

"I'll tell you what, why don't I give you weekend liberty privileges? How would that be? You can come and go as you please on the weekends from eighteen-hundred hours Friday until eighteen hundred hours Sunday."

"But, Doc--"

"That's the best I can do."

And he was gone.

"What'd I tell you." The voice was Tom's, and he was laying on his bed with his hands folded behind his head which was tilted towards me and had an expression of serious sympathy on it.

"Man, this is unreal. There's nothing wrong with my stomach."

"I'm tellin' ya, they probably got some new stomach doctor straight from Viet Nam and he needs to do a few stomach removals in order to get certified."

I was freaking out. But I had little time to be so. Not ten minutes later they came and got me to go to X-Ray.

"What for?"

"Just some tests, that's all."

"But, I've already had the tests on my back."

"This for your stomach."

Oh shit.

A complete upper and lower GI series may sound

harmless enough, but it changed my life forever.

In the lab, a tiny black man waited for me in a lab coat with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows.

"Get up on that table," he ordered. "And take off your pants."

"What?"

"Do it."

He wheeled one of those IV stands on wheels over, but it didn't have an IV on it. This was a bag, a big plastic bag with a tube coming out of the end of it. On the end of the tube was what for all the world looked like the cock of a horse. I know, I have seen one.

"Now, turn over on your side and relax, please."

I obeyed the first part, but relax? Impossible.

He fed this thing into me about, oh, I'd say three feet, and then said, "okay," and I began to feel something flowing inside me. "Now lie still." Yeah right.

He left the room and came back a few seconds later. "you can expel that." And I turned around and he was pointing to a small bathroom where I tiptoed to.

When I came out, he said "Okay, up on the table, please."

"Again?"

He nodded. Sammy Davis Jr. That's who he looked like.

When it was finally over, I was so humiliated and in so much pain that I didn't say anything to Tom or anyone when I got back to the ward. I just lay there and thought I am in Hell, and I felt one single tear slide down my cheek, and I fell asleep.

I woke up before "Reveille" and I heard a couple of women talking, rather loudly, I thought, and they were bitching about their jobs, commiserating with one another.

"I gots ta run these three in for a bath, and then go down and see about the lab results for that one over there. Shit, they don't pay me enough."

"Girl, watcha' gonna do? They ever get your vacation straight?"

"Shit no. But I don't give a damn, I'm gonna take a week off and go to the beach and they can just kiss mah ass."

"I heard dat. Leastwise it's Friday." And they walked off, affirming to one another how good it was that the end of the week was finally upon them.

Friday. I could finally get my libbo. But what difference did it make? I had no money.

"Tom, Tom, wake up, man."

He looked over at me and rubbed his eyes.

"It's friday, man, Liberty time!"

"What? It's eighteen-hundred hours already?"

"No, it's only zero-six-fifteen, but today's the day. Out."

"Damn right, watcha gonna do?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Listen,

you got any money?"

"Some, I was thinking about going to the Playboy Club. You know, get a decent meal and see some legs."

"I don't think I can get in--"

"I got a cahd, you can be my guest."

I had no clothes for the Playboy Club and I told him so, then asked for a loan of ten dollars.

"No way, man, I ain't got that much."

Great. Liberty for three days and not a dime to my name.

My doctor came in about nine-thirty.

"I have some news for you concerning your tests."

"What?"

"Well, they didn't come out very well, and I need to run them again."

"Not a chance."

"Now Peal, this is important, we here at the hospital are dedicated to taking care of our patients. And Admiral Hospodar called me personally to see to it that you are in excellent shape before we ship you back."

"Old man Hospodar called you personally?"

"I know it, he seemed especially concerned about you. You must have made an impression upon him."

"Oh shit."

"I'll send someone up for you shortly to escort you

to the lab."

I was upset, and I told Tom all about Trish and Brendan and he agreed that I was in trouble. Quickly I made my way to the little chapel in the hospital near the cafeteria, not to pray, but to hide out for a while. There was a small spinet piano in there and I played for a while, messing with a few chords. At noon, I went into lunch. I made myself a peanut butter sandwich and had some milk, all that was palatable in the entire room.

After lunch, I slipped back into my bed, pulled out the stationary that was in the drawer, along with a pen with the hospital's logo on it, and began to write.

To whom it may concern:

If something should happen to me, please contact the necessary authorities and tell them that my death was not an accident. I was involved with Patricia Hospodar Midgett who is the daughter of Admiral Hospodar and the wife of Lt. Brendan Midgett on Governor's Island in New York, and I know that he has been in contact with my physicians here at the USPHS. He

may have persuaded them to get rid
of me. This is no joke.

And I signed it and dated it, put it in an envelope
and gave it to Tom with instructions if something should
happen.

"Come on, Virg, the guy's not gonna have you knocked
off."

"You never know, Tom."

Eighteen-Hundred hours. Free.

I put on the civilian clothes that I had worn here,
and strode out the door. Safe, until Monday, anyway.

I went out the door and looked around. The sky was
overcast, but it was warm and muggy, and I looked across
the courtyard in front of the hospital to the Johns
Hopkins University Hospital. A lot of brick buildings.
I walked in that direction, but the first place I came to
was the Baltimore City Art Museum, and it was free, so I
went in.

I didn't know that much about art, so I just walked
around, looking here and there, revelling in my freedom.
There were paintings on the wall, some sculpture on
stands which were well-lighted, nothing that really
caught my eye.

Then, I walked around the corner onto this

atrium/patio area, and there, although I didn't believe it for a few moments, was The Thinker. You know, that guy who is sitting there with his chin on his hand, the elbow on his knees, in deep thought. The sculptor, Rodin, which I then pronounced "Road Inn," was a great artist, and I read about him and his great statue which used to be outdoors in the courtyard in the Louvre, a museum in Paris. I had seen pictures of it, and I had read about it, but I couldn't believe it, here it was, in Baltimore. Maryland. USA.

I was going to leave, but I couldn't. I was paralyzed just looking at it. The massive hands perfectly carved were too much for me to walk away from.

I finally did leave, but promised myself that I would return again tomorrow. As I was going out the door, two ladies were entering, and I recognized one as the green-eyed beauty who rescued me in the hallway at admissions.

"Hey there," I called out.

"Excuse me?"

"Don't you remember me? I owe you a great 'thank you.'"

