



COLLECTED
NOVELS AND PLAYS

James
Merrill

COLLECTED
NOVELS AND PLAYS

edited by

J. D. McCLATCHY and STEPHEN YENSER

Merrill

ALFRED A. KNOPF • New York • 2002 

This Is a Borzoi Book
Published by Alfred A. Knopf

Copyright © 2002 by The Literary Estate of James Merrill at
Washington University

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.
Published in the United States by Alfred A. Knopf a division of Random House,
Inc., and simultaneously in Canada by Random House of Canada, Limited,
Toronto. Distributed by Random House, Inc., New York.

www.aaknopf.com

Knopf, Borzoi Books, and the colophon are registered trademarks of
Random House Inc., New York.

The editors are grateful to René and Theodore Weiss for their generous
*permission to reprint *The Bait*, which was originally published in*
The Quarterly Review of Literature.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Merrill, James Ingram.

[Selections. 2002]

Collected novels and plays of James Merrill / edited by J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser.
p. cm.

I. McClatchy, J. D., 1945– II. Yenser, Stephen. III. Title.

PS3525.E6645 A6 2002

818'.5408—21 2002020953

The Birthday (p. 425): Courtesy of Amherst College Archives and Special Collections. By Permission
of the Trustees of Amherst College.

The Bait (p. 453): Walt Silver

The Immortal Husband (p. 493): Alix Jeffrey.

Courtesy of Special Collections, Olin Library, Washington University

eISBN: 978-0-307-55521-2

v3.0

EDITORS' NOTE

This volume collects James Merrill's novels and plays. Other fiction—short stories and translations—appears in *Collected Prose*, and his short play *The Image Maker*, because it was originally included in a book of his poems, *The Inner Room*, can be found in his *Collected Poems*. When, decades after their original appearances, his two novels were reprinted, Merrill added a preface to the new edition of *The Seraglio* and an afterword to *The (Diblos) Notebook*. They can be found here in the Appendix. We include in this volume a previously unpublished early play in blank verse, *The Birthday*, not least because it anticipates many of the concerns the poet took up much later in *The Changing Light at Sandover*. For a new production in 1988 of his play *The Bait*, he undertook revisions that are extensive enough (he even changed the sex of a character) to merit printing this short play twice, in each of its versions. The revised version may also be found in the Appendix.

As throughout this series of books, misprints in the original editions have been silently corrected and spelling or punctuation very occasionally changed for consistency's sake.

JDMcC and SY

CONTENTS

THE NOVELS

The Seraglio (1957)

The (Diblos) Notebook (1965)

THE PLAYS

The Birthday (1947)

The Bait (1953)

The Immortal Husband (1955)

Appendix

Preface to *The Seraglio*

Afterword to *The (Diblos) Notebook*

The Bait (1988)

Notes

Biographical Note

THE NOVELS

THE SERAGLIO

(1957)

For my nephews and nieces

1. Exactly a year later Francis learned the truth about the slashed portrait—by then, of course, restored with expert care. The gash running from the outer corner of his sister’s eye to her Adam’s apple had been patched, sewn, smoothed, painted over, until he really had to hunt for the scar. Enid was posed against a cultivated landscape. Her face, formal above velvet, discouraged even Francis from filling in the details of the crime. No doubt he could have. The intervening year had left him with a key to such matters. Besides, he knew the scene by heart. It was not, despite lawns, flowerbeds, terraces, the scene in the painting. Over the dunes a whitish haze trembled, thinning upwards, to the thunder of waves. Windows facing the sea were usually frosted by the salt air. All this could give you a feeling of loneliness, of being the one real person in a ghostly world. He guessed how the scene must have worked upon the little murderess; its effect upon his own first ten summers, if it came to that—but here again the portrait stopped him. As with Enid herself, where appearances so handsomely denied offense, it no longer seemed fair to probe.

The facts, however, were these:

Enid’s children had moved out to Long Island with their nurse. From her window, Lily, the oldest, caught a familiar sparkling. The entire summer awaited her, tomorrow was her tenth birthday, and she had been misbehaving all morning. Nobody knew what had come over her. Worse yet, her mother and Alice and the cook reacted as if the little girl—Lily kept telling herself, “I’m still only a little girl”—was disobedient out of choice, as if she had enjoyed torturing the twins, or screaming in the kitchen till a bowl of icing slipped from the cook’s lap. Far from it. Her unhappiness mounted with every naughtiness. Finally she had been sent up to her room.

