

Macklin's Epigraphic Loss · Gordon Weaver

*Did you hear the one about the man
who was so thin he fell through a hole
in the seat of his pants and strangled?*

TO MAKE AN OMELETTE, you have to break eggs

“What health problems do you associate with your obesity?”

“I tire easily. I'm short of breath all the time. I get a lot of headaches.” The slightest exertion overheats me. I dread spring and summer, early autumn. April's breezes coat me in fine sweat that evaporates only with the first polar front. Any heat wave's a flannel suit I have to wear; I fear I'll melt. My ears ring constantly; high blood pressure. My overworked circulation beats out migraines at my temples. My body fluids simmer in May, worry to a full boil through June, July, August, subside to troubled bubbling after Labor Day, cool mercifully in the icy blasts of November.

In my dreams my weight continues to escalate. I see myself in my king-size reinforced bed, inflating like a bladder. My balloon body rises from the bed, floats to the ceiling, bobs, trapped. Mama and Sister scream out in horror. I wake to my shrill alarm. Sometimes my density increases with my bulk, gradually collapsing the mattress, which folds over me like a chasm closing after an earthquake. I burst through the floor and foundation. My alarm, Mama and Sister shrieking, calls to me from out of an endless dark. I measure my death, ounce by ounce, accumulating on my aching bones.

“In what ways is your day by day behavior limited by your obesity? Be frank, please.”

“Well. I can't do normal things.” I can eat, drink, sleep, talk, read and write. An average city block or one flight of stairs exhausts me. My heart thunders under my ribs. My vision blurs, ears sing, lungs heave like bellows. I love my family.

I don't dare run. Ordinary chairs are impossible. I can't fit behind the wheel of an automobile. Other than sharing TV with Mama, listening to Sister's records, I have no hobby, no recreation. I have no social life. No sex life. I must be seated to urinate. I haven't seen my genitals in several years.

I like to eat, drink, sleep, read, think. I'm an excellent student, expect to complete my dissertation in quantitative analysis before the end of this calendar year. I love my family.

If I could, I'd be outgoing with strangers. I'm hidden behind this wall. The wall gets thicker each day. I'm an object of humor, of pity, of scorn and contempt, of thinly veiled disgust. I have normal desires. I think I'll die soon. I'm killing myself, digging my grave with my teeth. My *Angst* is so blatant as to be inadmissible to others. I'm in terror of receiving an at-

tractive offer from a carnival sideshow. I want a life. I'd rather die than live like this.

"Mr. Macklin, can you fix a particular date as the onset of your condition?"

"No." Ten pounds at birth. Mama likes to recall her astonishment when the doctor told her. Yet says she was no bigger with me than with Sister. Papa was proud. My baby pictures show a head round as a pot, chubby arms and legs. Toddling, I was burly, no-necked. In grammar school, already the brunt of cruel jeering. *Fatty-fatty boom-boom. Fatty, fatty, two-by-four, can't get through the bathroom door, had to do it on the floor.* Distinctly vicious in adolescence. *Lard ass. Wide sides. Looky, Macklin's got tits! Hey Macklin, loan me a wrinkle, my girl's busy tonight.* Last echoes in college. *Baby Huey. Humphrey Pennyworth. Mr. Five-by-five!*

"What efforts have you made to reduce your weight prior to this occasion, Mr. Macklin?"

"Nothing worked." Everything. Laxatives caused hemorrhoids. Bulking agents, cellulose tablets designed to swell up inside the stomach, but I could always find room. Calorie counting until I read *Calories Don't Count*, but they did. Grapefruit puckered my lips, burned my tongue and throat, turned my urine acid. Low carbohydrate-high fat regimens, all the butter and oil I could stand. My gullet felt greased. Pissing on chemically treated slips of paper to see if I could keep my system in ketosis. Fat clubs where we gave prizes, levied small fines for cheaters. A spa with pool, massage, steam, belts that jarred my kidneys, revolving drums studded with knobs battered my buttocks. Fish and green vegetable menus hawked by amoral corporations. You name it.

To a point. I won't have adipose tissue surgically removed, will not ask a dentist to wire my jaws shut, refuse to have my large intestine by-passed. I have integrity.

"Do you fully appreciate the loss we're contemplating, Mr. Macklin?"

"I think so." 489 down to 170. Way over half myself. I have a positive attitude. It's a search. Down there, deep inside. Waiting to be discovered. Come forth and be recognized. Complete his dissertation. Build a career. Have friends, date girls, court and marry. Children, a home. Weekends and holidays we'll visit relatives; vacations we'll travel. Love and be loved.

My two most frequent fantasies of death are: my body stolen by medical students for dissection and analysis; my body buried in a piano case, lowered to rest by a winch and boom, covered by a bulldozer.

"Other instances of obesity in your family?"

"None." Sister's a sylph, too thin for her own good. Mama's large, but big-boned, well able to carry it. Papa was average. He died of simple coronary occlusion. I love my family.

"Professor Stocker will see you now, Mr. Macklin." I'm dying. I'm afraid to die. I want to kill myself. I want life. I hear myself saying these things.

A minute on your lips, forever on your hips

Mama's in the kitchen before I wake. I wake with enthusiasm, troubled only by a nagging itch at the back of my consciousness that I attribute to dreaming's residue. My ears perk to the tap and rattle of Mama busy at the stove, the maudlin music of Sister's records a comfortable background. My nostrils flare at the aroma of rich frying slithering under my door. Dressed, washing up, Sister's music is louder, the swelling sound of Mama's preparations crowding the bathroom with me. The run and flush of water cannot dilute them.

"Good morning, Mama." I kiss her. Her worn robe's pathetic, slippers flopping, greying hair pinned back. Her smile, her eyes love me to love her for another day.

"Is my big boy hungry?" I'm lost, inundated in the panorama of Mama's bounty arrayed on the bright tablecloth. The odors make congress in the sunny air, something deep and rich, softly viscous, into which I fall as I take my place. Oh my loving mother! The itch begins to subside. I scarcely notice Sister take her seat across the groaning board from me. Mama hovers, passing and dishing, cooing her rapture.

