

THE MAN IN THE SYCAMORE TREE: A Fragment of an Early Novel

Thomas Merton

And running before, he climbed up into
a sycamore tree, that he might see Him,
for He was to pass that way.

PART I

The Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Express rolled heavily through mile after mile of Tidewater pines and sand, foul with its own soot. In the rare clearing there would be here a cornpatch, there a shabby, grey frame house, sometimes a man driving a mule team. Tom Riley had seen it all many times before.

He had made the trip by day and by night, fifty or sixty times. He had slept in the seats of daycoaches, and awakened with the feeling of having been wedged in a vise all night. Fifty or sixty times, most of them during his four years of college, he had travelled back and forth on this line, to and from Washington and New York. Now, for the first time since college he was going back.

The woman with the two children, who sat, facing him, at the end of the coach, had got on, as he had, at Richmond. Already the children were getting restless, and beginning to climb up and down on the seat. One by one, their mother had brought out, from the luggage, teddybears, dolls, Donald Ducks for them to play with; and now she was spreading open, for them, on the seat, a large picture book, and trying to put them to work on it with colored crayons.

The man in the white linen suit, across the aisle, had got on at Fredericksburg. Riley had thought: "He is fidgeting around and getting ready to lean over and start a conversation with me. He will ask me if I am going to Washington, and I will tell him I am going to New York. Then he will ask me if it is for a visit, and I will say no: for good. He

will not express his disapproval. Presently we may get around to Hitler and Mussolini and the Poles and Danzig, and the question whether there will turn out to be a war.

Just as the stranger put his hardskinned hand on the arm of his seat, and made as if to lean towards Riley across the aisle, and speak to him, Riley got up and went to the water cooler. The little, insolent child, was scribbling violently in green all over the outlines of the charming animals in his picture book. Riley tossed the wet and crumpled cup away, and went back to his seat. The stranger in the white linen suit, from Fredericksburg, was looking out of the window.

It was hot everywhere, but the new apartment, in New York would be cool, comparatively, since it gave on the river. Under any circumstances, New York would be better than home. Even if he had to go back to the Columbia dormitories, or to the gloomy firetraps of 113th street, New York would be better than home.

But now, he was taking over his sister's apartment, and they would all live there, he and Jim Mariner, and Fowke, without having to pay for it, all summer and all fall, and perhaps all winter, too, until his sister came back from Mexico.

It was on Sutton Place, and looked out over the river, and it was theirs for nothing.

"I dare say you all had a hot spell in Richmond too," said the man from Fredericksburg, leaning across the aisle.

"Yes, indeed," said Riley.

"This is killing heat," said the traveller.

"You said it," said Riley, "deathly."

"Yesterday we had a real killing heat in Fredericksburg. It took an old man, in the middle of the afternoon, sitting in a chair."

"Sitting in a chair!"

"The postman came and found him slumped over, dead."

"It must have struck him at the heart."

"I reckon so," said the man from Fredericksburg, calmly, looking out of the window.

Riley, in turn, looked out of his side of the train with nothing but distaste for this conversation.

The apartment in Sutton Place would have five rooms, with big windows over the river, and that was what he wanted to be thinking about. He had left his job for it. He and his friends had always wanted a big apartment to live in and work in. Besides that, now Linda could move to New York. Perhaps Linda might take a room with Mary Baxter somewhere near them. Perhaps Linda and Mary and Sue Clare could manage to raise money for a big apartment of their own. It was

possible that those three could live together. They would probably get along very well.

"Going to Washington?" said the man from Fredericksburg, and Mariner, shaking his head pleasantly, said:

"New York. I'm moving north for a while."

"I fear the northern winter," said the man from Fredericksburg, with a slight frown.

They would have all Jim Mariner's books, and Fowke's, and his own. It would be pleasant to live in a place with so many books, even if you never read any of them, but just glanced into their pages. On the wall, he knew his sister had a brown Modigliani picture of a woman. That would be the best thing about the apartment: that and the windows over the river. And there they would truly live the life they had always wanted. Mariner writing stories and poems, and Fowke doing drawings, and Riley himself maybe working in an advertising agency for a good salary, and playing the trumpet well whenever he felt like playing the trumpet.

"Well," said the man from Fredericksburg, moving in his seat, and turning again towards Riley, "They say there's going to be a war."

"They say so," said Riley, "and there is."

"They say it is going to be the most terrible war the world has ever seen, and I've no doubt we'll be in it."

"I believe that," said Riley, with only the vaguest sense of discomfort.

"They do say," said the man, leaning forward, and raising the hand that had been resting on his knee, "that there is an old nigger down in King and Queen county a hundred and two years old, who clearly remembers the liberation and can see into the future. They describe him as a mystic." He let his hand fall once again to his knee.

"A mystic," said Riley, "I've heard of him."

"Call him mystic," said the man from Fredericksburg, "or call him what you will: he has a piece to say about what we've got coming to us in times not so far ahead."

"Prophecies?"

"Armies overrun the world. The principal cities of the earth: in flames. Richmond is bombed. Blood flows in the Rapahannock river. Washington is levelled to the earth. Plagues," he continued, "Plagues of the body and plagues of the spirit take every tenth man. It is, as he calls it, the 'Great Decimation'. Where do you suppose an uncultured nigger learned a word like that?"

"It's odd!"

"And, what's more, you can't deny the damned old fool may turn out to be right in the end."

"No," said Riley, without interest, "I wouldn't be surprised."

Up at the end of the car, the little children had given up scribbling in their picture books, and were now busy taking cups out of the rack at the water cooler, and throwing them on the floor. Their mother watched all this without emotion.

The apartment would have to be clean, the food would be good. They would have anchovies, artichoke hearts, french bread, foie gras, black bean soup, cold capon, pickled eels whenever anybody got a check for work done. And the place would be further transformed by the presence of Linda, who, on 113th street, had never materialized, but had just been someone he wrote letters to, and saw four times a year.

All that time she had been going to Wellesley. He had met her the summer before his freshman year, at Virginia Beach. She was then sixteen. He had never seen anybody walk, move about, sit in chairs with such noble ease and grace as hers. He had never heard such delightful laughter. Polite young men from seven counties of Virginia drove all night to keep a date with her, and for his part, he took with him to college a portrait by which all his freshman friends were completely abashed, as soon as they compared it with their own fuzzy haired girls.

For five years he had written her letters, and travelled to Boston to see her, and to go to dances with her. But now she would come to New York, as she had always wanted to. New York was, at last, going to be very gay.

But now the tracks spread out fanwise to either side of the train, which had slowed down to a crawl, among the lines of empty freight cars outside of Alexandria. And presently the humble roofs of the town, scarcely level with the high embankment that the railway ran on, appeared alongside them. On the other side, forbidding, empty, and without function the freemason's tower for George Washington arose in all its greyness. The man from Fredericksburg pointed it out, and remarked that he had contributed some money towards its construction.

"May I ask you," he said to Riley, "if you are a mason?"

"You may," said Riley, "and I am not."

"I suppose your father is, then."

"Yes."

They passed the airport, where, with a sudden rush of motors close above them, an airliner swooped down among the poles and signs

and high-tension wires and came to earth upon the narrow landing field.

"Not even a father," said the man from Fredericksburg, "is allowed to suggest that his son become a mason."

"The son has to make up his own mind," said Riley curtly, "and ask of his own free will, to be admitted."

"I see you understand the principles," said the man from Fredericksburg, and the train moved slowly out along the airy black girders of the bridge, crossing the muddy waters of the Potomac. The air over the city was full of haze and heat. You could barely see to Georgetown and to the Episcopal Cathedral on the ridge behind it.

