

Marilyn Krysl

THE BEST YOU CAN DO

Passing the Museum, Clayton saw the panhandler, a woman, leaning against the polished fascia. She wore a thin wool dress, shiny with wear. Beside her a plastic mug, much battered. Daffodils bloomed in planters flanking the steps, and Clayton experienced a pleasant sense of accumulating wealth amidst these intimations of spring. And there was the woman, in watery light. It was as though someone had placed her against the facade, as though she and the light had been composed.

Clayton had met his wife, Celia, a photographer, at a gallery opening. She was enjoying the ease and the challenge that went with early success, and Clayton had begun to rise through the ranks in a design line that enjoyed a commanding presence in women's fashion. Her series, *Light on Water*, was a study in chiaroscuro. Nuance made a difference. He noted how small increments of increase or decrease in aperture changed things the light fell upon, how these increments moved the viewer back and forth between shallows, depths. In their subsequent meetings Clayton discovered how nuance informed Celia's breadth, which seemed wide as the arched span of horizon from pole to pole. She made him think of earth's curvature, how ships going away from land became tiny until they disappeared.

His company dealt in a volume that required manufacturing outlets in several Third World countries where Clayton sometimes gave coins to beggars on the street. Some had lost limbs. All were thin in a way that suggested that seldom had they had enough to eat. Some had children who were importunate but listless, as though already they lived without hope. Now he reached into his pocket, dropped his change into the woman's cup. Light reflected by stone seemed to swirl toward him, enclosing him in its warmth. It was a nice moment, and he savored it.

As a child he'd been fascinated by flecks of light floating like a mist near the ceiling: his grandmother's chandelier. The many bits shimmered, far away, like lights seen across water, and he gazed up, aching. Eventually he'd understood this light came from a lamp suspended from the ceiling, a thing one didn't take down and hold. His longing

was nearly bearable then, and he felt pride because he understood you didn't ask grownups for the impossible. Still he longed to bring it closer, to be, if he could, inside it, suffused with that watery light. He indulged this longing while his parents and grandmother sat in the next room, their conversation a murmur drifting over the dessert plates toward him. He'd been aware in those moments of their great distance from him. They'd had no idea what wealth he almost possessed.

What he didn't know, because his mother had never told anyone, was that once he'd nearly drowned. He'd been two, toddling beside her, and had fallen into a ditch. The water in the ditch was a turbulent force. He'd gone under and begun to float down with the current. His mother didn't know that to him the water had seemed another moving body, holding him. It was then, at the end of what seemed a dark tunnel, that he'd seen light, an appealing disc of flickering brightness—light dissolved into hundreds of dreamy bits. He was an arc, reaching out, yearning toward the lit distance. But his mother, infused by terror with strength, had snatched him back, lifted him by the feet. Water had poured from his mouth. He had begun to cry, to breathe.

On Sunday afternoon Celia returned from Yunnan where she'd photographed Yi warriors for a National Geographic article. The sound of her humming while she unpacked reminded him of the chandelier, its thousand vibrating bits. He was in awe of her poise. Her profile and the slope of her shoulder in shadow were foreground. Behind her lay the river, light at low slant.

"Massage my shoulders, will you, sweet? I'm a wreck." She spoke from the nebula of her warmth. Celia had been drawn to him by his excitement over her photographs. He did not find enthusiasm embarrassing. And he was without the impulse—too often the case with editors she worked with—to maintain a certain aloof distance. He went about life energetically, with a natural verve she found compelling, and which matched her own.

When he'd loosened her shoulders, she rolled onto her back. Celia wore jeans when she worked, or, in the tropics, cotton safari gear, but she liked to tease Clayton, saying she'd married him for his clothes.

"I brought you a dress," he said now. It was a joke between them. He often brought her some new item from his line, and each time they pretended it was the first time he'd done this.

“A dress! Aren’t you amazing,” she said, laughing. She lay between him and the window. Beyond, the river gleamed.