A platter of slippery eggs, over-easy, gold yolks running like arteries at the touch of my fork. Mama deftly slides five onto my gleaming plate. Cooked in one hundred per cent pure, sweet, creamery butter. "You know I hate eggs," Sister says as I reach for toast. Mama's home-made whole wheat, sliced thick and ragged, toasted crunchy on the surface, nutty-mushy within. I apply chunks of refrigerator-hard butter, an artist creating textured surface with a palatte knife. I use it for a plow to heap my fork, sop up pools of stiffening yolk. Half a dozen slices does it. Alternated with wedges of whole-hog sausage, country style, flecked with kernels of hot pepper that sears the lining of my mouth, blunts the base of my tongue, clears the way for the next bite.

Washed down with a cold glass of real orange juice, fresh-squeezed by Mama's strong hands, seeds and pulp removed with a tea strainer. And tumblers of icy milk Mama refills from a frosty jug. Sips of strong coffee, two sugars and real cream. "All I want's dry toast with my coffee," Sister whines. Whatever bothered me when I woke is mere memory now. I feel solid, as if my torso hardens as I eat, spine fusing into a truly supportive column. I get aggressive.

A large bowl of bubbling oatmeal, crumb-topped with brown sugar floating in a lake of cream. Not a lump in a carload of Mama's oatmeal! More milk. More coffee. A pan of sweetrolls hot from the oven, drizzled with frosting, gemmed with cherries. One, two, three. "Mama, you should open your own bakery," I say, wiping my brow with the back of my hand, dabbing my lips with my napkin. Four, five.

"I woke up with a headache," Sister says, will not drink her orange juice. Another glass of milk, cup of coffee. I am beginning to feel . . . not full, but *whole*. "I'll be late to class, Mama."

"I hate to waste such nice rolls," she says, proposes to eat one more if I will.

"Excuse me, I need an aspirin," Sister says.

"It was lovely, *lovely*, Mama!" I kiss her goodbye, fetch my satchel, off to class. Ah, if only the day ended there! In the midst of this contentment, something's still amiss.

What? The salt that's supposed to be the savor? I have my classes to attend, research and study in the holy quiet of the library, a dissertation chapter to outline. Not enough. Whatever I lack, I seek it. All through the day.

A second breakfast immediately after my morning class. Two brown waffles aswim in imitation maple syrup, a bowl of corn flakes, pithy English muffins spread with translucent apple jelly, a sugary milkshake, two cups of bitter vending machine coffee rendered tolerable with triple sugar and non-dairy lightener.

A caramel-nougat bar drifted with peanut bits to gnaw as I walk to the library, boxes of licorice, chocolate covered mints, bags of malted milk balls, packets of peanut-butter cracker sandwiches that crackle rudely as I open them in my carrel, pop them whole into my mouth, chew and swallow as I read.

Lunch a family-size pizza (mushrooms, Canadian bacon, onions, anchovies, studded in the marbled swirl of mozzarella and tomato sauce, dusted with grated Parmesan and ground Cayenne). Vases of Coca-Cola chilled by slushy ice, a little mountain of salad dotted with plump black olives, a sausage sandwich dripping dark sauce, bread stiff as two planks. What am I looking for?

Back to the library, sucking sour balls and hard candies until the roof of my mouth runs raw. Another class. My stomach growls. Now where?

The whole world, a void widening and deepening, filling with an ambience like dry fog. My eyes swim with print, hand cramped from note-taking on three-by-five cards. Thoughts veer out of their grooves. It's like the voice of someone I love calling telepathically to me. Like my spirit's left this body. I yearn after myself.

I lock my carrel, waddle to the elevator, descend, plod fecklessly among the campus trees where trysting couples grace the lyric shade. At the duck pond, coeds giggle and feed the raucous birds. A keener need draws me away. Some idealized Macklin cries out for release from his layered prison. An android blimp, I answer to a higher pitch. Like a pinball, I hit where I chance to land, carom, hit again, coming close to myself only in brief, animal moments.

An oily box of chicken parts, stale roll, paper cup of slaw, wolfed standing up at the drive-through counter. I bounce into a pancake house, bolt a stack of buckwheats the consistency of toweling, slathered with metallic blueberry syrup urged from a sticky pitcher, cutting the greasy aftertaste with sugared iced tea. I pause at a civic gumball machine, find eight pennies in my pocket, cram the pouches of my pillow cheeks like a greedy rodent, meander along the strip of beer bars and fast food establishments bordering this end of the campus, cracking the gum balls, masticating out the sugar and artificial flavorings, spit the waxy cud into the gutter. Ruminative, waiting on inspiration or chance.

A paper tray of fish and chips dunked in tartar and ketchup. A super-burger more lettuce, tomato, and relish than meat, heavily salted fries, cola slush. Messy spareribs that slick my chin, coat my fingers. A triple cone, pralines-and-cream, black walnut, papaya. Foot long Coney Island red hot. Stapled bag of salted-in-the-shell nuts, awkward to consume while walking, carrying my satchel, strewing broken husks behind me like a fat Hansel threading the hostile forest. Tube of breath lozenges to clear the tastebuds, freshen my hello kisses for Mama and Sister. I weary at last, go home to a long nap before dinner, mercy on these bones that must bear this body until it finds . . . something.

Mama outdoes herself. A roast big as a fireplace log, crisped like mahogany, juices running before the knife as I carve, laying the pink-red sheaves on the platter like shingles. New potatoes flecked with parsley, a heavy brown gravy smooth as paint.

“Was it a hard day, Stuart?” Mama asks, beaming as I crush and stir.

“I have a sour stomach,” Sister says when Mama accuses her of eating no more than a sparrow. Steaming vegetables, each in its own tureen: French-cut beans, Brussels sprouts, new peas tiny as buckshot, bloody beets, a spinach souffle shot with Cheddar, kernel corn yellow as the sun.

“Vegetables put sparkle in your skin, Sister. Isn’t that so, Stuart?” I nod, mouth full. Mama’s own butterhorn rolls, like English scones, buttered, folded like books, one ritual chew, melting as they’re swallowed. Cold milk!

