

Books by  
**JAMES BALDWIN**

GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN

NOTES OF A NATIVE SON

GIOVANNI'S ROOM

NOBODY KNOWS MY NAME

ANOTHER COUNTRY

THE FIRE NEXT TIME

NOTHING PERSONAL

BLUES FOR MISTER CHARLIE

GOING TO MEET THE MAN

THE AMEN CORNER

TELL ME HOW LONG THE TRAIN'S BEEN GONE

ONE DAY, WHEN I WAS LOST

NO NAME IN THE STREET

IF BEALE STREET COULD TALK

THE DEVIL FINDS WORK

LITTLE MAN, LITTLE MAN

JUST ABOVE MY HEAD

THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS NOT SEEN

JIMMY'S BLUES

THE PRICE OF THE TICKET

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**JAMES BALDWIN**



**Giovanni's  
Room**

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FOR LUCIEN  
*I am the man, I suffered, I was there.*  
—Whitman

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PART ONE



## O N E

I STAND AT THE window of this great house in the south of France as night falls, the night which is leading me to the most terrible morning of my life. I have a drink in my hand, there is a bottle at my elbow. I watch my reflection in the darkening gleam of the window pane. My reflection is tall, perhaps rather like an arrow, my blond hair gleams. My face is like a face you have seen many times. My ancestors conquered a continent, pushing across death-laden plains, until they came to an ocean which faced away from Europe into a darker past.

I may be drunk by morning but that will not do any good. I shall take the train to Paris anyway. The train will be the same, the people, struggling for comfort and, even, dignity on the straight-backed, wooden, third-class seats will be the same, and I will be the same. We will ride through the same changing countryside northward, leaving behind the olive trees and the sea and all of the glory

of the stormy southern sky, into the mist and rain of Paris. Someone will offer to share a sandwich with me, someone will offer me a sip of wine, someone will ask me for a match. People will be roaming the corridors outside, looking out of windows, looking in at us. At each stop, recruits in their baggy brown uniforms and colored hats will open the compartment door to ask *Complet?* We will all nod Yes, like conspirators, smiling faintly at each other as they continue through the train. Two or three of them will end up before our compartment door, shouting at each other in their heavy, ribald voices, smoking their dreadful army cigarettes. There will be a girl sitting opposite me who will wonder why I have not been flirting with her, who will be set on edge by the presence of the recruits. It will all be the same, only I will be stiller.

And the countryside is still tonight, this countryside reflected through my image in the pane. This house is just outside a small summer resort—which is still empty, the season has not yet begun. It is on a small hill, one can look down on the lights of the town and hear the thud of the sea. My girl, Hella, and I rented it in Paris, from photographs, some months ago. Now she has been gone a week. She is on the high seas now, on her way back to America.

I can see her, very elegant, tense, and glittering, surrounded by the light which fills the salon of the ocean liner, drinking rather too fast, and laughing, and watching the men. That was how I met her, in a bar in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, she was drinking and watching, and that was why I liked her, I thought she would be fun to have fun with. That was how it began, that was all it meant to me; I am not sure now, in spite of everything, that it ever really meant more than that to me. And I don't think it ever really meant more than that to her—at least not until she made that trip to Spain and, finding herself there, alone, began to wonder, perhaps, if a lifetime of drinking and watching the men was exactly what she wanted. But it was too late by that time. I was already with Giovanni. I had asked her to marry me before she went away to Spain; and she laughed

and I laughed but that, somehow, all the same, made it more serious for me, and I persisted; and then she said she would have to go away and think about it. And the very last night she was here, the very last time I saw her, as she was packing her bag, I told her that I had loved her once and I made myself believe it. But I wonder if I had. I was thinking, no doubt, of our nights in bed, of the peculiar innocence and confidence, which will never come again, which had made those nights so delightful, so unrelated to past, present, or anything to come, so unrelated, finally, to my life since it was not necessary for me to take any but the most mechanical responsibility for them. And these nights were being acted out under a foreign sky, with no one to watch, no penalties attached—it was this last fact which was our undoing, for nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than freedom. I suppose this was why I asked her to marry me: to give myself something to be moored to. Perhaps this was why, in Spain, she decided that she wanted to marry me. But people can't, unhappily, invent their mooring posts, their lovers and their friends, anymore than they can invent their parents. Life gives these and also takes them away and the great difficulty is to say Yes to life.

