

## **Rain Stopped; Clouds Blew to the Rising Sun**

James started up the outside stairs to his apartment.

Cindy walked out of her house next door and let the screen door slam shut behind her.

James turned. Cindy looked up at James, compactly built, light brown hair, tan, watching her in the heat of Sacramento Valley summer sunshine.

He stood on the third step, touched the outside rail of the staircase, and looked at Cindy. Shiny black hair, loose to her shoulders, highlighted red in sunlight, framed her pale, high cheek-boned face.

A huge maple tree, brown, black, and green, interrupted the blue summer sky above James.

Cindy asked, "Do you live up there?"

"Yes."

"I never saw you before."

"I just moved in. Yesterday."

She turned and walked away. Her high heels tapped the concrete sidewalk.

James sat in the open window of his apartment and studied for a test. The maple tree spread densely-leaved branches above the roof and above James in the white wall of the second story. Heat soaked through his shoes. He pulled his feet up onto the window sill, into the maple tree's shade. The odor of wood, hot in sunshine, of paint on wood, of newly watered lawn drifted in summer sunshine.

Thirty pages later, he heard Cindy's high heels tapping on concrete. He looked up and watched motion through spaces between branches, between green leaves of the black oak tree shading the sidewalk.

Heat washed the side of the house and flooded over him.

Cindy walked into sunlight, tapped up her concrete walk, pulled open the screen door, and looked up at James.

She said, "You'll fall out of there."

"No such luck."

"What are you reading?"

"Biology."

She said, "We're having a cast party here tonight at nine. You're invited."

"Thank you. I'll be there."

Dark settled into the valley. Street lamps shone into the hot

night.

James walked down the stairs, crossed the small front lawn, and knocked.

Cindy opened her screen door and said, "Come in. We're just getting started. About half the people are here so far."

Guitar music from the record player filled the old house, with its high ceilings, ornate chandeliers, and tall, narrow windows. People danced or stood on the faded red, tan, and black rug and talked in pairs and in groups.

Cindy introduced James to people. He wouldn't remember most of their names. Most of them wouldn't remember his name. Everyone drank.

James followed Cindy into the kitchen. Bottles of liquor lined the kitchen counter. Beer filled the refrigerator. He said, "I didn't bring anything to drink. I'll go downtown and get something."

"You're my guest. I'll supply your drinks if you'll drink cognac and coke." She got ice from the refrigerator, mixed a drink, and handed it to him. He sipped it, a strong drink, but he decided he liked the taste of cognac.

Cindy said, "All the people here worked on the play at the college. Actresses, actors, make-up people. This is Art. He took care of lighting. This is Andrea. She does makeup. She helps with costumes and the script during rehearsal. A Jacqueline of all trades. A very essential woman.

"Hey, you guys, get whatever ice you want from the freezer on the back porch when we run out in the refrigerator. I bought fifty pounds. That should be enough, but if it isn't, somebody go buy some more."

Heat filled the Sacramento Valley. Windows and doors stood open, screened against what flies or crawls through summer nights.

"Did you see the play?"

"No, I didn't know about it."

"*The Crucible*. Henry Miller wrote it. I'm Ann Putnam. Do you know the play?"

"No. I don't know anything about theater."

"You're missing out. You should make it part of your education. What's your major?"

"I started in math. I switched to sociology. I think I'm going to switch to psychology."

"Psychologists make more money than sociologists. Mathematicians probably make a lot of money, but math would be boring enough to grow mold on your brain."

Cindy circulated among the people, but she returned to James. "How's the drink? Gee, you're slow. What's that, your

second drink? Oh well, I guess everybody doesn't have to get falling down drunk."

Everyone talked about theater. The conversations didn't interest James much. He danced with Cindy. The song ended, and she walked away. He watched her. She moved among the people, interested in their conversations, lithe and animated.

After midnight, people left, mostly by twos. A few stayed; some of the people were quite drunk.

Guitar music and a deep voice filled the room. "There is a house in New Orleans, they call the rising sun ..."

Cindy sat down on the floor and leaned against the wall in the living room. She looked up at James and patted the rug beside her.

He sat down. Then he lay down, put his head in her lap, and looked up at her.

She said, "Your eyes are amazing. They're green and yellow and brown, all different colors mixed together."

He said, "That's hazel, they call it."

She traced the contours of his face with her fingers. He watched her blue eyes. She leaned down. Her soft, shining black hair circled his face.

