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CARSON
McCULLERS

The HEART

Is a

LONELY
HUNTER

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

by Carson McCullers

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Part One

1

IN THE TOWN there were two mutes, and they were always together. Early every morning they would come out from the house where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work. The two friends were very different. The one who always steered the way was an obese and dreamy Greek. In the summer he would come out wearing a yellow or green polo shirt stuffed sloppily into his trousers in front and hanging loose behind. When it was colder he wore over this a shapeless gray sweater.

His face was round and oily, with half-closed eyelids and lips that curved in a gentle, stupid smile. The other mute was tall. His eyes had a quick, intelligent expression. He was always immaculate and very soberly dressed.

Every morning the two friends walked silently together until they reached the main street of the town. Then when they came to a certain fruit and candy store they paused for a moment on the sidewalk outside. The Greek, Spiros Antonapoulos, worked for his cousin, who owned this fruit store. His job was to make candies and sweets, uncrate the fruits, and to keep the place clean. The thin mute, John Singer, nearly always put his hand on his friend's arm and looked for a second into his face before leaving him. Then after this goodbye Singer crossed the street and walked on alone to the jewelry store where he worked as a silverware engraver.

In the late afternoon the friends would meet again. Singer came back to the fruit store and waited until Antonapoulos was ready to go home. The Greek would be lazily unpacking a case of peaches or melons, or perhaps looking at the funny paper in the kitchen behind the store where he cooked. Before their departure Antonapoulos always opened a paper sack he kept hidden during the day on one of the kitchen shelves. Inside were stored various bits of food he had collected--a piece of fruit, samples of candy, or the butt-end of a liverwurst. Usually before leaving Antonapoulos waddled gently to the glassed case in the front of the store where some meats and cheeses were kept. He glided open the back of the case and his fat hand groped lovingly for some particular dainty inside which he had wanted. Sometimes his cousin who owned the place did not see him. But if he noticed he stared at his cousin with a warning in his tight, pale face.

Sadly Antonapoulos would shuffle the morsel from one corner of the case to the other. During these times Singer stood very straight with his hands in his pockets and looked in another direction. He did not like to watch this little scene between the two Greeks. For, excepting drinking and a certain solitary secret pleasure, Antonapoulos loved to eat more than anything else in the world.

In the dusk the two mutes walked slowly home together. At home Singer was always talking to Antonapoulos. His hands shaped the words in a swift series of designs. His face was eager and his gray-green eyes sparkled brightly. With his thin, strong hands he told Antonapoulos all that had happened during the day.

Antonapoulos sat back lazily and looked at Singer. It was seldom that he ever moved his hands to speak at all--and then it was to say that he wanted to eat or to sleep or to drink.

These three things he always said with the same vague, fumbling signs. At night, if he were not too drunk, he would kneel down before his bed and pray awhile. Then his plump hands shaped the words 'Holy Jesus,' or 'God,' or 'Darling Mary.' These were the only words Antonapoulos ever said.

Singer never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him. But it did not matter.

They shared the upstairs of a small house near the business section of the town. There were two rooms. On the oil stove in the kitchen Antonapoulos cooked all of their meals. There were straight, plain kitchen chairs for Singer and an overstuffed sofa for Antonapoulos. The bedroom was furnished mainly with a large double bed covered with an eiderdown comforter for the big Greek and a narrow iron cot for Singer.

Dinner always took a long time, because Antonapoulos loved food and he was very slow. After they had eaten, the big Greek would lie back on his sofa and slowly lick over each one of his teeth with his tongue, either from a certain delicacy or because he did not wish to lose the savor of the meal--while Singer washed the dishes.

Sometimes in the evening the mutes would play chess. Singer had always greatly enjoyed this game, and years before he had tried to teach it to Antonapoulos. At first his friend could not be interested in the reasons for moving the various pieces about on the board. Then Singer began to keep a bottle of something good under the table to be taken out after each lesson. The Greek never got on to the erratic movements of the knights and the sweeping mobility of the queens, but he learned to make a few set, opening moves. He preferred the white pieces and would not play if the black men were given him. After the first moves Singer worked out the game by himself while his friend looked on drowsily. If Singer made brilliant attacks on his own men so that in the end the black king was killed, Antonapoulos was always very proud and pleased.