I was thinking, when I told Hella that I had loved her, of those days before anything awful, irrevocable, had happened to me, when an affair was nothing more than an affair. Now, from this night, this coming morning, no matter how many beds I find myself in between now and my final bed, I shall never be able to have any more of those boyish, zestful affairs—which are, really, when one thinks of it, a kind of higher, or, anyway, more pretentious masturbation. People are too various to be treated so lightly. I am too various to be trusted. If this were not so I would not be alone in this house tonight. Hella would not be on the high seas. And Giovanni would not be about to perish, sometime between this night and this morning, on the guillotine.

thing  
of  
Kerouac

To see what you mean and what you mean?

I repent now—for all the good it does—one particular lie among the many lies I've told, told, lived, and believed. This is the lie which I told to Giovanni but never succeeded in making him believe, that I had never slept with a boy before. I had. I had decided that I never would again. There is something fantastic in the spectacle I now present to myself of having run so far, so hard, across the ocean even, only to find myself brought up short once more before the bulldog in my own backyard—the yard, in the meantime, having grown smaller and the bulldog bigger.

I have not thought of that boy—Joey—for many years; but I see him quite clearly tonight. It was several years ago. I was still in my teens, he was about my age, give or take a year. He was a very nice boy, too, very quick and dark, and always laughing. For a while he was my best friend. Later, the idea that such a person *could* have been my best friend was proof of some horrifying taint in me. So I forgot him. But I see him very well tonight.

It was in the summer, there was no school. His parents had gone someplace for the weekend and I was spending the weekend at his house, which was near Coney Island, in Brooklyn. We lived in Brooklyn too, in those days, but in a better neighborhood than Joey's. I think we had been lying around the beach, swimming a little and watching the near-naked girls pass, whistling at them and laughing. I am sure that if any of the girls we whistled at that day had shown any signs of responding, the ocean would not have been deep enough to drown our shame and terror. But the girls, no doubt, had some intimation of this, possibly from the way we whistled, and they ignored us. As the sun was setting we started up the boardwalk towards his house, with our wet bathing trunks on under our trousers.

And I think it began in the shower. I know that I felt something—as we were horsing around in that small, steamy room, stinging each other with wet towels—which I had not felt before,

which mysteriously, and yet aimlessly, included him. I remember in myself a heavy reluctance to get dressed: I blamed it on the heat. But we did get dressed, sort of, and we ate cold things out of his icebox and drank a lot of beer. We must have gone to the movies. I can't think of any other reason for our going out and I remember walking down the dark, tropical Brooklyn streets with heat coming up from the pavements and banging from the walls of houses with enough force to kill a man, with all the world's grownups, it seemed, sitting shrill and dishevelled on the stoops and all the world's children on the sidewalks or in the gutters or hanging from fire escapes, with my arm around Joey's shoulder. I was proud, I think, because his head came just below my ear. We were walking along and Joey was making dirty wisecracks and we were laughing. Odd to remember, for the first time in so long, how good I felt that night, how fond of Joey.

When we came back along those streets it was quiet; we were quiet too. We were very quiet in the apartment and sleepily got undressed in Joey's bedroom and went to bed. I fell asleep—for quite a while, I think. But I woke up to find the light on and Joey examining the pillow with great, ferocious care.

"What's the matter?"

"I think a bedbug bit me."

"You slob. You got bedbugs?"

"I think one bit me."

"You ever have a bedbug bite you before?"

"No."

"Well, go back to sleep. You're dreaming."