She touched her lips to his lips. She moved her tongue across his lips. He touched her tongue with his tongue. Her breasts pressed against his face. She said, "Let's go in my room."

A dresser of old, dark wood stood against the white wall in her room, opposite the tall window, and supported a big, bevel-edged mirror in an oval frame. A double bed with a white bedspread filled the center of the room.

Cindy pulled the curtain closed over the doorway, turned to James, and they held each other and kissed.

"Let the Midnight Special shine her everlovin' light on me ..." From the living room record player, rich guitar tones and a deep, resonant voice filled the hot Sacramento Valley night like a dream caressing James and Cindy, closely entwined.

The man finished singing. Full guitar tones still resonated through the hot night.

Cindy drew away from James, pulled the covers back on the bed, and undressed. James undressed, and they lay together on the bed and kissed and caressed each other.

She lifted her pelvis to his probing erection. He entered her, raised her buttocks with his hands, and thrust into her.

Grey daylight intruded into the black sky before they slept.

James woke at noon. The night's strenuous exercise had burned the alcohol out of him. He felt good, no hangover.

He got out of bed and dressed quietly. Fresh smells of

morning withered in the day's heat. Cindy's odors and his lingered, odors of perspiration, his sexual fluids, Cindy's. Cindy turned in bed and looked up at him. "Do you need a full-time mistress?"

"Yes, I do."

She said, "You're incredible. You came seven times last night."

Detailed memory of parts of the night had slipped away from him to alcohol. He thought, "I don't think so. Maybe three times and collapsed in temporary exhaustion several times," but he didn't say it.

They walked downtown together, looking for a meal. She said, "Let's keep this on a strictly physical basis."

Midday heat poured from the sun above them. Heat rose from the concrete sidewalk and the asphalt street. Asphalt stank in sunshine's heat. Newer, smaller trees grew downtown.

"Okay."

In the days that followed, he climbed the stairs to his apartment only to get what he needed, as he needed it.

Cindy said, "You don't own much, do you? Why pay rent on two places? You can move the rest of your stuff in here and let that place go, if you want to. Why rent two places?"

Leaves turned myriad shades of yellow, red, and brown and drifted to the ground. Geese flew from north and landed on farmland near town. Some geese took to wing again and flew farther south, calling as they flew. The sound of their voices carried a long way in cold, clear, early mornings.

James heard the geese and woke. Cindy woke, turned and looked at him, curled against him, and slept again.

Smells of leaves dying, of grass bleaching yellow, of cold wind blowing from the mountains, drifted across the valley.

James stirred with restlessness, then slowly settled down. He was where he wanted to be.

Lightning and thunder blew down the valley. Wind tore the last leaves from trees and blew them into gutters. Rain blew in hard wind.

Machines, stinking of burning diesel fuel, vacuumed up leaves, mixed them with metal, glass, and plastic garbage in the city dump, and buried them irretrievably.

James asked Cindy to marry him. She said no. She said, "You love me too much. I don't want to be owned."

Wind howled through town. Deciduous trees stood naked against winter. Wind roared around the small house. Lightning's brilliant flashes poured sudden light in the windows. Thunder shook the house.

James and Cindy clung to each other in the night. Rain

hammered the house.

They lay together, sleepy after love. She said, "I'm pregnant."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I'm sure."

He looked at her face in light from the street lamp penetrating the curtains into their room. "Now will you marry me?"

"I can have an abortion."

She watched his eyes. She said, "I don't have to be married to have a baby."

## 2

Two o'clock in the morning, fog engulfed the town. Cindy woke James. "It's time," she said, "I'm having contractions about three minutes apart."

He drove deserted streets into fog, rolled slowly from corner to corner. Street lights and signs emerged from cold fog. Cindy sat beside James and rested her hand on his leg. She breathed deeply and gripped his thigh hard when her uterus contracted in preparation for birth.

She said, "Whoa. That one was really hard. This baby might not care if it's foggy or not."

Fog rose from the cold earth. Night smelled like cold, moist earth. James said, "I can run in and have them come out and get you."

"I'm not staying out here alone in this foggy, dark night. If he comes on the way in, you can catch him and keep him from cracking his head on the asphalt. I'll hold tight to you. We'll make it."

Fog thickened around James and Cindy as they walked from the parking lot into the hospital. Cindy stopped, leaned into her contraction, and then walked again.