The two mutes had no other friends, and except when they worked they were alone together. Each day was very much like any other day, because they were alone so much that nothing ever disturbed them. Once a week they would go to the library for Singer to withdraw a mystery book and on Friday night they attended a movie. Then on payday they always went to the ten-cent photograph shop above the Army and Navy Store so that Antonapoulos could have his picture taken. These were the only places where they made customary visits. There were many parts in the town that they had never even seen.

The town was in the middle of the deep South. The summers were long and the months of winter cold were very few.

Nearly always the sky was a glassy, brilliant azure and the sun burned down riotously bright. Then the light, chill rains of November would come, and perhaps later there would be frost and some short months of cold. The winters were changeable, but the summers always were burning hot. The town was a fairly large one. On the main street there were several blocks of two- and three-story shops and business offices. But the largest buildings in the town were the factories, which employed a large percentage of the population. These cotton mills were big and flourishing and most of the workers in the town were very poor. Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and of loneliness.

But the two mutes were not lonely at all. At home they were content to eat and drink, and Singer would talk with his hands eagerly to his friend about all that was in his mind. So the years passed in this quiet way until Singer reached the age of thirty-two and had been in the town with Antonapoulos for ten years.

Then one day the Greek became ill. He sat up in bed with his hands on his fat stomach and big, oily tears rolled down his cheeks. Singer went to see his friend's cousin who owned the fruit store, and also he arranged for leave from his own work.

The doctor made out a diet for Antonapoulos and said that he could drink no more wine. Singer rigidly enforced the doctor's orders. All day he sat by his friend's bed and did what he could to make the time pass quickly, but Antonapoulos only looked at him angrily from the corners of his eyes and would not be amused.

The Greek was very fretful, and kept finding fault with the fruit drinks and food that Singer prepared for him. Constantly he made his friend help him out of bed so that he could pray.

His huge buttocks would sag down over his plump little feet when he kneeled. He fumbled with his hands to say 'Darling Mary' and then held to the small brass cross tied to his neck with a dirty string. His big eyes would wall up to the ceiling with a look of fear in them, and afterward he was very sulky and would not let his friend speak to him.

Singer was patient and did all that he could. He drew little pictures, and once he made a sketch of his friend to amuse him. This picture hurt the big Greek's feelings, and he refused to be reconciled until Singer had made his face very young and handsome and colored his hair bright yellow and his eyes china blue. And then he tried not to show his pleasure.

Singer nursed his friend so carefully that after a week Antonapoulos was able to return to his work. But from that time on there was a difference in their way of life. Trouble came to the two friends.

Antonapoulos was not ill any more, but a change had come in him. He was irritable and no longer content to spend the evenings quietly in their home. When he would wish to go out Singer followed along close behind him. Antonapoulos would go into a restaurant, and while they sat at the table he slyly put lumps of sugar, or a pepper-shaker, or pieces of silverware in his pocket. Singer always paid for what he took and there was no disturbance. At home he scolded Antonapoulos, but the big Greek only looked at him with a bland smile.

The months went on and these habits of Antonapoulos grew worse. One day at noon he walked calmly out of the fruit store of his cousin and urinated in public against the wall of the First National Bank Building across the street. At times he would meet people on the sidewalk whose faces did not please him, and he would bump into these persons and push at them with his elbows and stomach. He walked into a store one day and hauled out a floor lamp without paying for it, and another time he tried to take an electric train he had seen in a showcase.

For Singer this was a time of great distress. He was continually marching Antonapoulos down to the courthouse during lunch hour to settle these infringements of the law.

Singer became very familiar with the procedure of the courts and he was in a constant state of agitation. The money he had saved in the bank was spent for bail and fines. All of his efforts and money were used to keep his friend out of jail because of such charges as theft, committing public indecencies, and assault and battery.

