

Frederick Busch

The Falls A Ghost Story

They lie in the black narrow roads because they are too stupid to run from cars. In death, they are like little men—mouth open in a parody of appetite, upper paws thrown back as if in song, lower legs stiff and elegant, composed for nothing. These are woodchucks, groundhogs, as in the movies “varmints,” brothers to the rat. Men there shoot them, their long brown fur, buckteeth, small heads, wide bottoms, because woodchucks are said to forage in gardens and to undermine the foundation stones of homes. They steal your food and cause your house to fall, a shooter said to Somerset.

At a sign of danger, the woodchucks in meadows stand tall at the entrance to their home, a hole. The danger, if it is a man with a rifle, usually a .22 such as boys might have, stands tall and shoots. The woodchuck, doomed to peer, shivering, at his death, is dead. Sometimes the creature is stripped of his skin, and his pelt is sold to certain pet-food factories or buyers of hides. Sometimes his body is entirely disdained. But with or without its fur, his corpse is kicked back into his hole—a warning, perhaps, to his family: *Stay away from my garden.* Or possibly: *Greetings from the world.*

Dogs ferret the corpses. They fetch them home and lie in the backyards, at the borders of defended gardens, and they eat the rotted meat away from the bones grown soft in the dark tunnels of the dead rodent's home. Somerset observed this process on his journey through central New York State, to him a backward place of rusted auto parts on stony lawns, and encephalic children littering the steps of trailers propped shakily on stone blocks.

He stayed in a town named Steuben Falls. The locals referred to it as The Falls, perhaps because they knew that Steuben was a foreigner. To Somerset, they were ignorant and traditional: there were no falls, there hadn't been for twenty-five years, since a reservoir had been created two miles upstream of the town. Their principal industry was the manufacture, in a long, low, mostly-

wooden, two-storey factory, of cold cream. The white perfumed mucilage was sold to several firms which ladled and labeled and sold the goop as their own. In The Falls, once a town of mills and railroad stations and high commerce, the residue of Nineteenth-Century prosperity was the lard-like matter shipped on trucks, as well as a brown-green stain which ran from the factory and into the wide slow river that came from no falls and went toward what seemed to be a large swamp. Boys fished in the river, and Somerset always ate meat in, or near, The Falls.

His assignment at that time was to drive in rented automobiles through various out-of-the-way corners of the northeastern United States, seeking possible locations for a film. Never mind the subject of the film: it never was made. Never mind the director of the film: he retired to northern California, where he raised butter and milk and died of neglect. Somerset had searched for locations in Rhode Island and Massachusetts and had found nothing: shorelines were crowded with motels and machinery and with the homes of people seeking surcease. He was driving, now, from Rome, New York, which shared an airport with Utica, New York, into the center of the state, said to be undeveloped. He was making up jokes comparing Rome, New York, to Rome, Italy, and he was even laughing.

On the outskirts of Steuben Falls, he found a rooming house near a rough dirt road that, he later learned, ran parallel to the brown-green river where the boys caught varieties of fish he presumed to be mutated through cold-cream poisoning. He drove twice through the town—two main streets that crossed, some side streets that seemed to be truck graveyards and squares of red dirt, shabby houses, trimmed lawns, fields behind the houses and outside of The Falls that seemed given over to cattle and large gardens, hard-looking men with fat bellies, or with lean bellies, who tended to stare, seemed to know that Somerset was from another world. He stayed at the boardinghouse at the edge of town because in general it is safer at the edge.

He could see the husband, to the rear and side of the house, away from the high roadside sign that said ROOMS. The man was slowly firing and reloading, firing and reloading. As far as Somerset could tell, he was shooting into the side of a low hill which blocked the field behind the house. Somerset came to know him as Jack, his wife as Mill for Milly, both as the Hartleys. She and Somerset talked, she in her white head-rag over pink and yellow plastic hair curlers, her small body draped with a man's red and

black wool jacket, her slacks of synthetic fiber showing just a teasing inch or so of white ankle above her black cracked ballet shoes. The husband drew nearer, his gun at port-arms, his mouth open to show that his teeth were the exact brown-green shade of his municipality's river, his short arms looking muscle-less where they poked from his ribbed white T-shirt, his legs in dark blue cotton workpants, his feet in ripple-soled ankle-high workshoes over white cotton socks. He was little, pasty, balding and bucktoothed. He looked ill, or prematurely old. He looked, with his dark brown hair that sprouted everywhere but on his head—back of his neck, undersides of his arms, insides of his ears—like a woodchuck turned into a man by a wicked witch. His eyes were blue, and the sockets were clear of lines and bags: he looked like an old man (or woodchuck) with a baby's eyes. His wife, with her low-slung chins and blue-veined bunches of neck, her pendulous arms and chubby legs, her white long teeth and thin lips, her simper, her dark gray-brown eyes which looked full of hatred in spite of her whine and her full nose—allergies, she said; poisoned water, Somerset speculated—looked to him like the witch who had changed poor Jack from a groundhog into a mismade man. They were happy to have him, they told Somerset. The sky, as they talked, was orange from sunset, with mackerel clouds foretelling high humidity and, no doubt, air pollution from the cold cream plant. Sky there smelled like a bureau in a distant dead aunt's bedroom entered for the first time; it was redolent of strange perfumes, exotic life, and was either frightening or boring soon thereafter.

