteen or twenty and never seen again. She made me look up at the roof or rather roofs, having been added to again and again over the centuries since its foundation in pre-Tudor times the house had many roofs and hidden quadrangles. It all seemed so exciting and inviting, like a tiny city, and for a moment I forgot my grief. Or rather, she made me do so. The helpless bereavement I'd felt before never returned. It seemed that I was with her again, she was waiting for me here at her house. I walked inside feeling that she hadn't died after all and that, on the contrary, it was I who had had to take a journey---in order to meet her again. I date the beginning of my progress towards the place where I am now from those first moments after Petersham politely opened the door of his Rover for me to climb out.

I ducked from the low beams. I noticed that silk scarves had been draped over some of the lampshades. In the lounge a massive log fire was blazing. The inglenook was big enough to step inside. There was a Nativity on the wall which I knew from a visit to Rome with my mother in my college days. It was a Caravaggio and came, if I remember rightly, from a church in Piazza del Popolo. We'd gazed at it together (now his light-and-shade effect doesn't interest me) and perhaps she'd been thinking of the Cawne Manor lounge, where I suppose the reproduction must already have been hanging. And now she seemed to be directing my eyes to this Nativity in her intimate, unhurried way, and it felt as if we were in Rome again. I swear there was no difference between

my sense of her at my side in that Roman church and my sense of her now, after her death. I don't know if this idea seems confusing. But I felt exactly the same on both occasions.

Looking past the heads of her mourners I saw a photograph of her on the sideboard almost smothered in flowers. I'd never seen it before. She was a young woman, before her hair had turned from bright frolicsome gold to grey. Oh how lucky my father had been! I stood there gazing across at her, greeting the lovely creature who had decided to bring me into life.

But who were these mourners? Cousins, nieces and nephews? And where was Arthur Warren, whom she'd mentioned to me once or twice as the friend in charge of the 'Suffolk lands', as she called Cawne Manor and its adjacent farms? From time to time, I remembered, she had received letters from England, always in the same handwriting, and I wondered now if these had been his. Over the years he'd rented Cawne Manor and the holdings (good cropland and dairy pasture, with some valuable woods), and had kept the accounts with impeccable honesty and, so my mother once told me, without taking a nickel in commission.

There were groups of people everywhere in the hall and corridor leading to the other rooms. I passed between them awkwardly. There were children too. Surely this was more than family sorrow could account for? How had my mother maintained so many relationships during her absence? I found that the palms of my hands were sweating, an unusual reaction in me, and I was aware of looking extremely pale. Darkness was falling outside and through one of the latticed lounge windows I could see the sloping lawn and the brooding mass of the moat-trees beyond. The huge man Petersham had gone. There was such a silence. Yet everyone was talking. It had something to do with my mother, she seemed to spread a comforting hush over everything.

Then the question entered my mind, suppose my mother

had in fact visited Suffolk regularly over those forty years? And without telling my father? Or had it been a secret shared between the two of them and not with me? In that case why had I been excluded? I felt like a man who finds out about his wife's lifelong infidelity only after her death.

Yes, I felt that degree of shock over a mere suspicion. Perhaps my nerves were in a more distraught state than I was willing to admit to myself. But the suspicion and the shock grew stronger. I remember as a child staring through the gauze of the summer window-frame in my bedroom at the Long Island house trying to identify the dark huddled figures below on the lawn as they laughed and chatted and drank, wondering where she was, and whether other men than my father were at that moment standing close to her...

I stood gazing at her photograph and thought I saw the slightest smile on her face---I mean a smile different from the actual smile. And that hidden smile seemed to suggest secrets I might find unbearable.

Someone came up behind me and put his hand on my sleeve.

"I'm Warren," he said.

I turned and saw a man nearly as big as Petersham but much more imposing, even formidable. He had a high forehead which I noticed at once and deep steady eyes that made me flinch, almost as if he'd caught me having bad thoughts about my mother. His nose was firm and straight, the kind my father always used to call 'the nose of judgement'. He looked no more than forty-five but I knew he'd grown up with my mother, which made him at least sixty. He had massive shoulders and (I glanced down at them as we shook hands) long slender fingers and narrow wrists, not at all what you expected in a man so big and so forthright in appearance. We were standing among people deep in prayer but he seemed quite unconcerned about this, quite as if he alone were the arbiter of good manners. He drew me out of the lounge into the corridor, hardly making an effort to keep his voice down.

"I hope you don't mind all this," he went on. "I thought it was a fitting thing to do. I've arranged for a day and night vigil until the funeral which is Thursday."

I glanced back at her photograph again, wanting to ask her a question but not knowing what it was. My head was dizzy with the heavy scent of lilies everywhere.

Warren drew me out of the lounge into the dining room next door where drinks and a cold buffet were being served. I was horrified by this. I suppose it offended some sort of puritanism in me to see people eating and drinking so close to the room of mourning. Warren introduced me to a man called Mike Hammonsworth who was vicar of the church where my mother was to be buried. A man less like a minister I couldn't imagine. He was dressed in muddy riding breeches with a colourful ascot round his neck and he was eating a chippolati. I who never entered a church and had no God had sensitive feelings about all this! I'm amazed now at my first reaction to this humble and devout man. He was almost as tall as Warren, though quite skinny with a lined face and a sharp nose, very much an individual, rather jumpy in his movements. And every now and then he flashed a curious sparkling glance at me with very open, vulnerable, black eyes which I swore were Italian or Spanish. Actually, like Warren and myself, as I learned later, he had French blood.

There was also a blonde woman whose figure at once caught my eye. She wore a white close-fitting knitted dress, cut very low at the neck. That too seemed most inappropriate to me. Her name was Daphne Price and she was the wife of a local doctor. I thought she looked more like a girl out of a Chicago cathouse. Anger stirred under my grief. But I was more baffled than anything. I just couldn't see how you could mourn somebody's death dressed like that (I can now). She had white luscious skin and her figure was one of the most delectable I've ever seen, soft like my mother's. She was middle height with calm, rather audacious blue eyes and shoulders that, goodness knows why, suggested intelligence to me.

Cars kept coming and going outside. I wanted to ask Warren what it was all about but was afraid it might show how little I knew my mother, or rather how little she had confided in me. I returned to the photograph, in fact I couldn't drag myself away from it.

Thankfully Warren came back to the lounge and said, "Supper's waiting for us. Will you come?"

"Oh sure."

"I've fixed up a bed for you at Wilmers. You won't want to stay here all alone."