He looked at me with his mouth open and his dark eyes very big. It was as though he had just discovered that I was an expert on bedbugs. I laughed and grabbed his head as I had done God knows how many times before, when I was playing with him or when he had annoyed me. But this time when I touched him something

happened in him and in me which made this touch different from any touch either of us had ever known. And he did not resist, as he usually did, but lay where I had pulled him, against my chest. And I realized that my heart was beating in an awful way and that Joey was trembling against me and the light in the room was very bright and hot. I started to move and to make some kind of joke but Joey mumbled something and I put my head down to hear. Joey raised his head as I lowered mine and we kissed, as it were, by accident. Then, for the first time in my life, I was really aware of another person's body, of another person's smell. We had our arms around each other. It was like holding in my hand some rare, exhausted, nearly doomed bird which I had miraculously happened to find. I was very frightened; I am sure he was frightened too, and we shut our eyes. To remember it so clearly, so painfully tonight tells me that I have never for an instant truly forgotten it. I feel in myself now a faint, a dreadful stirring of what so overwhelmingly stirred in me then, great thirsty heat, and trembling, and tenderness so painful I thought my heart would burst. But out of this astounding, intolerable pain came joy; we gave each other joy that night. It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love.

But that lifetime was short, was bounded by that night—it ended in the morning. I awoke while Joey was still sleeping, curled like a baby on his side, toward me. He looked like a baby, his mouth half open, his cheek flushed, his curly hair darkening the pillow and half hiding his damp round forehead and his long eyelashes glinting slightly in the summer sun. We were both naked and the sheet we had used as a cover was tangled around our feet. Joey's body was brown, was sweaty, the most beautiful creation I had ever seen till then. I would have touched him to wake him up but something stopped me. I was suddenly afraid. Perhaps it was because he looked so innocent lying there, with such perfect trust; perhaps it

was because he was so much smaller than me; my own body suddenly seemed gross and crushing and the desire which was rising in me seemed monstrous. But, above all, I was suddenly afraid. It was borne in on me: *But Joey is a boy*. I saw suddenly the power in his thighs, in his arms, and in his loosely curled fists. The power and the promise and the mystery of that body made me suddenly afraid. That body suddenly seemed the black opening of a cavern in which I would be tortured till madness came, in which I would lose my manhood. Precisely, I wanted to know that mystery and feel that power and have that promise fulfilled through me. The sweat on my back grew cold. I was ashamed. The very bed, in its sweet disorder, testified to vileness. I wondered what Joey's mother would say when she saw the sheets. Then I thought of my father, who had no one in the world but me, my mother having died when I was little. A cavern opened in my mind, black, full of rumor, suggestion, of half-heard, half-forgotten, half-understood stories, full of dirty words. I thought I saw my future in that cavern. I was afraid. I could have cried, cried for shame and terror, cried for not understanding how this could have happened to me, how this could have happened *in* me. And I made my decision. I got out of bed and took a shower and was dressed and had breakfast ready when Joey woke up.

I did not tell him my decision; that would have broken my will. I did not wait to have breakfast with him but only drank some coffee and made an excuse to go home. I knew the excuse did not fool Joey; but he did not know how to protest or insist; he did not know that this was all he needed to have done. Then I, who had seen him that summer nearly every day till then, no longer went to see him. He did not come to see me. I would have been very happy to see him if he had, but the manner of my leave-taking had begun a constriction, which neither of us knew how to arrest. When I finally did see him, more or less by accident, near the end of the summer, I

*beautiful things & fore shadows*

made up a long and totally untrue story about a girl I was going with and when school began again I picked up with a rougher, older crowd and was very nasty to Joey. And the sadder this made him, the nastier I became. He moved away at last, out of the neighborhood, away from our school, and I never saw him again.

I began, perhaps, to be lonely that summer and began, that summer, the flight which has brought me to this darkening window.

And yet—when one begins to search for the crucial, the definitive moment, the moment which changed all others, one finds oneself pressing, in great pain, through a maze of false signals and abruptly locking doors. My flight may, indeed, have begun that summer—which does not tell me where to find the germ of the dilemma which resolved itself, that summer, into flight. Of course, it is somewhere before me, locked in that reflection I am watching in the window as the night comes down outside. It is trapped in the room with me, always has been, and always will be, and it is yet more foreign to me than those foreign hills outside.

We lived in Brooklyn then, as I say; we had also lived in San Francisco, where I was born, and where my mother lies buried, and we lived for awhile in Seattle, and then in New York—for me, New York is Manhattan. Later on, then, we moved from Brooklyn back to New York and by the time I came to France my father and his new wife had graduated to Connecticut. I had long been on my own by then, of course, and had been living in an apartment in the east sixties.