She leaned now on the windowsill, deliberately letting the last of her lunch slide off its plate into the boxwood below. Somewhere nearby Lily’s pet snail would still be lying, stunned from having been flung there by her mother, who had seen it early that morning, slithering blandly—unbearably—across the drowsing child’s naked stomach. Oh *please*, sweetie! a dirty old snail!—and as in a dream both it and Mummy disappeared, one out the window, one down the stairs, a loose robe of blue chiffon trailing behind. A new baby was coming—from the Stork, said her parents; from God the Father, said Irish Alice. Lily had sat then until the feelings of crossness and loneliness grew keener, and the tears began.

The morning of her punishment passed. She had listened to her mother on the steps with Alice, describing in a soft sweet voice the day ahead: the

hairdresser's, the hospital, the Cottage ... Had Michéle gone over there already? He mustn't forget to meet Mr. Buchanan's train. As for the twins, why didn't Alice take them to the beach after their nap? Be good now! And the door slammed, the car started, with not a word of reprieve for Lily, and nothing of the little girl's usual privilege—to be shown which dress her mother had on, which hat and gloves, which jewels. Lily had stood back against the wall while the car drove off, so that anybody who hoped she would run to the window to see would be disappointed. But her dull satisfaction did not last. She had had to pity herself in the mirror till Alice came up with her tray.

She poured a half-glass of milk into the shrubbery. It landed with the sound of cloth ripping. The rest of it she drank. She then set her tray in the hall. The twins put to bed, Alice and the cook would be eating now. Lily locked her door and, pocketing the key, went downstairs on tiptoe.

The cool fragrant rooms, rose and green, glimmered off on either side of the entrance hall. Their house wasn't (her father had once explained) a showplace like the Cottage. "Money's not the question," he had said, cracking his knuckles. "We have as much to spend each year as Grandpa does, considering what we save on taxes and alimony. But your mother and I want our home to be simple and comfortable, with a few nice things. Now your grandfather's house, though not much larger, is on a different scale entirely." A different scale ... The words, coming upon Lily's two years of piano lessons, called up a Cottage augmented, chromatic, a far cry from the plain triad of their own house—whose "simplicity," on the other hand, was news to the little girl. Next to her friends' houses it seemed embarrassingly splendid. Much of the furniture had been brought back from her parents' tours. Lily could have led you about, reciting: "These white-and-green chairs are from Venice; the chandelier, too. The tiles on the floor are Spanish. Where they're scuffed shows how antique they are. That painting's a Renoir. They bought it in New York, but it's French really. We're getting new drapes next month, yellow with tiny purple and white daisies. Here's Mummy's collection of Battersea boxes—that one's new." But the more polite way, her mother said, was just to let people notice things. With each addition a less perfect piece would be turned over to the Rummage Sale or crowded into the attic, where on wet days Lily and a friend climbed up on tables that didn't totter or chip, then flopped onto great rectangular sofas, rebounding high into the dusty air. Now *that* was simplicity and comfort! Downstairs she copied her mother's decorum, even today in full revolt against it. The hall mirrors made much of silver bowls filled with roses. Tiptoeing out, Lily crept from tree to shrub until she came to the road.

Not quite a half-mile separated the Buchanans' house from the Cottage, which Lily approached by way of the beach. Promptly the grotesque brick chimneys swung into view then the roof, whose steep angle recalled roofs in fairy-tales. She reached the bulkhead at last, and leaned against it, panting.

A sign nailed there read: *Trespassers will be Prosecuted*. It brought to mind first the Lord's Prayer, then, for she personally imagined the prayer addressed to an old man with white hair, her grandfather. Some years ago, as a *very* little girl, she had heard him call Uncle Francis his only begotten son, and upon her asking that night, "Is Grandpa God?" her mother had laughed and laughed and told the story to everybody, even to Grandpa himself. Lily was beyond all that now. Alice had given her a long shocked sermon, also a little silvery medal of Mary, to be kissed those nights her mother wasn't home to tuck her in. Today sand had drifted high enough to let Lily scale the bulkhead without using the wooden steps.