“It’s hot in here,” Sister says. “I lose my appetite when I get all hot.”

“At least eat your nice fruit,” Mama says. Glazed peach slices, plums that collapse on their pits against my gums. Baked apple. Seedless grapes. Oh! I *almost* feel I have found and quieted my lingering pain, filled that elusive emptiness echoing in me. What more?

“Surprise!” Mama cries, carrying a black-bottom pie from the kitchen.

“I don’t feel like dessert,” Sister says.

I resume my studies on the cleared table while Sister helps Mama with the dishes. I lose myself again, for a time, in fact and analysis, reach to dip handfuls of chips or cashews from the dish Mama sends Sister to place at

my dimpled elbow. Mama enjoys network television. Sister plays her bedroom stereo. Late to bed.

“Goodnight, Mama.”

“Sweet dreams, Stuart.”

“Night-night, Sister.”

“I’ll play my records soft so they won’t bother you, Stuart.”

I sleep. But often wake after a short time, rise, creep to the kitchen, torn again, this eternal cleft in my being. What’s wrong? I arrange a snack, cold roast beef eaten with my fingers, a pint of ice cream, another slice of heavy pie. Sister and Mama sleep a peaceful sleep. I launch the thought of my trembling love for them, return to bed. I fall asleep hoping I will not dream. That I won’t remember my dreams in the morning. I point my mind toward tomorrow, where I must believe I’ll find myself. Where I wait for myself in mufti, some new, different, *whole* person.

Matter is not continuous; it cannot be subdivided without limit

Professor Stocker, Ph.D., is taller than I, weighs less than a third what I do. Lean as a whip, hard as a bone, dry as sandstone. “Macklin,” says he, “you looking for someone to bullshit you? I crap you no crap about will power, motivation, goal orientation, positive goal ideals.” We laugh. I laugh. He pulls back his lips, shows small, even, very sharp looking teeth. Says he, “I’m *not* your friend, your father confessor. My shoulders look like they’re made to cry on?” He shrugs; the white lab coat moves, the man inside unbudged.

“I get your drift.”

“No you don’t,” he says, and, “Let’s understand each other.”

“The nurse explained—” I try to say, not allowed to finish. I’m in the presence of a man with convictions.

“*You* are the chief witness for the prosecution against you!” He points his finger, shakes it under my nose. “Look at you! Just look. You’re a god-damn monument to unbridled self-indulgence, a living testament to weakness of spirit and absence of will, a consistent failure of human resolve!”

“I’ve tried,” I try to say.

“You’ve done nothing but make yourself into a mountain of disgusting fat from the day you were old enough to know right from wrong! You’ve chewed and swallowed your way through every available morsel of nutritionally destructive gunk since you lost your milk teeth!”

“It’s not easy,” I interrupt. Ignored.

“Why?” His voice lightens, softens. “I’ll *tell* you *why!*” he thunders, retracting his finger to make a fist. “Macklin!” he says, like spitting, “Oh, I can see you clear as if I was there. You, Macklin, force feeding your emotions until they choke to death. Plastering over every little hurt, any possi-

bility of difficulty, burying your problems under an avalanche of food. Self, self, *self!*”

“Insults aren’t hard,” I say, discover I’m crying.

“I wouldn’t *begin* to excuse you. Not a bit of it,” Professor Stocker says. “The guilt goes just one way.” He stabs at me with his rigid finger. “It’s as enormous and ugly as you are. You yourself, none other.

“You think I’m hard. You think I’m hard? Okay, I’m hard on you.” I shake my head, unable to speak for crying. “If I’m hard it’s in context of knowing your suffering, Macklin. Macklin, are you listening to me?” I nod.

He says, “I’m not inhumane, you know. I appreciate your pain. Empathize with you. I’m the expert in this, remember? Let’s begin by forgetting the obvious documented damage to your health. Heart, lungs, circulation, kidneys, liver, we assume all that, right? You think I can’t imagine your subjective agony just as well? Macklin?”

“I hear you. I’m listening.”

“I positively *ache* for you when I think how you must wheeze for air just getting around on foot. I understand how degrading it must be to have to wear glorified flour sacks, orthopedic shoes to support your bulging ankles. Don’t you think I realize the sheer psychological pain? I’m not without normal human sympathies, Macklin.”

I try to smile, stop my tears. He passes me a box of Kleenex from his cluttered desk.

“And what other people must think of you when they see you, huh? Huh? *That* smarts, doesn’t it. Sure it does. Outside your family, do you suppose there’s a single human being lays eyes on you doesn’t experience something of the same fear and repulsion we all get when we confront a freak, a Mongoloid, say, some drooling half-wit? Ever avert your eyes from a blind man? Sure you did. Know how he’d feel if he could see it, too, don’t you. No, I don’t ignore your suffering, Macklin.”

“It’s why I’m here,” I manage to say. I wipe my smeared face with his Kleenex, cough, swallow, sniff.

“*Now* you’re talking, Macklin!” says Professor Stocker, Ph.D. “Because we’re going to do something about it, me and you, aren’t we. Aren’t we? You bet we are. Aren’t we?”

“I’m willing.”

“That’s all I need. You stick with me, stick with the program, we can’t fail. Because I’ve stripped it down to the bare facts of science, Macklin. You’re an educated young man. Nothing succeeds like reality, and—” he lays his hand on the small refrigerator set against the wall behind his desk—“*I’m* the man discovered it, refined it, put it in a bottle for people just like you.”

“I’ve been on reducing pills before.” He laughs. We laugh. The points of his teeth flash.

“Amphetamines?” He laughs again. “I’m an associate professor, Macklin, not a drug pusher. This is *science*. I’m working on the nitty-gritty of basic human nutrition. My hypothesis functions at cell level, see? It’s already done on paper. You want figures? Go over my credentials with an impartial observer?”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“You won’t need to,” he snaps. “By Day Three, Day Five at the latest, you’ll feel it happening inside you. Day Thirty, anyone you ask will tell you they see it. Day One Hundred, your own mother won’t know you. You, me, and my little amino acid compound miracle in a glass, Macklin. Game?” He takes hold of my arm. “What alternatives do you have left, Macklin?”