James waited alone in the stark, white room. Day began to light up fog settled heavily on the hospital. A nurse walked into the room and asked him, "Are you Mr. Riley?"

He turned from the window and faced her. "Yes. I am."

"You have a son. If you'll follow me." He followed the white-clothed nurse down the white-floored hall that smelled like disinfectant and unknown chemicals and looked through thick glass at his son, tiny, sleeping.

Fog rose into winter sunshine and dissipated into the pale sky.

James walked into Cindy's room. Puffy-eyed and groggy from the drugs they had given her, Cindy smiled at James,

reached, and held his hands. She asked him, "How long do we have to wait before we can have sex?"

"I don't know. I'll ask the doctor."

Two days later, he took Cindy and Ian home. Cindy lay against him in bed. James was erect and ready, but it was too soon to enter her. He said, "Come on, Cindy."

"No."

He touched her, kissed her, and caressed her. She responded with her hands, caressed and stroked, and then with her mouth.

Almost always, before Ian was born, Cindy had been eager for sex. Often, after the birth, she resisted.

James caressed her and tried to persuade her, "Come on, Cindy."

"No. I'm going to sleep. Leave me alone."

He persisted, gently but insistently. His persistence exalted her resistance. Sometimes, exultant in power, she yielded.

He didn't try to overpower her resistance. He knew force would destroy the delicate dance that built fire in both of them.

Sometimes, Cindy didn't resist James. Just as often, no amount of careful persistence brought her to yield.

Sometimes, James felt wildly frustrated that Cindy held the power of yes or no.

Cindy said, "Men and women have equal power. I don't have any more power than you do."

James's excitement and satisfaction when she did yield defused the frustration and powerlessness he felt when she would not yield.

He created himself each day according to the demands around him. He held an atheistic view of the world, a skeptical, cynical approach to everything around him, because he thought atheism, skepticism, and cynicism formed a stylish foundation for existence, a way to think that seemed to cover existence. Or maybe he thought that way because it was the only way he knew how to think.

Much of what he tried to be didn't fit him. He had had little guidance. He didn't yet know myriad directions lay before him, and he could choose where he would go.

Cindy chose directions and patterns of existence truer to herself, though James didn't see that. He wasn't blind. He suffered an illness common in the culture. He revised what he learned to fit what he already understood rather than expanding his perspective to include new information.

Cindy and James both worked, and they both went to school, part time each or alternating full time, whatever worked. For a while, they stopped going to school. They both worked full time at a die-casting factory on the edge of town.

Weekends, they partied or drank and danced in bars.

Two years after Ian was born, Cindy said, "I'm pregnant."

James said, "Seems like having two children together says we're committed to each other. Let's get your mother to take care of Ian, and let's drive to Reno and get married."

She measured him from deep in her blue eyes. Then she said, "Okay. Let's do that."

A week before they planned to go, she said, "Why get married?" She said, "It's been going fine the way it is. Why chance messing it up?"

James didn't say what came first into his mind. He said, "Okay. We'll go on the way we've been going. Why chance messing things up? People die from becoming too conventional."

Two days later, Cindy said, "We arranged everything. Let's go ahead and do it."

They drove to Reno and married. They came back, made a down payment on a house and moved in, out on the east edge of town, where a housing development grew toward the freeway.

Early in summer, the sun rose above the mountains on a cool morning. James helped Cindy into the car and drove her to the hospital, supported her across the asphalt parking lot into the hospital, and she gave birth to Heather.

Two days later, James took Heather and Cindy home. They settled into a quiet routine.

Friday morning of the third week at home, Cindy said, "If I don't get out of here and see some people and find some activity, I'm going to go crazy." She called friends and found out about a party.

Saturday evening, James and Cindy drove across town to the party and parked their car at the curb. The day's light washed out of the sky. Cindy's high heels tapped a strong rhythm on the concrete sidewalk as they walked from the car to the house. They danced and drank and talked to people.

Lela took care of both their children as willingly as she had taken care of Ian, so Cindy and James again partied or drank and danced in bars every weekend.

Late that autumn, James laced his belt through the loops and buckled it. Cindy walked out of the bathroom into the bedroom. She dropped her towel on the floor and stood naked in front of the mirror. "Does it look to you like I'm pregnant?"