PART II

August 1939

Busts of Greek poets and philosophers stood on the tops of the shelves and plaster casts of famous bas reliefs lined the walls of the reading room, except where a group of varnished candybox portraits of professors of dead languages caught the light from the street. These thin, scared men had probably been noticed or forgotten even in their lifetime and were now dead: and nobody had ever tried to read their names upon the gilt frames of their portraits.

But the Greek and Latin reading room was quiet, and not frequented by the crowd of chatting, bickering M.A. students who fought over the erudition and solemnity of Browning in the rooms on that floor of the library. Here, there was only one other person, a Franciscan nun whose name Mariner always forgot, but who had figured him for a friend from the first, and smiled politely and without fright when he had first said: "Good morning sister".

Since that time, she would eagerly talk, upon the proper occasion, about her favorite, the poet Saint Avitus, on whom she was writing a doctoral dissertation. He had, in exchange, given her Blake to read, and they had become good friends, she on one hand a little suspicious of his interest in unorthodox mysticism, and he awed by her erudition in questions of metrics, grammar, syntax and linguistics. But what was more remarkable, she would quite frequently ask him questions, the answers to which he never knew, sincerely expecting to get information from him. For it was part of her radical goodness to assume that everybody knew as much as she did, that everybody was smarter and more diligent than she. Today she sat at the far table, at the other end of the room, with her back to him. This was not one of her days for covering sheets and sheets of yellow paper

with small neat writing from her fountain pen. She was gazing, most of the time, out of the window, and Mariner could tell, although from where he sat he could not see her face, that she was preoccupied with some tiny, difficult problem.

He himself looked at the shelves full of books and at the sightless philosophers and at the horsemen in the bas relief, and found this a bad day to be shut in the room with the earnest, frowning, howling Gods of Blake's private pantheon, hurling themselves everlastingly out of Eden into the rat-race of material existence. This was a scarcely better day for trying to find out how Plotinus formulated the same problem. Spread across the big pages of Blake's Prophetic Books the anguish of Los spun itself out in long, irregular lines full of metaphors from the forgotten alchemy and crazy sciences of Medes and Babylonians and Egyptians. The anguish of Los the artist made itself out of symbol after obscure symbol as he strove in his ontological forges to make sense out of the created universe.

The briefcase at Mariner's elbow bulged with typewritten sheets he longed to burn. They would not let him write about Blake's poetry, and he was compelled to discuss weird and labyrinthine background of lunatic astrologies cosmologies that the poet had felt compelled to set down for angels to read because nobody else would.

So Mariner leaned on his elbows on his big book, and looked out of the window, with disgust, at the brown stone houses with whose roofs the reading room was just about level. No breeze stirred outside, and there was no sun, and his shirt clung to his back. Nothing came through the wide window but stale air.

Around his table, unopened, lay the other books he was using, places marked in them with index cards all covered with pencil notes: Whitaker's *Neo Platonists*, Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, Gilson's *Saint Bonaventure*, something by a Hindu. Presently, when he heard the chimes of the Presbyterian church down the street ring five o'clock, he gathered all these books together and got up to go. The sister turned as he was leaving and said she hoped he was having a better time with his work than she was with hers, and he laughed, saying it was impossible for anybody to be as disgusted with a thesis as he was.

Her face was that of a child, and of course it was pale. She might have been twenty-five or thirty-five, there was no way of telling.

She said "Good night Mr. Mariner" and he closed the door, and went down the hall admiring her calm. He piled the books up on his desk in room 401, locked the papers in the drawer, and went to the

elevator. On the ground floor he hesitated by the phone booths, wondering whether or not to call Sue Clare. He decided not to, and started out along the edge of South Field, for the subway.

A small group of young men with hats on the backs of their heads and fat briefcases on the brick pavement by their feet, stood around the pedestal of Jefferson's statue and argued about how soon Russia would be bound in a military alliance with the two empires of England and France, against the Nazis. From the subway station, people came reading evening papers, the big headlines of which said Paris was being evacuated.

The news turned Mariner's stomach, like the smell of some rotting, dead thing.

Nevertheless he threw down three pennies for a paper, at the stand. There on the front page were pictures of French Troops leaving for the Maginot line. Nobody knew how many hundreds of thousands were already in the West wall. The paper told what men of what ages had been conscripted in England, what atrocities Poles were supposed to have committed against Germans, and there were pictures of guards and a barricade on a road into Danzig.

He got out at Times Square and threw the paper into an ashcan. He went out into the heat and filth of Forty-second street. Already the papers on the stands had new headlines, something political. An ambassador had flown to Moscow in a plane. Fragments of trampled newspapers and cellophane wrappers from cigars and candybars littered the sidewalk. Racing around the Times Building, in the murk of the cloudy afternoon, went news with which direction he was already familiar. He turned and started in the other direction.

Hectic rubbery bodies looked at him through painted drapery on the Burlesque billboards, and from the Movie signs he was menaced by wicked and immobile gunners. The covers of hundreds of picture magazines fluttered in the murk like flags. He could hear the crack of guns in a rifle range, the zing and clang of bullets striking a metal target. A mob of highschool boys came rushing desperately out of the flea circus, and all stopped short at the foot of a stairway that led to a taxi dance hall. An old woman as old as a ghost bent over a refuse can on the corner, and turned over and over, with a kind of delicacy the paper and rubbish that was piled on it. Presently she lifted out, with neat fingers some indescribable, formless piece of waste that seemed to her, for some pitiable reason, precious; and this she put in a sack. Then she went on with her careful search.

Inside some bar, the shrill and querulous recorded voice of a sports reporter shouted a description of a race that had been run an hour ago, and Mariner caught the words: "They're Off!"

The street smelled of stale chile and cheap candy. Sweat ran down into Mariner's eyes. He read, without hope, the misleading signs on the movie marquee: you had to guess what the movies were, because in these theaters all the old movies return with false, new titles. Behind the tall, green McGraw Hill building the sky hung heavy with fetid haze and smoke from the stockyards and slaughterhouses in Jersey.

The smells and sights and sounds of this street were those of a city in which a terrible pestilence was just about to declare itself. The awareness of this was something that Mariner now carried with him like a heavy burden. In the unbearable heat, people moved slowly and listlessly, and their unquiet eyes seemed to be hunting for omens and prophecies in the signs and windows and in the dirty sky.

Mariner himself now approached the corner of Eighth Avenue half aware he wanted to see appear there the mad, naked figure of some prophet, like that Solomon Eagle that ran about before the Great Fire of London with a brazier on his head, and prophesied the city's destruction. But here were no other signs to be seen than those of the times, and that was what was so terrible.

Mariner felt in his pocket for a cigarette, but they were all gone.

A family of farmers came by, the boys in rumped seersucker and the girls in white linen, and looked about them, amazed, at the horrors of the city. Farmers of any other age, Mariner felt, would have smelled the plague as an animal smells death, and just as surely. But these poor people were too confused. They still could not quite be sure this street did not hold somewhere in hiding a valuable and mysterious thing they had come a long way to see. Therefore their disappointment equalled that of all the bums and salesmen and advertising canvassers and pickets and policemen in the street.

At the corner of Eighth Avenue, Mariner stopped and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. The choice between going north on the Avenue and turning to go back the way he had come, presented itself to him as a major quandary. He had thought at first he wanted to see a movie. Now he was sure he did not. He had no idea what he might be wanting. He only knew he was carrying with him a sense of terrible presentiment, like a heavy burden.

A big newspaper truck turned the corner and dumped a package of papers on the sidewalk without stopping. The newsman walked

unhurriedly to where it lay, and grasping it by the cord that bound it, dragged the package at his leisure to his stand. Mariner didn't wait for him to open it. He went up the Avenue one block and two and three, not knowing why.

If he decided to go as far as Fiftieth Street he could take a crosstown bus and go home. He didn't know if he would go that far.