“You’re hurting my arm!” I’m convinced. He’s surprisingly strong.

You are what you eat

“I thought Professor Stocker would be here.”

“Sit right there, Mr. Macklin,” says Ms. Heideman, R.N., and, “Professor was called away.” She goes to the motel-size refrigerator, takes a key from her pocket, unlocks the plain padlock, frees the hasp, opens the door. It has a light, like any refrigerator.

“The condemned man ate a hearty meal,” I say. We neither smile nor laugh.

The amino compound is cloudy, dense, like an unset gelatin in the sealed beaker she places with a drinking glass on the professor’s desk. “Is that *all* for me?”

“There’s extra,” says she, “should we need it.” Now she has a kidney-shaped enamel pan in her hands. “You’re going to find the odor strange at first, Mr. Macklin,” Ms. Heideman, R.N., says. “Probably quite unpleasant.” One hand goes out to the beaker, fingers resting on the rubber seal. She speaks without looking me in the eye; something’s wrong.

“Professor Stocker didn’t say . . .”

“I suggest you try and not breathe,” she says as though I haven’t spoken. “You know taste is strongly connected with smell. There’s no aftertaste at all. Hold this under your chin,” hands me the enamel pan.

“Professor Stocker should have warned me if . . .” She won’t hear.

“If you can manage with one hand, you might try pinching your nostrils shut.” Ms. Heideman, R.N., begins to inhale-exhale like a skindiver gulping air for a long descent, clamps her lips shut, cheeks distended, closes her nose with the thumb and forefinger of her left hand. With her right, she skillfully pops off the beaker’s rubber lid, quickly pours exactly half the amino compound into the waiting glass, sets the beaker down, snaps the sealing lid back in place, lifts the glass to my mouth.

I have never smelled anything like it. Total. The smell is *total*. The instant the lid's off, something horrible is everywhere in the professor's office. The smell comes from everywhere, out of the paint on the walls, through the closed window overlooking the campus greensward, up from the scaling floor tiles, from Ms. Heideman's immaculate white uniform, the paper hospital gown I wear over my shorts, oozing from the corners of my misting eyes, inside my nose and open mouth. My tears run freely. What's left after three days of hard fasting gathers, lurches for exit in my stomach. The smell's an electronic buzzing in the room, a pale fog, a sudden increase in air pressure.

I don't breathe, squeeze my brimming eyes shut, bite my lips. Ms. Heideman nudges my chin with the rim of the glass. I fear I'll drop the pan I hold to my chest. I'm afraid I'll fall out of the chair. "Drink it *fast* Mr. Macklin!" I hear her say through the smell. I can't open my mouth. "Drink!" Her voice resonates, as if from a great distance. "I said: *drink!*" I feel her fingers grip my hair, tip my head back. The rim of the glass clacks on my teeth. I open, swallow, gag. Swallow, swallow, gag, cough, swallow. I catch breath through my mouth. She pours the amino acid. I swallow. Swallow again.

I breathe freely, hard, blow like a walrus, paper gown pasted to me with heavy sweat. Ms. Heideman, R.N., is smiling as I open my filmed eyes. "Are we going to keep it on our stomach, Mr. Macklin?" Hard to find enough air to speak.

"He should have told me," I sputter. "He should have said."

"Nonsense," says Ms. Heideman, R.N. There's no aftertaste. My teeth, tongue, lips feel cleansed. I can't remember what it smelled like.

"You should warn people."

"I'm proud of you, Mr. Macklin. Some of them just will not keep it down." She takes the pan from me. "I've seen a young woman won't even stay in the chair. If I had my way we'd lock the door and sit on them until they did it."

"It's the worst thing I ever had to do in my whole life," I say.

"Oh, ho!" she snorts. "Life's *full* of surprises, Mr. Macklin! If you ask me, we can do just about anything we set our minds to."

I'd forgotten the project paid participants. In the ante-office, she hands me four worn dollar bills just as Professor Stocker enters. "Ah!" says he, obviously expecting me to have been and gone by now. "Macklin," says he.

"He's going to do just fine," Ms. Heideman says, locking the cash drawer in her desk, leaving us.

"Excellent," says the Professor, "Off and running, day one of a new life for you, Macklin. And spending money besides, what more could you want, huh?"

"It's not worth it, not for twenty dollars a day," I tell him, determined to withdraw from the project.

"Don't whine," he says.

"I'd like to see you drink it sometime."

"Teach your granny to suck eggs," says Professor Stocker. Pointless to oppose him. Blue fire roars in his eyes. Flash, dance, explode. "Walk a mile in *my* shoes," says he. "You been around academe, so don't come off like you're still cherry, Macklin." Certainly past fifty, iron-gray, coarse, tight curls, his hair catches steely highlights from the fluorescent lighting. Skin's a natural tan, rosied at the cheekbones and the point of his chin, color of fire behind isenglass. Thin lips almost cosmetically red. Straight nose, flared nostrils, jutting Adam's apple, corded throat, tuft of grizzled hair just above the first button of his lab coat.

"Everyone has his own problems," I venture. It only turns up his burner.

"Bullshit! Macklin, you young snot. I'm solving your problem, glass by glass. Don't you dare *think* of pooping out on me! You the only man in the universe with needs? Hardy har har. I'll tell you *needs*, Mrs. Macklin's fat boy Stuart. I'm paid, you're paid, Heideman's paid, the whole shooting match's paid—" he sweeps the vista of the room with his hand, knotted with strong veins—"by a piddling seedmoney grant out of a contingency fund a bitch of a lady dean squats on. For Christ's sakes, Macklin, I'm College of Home Economics faculty!" A wind blows over the blaze, fans it higher.

"I only said I can't—" Futile.

