

EATING IN AMERICA

Every ashy gray pre-dawn at around five-thirty a.m., winter and summer, it was Molloy's turn at duty to scrape down the immense griddle that sizzled along several hot yards of the Waxahachie diner. Though it was left perfunctorily clean by Nate, the night man, at the end of his late-at-night duties, Molloy by instinct still at the beginning of his own shift needed to remedy the previous scraping in preparation for yet another day's breakfasts, removing grits of char, bits of blackened crying onion, and trowelling the whole surface with vaporizing pats of "butter-food-product". The grill, even the ovens, certainly this griddle were never off or cool, and despite being mostly open wall-space toward the counter side the heat in the kitchen was crushing, keeping the sleeves of Molloy's tee-shirt rolled all the way to the top of his once muscular arms, that now hardly even lifted anything heavier than the occasional sixteen-ounce sirloin. Molloy was standing wonderingly, sweating at the refrigerator door, absently-

minded astonished of beginning to turn a grey fifty-four years, the last eighteen of which spent as *chef du jour*. Those crusted years, laid atop one another, stacked like flat griddle cakes, made an impressively heavy monument to the stickiness of routine. Steadfastly Molloy continued his busyness, habitually, conducting at the griddle. His back, damp and slumped, was turned to the entranceway. Ever-loyal and diligent Lila had been a fixture of the diner for almost as long as Molloy, her tenure being only fourteen years, ferrying coffee cups and victuals to the pleasurably waiting communicants whose wanderings traipsed them through the grotto of this beige Formica-and-tiled shrine at the side of the highway. Stressed Lila, though sometimes distracted in duties by thoughts of her to-and-fro home life and her eight-year-old baby girl in the care of the sixteen-year-old at home, nevertheless could most times rouse, and even manifestly enjoy, some jolly conversations with the sleepy-eyed crowds that flowed in and out in the early glow of each practically identical day. It was Lila, naturally, who had first noticed the young man, limp Angelo, when he had unsteadily entered the tinted glass door, while shaking the curling

waves of his dark hair, and taken a rather tentative step inside, as if he might be looking more for directions than home fries with eggs and morning conversation.

Angelo stood leant, tousled, searching coffee-coloured eyes adjusting haltingly to the amber-shaded lamp globes which whispered coyly to the early outside sunlight, just inside the entranceway of knotty pine and sandstone where greetings were extended by several newspaper racks and a cigarette machine, a pair of mounted eight-point bucks' heads, and an ancient straggly rubber tree with offspring as limp as Angelo himself. A neon pie buzzed warmly in the plate glass window, the complement to a towering outside sign where a neon cup was ever-constantly stirred by a moving neon spoon. The diner air-conditioning was seemingly cranked to capacity and gave a metallic chilled hint of November at the door against the intense southern reality that was September. Angelo looked about. He blinked at the competing lights. He stared upward at the dead-glassy-eyed bucks, as if for a moment considering crossing himself, as if they might be San Pietro guarding the gates to a downside-turned-up paradise. They

stared only straight ahead, with no nod of approval. Angelo took a hesitant step forward toward the main room with its maze of tables, pulling his over-sized Pullman-case aft and also hefting a stuffed duffel, not being acquainted enough so as to chance leaving them unattended in this vast country that was at most times intimidating to the foreign, and more puzzling than back home where one could not risk leaving temptations amongst the unscrupulous of Napoli, Rome or Taormina. He could not decidedly say that he had seen the gateways to the States had been any different: New York crowds moving so rapidly and being originally from so many other places anyway; Washington, DC, placidly marble yet a seemingly transient and somewhat shifty locality at any rate. Boston had seemed quieter, a cool introduction; and it certainly had by far the freshest and best waiting-room airport food in the country: carts of clams, plump oysters, fried cod, and cups of molasses-soaked beans. That was a far—weeks old—memory. He had since traveled far—and wide. Those were crowded cities; and here was not really even a city at all, just a wider bump in the road on the looping loose endless miles of the

concrete Interstate expressways. Angelo must acknowledge though that it was a bump he might himself have picked, and even with plastic woodgrain and vinylite and all such decor was not—*molto beneficio*—some styrofoam grease-smeared cardboard interstate McDonalds which could not even be considered within the broadest realm of actual cooking.