Somerset ate with Jack and Mill and with Isaac, their faithful and stupid labrador retriever, who was bony on high legs, and who loved everyone he saw. There were potatoes in their jackets, over-roasted. There was a quart-bottle of Coke (named, by Somerset, the *vin du pays*). There was a kind of chicken, roasted perhaps as long as the potatoes, which fell from the bone; it tasted like fowl, though not of tarragon or garlic or lemon, or even freshly-ground pepper. Somerset ate as much as he thought he must. There was ice cream for dessert, and Somerset was certain that nothing resembling milk or cream had ever touched the soybean-and-newspaper formula that Mill scooped from the box into wide chipped coffee mugs. Isaac thumped his tail each time Somerset looked at him. His eyes showed white as if he expected to be whipped. "Good dog," Somerset crooned above his Strawberry Ripple pulpwood ice cream. Isaac's tail thumped and he looked at Somerset and cringed. "Good dog."

Mill put the dishes into the dishwasher. There was no machine associated with kitchens, of which he had heard, that Jack and Mill did not possess, save a French food processor. Christmas would take care of that, he felt sure. They had no apparent source of income except their house, with its wide creaking floorboards and thick furniture encrusted with carved pineapples, yet they owned washer, dryer, dishwasher, vacuum-cleaner, blender, shaker, and two sorts of toaster. He learned that Jack was a disabled veteran and Mill the daughter of the town's dead plumber. They did not adjourn, the Hartleys for TV, as he'd been sure they would, and he for bed, as he had wished he might.

Their movements easy and smooth from habit, they stacked, racked, wiped and cleared, then set the Ouija board down and pounced upon it—fingers pressing on the spinner, backs hunched, eyes focused—and only then did Mill think to say, “We do the board every night after dinner.”

Somerset thought not to ask for a *pousse-café*, since he did not think the Hartleys ran to Hine, or *marc de Bourgogne*. “There’s some schnapps in the cupboard under the sink,” Jack said, reading Somerset’s mind, and not for the last time. Next to the Spic’n Span and Bon Ami was a quart bottle of something that actually said Schnapps. He tasted peppermint, raw alcohol and, perhaps, fingernail parings. He looked at the drink in the green goblet Jack had encouraged him to use.

“Depression glass,” Jack said.

“I can see why.”

“We like it. It’s worth a lot nowadays. But we just like it.”

“Exactly,” Somerset said. “May I ask why you haven’t asked me about the movie business?”

“Don’t care,” Jack said, spinning the pointer. “Unless you want to tell us about it. I suppose you will.”

“We’re making a film about living in the country. I’m looking for what they call locations.”

“Well,” Mill said, suddenly looking up. “There’s an *awful* lot of country around here.”

Jack smiled and nodded, dutiful woodchuck. Isaac thumped, good dog. Somerset drank the drink. They spun, crouched, hissed, wrote down in elegant old-fashioned script the letters their metal pointer directed them to, and Somerset dreamed through green Depression glass of hot California sun over ocean, and of a small hotel at sunny Nuits St. Georges where he had stayed to contemplate marriage to a woman who now sold the homes of the

wealthy. He remembered a room in the Bisanzio in Venice where he and another woman had embraced at a marble balcony three storeys high. Now he drove rented American cars through cruel landscapes and missed each woman he had known. He wanted to stop wandering. He wanted to go home and be wealthy and do something well—make films about subjects more important than he was, perhaps. “No character,” the woman in Venice, an American, had told him. “Interesting. Beautiful. No character. You’re like a bad dog—you know, when the breed runs out? You’re like a bad-hipped small-headed dog.” He suspected that she was right. But he admired himself for not entirely believing her. He was a good driver, after all, as he rode to look for locations. Isaac thumped his tail. “Good dog,” Somerset said.

“NO CHILDREN,” Jack said.

“That’s right,” Mill answered.

“No?” Somerset inquired.

“That’s what the board said,” Jack explained.

“And it’s true. We never had kids,” Mill said. “You can believe in it.”

“Oh,” Somerset said oilily, the unguented outlander, “I do.”

