



ASK THE

DUST

JOHN FANTE

Introduced by **CHARLES BUKOWSKI**

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For Joyce, with love

Introduction

I was a young man, starving and drinking and trying to be a writer. I did most of my reading at the downtown L.A. Public Library, and nothing that I read related to me or to the streets or to the people about me. It seemed as if everybody was playing word-tricks, that those who said almost nothing at all were considered excellent writers. Their writing was an admixture of subtlety, craft and form, and was read and it was taught and it was ingested and it was passed on. It was a comfortable contrivance, a very slick and careful Word-Culture. One had to go back to the pre-Revolution writers of Russia to find any gamble, any passion. There were exceptions but those exceptions were so few that reading them was quickly done, and you were left staring at rows and rows of exceedingly dull books. Within centuries to look back on, with all their advantages, the moderns just weren't very good.

I pulled book after book from the shelves. Why didn't anybody say something? Why didn't anybody scream out?

I tried other rooms in the library. The section on Religion was just a vast bog – to me. I got into Philosophy. I found a couple of bitter Germans who cheered me for a while, then that was over. I tried Mathematics but upper Maths was just like Religion: it ran right off me. What *I* needed seemed to be absent everywhere.

I tried Geology and found it curious but, finally, non-sustaining.

I found some books on Surgery and I liked the books on Surgery: the words were new and the illustrations were wonderful. I particularly liked and memorized the operation on the mesocolon.

Then I dropped out of Surgery and I was back in the big room with the novelists and short story writers. (When I had enough cheap wine to drink I never went to the library. A library was a good place to be when you had nothing to drink or to eat, and the landlady was looking for you and for the back rent money. In the library at least you had the use of the toilet facilities.) I saw quite a number of other bums in there, most of them asleep on top of their books.

I kept on walking around the big room, pulling the books off the shelves, reading a few lines, a few pages, then putting them back.

Then one day I pulled a book down and opened it, and there it was. I stood for a moment, reading. Then like a man who had found gold in the city dump, I carried the book to a table. The lines rolled easily across the page, there was a flow. Each line had its own energy and was followed by another like it. The very substance of each line gave the page a form, a feeling of something *carved* into it. And here, at last, was a man who was not afraid of emotion. The humour and the pain were intermixed with a superb simplicity. The beginning of that book was a wild and enormous miracle to me.

I had a library card. I checked the book out, took it to my room, climbed into my bed and read it, and I knew long before I had finished that here was a man who had evolved a distinct way of writing. The book was *Ask the Dust* and the author was John Fante. He was to be a lifetime influence on my writing. I finished *Ask the Dust* and looked for other books of Fante's in the library. I found two: *Days of Red* and *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. They were of the same order, written of and from the gut and the heart.

Yes, Fante had a mighty effect upon me. Not long after reading these books I began living with a woman. ~~She was a worse drunk than I was and we had some violent arguments, and often I would scream at her, 'Don't call me a son of a bitch! I am Bandini, Arturo Bandini!'~~

Fante was my god and I knew that the gods should be left alone, one didn't bang at their door. Yet I liked to guess about where he had lived on Angel's Flight and I imagined it possible that he still lived there. Almost every day I walked by and I thought, is that the window Camilla crawled through? And, is that the hotel door? Is that the lobby? I never knew.

Thirty-nine years later I reread *Ask the Dust*. That is to say, I reread it this year and it still stands as do Fante's other works, but this one is my favourite because it was my first discovery of the magic. There are other books beside *Dago Red* and *Wait Until Spring, Bandini*. They are *Full of Life* and *The Brotherhood of the Grape*. And, at the moment, Fante has a novel in progress, *A Dream of Bunker Hill*.

Through other circumstances, I finally met the author this year [1979]. There is much more to the story of John Fante. It is a story of terrible luck and a terrible fate and of a rare and natural courage. Some day it will be told but I feel that he doesn't want me to tell it here. But let me say that the way of his words and the way of his way are the same: strong and good and warm.

That's enough. Now this book is yours.

Charles Bukowski

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Chapter One

One night I was sitting on the bed in my hotel room on Bunker Hill, down in the very middle of Los Angeles. It was an important night in my life, because I had to make a decision about the hotel. Either I paid up or I got out: that was what the note said, the note the landlady had put under the door. A great problem, deserving acute attention. I solved it by turning out the lights and going to bed.

In the morning I awoke, decided that I should do more physical exercise, and began at once. I did several bending exercises. Then I washed my teeth, tasted blood, saw pink on the toothbrush. I remembered the advertisements, and decided to go out and get some coffee.

I went to the restaurant where I always went to the restaurant and I sat down on the stool before the long counter and ordered coffee. It tasted pretty much like coffee, but it wasn't worth the nickel. Sitting there I smoked a couple of cigarettes, read the box scores of the American League games. I scrupulously avoided the box scores of National League games, and noted with satisfaction that Joe DiMaggio was still a credit to the Italian people, because he was leading the league in batting.

A great hitter, that DiMaggio. I walked out of the restaurant, stood before an imaginary pitcher and swatted a home run over the fence. Then I walked down the street towards Angel's Flight, wondering what I would do that day. But there was nothing to do, and so I decided to walk around the town.

I walked down Olive Street past a dirty yellow apartment house that was still wet like a blotch from last night's fog, and I thought of my friends Ethie and Carl, who were from Detroit and had lived there, and I remembered the night Carl hit Ethie because she was going to have a baby, and he didn't want a baby. But they had the baby and that's all there was to that. And I remembered the inside of that apartment, how it smelled of mice and dust, and the old women who sat in the lobby on happy afternoons, and the old woman with the pretty legs. Then there was the elevator man, a broken man from Milwaukee, who seemed to sneer every time you called your floor, as though you were such a fool for choosing that particular floor, the elevator man who always had a tray of sandwiches in the elevator, and a pulp magazine.

Then I went down the hill on Olive Street, past the horrible frame houses reeking with murder stories, and on down Olive to the Philharmonic Auditorium, and I remembered how I'd gone there with Helen to listen to the Don Cossack Choral Group, and how I got bored and we had a fight because of it, and I remembered what Helen wore that day – a white dress, and how it made me sing at the loins when I touched it. Oh that Helen – but not here.

And so I was down on Fifth and Olive, where the big street cars chewed your ears with their noise and the smell of gasoline made the sight of the palm trees seem sad, and the black pavement still wet from the fog of the night before.

So now I was in front of the Biltmore Hotel, walking along the line of yellow cabs, with all the cab drivers asleep except the driver near the main door, and I wondered about these fellows and their fund of information, and I remembered the time Ross and I got an address from one of them, how he leered salaciously and then took us to Temple Street, of all places, and whom did we see but two very unattractive ones, and Ross went all the way, but I sat in the parlour and played the phonograph and was scared and lonely.

I was passing the doorman of the Biltmore, and I hated him at once, with his yellow braids and six feet of height and all that dignity, and now a black automobile drove to the kerb and a man got out. He looked rich; and then a woman got out, and she was beautiful, her fur was silver fox, and she was singing across the sidewalk and inside the swinging doors, and I thought oh boy for a little of that, just one day and a night of that, and she was a dream as I walked along, her perfume still in the wet morning air.