James dropped the shoe he had started to put on and looked up at her from where he sat on the edge of the bed. "Have you missed any pills?"

"No."

"Are you late for your period?"

"No."

"Then what made you think about it?"

"I don't know. I just thought, what if I'm pregnant? I look a little bulgy, don't you think?"

"You aren't pregnant. You couldn't be."

"I guess not." She started dressing. She said, "It's time to go get the baby sitter."

"I know. I'm on my way."

Cindy and James tucked Heather and Ian into their beds, kissed them goodnight, gave the babysitter a phone number and instructions, and walked out the front door into rain. James opened the car door for Cindy and closed it after she got in. He walked around and got in under the steering wheel, started the motor, and backed out into the street, then drove down the street toward town.

Rain poured down harder. Water ran down gutters beside sidewalks and into subterranean drains.

They turned into an older subdivision, parked and walked a block in hard rain. James opened a black umbrella and held it over both of them. To protect Cindy from the rain, he had to allow his left shoulder and arm to get wet. That didn't bother him.

Cindy's high heels tapped a sharp rhythm on the concrete sidewalk. Under the sidewalk, a pipe carried rainwater seaward. The rapid sound of water rumbled up through concrete.

Behind the house back among big black oaks, a stream ran. The streets and sidewalks received electric light from lamps high above them on metal poles. The stream behind the house ran dark through the shadow of the house, shadows of tall trees growing thick with dense, dark leaves. Rain fell into the rushing stream and ran oceanward with waters that flowed down from mountains rising east above the valley.

Except for Stan, James and Cindy were the only Caucasians at the party. It wasn't a source of discomfort to them, nor to the people there. They knew everyone there. They had been to parties like this before, some of them at this house.

Winky said, "We was thinkin you floated away down to the ocean in a flood."

Barbara said, "If it don't quit raining, everybody gonna have to start swimming. I never seen so much rain."

"Me, I'm so tired of this rain, I'm gettin out of here and movin to the desert."

"If this rain don't quit, you gonna need a boat to leave here."

"You gonna have to hire you a dove to fly out and find the desert for you."

The sound of rain drumming on the roof drowned in loud

music from the record player. People danced in the living room and congregated in the kitchen, drank and talked.

James danced, talked, walked into the kitchen for another drink. He started the night determined not to get too drunk. Someone had to drive home, and he knew Cindy wouldn't be in shape to drive. He didn't want to have a hangover in the morning. He danced and talked.

He crossed through the living room, crowded with dancers, went into the bathroom, shut the door, locked it, and urinated. He smelled all the people before him who had pissed, some of them missing the bowl in drunkenness. On the other side of the bathroom, there was another door, but he didn't do anything about it, because he thought all the people were on the other side of the door he locked.

The door opened, and Winky looked in at him.

He turned his back to her. Winky laughed and said, "You got nothing I ain't seen before, only better."

He was drunker than he meant to be. His nose felt numb. His pale image in the mirror blurred. He tucked back in, zipped his pants, and flushed the toilet. Winky stood in the doorway and watched him.

She said, "You sick, white man?"

"No."

"You look sick." She walked through the bathroom into the living room and shut the door behind her.

James opened the door and walked into the living room, turned and pulled the door shut behind him. People danced in the living room.

Cindy sat on the swivel stool, with her back to the piano, and turned the stool rapidly side-to-side. She laughed at Ace, who danced in front of her. The untucked left side of his shirt hung almost to his knee. He laughed and spun in a circle.

People danced in the living room. Stan stood in the kitchen doorway. He saw James and walked toward him. Barbara walked close behind him. James didn't want to be the object of Stan's conversation, but he didn't see any way to avoid it.

Stan said, "James, you was in that parking lot. Did I say Barb'ra was my maid? Would I say that? I love black people. You know that. If I said that, I didn't mean it how ever'body thinks I meant it. James, listen to me. I have to explain what I meant."

James said, "Stan, that was more than a year ago you acted like a jerk at the bowling alley. You try to explain it every time you get drunk since then, and that's a lot of times. It embarrasses me when you talk this I Love Black People stuff. I wish you'd cut it out. Your brain gets loose when you're drunk."

Barbara said, "Come on, Stan. You're drowning out the music."

James followed them into the kitchen, not because he wanted to talk to them, but because someone turned up the music in the living room, and it began to drown his thoughts. The house smelled like people, like alcohol, but James was losing his sense of smell to the alcohol he drank. He couldn't have another drink, because he had to drive home and then drive the babysitter home. He didn't want to be drunk when he drove the babysitter home.