He had sleep without actual dreams, on heavy ironed sheets that were cold to the skin and that made him huddle under piles of comforters. Spring there was as chilly as autumn elsewhere. Though he didn’t dream, he heard voices, one of them his, talking and talking. It was true: there was much he could have said about his life. Save it for the movies, he told himself. Not listening, and falling deeper into his sleep, he answered anyway. When he woke, he had forgotten what he’d said.

He hadn’t the courage for breakfast in the local greasery, so he ate with Jack and Mill, reading the Utica newspaper—four pages for national and international news, twelve for sports and local deaths. Jack and Mill were excited because an antiques dealer from downstate was traveling through the towns, a circuit-rider antiquarian, going through Steuben Falls and Deansboro, through Oriskany and Madison, working house-to-house, cataloging, evaluating, making offers on whatever genuine antiques the houses held. Jack and Mill, going back a long ways as they said, were certain that their house held treasures. They were eager to be assessed.

Strolling the village, then, in mid-morning, squinting into the bright sun lighting the clouds of central New York in April, three hundred miles above Manhattan, smelling the lingering cold

which came from the just-softening soil, seeing how sparse the vegetation was—gardens just planted with peas (so Jack said), no lilacs yet, the trees just unfurling the smaller soft leaves, everything clenched—Somerset was greeted, at the river, by maidens aiming their bosoms at him, giggling and looking away, shy and reluctant and nonetheless there: a Steuben Falls talent parade. Surely, Jack or Mill had got the word out—There's one of the *movie* people lookin' around, and it wouldn't hurt for him to see your girl some time timorrow, if you know what I mean. Some of them had taken showers, Somerset observed. They wore their most provocative outfits—shorts rolled tight against thighs which, because they were young, didn't wobble when they walked; sweaters too snug, shirts too small and made of cheap-looking, synthetic fibers; cheap shoes on thick raised platforms; perfume that blew on the oleaginous winds coming over the river from the cold cream factory. They walked in twos and threes, giggling, girls of twelve and girls of sixteen and a girl of possibly twenty-one. He smiled and made his eyes seem to be evaluating, but he couldn't remain, he retreated to the Hartleys' and prayed his car into starting and drove out on the countryside, to try to do his job, and to escape.

The truth was that Somerset was not awfully good at what he did. One can't be, really, he consoled himself. The producer would know about locations, and the director, and especially the head of photography, perhaps even the writers. But he? He had come from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, where he was supposed to be training for diplomatic work and where, in fact, he was recruited, without success, for the CIA; he went, then, to Stanford, where he worked at being a poet. From there to Culver City was a small fall—everyone there, it struck him, was working at being something they were not: some novelists, some screenplay repairers, some homosexuals, some heterosexuals—and in Culver City he found work. He brought coffee to his uncle's cousin. Then he brought coffee and some wild ideas for films to his uncle's cousin's partner. Later, he brought dialogue—coffee was brought in by another tall young man—to his uncle's cousin's partner's boss. And soon he was working in the movies. He was sent out, once, to buy a book for Marlon Brando. By the time he had found a store that sold such books, and a parking place, and had helped the clerk to locate a lonely copy of *Nostromo*, Mr. Brando had returned to his home and the office had begun to hum with dedication to a new project. They were acquiring the rights to an essay by Graham Greene. It had been Somerset's idea, really. They were to do a film

about a boy who played Russian Roulette, and Greene had done so many times, he'd written in "The Lost Childhood." The project flopped, and Somerset was sent by airplane and hired car, after an expensive vacation in Europe at his uncle's cousin's expense, to scout locations. He was not a traveling salesman, at least, he thought. He was a traveling purchaser, seeking sky, weather, water, earth and local lives that he might acquire for the rendering of fantasies written by committees on behalf of wealthy dentists and oil conglomerates. Ambrose Bierce, Somerset liked to remind himself, called destiny a tyrant's authority for crime and a fool's excuse for failure. Bierce had disappeared in Mexico, and Somerset vowed never, at least, to do the same.

There were ridges to ride along, the two-lane roads nearly paved, and one could look down along the valley in which Steuben Falls squatted. The winds blew harshly up there, and again Somerset doubted that it was spring. There were few houses and they, unimaginatively, occurred only at crossroads. Sometimes a tractor trudged along, but rarely; once in a while, boys drove a truck past too quickly. Descending from the ridge, past falling wooden silos, and one topless brown ceramic silo from which an entire tree was growing, past swaybacked gray barns and blistered houses that leaned away from the wind, past cannibalized truck cabs and abandoned tires and plastic bags of trash and scrawny children who stared at his car because there was nothing else they cared about, Somerset was thinking: To have a good life here, you must be a fool with no expectations. Or you must be a religious fanatic—a fundamentalist who thinks there *is* a Lord, and He wants you to suffer. Or you needed to be someone whose life held, or manufactured, much beauty. The green was good, Somerset thought. It would glow with moisture under the right lighting.