'Tiny' Petersham was waiting outside still sucking on his pipe. He and Warren seemed to be old friends, so close in fact that they snapped at each other instead of really conversing, short sharp sentences which I could hardly understand. It was quite a pleasurable experience for me to hear the English accent, like a homecoming. Of course I was used to that accent from birth, because of my mother. That was one of the things between my parents. They adored each other's accents and made the other promise not to adapt it in any way.

Petersham took the wheel again and we drove north along narrow lanes. Here and there the first buds were appearing. This was my first visit to England and the enchantment of its countryside began to take hold of me. I wonder if this is because I have English blood? Yet I feel a terrible nostalgia for America too. If I think of certain places in Pennsylvania where I intend to build a house I find it unbearable. As I write this I'm wondering if I shall ever see that little town fifteen miles south-east of Gettysburg again. That's where I'm buried, the old self.

Wilmers was quite different from Cawne Manor--- a simple rectangular Georgian mansion with vast windows and balustrades and still pools and ferns in stone pots. The house was in darkness, its wide steps leading up to a palladian front gleaming with some vague light from the moonless sky. I discovered when we walked into the vast hall that Warren never used electric light. There were

chandeliers with dripping candles everywhere. I walked in with Warren and three dogs came rushing to meet us, slipping on the carpets and clawing at the parquet but not barking. They were young coach dogs and Warren seemed to have perfect control of them. They jumped at his side yelping and huffing with joy but the moment he said "Down!" they ran into the library and curled up under the desk.

In the corridors flames quivered every time someone walked past. It only needed a spark to catch one of the curtains and all that deal and pinewood panelling would have gone up like matchwood in seconds. But he seemed to enjoy the danger, and the apprehension it caused in his guests. Sometimes he left candles blazing after he went to bed, to splutter out in their own way. It was just like him to tempt fate like that, on the grounds that fate is controllable. What an extraordinary man he was. No wonder my mother had more faith in him than in anyone on the globe (I write this rather bitterly).

Wilmers was the most eccentric house I've ever been in but everything had its reason, as I found out slowly over the months. There were dog baskets everywhere, and the rooms were perhaps not too clean. The carpets looked precious but had taken a fair beating. The central heating was a typically English non-starter and what warmth the radiators mustered with enormous gurglings blew away in the chill draughts from open doors and ill-fitting windows. Only the library, where everyone collected before and after dinner, was really warm, with its constantly burning log fire.

In every room there were piles of books, on the floor, on tables, on ricketty shelves. My bedroom, apart from being an ice-box, had heaps of locked trunks piled against one wall which made it impossible for me to get to the bathroom.

"That's OK," Warren said. "You can use mine."

There was a French housekeeper called Rachel who hardly ever spoke. She cooked and served at table. She usually appeared from the pantry when you entered the hall. The green padded door opened silently and there she was, offering to take your coat without a word, much less a smile. She was tall and slim but with large limbs that belonged to a farm woman in the Pyrenees. Her face was gaunt and pale and she wore her black hair drawn back tight into a bun, which threw her cheekbones into rather ugly prominence. She served at table so quietly that you could never understand how your glass got filled. It seemed against the house rules to address her even with a thank you and on that first visit I wondered if she was deaf and dumb. Then I heard her talking rapidly in the kitchen with a French accent.

We had dinner the first evening with 'Tiny' Petersham. He reluctantly put his foul pipe on the table in order to eat and I saw Warren, at the head of the table in a sort of throne, give it (and Petersham) a sour look. When she served the soup Rachel shifted the pipe a few feet down the table with the back of her hand and Tiny seemed to accept this like a child. He ate with concentration, his head lowered, and said hardly a word all the time. But when he did speak it was with the most charming accent I've ever heard in the English language, as clear as a bell, and in a voice so courteous and pleasant-sounding that you couldn't believe it belonged to his body even while you were staring him in the face.

During dinner I asked Warren (it took a surprising amount of courage) how it was that my mother had so many mourners when she'd---as far as I knew---been absent from the country for at least forty years.

He went on eating and finished his mouthful before replying, his eyes resting on the dark furthest wall of the dining room.

"You see," he said, "Elizabeth and I were so close

I suppose my feelings for her sort of washed off on others over the years."

It didn't sound true, or even mean to sound true. I thought there might be a smile in his eyes.

"You mean you were always talking about her?"

He turned to me slowly and gave me the full benefit of his gaze. I'd never been looked at like that before. The eyes told me simply that the subject was closed. Yet they were without the slightest anger or reproach. They conveyed the message to me with a clarity that almost made me shudder. He then went on playing with his food, placid and composed as I've rarely seen a human being outside India or China, or in some religious community. He never really ate. He picked at his food and sipped a little wine. His housekeeper paid him hardly any attention at table, I suppose for this reason. Frequently she offered dishes to the guests but not to him. How can I put it? He was like a guest always, at his own table.

As if to provide an epilogue to his cryptic remark about my mother he murmured as we walked back to the library after dinner, "You mustn't mope about her, you know. Elizabeth didn't like that sort of thing."

And, believe it or not, I felt that a calming hand had been laid on me, I don't know whether his or hers, and I wanted to cry, not with my early grief but with gratitude at receiving unbiassed love.

That night I lay awake gazing at the trunks all round me marked 'Wanted on Voyage', 'Basrah', 'Port Said', 'Bombay', wondering if they were still full of belongings from years ago because they'd never been unpacked. The flickering candles sent a comforting light round the room, producing dense shadows in which, had I been susceptible that way, many ghosts could have lurked.

I realised that all my life I'd neglected my mother while doting on her. Perhaps all sons do that. I never once asked myself what kind of human being she was. In

fact seeing so many mourners at Cawne Manor had raised her socially in my eyes. This was a distressing feeling to become aware of because it showed me that I had under-valued her during her life in a most patronising way. She must have seen that and shrugged it off as the lot of maternity.

I don't know if I'm telling this story properly. If not it's because I lack culture. I began to realise that for the first time in England. I picked up little at high school or even Harvard. I got into a rather a smart brainless set (of course 'smart' means nothing today compared with what it did in my mother's time). The little I knew she taught me. She used to sit on the other side of the room in the 62nd Street apartment talking to me in that remote cool way of hers.

"When you want to influence somebody," she used to say, "you must do it from inside, not outside. No one is going to be manipulated from the outside. What you have to do is get inside their thoughts and see things from their point of view. And then you telepathically suggest your line of action to them as if they'd chosen it themselves. This always works if you do it properly. You can't do it with people you hate or fear. You have to get rid of those feelings first."

She had hundreds of things to say like this and I grew up thinking that all mothers talked this way. And her advice really got inside me. I think it was the secret of my successes as a lawyer. She had a way of talking so that you felt the influence even though you didn't quite understand what she was saying.