“Here, let me undress you. You can try it on.” She laughed again, and he reached to unbutton her blouse. They were at play, and gradually, as they made love, he felt himself arriving at the center of a sphere, around which the rest of space floated.

When Clayton saw the man at the subway entrance holding out his cap, he was aware that he was glad to see him. It was the end of a productive day, and the little pleasure of going without a jacket suggested a lightness in all things. A little boy stood beside the man, clutching his pants leg.

“Spare some change?” the man said. Clayton was conscious, suddenly, of what he was doing in the same way that, when he began to make love to his wife, he was conscious of rising out of some thick medium in which he’d been submerged, into another, lighter medium. He reached into his pocket. He had nothing smaller than twenties. On impulse he thrust the whole roll of bills at the man.

“Brother!” the man said. “God bless!” It was as though the air and light had parted for Clayton’s thrust hand, then enveloped him. “You some brother!” the man said. Clayton reached out and squeezed the man’s shoulder.

“My pleasure,” he said. Then he walked on. Who would have thought something so simple, something people thought of as charitable and a human, if minor, duty, could deliver so much naked pleasure. How had he got so far away from this kind of spontaneous joy? His work of course, was monolithically predictable. It was a matter of mediating design and markets, and there was nothing spontaneous about this calculation. He felt himself in the throes of a decision. But what decision? To bankroll every homeless wanderer who crossed his path? That would be folly, he thought, then changed his mind. Possibly it wasn’t folly, but neither was it exactly the point.

When he’d traveled in his student days, places of worship had drawn him. He would enter and sit in awe of the simplicity of huge Buddhas. The temples of Hindu goddesses intrigued him, the quiet of mosques, the sacral splendor of cathedrals. In these spaces, grandly conceived and splendidly executed, he’d felt himself again beneath that chandelier’s

dispersing brightness. Now he thought there was something ineffable but crucial about the act of letting money go. It provided an immediate lightening of the atmosphere. He walked on, rising into the deep and detailed texture of the day.

On his next trip abroad, after he'd negotiated the business at hand with de Souza, the manager, and his assistants, Clayton decided to visit the factory's sewing room. De Souza, a jovial man in his fifties, accompanied Clayton. The room resembled a warehouse. It was without amenity. The women's clothing wrapped them decorously. They resembled commercial versions of nuns sitting at state of the art Japanese sewing machines, stitching the tailored, often daring garments women in Europe and America would wear. De Souza pointed out that these women were only allowed to work because their families could not survive without the additional income.

"It's a pity," de Souza said. "Some are children themselves, fifteen years old, or sixteen."

Clayton thought the lighting above the machines a bit dim. Couldn't they upgrade the system? De Souza demurred.

"These things cost money."

"Do it," Clayton said. When de Souza looked at him doubtfully, he spoke. "I'll take responsibility."

A secretary appeared to summon de Souza back to his office, but Clayton lingered, watching a seamstress' fingers guiding cloth through the feed. Clayton leaned down.

"How many hours a day do you work?"

She didn't understand. The woman next to her leaned forward.

"Twelve hours," she said. A fierceness in her eyes made Clayton think of Celia's photographs, records of her subject's suspicion, anxiousness. Anger. "Sometimes they make rush and we have to work faster. We have to say please like children to go to bathroom." She spoke hurriedly, glancing toward the door as though she expected de Souza to return and chastise her for revealing secrets. "And we get sick from cotton."

She extended her hand, gesturing toward the air. In the spray of light from one high window Clayton saw for the first time the motes floating. Now he noticed that some of the seamstresses wore cloth

masks. He felt the embarrassing weight of his naivete. But this slackness about the venue, he decided, was negligence on the part of the local managers. He found de Souza and explained what needed to be done.

“It would be expensive,” de Souza said. He seemed anxious. “Some elaborate system of fans and filters. Your company won’t pay for this.”

