

A Change of Season

Howie stood inside his father's clothing store, brooding about the absence of romance in his life, when a battered Chevy station wagon came to a stop on a street bordering the park. The young man who got out appeared heavysset inside loose and rumpled clothing. His hair was the same pale shade as his skin, so there was no definite line separating the two. He crossed the street to the shops that faced the park, coming to a halt in front of Howard's Mens and Boys Wear, and began to gaze at the window display.

This in itself was odd, something no one did, and Howard Jr. (known as Howie in the town where he had grown up) watched with suspicion. What was there to see? The display had been the same last summer, when Howie had last stood leaning against a counter of his father's store, earning his college tuition. Actually, the display was older than a year; it had attained the status of invisibility. It had been created by his father — it was he who had pulled the clothes onto the mannequin's plastic limbs. Although, thought Howie, "created" was surely not the word to use in reference to the sad assembly in the window.

Or maybe — here a slight smile came to Howie's lips — the display *did* reveal a talent. After thirty years of owning the store, maybe that scene was his father's artistic summing up.

As the stranger moved to another spot on the sidewalk, to get a new perspective, Howie observed the tableau from within, from memory. There were really two displays, one on each side of the entrance. In both, the male mannequins — the boys simply smaller in size than the men, but with the same vacant adult stares — posed in plain and dusty clothes. In some cases these clothes didn't fit; a socket where wrist hinged to arm was exposed, the cuffs of work pants were gathered in stumpy folds around shoes. No scene was depicted; no story brought these figures together. They stood amid a scattering of props — a four-step ladder, sheet-draped crates — upon which were displayed shirts, pajamas, socks, underwear, all in cellophane wrappers, all covered by dust. Dead flies littered the bare plywood floor.

Howie, his smile fading, concluded that, yes, his father had effectively portrayed the desolation of this small town — its stagnation, its emptiness. Plainness, devoid of drama. Its lack, really, of those things Howie had been dreaming of when the station wagon drove up.

The young man entered the store. Howie pushed away from the counter.

"Can I help you?"

"See the owner?"

It seemed an odd economy of words, with only the slightest rise in inflection to make it a question. Howie turned, walked to the rear of the store, and went through a door that led to the back rooms. It was where his father often was, carrying on a Sisyphus-like struggle involving the rearrangement of stock. The closest thing to a vice that Howie had discovered in his father was that he overbought. This weakness was evident in the boxes that had accumulated over many years; the back rooms were dim labyrinths of narrow aisles, with shelves packed to the ceiling. Even in the restroom there was a path to the toilet, and the boxes on both sides revealed, to the seated Howie's desultory perusal, labels that predated his birth.

Howie located his father by the sounds he emitted. Howard was stuffing a box into an opening over his head. One heel was hooked onto a lower shelf on the opposite aisle, and he grunted with each push.

“Dad, someone to see you.”

Sweating, his shirt sleeves rolled up, Howard preceded his son into the light.

The waiting young man made his offer without overture.

“Do your window for you.”

“What?” asked Howard.

The proposition became clear in the next minute. For the sum of one hundred dollars, the young man would create a new window display.

Howard declined the service.

The young man persisted.

“Guaranteed.”

“You give a guarantee?”

Ben Waverly, a sales clerk for fifteen years, shambled up. Even with a customer Ben seldom spoke, as if the ever-present toothpick between his lips limited that function.

“Bring in four times what you make now,” said the young man.

“A fourfold increase? Let’s see. I take in five hundred on a good week. That would be two thousand bucks.” Howard turned to his audience, eyebrows raised. “Gentlemen, we’ll soon be on Easy Street.” He looked back at the impassive young man. “What say we do this. You do the window display, I do the business, then I pay you out of the profits.” He again turned to his audience and winked.

The young man shook his head.

“Gone tomorrow and not back till the weather changes. Back for the fall.”

Howard shrugged. “Well, then, it’s no deal. You see, this operation doesn’t bring in enough money to warrant the outlay of a hundred bucks.”

“Because of the window now.”

The itinerant artist’s eyes were the color of clouds, when they are thin wisps.