Then a great deal of time passed as I stood in front of a pipe shop and looked, and the whole world faded except that window and I stood and smoked them all, and saw myself a great author with the natty Italian briar, and a cane, stepping out of a big black car, and she was there too, proud as hell, me, the lady in the silver fox fur. We registered and then we had cocktails and then we danced a while and then we had another cocktail and I recited some lines from Sanskrit, and the world was so wonderful, because every two minutes some gorgeous one gazed at me, the great author, and nothing would do but I had to autograph her menu, and the silver fox girl was very jealous.

Los Angeles, give me some of you! Los Angeles come to me the way I came to you, my feet over your streets, you pretty town I loved you so much, you sad flower in the sand, you pretty town.

A day and another day and the day before, and the library with the big boys in the shelves, old Dreiser, old Mencken, all the boys down there, and I went to see them, Hya Dreiser, Hya Mencken, Hya, hya: there's a place for me, too, and it begins with B, in the B shelf, Arturo Bandini, make way for Arturo Bandini, his slot for his book, and I sat at the table and just looked at the place where my book would be, right there close to Arnold Bennett; not much that Arnold Bennett, but I'd be there to sort of bolster up the B's, old Arturo Bandini, one of the boys, until some girl came along, some scent of perfume through the fiction room, some click of high heels to break up the monotony of my family. Gala day, gala dream!

But the landlady, the white-haired landlady kept writing those notes: she was from Bridgeport, Connecticut, her husband had died and she was all alone in the world and she didn't trust anybody, she couldn't afford to, she told me so, and she told me I'd have to pay. It was mounting like the national debt, I'd have to pay or leave, every cent of it – five weeks overdue, twenty dollars, and if I didn't pay she'd hold my trunks; only I didn't have any trunks, I only had a suitcase and it was cardboard without even a strap, because the strap was around my belly holding up my pants, and that wasn't much of a job, because there wasn't much left of my pants.

'I just got a letter from my agent,' I told her. 'My agent in New York. He says I sold another one, he doesn't say where, but he says he's got one sold. So don't worry Mrs Hargraves, don't you fret, I'll have it in a day or so.'

But she couldn't believe a liar like me. It wasn't really a lie; it was a wish, not a lie and maybe wasn't even a wish, maybe it was a fact, and the only way to find out was watch the mailman, watch him closely, check his mail as he laid it on the desk in the lobby, ask him point blank if he had anything for Bandini. But I didn't have to ask after six months at that hotel. He saw me coming and he always nodded yes or no before I asked: no, three million times; yes, once.

One day a beautiful letter came. Oh, I got a lot of letters, but this was the only beautiful letter, and it came in the morning, and it said (he was talking about *The Little Dog Laughed*) he had read *The Little Dog Laughed* and liked it; he said, Mr Bandini, if ever I saw a genius, you are it. His name was Leonardo, a great Italian critic, only he was not known as a critic, he was just a man in West Virginia, but he was great and he was a critic, and he died. He was dead when my airmail letter got to West Virginia, and his sister sent my letter back. She wrote a beautiful letter, too, she was a pretty good critic too, telling me Leonardo had died of consumption but he was happy to the end, and one of the last things he did was sit up in bed and write me about *The Little Dog Laughed*: a dream out of life but very important; Leonardo, dead now, a saint in heaven, equal to any apostle of the twelve.

Everybody in the hotel read *The Little Dog Laughed*, everybody: a story to make you die holding the page, and it wasn't about a dog, either: a clever story, screaming poetry. And the great editor, not but J. C. Hackmuth with his name signed like Chinese said in a letter: a great story and I'm proud to print it. Mrs Hargraves read it and I was a different man in her eyes thereafter. I got to stay on in the hotel, not shoved out in the cold, only often it was in the heat, on account of *The Little Dog Laughed*. Mrs Grainger in 345, a Christian Scientist (wonderful hips, but kinda old) from Battle Creek, Michigan, sitting in the lobby waiting to die, and *The Little Dog Laughed* brought her back to the earth, and that look in her eyes made me know it was right and I was right, but I was hoping she would ask about my finances, how I was getting along, and then I thought why not ask her to lend you a five dollar spot, but I didn't and I walked away snapping my fingers in disgust.

The hotel was called the Alta Loma. It was built on a hillside in reverse, there on the crest of Bunker Hill, built against the decline of the hill, so that the main floor was on the level with the street but the tenth floor was downstairs ten levels. If you had room 862, you got in the elevator and went down eight floors, and if you wanted to go down in the truck room, you didn't go down but up to the attic, one floor above the main floor.

Oh for a Mexican girl! I used to think of her all the time, my Mexican girl. I didn't have one, but the streets were full of them, the Plaza and Chinatown were afire with them, and in my fashion they were mine, this one and that one, and some day when another cheque came it would be a fact. Meanwhile I was free and they were Aztec princesses and Mayan princesses, the peon girls in the Grand Central Market, in the Church of Our Lady, and I even went to Mass to look at them. That was sacrilegious conduct but it was better than not going to Mass at all, so that when I wrote home to Colorado to my mother I could write with truth. Dear Mother: I went to Mass last Sunday. Down in the Grand Central Market I bumped into the princesses accidentally on purpose. It gave me a chance to speak to them and I smiled and said excuse me. Those beautiful girls, so happy when you acted like a gentleman and all of that, just to touch them and carry the memory of it back to my room, where dust gathered upon my typewriter and Pedro the mouse sat in his hole, his black eyes watching me through that time of dream and reverie.

Pedro the mouse, a good mouse but never domesticated, refusing to be petted or house-broken. I saw him the first time I walked into my room, and that was during my heyday, when *The Little Dog Laughed* was in the current August issue. It was five months ago, the day I got to town by bus from Colorado with a hundred and fifty dollars in my pocket and big plans in my head. I had a philosophy in those days. I was a lover of man and beast alike, and Pedro was no exception; but cheese was expensive, Pedro called all his friends, the room swarmed with them, and I had to quit it and feed them bread. They didn't like bread. I had spoiled them and they went elsewhere, all but Pedro the ascetic who was content to eat the pages of an old Gideon Bible.

Ah, that first day! Mrs Hargraves opened the door to my room, and there it was, with a red carpet on the floor, pictures of the English countryside on the walls, and a shower adjoining. The room was down on the sixth floor, room 678, up near the front of the hill, so that my window was on a level with the green hillside and there was no need for a key, for the window was always open. Through the window I saw my first palm tree, not six feet away, and sure enough I thought of Palm Sunday in Egypt and Cleopatra, but the palm was blackish at its branches, stained by carbon monoxide coming out of the Third Street Tunnel, its crusted trunk choked with dust and sand that blew in from the Mojave and Santa Ana deserts.

Dear Mother, I used to write home to Colorado, Dear Mother, things are definitely looking up. The big editor was in town and I had lunch with him and we have signed a contract for a number of short stories, but I won't try to bore you with all the details, dear mother, because I know you're not

interested in writing, and I know Papa isn't, but it levels down to a swell contract, only it doesn't begin for a couple of months. So send me ten dollars, mother, send me five, mother dear, because the editor (I'd tell you his name only I know you're not interested in such things) is all set to start me on the biggest project he's got.