On the flight back Clayton watched the plane’s wing, cutting through silvered light. This glancing brilliance—the very fact of flight, now so commonplace—served to remind him of his context. He came from a country that could afford to extend aid to other countries. Some small changes—fewer hours, an increase in wages, upgrading the sewing rooms—wouldn’t cost so much that his fellows could refuse.

The first few days back he used his bankroll of camaraderie to lay the groundwork for the proposals he intended to submit at the first meeting. When that day came, the others went along with the lighting improvements, since Clayton presented this as a *fait accompli*. But they treated his other suggestions as *outré*.

“Give us a break,” one said, laughing. “We’re not a nonprofit. Besides, their government gets aid, in the millions. What happened? You ran into Mother Teresa?”

“I’ve been there,” another said, “and those people are happy. Those places aren’t palaces, but we’ve got letters in the files thanking us for giving them work. We’re giving poor people jobs, Clayton.”

“They have to live in the free trade zones,” Clayton said. “Six to a tiny room. They’re lucky to get two days off in two months to see their kids. And families mean everything to these people.”

“So now they get to buy their kids things,” said one who was Clayton’s closest ally. “It’s a tradeoff.”

They liked Clayton, and wanted to humor him. The company gave small bonuses occasionally, and one of the partners suggested that on his next trip abroad he should distribute a bonus to the workers. As they filed out, several of them clapped him on the back. He was one of them, and they welcomed him back. But the feeling swept over him that he’d been chastened. He walked back to his office, taking in the fact: all he’d got for the women was the promise of a small, one time bonus. The irony, he thought, was that if he’d asked for a raise for himself, they’d probably have agreed.

“You were brave and wonderful to challenge those greedy bastards,” Celia said. They were drinking maté she’d brought from Brazil and watching the sun set beyond the river. For weeks Clayton had been disconsolate. He’d continued to press his partners to use a percentage of profits to better conditions for employees abroad. But his persistence had no effect. He berated himself. There seemed no way not to be who he was, someone born to privilege, making his living at the expense of others—women!—forced by circumstance to accept pittance wages.

At Clayton’s request, the accountant had given him access to computer files, and Clayton had poured over them, hesitantly at first, then more methodically. He was looking for—what?—something, anything that might give him leverage. Though his expertise was not in finance, he was conversant with the company’s assets and liabilities. That day he’d focused on the fact that rather than subcontracting the work, his line owned the foreign factories. The local managers were the line’s employees. The figures showed that the line was doing very well indeed. They could well afford to transfer ownership to the locals, he thought, who would subcontract the work. The locals could then realize more prosperity, and his line would still profit. There looked to be ample funds for this kind of gesture, and he toyed with the idea of proposing it. But he knew what the likely response would be. His partners would surely resist.

He’d begun walking to work. It gave him space to brood. While he walked he thought of Celia photographing vanishing species, the clouds of oil fires, ships dumping refuse into the gardens of whales. Amidst the fanning leaves of banana trees, the hierophany of sand and water, the sloping hills of polar snow, she was in her element. Her concentrated intensity when she worked was a form of love. He wanted to bring to his work that same attentiveness.

“It isn’t just my partners,” he said now. “It’s how business is. It’s part of the territory.” He was conscious of the fact that he was less in love with this terrain than he had been.

Celia had encountered more faceted life than he had, and she had done it at eye level. She’d dined with duchesses, slept among the families of nomadic herdsmen, returned the gaze of reptiles, deer. Though it wasn’t just that her experience was wider than his. It had something to do with her intelligence about that experience. What she learned

seemed to make her both more multitudinous and at the same time more pragmatic.

“My situation’s not so different from yours,” Celia said. “I photograph a grizzly, but just to get there I’ve broken trail. Or I cover the Kurds, in exile, but to do it I have to impinge on them. There I am with my expensive equipment, coolly recording their private moments. They accept this and offer me tea. Sure, I bring the plight of grizzlies and Kurds to the attention of the audience of whatever magazine I’m shooting for, but without them I haven’t got a subject.”