But apart from what she taught me I was a thoroughly ordinary young man. I believed what I read in the papers, I pulled out of discussions if they looked like getting serious, I enjoyed playing fives every evening with an English friend, I learned karate and developed a powerful muscular frame (which actually put Suzie off when she first met me) and I changed my car about three times a year.

I have blonde hair and I'm good-looking in a perhaps over-symmetrical way. I didn't have to fight for people's good opinion of me because i) I picked friends on my own level and not above it, ii) I had enough money not to have to depend on what other people felt about me and iii) I could charm a ferret out of its hole.

But while I had no mind I had a lot of unconscious animal power over other people which I used in my work as well as in love affairs.

"The girls fall for you like skittles," my mother used to say with her tinkling laugh that reminded me of a girl of fifteen.

It was her clever grooming that made this possible. But why she gave me this particular upbringing with its emphasis on the muscular I shall never really know, since it was the opposite of what she admired in a man. She turned me into a baseball player, a philistine, a nearly crooked lawyer, a party-goer, a philanderer, a handyman who could do repair jobs at the Long Island house. Sometimes I think it was to keep me out of the drug-scene. She was always talking about that. After all, everyone else in my generation had some drug experience but not me. I never once smoked grass, let alone sniffed coke or shot horse. I never once smoked even a straight cigarette. As for drink, I like wine with my meals but that's as far as it goes. Only now do I realise just how unique this was for my generation. None of my friends were dopeheads but they all smoked a bit of pot from time to time or took speed or swallowed a purple heart at a dance for the kicks. When offered these things I just laughed and did a sort of recoil. I felt too healthy. And I wanted to stay that way. I was very heavily into sex from the age of fifteen. I was insatiable, and pregnancies and outraged parents followed me all through high school and college. My mother didn't seem to mind that. Perhaps it was my way of balancing the rude health.

She often told me that for her drugs were the same as surgery.

"Once you cut certain nerves," she would say, "it's the devil's own job to get them to function again."

I didn't know what she meant. I just nodded. What I thought she meant wasn't in fact anything like what she did mean. It has taken me a year's hell (such as I wouldn't wish on my wickedest enemy) to find out the meaning.

Had I entered the drug scene I would have gone in head first like I did into sex. So the only way she had of keeping me out of danger was to turn me into an extra-vert, fornicator and bore. At least that's my guess.

I lay awake a long time that first night at Wilmers, with foxes making their ghostly bark outside. My windows looked out on lawns and ponds. These ended in a so-called ha-ha, a sudden drop in the ground intended to keep cattle out of the garden, which Warren said generations of drunken guests had fallen down. Beyond the garden were flat meadows just getting lush, and a fast stream, and open country as far as you could see, not a chimney or even a farmhouse in sight. They say that land in Britain is still in the hands of only five percent of the population, with the result that you get these uninterrupted views. Well, Warren was certainly a member of that little landowning club, hate them though he did.

Girls kept coming to the house while I was staying there. This surprised me. Warren referred to them, almost with a wink, as his 'nephews'. And I swear that that one of them---sometimes two---went up to his bedroom each night.

In part of the cavernous pillared cellars under the house he'd fixed up a kind of discotheque with a bar and easy chairs and knee-height tables and, incredibly, those highly professional coloured spots and twinkle-lights that flash to the rhythm of the music. He suggested an evening down there---my mother's funeral hadn't yet taken place. I looked at him woefully and met his eyes again. This time he was gazing at me with cool pitying curiosity. I didn't feel this fitted the occasion at all. But it really was impossible to resist this man and we went downstairs, where he obliged me to dance to the deafening juke-

box with three girls round me. I had a feeling that he'd more or less ordered the girls to fuss over me. After I met Suzie I decided to be faithful for the first time in my life. It was hard going at Wilmers. Finally Warren saw my distress and sort of called the girls off rather as he called off the dogs Bounce, Sandy and Booful.

"I think we'd better turn in," he said, "It's the funeral tomorrow."

All kinds of feelings were stirring in me---ones that accused me of disloyalty toward my mother, as well as to Suzie. Because I enjoyed the dancing, and certainly the girls, their light breasts, so subtle behind their blouses. I also felt increasingly suspicious that my poor dad had been duped. I formed the idea that my mother's association with Warren had been too shameful to mention to him.

But a glow returned to my cheeks at Wilmers. I played tennis every morning with Mike Hammonsworth, the vicar of St Clement's. He darted about the court like a demon---for a moment I had the impression that he had a monk's habit on and it was flying all over the place as he jumped and lunged at the ball. He mostly lost but he gave me a hard game. He always left the court sweating so profusely that he looked as if he'd just taken a shower. Losing made him irritable. You just couldn't imagine this man having a religious thought. He was so very childish--- it took me a long time to see that this was humility, ~~acquired from years of bitter inner struggle.~~

The food at Wilmers was succulent, all too much so. Rachel served the most exquisite French food. Nothing, not even sardines on toast, was like you'd had it before. Apart from playing tennis I went riding with Warren on one of his 'old skins' as he called his fine stable. One of the mares had recently taken second place at the Thousand Guineas.

He showed me old photographs of my mother in several albums. He sat at my side on the library settee, and the

way he was leaning back, gazing at me half from behind as I looked at them, you would think he was proudly recalling a deceased friend for someone who'd never set eyes on her.

My mother could look so light. This is difficult to describe. You felt you could lift her up on a finger. I recognised in those early photos that playful, almost skittish element I knew so well in her, symbolised perfectly by the loose way she wore her hair. This didn't change at all as she grew older.

"Are there any tenants at Cawne Manor?" I asked Warren quietly, without knowing why.

"No. I sent the last tenants away a few months ago."

"Why?"

"I had the impression that your mother wanted to come and stay, now that your father was dead. Just an impression. So I had the place done up."

"You know she wants me to spend three months there this year, don't you?"

"Really?"

"She says quite categorically in the will that it has to be this year, the year of her decease. And she feels so strongly about it that she's made it a condition of the inheritance."

"Perhaps she's right. Cawne Manor needs a resident owner for a change."

"Yes, but I plan to marry when I get back. It won't be easy. And for three months, impossible! I've already got a huge backlog of work waiting for me."

"You'll surely find a way," Warren almost whispered.

"How?"

Warren didn't give me an answer but he was right, as matters turned out. I did find a way. After the funeral I flew down to Beaufort in South Carolina and married Suzie two days later, then took her to the Bahamas and from there phoned my firm to say I was taking a three-month sabbatical. Now I look back on it I didn't have much to do with the decision, it just happened. I won't

say that Warren made it happen but sometimes, over the months that followed, it began to feel that way.