Back in The Falls, when he returned, Mill was reading tea leaves. She was staring into the bottom of a white china cup with a delicate handle, and she was whirling the remaining liquid of the nearly-empty cup as though rotating a kaleidoscope. Apparently the picture clarified. She held still, then she peered, and then she whispered, "That's peculiar." Somerset nodded to Jack, who pointed at Mill and raised his furry brows over baby eyes. Somerset nodded in return and went upstairs to nap.

When he descended, there was a new smell. Jack was drunk or crazy just then, because he weaved toward Somerset from the darkness of the living room they hadn't yet invited him into, and he said, as though he'd heard Somerset thinking of a question, "That's

why she was reading the leaves. In case of it was a sign." Jack pointed down the hall that went from the foyer through the kitchen and out the back door to the garden and the hillside that rose to seal it from heaven. Somerset peeked, stared—he saw only hard western light, a pearl shimmer that made him blink—and he walked down into it, blind, through the large kitchen and out into the yard. There was Isaac, alleging their long history of friendship, wagging at Somerset from ten feet away. Somerset thought that his tail made the earth resound like a child's rubber drum. Between Isaac's paws was something pink, about the size of a small animal's head. It was, of course, a small animal's head, a woodchuck's. Blue ropey projections at the bottom, he saw, were what Isaac had torn to get the head away from the neck. And those must be the little Disney-teeth at the other end, he thought, and the pinkish-grayiness must be the meat's corruption, and the stench, he thought, must be of death and decay, the good old earth doing its time-honored work. Somerset started to cough. He knew the cough would become a gag, and that he would shortly humiliate himself. So he breathed through his mouth, shrugged Gallically, and went inside, with Jack following, to meet Mill at the far end of the kitchen. She had probably been looking for him. For she held in her hand Exhibit B, a robin, it appeared to be, with one wing distended and with its chest eaten away, its bloody little organs on display. She dangled it from the wing. It bounced.

"Dogs don't eat birds, you know. Too slow to catch em. So a cat must've brought this by. We don't have cats, you know. I will not have a cat." Somerset had thought that all witches had cats, but wisely didn't say so. "And what I'm wonderin is this—why did Isaac drag it into the house from off of the door stoop or wherever the golblasted cat dropped it off?"

In such situations, there is little to say. Somerset said it: "Is everything there?"

Mill flushed. She cried, "No! How'd you know to ask that? Jack? You hear what he said? No! Everythin is there except the *heart!*" She looked at him with her wicked eyes set into her hundred-year-old face as though each of them had divined a central truth.

Somerset raised his eyebrows and said the only other thing he'd thought to say: "If you'll excuse me, now—" The knocker on the oak front door sounded. The third omen appeared.

Mill seemed to forget the reek of woodchuck, and the heartless robin redbreast, when she shrieked over her shoulder to them, "It's the *antiques* man!" Jack was several feet to the rear, on his

knees at the kitchen sink, his shoulders and head shielded from them. Somerset thought he heard the pumping of bubbles in the bottle of peppermint schnapps.

The antiques man was about five feet tall. His upper arms, sticking out of a T-shirt labeled ROLLING STONES ON TOUR 1975, were perhaps the size of a child's bony arms. He was the smallest, thinnest, apparently normal man whom Somerset had ever seen. He wore striped railroad engineer's overalls and workshoes. His eyes were surrounded by exhausted-looking dead brown skin. Speaking or smiling seemed to hurt him. He pushed his gold-rimmed glasses onto his small nose, rubbed his clean-shaven face, removed his engineer's cap to reveal baldness and age. He was close to forty, maybe over forty, the last of the hippies come to central New York. He smelled of marijuana and, astonishingly, Old Spice aftershave lotion. Somerset was reminded by the smell of embarrassing dates, in Bronxville, New York, with girls named Merri and Rita. The man's voice was deep, his locution as expected: "Now, folks, I won't take too long, because I am like wiped out tonight."

As he began his patter, Milly's hand began to wave wildly. Somerset, backing away, watched her other hand, containing the robin, wings furled, begin to wave as well. She was pointing with fierce delight at her wooden end tables, her Victorian love seat, her colonial kitchen chairs and, of course, her green Depression glass goblets. She laughed her pleasure, a witch's cry, the sound of chains in an iron pot, shaken. Somerset left them to it, walking past the dealer's—what else?—orange Volkswagen van, on his way to drive thirty miles to a country inn whose advertisements were on the small state highway, announcing elegant dining in a rustic milieu. He knew that he would not order fowl.

And when he returned from a meal of undercooked pork *rôti*, a bottle of Soft Mountain Red (like his childhood grapeade, only sweeter), the taste of tinned *petits pois* still high on the roof of his mouth, the whole awash in his after-dinner Tawny Hill Old Brandy, Somerset found a new, stronger smell of woodchuck chez Hartley, and a hostess in mourning.