When he walked now, he carried cash to give away. Often those to whom he gave money offered gifts in return. A stick of gum from their stash, cigarettes, flowers plucked from public gardens. Today he’d come home carrying a toy. He told Celia how the boy had thrust out the plastic horse with one ear broken off. Clayton had imagined the boy in the embrace of that lifting pleasure that came with giving away. It felt like unbinding the sails of a skiff, running them up the mast. He took the gift and thanked the boy, then offered it back. But the child grinned and hid behind his mother. Clayton tried to return the toy to the mother, but she insisted her son wanted him to have it. The boy had peeped from behind his mother’s skirt, eyes alight with bravura and joy.

Celia had always given spare change to panhandlers. Obviously they needed it. She did not think much about it and soon forgot. Now she kissed his cheek. “You don’t lock your doors,” she said. She’d never told him that at the time she’d agreed to marry him, she’d had a premonition: he would do something surprising, something spectacular. She had not tried to guess what it might be, but it was as though she’d made an oracular note to herself: he would do some grand and glittering deed—she was sure of it.

Now she offered him the incident of the moose calf.

“It was when I’d gone to Finland, remember? The mother was grazing, and the little one had wandered off to the side. I put out my hand, on impulse, and she stuck out her big tongue and licked me.”

He kept up his campaign at the office. The others teased him. “You’re gonna turn into a bleeding heart hippie,” one said. “Try sleeping on the street, Clayton,” one partner joked. “One night. No foam mattress. No sleep mask. No Courvoisier. I dare you.”

Once he might have enjoyed the challenge. Now he began to entertain the notion that he no longer fit. Partly dissatisfied, partly curious, he went so far as to inquire about a job at one of the local shelters for the homeless. He phoned, assuming there'd be those with MAs in social work ahead of him. When he got routed to the Department of Social Services, the head informed him that most salaried slots, sparse to begin with, had been cut. The salaries, where they still existed, were so minimal as to be token. There were batteries of applications on file in the event a position came open.

"Most slots are manned by volunteers," the woman told him. "If you care to volunteer, just phone the shelter of your choice."

Walking home that afternoon, Clayton gave a handful of ones to a woman with a baby. Temperatures were in the nineties and would probably stay that way through the night. Geraniums bloomed in pots beside walkups. He thought of stopping off for a beer. Then a man seated on a black plastic garbage bag on the sidewalk caught his eye. On a whim Clayton sat down beside him.

"Hotter than hell itself," Clayton said. It was an opener. They chatted, and the man produced two cigarettes from his shirt pocket and offered one to Clayton. Then he slid over to offer space on the garbage bag.

"No sense ruining that suit," he said.

Clayton smiled, and moved over. They smoked in silence. From this angle the city looked to be all legs. They were strong, healthy legs, and they had destinations, obligations. Holdings. Clayton was aware that his silk shirt was an impeccable antique white. Suddenly the man turned to Clayton and patted him on the shoulder. He leaned closer, in conspiratorial pose. "Friend," he said, "you don't belong here."

Clayton sold his golf clubs.

"Why?" Celia said.

"The game doesn't interest me much. They were sitting around, collecting dust."

She watched him sort his wardrobe, separating what he felt he no longer needed into plastic bags.

"Let's divest!" Celia said, teasing him. She studied the clothes in her closet, then began to lift out dresses he'd given her which now were out of fashion. "But how can I give these away? They were love gifts."

Clayton laughed. "I'll bring you more," he said.

"That's just it. You can," she said. Still she got into the spirit. She kept two dresses, some sweaters, her safari clothes. Jeans. Occasionally she photographed him the way you might a loved one. But often, when the impulse struck her, she did not follow through but demurred, knowing her impulse came from affection, knowing it was not the moment for a definitive portrait.