Dear Mother, and Dear Hackmuth, the great editor – they got most of my mail, practically all of my mail. Old Hackmuth with his scowl and his hair parted in the middle, great Hackmuth with a picture like a sword, his picture was on my wall autographed with his signature that looked Chinese. Hey Hackmuth, I used to say, Jesus how you can write! Then the lean days came, and Hackmuth got no letters from me. My God, Mr Hackmuth, something's wrong with me: the old zip is gone and I can't write anymore. Do you think, Mr Hackmuth, that the climate here has anything to do with it? Please advise. Do you think, Mr Hackmuth, that I write as well as William Faulkner? Please advise. Do you think, Mr Hackmuth, that sex has anything to do with it, because, Mr Hackmuth, because, because, and I told Hackmuth everything. I told him about the blonde girl I met in the park. I told him how I worked it, how the blonde girl tumbled. I told him the whole story, only it wasn't true, it was a crazy lie – but it was something. It was writing, keeping in touch with the great, and he always answered. Oh boy, he was swell! He answered right off, a great man responding to the problems of a man of talent. Nobody got that many letters from Hackmuth, nobody but me, and I used to take them out and read them over, and kiss them. I'd stand before Hackmuth's picture crying out of both eyes, telling him how I picked a good one this time, a great one, a Bandini, Arturo Bandini, me.

The lean days of determination. That was the word for it, determination: Arturo Bandini in front of his typewriter two full days in succession, determined to succeed; but it didn't work, the longest siege of hard and fast determination in his life, and not one line done, only two words written over and over across the page, up and down, the same words: palm tree, palm tree, palm tree, a battle to the death between the palm tree and me, and the palm tree won: see it out there swaying in the blue air, creaking sweetly in the blue air. The palm tree won after two fighting days, and I crawled out of the window and sat at the foot of the tree. Time passed, a moment or two, and I slept, little brown ants carousing on the hair on my legs.

Chapter Two

I was twenty then. What the hell, I used to say, take your time, Bandini. You got ten years to write a book, so take it easy, get out and learn about life, walk the streets. That's your trouble: your ignorance of life. Why, my God, man, do you realize you've never had any experience with a woman? Oh yes you have, oh I've had plenty. Oh no you haven't. You need a woman, you need a bath, you need a good swift kick, you need money. They say it's a dollar, they say it's two dollars in the swell places, but down on the Plaza it's a dollar; swell, only you haven't got a dollar, and another thing, you coward even if you had a dollar you wouldn't go, because you had a chance to go once in Denver and you didn't. No, you coward, you were afraid, and you're still afraid, and you're glad you haven't got a dollar.

Afraid of a woman! Ha, great writer this! How can he write about women, when he's never had a woman? Oh you lousy fake, you phony, no wonder you can't write! No wonder there wasn't a woman in *The Little Dog Laughed*. No wonder it wasn't a love story, you fool, you dirty little schoolboy.

To write a love story, to learn about life.

Money arrived in the mail. Not a cheque from the mighty Hackmuth, not an acceptance from *The Atlantic Monthly* or *The Saturday Evening Post*. Only ten dollars, only a fortune. My mother sent me some dime insurance policies, Arturo, I had them taken up for their cash value, and this is your share. But it was ten dollars; one manuscript or another, at least something had been sold.

Put it in your pocket, Arturo. Wash your face, comb your hair, put some stuff on to make you smell good while you stare into the mirror looking for grey hairs; because you're worried Arturo you're worried, and that brings grey hair. But there was none, not a strand. Yeah, but what of that left eye? It looked discoloured. Careful, Arturo Bandini: don't strain your eyesight, remember what happened to Tarkington, remember what happened to James Joyce.

Not bad, standing in the middle of the room, talking to Hackmuth's picture, not bad, Hackmuth you'll get a story out of this. How do I look, Hackmuth? Do you sometimes wonder, Herr Hackmuth what I look like? Do you sometimes say to yourself, I wonder if he's handsome, that Bandini fellow author of that brilliant *The Little Dog Laughed*?

Once in Denver there was another night like this, only I was not an author in Denver, but I stood in a room like this and made these plans, and it was disastrous because all the time in that place I thought about the Blessed Virgin and *thou shalt not commit adultery* and the hard-working girl shook her head sadly and had to give it up, but that was a long time ago and tonight it will be changed.

I climbed out the window and scaled the incline to the top of Bunker Hill. A night for my nose, a feast for my nose, smelling the stars, smelling the flowers, smelling the desert, and the dust asleep across the top of Bunker Hill. The city spread out like a Christmas tree, red and green and blue. Hell with old houses, beautiful hamburgers singing in cheap cafés. Bing Crosby singing too. She'll treat me gently. Not those girls of my childhood, those girls of my boyhood, those girls of my university days. They frightened me, they were diffident, they refused me; but not my princess, because she would understand. She, too, has been scorned.

Bandini, walking along, not tall but solid, proud of his muscles, squeezing his fist to revel in the hard delight of his biceps, absurdly fearless Bandini, fearing nothing but the unknown in a world

mysterious wonder. Are the dead restored? The books say no, the night shouts yes. I am twenty, I have reached the age of reason, I am about to wander the streets below, seeking a woman. Is my soul already smirched, should I turn back, does an angel watch over me, do the prayers of my mother allay my fears, do the prayers of my mother annoy me?

Ten dollars: it will pay the rent for two and a half weeks, it will buy me three pairs of shoes, two pair of pants, or one thousand postage stamps to send material to the editors; indeed! But you haven't any material, your talent is dubious, your talent is pitiful, you haven't any talent, and stop lying to yourself day after day because you know *The Little Dog Laughed* is no good, and it will always be no good.

So you walk along Bunker Hill, and you shake your fist at the sky, and I know what you're thinking, Bandini. The thoughts of your father before you, lash across your back, hot ire in your skull that you are not to blame: this is your thought, that you were born poor, son of miseried peasant driven because you were poor, fled from your Colorado town because you are poor, hoping to write a book to get rich, because those who hated you back there in Colorado will not hate you if you write a book. You are a coward, Bandini, a traitor to your soul, a feeble liar before your weeping Christ. This is why you write, this is why it would be better if you died.

Yes, it's true: but I have seen houses in Bel-Air with cool lawns and green swimming pools. I have wanted women whose very shoes are worth all I have ever possessed. I have seen golf clubs on Sixty Street in the Spalding window that make me hungry just to grip them. I have grieved for a necktie like a holy man for indulgences. I have admired hats in Robinson's the way critics gasp at Michelangelo.

I took the steps down Angel's Flight to Hill Street: a hundred and forty steps, with tight fists frightened of no man, but scared of the Third Street Tunnel, scared to walk through it with claustrophobia. Scared of high places too, and of blood, and of earthquakes; otherwise, quite fearless excepting death, except the fear I'll scream in a crowd, except the fear of appendicitis, except the fear of heart trouble, even that, sitting in his room holding the clock and pressing his jugular vein, counting out his heartbeats, listening to the weird purr and whirr of his stomach. Otherwise, quite fearless.

Here is an idea with money: these steps, the city below, the stars within throwing distance: boy meets girl idea, good setup, big money idea. Girl lives in that grey apartment house, boy is a wanderer. Boy – he's me. Girl's hungry. Rich Pasadena girl hates money. Deliberately left Pasadena millionaire 'cause of ennui, weariness with money. Beautiful girl, gorgeous. Great story, pathological conflict. Girl with money phobia: Freudian setup. Another guy loves her, rich guy. I'm poor. I meet rival. Beat him to death with caustic wit and also lick him with fists. Girl impressed, falls for me. Offers me millions. I marry her on condition she'll stay poor. Agrees. But ending happy: girl tricks me with huge trust fund day we get married. I'm indignant but I forgive her 'cause I love her. Good idea, but something missing: Collier's story.