Suddenly within the periphery of his blinking appeared Lila, languidly burdened, ferrying a tray of toast. “Just sit anywhere”, she called out. “I’ll be right with you. You best can leave that stuff there”, and with a head toss indicated a wall of coat rack behind the pay-station desk. Angelo deposited his belongings there where she had indicated, and then crept to the row of once-shiny stools at the aluminum-clad counter facing the exposed grills. Discovering the vinyl stools swiveled, much like observatories scanning the remotest reaches of an alien universe, Angelo could turn to see the farther corners of the gleaming vista of shining tables, splashed with the prairie morning light that seeped like syrup over the room from through the amber-tinted plate glass of the windows that faced a

wind-draggled rock garden and parking lots cluttered with the carcasses of mud-caked pickup trucks and shiny city-bound sedans. Knots of patrons were gathered about, clumps spattered like popping oil across the room. They, the hard tan boisterous loud-voiced farmers and withered lingering retirees and truckers and ambling small-town clerks, chattered at the tables, each idle group in its own cozy stewpot, eyeing quietly the other groups and then offering their observations, sometimes within joshing earshot. The smell of bacon and frying onion and warm coffee wafted like fragrant wisps of passing showers on warm dry earth through the air. Angelo thought back—about home, and his trip, and the remembrance of many things he had seen and tasted. What an incredible assortment, an overwhelming and cacophonous array—in the words of the English: “soup to nuts”—and many un-tasted adventurous miles yet to go. So unaccustomed was this place from the dim steamy *caffè* bars he knew of Montella and Napoli, those shadowy narrow and cramped storefronts. Those far places, he remembered, smelled of wet wooden floors and burlap and scalded milk and *pasta di mandorle*,

and the rain-washed dark earthiness of ground coffee, a smell that had lingered there nondissipative for multiple generations, bubbly and boiling as the wisps of cloud that hugged the horizon beyond Vesuvius—that very Vesuvius and the blue bay which picture adorned the bright calendar upon the scarred yellowed wall. Each shop possessed a muscular percolating contraption and, in whatever possible size it could accommodate, a burnished hissing mass of cappuccino maker arrayed along the faience-hung wall behind the zinc-topped bar. When the customers, anticipating the warm peace of a treat, scraped their *tazza di caffè* and plate across the bar crumbs of *torta* or *pane* or *biscotti* fell carelessly to the crevices between the tiny mosaic tiles patterning the border floor next to the bar itself and intent cupiditous patrons trod them along despite the repeated resigned sweepings by the diligent wife of the proprietor.

Here, Angelo noted, in the united states of this country called by its inhabitants “America”, most everything—newly-minted and feverishly glowing and seemingly refurbished by each cleansing day—gleamed ice-bright, though it might be only the mechanized and oily

shine of veneer and Plexiglas, Mylar and plastic, no less the non-wilting plastic flowers on their tabletops. Molloy flipped some curlicues of bacon, even they processed by some Midwestern factory, on the griddle. Their crisp smell tinted the air above the counter. Angelo pulled at his nose and considered how shadowy insinuating hunger, like some panhandling beggar through a crowd, could be always so easily manipulated into appearing at any suggestible moment, querying its widening maw toward the verdurous world, whether be in roiling energy or wearisome boredom charging on forward with its lust quelling toward the fulfilling of its foraging desire. Whether absolute stony actuality or a passing moment of mere craving it was a force, hunger, a force that could hop atop a person's diaphragm and perch there making them heavy breathing, wanting and longing. Angelo reached forward to tumble the flatware, fork and knife, from the folds of paper napkin, and then to arrange them in that pleasant so familiar comforting pattern on the hard fabricated surface of the counter. He wondered if anyone in this room, an equation opposed to that far other world, had ever been excruciatingly hungry