He loaded the clothes, along with some books and tapes, drove to one of the shelters and gave the young man in charge his cargo. When he returned, he turned his attention to the Audi. Did they need it? They drove it only to the terminal parking lot, to have it waiting at the end of return flights.

"Sweetheart," she said, "we can afford it. It's a convenience."

"But the rest of the time it just sits there."

"Is that really the reason you want to get rid of it?"

Clayton frowned. "It's just as convenient to take a taxi. We can afford that too."

"There isn't any way not to do damage," Celia said. "I think you know that."

"Of course. But we can minimize our damage," he said. "I think you want that too."

She was grateful for his honesty. "Oh why not. Sell it, if it pleases you. I can get into this."

"Let's not give each other Christmas presents this year," Clayton said. He looked through papers for the Audi's title.

"It's utterly fine with me," Celia said. "There's nothing I want. We could walk around Christmas day and give away some little presents." She ran water in the kettle and set it on the stove. Now his attractiveness included a distracted quality. He was not tranquil. She wanted to photograph him now, she who had recorded the faces of Mongolian shepherds, refugees, the honchos of guerrilla movements.

His destination was a country in which two groups of dark-skinned people who spoke different languages were at war. For more than a century civil servants of the ruling European power had administered the government. Now the royal family of that ruling power was no longer welcome in this country. In the neighboring country the Ameri-

can President's limousine had been stoned, and in a third a Fulbright scholar had been murdered.

Warfare in this country was generally confined to outlying areas, but, just days before, a high-ranking naval officer had been murdered in the capital by a suicide bomber on a motorcycle. The bomber had passed just as the officer and two subordinates were getting into their vehicle. Along with a handful of bystanders they had all been killed.

He'd picked a small hotel in a part of town away from tourists. He registered, then strolled out into evening. Here in the capital you wouldn't suspect there was war raging in the north. He walked amidst women toting string bags of eggplant and plantain. Lively hawkers cried up their bangles and combs, toothpaste and small gilded idols. Walking, he was conscious of the press of bodies. In the street taxis, buses, auto-rickshaws, trucks and bicycles jockeyed for space.

People were intent on their business in a way that bespoke urgency. He walked through streets strewn with bits of trash to a nearby market. Amidst the colors of eggplants and peppers in stalls, he became aware of a voice, rising in pitch. Behind a stall stacked with onions and tomatoes a woman shouted at her small daughter. The woman held a stout length of wood and had raised it above her head as though to strike. The girl cowered, her face bewildered. Clayton heard in the woman's voice the shrillness of someone pushed to their limits. The little girl began to weep.

Suddenly the mother threw down the wood, turned her back and began to stack onions. Clayton turned away. He walked, wanting to erase the scene, knowing he couldn't but walking anyway, as though to move away was to separate himself from anguish.

That night it rained. The next day was bright with the white light that characterizes tropical latitudes. Clayton took a taxi through streets littered with garbage. At the factory he met with the manager, Mr. Mallalingam, and his assistants. There were more of them than Clayton could keep straight, but that was the custom. There were always more on the payroll than the job required. Some were probably relatives, others men to whom Mallalingam owed a favor.

Tea and sweets were brought in, and Clayton made the necessary small talk about family. And how was business, he asked then.

Mallalingam shook his head, frowning. The company had received a letter from a group of seamstresses—he lifted a piece of paper from his file. Imagine, they believed they were forming a union!

“What are their complaints?” Clayton asked.

Mallalingam hesitated. Then he read from the letter. “Piecework wages are less than legal minimum. No overtime pay.”

“Is that true?”

Mallalingam looked pained. “They are paid sufficiently for their needs,” he said. “These things were agreed upon by your company. It’s enough.” His expression turned disconsolate, then offended. “These women also say insults from management. And another complaint—but this is preposterous—threats of death.” His air was that of a man whose pride has been deeply wounded.

“Really,” Clayton said.