"I'm sorry, I don't know you," and she began to walk on. But she was so beautiful, I persisted.

"I'm Peal, Virgil Peal, you found me lying in the hallway about a week ago? Remember?"

"Oh, yeah, yeah, now I do." She smiled.

I extended my hand, and she took it in hers, soft, tender, warm. "Elaine Dowager. I see you're on your feet again?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Are you still in the hospital?"

"Well, yes, for the moment. They granted me Liberty for the weekend, but I have nowhere to go."

"So you came to the museum."

"So I came to the museum."

There was an awkward moment as we stared at each other, and then the other woman, pretty good sized, said, "Why don't you come to the Officer's club with us?"

"Oh, I couldn't, really--"

"Why not?" asked Elaine.

"Well, first off, I'm not an officer--"

"Oh, that's nothing, we aren't either, they let anybody go there."

"And secondly, they took me right from the bowling alley on governor's Island where I got hurt, and I have no money."

"Well, so what, I'll buy you a drink." That was the friend.

"Welllllll--"

"Oh, come on, Virgil, it'll be fun." That was Elaine, and how could I resist those absolutely green

eyes?

So off we went. It was a short walk to the officer's club, and Elaine was right, nobody asked for my ID or anything. We went up to the bar, sat down, and the friend, whose name I found out was Krista, started rummaging through her purse. In a minute, she pulled out these little, perforated coupons which were used to purchase alcohol in the club. She handed me a couple of dozen or so of them and said, "This should keep you happy for a while."

She was rotund, sweet, and friendly, but my eyes were on her pal. I turned to Elaine.

"My father's the police chief of Providence, Rhode Island."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I studied several years at the New England Conservatory of Music. Voice."

"Really."

"Yep, and the only reason I'm here is because I was going out with this guy, a black guy, back home, and my father didn't approve so he arranged for me to study Medical Administration here at the PHS."

"Really."

"You keep saying that like you don't believe me."

"I am sorry, it's just that it has been a long time since I was inside a bar, drinking a glass of Jack

Daniels, and listening to a beautiful woman talk, that, I don't know, it's been a long time."

"Really?"

"Yes, and I do believe you. Really."

Her nose was pointed, and her smile was real. I began to think that she was someone who would lightly laugh the whole time you were making love simply because she was so thoroughly delighted with it all. Each time she chuckled at something I said, or something she thought, I pictured her straddling me as I lay atop a bed with soft, scented linens, her hands holding her head and her fingers running through her own hair, gently tugging at the ends as she smiled, giggled, and writhed her way to a soul-wrenching--

"What are you doing here?"

I snapped my head around to see a brand spanking-new Ensign, rigidly standing there in his dress whites, even his hat, glaring at me.

"Excuse me?"

"Are you an officer?"

"No, I'm a patient, at the hospital."

"Well, you have no business in here. This club is for officers of the United States Navy. You'll have to leave."

"I'm sorry sir, did you say 'leave'?"

"That's right, now are you going to go, or am I

going to have to throw you out?"

I looked at Elaine, and he looked at Elaine, and it was plain to see that this was, in some form or another, his girl.

"You wanna go?" I asked her.

"No, but you better. I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you weren't allowed in here."

"Well, come on, let's go somewhere else. This place stinks anyway."

"What did you say?"

"I said," I stood up and slightly towered over the man, "'this place stinks anyway.'"

"That may be as a result of your presence here," was his reply.

Now, striking an officer is a serious offense, and I had no desire to go to the brig, then or ever, however I did want to punch his lights out, and the frustration got the best of me. I pretended like I was going to sneeze, held my hand up to my nose and squinted and all, and when my cue came, I reared my head back, and raised my foot up and, in one motion I blew spit all over his uniform and stomped down on his toe. Then, of course, I turned and ran.

Outside, it was raining, and I ran as fast as I could, expecting the little bastard to follow, but he did not. Nor did Elaine. Nor did Krista. I was on my own.

My back was aching a bit, but not badly, and I felt quite healthy. The Jack was making me feel pretty good, not to mention quite brave, and I went back to the ward, got my things, went down to the snack bar, placed a collect call to the only place that I could think of.

"Hello?" after the second ring.

"Hi, Ma, it's Virgil."

"Virgil, hi, how are you?"

"Well, not so good, really. I'm in Baltimore, the Hospital, and I've hurt my back."

"Oh, no, what happened?"

"There's no time for that, Mom, I'm okay now, but they're using me for a guinea pig. I need bus fare back to New York. Can you wire me about twenty-five dollars?"

"I don't understand, they wouldn't do that, would they? I don't think you should leave the hospital until they say you're ready."

"But, Mom--"

"No buts, you do what they say. The doctors know best."

"Oh, alright, but could you send me some spending money, please? They took me without giving me a chance to get a check cashed."

"What do you need spending money for?"

"Please, Mom, I need things. Stationary,

toothpaste, magazines--"

"Well, how much do you need?"

"--and the food here's awful, too. What?"

"How much do you need?"

"I need twenty-five dollars."

"Virgil, don't push me--"

"Mom, things are expensive. They're going to keep me for a long time."

"Why? What's the matter? What are you not telling me?"

"Nothing."

"Son?"

"Nothing, really. It's nothing."

"What's nothing?"

"Mom, PLEASE?"

"Okay, I'll send the money, but only if you promise not to use it to buy a bus ticket."

"I promise, now, I've got to go."

"Okay, Virgil. Keep in touch, will you? I'm worried."

"Sure. Thanks, Mom. 'Bye."

I hung up and walked over to the hospital "Media Center," the mail room actually, and told them that I would be receiving a moneygram from Western Union, and that I would be in the snack bar. And the man behind the

counter understood! There was no hint of stupidity in his expression, and he said he would call me as soon as the money arrived. Can you believe that? No mix-up whatsoever.

I sat in the little room alone, sipping a soda that I lifted off a ward cart while the attendant issued a meal to a patient. The snack bar was adequate, with two machines for food, cold drinks, candy, a microwave oven, and a table with condiments and plastic forks and spoons. I wondered about Trish.

I sat drumming my fingers against the formica top of the table I was sitting at when an old woman walked into the snack bar. She carried a bouquet of cut flowers and a couple of magazines, and she smiled without looking at me. Her navy blue London Fog was dripping as she studied each machine's contents carefully.

"The Steermaster is pretty good."

"What's that young man?"