If he should come to a church, he would go into it, and pray, but only if he came to one. He did not have any strong desire to go looking for a church.

The sense that the world was about to be stricken by plague and famine and destruction weighed as heavily as a sense of sin, and with all the hopelessness that sin brings with it. And just as mortal sin makes men inarticulate, so that they grow too confused to even remember how they prayed, the nearness of disaster inspired in him nothing but a kind of weary carelessness that made praying seem futile.

But there were no churches here, anyway. He turned right on a cross street, and passed a couple of theaters. He felt again, in his pockets, after cigarettes, and decided he would now buy some. He came to a Hotel, the Hotel Messalina, and they directed him to the air conditioned bar, where there was a cigarette machine.

The place was upholstered in fake leopard skin, and was dark and cool. There were few people at the bar, and although they were loud talkers, the bar seemed pleasant. It was called the Safari Room.

As he ripped the cellophane off his pack of cigarettes, Mariner looked at the row of phone booths at the back of the room and realized it wouldn't be so bad calling from there since it was cool and quiet.

The box went 'ping' and swallowed his nickel, and he dialed Sue Clare's number.



Sue Clare's apartment on 11th street was in a basement, and got very little light through the window that let you see the feet of people going by on the sidewalk outside. On such a day, in Sue Clare's apartment there might as well have been no day at all.

Now she moved about the room with her hair hastily pinned up, so that wisps of it fell about her ears. Now she moved about the apartment in slippers and a blue kimono, and washed stockings in the washbasin of her narrow bathroom. The place was filled with steam, and the room outside was damp enough with just the normal wet heat of August. So she had stretched a line across that room, and hung her

stockings on it. They dripped on the pink pages of the Daily News she had spread over the table to protect it.

When the phone rang she was up to her wrists in the basin, and had to rinse her hands under the tap in the tub, and dry them on her dirty turkish towel. Then she picked up the receiver and sprawled across the bed and said:

"Who is it?"

"Mariner."

"Oh, hello, darling! I'm mad at you, I thought you were going to call me hours ago."

"Oh, I didn't get a chance."

"Where are you now?"

"Up town."

"What are you doing? You sound blue."

"Oh, everything's terrible," he said and paused, and she said indulgently, and not without a certain suspiciousness:

"Oh, for heaven's sakes."

There was another brief and awkward pause, as if Mariner, at the other end of the line, were making up his mind about something, and then he said:

"Do you want me to come down there, or would you rather meet me uptown?"

"Well," she said doubtfully, "where are you?"

"The Safari Room of the Hotel Messalina. It's on forty-fifth street near Eighth Avenue, it's easy to find. Have you got a Cue?"

"Yes."

"Well, look up and see if there is any old Chaplin movie playing anywhere around here."

"I did; there isn't"

"Oh," he said. He paused again. "Do you mind coming up here?"

"No, darling, I'd much rather," she said brightly. "What time is it?"

"Six o'clock. Will you be long?"

"Oh, no, darling, I'm all ready," she said, and glanced at her nails, which had no polish on them, and looked, in the mirror at her messy hair. "I'll be there in twenty minutes," she said, in a business-like tone of voice.

"Oh, all right then."

"Jim, dear."

"What?"

"What's the matter? Why do you say everything's terrible?"

"Oh, you know. The weather, and this lousy city, and the evacuation of Paris and all those things."

"Don't pay attention to the papers, there isn't going to be a war."

"There sure is."

"Oh, well, let's not talk about it. I'll be there in fifteen minutes. Wait for me, sweetheart."

"Well, hurry!"

"Bye."

She put down the phone, and went over and felt the stockings on the line. They weren't drying at all. She couldn't make up her mind whether she felt like going up town with no stockings. Maybe they would be dry in ten minutes. She turned on the radio, and lay, in her kimono on the bed, turning the pages of Cue and looking at the movie programs.

In ten minutes the stockings were still not dry enough. She turned on one of the burners of her small stove. She thought about Mariner's unhappiness. She liked it, sometimes, when he was quiet and melancholy. It was nice when a man was sad. He would sit and look puzzled, and not complain much, but just say, once in a while, that everything was terrible. There was something charming about it, just as she sometimes found there was something charming about a man when he had a hangover. Jim Mariner often worried about the war, everybody did. She did, too, she supposed. But still, you never could tell if there was going to be one or not.

For example, in the last war, nobody apparently thought there was going to be a war until suddenly it happened, and there it was: war. But this time, it was her own, private belief, since everybody had been expecting the war to come for so long, (since nineteen twenty-nine, and even before that,) there probably wouldn't be one after all, just to even things up.

So now she went back to the basin, and washed a couple more pairs of stockings, and hung them up on the line she had improvised in the single room of her apartment. After that she went and got the nail polish, and started applying it with dexterity and care, to her toe nails.

At about seven o'clock, just as she had pulled on her stockings, someone rang her bell. She put on her kimono again, and pressed the buzzer, and went to the door. She held it open a crack, and saw the front door open, and a tall, awkward man come in to the hallway.

"Why Terence," she cried, "Come in, darling! Where have you been?"

He came towards her, peering and trying to accustom his eyes to the dark hall.

"Oh, there you are," he said, thickly, "Hello, Susie, I'm glad to see you."

He came towards her, walking with a slight stoop, holding out his hand, but she flung her arms around his neck and kissed him twice on the cheek.

"Well," she cried, "Where have you been?"

"That's right," he answered, "a long time no see, eh Susie?"

Then she let him into her room, making apologies about the row of stockings drying on the line. He came, stooping, smiling through the door.

Terence Park was over six feet tall. He had big, expressionless blue eyes, and was beginning to lose curly brown hair.

Today, in spite of the heat, he looked perfectly collected. There was not much animation about his face, but it appeared cool and at peace. He was wearing a dark blue tropical worsted business suit with a chalk stripe in it. He had a claret colored bow tie on, and now carefully set down the newspaper covered table, coconut straw hat with a red band.

"What's today?" he said, sitting down on the edge of the bed, "Wash day?"

"How did you guess?"

"Ha ha. Ask me who I saw yesterday?"

"I don't know. Who?"

"Mary Baxter; she was at the Manhasset Bay Yacht Club."

"Oh. I know, she sometimes goes over there now, she lives in Great Neck."

"I know, she told me. Well, that's how it happened."

"What, what happened? Did something happen to you, too?"

"Oh no, I just mean that's how I came to be here. I thought you might be wondering who told me your new address. Well, it was she."

"Oh, Mary told you. Well, I think it's awfully sweet of you to come around so promptly to pay me a visit."

"Well," he said, "after all, Sue, you know: Long time no see."

"When was the last time? The day you sailed for Bermuda?"

"That's right. Why don't you ever come out and visit me any more?"

"Well, you know how it is. Are you out there in what do you call it? Manhasset?"

"Sure, sure. You don't have to wait to be asked, you know. Just call up and say you'll be out to dinner."

"Oh my God, that's right, dinner! What time is it?"

"Five after seven."

Then she jumped up and ran to her closet and took down a dress and shut herself in the bathroom to put it on. Terence Park sat on the edge of the bed with his hands on his knees and counted the stockings on the line, one two three four five six seven eight: there were four pairs. Then, clearing his throat, he called out:

"Sue, have you got a date tonight?"

"What?" she said, coming out of the bathroom with her dress on.

"Are you busy tonight?" he repeated.

"Yes dear, I'm awfully sorry. I have a date uptown, he's waiting for me now."

"Well," said Terence, "that's a pity. Where is it? I have my car outside, I'll give you a lift."

"Darling, that's marvelous," she said, putting on her hat, and they started out, at about seven fifteen, for the Hotel Messalina.



