

## Whatever Happened to Dr. Malone? · *Jonathan Baumbach*

AT LOOSE ENDS, Francis S. takes a job as a hit man for an undercover government agency.

His first assignment is the assassination of an old friend. When you have no money you'll do almost anything for a payday, he writes in his notebook, carefully omitting the particulars of his desperate commitment.

The nice thing about the job is that it permits him a new identity and gives a justifying framework to his reclusive life.

They, the Company, have recruited him for the assignment because Francis is a man without apparent attachments, a piece of information they make no attempt to hide. Their top agents are all anonymous loners, his supervisor tells him on the first day of what is a whirlwind two week training program. Men uncorrupted by the disease of society.

He comes out of the crash program with the code name "Camera" and with an imperceptible tick in his left eyelid. He graduates second in his class, which leaves him with a sense of failure and a desperate competitive edge. The next day he draws the name of an old friend out of a hat.

He tells himself it's only a job, depersonalizes the murder of a friend through concentration on detail. How to do it. Where to do it. When to do it.

Six months into the job—he has followed his unlikely assignment from Spain to Italy to France to England to France and back again to England—he has begun to lose heart, has the sense that, despite meticulous preparation, he will not be able to pull the trigger.

The more perfect his plans, the harder they are to carry out. Self-consciousness defeats him, the whining of moral compunction.

He has spent most of his ten thousand dollar advance and so expects some difficulty from his employers when he writes them that he is giving up the ghost.

A special agent of the Company, code name, "Now Voyager," comes to London to persuade him to reconsider.

The agent, as it turns out, is a sister of his estranged wife Nora, though neither of them knows this at the time.

A meeting is arranged at a bistro called The Great American Disaster. Each arrives in muted disguise—wig and false mustache in Francis's case. If either recognizes the other, the manifest content of such recognition is nowhere evident.

"You don't look like your picture," she says, impassive behind oversize dark glasses. Francis smiles nervously. She takes the picture of him they have given her from her purse and studies it in a businesslike way.

"Perhaps if you removed your glasses," he says.

His joking cuts no ice with her. "The Company asked me to look you up," she says in the driest of voices, "in relation to correspondence from a man named Camera. I am instructed to tell him that the answer to his request for relief of assignment is negative."

"I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused your people," he says. "For reasons I don't want to get into, Camera can't go through with his assignment. He agrees to repay all moneys paid to him in advance and will do whatever else is necessary to make reparation."

The waiter comes by and Camera orders imitation American hamburgers for the both of them and a litre of house wine.

"You'll have to eat them both, I'm afraid," she says, without the trace of a smile. "I never eat meat when I'm on a job."

He takes her remark as a rebuke. "I admire your dedication," he whispers.

She says nothing, occasionally taps a finger on the table, watching him (or perhaps not) from behind the impenetrable glasses.

Her solemnity piques his amusement. "We have a stalemate," he says, winking incongruously. "You say you can't eat meat on a job and I say you can."

She seems to smile slightly, though otherwise maintains the severity of her composure. When she opens her purse for a cigaret, sweat breaks out on his forehead. He takes a matchbook from the table and lights it for her. His hand is unsteady.

"I think we understand each other," she says. "I've been instructed by our mutual employers to inform you that the unthinkable is out of the question. Take comfort in certainty."

There is something a little loony about her insistence, he thinks, though he recognizes that it is her job to impress him with the irreversibility of commitment.

"What if," he says, eating without pleasure, finishing both hamburgers with no sense of having engaged the food, "what if, Camera were to take an alternate assignment?"

Voyager treats his question with a mildly contemptuous turn of the head.

The meeting is over. Another is arranged for the next evening at the same time.

The time arrives before he is ready for it. She is the same, silent, imposing, perhaps even more severe in manner than the day before. He has a movie camera with him, a miniaturized super-8 in the pocket of his coat.

"How long have you been working for them?" he asks at one point.

The question seems to surprise her, elicits a gasp or a sigh. She breaks down and has a drink of wine with him. Afterward they go for a walk.

Somewhere near the middle of the Waterloo Bridge, she stops to get a cigaret from her purse. His hand goes in after hers, pinning her wrist with thumb and forefinger.

"You're hurting me," she says coldly. "Do you think if I meant to kill you I would go about it in such a clumsy way?"