The door opened easily into the ocean room, huge and high—the Cottage had no upstairs. All the furniture had been massed together under stone-colored canvas, making the room look like a drained lake. Through the far windows workmen could be seen eating lunch, and beyond, on the sunken lawn, the rose-arbor in bloom. The whole house smelled of fresh paint and wax. All the paper had been ripped from Fern's bedroom walls. Grandpa used to call them his two flowers, once even trying to put Lily into his buttonhole. How she had shrieked! Now Fern and Grandpa were divorced. On the threshold she found a note in her mother's handwriting: "Walls, pale green or blue, something *restful*. Twin beds. A pretty chintz?" Lily moved on, feeling lonely.

In Grandpa's room, face down on the bureau, were photographs in leather or silver frames. She turned them over, one by one: Mummy; the twins; Uncle Francis when *he* was ten, grinning and holding a big black snake—not poisonous, Grandpa had assured her, and blind anyhow; finally some individual likenesses of smiling ladies. She recognized among them Cousin Irene Cheek, in appearance certainly not the tramp she was said to be. But no picture of Fern, or of her real grandmother. And no picture of Lily! Only bottles of medicine in the top drawer, a few handkerchiefs, a silver paper-knife. This last she picked up, and aimed at her breast. "Farewell, cruel world!" Lily sighed, then crumpled to the floor. She performed the act a second time before catching sight of the painting.

It was set face to the wall next to Grandpa's oxygen tank. Turning it around, she exclaimed in what she felt must be the voice of a particularly nice little girl, "Oh, I'd forgotten this was here!" It showed her mother wearing a blue velvet gown with bare shoulders, and diamonds in her hair. She was smiling the gently bewildered smile of somebody soon to be scolded or punished. Poor Mummy, thought Lily. All her resentment melted. With the tip of the silver knife she caressed, as with a wand, her mother's features, traced the curve of the lips, the eyebrows and cheek. The faint grating gave her gooseflesh. Resting the point against the surface at a certain angle, she saw how the blade reflected the whole face dully, in miniature distortion. She moved it this way and that; her mother vanished, reappeared. Before long a puzzlement came over her, to see that a speck of paint, no bigger than a gnat's wing, had chipped away, leaving a tiny patch of paler color beneath.

How? When? Just at the corner of her mother's eye, in which a streak of white created an uncanny liveliness. Lily's heart began to pound. She wouldn't have dreamed this face could be so fragile. Experimentally she touched the point of the knife to the same spot; a second, larger flake of paint fell off, exposing the dead white canvas. She had now a sense of fatigue. It was becoming such a slow, complicated process, not like the shattering of an ornament. And beyond repair. That fragment of a face could no more be put back than could the daisy petal pulled to see whether you were loved or not. The child knelt spellbound at her task.

A door slammed. The knife with a will of its own pierced the canvas and tore briskly downwards five or six inches before she succeeded in letting go. She closed her eyes. She knew that she was going to die.

A burst of Italian song came from down the hall—Michèle, her parents' gardener. His footsteps grew louder, stopped with the song, then evenly faded. Another door slammed. Ten minutes later Lily was back in her room.

Alice hadn't even taken the tray downstairs.

She lay on her bed exhausted. "You don't understand," she said aloud once, "I loved you."

Then Lily fell asleep, and it was nearly six when Alice came in and told her, in a pleasant everyday voice, that her mother had said to go downstairs now.

They were talking about it.

"I don't know what got into me. I just sat down and began to cry. Honestly, I couldn't stop. I kept thinking, this is so silly!"

"It's not one damn bit silly!"

"Michèle and the painters thought *I'd* been hurt—can you imagine? 'No, no, my little friends,' I had to say, 'it's only the picture!'"

"It's a damn lot more than only the picture, Enid."

"Well, it wasn't the moment—oh sweetie!" she cried as Lily appeared, steeling herself in the doorway. "Forgive your witless old lady! I meant for you to come down right after lunch. Go and kiss Daddy!"

"Your mother's just had a miserable experience, Lily," he said, looking flushed and furious. "That portrait over at the Cottage, the one we gave Grandpa, remember? Well, someone took a knife today and slashed your Mummy's face to ribbons!"

"Let's not get carried away! Only one little slash, if you please!"

"Oh Mummy!"

"We 're sitting around just so relieved that whoever it was got the old portrait instead of poor little me," she went on in lilting tones, patting the sofa. Lily sat down automatically. Her mother could transform the most disagreeable event into a kind of fairy-tale. Neither her voice nor her face had ever betrayed anything but sweetness, gaiety, at worst the soft

disappointment with which she had sent Lily upstairs that morning—no, one other thing her face did express; she had terrible headaches the specialists couldn't seem to help. But how little showed! Only, as now, a dimple would quiver above one eye. Her light-brown hair shone from brushing, her lipstick and powder were freshly applied. A scent of lilac started tears in the little girl's wide eyes.