Dearest Mother, thanks for the ten dollar bill. My agent announces the sale of another story, this time to a great magazine in London, but it seems they do not pay until publication, and so your little sum will come in handy for various odds and ends.

I went to the burlesque show. I had the best seat possible, a dollar and ten cents, right under the chorus of forty frayed bottoms: some day all of these will be mine: I will own a yacht and we will go on South Sea Cruises. On warm afternoons they will dance for me on the sun deck. But mine will be beautiful women, selections from the cream of society, rivals for the joys of my stateroom. Well, this is good for me, this is experience, I am here for a reason, these moments run into pages, the seamy side of life.

Then Lola Linton came on, slithering like a satin snake amid the tumult of whistling and pounding feet, Lola Linton lascivious, slithering and looting my body, and when she was through, my teeth ached from my clamped jaws and I hated the dirty lowbrow swine around me, shouting their share of

sick joy that belonged to me.

If Mamma sold the policies things must be tough for the Old Man and I shouldn't be here. When was a kid pictures of Lola Lintons used to come my way, and I used to get so impatient with the slow crawl of time and boyhood, longing for this very moment, and here I am, and I have not changed now. I don't have the Lola Lintons, but I fashioned myself rich and I am poor.

Main Street after the show, midnight: neon tubes and a light fog, honky tonks and all night picture houses. Second-hand stores and Filipino dance halls, cocktails 15 cents, continuous entertainment, but I had seen them all, so many times, spent so much Colorado money in them. It left me lonely like a thirsty man holding a cup, and I walked towards the Mexican Quarter with a feeling of sickness without pain. Here was the Church of Our Lady, very old, the adobe blackened with age. For sentimental reasons I will go inside. For sentimental reasons only. I have not read Lenin, but I have heard him quoted, religion is the opium of the people. Myself, I am an atheist: I have read *The Annals of Christ* and I regard it as a capital piece of work. I believe in the transvaluation of values, Sir. The Church must go, it is the haven of the booboisie, of boobs and bounders and all Brummage mountebanks.

I pulled the huge door open and it gave a little cry like weeping. Above the altar sputtered the blood-red eternal light, illuminating in crimson shadow the quiet of almost two thousand years. It was like death, but I could remember screaming infants at baptism too. I knelt. This was habit, the kneeling. I sat down. Better to kneel, for the sharp bite at the knees was a distraction from the awful quiet. A prayer. Sure, one prayer: for sentimental reasons. Almighty God, I am sorry I am now an atheist, but have You read Nietzsche? Ah, such a book! Almighty God, I will play fair in this. I will make You a proposition. Make a great writer out of me, and I will return to the Church. And please, dear God, one more favour: make my mother happy. I don't care about the Old Man; he's got his wife and his health, but my mother worries so. Amen.

I closed the weeping door and stood on the steps, the fog like a huge white animal everywhere, the Plaza like our courthouse back home, snowbound in white silence. But all sounds travelled swift and sure through the heaviness, and the sound I heard was the click of high heels. A girl appeared. She wore an old green coat, her face moulded in a green scarf tied under the chin. On the stairs stood Arturo Bandini.

'Hello, honey,' she said, smiling, as though Bandini were her husband, or her lover. Then she came to the first step and looked up at him. 'How about it, honey? Want me to show you a good time?'

Bold lover, bold and brazen Bandini.

'Nah,' he said. 'No thanks. Not tonight.'

He hurried away, leaving her looking after him, speaking words he lost in flight. He walked half a block. He was pleased. At least she had asked him. At least she had identified him as a man. He whistled a tune from sheer pleasure. Man about town has universal experience. Noted writer tells me one night with woman of the streets. Arturo Bandini, famous writer, reveals experience with Los Angeles prostitute. Critics acclaim book finest written.

Bandini (being interviewed prior to departure for Sweden): 'My advice to all young writers is quite simple. I would caution them never to evade a new experience. I would urge them to live life the raw, to grapple with it bravely, to attack it with naked fists.'

Reporter: 'Mr Bandini, how did you come to write this book which won you the Nobel Award?'

Bandini: 'The book is based on a true experience which happened to me one night in Los Angeles. Every word of that book is true. I lived that book, I experienced it.'

Enough. I saw it all. I turned and walked back towards the church. The fog was impenetrable. The girl was gone. I walked on: perhaps I could catch up with her. At the corner I saw her again. She stood talking to a tall Mexican. They walked, crossed the street and entered the Plaza. I followed. My God,

Mexican! Women like that should draw the colour line. I hated him, the Spick, the Greaser. The walked under the banana trees in the Plaza, their feet echoing in the fog. I heard the Mexican laugh. Then the girl laughed. They crossed the street and walked down an alley that was the entrance to Chinatown. The oriental neon signs made the fog pinkish. At a rooming house next door to a Chinese restaurant they turned and climbed the stairs. Across the street upstairs a dance was in progress. Along the little street on both sides yellow cabs were parked. I leaned against the front fender of the cab in front of the rooming house and waited. I lit a cigarette and waited. Until hell freezes over, I will wait. Until God strikes me dead, I will wait.

A half hour passed. There were sounds on the steps. The door opened. The Mexican appeared. He stood in the fog, lit a cigarette, and yawned. Then he smiled absently, shrugged, and walked away, the fog swooping upon him. Go ahead and smile. You stinking Greaser – what have you got to smile about? You come from a bashed and busted race, and just because you went to the room with one of our white girls, you smile. Do you think you would have had a chance, had I accepted on the church steps?

A moment later the steps sounded to the click of her heels, and the girl stepped into the fog. The same girl, the same green coat, the same scarf. She saw me and smiled. ‘Hello, honey. Wanna have a good time?’

Easy now, Bandini.

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Maybe. And maybe not. Whatcha got?’

‘Come up and see, honey.’

Stop sniggering, Arturo. Be suave.

‘I might come up,’ I said. ‘And then, I might not.’

‘Aw honey, come on.’ The thin bones of her face, the odour of sour wine from her mouth, the awful hypocrisy of her sweetness, the hunger for money in her eyes.

Bandini speaking: ‘What’s the price these days?’

She took my arm, pulled me towards the door, but gently.

‘You come on up, honey. We’ll talk about it up there.’

‘I’m really not very hot,’ said Bandini. ‘I – I just came from a wild party.’

Hail Mary full of grace, walking up the stairs, I can’t go through with it. I’ve got to get out of here. The halls smelling of cockroaches, a yellow light at the ceiling, you’re too aesthetic for all this, the girl holding my arm, there’s something wrong with you, Arturo Bandini, you’re a misanthrope, your whole life is doomed to celibacy, you should have been a priest, Father O’Leary talking that afternoon telling us the joys of denial, and my own mother’s money too, Oh Mary conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee – until we got to the top of the stairs and walked down a dusty dark hall to a room at the end, where she turned out the light and we were inside.

A room smaller than mine, carpetless, without pictures, a bed, a table, a wash-stand. She took off her coat. There was a blue print dress underneath. She was bare-legged. She took off the scarf. She was not a real blonde. Black hair grew at the roots. Her nose was crooked slightly. Bandini on the bed, perching himself there with an air of casualness, like a man who knew how to sit on a bed.