We, in the days when I was growing up, were my father and his unmarried sister and myself. My mother had been carried to the graveyard when I was five. I scarcely remember her at all, yet she figured in my nightmares, blind with worms, her hair as dry as metal and brittle as a twig, straining to press me against her body; that body so putrescent, so sickening soft, that it opened, as I

*love of nostalgia*

clawed and cried, into a breach so enormous as to swallow me alive. But when my father or my aunt came rushing into my room to find out what had frightened me, I did not dare describe this dream, which seemed disloyal to my mother. I said that I had dreamed about a graveyard. They concluded that the death of my mother had had this unsettling effect on my imagination and perhaps they thought that I was grieving for her. And I may have been, but if that is so, then I am grieving still. *melancholia*

My father and my aunt got on very badly and, without ever knowing how or why I felt it, I felt that their long battle had everything to do with my dead mother. I remember when I was very young how, in the big living room of the house in San Francisco, my mother's photograph, which stood all by itself on the mantelpiece, seemed to rule the room. It was as though her photograph proved how her spirit dominated that air and controlled us all. I remember the shadows gathering in the far corners of that room, in which I never felt at home, and my father washed in the gold light which spilled down on him from the tall lamp which stood beside his easy chair. He would be reading his newspaper, hidden from me behind his newspaper, so that, desperate to conquer his attention, I sometimes so annoyed him that our duel ended with me being carried from the room in tears. Or I remember him sitting bent forward, his elbows on his knees, staring towards the great window which held back the inky night. I used to wonder what he was thinking. In the eye of my memory he always wears a grey, sleeveless sweater and he has loosened his tie, and his sandy hair falls forward over a square, ruddy face. He was one of those people who, quick to laugh, are slow to anger; so that their anger, when it comes, is all the more impressive, seeming to leap from some unsuspected crevice like a fire which will bring the whole house down.

And his sister Ellen, a little older than he, a little darker, always overdressed, overmade-up, with a face and figure beginning to

harden, and with too much jewelry everywhere, clanging and banging in the light, sits on the sofa, reading; she read a lot, all the new books, and she used to go to the movies a great deal. Or she knits. It seems to me that she was always carrying a great bag full of dangerous-looking knitting needles, or a book, or both. And I don't know what she knitted, though I suppose she must, at least occasionally, have knitted something for my father, or me. But I don't remember it, anymore than I remember the books she read. It might always have been the same book and she might have been working on the same scarf, or sweater, or God knows what, all the years I knew her. Sometimes she and my father played cards—this was rare; sometimes they talked together in friendly, teasing tones, but this was dangerous. Their banter nearly always ended in a fight. Sometimes there was company and I was often allowed to watch them drink their cocktails. Then my father was at his best, boyish and expansive, moving about through the crowded room with a glass in his hand, refilling people's drinks, laughing a lot, handling all the men as though they were his brothers, and flirting with the women. Or no, not flirting with them, strutting like a cock before them. Ellen always seemed to be watching him as though she were afraid he would do something awful, watched him and watched the women and, yes, she flirted with the men in a strange, nerve-wracking kind of way. There she was, dressed, as they say, to kill, with her mouth redder than any blood, dressed in something which was either the wrong color, or too tight, or too young, the cocktail glass in her hand threatening, at any instant, to be reduced to shards, to splinters, and that voice going on and on like a razor blade on glass. When I was a little boy and I watched her in company, she frightened me.

But no matter what was happening in that room, my mother was watching it. She looked out of the photograph frame, a pale, blonde woman, delicately put together, dark-eyed, and straight-browed, with a nervous, gentle mouth. But something about the

way the eyes were set in the head and stared straight out, something very faintly sardonic and knowing in the set of the mouth suggested that, somewhere beneath this tense fragility was a strength as various as it was unyielding and, like my father's wrath, dangerous because it was so entirely unexpected. My father rarely spoke of her and when he did he covered, by some mysterious means, his face; he spoke of her only as my mother and, in fact, as he spoke of her, he might have been speaking of his own. Ellen spoke of my mother often, saying what a remarkable woman she had been, but she made me uncomfortable. I felt that I had no right to be the son of such a mother.