“No. You don’t understand. The business isn’t there. People around here . . . Look, my sales are mostly underwear and socks.”

“If they knew.”

“Knew what?”

The young man remained silent. Howard waited, then seemed wearied by the exchange. He shook his head.

“Sorry. It’s just too much.”

He turned and trudged back to his task. The young man stood under the gazes of Howie and Ben for a few minutes; then, without a word, he exited the store. After pausing outside to again look into the window, he went across the street and sat on a rusty iron bench in the park.

The park had a bandstand which had never, in Howie’s lifetime, been used for a concert. Its paint was peeling, and the lattice that came into contact with the ground was black and soft with wood rot.

When Howie went out for lunch he paused by the Chevy station wagon and peered into its rear window. He couldn't see anything distinctly — only a crowded jumble, with human limbs jutting out at odd angles.

The young man sat on the bench all afternoon. Just before six o'clock he got up and entered the store. He stood by the counter, where Howard was closing out the cash register.

"For fifty, then."

Howard grinned, showing his teeth.

"You want this job bad, don't you?" His voice rose, with something close to abandon. In his hand he held the cash profits for the day. He turned to Howie. "Fifty-two dollars." He waved his handful of money. "I'd say that's too much of a coincidence to ignore." He looked at the young man, then thrust all the bills across the counter. "So do it," he said. "Go ahead and do it."

The young man parked his car in front of the store and began carrying in mannequins swathed in sheets, large boxes, rolls of variously-colored material. He was still piling it inside the entrance when Howie left.

Howard arrived home later, but after dinner he returned to his store, to check out the progress. When he got back he paced the living room floor.

"That's one silent bastard," he said, querulously. "I asked him when he'd be finished, he says one word: Dawn. I couldn't see a thing of what he's done so far — he had sheets tacked up, front and back." Howard jiggled the car keys in his pocket. "What the hell, I don't guess there's anything worth stealing in the store. Nothing worth the risk and effort."

When Howie awoke early the next morning his father had already left.

Howie swung his car alongside the park, noting that the station wagon was nowhere to be seen. Walking toward the store he saw, from a block away, that there were no sheets over the window. The air was fragrant and birds were singing their greeting to the new day.

Howie gazed into the window for a long time.

Eventually he came to think that it must be a trick of perspective that could cause the display before him to recede into the distance. There was the sense that the scene went on and on, much farther than the eye could see.

In one window the men and boys were gathered on a playing field, with a blue line of water rimming the horizon. They were dressed for tennis and yachting, though the world of business was implied. The money had been made — now it was time to savor the fruits. Isn't that what life was about? The figures asked that question, in poses both arrogant and inviting.

After a long while Howie moved to the other window. There it was night. A man, in a jacket a lighter blue than that of his shirt and pants, stood in an arbor, a drink in his hand. He was turned to the side, looking behind him. Howie also looked into that velvety darkness; in time he came to feel that he was waiting for what was his to emerge and come to him.

When he finally shook himself from his reverie and entered the store, Howie found the floor strewn with boxes that had been dragged from the back. Howard was crouched over one, his hands inside the open flaps; he looked at Howie.

As if scooping rubies and diamonds from a chest, he held up shirts of multi-colored patterns.

"Look, son. Look."

The shirts slid through his hands. Howard bounded to another box, drew out cashmere sweaters.

“Look, son. Some of this stuff I bought when I wasn’t much older than you. And later, too, I kept on even when I knew no one wanted it.”

Howie stared. He had not expected such riches. So this was his father’s vice: clothes too beautiful for this plain town. Howie suddenly realized that his father was not unlike him. The unopened boxes contained dreams.

“And there’s more,” Howard said. “Come.”

They went through the door to the back rooms and dragged boxes out into the light, ripped them open. Many yielded nothing remarkable. In some were dark, heavy items fit only for protection against wintery blasts — clothes, Howie thought, ordered in the blackest of moods. These they quickly pushed aside. But when a shining treasure was revealed they would call out, and father and son would come together over it, their shoulders touching.

That morning, still well before nine AM opening time, Howard called Millie’s Alterations. Breathing hard into the phone, he proposed to hire her and anyone else she could round up who could handle an iron.