"The Steermaster, the sandwich, is what I get when I come here." I motioned to the vending machine to her left. "Well, not me, really. My roommate, though, he says it's good."

"Oh, I was just looking for some gum or mints, that's all."

I helped her look, but there were none of either in any of the machines. I had not noticed.

"That figures, around here."

She tossed an agreeing glance back over her shoulder as she left, and the room was quiet again.

I decided that enough time had passed so I popped my head around the corner to the mailroom to see if my money had arrived. The place was dark. Empty. Closed.

Then I was on the steps of our church and I must have been about nine years old, waiting there with my camping gear--sleeping bag, tent, cooking gear, matches, knife, flashlight--waiting there for the church bus to come and pick us, although no one else had showed, to take us to Squanto for the weekend. It had rained incessantly for three days, but was beginning to clear up, and I just figured that the camping trip was on. Or 'hoped' may be a better word. I was looking forward to that camp out, boys and girls together, but, I mean, I was so pumped up about it, I was peaking with excitement. I could have gone over to the pastor's house next door to find out what was wrong, why was the bus late and all, but I just didn't want to find out that the trip had been cancelled. Or postponed. I hated those words.

So I would have to postpone my plans for another day, so what? So what? So WHAT? I could not wait.

I ran out the front door of the hospital, and to the adjacent officer's club which I had left so hastily earlier. I peered in the window on the front door, but

I saw no one I knew. Not Elaine, not Krista, not the boy ensign, so I decided to try my luck in there again. The rain had stopped.

There were a couple of guys at the bar, one dressed in his Navy Whites, but it was not my ensign, and he paid no attention to me. I stood there, looking about.

"Virgil?" The word, my name, came from my far right, and I turned quickly to see Krista sitting at a table with an Asian man who was obviously drunk, laying all over her.

I was pleased to see her, and told her so.

"Hey four-eyes, take a walk," the drunk addressed me.

"Shut up Ernie," and she slapped the arm of the man who was with her.

"Yeah, shut up Ernie."

His head swiveled around on its own accord, and he barely opened his eyes and looked at me for a long moment. "Okay," he slurred.

"Sit down, Virg, where'd you go?"

"Oh, back to the hospital snack bar to make a call."

"That was really something, you decking that idiot Davis like that. He's always making a jerk of himself."

"I'll tell you, Krista, I'm not usually a violent person, but lately I've been frustrated."

"Frustrated?"

"Yeah, this hospital and all."

"It must be hell being cooped up in there when you're not really sick, huh?"

"Mmm. But I'm going to change all that first thing in the morning."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm going back to New York in the morning."

"Are they discharging you?"

"Well, I'm being discharged, that much is true."

And I smiled.

"You mean you're just going to take off, just like that?"

"Listen, I'm being used for a guinea pig here, all these--" and I lifted my hand toward her Asian drunk friend--"need to train on somebody, y'know." She pushed his head off of her shoulder.

I was still standing, and I remembered the coupons she had given me earlier, so I ordered myself a glass of Jack Daniels at the bar and returned to her table to sit and sip. I slid in next to her and it was then that I realized that, while she was fat, she wasn't all that fat. She only looked so next to the slim Elaine.

"So, Virgil, you ever been to D.C.?"

"No," I looked over at Ernie, who was thoroughly passed out. "Is he your boyfriend?"

"Ernie?" She laughed. "No, he's just a regular

here, like me."

We laughed and talked some more, about the band, New York--she had never been there--and I began to freely tell her the whole story of Trish. She was so easy to talk to. She seemed so interested in me, and her eyes rarely left mine as I talked.

"I'm sorry, I'm going on and on--"

"No, don't apologize. I enjoy your company, really. And I love to hear your voice." She placed her hand on my thigh. "You're a nice guy, Virgil,"

"I don't think anyone ever called me that before. Thank you, Krista." And she leaned close to me and kissed me, the first time I can recall being the kissee instead of the kisser.

"Would you like to come home with me?"

"Yes," without thinking. I drained my glass.

Outside, the rain was subsiding, and the steamy night seemed perfectly matched to my spirit.

"You wanna drive?" she asked.

"You mean it? I haven't driven in a month or more. Yeah, I'd love to."

"It's the Pacer, over there."

The copper colored AMC Pacer smelled like strawberries inside, and it was very clean. Krista handed me a mess of keys and said "it's the big red one,"

and I inserted it in the ignition and turned the engine over.

"Go up to the stop light and make a left, then get on the expressway."

"How far away is it?" Anxious little bastard.

"Not far, twenty minutes or so."

Once on the highway, I began a conversation about, I forget now, but Krista was leaning next to me, kissing my ear, licking my neck, rubbing my thigh and crotch, and I was thoroughly distracted from driving, but managed to keep it between the lines and somewhere near fifty-five."

"You know what I want to do?," she whispered.

I shook my head.

"I want to give you a blow job."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah. Would you like that?"

"Mmmmm."

And she was an expert, I knew that right away. But I couldn't keep the car on the road as she worked me into a frenzy, so I said, "give me a sec," and pulled over into the breakdown lane where she went at it like a wild woman, rocking the entire car as she bobbed up and down and me, well I just lost it and let out an earth-shattering groan as I grabbed the back of her head and released from the ends of my toes and the top of my head a long-overdue orgasm.

As soon as I came I thought, What am I doing here? I'll tell you what I'm doing, I'm using this poor woman for sex, that's all.

"Whew, that was nice."

"Yes, it was. Now let's go to my apartment where you can return the favor."

I started the car, thinking, How do I get out of here?

Krista's apartment was nice, but like so many others around it that one would have difficulty finding it again after just one visit. Set in amongst about twenty other buildings exactly like it, it made me wonder why anybody would want to live there.

"Be right back," she said as she went off, presumably, to the bathroom. She dropped her purse on the kitchen table, which was small but in a cutesy sort of way. The galley-style kitchen was probably exactly like the one in the apartment upstairs, next door, down the street, and that thought scared me; I thought, These people are all alike, robots.

I opened Krista's purse and took out her wallet. She must have had two-hundred dollars in there. Plus credit cards. She was in the bathroom, I could have just taken off with it, money, cards and all, but I simply replaced it; stealing it, I reasoned, is something that

Trish would do.

"There." She came around the corner a second after I got her purse back in order and my hands back in my pockets, and I lifted my head gingerly to make sure that I wasn't caught.