Years later, when I had become a man, I tried to get my father to talk about my mother. But Ellen was dead, he was about to marry again. He spoke of my mother, then, as Ellen had spoken of her and he might, indeed, have been speaking of Ellen.

They had a fight one night when I was about thirteen. They had a great many fights, of course; but perhaps I remember this one so clearly because it seemed to be about me.

I was in bed upstairs, asleep. It was quite late. I was suddenly awakened by the sound of my father's footfalls on the walk beneath my window. I could tell by the sound and the rhythm that he was a little drunk and I remember that at that moment a certain disappointment, an unprecedented sorrow entered into me. I had seen him drunk many times and had never felt this way—on the contrary, my father sometimes had great charm when he was drunk—but that night I suddenly felt that there was something in it, in him, to be despised.

I heard him come in. Then, at once, I heard Ellen's voice.

"Aren't you in bed yet?" my father asked. He was trying to be pleasant and trying to avoid a scene, but there was no cordiality in his voice, only strain and exasperation.

"I thought," said Ellen, coldly, "that someone ought to tell you what you're doing to your son."



"What I'm doing to my son?" And he was about to say something more, something awful; but he caught himself and only said, with a resigned, drunken, despairing calm: "What are you talking about, Ellen?"

"Do you really think," she asked—I was certain that she was standing in the center of the room, with her hands folded before her, standing very straight and still—"that you're the kind of man he ought to be when he grows up?" And, as my father said nothing: "He *is* growing up, you know." And then, spitefully, "Which is more than I can say for you."

"Go to bed, Ellen," said my father—sounding very weary.

I had the feeling, since they were talking about me, that I ought to go downstairs and tell Ellen that whatever was wrong between my father and myself we could work out between us without her help. And, perhaps—which seems odd—I felt that she was disrespectful of *me*. For I had certainly never said a word to her about my father.

I heard his heavy, uneven footfalls as he moved across the room, towards the stairs.

"Don't think," said Ellen, "that I don't know where you've been."

"I've been out—drinking—" said my father, "and now I'd like to get a little sleep. Do you mind?"

"You've been with that girl, Beatrice," said Ellen. "That's where you always are and that's where all your money goes and all your manhood and self-respect, too."

She had succeeded in making him angry. He began to stammer. "If you think—if you *think*—that I'm going to stand—stand—stand here—and argue with *you* about my private life—*my* private life!—if you think I'm going to argue with *you* about it, why, you're out of your mind."

"I certainly don't care," said Ellen, "what you do with yourself. It isn't *you* I'm worried about. It's only that you're the only person

who has any authority over David. I don't. And he hasn't got any mother. And he only listens to me when he thinks it pleases you. Do you really think it's a good idea for David to see you staggering home drunk all the time? And don't fool yourself," she added, after a moment, in a voice thick with passion, "don't fool yourself that he doesn't know where you're coming from, don't think he doesn't know about your women!"

She was wrong. I don't think I did know about them—or I had never thought about them. But from that evening, I thought about them all the time. I could scarcely ever face a woman without wondering whether or not my father had, in Ellen's phrase, been "interfering" with her.

"I think it barely possible," said my father, "that David has a cleaner mind than yours."

The silence, then, in which my father climbed the stairs was by far the worst silence my life had ever known. I was wondering what they were thinking—each of them. I wondered how they looked. I wondered what I would see when I saw them in the morning.

"And listen," said my father suddenly, from the middle of the staircase, in a voice which frightened me, "all I want for David is that he grow up to be a man. And when I say a man, Ellen, I don't mean a Sunday school teacher."

"A man," said Ellen, shortly, "is not the same thing as a bull. Good-night."

"Good-night," he said, after a moment.

And I heard him stagger past my door.

From that time on, with the mysterious, cunning, and dreadful intensity of the very young, I despised my father and I hated Ellen. It is hard to say why. I don't know why. But it allowed all of Ellen's prophecies about me to come true. She had said that there would come a time when nothing and nobody would be able to rule me, not even my father. And that time certainly came.