He found instant coffee on the counter. He ran water into a pan and put it on a burner and turned the burner on. He watched the water in the pan. It started to boil. Stan started over. "I told Ron Barb'ra was my maid when he asked me who was that sittin' in my pickup. I didn't really say that, Barb'ra, cause I wouldn't, cause you're just as good as I am, maybe better."

James thought there was no way to shut Stan up, short of knocking him down, which no one wanted to do, because Stan had been knocked down many times, and he never understood why. James carried his coffee out onto the back porch and shut the door behind him.

Rain hammered on the metal porch roof above his head. It poured off the roof and ran down the path toward the stream behind the house. Running water had eroded a small gully there, where the water ran to the creek, taking soil with it, even from the hard-packed clay of the yard.

Light shone from the back window to the yard, but rain and the dark night soaked up the light. The stream under black oak trees ran in darkness. James heard water murmuring toward the sea.

Winky walked out onto the porch and shut the door behind her. "What the hell you doing out here?"

"Watching the rain. Listening to the rain."

"You some kind of nut. You should watch inside, and you come out and watch rain. You some kind of nut." She grabbed his head, pulled him down to her, and kissed him. He pulled back. Winky gripped his hair and pulled his face to hers. He dropped his cup, and it rolled off the porch into the dark rain.

He put his arms around her and drew her close, excited by the smooth, soft feel of her clothing slipping around over her skin. She pushed him away, stepped back, and kicked him in the shin. She said, "You're not nuts. You just stupid, you stupid white man." She yanked the door open, walked into the lighted kitchen, and slammed the door.

He held his shin with both hands, trying to ease the pain. When the pain eased enough that he could move, he stepped off

the porch and tried to find the cup, but it was too dark. He couldn't find it. Rain soaked him. He walked back into the house and leaned on the counter in the kitchen.

Several bottles stood on the counter. One was cognac, the bottle he and Cindy brought. He picked it up to drain it, but behind the bottle, a white electric clock with an illuminated face swept away the night as the second-hand spun rapidly around and around the face. 1:45. The night was gone. He put the bottle down without drinking.

He walked into the dining room. Four men played cards. Thomas looked up at him and said, "James, you going to sit down and let us teach you how to play this game?"

"I'll have to wait for another night. I have to take our babysitter home."

"If a man got to get the sitter home, then that's what he got to do."

James looked for Cindy, but he didn't find her. He asked Barbara, "Do you know where Cindy is?"

"Some of them got up a collection and went to buy more booze before the liquor store closes."

James asked Barbara, "Who did she go with?"

"They took Ace's car."

Winky walked out of the next room and said, "Phone for you, White Boy."

On the phone, Cindy said, "The car won't start."

"I'll come and get you."

"You'd better go take the babysitter home, or we won't be able to get her again. A mechanic's working on the car. He says he'll get it running, and they'll give me a ride home. I won't be very long."

In Cindy's voice was a reflection of James he hadn't heard before. It might have been there before, but he didn't hear it. He wanted to say something about it, but he remembered arguments when Cindy said, "You talk. You always talk. That's all you do about anything is talk about it. You can't solve it by talking about it."

He didn't know what to do. If he couldn't talk about it, what could he do? He was going to say, "I'll come and get you. Where are you?" but Cindy said, "See you at home after a while," and she hung up.

He walked in hard rain to the car. He forgot to take the umbrella. His clothes soaked through. He unlocked the driver's door, but then he just stood there, looking up into the rain.

Nobody, nothing but the storm, knew he stood in the hard rain getting soaked, mixing tears with falling rain.

He opened the door and got in. He started the car and

u-turned in the street. He would be late getting the babysitter home, but not late enough to cause problems. He wanted to tell her something, the seventeen-year-old blonde girl, about being careful with her life. He knew some of the words, but he didn't get it said.

He left his children while he took the babysitter home. He needed to get back, and he didn't try to tell her. He waited until she closed her front door and shut off the porch light. He turned the car around, drove home, unlocked the door, and checked his daughter and his son.

He hung his wet clothes, and he showered in hot water. Steam filled the bathroom. He felt closer to sober by then. It was harder to sleep or to wait if he was sober or sobering up, but that was his direction, and he had no desire to change his direction.