Two men in business suits, carrying attache cases, come by. "Hallo," one of them says as they pass.

There is no weapon in her hand, only a pack of True. "It is not like in the films," she says.

He takes out his miniature camera and films her trying unsuccessfully to light a cigaret in high wind. "It is not only *like* a film, it *is* a film."

On a bench along the embankment, he notices the two men who had passed them on the bridge.

"Do you know those men?" he asks.

"One of them looks familiar," she says.

For no reason he can understand, perhaps it is only to light her cigaret, she goes with him to his hotel room.

For the first hour it is all business between them, a continuation of their first meeting, then she lets her hair down. It has astonishing texture and depth, though the color is not altogether to be believed.

"Will you take your glasses off?"

"I can't," she says, shrugging her regret.

He resists the temptation of inquiring why. She talks vaguely of the need for illusion in business transactions of an exceptional nature.

He thinks briefly of taking off his mustache and wig, of making the first confiding gesture.

"If you refuse me," she says, "someone else will come who will be harder to refuse."

"No one is harder to refuse than you," he says.

She floats with the compliment, lights up another cigaret. He sits alongside of her, leaning back to avoid the thrust of her smoke. She tells him the story of a former lover of hers who refused an assignment for what he thought were good reasons and who, years later in another country, met with a memory-destroying accident.

He tells her a version of the story of his life, using metaphor as disguise. It is not so much the story of his life as an altogether different story with significant resemblances. Voyager listens with sympathetic attention.

Later he asks, "Who wants him killed? What's the reason behind it?"

These are questions it is against the rules to ask. He expects no answer and gets none. Later, she says, "It may be the computer's idea. Sometimes people are selected for no humanly comprehensible reason. We use the same computers as the IRS. Sometimes the murder of one man is arranged for the sole purpose of warning or threatening another. . . . I'm afraid I'm talking out of school." She has a moment—this discovered from her diary—where she suspects that he, not she, is the one testing the other.

Their roles toward each other remain equivocal. He invites her to bed and she refuses, though goes to pains not to foreclose hope.

The next day, by the sheerest accident, Francis is run into and recognized by the man he has been assigned to kill.

They have a perilous meeting.

What comes of it is this. Francis learns that his estranged wife Nora has not remarried and that he has more reason than ever to give up the assassination business. Francis is eager to get the old friend out of London without involving him in the specific reasons behind the urgency.

"I happen to know," he says over dinner, "that it is not safe for you in London." The friend is dubious, though agrees to go with Francis north into Scotland for the ostensible purpose of visiting old ruins.

Over coffee, the old friend confesses that he had once been in love with Francis's wife.

They drive at night in a rented car—Francis afraid that his own vehicle might have been tampered with—in a manner determined not to call attention to themselves.

Francis has the uncontrollable suspicion that, despite his precautions, someone in a black car is following them. The drive at night, the unspoken urgency engenders a certain intimacy.

Further confessions emerge. The old friend not only was in love with Francis's wife Nora, but had a brief love affair with her.

"How brief?"

"Well, it went on for awhile, though there was not much opportunity."

The news does not ingratiate itself with Francis. The car, eluding pursuers or merely the idea of pursuit, picks up speed.

Francis tries to recall what he had been doing when Nora and his old friend were regretting their limited opportunity for betrayal.

The car, a Morris Monarch, handles poorly or perhaps the driver has no feel for the way it handles, never having commanded one before. The steering, it seems to Francis, has only symbolic connection, a wistful tendency to the direction the automobile chooses to travel.

The possibility strikes him that the car he is in has been tampered with, though the Company, as it calls itself, had no way of anticipating that he would go to the particular rental agency he had and be given this particular Morris Monarch. It may have been that the car was available on short notice because something was wrong with the steering mechanism. In that case, of course, they shouldn't have given it out at all.

He is still not out of the London suburbs, vaguely lost, although going in the general direction he intends.

"I don't think you ever properly appreciated her," the friend says in the course of his nostalgic monologue.

At the next turn they come close to having an accident, wheels skidding. Francis slows the Monarch, determined on survival.

The old friend yawns. "I tend to fall asleep in moving cars," he says.