Howie watched men gather outside the store. They looked at the scenes in the windows. They drifted away after a time, but when the store opened they returned, and once inside they wandered among the clothes displayed on the counters, draped over boxes, on hangers hooked over every door frame. They sometimes felt the lapel of a suit, held the sleeve of a shirt, caressed the silk of a tie, but no one spoke.

Howie recalled the window dresser’s words: “If they knew.” But what, wondered Howie, were these muted men now aware of? Was it their lost lives? If the previous window had confirmed their drab existence, this new one suggested worlds they had never experienced.

No one purchased anything until Sydney Beuhler, the attorney, broke the spell. He reached for a maroon corduroy pullover, its V-neck trimmed in leather; then, jostling some other men aside, he snatched up a houndstooth shirt. With the clothes over an arm, he strode to the counter. Everyone watched; he spoke to Howard in a voice that was defiant. “And those coats back there” — he pointed to a rack of light summer jackets in madras patterns — “Fit me into one of them.”

As if in a variation of musical chairs, every man in the store reached out to grab an item of clothing near him.

That day Howard and Howie and Ben sweated like laborers.

Long after the regular closing time, in a moment when he found the store empty, Howard locked the door, then leaned with his back against it.

As his father counted the day’s cash, checks and credit card receipts, a new group of watchers gathered at the window, waiting for tomorrow.

Howard’s muttering over numbers ceased. When he spoke to Howie and Ben his voice was oddly flat.

“Did he say a fourfold increase? He did say that, didn’t he? Well, that guarantee seems to be a bit on the conservative side, gentlemen. Because we took in almost \$2200 today.” Howard held up the curling paper from the adding machine and waved it slowly, like a banner.

Howie and his father packed their cars with wrinkled clothes and made several runs to Millie's house, where she and three other women leaned over creaking ironing boards.

Ed Murchison, the contractor, was at the store a few mornings later, before opening time. Howie noted a brisk decisiveness in his father's manner. First he stipulated that all work be done on evenings and Sundays. Then he ordered a central air unit, the best. He began moving through the store, pointing, and Ed scribbled in a spiral notebook. More racks for suits along this wall. Another dressing room over there. A three way mirror, on a raised platform. Take out all these display cases, put in new ones in mahogany. A cabinetmaker? Well, call him, get him over here. What about one of those canvas awnings that crank open and closed? Paint samples and carpet swatches. And a wooden sign that hangs over the street: Howard and Son Clothier. And . . .

Two months later Howie sat in the cool confines of Howard and Son Clothier, slumped in a soft leather armchair. He gazed out the window, past the figures gathered on the playing field, and contemplated writing a book. In it he would describe the internal workings of a renaissance. Surely his position, at the epicenter of the upheaval that had transformed this town, gave him a unique perspective. All change, he knew, had radiated out from the window display fifteen feet from where his suede loafers rested on a carpet patterned in sedate blocks of blue and gray.

It had begun with the men wanting to be like those romantic dummies in the window. (In his book Howie would give meaning to the old saw, "Life imitates Art"). So they bought clothes to correspond to the image they desired. That night, in their homes, they stood about in white ducks and checkered barn coats and polo shirts. As for their wives and daughters — well, for them it was the fulfillment of their most ardent dreams. The women hardly needed urging upon this new path. The next morning they were at Fran's Ladies Wear, buzzing like angry bees at what wasn't there.

Howie could see Fran's from where he sat. In keeping with a Town and Country look she had placed rustic wood planters bursting with begonias on each side of the entrance. Quite a nice touch. Yes, Fran had risen to the occasion — as had everyone in the town. Take their own Ben Waverly. Howie shifted in his seat so that he could observe Ben, in the back with a customer. Who would have imagined? The toothpick was gone. Ben had exchanged his wash and wear for conservative suits — today, Howie noted, a gray double-breasted pinstripe — and spoke knowledgeably about the break in a trouser line, the pitfalls of mixing patterns, the effects achieved by various styles of shirt collars. He combined the proper element of deference with just a hint of aloofness. At this moment Howie could hear the murmur of his voice. With a conjurer's motion, Ben produced a perfect Windsor knot and draped the tie over the sports coat which the customer had selected.