—probably not, beyond the sweet pull of dessert. Dessert equal to the *n-th* power. The baby, of course, was instilled instinctively with those quakes of palpitating hunger; his was unintellectualized, vibrant, primal, and announced with a moaning wail. Angelo had noticed the girl and baby when they had entered, not all too long after himself. Outside the expanse of window they had climbed warily down from the towering metallic-blue cab of an eighteen-wheeler MACK truck, an obvious handily borrowed ride, and then, hanging aside but still thanking the gray paunchy driver with much awkward gesturing, hesitantly looked toward the doorway but followed the driver inside after shaking the pebbles from her up-lifted sandals and brushing dust from her skirts. The driver limped stiffly off toward the restrooms, and the very young girl, a stranger, holding her tiny baby stood in the archway, her eyes darting, seeming not to know which crowded way to turn. Trepidatious with caution and fluttering like leaves of an aspen sapling, but otherwise taut and dark with the startlingly large espresso-hued black-lashed eyes much like, as Angelo could assess, the *signorina* back in Italy. She wore a plain tee-shirt beneath a light

guayabera-style unbuttoned shirt and a longish full skirt, a tier of shirred ruffle joined to another lower on down, that had a faint leafy pattern imprinted on it. Else, she carried something resembling a woven serape-like square and a loosely crocheted shawl which both had become a blanket for the dark squirming infant in her arms. Angelo gazed at her, intuitively only too aware of her timid hesitance, much as his own had been. After surveying every corner of the chattering room, she advanced on the serving counter, coming near enough to Angelo, where Lila had placed an order pad near a menu. Rumpled Lila trotted behind the counter, where stacks of plastic glasses towered. The mother—who was merely a girl herself—leaned in and barely above a whisper breathed, *“Por favor, un lech...”*, but then she stopped. Her eyes searched the area, roaming abroad, like the eyes of a befuddled schoolgirl called upon at the blackboard. *“Leche?”* she questioned, *“Leche con crema?”*

Lila turned her attention to the girl and baby now, but only to look blandly at the questing face almost hidden by waves of ink-black hair. *“It’s milk—half and half”*, Angelo offered. *“Si. Gracias”*, said the

girl, and she repeated, "Milk. Half and half."

"Coming up", Lila took a glass and started off toward the refrigerated case. Angelo indicated one of the stools; the mother looked at its round and padded cushion, then with a slightly bowed head and lowered eyes accepted the seat. Then she smiled at Angelo, very slightly, shyly. Lila placed the glass before her, and the young mother dug in the folds of the baby's blanketing until she pulled forth a nipples bottle into which she transferred the white liquid. Lila fumblingly asked if she would like it warmed but Angelo, finding that he could quite make himself understood to the mother and she related in Spanish and some few broken hesitant *gringo* words, had assisted to make it stammeringly understood to all the questioning that it was not yet necessary, while the bewildered nodding girl slipped the bottle back among the folds of bright blanket. He with care learned her name was Maria Concepcion, and she was traveling from Coahuila in Mexico. Coyotevia was a little village of the high desert, dust-choked and prickly and by-passed. While they tried speaking, elusive words prying and twisting, Angelo ate, fitfully

abashed, his buttery toast and the indistinguishable little packets of flavorless jelly but Maria accepted nothing more than another glass of milk for herself, as Angelo noticed she slipped two packets of saltines from a basket into the pocket of her gauzy skirt and another two packets into yet another fold of the serape blanket. The baby, apparently content and placid, dozed in and out of sleepfulness. Angelo raked the last generous bits of oily hash-browned potatoes into a paper napkin which he folded into a packet and pressed into Maria's hand, which she also wrapped twice-over for more dryness and slipped also into the blanket. By circuitous wordplays Angelo had learned that Maria was traveling from Coyotevia to Chicago to meet her husband, also a mere twenty-one years old, who had gone there to work and earn money which he planned to bring back to both his new-born family and his anxiously resigned parents. To Maria Chicago seemed a far-off elusively shifting goal, at times receding like the dust-choked undulating heat waves ebbing from the highway; although from the impetus of her recently-begun step-by-step journey she did not really know exactly how far the distance was. She only knew that