Bandini: ‘Nice place you got here.’

My God I got to get out of here, this is terrible.

The girl sat beside me, put her arms around me, pushed her breasts against me, kissed me, flecked my teeth with a cold tongue. I jumped to my feet. Oh think fast, my mind, dear mind of mine please get me out of this and it will never happen again. From now on I will return to my Church. Beginning this day my life shall run like sweet water.

The girl lay back, her hands behind her neck, her legs over the bed. I shall smell lilacs in Connecticut, no doubt, before I die, and see the clean white small reticent churches of my youth, the

pasture bars I broke to run away.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘I want to talk to you.’

She crossed her legs.

‘I’m a writer,’ I said. ‘I’m gathering material for a book.’

‘I knew you were a writer,’ she said. ‘Or a business man, or something. You look spiritual, honey.’

‘I’m a writer, see. I like you and all that. You’re okay, I like you. But I want to talk to you, first.’

She sat up.

‘Haven’t you any money, honey?’

Money – ho. And I pulled it out, a small thick roll of dollar bills. Sure I got money, plenty of money, this is a drop in the bucket, money is no object, money means nothing to me.

‘What do you charge?’

‘It’s two dollars, honey.’

Then give her three, peel it off easily, like it was nothing at all, smile and hand it to her because money is no object, there’s more where this came from, at this moment Mamma sits by the window holding her rosary, waiting for the Old Man to come home, but there’s money, there’s always money.

She took the money and slipped it under the pillow. She was grateful and her smile was different now. The writer wanted to talk. How were conditions these days? How did she like this kind of life? Oh, come on honey, let’s not talk, let’s get down to business. No, I want to talk to you, this is important, new book, material. I do this often. How did you ever get into this racket. Oh honey Chrissakes, you going to ask me that too? But money is no object, I tell you. But my time is valuable honey. Then here’s a couple more bucks. That makes five, my God, five bucks and I’m not out of here yet, how I hate you, you filthy. But you’re cleaner than me because you’ve got no mind to sell, just that poor flesh.

She was overwhelmed, she would do anything. I could have it any way I wanted it, and she tried to pull me to her, but no, let’s wait a while. I tell you I want to talk to you, I tell you money is no object here’s three more, that makes eight dollars, but it doesn’t matter. You just keep that eight bucks and buy yourself something nice. And then I snapped my fingers like a man remembering something important, an engagement.

‘Say!’ I said. ‘That reminds me. What time is it?’

Her chin was at my neck, stroking it. ‘Don’t you worry about the time, honey. You can stay a night.’

A man of importance, ah yes, now I remembered, my publisher, he was getting in tonight by plane. Out at Burbank, away out in Burbank. Have to grab a cab and taxi out there, have to hurry. Goodbye goodbye, you keep that eight bucks, you buy yourself something nice, goodbye, goodbye, running down the stairs, running away, the welcome fog in the doorway below, you keep that eight bucks, oh sweet fog I see you and I’m coming, you clean air, you wonderful world, I’m coming to you, goodbye yelling up the stairs, I’ll see you again, you keep that eight dollars and buy yourself something nice. Eight dollars pouring out of my eyes. Oh Jesus kill me dead and ship my body home, kill me dead and make me die like a pagan fool with no priest to absolve me, no extreme unction, eight dollars, eight dollars ...

Chapter Three

The lean days, blue skies with never a cloud, a sea of blue day after day, the sun floating through the air. The days of plenty – plenty of worries, plenty of oranges. Eat them in bed, eat them for lunch, push them down for dinner. Oranges, five cents a dozen. Sunshine in the sky, sun juice in my stomach. Down at the Japanese market he saw me coming, that bullet-faced smiling Japanese, and he reached for a paper sack. A generous man, he gave me fifteen, sometimes twenty for a nickel.

‘You like banana?’ Sure, so he gave me a couple of bananas. A pleasant innovation, orange juice and bananas. ‘You like apple?’ Sure, so he gave me some apples. Here was something new: oranges and apples. ‘You like peaches?’ Indeed, and I carried the brown sack back to my room. An interesting innovation, peaches and oranges. My teeth tore them to pulp, the juices skewering and whimpering at the bottom of my stomach. It was so sad down there in my stomach. There was much weeping, and little gloomy clouds of gas pinched my heart.

My plight drove me to the typewriter. I sat before it, overwhelmed with grief for Arturo Bandini. Sometimes an idea floated harmlessly through the room. It was like a small white bird. It meant no ill will. It only wanted to help me, dear little bird. But I would strike at it, hammer it out across the keyboard, and it would die on my hands.

What could be the matter with me? When I was a boy I had prayed to St Teresa for a new fountain pen. My prayer was answered. Anyway, I did get a new fountain pen. Now I prayed to St Teresa again. Please, sweet and lovely saint, gimme an idea. But she has deserted me, all the gods have deserted me and like Huysmans I stand alone, my fists clenched, tears in my eyes. If someone only loved me, even a bug, even a mouse, but that too belonged to the past; even Pedro had forsaken me now that the best he could offer him was orange peel.

I thought of home, of spaghetti swimming in rich tomato sauce, smothered in Parmesan cheese, Mamma’s lemon pies, of lamb roasts and hot bread, and I was so miserable that I deliberately sank my fingernails into the flesh of my arm until a spot of blood appeared. It gave me great satisfaction. I was God’s most miserable creature, forced even to torturing myself. Surely upon this earth no grief was greater than mine.

Hackmuth must hear of this, mighty Hackmuth, who fostered genius in the pages of his magazine. Dear Mr Hackmuth, I wrote, describing the glorious past, dear Hackmuth, page upon page, the sun a ball of fire in the West, slowly strangling in a fog bank rising off the coast.

There was a knock on my door, but I remained quiet because it might be that woman after her lousy rent. Now the door opened and a bald, bony, bearded face appeared. It was Mr Hellfrick, who lived next door. Mr Hellfrick was an atheist, retired from the army, living on a meagre pension scarcely enough to pay his liquor bills, even though he purchased the cheapest gin on the market. He lived perpetually in a grey bathrobe without a cord or button, and though he made a pretence of modesty he really didn’t care, so that his bathrobe was always open and you saw much hair and bone underneath. Mr Hellfrick had red eyes because every afternoon when the sun hit the west side of the hotel, he slept with his head out the window, his body and legs inside. He had owed me fifteen cents since my first day at the hotel, but after many futile attempts to collect it, I had given up hope of ever possessing the money again. This had caused a breach between us, so I was surprised when his head

appeared inside my door.

~~He squinted secretively, pressed a finger to his lips, and shhhhhhhhhhhed me to be quiet, even though I hadn't said a word. I wanted him to know my hostility, to remind him that I had no respect for a man who failed to meet his obligations. Now he closed the door quietly and tiptoed across the room on his bony toes, his bathrobe wide open.~~

'Do you like milk?' he whispered.

I certainly did, and I told him so. Then he revealed his plan. The man who drove the Alden milk route on Bunker Hill was a friend of his. Every morning at four this man parked his milk truck behind the hotel and came up the back stairs to Hellfrick's room for a drink of gin. 'And so,' he said, 'if you like milk, all you have to do is help yourself.'

I shook my head.