"I think we're lucky to have such a sweet sympathetic daughter," said Lily's father as if he meant it. "Look at her face, she's so pale, it might've happened to her. She's thinking how you feel."

"And that, my pearl," said her mother with a squeeze and a smile, "is why people like to have babies. Because they grow up into such lovely dependable friends."

Lily stared back flabbergasted. They didn't know!

"What about Fern?" her father asked. "Did she have a key to the Cottage?"

"She wouldn't have needed one. The doors were wide open."

"And the workmen saw nobody?"

"Mummy," Lily put in, "I thought Fern and Grandpa were—"

"Divorced." Her father glared. He was very high-strung.

"But Fern has rented a house for the summer," explained her mother. "She hasn't moved out yet, Larry. It's too early in the season. I saw her on the street last weekend, but I heard she'd gone back to New York Monday."

"That's something we'll want to find out. Did she speak to you?"

"On the street? Goodness, no!" She actually giggled.

"Mummy, will we see Fern?"

"God forbid!" said her father.

"Then why has she rented a house?"

"She has lots of little friends, sweetie, who come here every summer."

"She's doing it out of spite, Lily. She hates your grandfather, she hates your mother, she hates me. She's renting a house for the sole purpose of making everybody uncomfortable." He lit a cigar. Almost an inch was missing from his little finger.

"She doesn't hate me," corrected Lily.

"That's true, Larry. Fern was always very sweet to Lily."

"You see how remarkable your mother is. If ever there's a good word to say for anybody, she says it. People who don't even know her call her an angel. No," he went on, rapid clouds of smoke pouring from his mouth, "Fern's good and bitter. She'd be capable of a thing like this."

Her mother gave a tinkling laugh. "Mercy me! I'm married to Mr. Scotland Yard!"

"What about fingerprints?" asked Lily tonelessly.

Her mother laughed all the more. “My dear, if you could have *seen* the weapon, after five souls had examined it!”

“It’s not an incident we’d care to publicize, Lily,” said her father. “No matter who did it, it doesn’t reflect very nicely on any of the family. Enid, a drink?”

“Daddy means,” she explained in reply to Lily’s blank look, “that Grandpa’s been the subject of enough gossip as it is.”

Now Lily understood. They had shown her a clipping at school: NO LOVE, ASSERTS TYCOON; MATE ASKS 500 GRAND. Wasn’t that Lily Buchanan’s grandfather? Oh yes! she had proudly admitted to an envious circle.

“You see,” her father was saying as he poured Campari into one glass, then whisky into another, “your grandfather’s an important man. Original. Successful. Thanks to him, you’ll be a wealthy young lady one of these days. Now let’s talk about something else.”

Lily tucked one leg beneath her, trying not to look conscious of her good fortune. It tickled her to suppose that her father had changed the subject because she was too young for it. She watched him drink. His high coloring and the brilliant shades he liked in his shirts and ties—broad stripes of orange and olive against pink, or deep yellow checkered with black, brick reds, purples, apple greens—overpowered the pale settings contrived for them. In much the same way he acted upon Lily’s affections, making her feel agreeably small and innocent next to him. How fiercely, for example, his cigar glowed now! He had risen again at the end of a long moment’s silence, to say in a paralyzing voice: “God damn it, if you don’t know who did it, I do!”

Both Lily and her mother managed to avoid his meaning.

“The portrait, Enid,” he said crossly. “Hasn’t it occurred to you?”

“That some particular person—?”

“Of course!”

She hummed a high soft note by way of showing reluctance. “No,” she said, “no, it hasn’t occurred to me.”

Already he was rubbing his hands together. “Are we thinking of the same person? Are we?”

But she made a funny, final movement, and set down her untasted glass.

He stared, then cried, “And now you’ve got a headache!”

“I’ve had a teensy one since being at the Cottage. Sweetie,” she turned to Lily, “see if there’s some hot coffee in the kitchen. It’s the first in weeks,” she added apologetically.

“God damn it!” he shouted, striding about. “The smallness! The spitefulness!”

Lily was holding her breath outside the door.