It was after Joey. The incident with Joey had shaken me pro-

foundly and its effect was to make me secretive and cruel. I could not discuss what had happened to me with anyone, I could not even admit it to myself; and, while I never thought about it, it remained, nevertheless, at the bottom of my mind, as still and as awful as a decomposing corpse. And it changed, it thickened, it soured the atmosphere of my mind. Soon it was I who came staggering home late at night, it was I who found Ellen waiting up for me, Ellen and I who wrangled night in and night out.

My father's attitude was that this was but an inevitable phase of my growing up and he affected to take it lightly. But beneath his jocular, boys-together air, he was at a loss, he was frightened. Perhaps he had supposed that my growing up would bring us closer together—whereas, now that he was trying to find out something about me, I was in full flight from him. I did not *want* him to know me. I did not want anyone to know me. And then, again, I was undergoing with my father what the very young inevitably undergo with their elders: I was beginning to judge him. And the very harshness of this judgment, which broke my heart, revealed, though I could not have said it then, how much I had loved him, how that love, along with my innocence, was dying.

My poor father was baffled and afraid. He was unable to believe that there could be anything seriously wrong between us. And this was not only because he would not then have known what to do about it; it was mainly because he would then have had to face the knowledge that he had left something, somewhere, undone, something of the utmost importance. And since neither of us had any idea of what this so significant omission could have been, and since we were forced to remain in tacit league against Ellen, we took refuge in being hearty with each other. We were not like father and son, my father sometimes proudly said, we were like buddies. I think my father sometimes actually believed this. I never did. I did not want to be his buddy; I wanted to be his son. What passed be-

Parental  
boundaries

tween us as masculine candor exhausted and appalled me. Fathers ought to avoid utter nakedness before their sons. I did not want to know—not, anyway, from his mouth—that his flesh was as unregenerate as my own. The knowledge did not make me feel more like his son—or buddy—it only made me feel like an interloper, and a frightened one at that. He thought we were alike. I did not want to think so. I did not want to think that my life would be like his, or that my mind would ever grow so pale, so without hard places and sharp, sheer drops. He wanted no distance between us; he wanted me to look on him as a man like myself. But I wanted the merciful distance of father and son, which would have permitted me to love him.

One night, drunk, with several other people on the way back from an out-of-town party, the car I was driving smashed up. It was entirely my fault. I was almost too drunk to walk and had no business driving; but the others did not know this, since I am one of those people who can look and sound sober while practically in a state of collapse. On a straight, level piece of highway something weird happened to all my reactions, and the car sprang suddenly out of my control. And a telephone pole, foam-white, came crying at me out of the pitch darkness; I heard screams and then a heavy, roaring, tearing sound. Then everything turned absolutely scarlet and then as bright as day and I went into a darkness I had never known before.

I must have begun to wake up as we were being moved to the hospital. I dimly remember movement and voices, but they seemed very far away, they seemed to have nothing to do with me. Then, later, I woke up in a spot which seemed to be the very heart of winter, a high, white ceiling and white walls, and a hard, glacial window, bent, as it seemed, over me. I must have tried to rise, for I remember an awful roaring in my head, and then a weight on my chest and a huge face over me. And as this weight, this face, began

to push me under again, I screamed for my mother. Then it was dark again.

When I came to myself at last, my father was standing over my bed. I knew he was there before I saw him, before my eyes focused and I carefully turned my head. When he saw that I was awake, he carefully stepped closer to the bed, motioning to me to be still. And he looked very old. I wanted to cry. For a moment we just stared at each other.

“How do you feel?” he whispered, finally.

It was when I tried to speak that I realized I was in pain and immediately I was frightened. He must have seen this in my eyes, for he said in a low voice, with a pained, a marvellous intensity, “Don’t worry, David. You’re going to be all right. You’re going to be all right.”

I still could not say anything. I simply watched his face.

“You kids were mighty lucky,” he said, trying to smile. “You’re the one got smashed up the most.”

“I was drunk,” I said at last. I wanted to tell him everything—but speaking was such agony.

“Don’t you know,” he asked, with an air of extreme bafflement—for this was something he could allow himself to be baffled about—“better than to go driving around like that when you’re drunk? You know better than that,” he said, severely, and pursed his lips. “Why you could all have been killed.” And his voice shook.