Francis wonders what Voyager will think when she comes to his hotel

room for the appointment he has set up with no intention of keeping and finds him gone. Camera (or is it Francis?) looks at his watch. Voyager will be knocking at the door of his room in exactly three minutes. He wonders if his unexplained absence will excite any personal disappointment.

His old friend snores lightly, mumbles to himself in his sleep.

Francis's head, unlike the night he drives through, is extremely, one might say deceptively clear. It is odd then that the Motorway north (M2) toward which he has been heading, following erratic signs and portents, has not yet materialized.

Without warning, there had been no news of it for at least ten miles, the Motorway appears around a turn. Francis sighs with relief.

"Did you say something?" the old friend asks.

"Just breathing," says Francis.

"I thought I heard you say someone was following us."

Francis looks in his rear view mirror and sees a powder blue Firebird coming up on him in the same lane at considerable speed. He pulls over into the middle lane, the Monarch stammering slightly. When you rent a car, he thinks, you have no responsibility for its idiosyncracies.

His tendency, Francis observes (after the Pontiac has passed without incident) is to drive either too quickly or too slowly, one extreme compensating for the other, moving in idle desperation between equally inviable alternatives.

He slows to a crawl, then catching himself (or reminded by the friend in the death seat), he accelerates to the speed limit and beyond.

For no apparent reason, the car directly in front of him decelerates abruptly.

"You're driving very oddly," his old friend complains as he pulls the stammering Monarch into the right lane to avoid accident.

Then something unexpected happens. They are hit from the side or from behind, or something in the mechanism breaks down, and they are caught in a centrifugal force that pulls them from the road.

He wakes on the ground some time later, moved to consciousness by a sequence of aches with indeterminable reference. The first discovery, not without its attendant ambiguities, is that he is alive. A dark night, cloudy, a patina of rain in the air. He remains where he is, nauseated, listening for sounds, adjusting his eyes to the dark.

He has the idea that his old friend has tricked him in some way, has been a party to this confusing accident.

Some minutes later an ambulance arrives. He is carried by two attendants in gray coats into the back of the ambulance, an indignity he protests without voice, and taken to a local hospital. No one mentions the disposition of his car or of its other passenger.

Voyager comes to visit him the next morning, shows up in his hospital room an hour before visiting hours with a bouquet of flowers.

"I heard you were in an accident," she says, handing him an envelope, the remainder of his fee inside in laundered one hundred dollar bills. The cash a trifle starchy but doubtless negotiable.

"What's this for?" he asks, unamused by her uncharacteristic good humor.

"For services rendered," she says. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

He puts the envelope under his pillow and turns his face to the window.

"Then there is no more to be said," she says.

His silence seems tacit agreement.

"When you can travel again, Camera, when your leg is functioning, the Company wants you back home for a debriefing. Will you remember or should I send you a note?"

He nods or seems to, though continues to avoid her glance. She sits on the edge of the bed, chatting him up, a devoted visitor. "I've never had any patience with weakness," she says at one point.

He is indifferent to the causes of her impatience, closes his eyes. When he opens them again he notices that his visitor is holding a pistol in her gloved hand.

"It's not the way it looks," she says.

As if anything is. The gun is a further disillusion and appears on the scene just when he is beginning to fall in love with the young lady.

"Have they ordered you to kill me, Voyager, or is this your own idea?"

"In a crisis, all alternatives are to be investigated," she whispers.

She lifts up the covers and, kicking off her shoes, slips into bed next to him, the cold steel of the gun between them.

"You'll never get away with this," he says.

"I wouldn't worry about it if I were you."

Francis tends to expect the worst, a protective habit he is loath to relinquish. He imagines the nurse wandering in to discover his visitor in bed with him and shares, if only momentarily, that matronly figure's open-mouthed astonishment.

When he reaches between them for the pistol she says, "You'll have to get your own gun, I'm afraid."

And he is a man who likes to know how things turn out, an adept of fiction, so asks his companion what really happened to his old friend.

"I can only do one thing at a time," she says.

They do that one thing, though it takes more time than usual to get it together, Francis's leg in a cast, his mind elsewhere.

"I like happy endings," she says. "Real life is depressing enough in my opinion."

He asks her to explain this extraordinary remark.

She tells him of an emotionally deprived upper-middle class childhood where all her demands, no matter how inordinate, were honored except the unspoken, essential ones.