“No one has ever threatened these women,” Mallalingam said. “They are being incited to this impropriety by agitators.” He spoke as though a great weight had been placed on his shoulders. “Now we must deal with these outside elements.”

“Do you know for a fact that their discontent is manufactured by others?”

“The government has had to contend with these elements for some time now. But how unfortunate for the women. Inevitably some of them will suffer in the process of sorting this out.”

“Let’s meet with the women while I’m here,” Clayton said. “I’d like to get their side of the story firsthand.”

Mallalingam’s body went blank, as though a sliding door had been closed. “Please don’t trouble yourself over this. Please, no.” He held up his hand. “You should not be burdened. We will settle the matter in a satisfactory manner. Enjoy your visit. Tomorrow you can travel to the shore, if you like. We will send a car for you.”

Propriety demanded that Clayton cede to Mallalingam, but he declined the car. Then he took Mallalingam and two of his assistants to lunch. At the restaurant he explained he wanted to distribute a small bonus to the seamstresses. Actually it was a rather larger bonus than his company had provided. He’d added to it a year’s interest on his own stocks. It made the bonuses worth the trouble.

“This is very kind of your company, very kind!” Mallalingam was effusive. “It may solve our problem. Your generosity will perhaps persuade the women to back down.”

Clayton hesitated. He did not want to be party to manipulation. But he had come especially with this bonus in mind, and he’d changed the funds into local currency. Back at the factory he asked the secretary accompanying him to explain to the women that this bonus should in no way influence their negotiations with management. The two of them entered from the back of the sewing room. Lined up, the women resembled manufactured goods stored temporarily for shipping. They wore printed cotton saris, and their black hair was plaited down their backs or wound like a crown. The secretary turned off the music. She spoke over the P.A. system in the native language. Then she turned the music back on, and the women began to sew again.

He walked down the rows, handing out envelopes. The women’s hands were small, like the hands of children. A few smiled at him. Most took the envelope shyly, then dropped their gaze. He’d expected their circumspection. He hadn’t expected the light coming off their clothing, their faces. When he came close, the atmosphere around himself and them softened and turned lustrous, like light swirling down through the surface of water.

His sense of his surroundings was heightened by the details he now observed: the lint in the air, the loud music which kept the women from chatting, the number of women coughing, the strain he observed in their bodies. They could not escape their need for employment, and he could not separate himself from his own and his people’s history. Both were caught by circumstances, but his seemed most damning. Though he gave these women little bits of coinage in a gesture of protest, he remained one of those who took away with one hand what he gave with the other. He was, as the phrase went, part of the problem.

And yet as he passed out the envelopes the familiar rill of energy rose in him, and the light around him and each woman he reached toward cast beyond them into dimness. Though the exchange involved money, Clayton thought, there were those few moments in which it obliterated money. Two people who had seemed isolated beings rose and entered a single gestalt. He handed the last envelope to the last

seamstress. Now he was at the front of the room. Suddenly the P.A. system went silent. A woman near the back stood and began to sing. The others rose as a body, singing. Some of them looked at him as they sang, but others stared straight ahead. Though the melody was familiar, he could not understand the words. But he was moved. He imagined they sang in response to his gift. This was their gift to him.

Outside it was twilight. He got out of the taxi while it was still some distance from his hotel. At a market he stopped beside a vendor selling mangos. The globes of fruit, one on another, seemed alive, and the air, when he reached to take one, was a permeable medium that opened to receive his reaching arm. The vendor was eager with a child's hopefulness. He helped Clayton choose the best fruits, slipped them into a plastic bag.

Clayton noticed coming toward him a little girl holding her mother's hand. She was probably seven, or eight. She smiled at him, and her eyes flashed, as though with some splendid secret. Children often rushed toward him, beggar's children taught to importune, wanting coins, bills, a pen, anything. But when she was beside him, the girl reached out. For a moment her small hand grasped his wrist. It was a gesture of affectionate, fleeting possession. She held on a moment, smiled, then let go.