The Greek cousin for whom Antonapoulos worked did not enter into these troubles at all. Charles Parker (for that was the name this cousin had taken) let Antonapoulos stay on at the store, but he watched him always with his pale, tight face and he made no effort to help him. Singer had a strange feeling about Charles Parker. He began to dislike him.

Singer lived in continual turmoil and worry. But Antonapoulos was always bland, and no matter what happened the gentle, flaccid smile was still on his face. In all the years before it had seemed to Singer that there was something very subtle and wise in this smile of his friend. He had never

known just how much Antonapoulos understood and what he was thinking. Now in the big Greek's expression Singer thought that he could detect something sly and joking.

He would shake his friend by the shoulders until he was very tired and explain things over and over with his hands. But nothing did any good.

All of Singer's money was gone and he had to borrow from the jeweler for whom he worked. On one occasion he was unable to pay bail for his friend and Antonapoulos spent the night in jail. When Singer came to get him out the next day he was very sulky. He did not want to leave. He had enjoyed his dinner of sowbelly and cornbread with syrup poured over it.

And the new sleeping arrangements and his cellmates pleased him.

They had lived so much alone that Singer had no one to help him in his distress. Antonapoulos let nothing disturb him or cure him of his habits. At home he sometimes cooked the new dish he had eaten in the jail, and on the streets there was never any knowing just what he would do.

And then the final trouble came to Singer.

One afternoon he had come to meet Antonapoulos at the fruit store when Charles Parker handed him a letter. The letter explained that Charles Parker had made arrangements for his cousin to be taken to the state insane asylum two hundred miles away. Charles Parker had used his influence in the town and the details were already settled. Antonapoulos was to leave and to be admitted into the asylum the next, week.

Singer read the letter several times, and for a while he could not think. Charles Parker was talking to him across the counter, but he did not even try to read his lips and understand. At last Singer wrote on the little pad he always carried in his pocket: You cannot do this. Antonapoulos must stay with me.

Charles Parker shook his head excitedly. He did not know much American. 'None of your business,' he kept saying over and over. Singer knew that

everything was finished. The Greek was afraid that some day he might be responsible for his cousin.

Charles Parker did not know much about the American language--but he understood the American dollar very well, and he had used his money and influence to admit his cousin to the asylum without delay.

There was nothing Singer could do.

The next week was full of feverish activity. He talked and talked. And although his hands never paused to rest he could not tell all that he had to say. He wanted to talk to Antonapoulos of all the thoughts that had ever been in his mind and heart, but there was not time. His gray eyes glittered and his quick, intelligent face expressed great strain.

Antonapoulos watched him drowsily, and his friend did not know just what he really understood.

Then came the day when Antonapoulos must leave. Singer brought out Ms own suitcase and very carefully packed the best of their joint possessions. Antonapoulos made himself a lunch to eat during the journey. In the late afternoon they walked arm in arm down the street for the last time together. It was a chilly afternoon in late November, and little huffs of breath showed in the air before them.

Charles Parker was to travel with his cousin, but he stood apart from them at the station. Antonapoulos crowded into the bus and settled himself with elaborate preparations on one of the front seats. Singer watched him from the window and his hands began desperately to talk for the last time with his friend. But Antonapoulos was so busy checking over the various items in his lunch box that for a while he paid no attention. Just before the bus pulled away from the curb he turned to Singer and his smile was very bland and remote--as though already they were many miles apart.

The weeks that followed didn't seem real at all. All day Singer worked over his bench in the back of the jewelry store, and then at night he returned to the house alone. More than anything he wanted to sleep. As soon as he came home from work he would lie on his cot and try to doze awhile.

Dreams came to him when he lay there half-asleep. And in all of them Antonapoulos was there. His hands would jerk nervously, for in his dreams he was talking to his friend and Antonapoulos was watching him.

Singer tried to think of the time before he had ever known his friend. He tried to recount to himself certain things that had happened when he was young. But none of these things he tried to remember seemed real.