“If you don’t know who did it, I do!” her father repeated at the top of his

lungs. "Irene Cheek did it!"

Cousin Irene! The tramp! Lily ran to fetch the coffee.

Throughout supper she let the twins chatter. They were only six; poor little girls, their time was coming. Soberly she got into her pajamas, attended to teeth and prayers, let Alice put the medal under her pillow. Out went the light, but Lily lay, for hours perhaps, intensely wondering. Was Cousin Irene a misfit? Could portraits be slashed by grown-ups?—those stately eccentrics, cordial yet vacant, who wore bathing-suits but didn't swim, who were always thirsty but never for water. Lily took for granted this coincidence of dullness and daring in their behavior, also its complete remoteness from her own. However, if something *she* had done could be blamed on Cousin Irene, either Cousin Irene wasn't a real grown-up at all, or she, Lily, a little girl swept towards a whirlpool visible only to herself, had started turning into one. Her father's having called Cousin Irene a tramp tended to support the former view. But her own common sense confirmed the latter.

For instance: "What dress are you wearing to your party?" her mother had asked the other day.

"My blue one?"

"Sweetie, you're getting too *big* for that. What's wrong with your pretty new yellow one?"

In the dark, Lily shook her head over the futility of it.

She was forever being reminded, "You're the oldest, Lily, we expect more of you." Or, "My, what a big girl! This can't be Lily!" As for dresses, who could put into words that sense of how they were constantly outgrown? Of how the wearer's whole person had altered and elongated during the six weeks since last, in gray taffeta or blue, with velvet hair-ribbon and slippers of patent-leather, it had curtsied in dancing class or played Sinding while Mrs. Clement Younger and all her pupils' parents nodded approval? No, change kept happening. Alice had stated that childhood ought to be the happiest part of your entire life, and here was Lily's draining away like a lovely warm bath while she scrambled to replace the plug. With that, she sprang out of bed.

A faint light shone under her parents' door. Receiving no answer to her knock, she ventured in. The large room was done in tones of cream and sugar. On bright days, with only the dotted-swiss curtains drawn, it seemed the inside of a pearl. Lily's advance through its present gloom could not be heard above her father's distant thrashing in his tub. And her mother lay with shut eyes, her long hair loose, her profile, like that on a medal, rising in low relief against the pillow. Lily stifled a little sob.

"Sweetie? Aren't you asleep yet?"

"Does it still hurt?"

"It's better lying down. I took my pill."

Lily touched the damp cheek unwillingly. "Is this where?"

“No. Way inside.”

“I’m sorry.

“I think I’ll survive.”

“For today, I mean.”

Her mother’s eyes opened, though Lily could see that the effort hurt her. “I am too.” She smiled. “Go to sleep now. Dream about tomorrow. You’re having a magician, did you know?”

“Don’t try to talk,” said Lily consolingly; clearly *she* wasn’t going to be consoled.

From the bathroom came a blurred, guttural sound—her father’s throat being cleared. “Oh,” her mother said, as if just then reminded of the fact, “we spoke to Grandpa in the West Indies. He’ll be up here the end of this month, for the summer.”

“Did you tell him about the portrait?”

“Yes. He took it very well.” Whatever that meant. Unexpectedly, her whole face quivered.

Lily took her hand. Once Enid had been somebody’s little girl. Indeed, she seemed, just now again, to have gone all hurt and helpless, with great fringed eyes that shut like a doll’s. She hadn’t even power to send Lily back to bed, but lay, her wrist surrendered to a gentle stroking, and neither, at that particular moment, certain which was mother and which child.

2. Francis Tanning received Enid’s letter in Rome.

Before collecting their mail he and Jane had just “discovered” San Giovanni Decollato, and were full of the crazy frescoes in the refectory. Fancy watching a decapitation while you ate! They planned to have everybody go see *that*, and so bring about an unwilling recognition, by the cross-eyed monk who kept the gate, of an *attrazione turistica* within his precincts.

They sat now on the rim of the Piazza di Spagna fountain, their bare legs hanging in dazzling water, and as he glanced through Enid’s thin blue pages, “Oh melodrama!” exclaimed Francis. “No thank you! Not if that’s the sort of thing I’m going back for! *You* go back, Jane, you marry your young man! I’m glad I listened to the tiny voice that said not to book passage!”