He watched the girl and her mother out of sight. She'd wanted nothing from him. Even in children such purity of impulse was soon lost. He'd been offered something, spontaneously and freely, here where there was little left over with which to be kind. But generosity was a different currency, he thought, replete and multiplying. You were not diminished by it.

He walked past workers waiting for buses, not caring where he walked as long as the sensation of her hand on his skin lasted. Beyond the city's lights he could see faint stars. Though it was night now, there was a shimmering in this dark, which, if you looked closely, seemed lit bits of tingling brightness. Now he looked, but he couldn't find a line of demarcation between the dark and this shimmering. There was light and there was darkness and both were part of the seamlessness of the world.

He hailed a taxi, climbed in and gave the driver the address of his hotel. It was only in the taxi, when he heard on the radio the melody the women had sung, that he registered what one of the managers, earlier in the day, had told him. The man had said they'd instituted the singing of a song as closure to the workday for each shift. The suggestion, he'd said, had come down in a memo from Clayton's home office. The song was the people's national anthem. Now the women sang it every day.

Giving out the envelopes had seemed innocent and hopeful, a repeated gesture like a mantra or the thousands of prostrations Buddhists performed. But this repetition of the anthem had a troubling slant. One of his partners had calculated that associating the anthem with the factory would rally the women to accept their circumstances. It was a way of associating the foreign company with the workers' own nation, so that the prominence of Western executives might be obscured, though like puppeteers, they pulled the strings.

He woke on the final morning of his visit, and decided he would check in once more at the factory. He would have liked to indulge a swim, and his flight did not leave until late afternoon, but he wanted to chat once more with Mallalingam. Perhaps he could get a clearer picture of the women's situation, find out how Mallalingam intended to address their demands.

He took a taxi to the Free Trade Zone. Traffic seemed more congested than usual, and as they approached the factory it became impossible to proceed: cars and buses stalled. By leaning out the window Clayton was able to see police at the factory entrance, not just one or two but a squad, with batons.

He paid the driver and hurried to where the officers blocked the entrance. A sergeant who spoke English informed Clayton that there was "rioting" inside, that no one was allowed in. Clayton produced his card and convinced the man that he was indeed an executive in the company. The officer sent for someone to accompany him. Instead of Mallalingam himself, one of his underlings came. What was his name? Clayton was afraid to guess and get it wrong.

"Come," the man said. "We will go to Mr. Mallalingam's office." Clayton followed him down a familiar hallway.

"I hope no one's been hurt," Clayton said.

"The ladies would not cooperate. We could not convince them to return to work. Now they are talking with Mallalingam. We will wait for his report in the office."

"Can you take me where he is?" Clayton said. "I'd like to get a feel for the situation."

"He does not want you to take risks. You are valuable," the man said, attempting to make a joke.

They were about to pass another hallway, down which Clayton could hear voices raised in contention. When they were opposite the hallway, he glanced left, saw police bunched outside a doorway. There were always more police too than were needed. On impulse Clayton went striding down this hall, against his companion's protests. When the officers in the doorway saw him, they seemed uncertain what to do. Clayton tried to see over their heads, but he could see only that the room was crowded with more police. Then he heard the sound of shattering china, and Mallalingam burst through, pushing past two women who stood inside the doorway, past the press of men in uniform.

Through the breach Clayton glimpsed the women still inside, diminutive figures around a table, and in front of each a cup of tea. There was something innocent about this scene, but Mallalingam's face was flushed, though whether with confusion, anger or both, Clayton could not tell. Mallalingam saw him. He reached out and tugged at Clayton's arm, shouting something Clayton didn't understand. Suddenly a police whistle blared, and out of nowhere a new phalanx of uniformed officers pushed past them, into the room. These officers wore helmets and black kerchiefs across their mouths, and they carried white plastic buckets with lids. Clayton was just able to glimpse two of the women: their faces registered fear. Quickly they stood and tried to get to the door.