There was one particular fact that he remembered, but it was not at all important to him. Singer recalled that, although he had been deaf since he was an infant, he had not always been a real mute. He was left an orphan very young and placed in an institution for the deaf. He had learned to talk with his hands and to read. Before he was nine years old he could talk with one hand in the American way--and also could employ both of his hands after the method of Europeans. He had learned to follow the movements of people's lips and to understand what they said. Then finally he had been taught to speak.

At the school he was thought very intelligent. He learned the lessons before the rest of the pupils. But he could never become used to speaking with his lips. It was not natural to him, and his tongue felt like a whale in his mouth. From the blank expression on people's faces to whom he talked in this way he felt that his voice must be like the sound of some animal or that there was something disgusting in his speech. It was painful for him to try to talk with his mouth, but his hands were always ready to shape the words he wished to say. When he was twenty-two he had come South to this town from Chicago and he met Antonapoulos immediately. Since that time he had never spoken with his mouth again, because with his friend there was no need for this.

Nothing seemed real except the ten years with Antonapoulos.

In his half-dreams he saw his friend very vividly, and when he awakened a great aching loneliness would be in him.

Occasionally he would pack up a box for Antonapoulos, but he never received any reply. And so the months passed hi this empty, dreaming way.

In the spring a change came over Singer. He could not sleep and his body was very restless. At evening he would walk monotonously around the room, unable to work off a new feeling of energy. If he rested at all it was only during a few hours before dawn--then he would drop bluntly into a sleep that lasted until the morning light struck suddenly beneath his opening eyelids like a scimitar.

He began spending his evenings walking around the town. He could no longer stand the rooms where Antonapoulos had lived, and he rented a place in a shambling boarding-house not far from the center of the town.

He ate his meals at a restaurant only two blocks away. This restaurant was at the very end of the long main street and the name of the place was the New York Cafe. The first day he glanced over the menu quickly and wrote a short note and handed it to the proprietor.

Each morning for breakfast I want an egg, toast, and coffee--\$0.15

For lunch I want soup (any kind), a meat sandwich, and milk --\$0.25

Please bring me at dinner three vegetables (any kind but cabbage), fish or meat, and a glass of beer--\$0.35

Thank you.

The proprietor read the note and gave him an alert, tactful glance. He was a hard man of middle height, with a beard so dark and heavy that the lower part of his face looked as though it were molded of iron. He usually stood in the corner by the cash register, his arms folded over his chest, quietly observing all that went on around him. Singer came to know this man's face very well, for he ate at one of his tables three times a day.

Each evening the mute walked alone for hours in the street.

Sometimes the nights were cold with the sharp, wet winds of March and it would be raining heavily. But to him this did not matter. His gait was agitated and he always kept his hands stuffed tight into the pockets of his trousers. Then as the weeks passed the days grew warm and languorous.

His agitation gave way gradually to exhaustion and there was a look about him of deep calm. In his face there came to be a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise. But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone.

2

ON A BLACK, sultry night in early summer Biff Brannon stood behind the cash register of the New York Cafe. It was twelve o'clock. Outside the street lights had already been turned off, so that the light from the café made a sharp, yellow rectangle on the sidewalk. The street was deserted, but inside the café there were half a dozen customers drinking beer or Santa Lucia wine or whiskey. Biff waited stolidly, his elbow resting on the counter and his thumb mashing the tip of his long nose. His eyes were intent. He watched especially a short, squat man in overalls who had become drunk and boisterous. Now and then his gaze passed on to the mute who sat by himself at one of the middle tables, or to others of the customers before the counter. But he always turned back to the drunk in overalls. The hour grew later and Biff continued to wait silently behind the counter. Then at last he gave the restaurant a final survey and went toward the door at the back which led upstairs.

Quietly he entered the room at the top of the stairs. It was dark inside and he walked with caution. After he had gone a few paces his toe struck something hard and he reached down and felt for the handle of a suitcase on the floor. He had only been in the room a few seconds and was about to leave when the light was turned on.

Alice sat up in the rumpled bed and looked at him. 'What you doing with that suitcase?' she asked. 'Can't you get rid of that lunatic without giving him back what he's already drunk up?'