There is a moment of recognition. "Where do I know you from?" he asks.

She denies any prior acquaintance, recovers her piece, puts on her shoes and leaves.

Francis is kept another two weeks in the hospital, mainly (so he is told) for observation. In all that time he is not once visited by the law, although a particularly unsavory lawyer comes by on two occasions to offer his services. No explanations are asked of Francis. No information is given him. Yet his old friend, his wife's former lover—he has money in an envelope under his pillow to attest to it—has been killed under suspicious circumstances in an auto accident. Someone must be accountable. He thinks of pursuing an investigation on his own, even if to uncover himself at the last moment as the object of his quest.

Voyager makes one more visit in which she is all business, taking down his social security number in a notebook, remarking before she leaves that it has been a pleasure to work with an operative who has a professional attitude toward his work.

"Will we see each other again?" he asks.

"I doubt it," she says, looking older and tired, graylights in her brown hair. "They don't like to repeat the same chemistry. If we do, sometime in the future under widely varied circumstances, it is altogether possible—debriefing sometimes has that effect—that we will have no recollection of each other. Goodbye Camera."

"I'll know you when I see you," Francis calls after her, fixing her image firmly in his mind, holding onto it willfully for days. Gradually, it begins to blur, confusing itself with any number of other images he has resolved to keep, finally leaving him altogether, defying his powers of imaginative recall. He is reduced to inventing her in language, though she is never the same twice, her reality subject to the quixotic predilections of the imagination.

"We're releasing you today, Mr. Sensabaugh," the baby-faced nurse announces.

It is an odd sensation being addressed by a wholly unfamiliar name. "I'm afraid you have the wrong patient," says Francis. "My name isn't Sensabaugh."

The nurse frowns (she is dressed in a nun's habit unlike the nurses he is accustomed to), says, "What a funny man you are, Mr. Sensabaugh." She enjoys an uncomfortable laugh.

Lifting the bedclothes, Francis notices that his leg is no longer in a cast. "When was the cast taken off my leg, sister?" he asks the nurse.

"Mr. Sensabaugh," she says with quiet desperation, "you know there's nothing wrong with your leg."

Something is wrong, something else. The room is different in certain ways from the one he went to sleep in, though he can't quite articulate the

nature of the difference. When the nurse turns her back he reaches under his pillow for the envelope of money.

He starts to complain of its absence, but finds it unusually difficult to get the words in order. Nothing is as it was.

A doctor comes in, one he's never seen before and asks him how he's feeling. "How are we feeling today, Mr. Sensabaugh?" asks the young bespectacled doctor in the tone of someone amused by himself. "Any head pain, is there?"

"Who told you my name was Sensabaugh?" Francis asks.

The doctor, whose name is Andrews Sista, hums to himself as he removes a bandage Francis has no recollection of from the forehead of the ostensible Sensabaugh.

"With a scar like that," the doctor says, "you could be in moving pictures, Mr. Sensabaugh. You come back in a month and I'll burn off some of the scar tissue for you, okay? It'll be like new I tell you. Bellissimo."

"What about my leg?" Francis asks.

"Your leg?" The doctor looks at his clipboard, then over at the nurse who has her eyes averted. "Our patient doesn't have a leg to stand on," he says. "Seriously though, is there something the matter with your leg?"

"The cast," Francis says, "is gone. It wasn't supposed to come off for another five days. Where the hell is Dr. Malone?"

"Dr. Malone?"

The nurse calls the doctor aside and they exchange hisses, then they leave the room together which makes Francis feel, as if he needed further evidence, that he is the intended victim of a maddening conspiracy.

Francis doesn't wait for their return. He gets out of bed, careful of the leg which seems as mobile as ever and looks in the closet for his clothes. He dresses himself in whatever he finds—camel's hair pants, white cashmere turtle neck, Harris tweed jacket, soft leather riding boots—which, though not his, fit him as if he had been measured for them.

He hears footsteps and gets under the covers with his clothes on, hiding his hospital pajamas under the pillow.

An older doctor comes in, a solemn, slow-speaking man. "How are you today, Mr. Sensabaugh?" he asks.

Francis pretends to be asleep, snores convincingly for his inquisitor.

"If you need me, Mr. Sensabaugh," the older doctor says, "you know where I can be found. My name is Dr. Malone."