A stench filled the air. Could it be? But of course, yes. The buckets had been opened, and now these officers reached gloved hands into the excrement and began to throw it at the women, to smear it on the saris of those closest to them. The women's cries were pitched high, and in the melee he saw two of the masked men push a woman's head down, while a third smeared her face and ears. He lunged then, shouting. He would go to the center, climb on the table and there get the attention of the officers. Then Mallalingam was in front of him.

“Please. We must not interfere with police.”

“Police!” Clayton said. “Are these men really police?” He lunged past, into the press of bodies. One whole bucket spilled across the table, its contents smearing the folds of a pink sari. He managed to press through. As he entered the room, the masked officers seemed for the first time to register his presence.

“Go!” he shouted in English. He banged his fist on the table. “Get out!”

Quickly the one with the whistle blew another sharp blast, and in moments the phalanx was out of the room, running in squad formation down the hallway. Clayton stood there, excrement on his hands, his clothes, surrounded by women, sobbing, bent over, unwilling to look at him, trying to hide their shame from view.

The plane taxied in. He remembered how in the light from those shops, the dark gold of peoples’ skins had seemed to throb, how the whites of their eyes flickered and swayed like distant lights on water. Now the passengers in front of him began to file out. He walked toward the gate, leaning forward, looking for Celia. She saw him and waved. They made their way to each other and embraced.

“You’re lit up,” she said. “Good things happened?”

“I don’t know whether something good happened,” he said. “There were some absolutely astounding events—starting with the seamstresses wanting a union.”

He gave her the short version. “I felt like I was being given an education. Now I’m wondering if there are irregularities in our books—I took along some files to look at. But I’m not sure yet. I’ll have to probe. I don’t know yet how bad we are, or who’s responsible, or if anyone is. Is Mallalingam following our orders, or is he the prime mover? Or is this just what routinely happens?”

Celia nodded. “On my trip to Dar-es-Salaam I talked to a civil servant, off the record, who told me his government used to purchase weapons from the Israelis, while the separatists bought from the Russians through a London—Turkey supplier. Now a German munitions firm—whose major shareholder’s an American—contracts with both sides.”

Clayton nodded. “Business as usual.” I’ll follow my hunch, he thought,

check the books. "How have you been?"

"Well. And at your elbow," she replied. He laughed.

"And where shall we go, elbow to elbow?"

"How about home to the apartment?"

He nodded. "By the way, I've been wondering. Should we keep the apartment?"

"Absolutely," Celia said. "Though we cast aside our silks and our emeralds, I still need the apartment to come home to." She stopped and turned to him. "It's better that you're there, present at board meetings, plugging your view," she said. "The gadfly effect."

"Is that the best I can do?"

Celia remembered her premonition: Clayton would accomplish something magnificent. Now this notion struck her as sentimental. What had she expected? A blaze of trumpets? A Hollywood spectacular? "I like to think I haven't seen your best yet," she said. "Or mine. But maybe I have. Maybe our best has already been done and we failed to notice." She smiled. "Or maybe not."

It was true, he thought. Things got blurred, lost. You couldn't keep track. And there were few plausible grand gestures. Mostly life was small though decisive events, one after another, one minute decision leading by a hidden, connecting path to the next, which would also be minute and probably not especially memorable. By the end of a life a person would have done the best they could do many times, countless times.

And all of these times, though you could isolate them and see them as separate, flowed together. They were a seamlessness which never stopped moving and which went on as long as a life and longer, for this seamlessness contained the lives of all the others, and it kept moving, flowing on.

They walked down the concourse through the muted canticle of thousands of voices, and as they walked Clayton imagined how the crowd they were part of would look from above. Like the swaying sea, he thought. Or like a single wave, as it moves through water, rocking itself at the same time that it rocks the water it moves through.