My mother's funeral was as perplexing for me as the 'vigil' at Cawne Manor. The church was crowded and there was even a sprinkling of lookers-on outside. The wreaths were something to gape at. Some were so huge and lavish they needed two or three people to carry them. And there were so many. You would think a celebrity had died. It was one of those warm gentle days, touched with the slightest balmy breeze, which I have come to recognise as England's occasional heavenly reward for otherwise heart-rendingly inconstant weather. Everything seemed to float dreamily in this atmosphere. Even the nearby roaring highway was silent. Probably the wind-direction was favourable. One could smell the sea, sense its reflection in the sky. Nature was moving. The trees were putting on their first leaves. I noticed crocuses and the first daffodils. Mike Hammonsworth swept past me in a cassock and freshly washed surplice, on his way to the vestry, as six men bore the coffin into the church. The sunlight glittered on its brass handles. Thankfully Warren stayed close to me throughout the ceremony. I couldn't have remained on my feet without him. He seemed no different from the previous days, neither more nor less reverent. He gazed round at the other mourners in his placid, unruffled, open way, his hands in his pockets. He wore dark grey with a black tie. He nodded to a few people, smiled. Again I had the impression that he was setting the tone for everyone else's behaviour.

Daphne Price was there, alone as before. I was amazed at myself for having judged her so harshly at the Cawne Manor vigil. She was still dressed in white, though. A spring coat covered her dress (I don't know if it was the same dress as before but the neck was cut just as low). There was something in her bearing that struck me. Far from greeting me, she never once glanced at me. Nor did she glance at the others. She gazed

ahead with quite unmoving eyes and I had the impression that my mother meant something very special to her. I didn't see her speak once. She was entirely in her own thoughts. There was something in all this---in the bearing of the other mourners too, including the children---which filled me with bafflement and also a sense of helpless remorse, as if they were accusing me of negligence toward my mother. Really, my obvious grief apart, they seemed to reverence her far more deeply than I did.

Mike Hammonsworth was a different man in his cassock and surplice, towering from the pulpit, his hands gripping the lectern while he swayed to and fro and shouted like a Neapolitan priest, his black eyes boring into those of the congregation. I saw the same sparkle in his dark, shrouded eyes ^{as} before but realised now that it was due to fanaticism.

"Elizabeth Bloomfield was perfect," he bellowed, "and that was why she died!"

I looked round the congregation, expecting the vague expressions of those who are listening to empty words and thinking other things, but this wasn't the case at all. Everyone was concentrated, grave, as he talked. And I couldn't understand a word! I knew my mother was a good woman---and apparently, judging by the size of the congregation, an influential one too---but how could he use the word 'perfect', especially as he'd almost certainly never set eyes on her?

"We mustn't be afraid of perfection!" the sermon went on, almost as if he knew what I was thinking. "There are those who wait to be called and there are those who seem even while living to be already received. And Elizabeth Bloomfield was one of the latter!"

I puzzled over these words for hours afterwards and finally gave up. I concluded that Mike Hammonsworth was a bit touched. Otherwise how could such a man, well endowed to fit almost any of the valid professions, choose to become the vicar of some hen-roost parish in

the Suffolk sticks?

When the coffin was lowered I tottered forward and felt the strong hands of Petersham on one side and Arthur Warren on the other pulling me back. They did it so forcefully that I almost fell into their arms. I couldn't bear to hear those first handfuls of earth as they were flung down on the coffin. As a child I'd seen a man trying to clamber into his young wife's grave as they threw the soil down---he was restrained by weeping relatives. I felt like doing the same. I couldn't believe that my mother was dead. Because, you see, I hadn't even started to get to know her yet.

2.

We arrived at Cawne Manor in early May. The moat had already dried up and last year's dried-up leaves formed a soft bed which was pleasant to walk on.

I often remember those first days at Cawne Manor with Suzie. The house had been newly decorated by Thomas Belling across the lane and on the evening of our arrival we found the kitchen humming with warmth and cosiness, the ascot stove showing a dim red glow of anthracite and the clock on the mantelpiece ticking peacefully as it must have been doing for a century past. I put my nose into the pantry and saw hams, a brace of pheasant and salami sausages hanging.

The master bedroom upstairs was large and rather low-ceilinged. Its wooden floor creaked loudly every

time you passed. Arthur Warren had bought new curtains and bedspreads, and there were fresh chintz covers on the lounge armchairs. The dining room was next door to the lounge, sharing the one vast chimney in that wing, so that on each side of the wall one could step into an inglenook big enough to take two sitting people on freezing nights. Mostly, at the beginning, before the summer warmth had set in, we ate in front of the lounge fire at the settee, with a knee-height table before us. There was central heating but, as at Wilmers, the walls and windows seemed to suck it out greedily. Wherever you went there were draughts and you looked round for an open window but found everything locked. In the bedroom you pulled the bedclothes up to your nose at night and still you felt exposed, so Suzie started wearing a knitted hat which she kept under the pillow. We didn't mind. It was a holiday house after all. We had no intention of spending winters there, though we did mean to stay for the whole of the three months demanded by my mother's will, which would take us into the middle of July. I wanted to fulfil this condition less in order to inherit the 'Suffolk lands' than simply to fulfil my mother's wishes. I reckoned that she must have a reason and I intended to wait for this to become clear. As for Suzie she'd always dreamed of living in England. Charleston had been founded by a British merchant and, goodness knows why, this had given her the idea at school that one day she might find a home in England. And the British accent enchanted her---as, I soon observed, her drawl delighted the Suffolk people. It looked as if our stay was going to be idyllic. We made friends quickly. Mike Hammonsworth invited us to the vicarage for afternoon tennis, and we also played tennis at the Nat West recreational ground at Tarnley Cross.

We went riding with Arthur Warren and he gave us carte blanche to use his stables whenever we liked.

We made the acquaintance of Daphne Price's husband, the doctor, whose name was Shaun. He was a rather hunched, disgruntled man with a long curling nose which seemed to twist with disgust. But we discovered he was morbidly shy (as his wife was, if anything, brazen), and quite affable---very loyal---when we got to know him. He would turn up at Cawne Manor alone in the evening with a brace of pheasant hanging from his hand (those in the pantry the first evening were his offering). And all he wanted really was to sit and chat with us. He never talked about Daphne but it was clear to us that she was a source of distress for him. We didn't probe. Never once was she out with him, unless we invited them both to dinner. Yet she was frequently at Wilmers for dinner. She would be sitting in the library showing her legs and, always, a lot of cleavage. She was a quite opposite type physically to Suzie but they hit it off at once and became close friends. They shared a certain irreverence towards life and were always spluttering with laughter together. Suzie told me that most of Daphne's jokes were about Shaun Price's inadequacy as a husband. Shaun apparently disliked Arthur Warren and never visited Wilmers socially. The odd thing was that he was Warren's doctor. If I ever tried to bring the subject round to Warren in his company he always clamped up, refusing to say a word, and stared into the log fire, his mouth like a thin thread.