"Fat-ass Macklin, know what academic tenure is? Know how you glom science foundation grants? Know who my competition is? No. Lard-o Macklin's hungry for a doughnut and the mean professor's amino compound gives him a sore tummy!" I say no more. Know better than to stick my hand into a fire. He speaks without unclenching his teeth.

"I *need* this project, Macklin." Like a boiler approaching the red line on the gauge. "I need you and two dozen odd more tubs signed on for four bucks a day and all the miracle stinky juice you can stand. I'm out to win, Stuart Macklin. I'm up against review committees packed with twats, fem libbers riding high on federal equal opportunity legislation, see? I mean to be ruthless." He pauses. Banks the fire, adjusts the draft for a bitter cold night. "Agreed?"

I'd follow him over hot coals.

A monkey in silk is still a monkey

"A man," says the grandfatherly chief salesman of Collegiate Man's Clothiers, "can't have too many clothes."

"What I'm basically doing is getting started on a wardrobe. I haven't bought anything new for a good while."

"I understand. I understand," says he. An inspiration just to look at him. Cream-white hair, full as meringue on a chiffon pie, swirled in frozen, natural whorls. The full-length triple mirror allows me to pretend to look at the suit he adjusts, smooths on me with easy, languid strokes as I watch him. "There," he says, rolling, chalking the cuffs. His words come wrapped in a secure, elderly voice, ridden by unselfconscious sighs, a tin whistle of exertion after kneeling, rising. Forty pounds overweight, at least. But at his age, on him, an appropriate padding. "How does that strike the eye, Mr. Macklin?"

Three new Stuart Macklins return my open-mouthed awe. The suit, complete with vest, is bright yellow; I glow like I've been plugged in. "I never exactly pictured myself this way. If you know what I mean."

"Of course I do." His smile will warm his descendants to the fifth generation. Together in the mirrors, we're a brilliant brace of triplets. Mc. Macklin, a brassy, lean canary, chest swelling to sing. The canary's adopted grandfather, an immaculate owl. "The nice thing about sumptuary laws, Mr. Macklin," he says, "is that every man has a vote."

"I look good, don't I." I pirouette the three of me in the mirrors.

"You look *great*," he corrects. He'd know. Under the choreographed display of his crowning glory, his paternal eyes twinkle behind rimless spectacles with thin gold bows. *His* suit's a deep gray double-breasted, teased by a barely perceptible white thread. The pleated ascot at his throat matches the folded kerchief peeking over the slit of his breast pocket. "May I say something personal, Mr. Macklin?"

"Please do."

"I've been a member of this profession for forty years. I operated my own establishment for years. I keep my hand in here for the sheer joy." He waves graciously at the arranged lushness of Collegiate Man's Clothiers. He wears a gold digital wristwatch, thick as a hot-rise biscuit, huge turquoise ring that would be gaudy on a less dignified man's knuckle. "I have an abiding love of things sartorial," says he.

"I never paid much attention to what I wore." I lie. Remember Mama taking me downtown on the bus each fall for back-to-school clothes bought at the Husky Boys counter in department stores. Going over illustrations in mail order catalogues for coveralls and union suits. Shopping bargain sales at the Big Man's Store. So I lied, so what?

"You," says my adoptive grandfather, "of *all* people, should. If you'll permit me to say so." I do. His smile's a spring zephyr in the serious hush of Collegiate Man's Clothiers.

We, the two of us side by side, the six of us in the mirrors, create something. A locus. The establishment radiates from us. Long racks of suits and shirts, blocky piles of slacks on low display tables, bins of socks, neckties, underwear, tiers of shoes, poles dangling belts, glass cases of pins, links, clusters of cologne and after-shave in faceted bottles, discreetly gleaming

chromed caps. The wainscotted walls and the carpet's long nap diffuse the speech of other clerks and customers to a pleasing, subservient mumble. The air's spiced, tasty with burnished leather. On the back of my tongue, I roll the flavor of motes given off by costly fabrics.

"Now, I've never said clothes *make* the man," he shakes his head, gently intolerant of this basic fallacy. "Oh my no. What I say is: men can make *themselves* by a judicious choice of attire. Look at you." We do, two observing six. "There are men who allocate a *considerable* portion of their discretionary incomes to apparel, Mr. Macklin." He squints wisely.

"I can believe it."

"Consider our clientele." His hands form them from thin air and self-assurance, to the last detail. "Occupants of endowed chairs, department heads, deans, the university president himself." What, I wonder, does Stocker wear under his lab coat? "Young gentlemen in the better social fraternities, some from families whose names are synonymous with giant corporations you would recognize instantly." His sincerity renders examples moot. His voice falls to a tone just above conspiracy. "This is the horse's mouth," he says, revealing gold inlays.

"A man such as yourself, Mr. Macklin, has an *obligation* to dress well." I understand. "You have the shoulders and chest for it, broad, masculine without being beefy. Your waist tapers without reminding people of a ballerina or a flamenco dancer. Has anyone ever told you your legs are perfectly proportioned in length to your trunk?"

"Never."

"Perhaps they didn't know." Taps his frothy sideburn with a buffed fingernail. "I know."

"I believe you." I do. Proof. He, me, all eight of us, self-evident.

"May I suggest," says the chief salesman, "one of our convenient accounts?"

Clutching crisp bundles, cleaner's bag over my shoulder, I stop outside. In the tinted display windows, decapitated mannequins in coats, jackets, blazers, shirts. My image among them is distinguishable only by the jaunty salute I throw myself, the candidly smug leer it evokes.

In addition to a sensible diet and adequate rest and relaxation, our good health requires that we develop a daily routine of at least moderately strenuous physical exercise

Gargantua's Disco looks like an abandoned warehouse. The pink stucco exterior is faded, cracked, pocked with chips exposing lathes underneath, windows boarded over. The name's superimposed across the dome-like belly of a gorilla painted by an amateur. Three go-go girls execute high kicks in a halo around the gorilla's head. The go-go girls are drawn out of proportion, legs at least a third too long for their orange torsos. The only light seeps out the doors when students enter. The music spills out the doors with the

pale light, splattering on the street like the contents of a slop pail emptied whenever they threaten the brim. Half a block from the campus, the music's live, cover charge only two dollars. You bring in your own bottle or dope if you don't like beer.