She was now dressed in a beautiful, form-fitted, black dress, cut way down in the front to show her ample cleavage. Her dark hair fell down below her shoulders, and she had fresh lipstick and perfume, White Shoulders, I think.

"Wow, you look terrific."

"How about a drink?"

I approached her. "How about something else?"

"Better idea," she said, and we were like animals, all over each other, my hands immediately went to her chest, then one to her backside, which was large and hard, but I didn't care then. I pulled off the polo shirt I was wearing and she reached her hand down the front of my pants, grabbed the waistband and pulled me into the bedroom where we fell down onto her waterbed and I remember wondering if it could sustain the two of us.

She stopped abruptly, held my face in her hands a moment, and smiled. "I'm glad you're here, Virgil."

"I'm glad I'm here, too." And we were at it again.

In the morning, I cooked us some eggs and toast, and

we talked about going to D.C., but my mind was still on getting out of there, well, not there exactly, but Baltimore, so I said no to the day trip.

"But, Krista," I continued, "I wonder if I might borrow a little money. I've got to get out of this town today. I'm scared for my life."

"How much?"

"Please, I don't want you to think I'm begging, or that I'm some kind of creep, but--"

"Virgil, how much?"

I looked at her. She was smiling. "How much?"

"Well, thirty or forty ought to do it, and I'll pay you back--"

"Why don't I give you fifty bucks to cover it? And you don't have to pay me back."

"What? Of course I'll pay you back. What are you talking about? I'll send you the money from New York."

"No. Virgil, I'm ashamed to admit it, but you've been so open with me that, well,---I've paid men lots more for a lot less, if you know what I mean."

I couldn't believe it. I immediately felt sorry for her. She rummaged through her purse and pulled out her wallet. She handed me a twenty and three tens and I took it, still in shock and a little embarrassed.

"This is a loan," I said.

"If you like," and she took out her pen and wrote

down her address and phone number, handed me the slip of paper and I examined it. It was on one of those memo pads that says 'From the Desk Of:' and, underneath, 'Krista McIntire.' Until that very moment, I did not know her last name.

"Take me to the bus station?"

"A swim and a shower first," she said.

A swim! Now that sounded real good. Krista even had a pair of trunks, and we spent a half-hour or so at the pool at her apartment building. Then a nice warm shower, some Mexican food and then the Greyhound station, where she gave me a warm, tender kiss, and said 'goodbye.' I hate goodbye's, and wanted to cry out loud, and a voice inside told me that everything would be alright, but the lump in my chest provided skepticism enough, and a tear or two did make their way to my cheek.

I took my seat, in the back where I could smoke, and looked out over the Delaware as the coach made its way north. A lot had happened to me in a short period of time, but now I was gaining control of my own life once again. I tried to discern the exact feeling inside me, but found it difficult. I was what? Older? Yes, older. In a few days and one long night, I became aware of the quite pleasing sensation that I was growing up.

I awakened as we stopped in Trenton, from a dream that I found particularly interesting. And frightening. I was living on another planet, Mars, I think, and it was cold, winter with not a large amount of snow, but it was so white. The snow made the traveling a bit tough, but the thing I remember most is the sense that communication took much longer to get to us there, from the Moon where it originated. Funny, I never thought How did I know it took longer if I had no idea when it was transmitted? And every now and then, I would have this completely panicky feeling that I was isolated from Earth, a feeling that lasted only an instant in my dream, a feeling that was soon replaced by my own quiet comforting.

There were a few scattered homes on the planet, situated like the ones in the Old American West, next to each other, but generally it was desolate, empty.

Then Trish was on the television, saying, "See Virgil, this is your life, empty, a bottomless void with even horizons. You know why? 'Cause you don't care about anybody but yourself. You don't care about that fat bitch you just screwed, you don't care about me, you only care about Virgil." Here her face got distorted and it changed into my father saying, "And here you are again, running away from your problems instead of facing them like a man, like a man, like a man..."

The steady idling of the bus awakened me; the absence of the grinding engine and gears was peaceful enough, but it was the change in timbre that aroused me from the awful dream.

"Trenton, fifteen minutes rest stop." The driver, a man well into his fifties, called over the intercom, and I was happy to disembark for a few moments. I bought a Milky Way and a Pepsi, ate them, then popped a Marlboro into my mouth while I sat and watched the throng of hapless souls whose lot, or preference perhaps, it was to travel by motor coach, the "Scenicruiser," into the seediest neighborhoods up and down the east coast.

I watched one man as he sat, expressionless, on a bench while his stogie burned away in his mouth and the flies swarmed his thinning scalp. I wondered what the attraction was, what characteristic it was of his head that made the large flying insects select it over, say, mine? I imagined that he had spent the night in a dumpster somewhere, and the sweet stench of molding lettuce and fermenting tomatoes still lingered in his hair. Which probably wasn't too far from the truth.

Back on the bus, I quickly regained my semi-consciousness long enough to have another vivid dream. This time I was locked in a barn with a girl that I wanted to kiss so badly--I must have been about fourteen or fifteen--but didn't have the courage to do so. It was

so dark, and the smell of hay chaff on the barn floor added to the bright beam of full moonlight reaching in the only window to set my soul on fire. The thing about this dream is that it was real; it had happened just that way. Donna--I forget her last name now--she had somehow let the latch to the door fall from the outside when we went in there to hide during a game of hide-and-seek. We waited a long time as the voices called out "Donna!," and "Virgil?," but neither of us said a word. I know that she wanted me to do something, why else would she not speak up to the seekers? But I didn't do anything, and, finally, after a long silence she piped up, "In the barn, we're locked in!" And they let us out. Oh, they were smiling, and saying things about us, and Donna seemed satisfied with that.

But in the dream, the door opened and I started to run, fast, down the street to my house, and Donna was right behind me, running to catch me. I looked around as I ran and she had something in her hand, something slender, a few inches long, and she was saying, "Here, take this, Virgil, stop and take this, please?"

And my curiosity got the best of me, so I stopped.

"Here," she said, out of breath. "Take this. So it didn't happen, but that doesn't mean we can't pretend that it did, does it?"

"What do you mean," I asked.

"Just take it, and trust me, okay?"

And I finally dropped my eyes long enough to reach out and accept the item that she presented me with: A pen.

What did that mean? A pen? A pen.

The driver was shaking me, telling me that we had arrived, "Grand Central, son, welcome to New York."