First the smell: Isaac—cringe of white in eyes, thump of snaky tail, pink grin of gums, Good Dog!—had brought home what was probably the hind end of the decapitated woodchuck with which he'd greeted them earlier. It was grayer than the head, it had appendages which flopped, with the loose body, into grim puddings. It had a stench of hot old Esrom cheese. The smell

lingered in the sinus chambers over the eyebrows and next to the nose. Isaac, happy old friend, good dog, stood guard above his trophy. Then, in the brownish light slanting from the kitchen, he aimed his thick-boned head at the varmint's corpse, and then he dove onto it—first hitting it with his brainless head, then scraping his thick neck and chest over it, wriggling finally with at least half his rib-cage and sometimes part of his flanks, until he had no doubt acquired some of the effluvium of dead rodent, which he guarded, tail wagging, when he didn't dive and roll upon it again.

Isaac repeated his trick. Jack sat on his haunches, legs crossed at the ankle before him, in the wet dark grass. He drank peppermint schnapps—the bottle was before him and between his legs—in what seemed to be a green Depression glass goblet. He was composed mostly of shadows, but as he moved the brown light ran weakly across his little woodchuck's face. He was looking past Isaac at Mill, who was wearing a bright scarf of shimmering material over her still-wet, but uncurled, hair. She wore pants of some sort, and a sweater that looked pilled from as far away as Somerset was standing. In her eyes—they shimmered as the scarf did, even from the back-light (a professional term)—were thick tears. In her hand, dangling like a talisman, or evidence, was the heartless robin or one just like it.

"There were signs," she said softly, her voice unpleasantly high.

"Well, we saw all of em," Jack said.

"We saw the head of the woodchuck."

"We did," he said.

"We saw the body of the bird with his heart ate out."

"Yes, we did."

"And then I told you what the leaves told us: no day of gain."

"I heard you."

"And the board told us: no children."

"Which is for damned sure right."

"And more death in the garden."

"We can see it. Hell, Mill, we can *smell* the bugger."

"Is there bad news?" Somerset asked.

"Oh, there is," Mill said.

"We're worthless," Jack said. "We're just about worthless."

"Shall I pay you something in advance?" Somerset said, remembering a woman in a high-smelling dead city: no character. Bad dog. "Is there an emergency, I mean."

"We been counting on the assay." She said *ass-ay*.

"Assay."

"From the antiques man?" Jack reminded him.

"The troll," Somerset said.

"Ain't he the littlest damned man you ever come upon," Jack said in all his smallness.

"He come in," Mill said, waving the chestless robin. "He walked around every room in my house. He walked into my closet and poked my lingerie"—lahnge-uh-ree—"and he even climbed up into the attic-way."

Jack said, correcting her, "We don't really have no attic. There's one of them little trap-doors into the crawl space up there."

"He felt of the bed," Mill said. "He slid the drawers in and out on what I *know* is a genuine cherrywood slabsided dresser. He looked under the hutch in the kitchen and he bounced on the four-poster bed."

"A remarkably comfortable house," Somerset said.

"Not to the antiques man," Mill shouted.

"Little puppet," Jack snorted, pouring more schnapps. "I kept looking, you understand, to find the *real*-size person who done his talkin for him. By throwin his voice?"

"Eight hundred dollars for everythin in the house," Mill announced. "Eight hundred." She took a breath. "Why—" The robin bounced. "Why, you can't live on that."

"You can't *live*," Jack amended.

"Darlin Jack is a drunk and a woodchuck killer," Mill said to Somerset. "I'm the poor daughter of a plumber who wasted all his money on his second wife. Now, we can live. If you mean breathe and walk around and not smell bad without refrigeration. We can live. But I mean *live*, don't I?"

Somerset was offended by Mill's assumption that he understood her life so intimately. And he was attracted by how untouched Jack seemed to him. Jack had a gift for not receiving offense from a world intent on giving it to him. Jack was offended not so much by the dealer's estimate, Somerset realized, so much as he was on Mill's behalf. Give Jack some peppermint schnapps, a cringing retriever, and a little rifle with lots of ammunition, and he could live contentedly by killing little simulacra of himself and kicking them down into holes, watching his shovel-headed dog retrieve the corpses and roll all over the stench of their bodies, then bring the smell inside for the night. Somerset wanted to truly applaud.

"Now the door's a different matter," Mill said.