'Wake up and go down yourself. Call the cop and let him get soused on the chain gang with cornbread and peas. Go to it, Misses Brannon.'

'I will all right if he's down there tomorrow. But you leave that bag alone. It don't belong to that sponger any more.'

'I know spongers, and Blount's not one,' Biff said. 'Myself--I don't know so well. But I'm not that kind of a thief.'

Calmly Biff put down the suitcase on the steps outside.

The air was not so stale and sultry in the room as it was downstairs. He decided to stay for a short while and douse his face with cold water before going back.

'I told you already what I'll do if you don't get rid of that fellow for good tonight. In the daytime he takes them naps at the back, and then at night you feed him dinners and beer. For a week now he hasn't paid one cent. And all his wild talking and carrying-on will ruin any decent trade.'

'You don't know people and you don't know real business,' Biff said. 'The fellow in question first came in here twelve days ago and he was a stranger in the town. The first week he gave us twenty dollars' worth of trade. Twenty at the minimum.'

'And since then on credit,' Alice said. 'Five days on credit, and so drunk it's a disgrace to the business. And besides, he's nothing but a bum and a freak.'

'I like freaks,' Biff said.

'I reckon you do! I just reckon you certainly ought to, Mister Brannon--being as you're one yourself.'

He rubbed his bluish chin and paid her no attention. For the first fifteen years of their married life they had called each other just plain Biff and Alice. Then in one of their quarrels they had begun calling each other Mister and Misses, and since then they had never made it up enough to change it.

'I'm just warning you he'd better not be there when I come down tomorrow.'

Biff went into the bathroom, and after he had bathed his face he decided that he would have time for a shave. His beard was black and heavy as though it had grown for three days. He stood before the mirror and rubbed his cheek meditatively. He was sorry he had talked to Alice. With her, silence was better.

Being around that woman always made him different from his real self. It made him tough and small and common as she was. Biff's eyes were cold and staring, half-concealed by the cynical droop of his eyelids. On the fifth finger of his calloused hand there was a woman's wedding ring. The door was open behind him, and in the mirror he could see Alice lying in the bed.

'Listen,' he said. 'The trouble with you is that you don't have any real kindness. Not but one woman I've ever known had this real kindness I'm talking about'

'Well, I've known you to do things no man in this world would be proud of. I've known you to--'

'Or maybe it's curiosity I mean. You don't ever see or notice anything important that goes on. You never watch and think and try to figure anything out. Maybe that's the biggest difference between you and me, after all.'

Alice was almost asleep again, and through the mirror he watched her with detachment. There was no distinctive point about her on which he could fasten his attention, and his gaze glided from her pale brown hair to the stumpy outline of her feet beneath the cover. The soft curves of her face led to the roundness of her hips and thighs. When he was away from her there

was no one feature that stood out in his mind and he remembered her as a complete, unbroken figure.

‘The enjoyment of a spectacle is something you have never known,’ he said.

Her voice was tired. ‘That fellow downstairs is a spectacle, all right, and a circus too. But I’m through putting up with him.’

‘Hell, the man don’t mean anything to me. He’s no relative or buddy of mine. But you don’t know what it is to store up a whole lot of details and then come upon something real.’ He turned on the hot water and quickly began to shave.

It was the morning of May 15, yes, that Jake Blount had come in. He had noticed him immediately and watched. The man was short, with heavy shoulders like beams. He had a small, ragged mustache, and beneath this his lower lip looked as though it had been stung by a wasp. There were many things about the fellow that seemed contrary. His head was very large and well-shaped, but his neck was soft and slender as a boy’s. The mustache looked false, as if it had been stuck on for a costume party and would fall off if he talked too fast. It made him seem almost middle-aged, although his face with its high, smooth forehead and wide-open eyes was young. His hands were huge, stained, and calloused, and he was dressed in a cheap white-linen suit. There was something very funny about the man, yet at the same time another feeling would not let you laugh.