Part IV.
New York, Part 2

Even though it was almost eleven P.M., I stopped off at the base post office long enough to find out that I was way overdrawn on my checking account.

"Overdrawn." The word resounded in my head, and, in a second, I was seated on the sofa in our living room with Chuck and Gretchen, trying to watch the Road Runner while Mom and Dad were in the kitchen, the door closed, screaming at one another.

"But Lewis, how did we get overdrawn?"

"I don't KNOW! You think I know everything?"

"Well, did you spend some money that we didn't have?"

"You're the one who always carries a check around in your purse. YOU probably spent it. What'd you buy Ellen? Huh? Some new offering plates for your church?"

"How dare you talk to me like that. You're the one who always squanders away every penny we ever get our hands on--"

"I've got to provide for this family. God knows you're not going to do it--"

"I'll have you know that I buy the groceries and see to it that the bills are paid every month. What do you do?"

"I'm the one who goes to work and busts my ass so that you can have money to buy groceries with. You think

that your measly part-time job brings anything extra into this house? Look at this!"

"What?"

"This. Three boxes of cereal? Two gallons of milk? What are we feeding here, an army?"

"They've got to eat, Lewis."

"Well, they can learn to eat less, God damn it. I can't afford for them to free-load much longer. Gretchen can get a job and bring some money into this house. And those boys, they are the laziest little bastards I have ever seen. I'll show them come saturday."

I was certain that any day would come the news that we were forever out of money and we would soon be moving to the street.

There were no less than eight notices of insufficient funds, each with a fifteen dollar charge attached to it, a hundred and twenty dollars. No wonder I was overdrawn. Of course, I wasn't able to deposit my monthly paycheck since I was in Hell for two and a half weeks. I thought about calling the bank and trying to work it out with them, but quickly realized that such a move was futile.

The rest of the mail was junk, and I threw the whole stack in a trash can as I walked to my quarters, still

thinking about the dreams, or more specifically, the dream. Why did Donna give me a pen? 'That doesn't mean we can't pretend that it did, does it?' That's what she said to me. Which is actually quite humorous because there had been occasions upon which I had indeed pretended that she and I had copulated in the excited quiet of that barn. Times alone when, without trying to, perhaps triggered by the scent of a new-mown hayfield, or the chance meeting of a woman whose figure reminded me of Donna, I would be transferred back to the barn, alone, with her willingness and the fragrance of her shampoo competing in the cool twilight air, and I would trade much of value for another chance.

So, in my room, which hadn't changed in my absence, I removed some stationary from my small desk drawer along with the hospital pen that I had somehow pocketed, and I began to write.

But it wasn't me really, it was something inside me, some force that remembered every detail of that night much better than I did. Especially the "No Trespassing" sign, the one that Donna's father hastily painted and hung on the barn door.

I built on that idea.

Then I thought of how Trish had made me feel when we first met, and I added that enthusiasm, that innocence, that passion.

And I remembered how she had hurt me, so the girl in the barn hurt the boy with, with---

A boyfriend! Yes. In fact, a fiance! A fiance in Viet Nam. Good.

I thought I was in love with Trish.

The boy in the barn thought he was in love. Pain, tears, an overload of emotion.

How, the boy finally asks, does one make the feeling go away?

Good, good. Not great, but not bad either. A story? Yes it was a story. It had a beginning, a middle and an end.

But not a title.

But of course, "No Trespassing," was the title. I didn't even have to think it up. It just was the title.

What I hadn't paid attention to was the time, and my stomach. It was ten-thirty A.M., and I was starving. Almost twelve hours had passed since I sat down with a pen and a few pieces of paper. My emotions ran from sheer joy to intense sorrow to impatience to panic. There was no denying it, though. Somewhere in the deep darkness of New York city, I had crossed an invisible boundary. I had seized upon the chance to identify myself, my short life, my fantasies.

In my youth, I was separated from the herd, wrestled to the ground, and held there while the red iron

was placed to my flesh, leaving the mark, leaving the scar for all to see. Now I wanted the chance again, the chance to fight back, to say "No, I'm not like the rest of the herd." The chance to allude the captors, the chance to outrun them, leave them in a cloud of dust.

None of us wants to be captured; the difference is that then, as I created something that wasn't there before, instead of simply not wanting them to capture me, I had a plan in case they tried.

I always knew I was different. Now, I had the proof.

I was a writer.

I had no idea what to do with my story, so I went to the library on base and checked out a copy of a book called "Writer's Market," which told how to go about publishing it. "Publishing it." Those words bounced around in my head for a while. How could I publish anything? Well, I scanned the catalogue but found nothing to indicate that any publisher out there would be interested in my little story about a boy's first sexual encounter.

As I was leaving, I noticed a glass case with a number of the classic novels from the American Modern period inside. One was "The Great Gatsby," by F. Scott Fitzgerald. I should have read that one already, in my senior year of High School, but I was much too rebellious to be forced into reading anything, and Miss Ammons knew it, too.

"What is it with you, Virgil? You have sooo much potential but you don't apply yourself. Why?" She was a half-foot shorter than me, with very short hair, and always wore very short skirts and dresses but they didn't stop her from sitting atop desks around the classroom, Indian style. Usually braless, she hadn't left me with a shred of attention span left for Fitzgerald or Twain or Dickens or Salinger.

"I don't know, Miss Ammons, I just think there's other things out there in the world that are more important than reading a bunch of books by a bunch of dead guys."

"Well, how do you expect to get out there if you don't pass this class?"

"Oh, I'll pass, I'm not worried about that."

She became furious.

"Bullshit! You think you're so much better than anyone else, don't you? Well, I'll tell you something, mister, you may have a gift and a flair for writing, but you'll never be a writer or anything until you learn that you have to work at it, give it all you've got, fail--a lot--and, perhaps most importantly, grow the fuck up!"

I had never heard a teacher use language like that before, and it struck me that she actually meant it.

"Look, Miss Ammons, I'm not like these guys we are reading in this class, they're successful, brilliant, they never worked for anything they got, they never failed--"

"What do you know? Why F. Scott Fitzgerald spent an entire summer in a hotel in my home town of Asheville, North Carolina doing nothing but getting drunk and tacking rejection slips from publishers upon the wall of his room. How do you like that?"

I heard what she said, but I didn't believe her.