By half past six, Mariner was beginning to get tired of eating pretzels in the Safari Room of the Messalina. He found himself unable to finish the glass of beer he had ordered half an hour before, and tiring of the loud voices and big gay gestures and melodious laughter of the unemployed actors at the other end of the bar. The bartender sometimes joined in their conversations, but seemed to show them only minimum of respect. They probably lived upstairs in the hotel.

Since Mariner had been sitting there, more and more people had come into the bar. Groups of middle aged men and women came and sat at the tables, including not a few fat men with sunburns and rich deep voices and silvery white hair accompanying exotically dressed and skinny girls who had on too much lipstick and walked as if they were held together with pieces of string. And there was a busy Italian midget to run from the bar to the tables with trays full of old fashioned and manhattans.

Mariner sat and watched the lighted face of the clock that stood against the mirror in which all the movement of the bar darkly reproduced itself like the life of some kind of aquarium that had been conceived against nature. The beer in his glass had altogether lost its little white collar, and gone flat. He had smoked two or three cigarettes, sitting there, and now he wanted no more. He also pushed away from him the dark blue bowl of pretzels, and folded his arms on

the bar and wished that he were dead. The Italian waiter came and slapped his tray down on the bar next to Mariner, and gave him a curious look, not because he wasn't an actor, not because he wasn't drinking, but just because he seemed to be in such a bad temper.

The bar was clean, all right, and it was cool, and the people in it seemed to be happy, and the beer was certainly no worse than you got anywhere else, but it was obvious enough to Mariner why he preferred to be somewhere else, away from the city: the smell of the plague was in here too. It was in here with all the new fake leopard skin of the upholstery, with all the clean shining darkstained wood of the bar on which the bartender's rag was continually busy, it was in here with all the pressed suits and clean fingernails of the people.

It was in here although nobody was talking about the danger of war, but all discussing the big union trouble that was then taking place, involving actors and stagehands and a lot of hairpulling that made the second page of the World Telegram.

In the dark aquarium tank that the mirror in front of him made, Mariner did not need to watch the nodding, waved, iron grey heads of the old men, nor the flashing teeth and black circled eyes of the women, nor hear their voices that rose and fell and filled the room with the sound of a chorus of wraiths. He did not have to see or hear or smell or touch anything around him, to be penetrated with the fear of the pestilence that was everywhere.

And that was not so much because the plague surrounded him, as that he felt it already possessed him, that he had already been infected, perhaps beyond hope. Perhaps beyond hope—or perhaps, as soon as this came to mind, he was compelled to deny it. That there was no hope had been what had dominated him in the street. It had seemed so bad that, although he was bound to believe some underlying intelligibility was there, and could be attained to, in some manner, by whoever wanted to, yet the effort would be too great, for the confusion and diversity of horrors all around him were too overpowering. The plague was too strong. There was nothing for it but to weaken and fall, and wait for the bell men and their slow wagon to come crying: "Bring out your dead."

But now, as he waited, for no good reason, to see Sue Clare, surrounded by people and by atmosphere that made him more and more impatient, the hopelessness began to give way to active resentment and once again he knew very clearly that he was not bound to sit still. Nothing compelled him to be in that place, watching the sad underwater life of the bar mirror, and filling his mouth with a bad

taste. He was free to get up and walk out and go anywhere he pleased. Not only that: freedom was more than freedom to move in space.

And once again he felt, but more confusedly than the other night, that it took nothing less simple than a pure act of volition to liberate himself from everything that now filled him with despair, and that he could clean himself of the plague by merely wanting to.

One other time, he had held the intuition up before him and tried to estimate only some sort of aesthetic, or literary, or dramatic possibilities it held. But it had to be different, more than an apprehension that gave some delight to the intellect. You could not escape the plague by knowing that it was possible, but only by actually wanting to: only by an act.

And yet he sat there, inert. He did not touch his glass, he did not touch his pack of cigarettes, he did not move his hands. He shifted his eyes from the line of bottles behind the bar to the clock. The clock said twenty to seven. The bartender looked, with disapproval, at the half glass of beer that had gone flat in front of him.

Mariner only felt the weight of his inertia growing upon him, like a burden, and he knew that in a minute he would shake it off and go away. He knew that in a minute he would make a certain decision that he had been waiting to make for a long time. Just at the moment it seemed ridiculous that anything he remembered about Sue Clare could affect his decision, because it involved something that was much more important to him, his own life, his very being. He turned his eyes again to that clock. Only another minute had passed. In the mirror heads wagged. Behind him, silvery laughter arose, in a corner of the room, from a wide mouth that looked like the maw of a barracuda, and all of a sudden, Mariner remembered words that he had read, and was shocked with a strange excitement.

"Then you know that the summer is very nigh."

Outside, everywhere, brightness had fallen from the air, dust had closed the eye of the fairest that had ever lived, and full swift the plague went by.

"When ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors."

Whether Sue Clare would ever get there, and whether she would be put out at not finding him did not have the slightest importance, any more than it would have had if the building had gone up in flames. He remembered the words that he had read:

"Now learn a parable of the fig tree; when his branch is yet tender and putteth forth leaves, then ye know that the summer is very

nigh: so, likewise, when ye shall see all these things, ye know that it is near, even at the doors."

He tossed a dime on the bar and went out directly into the street.

On leaving the Hotel, Jim Mariner had turned and walked to Eighth Avenue, the way he had come before, and started downtown. It was just as hot as before, although now the sun was down and the streetlights shone in the damp, brown murk of the evening.

Taxis, private cars swung in and out of the side streets. A newspaper truck dumped another load by the same news stand he had passed before, and again he did not wait to see what the fresh headline was. But he went on past three young men with their shirt collars wide open and ties hanging loose upon their chests, who argued hoarsely and violently, with wide and murderous gestures of their arms in front of their faces. And out of this group was flung ten or twelve times, before Mariner was out of hearing, the name of Russia, and the word Soviet. There was also a lot of swearing. While he stood and waited for the light to change, he heard the voice of one of these young men shriek:

"Stalin did it to save you, you bastard," and the voice sounded so desperate and so crazy that it frightened him into turning around. He saw a twisted mouth, unshaved cheeks that shone with sweat, and two eyes that were wild and scared, the eyes a man might have if he had thumbscrews on and the torturer had just given them the first twist. Then the light changed, and Mariner crossed the street.

In spite of the heat, and in spite of the sweat and the dirt and the stink of the street, he went on walking down Eighth Avenue. He no longer noticed any of these things, and did not notice, either, that he was hungry. He just went on walking.

He passed a couple of movies, some cheap clothing stores, some Greek Lunch Rooms, and got into the garment district where all the buildings were now dark, and the streets fairly empty. He passed the Hotels around thirty-fourth street, and the Post Office, and kept on, down town.

"When ye shall see all these things, know that it is near, even at the doors."

What things? The numberless sightless windows of these shuttered buildings and dark factories? The little lighted bars? The line of heavy buses, interspersed with passenger cars, speeding uptown on the wide street? The news stands? The corner arguments? The ambulance, shrieking out of twenty-eighth street? The four little boys fighting viciously and silently and well among the ashcans below

twenty-third? The Y.M.C.A.? The Used Car lots? The lighted store window full of trusses and braces and supporters and false legs and crutches?

Was this brown, fetid haze of late August something you might interpret to be brimstone? Were there eclipses and portents? Yes, everywhere. Wars and rumors of wars. Everywhere. Passing a news stand he glanced at the new headline; it said Russia and Germany were allies now. That only made him laugh. Wars and rumors of wars. Well, anyway, that was funny. When ye shall see these things...

Ten feet in front of him he saw the door of a bar open wide and out came a man with his arms flapping, his shirt tail flying, his feet sliding out from under him, his legs waving madly. He fell forward on the sidewalk and somebody tossed his hat out after him. It was a straw hat. It sailed out in a clean arc and overshot the fallen drunkard, and skidded across the sidewalk nearly to the kerb. An old lady stepped over it carefully, and walked on, gaping behind her at the men. And now he picked himself up, and fell down again as Mariner passed. People began to gather silently, (and only a few smiling) to watch the man get up and fall down, get up and fall down, get up and fall down.