Variety! Cream-gold sorority girls, like sets of triplets, quads, quints, so bubbling luscious I salivate. Bra-less wraiths in tee-shirts, shabby jeans, sandals, bad skin and lank hair particularly unwholesome in the sickly light of the opened doors. Straight co-eds with straight dates, wearing dresses, holding hands or clinging to one another's waists like shipwrecked sailors. Plug-uglies stained by acne, and, of course, fatties in clots of three and four, laughing hard to stifle their self-consciousness. If they played her music, even Sister might feel at ease in Gargantua's.

Males equally varied. Frat rats in sweaters and slacks, white shirts open at the collar, sculptured hair. Exhibitionistic dopers with fright-wig Afros, obligatory jeans, embroidered chambray shirts, poor posture and furtive glances. Nondescripts in sweatshirts, straights in blazers, suits. Turned out in my canary Collegiate Man ensemble, I'm not conspicuous.

Entering, the illusion's one of light, but the light's a plain fixture in the ceiling of a corridor no larger than a closet. Sound, noise. Music magnifies light. Amplified guitars and drums slam your ears, hit you like blows in a pillow fight. You're momentarily numbed. Someone slouching against the grimy wall plucks the two dollars I hold out, stamps the back of my hand with a purple gorilla.

Through a slashed curtain. I stand as if snowblind in darkness lit by flashing strobes, buried under the music convulsing from a low stage at the deep end of the barn-like room. A rock group, Instant Gratification in foot-high gilt letters suspended from the rafters above their narcotically nodding heads.

Strobes transform the dancers to jerky stick-figures, a slide strip catching on the projector's feeder ratchets. The musical bombardment never stops. Your ears defend you, filter it down to remoteness, until Instant Gratification's lead singer even pierces their electric wailing with occasionally intelligible words: *baby, high, love, you, me*. Your eyes withdraw.

Soon I can sort particulars, hear my thoughts clearer than anything else. The air reeks of flushed skin, textured strata of cigarette smoke edged with the dry tang of marijuana. Crowded. Everyone's alone.

Dancers a minority. Beginning with partners, most fall to private planes and spheres, wiggling in place like burlesque novices, like sexually precocious demented children, acolytes of St. Vitus. A few pass into quasi-mystic self-preoccupation, eyes closed, mouths open, expressionless, moving without reference to the monomaniacal rhythms of Instant Gratification. A few females shake breasts, roll buttocks as though a prurient applause were possible. The ugliest of the uglies bump, grind, thrust as if music and flashing strobes sea-changed them to voluptuousness. I watch, am bored, quit.

Non-dancers are almost a tableau. Some drink beer served by humanoid bartenders in white shirts with Colonel's neckties, Fu Manchu moustaches. Some swig from bottles they grip between their knees like aged winos. A few couples sit close enough to fondle and kiss as freely as if they were locked in motels. Many look asleep, hibernating. Dopers shiver and weave. A boy shuffles past me, like some harmless asylum inmate with grounds privilege he exercises without purpose. A girl flounces past, fluid as a prostitute cruising a deserted park.

"Hello!" She hears something, not sure what. Stops. I reach, touch her bare arm. She turns, very slowly. "Hello, I said." She steps closer, examines me as if I were some message scratched in crude cipher, scarcely intended for her. "Hello," I repeat, exaggerating my lips, as though I spoke with a foreigner, the hearing deficient, the mildly senile. "My name's Macklin."

"I don't know you," she says. Plain face, but the body's nature's bounty. I'm tempted to wave a finger under her nose, see if she blinks or can focus her pupils.

"Macklin," I say.

"Do I know you from somewhere?"

"It's hard to talk in this noise." She turns her head a little to see what I'm talking about.

"You want to go outside?" She speaks to me as if I were a contrary child left in her care.

"Whatever you want." She looks at me—hard to say how long when time is so vague, where no one has reference to anything, anyone else. Takes my hand, leads me through the frozen crush to the exit, past the doorkeeper, head down on his chest. Leads me by the hand like a mother seeking a comfort station for her incontinent toddler.

Outside. Like waking suddenly from a dream so grotesque you dare have no slightest memory of it, fresh air banishing terror. The music, like excruciating pain, cannot be recalled. Ordinary dark of night, like the playful splash of cool water. Leads me down the street, around the corner. Houses, lawns, grass and trees. A van with opaque bubble windows, panels painted with forest and mountain panoramas. Opens the rear door, crawls in ahead without releasing my hand. Her hand is dry, mine slippery. I crouch, enter. The rasp of carpeting everywhere, polished fittings and fixtures. She sits Indian-fashion.

"You're cute," she says. "Do you want to smoke or ball?"

"I don't need any dope," I say. Help her out of her jeans.

"Leave it on," she says when I try to pull her jersey over her head.

"Relax your arm, it'll slip right off," I say, surprised how calm my voice is.

"No! If I smear the stamp off I can't get back in without paying again." All the while, she holds her stamped hand aloft, as if she stroked an invisible wellwisher who watched us. "What are you doing?" she asks.

"This suit's brand new," I say, carefully folding my jacket and trousers, laying them softly with my vest, out of range behind me. I did not even consider, seriously, telling her she had the distinction of my virginity.

We are such stuff as dreams are made on

Where's Ms. Heideman? For a moment I thought the ante-office was locked, no light diffusing through the opaque glass pane in the door, no clicking typewriter keys, file drawer ramming home, floor protesting her shoes. But the knob turns in my hand. "Ms. Heideman?" Dim, empty, no echo to my voice.

Swept clean. No desk, no chair, no plastic-covered couch for waiting, no files, telephone, file folders, in-out tray. The scale still stood in the hallway, but the dressing screen was folded, propped against the wall. Stocker's door opened too, and I found him there, sitting at his desk, illuminated only by the window overlooking the campus greensward.

"When I saw she was gone I figured you'd be gone too," I say. And when he doesn't speak, "It's me, Macklin."