We grew very fit in those first weeks. I simply couldn't understand why my parents hadn't spent their summers at Cawne Manor. My father had often talked wistfully about Suffolk. They were of course much attached to the Long Island property. But this hardly explains an absence of over forty years.

The house had so many rooms (some of them locked up) and mezzanines and twisting corridors that it was easy to lose oneself. One looked out of a corridor window and discovered a tiny quadrangle below which one hadn't noticed before. It might have a well of its own, the handle rusty now. There was so much to see that you

could imagine living the rest of your days without once going beyond the circle of the moat. You could vary the picture every day. What we in fact did was to close off most of the house, after we'd found the locked rooms to contain only junk---and even that of little historical interest. We decided to live in the area round the kitchen and entrance lobby. This contained a winding wooden staircase so narrow that only one person could pass at a time. It was steep and rather perilous, especially as there were no bannisters. It curled round on itself so that it reached the upper floor at the same angle with which it departed from the ground floor, and one stepped on to a landing outside the master bedroom. Below, it was a few paces from the lounge and dining room, which made a compact arrangement, like living in a cottage for two while we were in fact in^a house of at least thirty rooms. That suited us.

Rose, a large, red-faced woman with square chapped hands and a cheerful smile came over most mornings and did the housework. Suzie liked having her in the house and often sat drinking coffee with her in the kitchen, finding out as much as she could about the thinly populated neighbourhood. There were two ugly brick houses the main gate of Cawne Manor and in one of these Rose lived with her husband Thomas Belling and her silent mother of ninety, who'd been born there and knew every nook and cranny of the Manor, its dark corners leading to unexpected views of the garden or barns or fields beyond the moat. Rose seemed to love it, and once or twice I found her standing in the lounge, duster in hand, gazing out of the window on to the lawn in a dreamy state. However, she would never come to the house if we weren't there. We put this down to a nervous disposition.

The narrow staircase was far from being the only one in the house. The main one was in another wing, quite a grand affair, dividing into two open landings at the top, in a tall hallway pannelled with dark wood from, so people said, the time of Oliver Cromwell. But the rooms at this end of the house were too large for us,

and apparently former tenants had found the same, since there was no central heating in this wing. The panelled rooms stood hushed and empty, and in one or two of them I found that the windows were still intact from centuries ago, the glass hand-made.

We were lucky with the weather, once May was out. Almost every morning the sun rose gently behind the painted pagoda in the rose garden and touched the wood panelling of the dining room with soft orange light. A door led straight into the rose garden from this room and we were in the habit of leaving it open while we took our breakfast at the long polished dining table. The scent of the roses would drift in. And if we had nothing better to do we would take tea in the pagoda, usually in the afternoon when the sun had come round, sitting at the entrance while blackbirds and starlings and robins hopped closer and closer to us. Behind us the moat was at its narrowest, so that the lane outside was well within earshot and we could hear everything that went on while not being seen. Sometimes a tractor passed on its way to the fields, or a herd of cattle was ushered from one field to another. Or children rode past on ponies, laughing. Or we would hear the ring of a bicycle bell. Sometimes a truck halted at Rose's house to deliver planks or building materials for Thomas. Apart from looking after Cawne Manor he did odd jobs as far afield as Wilmers. He would put his hands to anything. I think he got quite a surprise when he saw, later, how good I too was with my hands. I could build walls, doors, chicken runs. That again was my mother's doing. She saw to it that I learned a man's skills at school.

"I don't want a bookworm," she used to say.

But she was just that herself. My father used to shake his head proudly as he watched her reading. She had a room full of books at the Long Island house. The reader will appreciate what an avid reader I was when I say I had no idea what books they were.

Suzie and I went jogging sometimes in the early

morning. It gave us a chance to see the farmland belonging to Cawne Manor and to say hullo to some of 'our' labourers. They seemed quite affable. But I couldn't help feeling that England had never recovered from its class system and that people, however prosperous they might now be, still had the old attitudes deep down. Thomas had two cars and a five-cwt truck in his back yard, and one of the biggest colour televisions I've ever seen, but he always gave me 'sir' and half touched his cap. I got a feeling, though, that there was an element of deliberate burlesque here. His attitude to Arthur Warren was cowed to say the least. If Warren's car (a Rolls) could be heard slowly crunching its way along the lane towards Cawne Manor he would leap out of his house and open the wooden gate as if royalty had arrived. This seemed to amuse Warren, and he treated Thomas with chilling remoteness. Or he would laugh in such a belittling way that you could feel the other man cringing inside, the whole five foot ten inches of him, brawn and muscle, with a thick, blue nose and shoulders that had been carrying sacks of cereal and manure for decades. Apparently he'd only left the farm to do building jobs quite recently. Rose said that Arthur Warren had wanted him to look after both Cawne Manor and Wilmers because outside builders were too expensive these days. I was surprised at his degree of control over Thomas.

Apart from his building activities Thomas ran a battery farm, mostly turkeys, ducks and chickens. So he was in no way dependent on Warren, much less on the tenants of Cawne Manor. He did poach in the Cawne Manor woods. Everyone knew this. He would leave his house on a Sunday morning carrying a shot gun in a felt case, as if he had no intention of using it. We would be sitting in the pagoda and his shots would ring out.

"It's Thomas," we would say. It made us feel we belonged.

I went 'up to Town', as I learned to say---it meant in fact going south to London. I had agreed with my

firm to make myself useful during the three-month sabbatical by founding a London subsidiary, which meant renting suitable offices in the Gray's Inn area and meeting various of Tiny Petersham's friends who could help me (he was a retired barrister). I didn't enjoy this much. I escaped from the long lunches as soon as I could and strolled through Fleet Street and Covent Garden, my head thick from the gins and wine that had been more or less forced on me. Sometimes Suzie and I went to a theatre. It was funny how anxious we always were to return to the old house. We could easily have stayed at a hotel overnight but we hurried back even if it meant arriving dead tired at three in the morning. There was something at Cawne Manor that called to us, something special in the silence and the slightly damp freshness of the air, and the sense of being hidden from the world by those thick trees that clustered round the moat. And people seemed so glad to see us back, even after an absence of no more than a day. Rose would call out cheerily as she came down the rose garden quite as if we'd been away a month, and Thomas would put his awkward head in at the kitchen door to ask if 'the squire', his burlesque name for me, needed anything done. Then Warren or Hammonsworth or one of the Prices would call us up. It seemed we had really found a second family---in a place where less than half a year before we'd had no connections whatever! It felt like a very special gift from my mother. Suzie felt that way too. I think it hurt her that I'd never introduced her to my mother and of course it caused a bit of jealousy. But Suzie wasn't the type to brood. Once she'd decided that Elizabeth Bloomfield had been a woman of hidden powers she began taking her side in all things. She had the big photo of her, the one I'd seen at the vigil, reframed and put it in the dining room. She went to the grave at least once a week and arranged fresh flowers while the tombstone was being cut. And she agreed with me that we had to stay the full three months stipulated in the will because that had been my mother's wish.