It is not the Dr. Malone he remembers.

When he hears the door close he counts slowly to ten, then gets out of bed and leaves the room, whistling to himself as he goes down the hall—an old man in a wheel chair nods at him in a conspiratorial way—looking for the way out. The various hospital attendants that pass him in the hall pay him no notice, and it amuses him (in a grim way) to think himself invisible.

Just as he reaches the main door, a woman comes in, dressed in furs and a



purple cloche hat, and appears to recognize him. (He has a dim sense that he has seen this handsome woman before, though is almost sure they have never met.)

She says: "I'm sorry I'm late, darling."

"Do you call everyone 'darling'," he asks, "or only people you don't know?"

"Clifford, have I done something to make you angry?" she asks in a tight voice. "If I have, I'm terribly sorry."

"I'm afraid you're confusing me with someone else," he says, embarrassed at the reaction he has provoked. "My name isn't Clifford."

She puts her fist in her mouth and turns away, seeming to tremble, though it's hard to tell what's going on beneath the furs. "With no one else," she whispers. "Please don't be unkind, darling."

We pause here for an explanation. The woman, who calls him darling, is Nicole Sensabaugh, wife of the man she knows as Clifford, although known to us and to himself by other names.

Francis discovers, not an easy discovery to accept, that a year and five months have passed that he is unable to account for, that there have been two auto accidents seventeen months apart and that under the pseudonym Clifford Sensabaugh he has been married for eleven months to the splendid woman in the cloche hat who has come to call on him in the sanitarium.

Nicole refuses to believe that Francis doesn't know her, assumes that his pretended amnesia is one of his characteristically unpleasant jokes.

Francis, on the other hand, suspects Nicole of being in the employ (or control) of the Company, of having married him in order to spy on him at close quarters.

It is no way to start a false marriage.

Small bitternesses are exchanged at every occasion.

"Do I get to sleep in your bed?" he asks.

She says no, though not with unshakeable certitude.

He questions her about their first meeting.

Her eyes moist. Perhaps it is the fog rolling in. "You were the most charming man I ever met," she says. "That of course was before you started drinking."

"So I drink, do I?"

"Like a fish."

He looks for ways to expose her treachery, though she is either always on her guard or not what he thinks.

When she is out of the house he sneaks a look at her diary and gets a portrait of himself—vain, self-centered, brutal—that he finds difficult to live with.

One day he gets a call from her lawyer requesting a divorce.

"Why," he asks her, "did you have your lawyer call instead of telling me yourself?"

"You never seem to listen to what I say. You're always so distracted, Clifford. I thought this would be the most efficient way to get through. It did make you notice me, didn't it?"

He has never, he thinks, not noticed her and would say so if he didn't think she would misconstrue what he meant. The call from her lawyer, her apparent willingness to dissolve the marriage (in circumstance only) somewhat allays his suspicion. It is at this point they come to an understanding. She is willing to concede that he may be, as his behavior insists, a victim of amnesia if he is willing to trust that she is not, appearances aside, in the pay of some sinister organization.

They embrace somewhat awkwardly to commemorate this understanding. "What does Clifford Sensabaugh do?" he asks.

The woman who claims to be his wife has difficulty characterizing his ephemeral career. "He's a playboy," she says. "And does, you know, the kind of things that playboys normally do. He drinks to excess, runs after women, rides to hounds, goes to all-night parties. It's hard to explain. Clifford Sensabaugh is the kind of man who wears his dissipation lightly."

"He does no work with his hands?"

"None that meets the eye. He plays an occasional game of polo, and it is rumored that he writes a bit between drinks—mostly letters, I suspect, dictated to his male secretary."

"Why do you put up with him?"

Nicole shakes her head, smiles wanly, lights a cigaret, has no answer but the obvious.

"You'll find," he says, "that I'm not the Clifford Sensabaugh you knew."

Francis studies the life of his alter ego in order to impersonate him convincingly. If it became clear to whoever it is assigned to watch him that he has regained his memory, his life is in danger. For an hour each day after breakfast Francis and Nicole rehearse the roles of their marriage, reminding each other from time to time that it is only a performance. Nicole suffers his essential disregard, cries to herself in her room when she is alone.