He ordered a pint of liquor and drank it straight in half an hour. Then he sat at one of the booths and ate a big chicken dinner. Later he read a book and drank beer. That was the beginning. And although Biff had noticed Blount very carefully he would never have guessed about the crazy things that happened later. Never had he seen a man change so many times in twelve days. Never had he seen a fellow drink so much, stay drunk so long.

Biff pushed up the end of his nose with his thumb and shaved his upper lip. He was finished and his face seemed cooler.

Alice was asleep when he went through the bedroom on the way downstairs.

The suitcase was heavy. He carried it to the front of the restaurant, behind the cash register, where he usually stood each evening. Methodically he glanced around the place. A few customers had left and the room was not so crowded, but the set-up was the same. The deaf-mute still drank coffee by himself at one of the middle tables. The drunk had not stopped talking. He was not addressing anyone around him in particular, nor was anyone listening. When he had come into the place that evening he wore those blue overalls instead of the filthy linen suit he had been wearing the twelve days. His socks were gone and his ankles were scratched and caked with mud.

Alertly Biff picked up fragments of his monologue. The fellow seemed to be talking some queer kind of politics again.

Last night he had been talking about places he had been--about Texas and Oklahoma and the Carolinas. Once he had got on the subject of cat-houses, and afterward his jokes got so raw he had to be hushed up with beer. But most of the time nobody was sure just what he was saying. Talk-talk-talk.

The words came out of his throat like a cataract. And the thing was that the accent he used was always changing, the kinds of words he used. Sometimes he talked like a linthead and sometimes nice a professor. He would use words a foot long and then slip up on his grammar. It was hard to tell what kind of folks he had or what part of the country he was from. He was always changing. Thoughtfully Biff fondled the tip of his nose. There was no connection. Yet connection usually went with brains. This man had a good mind, all right, but he went from one thing to another without any reason behind it at all.

He was like a man thrown off his track by something.

Biff leaned his weight on the counter and began to peruse the evening newspaper. The headlines told of a decision by the Board of Aldermen, after four months' deliberation, that the local budget could not afford traffic lights at certain dangerous intersections of the town. The left column reported on the war in the Orient. Biff read them both with equal attention.

As his eyes followed the print the rest of his senses were on the alert to the various commotions that went on around him. When he had finished the articles he still stared down at the newspaper with his eyes half-closed. He felt nervous. The fellow was a problem, and before morning he would have to make some sort of settlement with him. Also, he felt without knowing why that something of importance would happen tonight. The fellow could not keep on forever.

Biff sensed that someone was standing in the entrance and he raised his eyes quickly. A gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve, stood looking in the doorway. She was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes--so that at first glance she was like a very young boy. Biff pushed aside the paper when he saw her, and smiled when she came up to him.

‘Hello, Mick. Been to the Girl Scouts?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I don’t belong to them.’

From the corner of his eye he noticed that the drunk slammed his fist down on a table and turned away from the men to whom he had been talking. Biff’s voice roughened as he spoke to the youngster before him.

‘Your folks know you’re out after midnight?’

‘It’s O.K. There’s a gang of kids playing out late on our block tonight.’

He had never seen her come into the place with anyone her own age. Several years ago she had always tagged behind her older brother. The Kellys were a good-sized family in numbers. Later she would come in pulling a couple of snotty babies in a wagon. But if she wasn’t nursing or trying to keep up with the bigger ones, she was by herself. Now the kid stood there seeming not to be able to make up her mind what she wanted. She kept pushing back her damp, whitish hair with the palm of her hand.

‘I’d like a pack of cigarettes, please. The cheapest kind’.

Biff started to speak, hesitated, and then reached his left hand inside the counter. Mick brought out a handkerchief and began untying the knot in the corner where she kept her money. As she gave the knot a jerk the change clattered to the floor and rolled toward Blount, who stood muttering to himself. For a moment he stared in a daze at the coins, but before the kid could go after them he squatted down with concentration and picked up the money. He walked heavily to the counter and stood jiggling the two pennies, the nickel, and the dime in his palm.

‘Seventeen cents for cigarettes now?’

Biff waited, and Mick looked from one of them to the other.