But now, standing in front of that case, the hard-bound copy of Fitzgerald's most popular book looking out at me, I thought about what my english teacher had said again. I walked up to the counter.

"Excuse me," I spoke to the slender woman in a black dress, eyeglasses draped around her neck on a rhinestoned chain.

"How may I help you?" she smiled as she spoke.

"Where can I find a copy of 'The Great Gatsby?'"

She directed me to the shelf, but I couldn't find it, so I returned to the desk.

"It's not there."

"Perhaps it's checked out."

I marveled over the idea that the library contained only one copy of such a work.

"Let me check the shelf for you."

I followed her up the aisle, watching the intoxicating sway of the loose-fitting black fabric against the sides of her hips, and then she stopped, turned and her eyes followed the numbers on the bindings of book after book down and down until they fixed upon the next to the last shelf. My own were focused on the opening in the top of her dress as she stooped over, and the black undergarment which contained her breasts. We were alone and the room was quiet, and I was overcome by the intense excitement as my mind drifted to the thought

of just taking her in my arms, kissing her neck and slowly levitating the dress over her shoulders as we both slipped easily to the rust colored carpetin--.

"You're right, it's not here. I'll check to see when it'll be back in." And she brushed by me soft as lamb's wool, fragrant as fresh lemonade, and again I followed.

She checked a file. "It's due back on the fifteenth, that's ahh, three no, four days from now."

I turned to the case.

"What about that copy?"

"Oh," she chuckled, "you can't check out those copies, they're part of the library's private collection."

I simply did not move.

"I'll put a hold on it when it comes in, if you like." Her eyes only questioned.

"I want that one," and I pointed to the case, "today. Now. Please?"

"I'm sorry, that's not possible." And a tenseness hovered over the two of us for a few moments as I stared and did not breathe.

"Okay, okay. What else have you got by Fitzgerald?"

"Oh, lots," she seemed relieved at my acceptance as she made her way to the card catalogue.

But this time, my eyes did not follow the dress, but

went to the glass display case, followed by my hands, then my arms, and I lifted the top off of it, snatched the book from it's holder and bolted for the door.

"Hey!" is all I heard over my shoulder as I ran to my quarters.

Once inside, I opened the aging pages. On the inside cover in black ink was inscribed the following:

To Admiral Brian C. Midgett,
Commanding Officer USCG, Eastern
Fleet, December, 1931--Best Wishes
F. Scott Fitzgerald

A signed copy! It must be worth a fortune.

I opened and began to read.

'In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since.'

That's as far as I got before the heavy knock upon my door.

Quickly, I slid the book underneath my locker.

I opened gingerly and looked at the two, snappy-dressed, crisp blue with white ascoted members of the Shore Patrol.

"Seaman Virgil I. Peal?" asked one large young man with a crew cut and, quite evidently, no sense of humor.

"Yes, that's me.

"Seaman Peal," began the other one as he read from a small card in his hand, "you are under arrest. The charge is AWOL, absent without official leave." As he read, the first one turned me around and placed handcuffs on my wrists behind my back, asked me if there was anything I wanted to get before I left, I told him my cigarettes and my keys, he got them from my desktop and put them in the breast pocket of my shirt, and they led me away.

In the car, I knew that not much would be done to me; I had heard of others who had undergone similar humiliation only to get a couple of weeks restriction to base.

"Ah, excuse me, Petty Officer?"

The first one, who was in the passenger's seat, turned around.

"What's the deal here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why am I being arrested?"

"I can't tell you that. Just that you went AWOL."

" I see."

In the brig, an old building with creaking floors and mint-green painted brick walls, the formal charges were rendered.

The SP behind the desk made me stand at attention as he read from his clipboard.

"Seaman Virgil Isaac Peal, you are hereby charged with Absence Without Official Leave to the following: On or about nine July 1976, you failed to report to your regular duty station on Governor's Island, New York, to wit, the Bicentennial Band, and remained absent from your duty assignment for a period of twenty-two days without official leave or liberty from that assignment, until today, thirty July, 1976. Do you have anything to say on your behalf?

When, I thought, will I ever be amongst the human race again?

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I do."

"Sound off."

"I injured myself, my back specifically, at the on-base bowling alley--"

"Here, at Governors Lanes?"

"Yes, sir." The three men exchanged glances and easy grins.

"Go on."

"I was taken by base paramedics to the infirmary, here, on base, and subsequently transferred via ambulance to the United States Public Health Service Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, for testing and treatment." Well said, I thought.

"And when were you transferred back to this unit?"

"Ah, yesterday, sir."

"And your orders? You have your orders?"

"Ah, no, sir, I ahhh, I turned them to the O.D. yesterday."

"Is that a fact?"

"Yes sir," things were going so well.

"Well, Seaman Peal, it just so happens that I was the officer of the day yesterday, and I don't remember receiving your orders."

Oh shit.

"Officers," he spoke to the two who had brought me, "retain Peal here in custody until I can check this bizarre story out."

And they led me to a holding cell where the cuffs were removed and I rubbed my wrists and lit a smoke and wondered when this most terrible of nightmares would end.

Caged! There is no real way to describe how it feels to be locked in, isolated, with no way out. I looked out through the green bars, and back at the toilet in the corner of the small cell. It was clean, shiny actually, but it was so public. Any person who happened to be passing while I was in the most vulnerable position, seated on the white porcelain receptacle, could stand and observe without my ever having the luxury of

privacy.

Other than the toilet, though, I was alone. I panicked at the thought of freedom being ever so close, and yet completely out of reach. And the idiots! How did they not know that I was not AWOL, but that I was in that worst of prisons known as a military hospital?

Yeah, but as soon as they find out, they're going to know that I was never formally discharged.

And what if Hospodar learns of my proximity to him?

These thoughts were troubling, and I longed for something to distract my mind from them. A magazine or a book, perhaps.

The book! They never even asked about the book. I remembered thinking that it was the book they were after when I opened my door to them.

A deserter and a thief. What would Mother say?

"Where'd you get that, Tiger?" My Mom spoke as she finished drying the big, black iron skillet in which she had prepared salt pork and onions for the clam chowder we would have for dinner.

"Nowhere."

"What do you mean, 'nowhere'?"

I looked down at the miniature wax Coca-Cola bottle which once held the sweet green liquid that, I am sure, now smeared my six-year-old face.

"I found it."

"Found it? Where?"