Jack, speaking through him as if Somerset were hardly there, were the ghost of the long-departed short-term tenant, said, "He

says our door's mismatched. Says the house is pure not-much. Says the door's genuine Victorian off of some 1850s house near Albany or Rensselaer. The little window's bubble glass. He says it's almost green. Looks clear to me, but then he's supposed to know. I guess folks nowadays like all them curlicues in the wood and all. But he says we near to ruined it with paint. Figures there's all them coats of paint to get off of the front and back, strip it down to the buff, so to speak. Says he can sell it for a lot, but he'll have to have a fifty-fifty split of the proceeds. Now, you got to ask yourself: half and half?"

The bird whirled, spun, bounced, drifted in her grasp as Mill said, speaking to Somerset, he presumed, but seeming to speak through him back to Jack: "What kind of *life* is this supposed to be when everything precious we ever held onto adds up to eight hundred dollars worth of old junk? And the front door's worth as much as everything else put together? Just what you go past to get in and out! And he tells us it's mismatched? How can you live in a house without a *door*?"

Mill sat down in the back doorway. Jack, as if signalled, stood up, though very carefully. Isaac stood too, wagged his tail, then dived onto his pink-gray piece of corpse. Mill cried with evidence in her hand. Jack walked toward her with determination: a husband was coming to tend to his wife.

Somerset walked, on garden and gravel, around the side of the house, until he had passed his car and was turning into the front dooryard. At the unremarkable-seeming front door, lit by a little bulb enclosed by a wrought-iron holder, he stopped to run his hands over generations of paint that hid what was most worthwhile in the Hartleys' house to the world. Then he went in and up in the smell of Isaac and his triumph—it had spread to everything by then, was on the shabby carpet and in the soft chalky wallpaper of his room—and he went to sleep as quickly as if he had worked a full day.

When he woke, he felt like one of those portly traveling salesmen you see in motels at which, in Somerset's line of work, one sometimes stays. They try to sit at the bar after dinner, and they do for a while, drinking quickly and watching on the television set above the bar precisely what their pre-adolescents at home are watching, the family jaw slack, the family lips apart, the family eyes tumid and unalert. Then they pull themselves from the stupor of the bar and walk droopily toward their room. One can almost hear them, as they set the alarm for dawn, compose the family features

for sleep, say their prayer: "I got to get home." Since "home" was a rented stucco cabin in West L.A., Somerset really didn't have to get there. It was realistic, at this point, for him to quote Gertrude Stein on someplace else: "But there's no there there." Precisely, he thought. Nevertheless, he felt an urgency, on waking in the chill of early spring in Steuben Falls.

The stink he had slept in was subsiding. Jack, shooting in the far field this morning—his little gun went crack instead of making a movie-bang—would soon set the cycle of smells in motion again, killing a woodchuck and kicking his corpse down a hole for Isaac to find, once rot had set in, and fetch home to wag above, cringing, and then begin to dive.

He risked the small diner. It was clean, more spacious than he'd thought, and not very crowded. To his left, along the counter, sat men and a woman who had finished staring at him. In their dungarees or blue workpants and boots (the woman wore sneakers and white anklets) they sat now with their backs toward him, perhaps discussing the Hollywood mogul who had spurned the village daughters.

The little antiquarian approached from the back of the diner, speaking, over the Muzak, a mouthful of orange-yellow scrambled eggs and the time-honored "Mind if I join you?" which people say as you fail to think of ways to escape the junction. He slid a plate of eggs and a cup of coffee to the table and went away to return with silverware and a glass of juice. The slowly defrosting music was the theme of one of, or all of, the James Bond films. He said, chewing, showing his perfect teeth, small but symmetrical and marred only by a marbling of egg, "Those people's house I met you in?"

"Jack and Mill."

"Jack and Jill?"

"Mill."

"Oh, yeah. They your parents?"

"No."

"Fine, that's cool. But listen," he said, pushing the egg from his teeth with toast, closing his eyes. Little muscles rippled under the Rolling Stones shirt each time he moved. He prodded his tongue at his teeth. Finally, he told Somerset what he ought to listen to, while Somerset was at last brought coffee and an English muffin, butter ostensibly on the side, and no napkin. "They were very, very bummed out, Jack and Jill. Your friends. They friends of yours?"

"Mill. My landlords. I'm staying there temporarily. I'm here on business, I don't live here."

"Yeah. This part of the country, did you notice? You know anything about antiquities? This part of the country is loaded with dynamite material. And the locals here, most of them don't know what they *own*. They think they do. They can tell you how they remember when you could buy citrite of magnesite when you find an old bottle in the cellar for them. What they *don't* know, it's worth maybe sixteen, eighteen bucks when you sell it to the right people. All you got to do is pay, say, five-six bucks, and they think you're doing them this huge favor, you know? So this is a very high-profitability low-risk area. Buy pretty cheap, offer the goods like a small investment via cleaning materials and labor, then bide your time and sell at a significant margin of profit. So listen." He prodded his teeth with another piece of toast, cleaning specks of egg away, then chewing with relish. He said, "You can call me Smith if you want to."