"Do tell," says Professor Stocker. "Mrs. Macklin's former fat boy, come to show off his fancy duds, let us all bask in his new glory. How far'd you chase that nigger for his suit?"

"I haven't seen you in so long," I say. "I just wanted to say thanks for all you did for me." I'm not sure he's listening.

"Go away, Macklin," Stocker says. "See the door? Pull it to you and run. Don't let the knob hit you in the ass. Go. The project's over. The till's dry if you're looking to cadge four bucks. Magic juice's all dried up. Leave me to hell alone, Macklin."

"What is it with you?" His desk's cleared too. The examination table still there, and the refrigerator, plug pulled. "I thought you'd be glad to see me."

"Macklin," the professor says, "come to gloat over his new self. Okay. You're a marvel to behold. Broads falling back over their heels for you, are they? So gloat. Have a good life, Macklin." His voice. The way he sits. Nothing in his voice but words. Sitting I wonder how long with the light off, speaking like an old recording, ashes and cinders.

"I don't get it. I thought you'd be happy. It worked, right? Look at me! Living proof." He laughs like it was an accident happened to someone he hated.

"Macklin," he says, throws back his head, tilts back in his swivel chair, speaks like he reads print on the ceiling. "The widow Mrs. Macklin's fat boy. A sister, too, right? I remember him well. Pushing five hundred avoirdupois, one big ball of adipose. Cellulite to the bone, weren't you. Decked out now like a dancing fag. Oh, Jesus."

"It's probably not good for you to sit all by yourself here."

“The man just does *not* twig!” He tilts forward, looks at me. I step to where I can see his eyes. What’s left, cold and dry. “The exception proves the rule, see? Get it? I failed, Macklin. El bombo. Funds expended and accounted for. Done. Dr. Stocker’s amino acid compound hypothesis went bust, see? Go away.”

“It *did* work! Look at me. The other . . .”

“Dunce,” says he, “there aren’t any others! Start with thirty-seven volunteers. Prize fatties. Blimps. Tubbies all. Half can’t fast long enough to start. Half the rest, Heideman couldn’t scare them into the first drink. You wouldn’t blame them for barfing at the smell, would you? Half what’s left never held a dose down. Make a guess how many times Heideman had to change her clothes. Get it? Three of you. Three came back for a second taste, Macklin. One besides you made it past the first week. You ninny, I knew from the second week it was a bust! Doctoral candidate in quant analysis doesn’t know what an adequate sample is? Get lost, Macklin.”

“Why’d you keep me, then? Tell me!”

“Just wanted to see if you could. Sheer-ass curiosity. I got interested,” the professor says. “Involved. Enjoy yourself, Macklin. Watch that maintenance diet, though, that lard’ll come back on you like stink on shit.”

“At least I came to say thanks, even considering I’m the one did the hard part.”

“Think of me sometime, Macklin,” he says.

I should say goodbye, something special in appreciation for his helping me do it. But he doesn’t want to listen. Nobody should blame him for the ones who dropped out. And the real credit’s mine for me. I’ve got enough responsibility for myself. Nothing’s easy. I say: if you got it, flaunt it. I’d like to tell him, complaining never cut a single calorie.

*The bigger the figure, the better I like ’em,
The better I like ’em, the better I feed ’em,
The better I feed ’em, the bigger the figure,
The bigger the figure, the better I like!*

“I’ll be late, Mama.” Wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. Anyone thinks a brewer’s yeast cocktail’s rough never tried amino acid.

“You can’t live like this,” Mama says. She stands midway between the sink and the stove. The table’s set for the three of us, plates, silver, cups and saucers, juice glasses, but the stove’s cold, percolator unplugged. I set my satchel on the floor. I don’t seek this.

“Yes I can. I am. Look at me. I never felt better.” I go to kiss her goodbye, but she flinches.

“Crazy,” she says. “You’re making us all crazy with this. You have to eat sensibly now, even your crazy professor said so. I can cook anything you want. Nobody can live this way.” Mama’s crying. When Papa died she

didn't cry until his funeral. After, late at night when she thought I was asleep, I always got up, went to her, hugged and kissed. She'd dry her eyes, make us a snack, tuck me in again, whispering not to wake Sister, just a baby then.

"Stop it." She does. "That's not fair. You can't do that to me anymore. Don't ever do that again." She comes to me, puts her arms around me, hands crossed behind my back. Odd. Me so thin, yet she seems so much smaller now. We say nothing, hear only Sister's radio-alarm begin to play. "Sister's going to come out in a minute," I say. At first I think she's sobbing again—she'll get my new shirt wet! But she's talking, muffled against my chest.

"Won't you talk to me? Oh won't you talk to me, Stuart?" She lifts her head, looks at me with runny eyes. "I can't talk to my boy. My boy won't tell me what's the matter. It's making me go crazy." She releases me before I ask her to. I step away.

"That's stupid. You just can't accept what I've done. How do you think it makes me feel? I need to be disciplined. You think my maintenance diet's fun? You should be pleased for me. Look!" I half-turn, arms extended, half-dance for her in our kitchen, hop, kick my heels in mid-air.

When I see Sister in the doorway, leaning slackly against the frame, wrapped in her robe, feet bare, hair tangled from sleep. I freeze, almost fall. "Stuart," Mama says.

"I got to run," I say. "Goodbye, Mama. Bye, Sister," leave before they can answer. Later in the day, sitting in my carrel, I remember I failed to hug and kiss. I promise to give them double when I get home. That, I know, will just cause more trouble.

Evening. I read in my bedroom while they eat dinner. In the kitchen. No point in laying the dining room table if we're not going to sit down like a family, Mama says. "It's crazy for me and Sister to sit eating while you bury your nose in a book," she says.

"Eat your supper, you two," I tell them, "You won't even know I'm alive."

I'm more efficient than ever. Mind keener, retaining more. Like amphetamines or a fasting high. I concentrate. A kind of power. Can't help gloating. No doubt Professor Stocker could explain it scientifically, sound mind in a sound body. No need.