Jane blinked. “*Non riesco a capire—*”

So he showed her the letter, rereading it over her shoulder and from time to time—for she never kept it straight—distinguishing among his father’s wives: Enid’s mother, *then* his own, finally Fern. “Or rather *not* finally, it now appears,” he said, rolling back his frayed shorts, actually trousers he’d trimmed himself, to get more sun.

Enid dwelt mostly upon Mr. Tanning's response in the matter of the portrait. He hadn't taken it well at all. Reading between her cautious lines, Francis marveled at the old man's egoism. He had assumed from the first that the blow was aimed not at Enid but at himself. And by Fern. It hurt him to admit that a person with whom he'd lived intimately for so many years was capable of this cruel spiteful act. When Larry, having already ascertained from three sources that Fern was indeed in New York, had grabbed the phone and tried to express his own suspicions, Mr. Tanning had blown up. Irene Cheek was a fine straightforward woman. Nobody's on God's earth liked to be snubbed and talked about as if she were dirt under the Buchanans' spotless feet. Then to pretend that Irene—! The wires to Jamaica had crackled and buzzed as he ranted. What about the dinner party Larry and Enid, deaf to his entreaties, had declined to give in honor of the Cheeks, the previous summer? What about the Cheeks having taken *him* into their bungalow in Jamaica, the previous winter, at great inconvenience to themselves, but knowing he wasn't physically up to the season at Hobe Sound with Fern? What about the transformation Irene had wrought in Cousin Charlie, who had been the town drunk before she married him? On and on. "Now there are rumors," Enid's letter said, "of Daddy's wanting to marry Irene."

"There you are!" cried Francis, gesticulating cynically in the warm light. "Why can't Larry and Enid be nice to Irene, instead of *driving* her to Reno? Wait and see—she'll *be* the fourth wife if they don't take care!"

"Think of wives outnumbering children," said Jane.

"Think of each wife lasting thirteen years."

She did, and called it creepy. As an art-historian Jane appreciated these formal touches, but her inner life—or whatever went on beneath her healthy sunburned face and black curls straining against combs—was a chaos. Or so Francis assumed. They spent hours together every day.

Nevertheless each had warned the other that, back in America, they would most likely not be friends at all. Francis would settle in New York, Jane would marry her childhood sweetheart, now a graduate student at Harvard, and since neither of them really enjoyed traveling, that would be that. The great topic between them was less their love of monuments than their dislike of Italy, of Italians, of the Americans who pretended to feel at home there. They agreed vigorously as to the unreality of any given Italian. "Nothing but gesture and vanity," Francis would say, "like a trip through a progressive school. Italians have never understood the difference between expression and self-expression. They have no feelings because they're forever showing them off. Such people *are* unreal. No wonder they produced Pirandello."

"The men think of nothing but sex," said Jane.

"And they're utter failures in bed."

"You don't say!"

"So Xenia tells me," he hastened to add.

“Speriamo!” She often lapsed into Italian, not so much from ostentation as to poke fun at those who spoke nothing else.

Alessandro Allori kept Jane in Italy. She had dutifully covered half the country in search of his work, and Francis once or twice, having nothing better to do, went along. Whenever you passed a chapel without bothering to look at the dull dark unstarred painting above the altar, you were like as not neglecting an Allori. Francis had watched his friend, during a Sunday Mass in Pesaro, interrupt the Elevation by crossing in front of it—bareheaded in dirndl and sandals, her arms full of notebooks—on the heels of a corrupt sacristan whose genuflection she dared not imitate, only to find herself examining something truly awful, worse than Allori, a *scuola d’Ignoto*. Allori was awful enough, but what could she do? All the interesting painters had been snapped up by her colleagues. Still, when the Caravaggio wave was over, people would look about for new figures to rediscover. Jane took the view that Allori’s very unlikeliness gave him a certain advantage.

What kept Francis in Italy? A hunch that he would be asked this question on his return had helped him dawdle there all through the winter and spring.

Jane handed back the letter. “But who is Irene, really?”