They go to a party at the home of a man who is known to be Clifford's closest friend, a Dr. Matt Bohrman, MP, currently residing in the United States.

They charter a plane to a private airport in Connecticut, with three other guests, a means of defraying costs. Even the very wealthy, Nicole informs him (she is an heiress in her own right), tend to pursue certain economies.

Everyone on the plane, indeed everyone at the party, has an air of longstanding self-importance.

Doctor Bohrman is an older man, white-haired, with easy and elegant manners, no one, in his non-Clifford identity, he has ever seen before.

"How good of you to come!" says his host. "Fully recovered from your accident, are you?"

"Good as new," says Francis, unable to resist ambiguity.

"I couldn't be more pleased," says the other, a man of practiced geniality. "Your wife, if I may say so, my boy, has never looked more. . . ravishing. Is that the right word?" He has a predilection for twinkling.

Nicole averts her eyes at the word 'ravishing', an uncharacteristic reticence.

"He doesn't like women," she whispers to Francis when they're alone. "He takes every occasion to make light of them."

At dinner, he is seated between the Countess Emilia Cassimassima (recently separated from the count) and an American stage actress named Charlotte Bron. Francis can't remember if he is supposed to know these women or not, so courts ambiguity.

Bohrman seems to glance at him from time to time as if checking him out, his smile querulous, a soupçon sinister.

Francis has an intuition—perhaps an unremembered memory—his ostensible friend is the Company's No. 1 man, code name "General Motive."

"You're not up to usual form tonight," the countess whispers in his right ear.

"How so?" he asks.

He doesn't hear her answer or mishears, the voice of his other neighbor in his other ear.

"You don't seem like your old self," whispers Charlotte Bron. "What did they do to you in that nasty hospital?"

"You've changed somewhat yourself," he says.

"How sweet of you to notice," she says. "Do you like it?"

"I can't say how much," he says.

"Are you making love to me, Mr. Sensabaugh?"

"My hands are on the table, sweetheart."

She laughs falsely catching Bohrman's watchful eye.

It is all seemingly ordinary, an elegant dinner party at the ancestral estate of a revered and kindly old man. The countess chatters to him of her former husband the count, insatiably forgiving. The word "oil" comes up and it stays in Francis's memory like a smear on the landscape.

After dinner (and brandy and cigars), Bohrman invites his guests into the den for a new game, one he has been promising them, he says with understated implication, for some time.

Each of the participants is dealt four playing cards—there are thirteen players in all—and are instructed not to show their cards to anyone else under penalty of exclusion. When the deck is dispersed, Bohrman calls off the names of twelve cards.

"When your card is called," Bohrman says in his dry genial voice, "it becomes your identity for the game and you live or die, I speak metaphorically of course, by whatever implications you imagine for it. As your card is called please step out into the hall where one of my assistants or ac-

complices, if I may, will continue your briefing."

A pattern emerges: every one of the guests but Clifford Sensabaugh has one of his cards called, leaving Francis alone in the room with his host.

"Well, my boy, it looks like you're the winner of the first part of the game," says the doctor in name only.

"And what advantage does that give me?" asks Francis.

"Ah, now the real fun starts," says Bohrman, clapping his hands with childlike delight. "You have four cards, my friend, each of which corresponds to some place or point on the grounds of Bohrman Cottage. Each of the points represented by the cards or "in the cards," as I like to say, is your particular sanctuary. If one of your pursuers attempts to apprehend you in your sanctuary, he or she is in violation and removed from the game. To win the game, which I need not add is the goal of all games, you have to move from the first of your sanctuaries to the fourth without being apprehended, as it were, off base. Your first point of sanctuary, the King of Clubs—notice the painting of the black batman on the wall—is this room. After you start off, Clifford, moving toward Sanctuary 2, which is a place that corresponds to your second card, I will hold the others for fifteen minutes before setting them on your trail with an appropriate clue. Each will have a weapon corresponding to his card and must use that weapon and nothing else in apprehending you. There are a number of Observers in red jackets spaced along the field of play whose job it is to note violations. Each of your sanctuaries is inviolable for twenty minutes. When the twenty minutes is up, sanctuary reverts to field of play and you are vulnerable there, as elsewhere, to apprehension. You are allowed now ten minutes to ask questions. I must warn you to be careful and precise in your choice of questions." He takes out his pocket watch and rests it on the table in front of him. "Begin."