her loneliness from Ernesto and her unhappiness had goaded her into silently during the guise of siesta leaving the house of her mother-in-law and fleeing toward the north—the green plentiful north submerged, tantalizingly sprinkled in, the piquant marinade of those elusive *norte* dollars and also seasoned along with shouted hard pits of sharp mouth-puckering advice—where lean and courageous Ernesto feverishly attempted to accumulate the odd jobs that would lard his and Maria's pockets. Maria Concepcion for a great deal of the time could go unnoticed among the populace this nearer the borders, but sometimes in the midst of increasingly unfamiliar landscapes she could sense the curiously over-long linger of suspiciously-inclined eyes that would cause her to stiffen and redden with a self-awareness that she, or perhaps also the baby, looked dusty or worn or awkward or just no little more than a stranger's face. At these moments she felt a crushing need to shrink and perhaps even to hide behind the baby's blanket, but still she simply stiffened and stared straight ahead without offering acknowledgement of the prying gazes, trying to look as confident as any pale and cool *norteamericanas*. She was unnerved

a bit with embarrassment and the lack of sureness in her use of English language. Now in an outburst of conversation torrentially un-pent, she had been most fortunate, she told Angelo, to have had the traveling assistance of rides with two truck-drivers who had aided greatly her journey. The first was a middle-aged Mexican himself, with whom she had no trouble talking in his rattling cab, who was a vegetable trucker and carried her from Morelos inconspicuously concealed across the border and on to his cousin's market stand in Sweetwater. The other a veteran long-distance trucker who had found her and her bundle beside highway 80 and though not so talkative but offering her instead sweet iced tea and beef jerky and Nashville-inspired radio had brought her at least to this far. Sweet greasy-smear'd lips agape, moving with empathetic tempo in astonishment, Angelo's curiosity grew whole-heartedly intrigued only by the fragility of her demeanor and the sometime mysterious translation interpretations of her wandering tale. She found Angelo—as he found himself drawn, *grazie a Dios*, to another fellow-sojourner—easy to open her jumbling thoughts to, perhaps because of his kind

open looks, rather as olive-warm as her own, or perhaps of his attempts at somewhat familiar but Italian-accented Spanish.

Outside the tinted pane of windows and beyond the sign hoisting the neon cup, across the warming stained weather-pitted grey asphalt of the parking lot, was the unwelcoming concrete blob of the convenience store that served as the way-station for the coach-lines , to which Angelo turned an occasional glance making sure that nothing had moved extraordinarily or gone astray though he knew he had much extra time before his possibility of changing to a more northbound coach. Quaint sun-dappled Natchez—some ten hours behind down the roadways—was now a far memory as well. The States were a vast clutter-strewn panorama of manufactured sights and sensations, layered like a predictable unvarying lasagna, and bubbling over as well those chopped tidbits—like garlic or spice tossed throughout—that enlivened the smooth and incorporated texture of the routine daily sauce that covered every corner Angelo had traversed with a *mezzo-mezzo* blanket of consistency: granite cities to indistinguishable malls to sprawling suburbs and the overflowed

growth of development tracts. He had seen, and tasted, searching for the essential spicy burst, all that he could find offered, by a blur of trains and coaches. It was really too much to see and be savored in a short time. Angelo considered how incomprehensively confusing it all must seem to the unsuspecting waifish *scugnizza*, Maria, the almost tongue-tied wanderer, whose world before had been very small. Maria knew only that she must get to her *marido* now; and, somehow then, everything would feel better—he would hold her and the baby, Benito, in his sunny brown iron arms and accompany them back to Coyotevia. “*La viaje grande—si*, “she said, looking directly into Angelo’s eyes, “*pero*, I...I need to do. I see Ernesto and laugh then very happy.” She had a slip of envelope Ernesto had sent home on which was the name of a church and of a friendly priest who helped Ernesto send and collect mail.