So she too helped to spring the trap that had been laid for us.

Cawne Manor began to influence us in other, stranger ways. We really began to think of it as a magic house. I don't know how to write about this but our sex-life changed abruptly or at least quite soon after we arrived from the Bahamas and I swear it had something to do with the house. My mentioning this brings back such a yearning for her. It makes me tremble, my throat goes dry. Sometimes, when the yearning comes over me, I go to bed and bury my face in a pillow. At Harvard in my second year I kept tame mice, a male and female. Because they spawned so many young I got rid of the female and for weeks afterwards that wretched deprived male stood hunched in a corner, its eyes closed, quite still, daydreaming (I'm sure) about the wife he'd lost. I would never do that to an animal now. Since coming to the clinic I've become vegetarian, as I think my mother would have wished. I now see what suffering we inflict on animals and how much more love they feel than we do. But this is jumping ahead.

I'm half afraid to write about my relationship with Suzie lest, because of a certain feverish element which might enter the writing at this point, the reader should think I deserve to be where I am at this moment.

She and I used sometimes to walk in the moat. It became quite a habit now that its bed had dried up. I think we enjoyed seeing the trees tower above us on either side. We would go round and round the property this way, hidden to everyone but seeing and hearing everything. And I could feel her darkness, the deep shining blackness of her long hair. I could feel her dark texture, if I may put it like that, without looking at her---and her litheness at my side, the light way she strode along, and with such composure. I lived, breathed this texture night and day. Of course young married couples frequently make love to an obsessive degree at the beginning. But we never felt the excess. We knew it hadn't happened in the Bahamas, and certainly not in the previous two

years in South Carolina or New York.

Yet I think we both realised at Cawne Manor that we weren't in love. It was something different. We always, even after our marriage, found it difficult to take our eyes off each other. And we'd known instinctively the first moment, in Clive Rembold's apartment, that we had to be together, there was no other way. But we didn't get any of those momentous feelings of life suddenly changing and great ecstatic vistas opening up which you have when you fall in love. It was, so to speak, an already established thing: we were together from that first moment whether we liked it or not. We weren't even each other's physical type. Al, her boyfriend in Charleston whom she would have married had I not come along, was physically my opposite. He was dark, slim, a very quiet man. He was the adaptable type, letting life happen round him. I felt he was much the better man to marry Suzie. She would certainly have been happier. She wouldn't be in a mental-care clinic right now.

Also Suzie made no secret of the fact that my muscular build (as it was then) put her off, though she could just take the blonde complexion, the sandy hair, the freckles here and there. And on my side I tended to fall for the Daphne Price type of woman.

But it was our very strangeness to each other that drew us together. This isn't quite right. We knew, from the first moment, that the very differences between us were what provided the salt, the spices of our feast. Marriage was in our minds from the moment we first clapped eyes on each other. We checked that with each other afterwards. Of course that was why I didn't tell my mother about her. It was one thing to talk about a nice girl I'd met, another to say I was marrying a girl I didn't know a thing about even sexually. Suzie and I were aware of each other to a hyper-sensitive degree and that still holds, it didn't wane in all the months at Cawne Manor. You could say it was a primal thing, came from such deep areas that we didn't understand what was going on. But it wasn't carnal in the proper sense. That would have worn out, fatigued us. That first night in Columbia I stayed with

Clive and she went to a girlfriend called Kay Shore for the night (she was working in Beaufort and staying with her parents at the time). But within one hour of separating we were talking on the phone, and we talked at least twice a day from that time on, wherever we were. When I was in England for my mother's funeral I called her up just the same---twice a day. I felt sorry for Al, her man. From one day to the next his life fell to pieces. Because they really were in love. Life is so mysterious, unexpected. What Suzie and I had for each other was deeper than love. We knew when we met each other that we were home.

I just had to get a whiff of her Chanel, mixed with the dark natural perfumes of her body, to go giddy with need. At Cawne Manor we were constantly rushing to the bedroom and locking ourselves away, even with Rose in the house, even with guests downstairs. We delighted even in the most snatched contact. As I said before, young married couples do make a lot of love but, for God's sake, neither of us had exactly suffered from sex-deprivation before. Neither of us seemed interested in having a baby---that is, though we wanted children, had decided to have them, that wasn't in either of our mind's when we were behind locked doors together. In fact she just couldn't get pregnant, though she took no precautions whatsoever. One of the reasons she loved Cawne Manor was because it would make a wonderful holiday house once we'd started a family, a place where we could give our children rich lives indeed. She wanted to start right away but it wouldn't happen. We had tests. I was OK. On her side there were no Fallopian tubes problems. No blood-group discrepancy. One Harley Street specialist was convinced before he examined us that we were chain smokers because this, so he said, was a prime cause of sterility. But tennis and jogging and making love were our pastimes, not smoking or sniffing or drinking.

Idle hands will find evil work to do, my mother said. But we weren't all that idle. We were up soon after dawn

most days. If I didn't go to town we were out on the tennis courts or mending something in the house. I looked after the roof myself, unknown to Thomas. I loved to get up there and sit fitting the old moss-covered tiles so that no one should see from below a bright new one.

Our love-making produced more energy, not less. Our nights were often a turmoil, yet we woke refreshed in the morning. Our bodies bloomed. People talk about the healing properties of touch. I think it true to say that we healed each other of all life's ills the moment we were alone together, whether in the full light of day in the pagoda or hidden away in the shadows of the moat.

In the Bahamas our experiences together were what I would have expected. We enjoyed it, we were relaxed afterwards---hungry, ready for a dip in the sea, in need of a drink. But at the old house the enjoyment took on other dimensions, so full of the unexpected as to be almost unbearable. I don't wish to give the impression that we were always making love. We went through periods, sometimes as long as ten days, of abstinence. I mean we allowed the natural biological cycle to take place. We weren't mentally obsessed with each other, much less with sex generally. But these periods didn't feel like abstinence at all. We could feel new energies building up, and this produced an expectant thrill similar to that of the act itself.