Nicole Sensabaugh wanders into the room at the back and sits down. Bohrman nods to her. Has she betrayed him? Francis wonders.

"Is there a reward for winning?" he asks.

"Dear me, I hadn't thought of one. What would you have? One had always supposed victory to be its own cup of tea."

"What happens if I'm apprehended?"

"It all depends on what's in the cards," Bohrman says, twinkling characteristically. "Advice, my boy, is not to think negatively."

Nicole winks at him when he looks her way, a communication Francis chooses to ignore.

"Will you answer anything I ask?"

"That's one of the rules of the game, Clifford, and I am, as you know, a man who likes to play by the rules."

"Are you the head of the Company?"

"What Company is that, my dear boy?" His smile, which pretends to amusement, wilts like old lettuce. "That's not a proper question, is it? Your

time, I must warn you is running out. I'm disappointed in you, Clifford. You used to have a decent respect for sport."

"Whose side is my wife on?"

"Your ten minutes are up," says Bohrman, "and I must say I expected you to employ your time with considerably more tact than you have."

"I can see," says Francis, "that you're not the head of the Company as I thought but merely one of its minor functionaries."

Bohrman permits himself a sinister smile. "I'm not what I seem, my boy, is that it? Illusion is the nature of the game."

Two servants in red jackets bully Francis out the door into a courtyard. In a few minutes it becomes clear that the nominal doctor has no intention of playing the game by the rules. Someone, not clear who in the dark, tries to strangle him from behind with a rope. Intuition saves him, the reflexes of a suspicious nature.

There's something to be said for duress. Pursued by unseen adversaries, Francis becomes the man he has often imagined himself to be.

His second card is the Queen of Hearts and so Francis, playing the game, climbs in the window of his host's mistress, the actress, Charlotte Bron. After he makes love to her, throwing himself on her mercy, she agrees to help him escape.

"I've been a mistress in name only," she says. "In reality Matt Bohrman is my uncle. He keeps me as his concubine—that is, his apparent concubine—as a form of self-deception. He is a man with an absolute faith in appearances. His real mistress, however, is his work."

"And what work is that?" Francis asks.

She lies back on the bed in voluptuous disarray, pondering an answer to the question.

"Is Nicole in league with them?" he asks.

"If I were you," she says, "I'd trust no one."

Charlotte goes out into the hall to see if the coast is clear and while she is gone Nicole comes into the room. She has a gun in her hand.

"What have you done with Charlotte Bron?" he asks.

"Charlotte Bron is not really Charlotte Bron," she says, in a breathless voice. "I've come to tell you that, though I don't expect you to believe me. It's a long story and there's no time for it now, but I've come to show you a way out that will escape the attention of the others."

Outside the window, Francis notices that his adversaries, some if not all, are drinking brandy and arguing politics. What are they waiting for? he wonders.

"It is a tradition with them," Nicole explains. "They won't attack until they've burned away the last vestiges of human feeling. Still, it doesn't give us much time."

"Us?" Francis takes a gun from under Charlotte's pillow and they face each other, this unlikely couple, at gun point.

There is a dispute going on outside among the others as to the most effective way to proceed. The argument gets heated. The word "oil" comes up again. Also the words "fire and ice."

Someone says, "We are always getting sidetracked into unworkable subtleties. I for one believe that murder is the only final solution."

"I guess you'll have to trust me," Nicole says.

Francis puts his gun in his coat pocket. Nicole hesitates—there is a moment in which we think she may actually pull the trigger—then she drops her weapon into her purse. There is no time for even a cursory embrace.

There is a quick knock on the door and Bohrman comes in, radiating charm. He has aged, Francis senses, since their last meeting, a crooked stick of a man, his white hair blown about like threads of silk. He asks, his manners always impeccable, for a private audience.

Nicole comes over to Francis, puts her arm in his. "Will you believe him if he talks against me?" she asks.

"She stays," Francis says.

Bohrman presents himself in a new light. Although he is the head of the Company, as Francis had guessed, he is by and large a figurehead, held in distrust by those behind the scene. It is a principle of the Company that no one in its service be precisely what he seems.