"Beside the road, in front of the house." Possible enough, I thought. I put the empty container in my mouth to chew the wax.

"Don't put that in your mouth, you don't know where it's been!"

I obeyed, and I'm sure the quizzing was about to continue when the phone rang and I was saved by the bell.

Mom answered it.

"Yes? Yes. I see." Here she looked at me.

"I understand, no, no you were absolutely right to call. We'll be right there."

And she hung up.

I turned to walk out the front door.

"Sit!"

"What?"

"You know what. That was Mr. Grundy at the Five-and-Ten." Here she lowered her head to my level and employed that I'm-confused-I'm-disappointed-tell-me-the-truth-and-you-won't-be-punished-where-did-I-go-wrong look. "Did you take that candy without paying for it?"

I lowered my head to stare at the black and white linoleum floor.

"Look at me!"

I looked.

"Did you? Tell me the truth."

I HATED being caught, and my face gave me away. And I mustered all the strength I could call up, looked her right in the eye, and said, "No."

"Virgilllll."

"I didn't, Mom, honest."

"Mr Grundy says he saw you and that Philip in there a while ago, even though you are not to leave the yard by yourself, and he saw you stick that candy in the pocket of your shorts. Were you in the Five-and_Ten a few minutes ago?"

"No, I wasn't."

"Oh, why are you lying to me? Whoever taught you to lie to your parents? That Philip?"

"No, no one--"

"So! You are lying."

"No, I'm not."

But of course I was. I stole the tiny drink, and three others like it, from the Five-And-Ten which is, of course, outside the yard, but I just couldn't bring myself to tell the truth.

"Okay, Peal, let's go." The tall SP, the one who arrested me from my quarters, awakened me through the bars as he worked the lock. I stretched and looked at my watch. Seven-fifteen. Something told me 'A.M.'

"Where?"

"Just follow me," he said. I don't know why I expected a straight answer from him.

But it did feel good to be free. I looked over my shoulder at the cell that held me and noticed that it looked much bigger, from the outside. I walked behind the large petty officer and openly envied his physique.

"You're in pretty good shape."

"I work out at the gym a lot, and I run six miles a day, first thing in the morning. You ever work out, Peal?"

So this, I figured, was the way to get him to talk.

"Not much, not with weights or anything. I played a lot of sports in high school, and ran a lot. I was always running somewhere. Where'd you go to high school?"

He would have answered, I'm sure, but we were back at the desk and the man, his boss, was both seated and looming at his desk behind the two-part door, and his presence abruptly ended our little chat.

"Come in," he motioned to the steel and vinyl chair

opposite him.

As I sat, he shuffled papers, moving a big stack to his right, another to his left, which left him with a small stack of papers on top of a manila envelope. Out the window, I recognized the early morning shadows on the buildings, and realized that I had spent the entire night in that cell. I was glad that I had slept.

"I apologize. I checked your story out, and you were indeed telling the truth. How's the back, now?"

"Better, sir. Not perfect yet, but feeling better."

"You realize that sometimes mistakes are made, it's nobody's fault really, but a computer glitch here, a miscommunication there..." His voice trailed off as his attention was pulled away by a squawked message coming in over his walkie-talkie. He sat back in his chair and his head turned slightly to his right as his eyes focused in on the crackled voice. When it was done speaking, he returned to me, the message of no particular concern to him, I guess.

"But," he went on, "the hospital has no record of you being discharged, in fact, they were kind of looking for you. You know why--"

"--That place is a loony bin, they were using me for a guinea pig." He stared at me as I spoke, listening that trained listening of all cops.

"I see. Well, that's no problem. As long as you

are fit for duty, and I can tell that you are, the higher-ups are willing to overlook your desertion from the hospital." He smiled.

I nodded.

"However, they are unwilling to accept responsibility for any future action on your part, which brings us to these orders."

I looked at the papers in front of him as he let his glance fall to them, and I began to get the picture.

"Son, you are being shipped back to your station in New Hampshire, how do you like that?"

"But the band--"

"I know how you feel, Peal, but this assignment is only temporary, and you knew that when you took it."

"But--"

"--It's all taken care of. You leave tomorrow morning, and you are due back in Portsmouth on Saturday."

I counted in my mind. "That's five days. Why do I have to leave tomorrow?"

"Now look," he looked at the papers, "Virgil, the old man wants you out of here tomorrow. He, and I shouldn't be telling you this, but he, personally, called me to ask my assistance in this matter, and he stressed expedience. I don't know what you did to get on his bad side, but take my advice, do as he says, okay?"

I nodded and he did too, then stuffed the papers in

the large envelope, handed them to me, shook my hand and said, "I'll have Pinkman give you a ride back to your quarters."

"Thank you, sir," I replied, "but I prefer to walk a bit." I gave a quick bob of my head to Pinkman, the large SP, and went out the door.

God, the heat! It hit me as though an invisible parachute was opened in my face. All of a sudden I sensed that my insides were warming up, my whole body was energizing, loosening, my joints were supple from my ankles to my shoulders, and I began to immediately relax.

Back to New Hampshire, to New England, to Home. The idea became more than welcome, and I was astonished at my reaction. The last place I wanted to go was back out to sea, but somehow, the New England coast, the one that talked me into joining the Guard in the first place, was somewhere that I instantly longed to be. I picked up my pace on the short downhill that led to my barracks. My jog became a canter, then an all out sprint for my door.

I almost ran into Robbins, one of the drummers, as I quickly rounded the corner to my room.

"Hey, Man, where you been? Everybody's been lookin' for you." He was from Florida and he looked the part, tan, slim, blonde.

"I don't know, Rob, I don't know where I've been." I was out of breath. Gotta quit smoking, I thought.

"But I know where I'm going: Home!"

"What?"

"I'm being transferred back to my ship, back to New Hampshire, back home. Finally, out of New York at last!"

"No shit?"

I got my key into the lock and turned before I fixed my eyes on his. "No shit," I said, and turned the key.

Inside, a flurry of activity was taking place. Everything that I owned was now being prepared for transport. I emptied all of my clothes out of the locker, some of which hadn't been laundered for a while, and loaded them into a ditty bag. My camera, shaving kit, and other little things went into a small travel bag I had. There was my story, "No Trespassing," on the desk, and I just threw it into the bag with the other things. Stuffed, really. Somehow it just wasn't important, at least not as important as getting the hell out of there.