“I’m sorry,” I said, suddenly. “I’m sorry.” I did not know how to say what it was I was sorry for.

“Don’t be sorry,” he said. “Just be careful next time.” He had been patting his handkerchief between his palms; now he opened his handkerchief and reached out and wiped my forehead. “You’re all I’ve got,” he said then, with a shy, pained grin. “Be careful.”

“Daddy,” I said. And began to cry. And if speaking had been agony, this was worse and yet I could not stop.

And my father’s face changed. It became terribly old and at the same time absolutely, helplessly young. I remember being absolutely astonished, at the still, cold center of the storm which was occurring in me, to realize that my father had been suffering, was suffering still.

“Don’t cry,” he said, “don’t cry.” He stroked my forehead with that absurd handkerchief as though it possessed some healing charm. “There’s nothing to cry about. Everything’s going to be all right.” He was almost weeping himself. “There’s nothing wrong, is there? I haven’t done anything wrong, have I?” And all the time he was stroking my face with that handkerchief, smothering me.

“We were drunk,” I said. “We were drunk.” For this seemed, somehow, to explain everything.

“Your Aunt Ellen says it’s my fault,” he said. “She says I never raised you right.” He put away, thank heaven, that handkerchief, and weakly straightened his shoulders. “You got nothing against me, have you? Tell me if you have?”

My tears began to dry, on my face and in my breast. “No,” I said, “no. Nothing. Honest.”

“I did the best I could,” he said. “I really did the best I could.” I looked at him. And at last he grinned and said, “You’re going to be on your back for awhile but when you come home, while you’re lying around the house, we’ll talk, huh? and try to figure out what the hell we’re going to do with you when you get on your feet. OK?”

“OK,” I said.

For I understood, at the bottom of my heart, that we had never talked, that now we never would. I understood that he must never know this. When I came home he talked with me about my future but I had made up my mind. I was not going to go to college, I was not going to remain in that house with him and Ellen. And I maneuvered my father so well that he actually began to believe that my

finding a job and being on my own was the direct result of his advice and a tribute to the way he had raised me. Once I was out of the house of course, it became much easier to deal with him and he never had any reason to feel shut out of my life for I was always able, when talking about it, to tell him what he wished to hear. And we got on quite well, really, for the vision I gave my father of my life was exactly the vision in which I myself most desperately needed to believe.

For I am—or I was—one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower, on their ability to make a decision and carry it through. This virtue, like most virtues, is ambiguity itself. People who believe that they are strong-willed and the masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception. Their decisions are not really decisions at all—a real decision makes one humble, one knows that it is at the mercy of more things than can be named—but elaborate systems of evasion, of illusion, designed to make themselves and the world appear to be what they and the world are not. This is certainly what my decision, made so long ago in Joey's bed, came to. I had decided to allow no room in the universe for something which shamed and frightened me. I succeeded very well—by not looking at the universe, by not looking at myself, by remaining, in effect, in constant motion. Even constant motion, of course, does not prevent an occasional mysterious drag, a drop, like an airplane hitting an air pocket. And there were a number of those, all drunken, all sordid, one very frightening such drop while I was in the Army which involved a fairy who was later court-martialed out. The panic his punishment caused in me was as close as I ever came to facing in myself the terrors I sometimes saw clouding another man's eyes.

What happened was that, all unconscious of what this ennui meant, I wearied of the motion, wearied of the joyless seas of alcohol, wearied of the blunt, bluff, hearty, and totally meaningless

friendships, wearied of wandering through the forests of desperate women, wearied of the work, which fed me only in the most brutally literal sense. Perhaps, as we say in America, I wanted to find myself. This is an interesting phrase, not current as far as I know in the language of any other people, which certainly does not mean what it says but betrays a nagging suspicion that something has been misplaced. I think now that if I had had any intimation that the self I was going to find would turn out to be only the same self from which I had spent so much time in flight, I would have stayed at home. But, again, I think I knew, at the very bottom of my heart, exactly what I was doing when I took the boat for France.

*finding oneself and  
running away from  
oneself.*