Howie turned back to his view of the street. His father dressed conservatively too. Howie, on the other hand, opted for the casual look. Today he wore a beige linen sport jacket over a dark blue denim shirt. A pair of pale yellow pants. His tie was decorated with a series of large and colorful clocks. Loud, yes, but his clientele were young men with similarly flamboyant tastes. Often they'd join Howie in the store, just to talk — about last night's party, last night's girl — and when Howard Senior would return from one of his many excursions about town, he'd find three laughing young men lined up in his armchairs. He'd look down at them, shaking his head ruefully, and make a comment in which the word "ne'er-do-wells" made an appearance. But it was a mock sternness, behind which a paternal affection for his son and his carefree young

friends was obvious — for the breezy freshness of their paisley ties, blue blazers, argyle socks. Anyway, Howie's sales figures for June and July were quite respectable.

His father was due to return soon from his morning shave at Henri's. His jowls would be red from the hot towels and stinging aftershave. At one o'clock he'd leave again, to have a long lunch at Sebastian's, the restaurant that had opened in the old railroad depot. His father liked to be out and about, moving briskly down the streets he had created. The founding father.

Looking out at those streets, so altered from a month ago, Howie made an effort to refocus his scattered thoughts. Back to his book. On economics. How far had he gotten in tracing the town's renaissance? Not far, just to the women joining in. Yes, the women. And how they had joined in. Not just the clothes, but what went into those clothes. There was another metamorphosis that took place, one achieved in privacy. Diet and exercise regimes were begun and were not abandoned. Every day, from his chair, Howie enjoyed the results. This very moment Suzie Hendricks strolled by, wearing a sun dress; she gave him a little wave. He waggled his fingers in reply, wondering who was more desirable, Suzie or her seventeen-year-old daughter. The men, too, Howie had to admit, had become sleekly virile — like the waiting figure in the arbor. In his book, in showing the interconnectedness of things, could he extend his study into the town's bedrooms? He grinned. Not wise. It would be prudent to steer well clear of what people were up to lately; he needed to stick with the dismal science of economics. Where he had only proceeded as far as the clothes. Which, of course, included shoes; the Bootery stocked the latest Italian styles. Next came hairdos. Beauty parlors became salons, adding facials, manicures, pedicures. And then there was Henry Procter, the formerly taciturn town barber, who had given Howie a butch haircut almost twenty years ago, becoming Henri almost overnight. His image floated before Howie — the short-cropped black beard and dramatic gestures. If he didn't have six kids, you would almost wonder . . .

Howie made himself sit up, like a schoolchild called back to task. Back to his book. He had reached the part about the beauty businesses prospering; now the great leap was about to take place. It came when all the recently-transformed people looked at their homes, inside and out, and found them — well, drab. Certainly not in keeping with their new image. Not a place they'd want to throw a party. So in residential streets, from dawn to dusk, hammers flashed in the sun, painters climbed ladders, rolls of carpet were dragged through doorways, banks of shrubs were planted. Evenings Howie drove about a town that was approaching an ideal: gleaming homes in a manicured setting. And every workman — every carpenter, plumber, painter, roofer, electrician, landscaper (formerly yard man) — was reaping the benefits. Providers of material, from lumber to lamps to lavatories to linen, had seen a boom in business. And these newly-prosperous folks spent their money, spreading the wealth into every nook and cranny of society. Who did not share in this complex chain of reciprocity? Dentists straightened teeth, dance instructors had more little ballerinas, pet groomers sheared and bathed their wriggling clients, car dealers rolled out the newest dream machines.

Newness was everywhere. On the four blocks bordering the park Howie looked out at two businesses that had opened in shops that had formerly been vacant. One was a gourmet market, for the parties that took place nightly. In addition to an extensive selection of wines, it stocked fresh portabello mushrooms, cans of peeled asparagus, a dozen types of cheeses, baked hams glazed in harlequin designs. The sales people were young, and wore aprons. The other shop sold

fashions for children, blue and white sailor suits and dresses with petticoats. Actually, above this shop there was a third business. In rooms which had once been a dingy apartment, Millie had relocated. Millie, the seamstress, who just months ago had ironed stacks of wrinkled clothes. She had been the first benefactor of the renaissance.