Cousin Irene? Stretching in the sun, he felt hungry and wondered if he could do justice to Mrs. Cheek. After what Enid had written, could anyone? She looked, he began, like a lady golfer, tanned, with small eyes. She was actually a cousin of the Tannings—at least her husband was—but the connection, and for that matter the Cheeks themselves, had played no part in Francis’s consciousness until the winter before he came to Europe. They turned up, as if from nowhere, in Hobe Sound—Irene and Charlie and two beagles, these last going directly into a kennel because Fern wouldn’t have them in the house. Francis understood that; the house was new, all marble with oyster-white carpeting—very Fern. Even the grass outside felt like paper and rustled dryly underfoot. To go on, Irene had brought her hostess a kind of Guatemalan fiesta dress, purple and orange, one that couldn’t have been worn as a joke—not at any rate by Fern, although Irene turned up for dinner that night in flesh-colored slacks and a silk T-shirt on which one of the beagles had been *painted* with a slipper in its mouth. Mr. Tanning did his best to make up for Fern’s remoteness, Fern herself grew wild with jealousy, one thing led to another. “Mind you,” Francis finished, “I like Fern. She’s extremely fond of me. For that matter, she was extremely fond of him.”

“Then why—?”

“He divorced *her*. None of the wives ever dreamed of divorcing *him*. One thing, of course, that’s accomplished by divorcing them is,” he paused, unable for an instant to recall the point he wanted made, “well, that before long they’re on such splendid terms. They start having lunches alone with him, sometimes even dinners, laughing and crying over old times, burying the hatchet. Naturally none of them ever remarries. They get cases of champagne at Christmas and on birthdays more or less undemanding pieces of jewelry.

The poor man can't bear to fail with people."

Reading in Jane's expression that his tone was baffling, he searched her dark glasses for a clue. There was this about Francis: he had little sense of how he sounded or looked. Years went by before he accepted that his voice had changed. And, while a good head taller than his father, taller even than Larry Buchanan by a few inches, he invariably saw himself as littler than anyone else—children and dwarfs aside. He squinted now, but the green lens gave back only a tiny greenish handsomeness with teeth that, straightened in childhood, had reverted to some glinting disorder of their own. It did no good to know that in Jane's eyes he was handsome. He had to ask outright what her smile meant.

"Nothing," she said. "Just that you can be so patronizing."

"Towards whom? Towards Irene?"

"Forget it."

He would be glad to. Such matters weren't for Jane to judge; he felt it in all kindness. Despite her modest emancipation, despite Allori and sandals and a medical student named Bruno, she came from a plain Midwestern household in which no painting had ever been hung, let alone mutilated, and divorce, a thing unknown, could blacken cousins two states removed. The world of the Tannings, Jane's parents would have agreed, was a dungheap. And it did no good to know that in her eyes Francis had grown up out of it like a rose, until her world, by contrast, seemed as dull and artless as her way of talking. (She said "mere" for mirror, "Yurp" for Europe, "broke" for baroque—or "barrack," as he himself sounded it.) It did no good to guess that she adored him. He preferred to pass for a celibate, to tell his tale with an air of dry comedy. They were sitting after all like cut flowers, up to their calves in the purest water.

He had a polite afterthought. "Did *you* get anything interesting?"

"A postcard from Roger. He's going to meet the ship."

"A postcard only!" Francis took it from her. On one side was a sepia photograph of an empty restaurant. A motto read: *Escape into the Reality of Fine Food*. The other side bore a few scrawled lines. "I never believe things written on postcards," said Francis.

"Neither do I."

"You'd think he'd have more to say."

"That was our understanding about this year."

Francis shrugged. He found incomprehensible that Jane should risk her marriage for a trip abroad. She hadn't needed to accept the grant from the Foundation. As for her "understanding" with Roger, it left both free to do as they wished, form what attachments they chose. Jane didn't even carry his snapshot. "I guess I'm old-fashioned," he sighed. "Will you really get married?"

"Why not?" she returned, out of her brown study.

He handed back the postcard. "Shall we have lunch, then?"

Outside the *trattoria* they came upon Xenia Grosz in the act of dismissing, with a yawn and a nod of her golden head, a ferociously handsome young man. She watched him mount his motor-scooter and bounce away over the cobblestones. "*Hopelessly* in love," she laughed. "Come, I'm starving. I see you've taken my advice and eat here now. It's the best food in Rome, and the cheapest."

Francis and Jane had eaten there—in fact they had *met* there—long before Xenia's appearance on the scene. But this was Xenia's way, and for that matter Xenia's scene, there being no corner of the Old World in which she hadn't abundantly lived, as a tiny child, a girl, a young woman, as whatever she might now be in respect to age. It was simpler to forget that she had any.