Really I thought marriage was going to be a humdrum affair after a time. As a lawyer I'd observed it turning sour or stale after a fairly uniform period of time, in many couples. I'd never seen marriage in terms of sex anyway. Perhaps that was my mother's influence. I thought that after a time Suzie and I would continue to have adventures. In fact, a mutual toleration would keep the marriage going, especially if there were children. But it didn't happen that way. An hour's separation set up a sort of nervous alarm in us, a sense of deprivation, almost malnutrition. The reader will appreciate what

horrors we suffered when first our relationship was undermined and then we were wrenched apart (I am thinking again of the tame mouse I kept at Harvard).

One sunlit day I happened to be in the woods and heard the sharp crack of a shotgun close by. I didn't at once think of Thomas Belling and hoped I might catch the poacher hot-handed. I waited, hidden by a tree, while the man's heavy steps, swishing through the dead leaves, drew nearer. Thomas came in sight carrying a dark grey hare by the hind legs. Blood was dripping from its head. The eyes were staring pathetically and the body was still twitching.

"Up to your old game, I see."

He nearly jumped out of his skin.

I laughed and he said, wiping his chin with his free hand, "Well! It's Bloomfield! I couldn't resist, Mr Bloomfield! He practically offered himself to me!"

His presence of mind had returned in a flash. He was a quick, artful chap. He had wide eyes that constantly looked sideways as if for an avenue of escape. And then he looked you full in the face with something derisive in his expression. I couldn't make him out at all. Even Rose, his own wife, talked about him as if he was an enigma. But I noticed that whatever he said was law as far as she was concerned.

"You smoke Mr Bloomfield?" he asked, dropping the hare with an unpleasant thud on the forest floor. The animal fell on its head, so that its neck buckled for the fraction of a second, and blood made a little spurt out of its mouth. Then he took out a tin of tobacco and some cigarette papers.

"Like a smoke?" he asked me again.

"No thanks."

I was irritated by this performance (he knew perfectly well that I didn't smoke) and said, "Does Mr Warren know you poach like this?"

"No sir." I noticed that his eyes started with alarm. It was hardly perceptible but I hadn't been a lawyer for nothing.

"And suppose I tell him?"

"He's been trying to stop me poaching for nigh on forty years, Mr Bloomfield," he said. "And there's nothing I can do about it."

"Nothing you can do! You realise you're stealing my property?"

He shook his head, concentrating on rolling his cigarette, and I was astonished to see a look of contrition on his face.

"I listen to him and say yes, and I do my best not to make them suffer, I'm a clean shot as you can see. But I just can't stop myself. It'll get me into trouble one day, Mr Bloomfield. I've made you angry. I can pay you for this---" He nodded toward the dead animal. "Double, treble what it's worth. I just can't stop doing it, that's all. Mr Warren knows---I mean he doesn't know I do it but he knows I want to."

"You like the killing part?"

"Yes." He looked at me without guile and added, "Why don't we sit down squire?"

He lowered himself to the ground and leaned against a tree. When he saw that I wasn't sitting he began struggling to his feet again but I said, "No it's alright", and found another tree to lean on. He fiddled in his pockets for a match and lit up.

"Yes," he went on, "I've been doing it since I was a lad and it's stronger than I am. My old dad used to try and reason with me but it was no use. Are you vegetarian by any chance like your mother Mr Bloomfield?"

"No." I gazed at him. "How did you know my mother was a vegetarian?"

"Oh, these things get around. I thought you didn't like to see the poor beast dead, that's why I ask."

"I'm not squeamish about that, no. But I don't come into your back yard and shoot one of your turkeys."

"You're at liberty to, squire," he said with a smile that creased his face in an unexpected way, producing

another face. "Then we'd both be wrong, wouldn't we?"

We sat there in silence and I began to wonder what I was doing in the middle of Cawne Woods staring at my neighbour. He drew on his cigarette, long pulls which seemed to satisfy him immensely.

"I wish I was young and just married again," he said musingly, looking at a point well above my head. "I shall be fifty-nine come Michelmas Mr Bloomfield. But I don't think anything's changed really."

I didn't understand his drift and he saw it.

"It's as good with the wife as it always was. And as often," he said.

Then he nodded, and nodded again, as if to confirm the matter to himself, gazing at the dead leaves while he pulled again at his cigarette.

"Yes," he went on. "Take yesterday morning. I'd just picked a nice wet cabbage and I watched her go upstairs and I couldn't resist going after her Mr Bloomfield. I was up there like a shot and in less time than it takes to say Jack Robinson that bed was rolling round the room on its castors and she was hollering for more. I'll tell you one thing about Rose. She gets the message almost before you send it and she's waiting for you as wide as any man could wish. You don't have to spend an hour waving your flag in front of her like you do with some women."

I didn't know what to say. I wasn't exactly embarrassed but I felt a similar confession was expected of me and I wasn't going to oblige. I simply looked at him as he smiled and puffed at his cigarette and shifted his great boots in the dead leaves.

"So she got some cabbage-dew where she didn't expect it!" he said with a laugh which had a grating edge, not unpleasant but disturbing in a way I couldn't put my finger on.

He finished his cigarette and we got up. He lifted the hare again and we walked along towards the Manor.

Blood was dripping quite profusely from the animal and some of it reached Thomas's trousers as he strode along. He took no notice. In fact I think it gave him some satisfaction.

Suddenly he said, "Mrs Bloomfield all right, squire?"

And the way he said it, turning to me sideways, his face bland and yet full of suggestion, made me blush.

"She's fine," I said---and a suggestive tone similar to his came into my voice despite myself. I felt I was suddenly telling him about my sexual adventures and that he understood what these were without a word passing between us. I hurried home, after saying good bye to him with my face averted, and I felt his eyes on me as I jumped over the turnstile into the property. Also I felt desire stir in me, a feeling of complicity with him. I looked for Suzie but then remembered she was out with Daphne Price buying pillow covers at a discount in Tarnley Cross. It was almost as if---I hesitate to write this---Thomas and I were sharing the same woman! Yet I didn't know who this woman was. It wasn't precisely Suzie but it was definitely her body in the darkness. Though it was another woman's too. It wasn't Rose's, for obviously she had no physical attractions from my point of view. It was a most distressing feeling as if Suzie and I could now be seen making love from the other side of the lane, from those ugly brick houses, no matter how hidden we were, how late in the night it was. It felt as if I'd already made a long confession about these nights to Thomas and he was smiling at me with that other face of his.