"Smith."

"Yeah. It's really my name."

"Smith?"

"Incredible, huh? Probably, half your life you hear about guys on the run signing Smith into hotel registers, right? Because it's such a common name, right? And you never met anyone named Smith so how come in the movies it's supposed to be so common? So, how do you do. I'm a genuine Smith, just like my father." He smiled modestly, adjusted his overall straps, then pulled a pouch of tobacco from his breast pocket. Somerset watched as he poured tobacco into a paper, rolled and twisted, then lighted the cigarette with a wooden match he struck on the wall. "Bull Durham," he said. "Just like in the movies. You ever see a guy—"

"No."

"Couple of first times for you, right?"

"Mr. Smith."

"Right. Business. You're in a hurry, I'm in a hurry. The world's business cannot rest while those who tire too easily beg for time to reflect."

"Benjamin Franklin?"

"Jim Smith. You ready to listen to me?"

"Mr. Smith, I'm only renting a room with the Hartleys."

"Jack and Jill?"

"Mill. I'm not an intimate of theirs, nor should I be privy to their business. I wanted only coffee and a muffin this morning. Did you see her smear it with butter when I asked for butter on the side?"

Smith shrugged his small shoulders. "It's like business," he said. "Risk and gain. The name of the game is venture. Nothing—"

"I have heard that one before. I'm trying to explain my relationship to the Hartleys."

"No problem," Smith said, closing his eyes against his smoke and stubbing his cigarette out. "No problem at all. That's why I'm here talking to you. Dig it: their house is worth shit. Understand what I'm telling you? It's all this veneer junk used to be made in Michigan for Montgomery Ward in 1925. Pure junk. Nobody wants that except for the local antique stores, maybe they can unload it on the tourists going through. Not me, pal. I pull a big rig to fairs all the hell over. I do good ones, you dig? I do Rhinebeck in Dutchess County, I do Westchester, I do Manhattan twice a year. I do good work on good stuff and I sell it for like a shitload of money very commonly. So I am not *about* to acquire crap and purvey it as decent goods. I'm talking reputation. Jim Smith is not a name I intend anybody taking lightly. So these people of yours, they insult my intelligence with a household full of, I don't know, strap it on a dinghy and sell it to the boatpeople, understand, Jack?"

"That's *his* name. The man—"

"Sorry. Right. So I could see it right away. Still. They're old people. They're ugly old people. They are obviously high on antique-dreams. You know, biff, you score off of the big-money dealers and retire. So I gave them half a rush by doing half a lookaround. Zip. Montgomery Ward City. Maybe one candlestand upstairs. But who needs it? Nobody's into candlestands anymore, they look too phony for people's apartments now. What people want, they're into handmade quilts that have like mildew in the fibers and they're falling apart. They're into these honest-looking old Hoosier cabinets, especially if they're all-oak, with the flour bin and the old glass doors and the cannisters? It's the new honesty, Jack. Rugged, simple, functional, but still handsome. You know. Bullshit, in other words. But that's the times. I'm serving up what people want, what can I say? Your people, they got rien de nissy-vous, they got zero."

John Wayne would have smiled, Somerset reflected, in something like *Rio Lobo*, and he would have punched the little man without standing up. In *One-Eyed Jacks*, Marlon Brando would have called him a scum-sucking pig while turning the table over on him and then killing him with a sawed-off shotgun. Clint Eastwood, a happy medium, would, in *For a Few Dollars More*, have shot him with a long-barrelled pistol, without either speaking to him or touching him. Of the three, he is the only one who would have lit a cigar directly afterwards. Somerset sat where he was, regarding cold coffee.

I felt really bummed out for them,” Smith said. “This is not being patronizing. I’m a businessman, and it’s bad business to feel too sorry for people like that. But these are old ugly people and they are just about out of space. Where are they gonna go to have a dream? They’re losers. Their breed is like extinguished. So I offer them a few yards for a few things. I can make it back over a few months. Still. Believe me, advancing money is bad business. You tired of hearing about cash-flow? Listen, you’re not half as tired as I am. It’s like a *disease*. Still, what the hell. Then I see this door. This is a decent door. I can sell it, no problem, and not for a little. Not for a lot, by the way, but not for such a little. But I was thinking about it last night, after I told them what was what. What was almost what.” He smiled his perfect teeth at Somerset, who kept hoping that Mill had thrown a delayed-action spell which, any moment now, would turn Smith into a hair on an ingenue’s brush. “What I’m thinking is this. I can get into the door, bringing it back very nicely. That’s rewarding work. But I have to confess, I *am* regretting my previous offer which, if it isn’t charity, comes uncomfortably close to being a free pop for Jack and Jill. And I am wondering how good you could be, on a commission basis if you like, at lowering their expectations for the door and the household junk and everything else. You understand me?”