The drunk stacked the money into a little pile on the counter, still protecting it with his big, dirty hand. Slowly he picked up one penny and flipped it down.

‘Five mills for the crackers who grew the weed and five for the dupes who rolled it,’ he said. ‘A cent for you, Biff.’ Then he tried to focus his eyes so that he could read the mottoes on the nickel and dime. He kept fingering the two coins and moving them around in a circle. At last he pushed them away. ‘And that’s a humble homage to liberty. To democracy and tyranny.

‘To freedom and piracy.’

Calmly Biff picked up the money and rang it into the till.

Mick looked as though she wanted to hang around awhile. She took in the drunk with one long gaze, and then she turned her eyes to the middle of the room where the mute sat at his table alone. After a moment Blount also glanced now and then in the same direction. The mute sat silently over his glass of beer, idly drawing on the table with the end of a burnt matchstick.

Jake Blount was the first to speak. ‘It’s funny, but I been seeing that fellow in my sleep for the past three or four nights. He won’t leave me alone. If you ever noticed, he never seems to say anything.’

It was seldom that Biff ever discussed one customer with another. 'No, he don't,' he answered noncommittally.

'It's funny.'

Mick shifted her weight from one foot to the other and fitted the package of cigarettes into the pocket of her shorts. 'It's not funny if you know anything about him,' she said. 'Mister Singer lives with us. He rooms in our house.'

'Is that so?' Biff asked. 'I declare--I didn't know that'

Mick walked toward the door and answered him without looking around. 'Sure. He's been with us three months now.'

Biff unrolled his shirt-sleeves and then folded them up carefully again. He did not take his eyes from Mick as she left the restaurant. And even after she had been gone several minutes he still fumbled with his shirt-sleeves and stared at the empty doorway. Then he locked his arms across his chest and turned back to the drunk again.

Blount leaned heavily on the counter. His brown eyes were wet-looking and wide open with a dazed expression. He needed a bath so badly that he stank like a goat. There were dirt beads on his sweaty neck and an oil stain on his face. His lips were thick and red and his brown hair was matted on his forehead. His overalls were too short in the body and he kept pulling at the crotch of them.

'Man, you ought to know better,' Biff said finally. 'You can't go around like this. Why, I'm surprised you haven't been picked up for vagrancy. You ought to sober up. You need washing and your hair needs cutting. Motherogod! You're not fit to walk around amongst people.'

Blount scowled and bit his lower lip.

'Now, don't take offense and get your dander up. Do what I tell you. Go back in the kitchen and tell the colored boy to give you a big pan of hot water. Tell Willie to give you a towel and plenty of soap and wash yourself good. Then eat you some milk toast and open up your suitcase and put you

on a clean shirt and a pair of britches that fit you. Then tomorrow you can start doing whatever you're going to do and working wherever you mean to work and get straightened out.'

'You know what you can do,' Blount said drunkenly. 'You can just--'

'All right,' Biff said very quietly. 'No, I can't. Now you just behave yourself.'

Biff went to the end of the counter and returned with two glasses of draught beer. The drunk picked up his glass so clumsily that beer slopped down on his hands and messed the counter. Biff sipped his portion with careful relish. He regarded Blount steadily with half-closed eyes. Blount was not a freak, although when you first saw him he gave you that impression. It was like something was deformed about him--but when you looked at him closely each part of him was normal and as it ought to be. Therefore if this difference was not in the body it was probably in the mind. He was like a man who had served a term in prison or had been to Harvard College or had lived for a long time with foreigners in South America. He was like a person who had been somewhere that other people are not likely to go or had done something that others are not apt to do.

Biff cocked his head to one side and said, 'Where are you from?'

'Nowhere.'

'Now, you have to be born somewhere. North Carolina --Tennessee-- Alabama--some place.'

Blount's eyes were dreamy and unfocused. 'Carolina,' he said.

'I can tell you've been around,' Biff hinted delicately.

But the drunk was not listening. He had turned from the counter and was staring out at the dark, empty street. After a moment he walked to the door with loose, uncertain steps.

'Adios,' he called back.