Which brings us full circle, thought Howie, satisfied at the symmetry of his ruminations. He could end his book with Millie, narrowing the focus to one person.

But . . . No. Howie preferred to end with a wide lens, embracing the whole town. And he realized that the scene for that ending was right before his eyes: the park, where last night a band concert had taken place. He would infuse this gathering in the heart of the town with a symbolic importance.

The town government, its coffers full of tax revenue, had restored the park. The rotten wood on the bandstand had been torn out and sound new wood pounded into place. It had been painted in pastels and was now as bright and fresh as the flowering shrubs planted on each side of the winding gravel paths. The high school band had practiced in their gym every afternoon, with a sense of purpose, and last night, dressed in starched new uniforms, they sat in two rows of metal chairs as the whole town gathered around them. It was twilight. The conductor raised his arms and a jaunty Sousa march burst forth. Surrounding the bandstand was a grassy area; over it hung paper lanterns, glowing. The overarching trees were strung with tiny colored lights. The band played on, as darkness fell and then deepened. Children romped in the open space, but gradually they tired, came to lie upon blankets spread on the ground, to dream. The music mellowed, and couples rose to dance, to move in each other's arms . . .

Howie remembered Allison Buchanan, fragrant with lavender, softly alive in his arms.

She, or someone else, would be in his arms again tonight. And so — here Howie ended his ruminations with a shrug — when would there be time to write a book? He could not see himself spending one precious evening of this summer on any manner of drudgery. College resumed in mid September. He had only a month left to play. Like a happy cricket, he would rub his chirping wings together. He would grant himself the right to squander every moment in wasteful pleasure.

The days passed like calendar pages flipped by a careless breeze, until it was September. Then the breeze turned decidedly chill. Some mornings Howie was awakened from his slumber to find, with bewildered annoyance, that the room was cold. An early winter, he thought, uneasily.

One day, as his father stood at the cash register, Howie saw the station wagon come to a stop alongside the park. He watched the young man get out of his car, walk directly to the store and open the door without one glance at the window display.

So, thought Howie, the itinerant window dresser has returned, as promised. To change the display. Howie felt chill air come in through the briefly-opened door.

The young man stopped in front of the cash register. Howard worked on, murmuring figures, oblivious. When he looked up he seemed at first startled, then his expression brightened, becoming almost avid. But the face before him retained its impassiveness. The young man didn't speak, as if his presence this time needed no words of explanation.

“Ah,” exclaimed Howard. “You said you’d be back in the fall. In time for fall fashions. A new window. That old one — well, summer’s over, isn’t it? We need a new beginning.” He rubbed his hands together as if trying to generate heat for a fire.

The young man stood bland and neutral, neither confirming nor denying the hopeful role assigned him.

“How much this time?” Howard asked. “Whatever you say . . .”

“Twenty enough.”

Howard seemed startled by the price. When he spoke his voice shook a little.

“Why . . . Why so cheap this time?” he asked.

“Cheaper goods.”

“Well, that’s . . . Maybe that’s the right idea. To take a step back, get things settled on track again. On a sound basis. Then everything will be . . .”

The voice trailed off. Howie noticed that his father’s hand, reaching into the open register, was trembling. He drew out a bill. But before passing it across the counter he could not resist speaking again. His tone was plaintive and cajoling.

“Guaranteed? Like last time?”

“Nothing to guarantee. Not in winter.”

The young man took the bill and walked out to his car. At six o’clock it was almost dark, and the street lights had switched on. He began unloading boxes.

The next morning Howie stood in front of the window display. Before him was a scene of blunt simplicity.

Men and boys stood with their backs to the wind, isolated figures looking down at their own patch of ground. They all wore heavy black overcoats. The coats did not vary in any way. They were shapeless, extending almost to the snow. The collars were turned up, and the hunched figures had their hands thrust deep in the pockets. The material was indeed cheap; it would stink when wet.