Somerset poured his coffee on the small man’s head. Somerset mashed his muffin, butter patently not on the side, directly into the small, astonished features. It was a good moment, for Smith was very much smaller than Somerset, who felt quite safe. But he had forgotten a salient fact: Smith was in The Falls to spend money during hard times. The diners at the counter turned to study what Somerset was—he saw himself revealed, in their uncomprehending terms, to be—a bully, a victimizer of a man who had brought with him *cash*, a man who was flattering their family households on the strength of his ass-ay, a man who might purchase for them that week’s meat and Coca-Cola. A diner with a bulbous bright nose, and glasses which looked just like the granny glasses Somerset had smeared with butter, pushed him back by the shoulders. A lean nasty man with a pointed hat and a pointed nose took Somerset’s own long nose and twisted it in his cold fingers. The woman in sneakers said, “Just about the god-damned time someone did that.” Somerset wasn’t sure who had won her approval, and for what, but it didn’t matter. One more chap, young and strong, his face buried in a black beard, joined the fray. Somerset flailed, the others flailed, things shuddered and danced,

and then Somerset had fled the beanery, was running while panting and bleeding a bit from the nose and upper lip. They didn't pursue him too far, probably because they were tending to Smith. He ran, however, until he came to the broad part of the river in the center of The Falls, where cars passed on the road leading to the highway, and where the cold cream factory poured its refuse into the river which had no falls.

Two of them stood at the grassy verge above the river, just off the road. Today they wore blouses and skirts, perhaps thinking to represent the new honesty. They were pretty, Somerset thought. He hadn't time to tell them that their prettiness was probably a function of being young; that they should look at their mothers, who once had been as pretty as they and now were wearing out; that being pretty and even seeming talented would never be enough; that not even possessing actual talent was enough; that neither the old delicacy nor the new honesty could ever be enough; that they should wash the makeup from their eye sockets and relish being children. He pretended to smile. He dodged around them and started once more to run.

In the yard again, where Jack was at the far end, staring, it seemed, directly into the hill, his rifle in the crook of his arm and with Isaac for once out of sight, Mill was seated on the back sill, reading aloud from a folded-up newspaper: "I just turned to it and there it is. It says, It is urgent you handle budget problems. Put family security first or it undermines your peace of mind. New talents emerge when you spend time with *creative people*. Isn't that you? Do you think? It surely is all about *us*, and it's pure Gemini. I say this tells us to sell that man the door, that little antiques fella."

Somerset breathed shallowly so that his panting would be less apparent. He pretended, then, to yawn. But they weren't looking at him. Mill was staring up toward him from the sill, but she was really staring, Somerset thought, through him and into her future. Jack still looked into the hill. It occurred to Somerset that he might take travelers' checks from his wallet, sign several, then leave. Suddenly, Mill focused on him. "Hey. You cut your face? You been in a *fight*?"

Tears leaked from his eyes. He nodded his confession.

"At your age," Mill said.

He nodded.

Isaac returned from over the hill. He was carrying a very old one, for they all smelled it just as they noticed his great shoulders in silhouette. It was long and pulpy, irregular in shape. Somerset thought that it might be a head, but it seemed too soft for anything

containing bones. Yet it seemed too small to be a chest and hindquarters. It was like blared brass in the strength of its stench. Somerset retreated. Mill sat upright, as though prodded, and Jack, from the bottom, cried, "Why that's *all*, by Jesus!" Somerset was at the side and turning the corner, making for the front door, when he realized what would happen. He was holding the doorknob when he heard the first one, soft as never in the films, and he was pushing the door open, had its paint-covered, woodworked harsh weight in, when he heard the second, and then the third, and then the fourth. Shutting the door from within, he heard the fifth cracking against the sill that sealed the house in.

Isaac hadn't made a sound. Good dog. Jack was holding his fire, and then Somerset wondered if anyone was left. Inside, the smell, despite Jack's shooting, was gathered and dense. Somerset began to weep.

But Isaac barked a long, triumphant volley, then. And Mill shouted, "You may be a fool, Jack, but you never missed *nothin* that bad. You old fool. *Of course* you still love him. Now, you tell him so. Pat his head, you fool."

Somerset, wiping his eyes and sniffing, thought he heard Jack make his reply. By then, upstairs, he was packing his overnight bag. He signed travelers' checks and left them on the Montgomery Ward bureau. He tugged at the corners of sheets and folded the comforter taut so that the bed he made up was so smooth and so flat, it looked as if no one had sweated at night within its harsh clean envelope. He was calmer, by then. He smiled, in fact, when Mill laughed, chains someone shook in a pot. This is almost a happy ending, Somerset thought.