'That's pretty contemptible, Hellfrick,' and I wondered at the friendship between Hellfrick and the milkman. 'If he's your friend, who do you have to steal the milk? He drinks your gin. Why don't you ask him for milk?'

'But I don't drink milk,' Hellfrick said. 'I'm doing this for you.'

This looked like an attempt to squirm out of the debt he owed me. I shook my head. 'No thanks, Hellfrick. I like to consider myself an honest man.'

He shrugged, pulled the bathrobe around him.

'Okay, kid. I was only trying to do you a favour.'

I continued my letter to Hackmuth, but I began to taste milk almost immediately. After a while I could not bear it. I lay on the bed in the semi-darkness, allowing myself to be tempted. In a little while all resistance was gone, and I knocked on Hellfrick's door. His room was madness, pulp western magazines over the floor, a bed with sheets blackened, clothes strewn everywhere, and clothes-hoos on the wall conspicuously naked, like broken teeth in a skull. There were dishes on the chair, cigarette butts pressed out on the window sills. His room was like mine except that he had a small gas stove in one corner and shelves for pots and pans. He got a special rate from the landlady, so that he did his own cleaning and made his own bed, except that he did neither. Hellfrick sat in a rocking chair in his bathrobe, gin bottles around his feet. He was drinking from a bottle in his hand. He was always drinking, day and night, but he never got drunk.

'I've changed my mind,' I told him.

He filled his mouth with gin, rolled the liquor around in his cheeks, and swallowed ecstatically. 'It's a cinch,' he said. Then he got to his feet and crossed the room towards his pants, which lay sprawled out. For a moment I thought he was going to pay back the money he owed me, but he did more than fumble mysteriously through the pockets, and then he returned empty handed to the chair and stood there.

'That reminds me,' I said. 'I wonder if you could pay the money I loaned you.'

'Haven't got it,' he said.

'Could you pay me a portion of it – say ten cents?'

He shook his head.

'A nickel?'

'I'm broke, kid.'

Then he took another swig. It was a fresh bottle, almost full.

'I can't give you any hard cash, kid. But I'll see that you get all the milk you need.' Then he explained. The milkman would arrive around four. I was to stay awake and listen for his knock. Hellfrick would keep the milkman occupied for at least twenty minutes. It was a bribe, a means of escaping payment of the debt, but I was hungry.

'But you ought to pay your debts, Hellfrick. You'd be in a bad spot if I was charging you interest.'

‘I’ll pay you, kid,’ he said. ‘I’ll pay every last penny, just as soon as I can.’

I walked back to my room, slamming Hellfrick’s door angrily. I didn’t wish to seem cruel about the matter, but this was going too far. I knew the gin he drank cost him at least thirty cents a pint. Surely he could control his craving for alcohol long enough to pay his just debts.

The night came reluctantly. I sat at the window, rolling some cigarettes with rough cut tobacco and squares of toilet paper. This tobacco had been a whim of mine in more prosperous times. I had bought a can of it, and the pipe for smoking it had been free, attached to the can by a rubber band. But I had lost the pipe. The tobacco was so coarse it made a poor smoke in regular cigarette papers, but wrapped twice in toilet tissue it was powerful and compact, sometimes bursting into flames.

The night came slowly, first the cool odour of it, and then the darkness. Beyond my window spread the great city, the street lamps, the red and blue and green neon tubes bursting to life like bright night flowers. I was not hungry, there were plenty of oranges under the bed, and that mysterious chortling in the pit of my stomach was nothing more than great clouds of tobacco smoke marooned there, trying frantically to find a way out.

So it had happened at last: I was about to become a thief, a cheap milk-stealer. Here was your flash-in-the-pan genius, your one-story-writer: a thief. I held my head in my hands and rocked back and forth. Mother of God. Headlines in the papers, promising writer caught stealing milk, famous protégé of J. C. Hackmuth hauled into court on petty thief charge, reporters swarming around me, flashlights popping, give us a statement, Bandini, how did it happen? Well, fellows, it was like this, you see, I’ve really got plenty of money, big sales of manuscripts and all that, but I was doing a yarn about a fellow who steals a quart of milk, and I wanted to write from experience, so that’s what happened, fellows. Watch for the story in the *Post*, I’m calling it ‘Milk Thief’. Leave me your address and I’ll send you all free copies.

But it would not happen that way, because nobody knows Arturo Bandini, and you’ll get six months, they’ll take you to the city jail and you’ll be a criminal, and what’ll your mother say? and what’ll your father say? and can’t you hear those fellows around the filling station in Boulder, Colorado, can’t you hear them snickering about the great writer caught stealing a quart of milk? Don’t do it, Arturo! If you’ve got an ounce of decency in you, don’t do it!

I rose from the chair and paced up and down. Almighty God, give me strength! Hold back that criminal urge! Then, all at once, the whole plan seemed cheap and silly, for at that moment I thought of something else to write in my letter to the great Hackmuth, and for two hours I wrote, until my back ached. When I looked out of my window to the big clock on the St Paul Hotel, it was almost eleven. The letter to Hackmuth was a very long one – already I had twenty pages. I read the letter. It seemed silly. I felt the blood in my face from blushes. Hackmuth would think me an idiot for writing such puerile nonsense. Gathering the pages, I tossed them into the wastebasket. Tomorrow was another day and tomorrow I might get an idea for a short story. Meanwhile I would eat a couple of oranges and go to bed.

They were miserable oranges. Sitting on the bed I dug my nails into their thin skins. My own flesh puckered, my mouth was filled with saliva, and I squinted at the thought of them. When I bit into the yellow pulp it shocked me like a cold shower. Oh Bandini, talking to the reflection in the dressing mirror, what sacrifices you make for your art! You might have been a captain of industry, a merchant prince, a big league ball player, leading hitter in the American League, with an average of .415; but no! Here you are, crawling through the days, a starved genius, faithful to your sacred calling. What courage you possess!

I lay in bed, sleepless in the darkness. Mighty Hackmuth, what would he say to all this! He would applaud, his powerful pen would eulogize me in well-turned phrases. And after all, that letter to Hackmuth wasn’t such a bad letter. I got up, dug it from the wastebasket, and re-read it. A remarkable

letter, cautiously humoured. Hackmuth would find it very amusing. It would impress upon him the fact that I was the selfsame author of *The Little Dog Laughed*. There was a story for you! And I opened a drawer filled with copies of the magazine that contained the story. Lying on the bed I read it again, laughing and laughing at the wit of it, murmuring in amazement that I had written it. Then I took to reading it aloud, with gestures, before the mirror. When I was finished there were tears of delight in my eyes and I stood before the picture of Hackmuth, thanking him for recognizing me as a genius.

I sat before the typewriter and continued the letter. The night deepened, the pages mounted. Ah, all writing were as easy as a letter to Hackmuth! The pages piled up, twenty-five, thirty, until I looked down to my navel, where I detected a fleshy ring. The irony of it! I was gaining weight: oranges were filling me out! At once I jumped up and did a number of setting-up exercises. I twisted and writhed and rolled. Sweat flowed and breathing came hard. Thirsty and exhausted, I threw myself on the bed. A glass of cool milk would be fine now.