Sometimes events are strangely connected. That afternoon, when Suzie had returned, Mike Hammonsworth called up and said, "I've just taken a sliced loaf out of the deep freeze, would you like to come over?"

He always invited one like this. If he wished to have us for dinner he said, "I'm going to open a tin of baked beans on ⁺Thursday, would you like to come over about eight?" Of course we always found a delicious meal---

nothing like the sumptuous affairs at Wilmers but he cooked himself, served it with care, in a butcher's apron. No one could understand why Mike didn't marry. Like Warren, he had girls galore.

Anyway we went to tea. It was a still warm day with the scent of roses everywhere. Mike had a large lawn at the back of the vicarage, protected by a tall wall with a wrought-iron gate in it, through which you could see the fields. He had sunshades and white iron tables outside and it was most enjoyable to sit there with him. This afternoon he had no other guests. One could just see the churchyard on the hill, behind the church. The church clock sounded the quarters. It was all quite idyllic.

But this feeling disappeared pretty soon, at least for me. It was when Mike said to me out of the blue, after serving us a second cup of tea, "I wish I'd known your mother better. I did meet her once you know."

"You were in New York?" I asked him.

"No. It was in the south of France, at a place called Collioure, you know the painter's village near Perpignan. Your mother and Arthur Warren were on holiday together. I joined them for a few days. We had a great time."

"When was this?" I asked.

"Oh it must have been all of ten years ago."

I was going to ask him more but the bell started ringing for vespers (we'd come rather late). Mike excused himself and hurried round to the vestry to get his cassock on.

We wondered if he expected us to come to vespers and he seemed to sense this because he called out as he was going, "Finish your tea! And I forbid you to enter the church! It's strictly for old cats only this evening!"

He didn't lower his voice at all, though a few of the old cats were at that moment appearing round the corner.

I drove Suzie home feeling a perplexity that seemed oddly connected with what had passed that morning between Thomas Belling and myself. Even now I can't explain why

I should have felt this connection.

So my mother had come to Europe! I could swear that my father had known nothing about these visits. My mind wandered back once more to those evenings in Long Island when I would put my face against the gauze of the window frame and wonder whether, by some thrilling chance, my mother was holding the hand of another man on that dark lawn below. Yes, I realised now that the idea was thrilling to me, had always been. It amazes me how long one can go through life having feelings which one never becomes aware of.

I remember how, when the laughter and chatter had died down and those dark figures had gone into dinner, I lay in bed and let my imagination create all kinds of forbidden circumstances connected with my mother. My mouth went dry and my legs trembled. Those images provided ~~the dawn~~ of my sexual awakening, my first physical release and pleasure.

And, somehow, now, in ways I couldn't define (which made it all the more distressing), these things had become connected with my present life at Cawne Manor.

I'm not suggesting anything oedipal. We all know those cliches. I repeat that those childhood images became strangely connected with Cawne Manor for me, not with my hours of sexual pleasure with Suzie. And there, for the moment, I am going to leave it.

That night I lay at Suzie's side and thought of my mother again and again. I hoped Suzie was asleep. As the night wore on and I heard her breathing steadily and deeply my mind became increasingly prone to outrageous ideas. Was it possible that my mother had come to Europe quite frequently, and without my father's consent? Or with his reluctant consent? Or to his dismay, horror?

I fell into an odd delirium. Until now I'd thought I'd come to terms with my mother's death and that the funeral had closed a certain period in my life but here she was suddenly revealing herself again, so much alive that I could almost feel her in the bedroom! Not that

this was at all distressing to me. The distressful thing was that she appeared to me as a young and blooming and desirable woman, rather of the Daphne Price type, and I began to derive^a distinct pleasure from this which was much more than filial. Therefore I experienced shame with it too---not only because she was my mother but because she was dead! But this shame, as shame will, put an edge on my pleasure, supplying that secretive element which I seemed to find essential.

While these images were going through my head, ever more lurid, I began fearing some sort of vengeance---in the form of my mother's disapproval---but since she was now in the land of the dead this disapproval might reveal itself in ways I couldn't, with my carefully logical mind, cope with. I started getting frightened of the shadows near the wide windows with its cross latticing.

And the silence of the room began to disturb me, the quaint creaking of the ancient panelling, the cry of the white owl which always settled on the barn roof, the lonely swish of the traffic on the six-laned highway, remote, ghostly beyond the trees of the moat. I date all the unfortunate events that later occurred at Cawne Manor to this night during which I gave way to a sensitivity in me which my New York life had failed to expose.

The images in my mind became more extravagant. I realised well enough that I was manufacturing them. I saw my mother holding hands with another man---then kissing him---embracing him---while the other guests continued unaware. Of course the reader may laugh at my childishness but these images were of the utmost potency for me, almost a revelation of new pleasures, after Suzie and I had stumbled on enough to occupy ten lives!

My mouth was dry, I turned and writhed in my bed as I realised that I'd always wanted my mother to have another man, wanted that man's hands to wander, wanted a wet dewy hand to approach her where she least expected it, and to achieve her degradation!

Well, vengeance was exacted on me. I paid for those images as I half wanted to, even as they flooded through my mind. Suddenly, from the floor below---it shattered the images in a moment---there was a tremendous crash of falling glass and something metallic, like a small explosion.

I sat up, my mouth open, my eyes gaping into the darkness, unable to cry out. A trembling had seized me. I couldn't understand why Suzie hadn't woken and for a wretched moment I thought I might have imagined that sound. I was afraid to shake her awake because my shame had caused that explosion---invasion from below---whatever it was (what ridiculous thoughts go through our heads at such hours in the night). I waited for footsteps. But there was nothing. I think I waited, sitting up in bed with the sweat pouring out of me, for at least twenty minutes. That wasn't like me at all. Normally I would have leapt out of bed and rushed downstairs. But the knowledge that some vengeance was being enacted on me from another quarter than the real world was what held me back. Stealthily I got out of bed and took hold of the Sikh knife which I always kept near me. I tiptoed downstairs. The chill night air drifted on to my sweat-soaked pyjamas. I didn't switch lights on. I managed to get down the steep, crooked staircase without tripping. Then, once below, I switched on the corridor light and virtually kicked open the lounge door in one movement. And this sudden exertion released me from my fear. I switched the light on in the lounge and saw that there was no one there.

On the floor, in fragments spread over an area of about four yards square, was the picture that had been hanging on the wall close to the inglenook, the Nativity which my mother and I had seen together in Rome, the Caravaggio, the one she'd directed my eyes to during that strange vigil in this same room, as if she were standing by me alive!