Very near, even at the doors. Mariner looked up into the murky night sky, nothing but haze that held all the dust, and smoke and miasms of the city. The city was overshadowed by pestilences as though by the wings of a gigantic and legendary bird. A newspaper truck came pounding out of a sidestreet and dropped a load of papers in front of him, this time the first edition of the morning tabloids. They all carried big headlines about Russia going over to Hitler. Then he was at Fourteenth Street. He looked up at a clock on one of the savings banks, not because he wanted to know the time but because it was such a large clock it forced itself upon his attention. Then he realized he had come a long way, thirty blocks. He turned west, not knowing quite what he was looking for now, a place to eat, or a subway to go back uptown. The first thing he came to was a small church.

He went inside, through the narrow doorway, passing an old woman selling holy cards and little devotional pamphlets, and climbed a long flight of steps up into the dark chapel. It was hot, and silent, and smelled of melted wax.

He got to the top of the steps. Silence. The holy water left a cool spot on his forehead. Masses of banked up red lights stood like flowers and flickered and winked before the altar. Signed again with the sign of his faith, Mariner dipped his right knee to the floor. Illuminated, above the altar, with folded hands, was the Virgin according to the miraculous image of Guadalupe. It was a Spanish church, dedicated to

the patroness of Mexico. Here on Fourteenth Street was a mission station, a church of Spanish missionaries, of some order or other, to them an outpost a distant station on a frontier.

The little red lights flickered, countless flowers, a garden in that silent darkness. And in the darkness now began to come clearer the shapes, here and there among the pews, of kneeling women, their heads covered with shawls. Here and there were men, but not many. Behind him somewhere Mariner could catch the sound of whispering which, he guessed, came from behind the curtains of a confessional.

Kneeling, Mariner raised his eyes to the altar, the crucifix, the Virgin. The darkness was very silent. Mariner made, in his mind, the first words of the prayer, and called upon his Father in Heaven. In the stillness, everything began, now, to take on its rightful proportion. The lights flickered in their utterly noiseless burning. Mariner drew through the silence of his mind, in orderly sequence, the words of the prayer: *Who art in heaven hallowed be thy name: Thy will be done on earth as...* Suddenly earth became unbearable.

Suddenly the weight of the whole city seemed to fall down upon him and crush him.

Suddenly the immense weight of the whole world pressed down upon his shoulder and shattered his body.

Suddenly the huge mass of everything created bore down upon him and overwhelmed him.

The whole tension that holds the innumerable systems of planets and stars together seemed to be concentrated inside his chest. The terrible energy that hurls and heaves the planets around their elliptic courses seemed to be imprisoned in his breast, striving to burst out of it. His breath was stopped in his throat. He was terrified. He was smashed.

He was suddenly, and just as certainly, smashed and ground to pieces as a handful of wheat thrown in between two big slow millstones, heavily turning.

Then abruptly the breath burst once again from his throat, and into his hands came tears, that poured hot over the lids and lashes of his eyes.

Pouring through the turbulent confusion of his mind came, bright and sharp, one on top of the other, endlessly the words of prayers. Rushing into his mind, and filling it like water, and flowing through it, the clean words of prayers. Filling him up like water, pouring through him, the words of prayers. As nearly silent as wind, people passing in and out of the confessional moved and stirred the curtains. Sometimes the church was so still, the candles before the

sanctuary, the banked red lights, burned utterly straight and still in their little cups. The words of prayers filled his mind like clear water, in the light. Air went into his lungs. The words of prayers filled his mind like sweet air and light.

Up in the sanctuary a brother in a black surplice had come out of some noiselessly opened door and was lighting candles on the altar, one by one. By their flames, the walls of the apse were shown, obscurely, to be covered with a large mural, full of figures with banners, with crosses, in some open land, as if they were dedicating a new-found country. There was also an inscription which read: "Non fecit taliter omni nationi."

In the obscurity you could tell, if you looked closely enough, that some of the figures in the pictures were old Spaniards, some, country people, and some priests, missionaries. And now one of these same missionaries, one of the members of this little community of Spaniards, the black robed brother, passed, genuflecting, in front of the altar and went about lighting the candles on the other side. One after the other, carefully, he put flame to the wicks of the tall candles. He was in a strange land, if you thought of it, and not his own. He was a missionary, in a huge and violent city one half barbarized and three quarters without faith. He was just as much a missionary here as if he were in the black jungle of the Congo, the Amazon. But then, every priest is a missionary and an exile in the same sense, a missionary in Rome as much as he would be in the Cameroons.

You could not tell, from the indistinct shapes of the men and shawl-covered women kneeling about the church, whether they were Indians or Spaniards or Germans or Poles or what they were. You could not tell if they were the sisters or mothers or grandmothers of soldiers or savages, of conquerors or helots. A person coming in could not tell whether Mariner, kneeling in the shadows were a black or a white man, a kind or a cruel man, an honest man or a thief; and as for this church, it could have been anywhere: Warsaw, Dakar, Barcelona, Dover, Berlin, Shanghai, Fourteenth Street.

In his black surplice, with his cropped black hair and his thoughtful, collected brow, the little missionary brother went on lighting the candles on the altar: he was in a strange land, an alien land, and the church of the missionary priests was filling with people who had come in from the fierce and plague-stricken city for Benediction.

As nearly silent as wind, penitents leaving the confessional lifted and let fall the curtains, and went to kneel and say their penances. Signing himself again with the sign of his faith, placing

upon his body the ritual symbol at once of the Trinity and of the infinite sacrifice of Christ for man's redemption, Mariner went swiftly and quietly across the church, and the curtain of the confessional fell closed behind him with no sound.

PART III
September 1939

Riley sat among the bedsheets that were draped over the back and arms of the chair. His feet were up on the windowsill and he could see their reflection in the mirror on the dresser. Scattered on the floor were pages of music which he no longer looked at. With his feet on the sunny windowsill, he tightened his lips, and raised the trumpet to them once again. A shrill blast flew out the window. He held it, slipped with a sort of a coy wail into a blues melody reminiscent of Armstrong's Basin Street, but dead and sour on half of the notes. They flew out the window, and the air outside the apartment house shivered with their insolent virtuosity. Riley wagged his foot to the slow time of the tune he made up.

Once in a while he would hit a couple of bars clear and fine and hard, and drive them home, perfect. Then a drunken cynic razzing complaint followed again, and Riley could almost feel the people up and down the whole building stiffening in their beds, startled out of their late sleep by this crazy horselaughing trumpet he played. Then came ten good notes, so good and clean they seemed to nail everything down, and put some kind of stability in the senseless flux of the world.

Pretty soon the telephone would begin ringing, and he would have to stop feeling around for those few sound breaks that came as gifts from somewhere; but meanwhile his lips ached, and his fingers restrained themselves upon the valves as he strove with a kind of anguish to blow some precision into his trumpet and get out of it those good notes, the clear ones, before the neighbors told him they would call the police to stop him practicing.

That was the trouble with this place. The people were rich, they had the terrible headaches only the envious can get, and the bitter determination to be revenged on anyone who broke in upon their light and nervous sleep. And they definitely had ways of making you stop playing the trumpet.

Riley drove out four good bars. They came as easy as magic, as easy as breathing, but perfect, so perfect you might kid yourself they might endure forever the very moment when they vanished forever and were lost. They were so good he stopped short, because he knew the

next bars could not be that good, and whatever was not that good would sound terrible.