At that moment I heard a knock on Hellfrick's door. Then Hellfrick's grunt as someone entered. It could be no one but the milkman. I looked at the clock: it was almost four. I dressed quickly: pants, shoes, no socks, and a sweater. The hallway was deserted, sinister in the red light of an old electric bulb. I walked deliberately, without stealth, like a man going to the lavatory down the hall. Two flights of whining, irritable stairs and I was on the ground floor. The red and white Alden milk-truck was parked close to the hotel wall in the moon-drenched alley. I reached into the truck and got two full quart bottles firmly by their necks. They felt cool and delicious in my fist. A moment later I was back in my room, the bottles of milk on the dresser table. They seemed to fill the room. They were like human things. They were so beautiful, so fat and prosperous.

You Arturo! I said, you lucky one! It may be the prayers of your mother, and it may be that God still loves you, in spite of your tampering with atheists, but whatever it is, you're lucky.

For old times' sake, I thought, and for old times' sake I knelt down and said grace, the way you used to do it in grade school, the way my mother taught us back home: Bless us, Oh Lord, and the Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy most bountiful hands, through the same Christ, Oh Lord, Amen. And I added another prayer for good measure. Long after the milkman left Hellfrick's room I was still on my knees, a full half hour of prayers, until I was ravenous for the taste of milk until my knees ached and a dull pain throbbed in my shoulder blades.

When I got up I staggered from cramped muscles, but it was going to be worthwhile. I took the toothbrush from my glass, opened one of the bottles, and poured a full glass. I turned and faced the picture of J. C. Hackmuth on the wall.

'To you, Hackmuth! Hurray for you!'

And I drank, greedily, until my throat suddenly choked and contracted and a horrible taste shocked me. It was the kind of milk I hated. It was buttermilk. I spat it out, washed my mouth with water, and hurried to look at the other bottle. It was buttermilk, too.

Chapter Four

Down on Spring Street, in a bar across the street from the secondhand store. With my last nickel went there for a cup of coffee. An old style place, sawdust on the floor, crudely drawn nudes smeared across the walls. It was a saloon where old men gathered, where the beer was cheap and smelled sour where the past remained unaltered.

I sat at one of the tables against the wall. I remember that I sat with my head in my hands. I heard her voice without looking up. I remember that she said, 'Can I get you something?' and I said something about coffee with cream. I sat there until the cup was before me, a long time I sat like that thinking of the hopelessness of my fate.

It was very bad coffee. When the cream mixed with it I realized it was not cream at all, for it turned a greyish colour, and the taste was that of boiled rags. This was my last nickel, and it made me angry. I looked around for the girl who had waited on me. She was five or six tables away, serving beers from a tray. Her back was to me, and I saw the tight smoothness of her shoulders under a white smock, the faint trace of muscle in her arms, and the black hair so thick and glossy, falling to her shoulders.

At last she turned around and I waved to her. She was only faintly attentive, widening her eyes to an expression of bored aloofness. Except for the contour of her face and the brilliance of her teeth, she was not beautiful. But at that moment she turned to smile at one of her old customers, and I saw a streak of white under her lips. Her nose was Mayan, flat, with large nostrils. Her lips were heavily rouged, with the thickness of a negress's lips. She was a racial type, and as such she was beautiful, but she was too strange for me. Her eyes were at a high slant, her skin was dark but not black, and as she walked her breasts moved in a way that showed their firmness.

She ignored me after that first glance. She went on to the bar, where she ordered more beer and waited for the thin bartender to draw it. As she waited she whistled, looked at me vaguely and went on whistling. I had stopped waving, but I made it plain I wanted her to come to my table. Suddenly she opened her mouth to the ceiling and laughed in a most mysterious fashion, so that even the bartender wondered at her laughter. Then she danced away, swinging the tray gracefully, picking her way through the tables to a group far down in the rear of the saloon. The bartender followed her with his eyes, still confused at her laughter. But I understood her laughter. It was for me. She was laughing at me. There was something about my appearance, my face, my posture, something about me sitting there that had amused her, and as I thought of it I clenched my fists and considered myself with anger and humiliation. I touched my hair: it was combed. I fumbled with my collar and tie: they were clean and in place. I stretched myself to the range of the bar mirror, where I saw what was certainly a worried and sallow face, but not a funny face, and I was very angry.

I began to sneer, watched her closely and sneered. She did not approach my table. She moved near it, even to the table adjacent, but she did not venture beyond that. Each time I saw the dark face, the black large eyes flashing their laughter, I set my lips to a curl that meant I was sneering. It became a game. The coffee cooled, grew cold, a scum of milk gathered over the surface, but I did not touch it. The girl moved like a dancer, her strong silk legs gathering bits of sawdust as her tattered shoes glided over the marble floor.

Those shoes, they were huaraches, the leather thongs wrapped several times around her ankle. They were desperately ragged huaraches; the woven leather had become unravelled. When I saw them I was very grateful, for it was a defect about her that deserved criticism. She was tall and straight shouldered, a girl of perhaps twenty, faultless in her way, except for her tattered huaraches. And so I fastened my stare on them, watched them intently and deliberately, even turning in my chair and twisting my neck to glare at them, sneering and chuckling to myself. Plainly I was getting as much enjoyment out of this as she got from my face, or whatever it was that amused her. This had a powerful effect upon her. Gradually her pirouetting and dancing subsided and she merely hurried back and forth, and at length she was making her way stealthily. She was embarrassed, and once I saw her glance down quickly and examine her feet, so that in a few minutes she no longer laughed; instead there was a grimness in her face, and finally she was glancing at me with bitter hatred.

Now I was exultant, strangely happy. I felt relaxed. The world was full of uproariously amusing people. Now the thin bartender looked in my direction and I winked a comradely greeting. He tossed his head in an acknowledging nod. I sighed and sat back, at ease with life.

She had not collected the nickel for the coffee. She would have to do so, unless I left it on the table and walked out. But I wasn't going to walk out. I waited. A half hour passed. When she hurried to the bar for more beer, she no longer waited on the rail in plain sight. She walked around to the back of the bar. She didn't look at me anymore, but I knew she knew I watched her.

Finally she walked straight for my table. She walked proudly, her chin tilted, her hands hanging from her sides. I wanted to stare, but I couldn't keep it up. I looked away, smiling all the while.

'Do you want anything else?' she asked.

Her white smock smelled of starch.

'You call this stuff coffee?' I said.

Suddenly she laughed again. It was a shriek, a mad laugh like the clatter of dishes and it was over as quickly as it began. I looked at her feet again. I could feel something inside her retreating. I wanted to hurt her.

'Maybe this isn't coffee at all,' I said. 'Maybe it's just water after they boiled your filthy shoes in it.' I looked up to her black blazing eyes. 'Maybe you don't know any better. Maybe you're just naturally careless. But if I were a girl I wouldn't be seen in a Main Street alley with those shoes.'

I was panting when I finished. Her thick lips trembled and the fists in her pocket were writhing under the starched stiffness.

'I hate you,' she said.

I felt her hatred. I could smell it, even hear it coming out of her, but I sneered again. 'I hope so,' I said. 'Because there must be something pretty fine about a guy who rates your hatred.'

Then she said a strange thing; I remember it clearly. 'I hope you die of heart failure,' she said. 'Right there in that chair.'