“Let me help you with traveling,” Angelo informed her reasonably, looking into the slight crack of doubt in her determined dark eyes, “It is not good to be alone. And you must try speaking English with me, as we will practice English together. It is still a long

way.” Maria half-heartedly protested, saying that she was a good walker and that she did not have very much money. Angelo insisted. She was getting further into the middle of the country, he said, and would have to speak more, and they would work out some agreeable pay arrangement once she could be securely deposited with Ernesto. “It is the best way. I will help you, and with Benito. We will converse, and it will be good. Chicago is also my destination, for it is from there that I will return to New York and then to Italy. It is for the best that you have met me to assist you with your journey.” Angelo also decided, for his own part, it would be fortuitous to have a traveling companion in accompaniment as he had grown a mite weary of talking to himself the last two weeks, having no one to share staring out of windows at the moving countryside, or to appreciate the many tastes that were the centerpiece of his tour, his degustation of the States.

When Benito awoke from his doze, Maria gave him milk from the bottle. As Angelo and Maria watched Benito drinking they exchanged a few phrases of practice English about babies, and Angelo suggested to Lila more filling again of the bottle. This she did happily.

Maria smiled, also this time shyly, at Angelo. His concern was a welcome gallant gesture; he had a young kind face.

Passing people had flowed out of the diner, content, sated as Benito with comforting food, renewed, headed in many directions, their sun-heated cars spinning gravel as they arced in gleaming flashes, multiplicity of colours, out of the parking spaces. As the time drew near for the northbound, Maria followed Angelo cross the expanse of parking lot and waited in a shady area while he went inside the little convenience store station and bought an additional ticket. She watched through the window as he spoke with the young clerk, and wondered. Alongside in the corner of the shade stood an old hombre, over sixty but very solid and compact, his lined face and thick hands like tooled leather, short hair white under a mesh cap, alternately leaning from one foot to the other, and facing him standing in the bright sunlight a young man, hardly older than Ernesto, but with shaved hair and dressed in military camouflage, booted, feet planted widely apart at natural attention. Beside him lay an olive drab duffel, plus a plastic shopping bag; and the older man appeared to have a

worn brown satchel and a brown paper grocery bag. They lazily talked, passing only time, remarking very little, and the younger man was chewing on a straw which he sometimes held in his cupped hand. He flickered Maria a quick glance, an instinctual appraisal, yet covertly, as she stood nearby. In the sunlight a sheen of perspiration was forming on his forehead, his cheeks and the backs of his arms and hands. Maria looked down. Benito was dozing again, sweetly. She let her mind go blank and began to count the discarded scraps of sunlit cellophane that scattered the splotched and oily asphalt.

Angelo stood beside her when the ticket arrangement had been completed; and they sat on a decaying bench and watched the automobiles that passed by. Some slowed to evaluate the sign that posted the price for gasoline. When eventually the coach arrived—swaying like the tired tortoise it seemed—Angelo ushered Maria on board, followed by the old man and the young soldier. The air-conditioned interior wrapped them in a pleasant chilly plunge, as they took empty adjoining seats somewhat at the center of the scattered other travelers—some staring directly, others unconcernedly

pretending to nap. A few had gone into the convenience store with the driver who, when he had conducted his business, rounded them back into the patient vehicle. The baggage door slammed down, the front passenger door whooshed tight; and they were off. They lunged ahead, looped the spiral that lead them on to the grinding race of the interstate, and leaned into its northward flow. After the driver's rote cautionary message about no dangerous objects, no alcohol, no smoking, no blatant radios, and no profane disturbances, they settled into the rhythmic clomp of the turning wheels on the passing pavement, sped along easily alone or clasped in duets, the rise of conversation marking intervals of uneventful roadway, the sunny slipping countryside pulled into the coach's wake and left behind. Off the metal shine of the speeding cars flashes of sunlight glinted as if it bounced off the ripples of a flowing river, ceaselessly moving through its channel—and the heavy-laden SUVs darted past each other much the same as locusts bounded after the preceding others in the ever-moving procession forward across prairie space—the coach somewhat giant as a chunk of driftwood or a tumbleweed lumbering along.