He wiped his lips with the back of his hand. He stuck the mouth of his trumpet on his knee, and stared out the window. Sun shone through the mist over the river, refracted into pale dazzling silver and grey and bluish lights while the surface of the water itself shone as slick as chromium. Pretty soon it was going to be too hot to want to do anything, and Riley wished the summer were over, wished everything would change, so that his days would be different. For now he could think of no activity that was not desperate and hopeless except perhaps sitting in this bedroom playing the trumpet and striving, in anguish, for a couple of good notes. Just as he was going to start again, to play anything, no matter how bad, the telephone in the next room rang. He got up out of the chair, and set his trumpet on the dresser.

"I know, I know," he said to Fowke, who was just setting the receiver down again.

"Somebody wants to sue you for a million dollars," said Fowke, "if you won't stop practicing on your horn."

"I'm through anyway," said Riley, "I'm tired of the damned trumpet, and I wish I was dead, and lying in my pauper's simple grave."

Fowke sat with his legs stretched out on the window seat, smoking and reading the morning paper. He was wearing blue dungarees and a polo shirt, no shoes. The dungarees were spotted up with paint and India ink. Magazines and old newspapers lay along the floor by him, and there were drawing pads on a chair, which he would presently ignore.

"Dead?" said Fowke, "don't worry, you will be soon enough."

"What happened? Did the war start?"

Maybe by now it has. Germany's called all her ships back home, and they've closed the frontiers, the German frontiers, and confiscated all the gasoline and you can't travel by train or any other way except on official business. Then they've cut down all their rations to nothing, and there's been some fighting back and forth in Danzig and Poland: you know, framed up fights and a couple of fake atrocities. I bet they'll invade Poland within twenty-four hours."

"Hell," said Riley, "it makes you feel queer, all that." He went into the kitchen, and came out with an open bottle of Coca-cola.

"What else happened?" he said.

"Oh, they have evacuated the children from London to the west of England, and of course they have also evacuated their pet dogs to safe places in Wales, too. It says, though, that many in London have had

their dogs chloroformed so as to mercifully spare them from the horrors of bombs and gas. Then Germany is supposed to have a new secret weapon that disintegrates buildings and melts flesh so that when the bombing is over you can't tell anything used to be there at all."

"I don't mean that imaginary stuff," said Riley, "but what else really happened?"

"The Normandie is getting ready to sail without passengers, and the Bremen was all set to pull a sneak last night but they held her up, and there is supposed to be a British cruiser waiting to sink her, off Nantucket Light. The Bremen is full of guns, they think."

"This is it," said Riley, "they aren't fooling this time! Don't you get a funny feeling about all that stuff? Now we all know what it is like the day before a war starts: you feel funny in the stomach, and light in the head and you know that what you have always been scared of worse than anything is going to happen, and you can't do anything about it."

"British ships are all running home without lights, and they have London blacked out at night, and Paris too, and probably German cities as well."

"It must feel like this to fall out of an aeroplane," said Riley. "I heard somebody say we would be in it in three weeks. Then what? Boy, you can hold your dumb head and damn the day a man child was born in your mother's house."

"Before we get into it," said Fowke, "there'll be a revolution in Germany. The Czechs will blow up the Skoda factory, and sabotage everything in sight, and somebody will murder Hitler. Probably Russia will keep them out of Poland, anyway. They don't want the Nazi's so close."

"I don't know anything about that," said Riley, "But everybody's going crazy. You walk into a subway and there they sit with their papers open and tension is so stiff it knocks you flat. But it's even worse when you see a subway car where half the people are obviously not reading the paper. They sit with their hands folded, and show the crazy expressions you see in a dentist's waiting room. You ought to see them refusing to read in the subways; then you really wonder what's going to become of us! I never saw anything that bad. They're going mad, everybody is, they're breaking up and dissolving inside as if they were full of some chemical, or one of those new diseases where your blood turns to water, or your bones crumble."

"The Germans are supposed to have a secret weapon that makes you do that, too. You just break up and dissolve."

"If only the damn war would start," said Riley, "that's all anybody cares about now. They know it has to start: so let it begin, let them go to work! If we've got to be all killed, they'd might as well begin and get it over with. And as for me, I don't see the point of sitting around playing the trumpet when the people upstairs don't like it, so why shouldn't I go and join the navy?"

"What are you, crazy?" said Fowke.

"Me, if I'm killed. I'd just as soon be killed on a boat," said Riley cheerfully, and set down the empty Coca-cola bottle on the table. "I have very few interests outside of my music," he said, "and I'm sure I would find an opportunity to practice my trumpet on those long tropical evenings off Guantanamo."

"They'd probably let you practice on your trumpet in jail with the rest of us," said Fowke.

"Jail sours the temper and spoils character," said Riley, "I'll go to war, and keep from evil associations and base contacts. By the way, speaking of evil associates, where's Mariner been, these last few days? I haven't had the pleasure of his company."

"Oh, Mariner," cried Fowke, "I think he is building himself a tent in front of some statue of Saint Francis, and spending his days burning candles to the Virgin, against the loss of his soul."

"Doesn't he like our house any more? Is he mad at his girl Sue, and sore at his intellectual friends?"

"No, but the priests have got him all sewed up. He can't stay away from the churches, and I guess he's content to take Hail Marys as a sort of solution to his own eccentric problems."

"In a way," said Riley, "I don't blame him. Churches are all right, and I can't imagine a better place to be, at a time like this, than in one of them, if you could believe in it."

"Sure," said Fowke, "if you could believe in it."



Slanting through the window of the sacristy, the early morning sun cast its light upon the clean floor, its reflection glowed on the white, bare walls where moved the shadows of the two sleepy acolytes as they helped Father Gregory put on his vestments for six o'clock mass. Striking also the stained glass windows of the church, where Apostles and Virgins and Martyrs and Doctors and Confessors glowed and flamed with deep colors, it cast a multicolored light upon the slightly worn carpet of the sanctuary, and upon the wooden pews, and upon the cropped heads of working men, the bent shoulders of old

women and the print dresses of young girls. A flowerbed of red candles flickered in front of the side altar. Masses of marigolds and Zinias and late summer flowers surrounded the statue of Saint Anthony.

Facing the crucifix upon the bare wall, Father Gregory let fall upon his shoulders the weight of his chasuble. An acolyte came in from lighting the altar candles, and another held in his hand the priest's biretta. Presently Father Gregory took the biretta from the boy's hand and placed it upon his head. Then they preceded him into the sanctuary.

The clear, sharp note of the bell fell into the silence of the church like a stone in a clear pond, and from every corner was heard the noise of people standing up.

Father Gregory ascended the steps of the altar. Mariner felt in his coat pocket, and extracted, from among the papers and match folders, his blackbeaded rosary. The little silver-plated cross fell free and swung from his fist. Father Gregory laid open the big missal, on its stand, and returned to the foot of the altar.

Alternating with the shrill, mispronounced responses of the altar boys, the rapid and quiet Latin of the priest reached Mariner distinctly enough for him to catch the words only because he already knew them: *Introibo ad altare Dei*. The stone floor of the sanctuary was grey, worn with scrubbing. The carpet was shabby. The priest's shoes were down at the heels. The clasped hands of the old women were brown and hard, the coats of the men, patched; the hair of the young girls, uncurled, and their dresses thin and cheap. In one pew were a couple of bell boys in uniform. There were laborers, beggars, a cop; and Mariner, a student.

But even if there had been a rich man in the church, he would have looked poor, perhaps poorer than the rest, for here you had to be poor: it was compulsory.

If you had a hundred dollars in your wallet, it would have served you no better here than it would on a desert island. No matter what you thought you possessed, it could not be exchanged here for anything. Nothing having a value it would be possible to estimate in ordinary terms, was acceptable for currency here. You couldn't help being poor. You could not possibly buy anything, make a bargain, pay a price. You could only have things by begging.