It gave her keen satisfaction, even though I laughed. She walked away smiling. She stood at the bar again, waiting for more beer, and her eyes were fastened on me, brilliant with her strange wish, and I was uncomfortable but still laughing. Now she was dancing again, gliding from table to table with her tray, and every time I looked at her she smiled her wish, until it had a mysterious effect on me, and I became conscious of my inner organism, of the beat of my heart and the flutter of my stomach. I felt that she would not come back to my table again, and I remember that I was glad of it, and that a strange restlessness came over me, so that I was anxious to get away from that place, and away from the range of her persistent smile. Before I left I did something that pleased me very much. I took the five cents from my pocket and placed it on the table. Then I spilled half the coffee over it. She would have to mop up the mess with her towel. The brown ugliness spread everywhere over the table, and when I got up to leave it was trickling to the floor. At the door I paused to look at her once more. She smiled

the same smile. I nodded at the spilled coffee. Then I tossed my fingers in a salute farewell and walked into the street. Once more I had a good feeling. Once more it was as before, the world was full of amusing things.

I don't remember what I did after I left her. Maybe I went up to Benny Cohen's room over the Grand Central Market. He had a wooden leg with a little door in it. Inside the door were marijuana cigarettes. He sold them for fifteen cents apiece. He also sold newspapers, the *Examiner* and the *Times*. He had a room piled high with copies of *The New Masses*. Maybe he saddened me as always with his grim horrible vision of the world tomorrow. Maybe he poked his stained fingers under my nose and cursed me for betraying the proletariat from which I came. Maybe, as always, he sent me trembling out of his room and down the dusty stairs to the fog-dimmed street, my fingers itching for the throat of an imperialist. Maybe, and maybe not; I don't remember.

But I remember that night in my room, the lights of the St Paul Hotel throwing red and green blobs across my bed as I lay and shuddered and dreamed of the anger of that girl, of the way she danced from table to table, and the black glance of her eyes. That I remember, even to forgetting I was poor and without an idea for a story.

I looked for her early the next morning. Eight o'clock, and I was down on Spring Street. I had a copy of *The Little Dog Laughed* in my pocket. She would think differently about me if she read that story. I had it autographed, right there in my back pocket, ready to present at the slightest notice. But the place was closed at that early hour. It was called the Columbia Buffet. I pushed my nose against the window and looked inside. The chairs were piled upon the tables, and an old man in rubber boots was swabbing the floor. I walked down the street a block or two, the wet air already bluish from monoxide gas. A fine idea came into my head. I took out the magazine and erased the autograph. In its place I wrote 'To a Mayan Princess, from a worthless Gringo.' This seemed right, exactly the correct spirit. I walked back to the Columbia Buffet and pounded the front window. The old man opened the door with wet hands, sweat seeping from his hair.

I said, 'What's the name of that girl who works here?'

'You mean Camilla?'

'The one who worked here last night.'

'That's her,' he said. 'Camilla Lopez.'

'Will you give this to her?' I said. 'Just give it to her. Tell her a fellow came by and said for you to give it to her.'

He wiped his dripping hands on his apron and took the magazine. 'Take good care of it,' I said. 'It's valuable.'

The old man closed the door. Through the glass I saw him limp back to his mop and bucket. He placed the magazine on the bar and resumed his work. A little breeze flipped the pages of the magazine. As I walked away I was afraid he would forget all about it. When I reached the Civic Center I realized I had made a bad mistake: the inscription on the story would never impress that kind of girl. I hurried back to the Columbia Buffet and banged the window with my knuckles. I heard the old man grumbling and swearing as he fumbled with the lock. He wiped the sweat from his old eyes and saw me again.

'Could I have that magazine?' I said. 'I want to write something in it.'

The old man couldn't understand any of this. He shook his head with a sigh and told me to come inside. 'Go get it yourself, goddamnit,' he said. 'I got work to do.'

I flattened the magazine on the bar and erased the inscription to the Mayan Princess. In place of it I wrote:

Dear Ragged Shoes,

~~You may not know it, but last night you insulted the author of this story. Can you read? If so, please invest fifteen minutes of your time and treat yourself to a masterpiece. And next time, be careful. Not everyone who comes into this dive is a bum.~~

Arturo Bandini

I handed the magazine to the old man, but he did not lift his eyes from his work. 'Give this to Miss Lopez,' I said. 'And see to it that she gets it personally.'

The old man dropped the mop handle, smeared the sweat from his wrinkled face, and pointed to the front door. 'You get out of here!' he said.

I laid the magazine on the bar again and strolled away leisurely. At the door I turned and waved.

Chapter Five

I wasn't starving. I still had some old oranges under the bed. That night I ate three or four and with the darkness I walked down Bunker Hill to the downtown district. Across the street from the Columbia Buffet I stood in a shadowed doorway and watched Camilla Lopez. She was the same, dressed in the same white smock. I trembled when I saw her and a strange hot feeling was in my throat. But after a few minutes the strangeness was gone and I stood in the darkness until my feet ached.

When I saw a policeman strolling towards me I walked away. It was a hot night. Sand from the Mojave had blown across the city. Tiny brown grains of sand clung to my fingertips whenever I touched anything, and when I got back to my room I found the mechanism of my new typewriter glutted with sand. It was in my ears and in my hair. When I took off my clothes it fell like powder on the floor. It was even between the sheets of my bed. Lying in the darkness, the red light from the St. Paul Hotel flashing on and off across my bed was bluish now, a ghastly colour jumping into the room and out again.

I couldn't eat any oranges the next morning. The thought of them made me wince. By noon, after an aimless walk downtown, I was sick with self-pity, unable to control my grief. When I got back to my room I threw myself on the bed and wept from deep inside my chest. I let it flow from every part of me, and after I could not cry anymore I felt fine again. I felt truthful and clean. I sat down and wrote my mother an honest letter. I told her I had been lying to her for weeks; and please send some money, because I wanted to come home.

As I wrote Hellfrick entered. He was wearing pants and no bathrobe, and at first I didn't recognize him. Without a word he put fifteen cents on the table. 'I'm an honest man, kid,' he said, 'I'm as honest as the day is long.' And he walked out.

I brushed the coins into my hand, jumped out the window and ran down the street to the grocery store. The little Japanese had his sack ready at the orange bin. He was amazed to see me pass him by and enter the staples department. I bought two dozen cookies. Sitting on the bed I swallowed them as fast as I could, washing them down with gulps of water. I felt fine again. My stomach was full, and I still had a nickel left. I tore up the letter to my mother and lay down to wait for the night. That nickel meant I could go back to the Columbia Buffet. I waited, heavy with food, heavy with desire.

She saw me as I entered. She was glad to see me; I knew she was, because I could tell by the way her eyes widened. Her face brightened and that tight feeling caught my throat. All at once I was so happy and sure of myself, clean and conscious of my youth. I sat at that same first table. Tonight there was music in the saloon, a piano and a violin; two fat women with hard masculine faces and short haircuts. The song was *Over the Waves*. Ta de da da, and I watched Camilla dancing with her beer tray. Her hair was so black, so deep and clustered, like grapes hiding her neck. This was a sacred place, this saloon. Everything here was holy, the chairs, the tables, that rag in her hand, that sawdust under her feet. She was a Mayan princess and this was her castle. I watched the tattered huaraches glide across the floor and I wanted those huaraches. I would like them to hold in my hands against my chest when I fell asleep. I would like to hold them and breathe the odour of them.

She did not venture near my table, but I was glad. Don't come right away, Camilla; let me sit here

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