My own metaphor suffices. My new self's uncluttered, unchained, minus over three hundred pounds of fatty tissue. Free. I'm cleaner, lighter, simpler, more exact with each day I hold to my maintenance program. More than physical. Sure, heart beating easier, less rapidly, blood coursing a shorter distance to my extremities, lungs gleaning more oxygen, distributing it more evenly and generously. More than that. *Found*. Myself. What I looked for, eating, all my life. The *real* Macklin. *Macklin*, I say to myself, smack my lips like it was a vitamin-enriched confection. *Macklin!* I snigger to myself over my book, in my bedroom, alone.

"Stuart?" Mama says at my door.

“I’m studying.”

“There’s a good show on TV.”

“I *said* I was studying.”

She goes away. Silence. I forget them, the house, the television murmur I could hear if I wanted. Forget. Except Macklin. Me. Him, emerging day by day, finer definition, larger as he’s smaller. Greater for being less. What he sees, hears, smells. Words he reads, gaining without adding the least fraction of an ounce. Macklin. *Macklin*, I say, lipping the initial consonant, gulping the vowel, tonguing the close against my teeth, swallowing.

“Are you going out, Stuart?”

“Would I wear a new suit if I wasn’t?” Powder blue so posh you could eat it with a spoon.

“Stuart’s got a heavy date,” Sister sneers.

“Would you like to go along with him, Sister?” Mama says.

“Hey! Did I invite company?” I say. I should leave on that. Why prolong an agony? “Macklin’s had a bad day,” I say to them. “Classes, working in the library. He’s read his eyes out half the night trying to make something of himself in this life. Do you grudge me some recreation?”

My mother begins to cry. My sister cringes into her chair. My sister is also weeping. I wait until they find enough control to stammer apologies. I’m not angry, just determined. Do, I have learned, what you must. Then what you can. Ignore the impossible.

What a night for a walk! I walk fast, almost skipping. No hard feelings. They’ll get over it. Or they won’t. I already have. I pick up my pace. Turn a corner, catch the feeble light, suggestion of disco music.

*Mirror, Mirror, on the wall,
Who’s the fairest of them all?*

Reminders. Old habits persist. I work at it, water on stone, new habits for old. Smart would be, pack and leave town. Soon enough. Meantime, I accept the challenge, the long haul. I’m a man knows the value of discipline applied over a course of time. Basic dialectics: quantitative changes, past a certain point, become qualitative.

Stick to business on campus. Things go well. Finishing the dissertation, conferences with my major professor, assembling a dossier with the placement service. I run into old faces. Neither seek nor evade.

I pass the student infirmary as the lunch hour knells on the carillon. Ms. Heideman emerges, stout and hard as ever, cap squared, shoulders back, bust outthrust under her dark blue cape. Must be dull work. Runny noses and sore throats, hot streaks when a flu bug mingles with the student body. Occasional fractures from intramural sports to jar the monotony of malingerers looking for chits to excuse class absence. I neither wave nor look away. She sees me, must. No recognition. My prime witness, administered it drink by

nauseating drink, measured it pound by pound on her clanking scale. I can admire her.

Given a job, does it. On to the next. I respect a plodder. Determination and accomplishment, no matter how mundane. What was, was. Now's now. We pass one another, and that's all. I'll get on fine with the Heidemans of this world.

Stocker's another story. Seen him twice recently, ambling past the duck-pond. Wearing his lab coat. Of course we don't speak. It hurts, a little. A whipped dog, stooped, greatly aged in so few months. Preoccupied somewhere inside himself, uncertain, awkward. The breaks. I sleep in my bed, he in his. The way I see it: we took a shot together, mine hit, his fell short. Live and let live.

I call my mother at least once a week. No problem. "I can't make that, Mama," I tell her. "You should quit asking me."

"I can fix anything you want, Stuart," she says. "I'll special buy what you want. Your sister would like seeing you."

"You know better, Mama." You have to be firm. No pun.

"She's your sister. We're your family."

"So? Look, Mama, I have to meet somebody."

"A girl?"

"Don't ask dumb questions. Listen, take care of yourself. Tell Sister for God's sake to get out of the house once in a blue moon."

"You have to make allowances for other people, Stuart."

"No," I say. Say goodbye. I call regularly.

Hanging tough. Whiff of hot cooking oil, TV commercial for doughnuts, billboard featuring a cross-sectioned candy bar. I confess to automatic reactions. Spontaneous salivation, harsh wincing of the stomach. My fingers clench into fists, palms sweat, breath comes short and fast. Children pass, licking popsicles. A grocery clerk anoints fresh produce with a spray bottle. A bakery truck rumbles by. Fast food personalities flash plastic grins at me. I set my teeth, narrow my eyes, break into a trot. Prepared to cope with my glands the rest of my life, the long haul, if I must.

Truly strange, what I call my . . . *visions*. Tricks of the imagination. Infrequent, once or twice a day. I pass a mirror, a plate-glass window, a reflective puddle of rainwater. I see . . . Macklin. Trim as a welterweight. Hard as oak siding. Macklin, able to stand inside one leg of an old pair of trousers, room for his twin left over. And I see Macklin. Before and after, testimonial for reducing formulae, a kind of double vision. Macklin half the man he was. Macklin whole.

I sense the sympathetic aura of my old body enveloping me. Feel my heart struggle, lungs heave, blood slosh feebly toward the distant limits of what was once . . . me, Macklin.

Go away, I command. Run my hands over my body, poke my taut abdomen, dig fingers into a wiry bicep, shake a racer's leg, stroke my

muscular throat, shake my deflated behind. *Go away, Macklin.* He does. But returns. I look for a long haul.

Sleeping, I'm helpless. Naturally I dream of food, drink, myself at twice or three times my new weight. My dream sister pines, mother pleads, Stocker mourns, Heideman executes. Dream myself teased and scorned by easy women, dream motley wardrobes, the ineffable stench of an amino acid compound I almost think lingers after I wake.

Overall, I accept a long haul. All in all, I'm grateful to be alive, sometimes regret my father didn't live, that I have to imagine my joy in his pride.