The full extent of his own poverty was brought upon Mariner by the unambiguous material poverty of everybody around him, and by the joke that he, a poor man, had been living in a rich man's apartment and not liking it.

This sudden awareness of bitter ontological destitution was accompanied by the knowledge that nothing could be possessed, in a

real sense, but only as sunlight and air are possessed. And, as for sunlight, nobody owns it, and not even everybody uses it: you have to have eyes. But Mariner felt his destitution was as complete as that of the poorest beggar, a blind beggar and a crippled one. But everybody in the church was destitute, everybody poor. Only the priest was rich.

Mariner could not imagine any sum of money big enough to make him anything but a beggar. He could think of not one possession it would be possible to really own, for he could not be certain he even possessed his own hands or his own feet in such a way that he could say, with complete confidence: "My hands, my feet". Possessive pronouns had lost all except a certain vague demonstrative force.

If he had the finest clothes in the city, he would be here still no more than a shabby man, (although the unpressed gabardine he wore was not outwardly, literally tattered) and no matter what, he could only come here hungry, thirsty, in rags, and begging for charity.

It was the same for everybody else, except for the priest. He was the only one who was rich, who had anything. They came to him, ragged, hungry, thirsty. He could give them something to cover their nakedness, and give them to drink.

Even though his shoes also were down at the heels, that didn't matter, for the communists are perhaps right after all: the Catholic priesthood is insanely rich.



Imperceptibly the light had moved up one step of the sanctuary, and the murmur of Father Gregory's voice ending the *Vere Dignum* was interrupted by the thin and silver tinkle of the Sanctus bell. The sound of people sinking forward to their knees rushed through the church.

Slowly and in order the beads followed one another through Mariner's fingers. With less order went the words of prayers through his mind, tending to jostle each other in little crowds, as he silently formed them. They were dry words, but they were all he had, in his destination.

Then the warning bell scattered its sound upon that dryness like drops of water. There was a long moment of deep silence.

As sudden as the Consecration bell, the declaration of his faith expanded within him like light, as he bowed his head. Then whatever he had held on to that was dust, vanished like dust. Whatever he had clung to that was crumbling, dried up and blew away. Confusion was immediately replaced by clarity, and because of the priest's treasure,

which could not be diminished by being shared, nobody in the church was any longer destitute, unless he wanted to be, unless he refused to be anything else.

When the sunlight had swung further across the floor, and Mass was over, Father Gregory closed the missal, and gave his benediction to the people, then turned his back on them, again, a moment, for the Last Gospel. When the final prayers were finished, he turned, and took his biretta once more from the hand of one acolyte, and the two of them preceded him from church. In a moment one of the altar boys returned and snuffed out the two candles on the altar. Men were putting on their hats in the doorway.

On the sidewalk, heavy handed laborers went off in different directions to their work, the old women started home, Mariner stood with his hat in his hand and looked at the sunlight and the crowd dispersing. Then he went up the street.

There was one thing he had never prayed for.

He passed the rectory, glanced at the clean windows, the white curtains, the polished doorbell. Inside, from the sacristy, Father Gregory was once again climbing the steps, and walking in that silent well-swept house, past the well dusted shelves of books: Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine and Scotus and Bonaventure and Cajetan. Father Gregory, in his black cassock, would pass on his way to breakfast, through his little library with the desk and the green shaded desk lamp, the crucifix on the wall, and the picture of the Mother of God.

Mariner thought of all this, and thought of the two other priests in the same house: Father Cassidy with his red hair and glasses and his shy silence in all conversations that didn't have something to do with the Notre Dame football team. Mariner thought of the Monsignor, who liked the poetry of Francis Thompson, and smoked inexpensive cigars. Then he thought again of Father Gregory, tall, with black hair, big boned, quiet. He thought of his tremendous recollection and patience, and the flashes of fierce intellectual intensity that were alone able to devour that patience and overwhelm it. And he thought of Father Gregory's rare quiet laughter, and of his unsuspected depth of innocence.

He thought, again, of Father Gregory's library, the silent room with the volumes of St. Thomas, St. Augustine, Scotus. The crucifix, the picture, on the wall, of the Mother of God. Such peacefulness in that room, from which, as you looked out the window, you were confronted with a window of the church! This was a room where no sounds came except at chorus-practice, or Benedictine time.

But this was one thing Mariner had never asked for. Something kept him from praying for that kind of life: or at any rate, he had always been scared to do so. Walking up the street, away from the church, he still was scared. But now for the first time he wondered why he had never realized as much.

Why should he be scared? He could not tell. Perhaps he felt that he had lived so remote from the kind of discipline and perfection necessary for a priest, that it seemed blasphemous for him to think now, of becoming one. But perhaps, instead of an exaggerated kind of shame, that feeling was nothing but convenient self-deception; perhaps all it meant was, that he was afraid of the discipline itself. But in any case, he was afraid even to think about it, or to actually pray for a vocation: he was afraid it might turn out that he had one.

Then he almost laughed out loud, in the sunny street. Men and girls going to work saw him walking along smiling to himself, and some of them, curiously, stared.

Perhaps that was it: he was going to find out that he had a vocation to the priesthood, and it was going to scare him badly when he did. That was funny. Perhaps it was also blasphemous. He suddenly thought of himself sitting on the bed in the 113th St. place, listening to the radio, with a hangover. He thought of the window seat at Sutton Place, the lights in the river, a song on the phonograph played over and over again, his arm around Sue Clare. No wonder!

No wonder he was frightened at this idea. No matter what he had done, in his life, it might still be true that he had a vocation, that he could be chosen as a priest. And also it could just as well not be true; but if it wasn't true, perhaps the whole thing was nothing but a terrible temptation. Perhaps it was something that had been waiting for him all his life, like a snare, and instead of leading into heaven, was a trap door opening into the very depths of hell. And perhaps, instead of being the one way to give his life meaning, and to order it perfectly in the line of whatever perfection he was capable of achieving, perhaps it was a supreme temptation, the culmination of all his sins, and the step most surely leading to annihilation of his life and his soul and his being.

He swung around a corner, full of a strange excitement. That would be a curious argument, and the kind that would seem most persuasive when all you wanted to do was avoid the discipline of novitiate and preparation, and the strictness of a priest's life, bound by solemn vows to have no property, no personal independence, never to marry. That would be a strange argument: but it would be a strange

thing too if the vocation were really there, and turned out to be a true one!

Still he did not dare investigate it. It was something terrible to take chances with, that decision. Now, rather than even think of making it, one way or the other, his instinct was to avoid the whole thing. And yet, again and again the certitude came back upon him: that he was only afraid because of the discipline, the long novitiate and the years of study and trial. Perhaps he was only afraid because it would be hard to change his life, and bitter to give up, forever, things he didn't really want anyway. He would have to know that he would never go dancing again, and there would be no more parties, and he would never bang on a drum again to the noise of Riley's crazy trumpet. There would be no more congas and no more Bajan songs. He would never be able to hitch hike, if he felt like it, to California, or move where he ever pleased, or walk his way to Mexico, or Brazil, or Peru. And yet he knew he didn't really want all these things, or that some of them he would never have anyway, but he would only be in a vicious circle of wanting innumerable things of the same kind. Yet because he would have to give up even wanting them, it frightened him to think of having a vocation. And nevertheless he knew he might find out he had one.

Once again, he smiled to himself because of the excitement of the idea inside him.

Suddenly he realized someone was walking beside him and a voice next to him said:

"Psst! Psst! Hey brother!"

Mariner was confronted with a wrinkled and unshaved face and two small blue eyes looking out at him from under the peak of a brown cap.

"Excuse me, brother," said the man and Mariner reached in his trouser pocket, where there were a nickel and a quarter and a couple of dimes.