Howie turned away and entered the store. Not seeing his father, he moved through the door leading to the back rooms. He remembered how, months ago, they had searched there for treasures. They had come across such gloomy items as those black overcoats, shoving them quickly aside.

Howie turned a corner and found his father, kneeling. When he saw his son Howard hurriedly closed the flaps of a box he had been looking into and struggled to his feet. He pushed past Howie without a word and moved rapidly out of the back rooms, Howie following. In the front of the store, his father proceeded directly to the edge of the display; there was something in his headlong manner that suggested he meant to clamber onto the platform and dismantle the joyless tableau. But he stopped on the brink and merely stood there, suddenly slumped and small. Those figures in the window were fixed, capable of resisting any puny attempts to remove them.

On that day, and the following, people did not pause to look at the window display. Those on the street passed it with heads averted. The weather was not yet so bad.

The people of the town continued to wear their summery garb even when goose bumps stood out on bare arms. The glibness of summer was gone, as if the chill had numbed their tongues. They retreated inside, from a sky that was often gray, with clouds that scudded along purposefully, like troops headed to the front. The day came when the back yards were empty,

where once had been tables laden with pitchers of drinks to refresh the sun-parched gathering. The only remnant of that time was a woman's wide-brimmed hat that had blown under some bushes, snagged by brambles.

At work, Howie looked around a store that was void of customers; he realized, with a belated awareness, that customers had been dwindling to this nothingness for many weeks, even before the window dresser came. Day after day his father stood at the register, lips moving with a recitation of figures; he would occasionally glance up at the sound of the wind rattling the windows, his eyes widening.

On a Saturday, a day to end a week in which not one sale was made, Ben was let go; he accepted the dismissal silently, merely fishing a toothpick from the pocket of his oxford shirt and placing it between his lips.

It was with trepidation that Howie finally brought up the subject of college. His father looked at his son with a gaze that tried to attain sternness. But behind that expression was a plea. He opened a drawer under the cash register and held up a fistful of its contents.

"Look, son. Look at this. Don't you know that it's just paper? Not money, just paper? For months, it's been empty promises. Look at these charge account receipts. And these checks. If I wrote you one for tuition, it would be as worthless as these."

Howie turned, without a word, and went to the restroom. In the back there were fewer boxes; those which had contained clothes that were stylish, chic, swank could have floated off, as insubstantial as all dreams. He sat on the toilet, head in his hands.

He would find consolation at a party that night. They still continued. Nightly the townspeople drained their glasses, raised their voices to raucous heights. Howie's voice rang out among them, his laughter as desperate as any. People danced wildly, arms and legs flailing.

After one such party Howie wandered alone, shivering, through the back yards. He was in search of his car; maybe it was in a driveway a few houses away. In the distance he heard the sound of tires spinning on gravel, like harsh words of recrimination being exchanged by the couple inside. A cigarette hung from his lower lip; sometimes he staggered. There was a throbbing pain behind his eyes and the acrid taste of bile on his tongue. This night he had knelt before a toilet bowl, praying. His common place of worship lately.

He staggered against a tree, careened off it, and suddenly he saw himself, as if from on high: him in his polka dot bow tie and blue and yellow sweater vest — a suitable outfit for such a ridiculous and contemptible fellow. He tried to clasp his hands over his face, but the cigarette was in the way. He spit it out and threw back his head and howled.

The next day Howie leaned against the counter in his father's store. In the late afternoon his head was still throbbing. He was remembering the howl, which seemed to well up from some vast empty place inside the curve of his ribs.

Howie gazed past the dark figures in the window, out at the street. The scene before him had achieved desolation. Some days all that moved along the sidewalk was trash — scraps of paper, leaves — swirling in eddies, ending up huddled in doorways. The store selling children's wear had closed weeks ago; its front glass had been smashed one night — a wandering gang of booted teenagers, probably — and a sheet of plywood nailed up. The windows of the rooms above it were dark; Millie's white curtains were gone. The gourmet shop still survived, or a much-altered form of it. The shelves were almost bare, with only odds and ends of leftover

canned goods remaining. The lone proprietor did his business in the lower-priced wines now, and sold pint bottles of vodka and whiskey from under the front counter.