They followed her to a central table, close to the cool splashing of water. Xenia took one swift glance upward to make sure the light, filtering through vine-leaves, was flattering to her, then another about the crowded garden in search of friends. "Ah!" she exclaimed, "Mr. Durdee is eating here with his wife. He's a very rich American, but quite intelligent, who has just ordered one of my pieces—the abstract torso, only *big*, to go by his pool. And in pink granite instead of marble." She caught his eye and waved. "I told him if he wanted real Italian food to come here. *Cameriere!* Today you're my guests. We'll celebrate."

As they downed their first liter of Frascati, a half-dozen people stopped at the table to kiss Xenia's hand, slap her bare brown shoulder, exchange a joke in French or Italian. They were all artists, all more or less political: a communist sculptor and his wife, who wove; a film-director who could not return to France—the figures blurred after a bit. Francis knew that Xenia, because she liked him, took for granted that he, too, was "creative." He had soon given up trying to contradict her. "You Americans," she would laugh, "with your modesty and your guilt!" So he ended by letting her see him as a liberal, a writer (though he scarcely now wrote letters) struggling, young, living the *vie de Bohème* in a high bare frugal room. He *had* such a room, but not from necessity. He had wanted the cold tile floors and the smelly stove. The bareness appealed to him, like that of the straight razor he affected; it made *him* seem more real. Accordingly he found Xenia's view of him far more soothing than that held by Jane, to whom he had confided the worst.

Still, he couldn't shake the sense of his own imposture. There had been evenings out under the stars with Xenia and her friends, drinking the cheap white wine for which each had so scrupulously put down his pittance, when Francis could only sit—while they joked and waved their arms and criticized America—smiling but silent, lest a false move betray him. The truth, Francis had come to suspect, was that they didn't care one way or the other; he wouldn't be sitting there if he hadn't wanted to, and as long as he claimed no attention they would pay him none. All but Xenia. "You're so mysterious," she would chuckle, licking her lips, "I like that!"—never guessing his secret,

although she kept a studio in New York and had dealt, by her own confession, with the rich.

Their food was slow in coming. “*Subito, signora,*” the waiter chanted, and brought more wine. Jane had promised to take some cousins of Roger’s, virtual strangers passing through for two nights and a day, on a quick tour of the splendors. It was now half past one, and she had begun to fidget. Francis watched her a full tolerant minute before she looked up, blushed, and blurted out, as if anything that came to mind would do, “Then you *aren’t* going back to America next month?”

He ran a hand through his cropped hair. “Why? Did I say so?”

“I thought you had, after reading your sister’s letter.”

“What!” cried Xenia. “Aren’t we all planning to go back together? I booked my passage last month. For two weeks from today, out of Naples.”

“So did I, but Francis didn’t.”

“I’m afraid to go back,” he laughed apologetically.

“Well, I wish you had told me,” said Xenia, glaring briefly at Jane. “Now it’s too late to make other plans. We’re in July already. It seemed like such a good idea, our cozy little group, absorbing the shock together.”

Francis winced. But he hated not to oblige. “I’ll see about it this afternoon. You’re both in,” he faltered, “*second* class?”

“Good heavens, no!” said Xenia, thinking to put his mind at rest. “Do you think we’re millionaires? Besides, on the Italian line, there’s no difference between second and third.”

He saw Jane smile. He had had to confess to her his taste for first-class carriages. Francis had few extravagances, had indeed picked, on their trips, hotels not even amusingly squalid—but let them board a train! “*Do* you mind?” he would ask, sinking with an embarrassed grin into red plush, as he paid the difference on both tickets, “so as not to have to talk to people ...!”

“Write it down, Francis,” she said firmly, offering him her pen. Jane repeated for him the name of the ship, the date of sailing, and when at length he looked up with the distant fixity of a child who has incriminated himself at a schoolroom blackboard, she was on her feet. He guessed that she dared not linger, after taking such conscious advantage of him.

Meanwhile, the waiter appeared with their food, a look of horror crossing his face. The Signorina leaving? Impossible! His dismay, Francis knew, was no more genuine than the long reprimand from Xenia that met it. Both were behaving as the Americans wanted them to. Only at the end of their duet did they risk beaming at one another, or rather at Jane, their victim, who had torn open a roll and was gingerly stuffing it with *saltimbocca*. Before she could finish, the Durdees, he sallow and blue-eyed, she pink and white with blue-tinted glasses, had made their way over to the little group.

“I’m enchanted to see you,” said Xenia suavely, extending her hand at an