"Excuse me, brother," said the man, "but I can tell by looking at you that you're the kind will never refuse help to one in need. And you're the kind will know I'm telling the truth when I say I haven't had a square meal in eight days. Just scraps and crusts and an occasional piece of stale pound cake." And he suddenly broke off and said, parenthetically:

"I'm, sorry to bust in on your meditations, but I could tell from your expression that they were charitable."

"Some joker!" thought Mariner, embarrassed, and pulled a nickel out of his pocket. But the man held up his hand, and would not take it yet, for he had more to say.

"I hate to cut you off in the middle of your train of thought," he explained, "but, brother, I can tell you ain't the type to question a poor man's story or despise a fellow for asking for charity when he's up against it. Furthermore I need not tell you it is more blessed to give than to receive."

Mariner said: "Sure, you bet," and tried to hand the man the nickel, but he still refused, and went on:

"That is well known to you, brother: am I right? For I'm a sound judge of human nature, and I take you to be a pious church-going young man, with high aims and lofty ideals. The world," (and once again he refused Mariner's nickel) "the world is swept with a spirit of irreligion and atheism these days, which bids fair to ruin us all. There is not enough love and charity, not enough humanitarian mercy, but on the contrary the word has gone forth: kill! kill! kill!"

At this time the man grabbed Mariner by the sleeve of his coat entirely ignoring the nickel, and repeated:

"The word has gone forth: kill and maim! Slaughter the innocents! Let the blood of widows and orphans and poor beggars curdle in the highways and the by-ways."

"You're right," said Mariner, "times are bad!"

"Bad?" said the beggar, "times are inhuman. What are you, Catholic?"

"Yes."

"Dominus vobiscum et cum spiritu tuo! I was in a Catholic orphanage. The world is full of pagans and heretics rising against good Christian people on every side, with their daggers unleashed. Now I'm not asking you for a nickel," he said, returning suddenly to the point, "and I'm not asking you for a dime, but I'm going to appeal to your charity to remember the words of the Lord, it is more blessed to give than to receive, and don't let your right hand see what your left hand is giving away. You know the glow," and here he raised his hands, and turned up his small eyes in the sunlight, "you know the warm feeling of self-satisfaction you feel when you've just dug down deep in your pocket and made a large-sized donation to charity?"

"Yeah," said Mariner, slipping the nickel back in his pocket.

"You want to feel good? You want to feel real blessed and smug? You can buy yourself that feeling, brother, right here and now by giving me a good, generous handout and no nickel or dime. You're big enough, brother, I can tell by the piety of your expression, you're

big enough to do it. Think of the holy Saints, brother. Think of Purgatory. If you give me the price of a good meal, you may even get yourself off all your Purgatory in one throw!"

"You'd better not let the priest hear you going around selling plenary indulgences," said Mariner, reaching again in his pocket.

"Oh, hell," said the beggar, "the priest can't do anything to me. I'm Lutheran." Mariner grinned at him, and the man looked back, offended, with his shifty blue eyes.

"Oh, I know you're big enough to overlook the difference in our faiths," the man said, cajoling, and then added, in a different tone, "you have to, brother, if you're real charitable, if you love your neighbor!"

"Sure," said Mariner and he felt, between his fingers, the quarter he had in his pocket.

"Our Lord said you should give away everything, didn't he? Even if you were to give me all the money you have on you right now you'd be taken care of in some way, if you had faith. Think of the glorious Saints, think how they will applaud you, sitting on the golden chairs, when the angel writes down your name in the big Golden Book of Life for this charitable deed you are about to perform. Don't think of the gluttonous joy I'll get out of it, but just picture the spiritual glee in your own pious soul. Maybe it will help you to get something you want bad. Maybe an opportunity to study for the priesthood; maybe it will get you some lifelong ambition."

"Listen," said Mariner, "that's a nice speech. Here's a quarter. I'm hungry enough to keep the rest for myself."

"You shouldn't remember your own hunger," said the tramp, "am I right?"

"Of course you're right."

"Right!" said the beggar. "Anyway, thanks for the two bits, brother. I could tell you was sensitive; I knew you wouldn't refuse me. By the way, you haven't got a couple of cigarettes, have you?"

"Sure," said Mariner, and gave him five. And so they parted, and went off in opposite directions on the sunny street.

The next block was a quiet one, and when the noise of the elevated, and the trucks and traffic on the avenue receded behind him, Mariner found himself walking into a sort of a sea of radio-talk, pouring out of the windows that stood wide open to the street.

In every one of the rooms, in every house, it seemed they were turning into the same wave-length, the same station. Suddenly that wave-length filled the whole street, and the voice of the broadcaster began to speak everywhere, not like an echo of itself, but absolutely

continuous. You did not walk away from the voice or back into its range, but you moved in a kind of continuous medium possessed by it altogether. The voice came from so many windows at once, from above and below and from all sides, from the sky, from the pavement, that at last you might have thought it flowed right through your own self, and spoke inside your own head.

At first, Mariner heard only the voice, and was more aware of its omnipresence than of the things it shouted. But now it began to announce the news of the war. He might have guessed it would. The voice shouted about no distant event in the past and made no hopeless guesses about the future, it uttered no aimless and random statements now. It was talking about that very morning, about a specific time, and a specific event in another city. It spoke of what had happened in a place almost identical to this, a place where there were streets lined with windows, window boxes, hung there here and there with washing, having little stores, radio stores, drugstores, a delicatessen, a fruitstand, a place to buy the paper, to buy pencils, schoolbooks and cigarettes. The voice made statements, not guesses.

That morning, (and the voice uttered the precise time, to the minute) waves of bombers had appeared over the city of Warsaw, and the war had begun.

There was no uncertainty of prophesy, none of the shades of doubt that conjecture might have put in the announcer's voice: there was none of the comfortable accent of reminiscence of a disaster in the past. The voice had the absolute confidence inspired by events that went on happening even while it was relating them. Strongly, and clearly, and with a certain tension of excitement the voice boomed from every side the absolutely latest messages from another street almost identical with this one. The houses were falling in heaps of rubble in that street, roofs were caving in, smoke was blotting out the sun, the air was full of the roar of monsters, the shrieks of sirens, the unceasing pounding and crashing of bombs, the thump and thump of anti-aircraft, the clatter of machine guns.

In a place exactly identified, a place that in almost every respect had been outwardly the same as this street, people were running for shelter in the ruins, running among the dying, fighting the fires, digging out bodies, fleeing, shooting at the bombers. News of this, here, literally filled the street. The people in all the houses, in almost every important respect the same as the people of those other houses, were submerged bodily in the news, as if in some weird new medium.

The war was on again, a surprise to no one, exactly as it had been predicted: waves of bombers were systematically reducing an open city to a junk heap.

Mariner walked down the street to the end, past groups of people who perched at the top of their doorsteps, hunched up like hypnotized birds.

He turned the corner, bought a paper, and went in to the dairy where he usually ate breakfast. The radio was on there, too, but the news was coming to an end. That was all anybody really needed to know: the bombing had started. The English had sent in an ultimatum. That was to be expected. Presently the bombing would spread. Tomorrow it would be London and Paris. The war was on again.

The white-aproned counterman switched off the voice when it cheerfully cried: "And NOW..." and dived into its commercial. Mariner opened the paper and looked at the big headline. It was exactly like the ones he had seen reproduced from twenty-six years before. In the movies, when war broke out in something like "Hell's Angels", they flashed a front-page make-up like this one onto the screen.

And now the whole thing was just the same. It was so phoney, so exactly consonant with all the demands of theatrical artifice, that it could not be anything but true. Warsaw bombed; British ultimatum to Germany: you could see it all reproduced in the pages of a *Shorter History for the Third Grade*. It was war. Already hundreds of people were dead.