Bohrman, Nicole and the pseudonymous Clifford Sensabaugh go out a back entrance to the estate garage. They get into the brown Mercedes at Bohrman's suggestion and drive off into the darkening night, Francis at the wheel. They can see the lawn party through the back window continuing without them. What happens is this. Someone notices the car rushing toward the gates of the estate and points a finger. A group of four or five get into another car and take pursuit.

Bohrman takes the occasion of their escape to explain himself further. It was he (he admits) who actually assigned Francis to murder his estranged friend, though the choice had been made with the aid and advice of the Company's most advanced computer.

"A client had brought the project of this eradication to the Company's board of directors. The Board voted with one dissenting vote—the dissenter, I need not add, no longer with us—to accept the assignment. It was my job as defacto head to appoint the right agent. The four most likely candidates were chosen from the files and their salient statistics fed into the computer. Your name, Clifford, the name under which you registered with us, came to the top."

"A false name with invented attributes."

"All of that of course was in the computer's report. Do you think the Company was ever innocent as to your real identity? Having no core identity, you were an ideal agent for us. We could dispose of you at any time without the slightest notice taken of your disappearance. We could hit

you on the head, change your name, and start you over on a new career.”

Francis wonders at the turn the conversation has taken. He stops the car at the side of the road. “You get out here,” he says to Bohrman. He holds Charlotte’s gun in his hand.

“There’s more to tell,” says Bohrman. “Your old friend was not killed in that so-called auto accident. Intrigue much too complicated to go into here behind the turn of events. Suffice to say he himself planned that episode on the Motorway, and he walked away from the overturned car virtually unharmed.”

“I want you out of the car.”

“Nicole,” he says, “are you going to let him do this to your father?”

Nicole circles her soft glance from one man to the other, from Bohrman to Francis and back again to Bohrman, moves her lips silently as if rehearsing an answer.

“You’re not my real father,” she says to Bohrman.

“Not by blood perhaps but real enough, dear girl. You got what you wanted, didn’t you, and when you wanted it, anything and everything?”

“If Clifford wants you out of the car, father,” she says, “I’m afraid you’ll have to go.”

Bohrman shrugs, opens the door on his side and enters the night. A black limousine passes, moving at great speed, stops about a hundred feet down the road. Two men get out, carrying rifles. It is dark, though one makes out the men and the rifles coming slowly in their direction.

Bohrman knocks on the window, pleads to be taken back, doesn’t wait for Francis to open the door but rushes off into the fields. Francis whips the Mercedes around and starts off in the opposite direction. The rifle fire is not directed at the car. Nicole lets out a cry from deep in her throat.

Francis drives with one eye on the rear-view mirror. After awhile, nothing to be seen behind, he gives full attention to the road ahead. The names of towns change. The night gets darker.

The night gets darker. They stop at a motel called Wayside Stop, an out of the way place and have to wake the manager to get a room. “This is not our busy season,” he says.

In the room. “There are a lot of things I still don’t understand,” Francis says, sitting down on the bed, feeling the scar on his forehead with two fingers.

“Maybe darling, you’re not supposed to understand,” she says. “Maybe the message of this experience is incomprehensibility.”

He has seen her some place before, but where?

“Will you put your arms around me?” she asks.

He has no objection to that, merely a vague distrust or foreboding, a deep unannounced suspicion that there is more to come.

They fall asleep in each other’s arms as they had during the first months of their marriage. In his dream, he says to her, “The man you married never

existed.” The he hears someone outside fiddling with their car and he realizes that an explosive device is being attached to the starting mechanism. He means to warn her not to try to start the car, but he forgets, or doesn’t expect her to get into the car without him. When he hears a car door slam he rushes out to warn her of the bomb. The car erupts in a flash of light before he can get out the door. The explosion jars his memory.

He wakes with an erection alone in bed. She is not in the room. He calls her name. The Mercedes is not in the parking lot outside. In its space there are smears of oil, a broken kewpie doll, two half-finished cigarettes, a puffball of metallic dust.

Francis returns to the motel room to see if she had left some message for him, a note, a keepsake, something to validate his memory of her. There is no word, nothing of hers left behind.

Between the covers there is the faint odor of her perfume. He clings to it, embraces whatever the imagination allows. Their ghosts take a final turn. When he wakes in the early afternoon there is nothing left.