"You'll leave tomorrow..." that's what that Lieutenant said. But no, there would be no tomorrow in New York.

When everything was ready, I loaded my Mazda, took one last look at the island and her straightforward inhabitants, took my place in the driver's seat and started the engine.

Then I quickly shut it down.

I ran back to my room, crossed the tile floor and knelt down by my locker. I reached my hand under it, but felt nothing; a pang flew through my body as I bent lower to look.

It was there, I must have shoved it harder than I thought when the knock came to the door. I stuck it under my shirt and took it to my car, started the engine and pulled out of the parking lot and headed for the ferry.

At the stop sign to get onto the main road through the base, I had a moment to look around. Up above, the twin towers still held their vigil; one of the cutters remained in the harbor, be-flagged and ready for tours while the other performed the work for which it was intended, out to sea, in Cuba, preparing itself and her crew for the unexpected.

Down the road, four-hundred yards to the east, along the edge of the huge quadrangle stood the bowling alley. Surprising myself, I almost turned and drove there for one last look at the woman who had unceremoniously broken my will, my confidence, my heart. She would be shuffling papers, spraying shoes, all the time keeping one eye on the door for someone who she could pretend with for a while.

But what would I have said? "Hi Trish, thanks for

everything, see you soon, take care, fuck you?"

About the time I felt my chest heave for the third time, I thought about the night that Steve and I could barely make it back to our quarters across the great parade field, falling down every two or three feet. Then I remembered the picture and I flipped down my visor to see myself spread-eagle on the ground. Him and that camera.

I selected first gear and pulled out onto the road with a quick flick of my eyes once more at the bowling alley, and I was gone.

Of course, I had to stop at the band room to get my horn. I hoped nobody was there. I tried to tip-toe across the floor, but the aging oak boards in it gave slightly and creaked in the silence, filling the large room with the news of my presence.

"Going somewhere?" He didn't really smile, but I think he wasn't really angry.

"Yep." Henry was looking at me across the tops of his black horn-rims, his hands behind his head as he leaned back in his desk chair.

"Just gonna fly off like the buttons on a fat man's shirt? Without saying goodbye?"

"Goodbye, Henry." And I laughed.

"You are the worst fucking little prick, do you know that?" And then he was laughing, too. "Was it worth it?"

the pussy? Was it worth getting your ass flung back to that goddam ship? Didn't anybody warn you about something like this? Huh?"

I found my horn in the instrument locker.

"I'll say one thing, Virgil, you got balls."

I went into his office.

"And, you got talent. Do me a favor and don't turn your back on the music. I know you don't listen to me but--"

"--Henry," I held up my hand, "the music is everything to me. This horn, and my guitar," I motioned toward my car, "they've been the only things in my life that I ever felt I could turn to, the only friends who wouldn't turn their backs on me."

"I know, I know. Well, let me know how all of this turns out, will you?" And he dabbed at his neck with his handkerchief. "God," he continued, "it's hotter'n a half-fucked fox in a forest fire."

"Sure," and he shook my hand. I smiled, but I was about to explode in tears, so I turned, grabbed my trombone and left.

At the ferry terminal, I asked for Steve.

"He's gone, transferred out."

"When? Why? Where?"

The bored woman made a huge sigh as she stopped what

she was doing, which appeared to be nothing, then said methodically, "A week ago, they made him, an ice breaker, in Alaska."

"Nooo!," I said, not to her, but she still said, "Yeeesss."

I remembered someone in Boot Camp saying how they only sent you there when you really fucked up. It was isolated. Desolate. And so cold.

By the time I got to Hartford, the entire experience of the Big Apple seemed like a dream, and part of me wanted to return immediately. I felt as though here, in Hartford, or New Hampshire, or anywhere else, I was missing out on the clamor of a world where everything was taking place. Right now, I thought, there was something occurring in that city that I was completely unaware of. The band was getting ready to practice and I wasn't there. Trish was working over her desk and I wasn't there. Sailors were getting ready to have dinner and I wasn't there. The ferry was bringing in some new faces, people just like me a few months before, maybe even my replacement, and I wasn't there. And I realized that if life went on while I wasn't there, and nobody noticed, then probably no one noticed when I was.

I am halfway home before I remember that I drove to the meeting. Behind me, I can feel the glow of the lights of the city cooling, while ahead the quiet community that Hannah and I call our neighborhood lies dormant, its tiny creatures safe within the houses watching TV, correcting homework, applying conditioner to their hair.

Initially it was Hannah's idea to attend this meeting.

"But I'm not a 'grouping' sort of guy, babe."

"No one's saying you should pal around with them, or even that you have to go. Only that you should give it a try, nothing else seems to work."

She's right about that. I've seen counselors, therapists, shrinks, you name it. I've tried to have at it on my own. But last week, when I realized that I was becoming the man whom I loathed the most, the one person in the world that I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemies, I knew something had to give.

"Well, honey, I'll see what it's all about."

When I decided to go back to school to learn how to write, how to dispel upon the world of readers what it was that I had to say, it was at her suggestion. After all, she had her work. An artist who worked and shaped clay into not just pots and pitchers and bowls, but real sculpture, she knew that it would be her life's work before I even met her.

But me, I had no real skill for anything. Sure I loved to write, and had put a few things down on paper, but---

I walk underneath the overpass near our house, the one where the drunks and homeless stay to get out of the weather, and my footfalls echo louder. I walk quickly; one never knows the extent of the measures of one whose hunger, real hunger, is his motivation.

In fact, I jog. Swiftly.

I imagine the little woman at my heels--"I've read everything you've written"--and know that, whatever the amount, whatever the quality, as a writer, I'm mediocre at best. Not because I don't have rhythm. Not because I don't know structure. Not because I don't have talent. But because I've never had the ability to tackle the toughest of subjects.

Not true.

I've never had the time.

Nope. Not true either.

I mean, writing about the deflowering of a young man, or the fantastic reincarnation of a childhood friend as your own child, or the heinous mutilation of the hand of a great guitarist in a buzz saw, or a schizophrenic Viet Nam Veteran who drives a fork lift at a boatyard are all easy subjects to write about. What, I ask myself, now at a decent four-forty clip down the last leg to my house, is so different about them?

I stop abruptly.

They take no courage.

But I'm not afraid, I tell myself.

Bullshit, myself tells me.

Of what? I ask it.

No reply.

Afraid of what?! I demand.

Silence.