The store Howie stood in was also a shell of what it had been. The leather armchairs were gone; Howie stood not on thick carpeting but on bare concrete. Ed Murchison had come by one afternoon, unpaid bills in hand. He demanded the rest of his money, all of it — his truck was about to be repossessed. Howard, holding out open palms, muttered that there was no blood in a turnip. Ed ran a hand through his thinning hair, then vowed to return later that day to rip out all he'd put in. But before driving off he backed his truck onto the sidewalk and, climbing into the bed with a crowbar in his hand, yanked down the sign proclaiming the existence of Howard and Son Clothier. Now two chains swung in the wind.

Yes, Howie thought, a new phase in the economic history of this community had asserted itself. He knew that he was viewing, on the street before him, the aftermath of surfeit. But he had no interest in economics. It was spiritual barrenness that now concerned him.

He remembered the laughter of the summer days, among which his own donkey's bray had been prominent. Laughter as empty as the promises they had made. Such preening idiots, pursuing nothing more than pleasure-sodden lives. Fashion plates! No wonder he had howled, in disgust and shame. They deserved punishment. He looked forward to the snow, the excoriating winds. The townspeople would stand stupidly in the teeth of it, unprotected in their light blazers and white ducks.

He smiled grimly — he took pride in an unflinching grimness he had discovered in himself.

And though he had accepted the loss of college with stoicism, Howie spent much of his afternoons thinking about returning. If he could somehow — in some way! — get the tuition money, he would take as many philosophy courses as he could. He would study deep into the night. He pictured himself in an attic room crowded with books. It would be cold, but he welcomed the harshness. He dreamed of immersing himself in the truth.

And if the truth were dreadful? If it offered no solace for the winter of the soul? He stared out the window.

So be it, he muttered.

Winter began savaging the town when his father finally dragged out the boxes of overcoats, heaped them in piles. The men came to buy, silently handing over cash. This time it was payment in full. They put the overcoats on, then disappeared out the door, heads bowed. Howie, too, shrugged on a shapeless black coat. It was so heavy that his shoulders sagged under the weight.

Nighttime, a month later.

Howie stood in the darkness of the park, his hands thrust into the pockets of the overcoat. He heard a restless banging from the bandstand — a loose board in the wind. There was no one about.

He looked up at the one lighted window on the street. It was on the second floor, where Millie's had been. Now it was occupied by the old woman. She had come with the winter, had set up her pawnshop there. She had her living quarters there too. She did good business, from the misery of others. Every day Howie watched, from his spot by the counter, as people disappeared

into the alley where the entrance to her stairway was. He had once gone up that narrow stairwell himself, his shoulder bumping against the wall. He had a watch to pawn. He rang the bell; the door opened a crack and one eye appeared, almost colorless, scrutinizing him. She unchained the door when he dangled the watch in the opening. She took it with greedy haste. He looked at her bowed head. Her gray hair was parted in the middle, dividing her skull in two parts; he looked away. Through a door he saw a bed, a chest of drawers. . . .

Howie turned and began moving along one of the park's winding paths. The heavy object that hung from the noose inside his overcoat tugged at his shoulder.

He recalled the querulous sound of her voice: a worthless watch. Why did people bother her with such trifles? Howie had been told that she gave only a pittance, and indeed she offered him next to nothing. Take it or leave it, she said; it's not you who sets the price, my fine young man. She exuded a malignancy that was palpable.

And yet it was she who prospered. Why? thought Howie. What value, seen in the balance of existence, did this evil woman have? No more than the life of a louse, of a black beetle.

She had gone into the bedroom to get the money for his watch, closing the door behind her. The money was in there, somewhere. A small fortune, it was rumored. It was further rumored that in her will she had left it all to a convent, in exchange for prayers to be said into perpetuity. So that her soul would repose forever in heaven.

Thus she would escape God's judgment. But man's?

Howie's lips twisted into a smile. Looking down at his heavy boots crunching the brittle snow, he was struck by a sense of inevitability. One step simply led to another. In the pocket of his overcoat he fingered a silver cigarette case.