Angelo made sure that Maria was comfortable with the baby, and he read the signs and he took notice of the view from the pitted dirty windows on both sides, and he started a tentative conversation with the young soldier and the old gentleman who were across the aisle. In turn he answered their questions, and thanked them for their interested kindness. Angelo's attention returned to Maria. He, pleased and contented with his satisfied curiosity at conversing with fellow travelers, could somewhat inform her that the young soldier, Willie Bruns, was on leave visiting his grandfather, the older man named Abel Galt, who was accompanying him back to U.S. army reserve training near Chicago where the infantryman once again mustered, this time deployment for active duty.

Next stop: Dallas, really only a short distance, where there would be a stopover of several hours before the northbound continued. Benito dozed contentedly, and drifting in and out, leaning askew against the sun-warmed window so did Maria, comfortable in the pale air-conditioning, and no longer concerned with the possibility of vigilance among the truck drivers. Angelo, gearing and swaying in

rhythm with the rolling coach, continued his conversation with Willie and Abel who, though somewhat rigidly serious—no doubt aligned with the somber purpose of their return trip—were nevertheless friendly enough and determinedly began to lighten their overcast mindsets with a certain jostling banter. Angelo learned of their hometowns, and their ages, and of the numbing upheaval inherent in an assignment to military life; he told them a bit about Italy, its sunny gilded beauty, its southern tobacco fields and olive orchards, and the ancient close crowded towns of rough brick and terracotta tile scattered over hillsides. Despite the radiance of Angelo's treasury of descriptions, Willie and his grandfather, outside the coach windows were heartened and proud to instead see the familiar Texaco and Shell, the Pizza Huts, and mobile home dealers and automotive wrecking yards. With her wide brown eyes Maria looked upon these things, too; saw them rapidly move past in colour-splotched blatant confusion, ragged as badly healed scars, and as confoundedly unsettling to the landscape of her previous vision as if these curious audacious remnants had been intentionally transplanted to her homey

vistas of Mexican desert. She nuzzled Benito closer to her.

When they had reached the stopover point of several hours in Dallas the three men, plus Maria Concepcion and her baby, decide on the need to have a nice lunch to pass the time, and make the waiting seem less. The bus terminal was dingy, and cruelly small. Maria once more felt comforted somewhat by all the Spanish voices she heard speaking there. A security guard points them to various coffee shops in an area nearby. Outside, the blazing sun turns the lime-pale blistering cement of the sidewalks to brazier-range temperatures, ideal for searing, but the determined little group trickled from out the breeze of the air-conditioned doorways onto the melting streets, and headed cautiously through the blinding glare toward the West End. Slowly strolling autos passed by heavily but not another person, no other living appearance, though it was a workday, walked on the streets. The desperate sun-baked group wandered, stared eastward at the taller buildings, looked in deserted windows, and crossed from one patch of slender shade to another. They paused, only momentarily in the heat, like other tourists when they passed at the

white compact square commemorating the unhappy end of the life of President John Kennedy, where usually a sparse knot of visitors paced now even thirty-eight years later; and edged along quickly the heavy red sandstone walls of the county courthouse. Just beyond Angelo could discern the clumped bars and restaurants, lunch environs of the office-weary trapped by an expanse of freeway. The preferred destination beckoning Angelo would be any place he could procure an anticipated cut of authentic heavyweight sizzling Texas beef, a thick straightforward succulent and tender beefsteak favored by those rough tough western men who had inhabited here. These currently searching explorers, mouths now dry and hungering, stumbled blindly into a wooden-floored wooden-tabled brass-railed kind of saloon with the ubiquitous frigid air-conditioning that looked promising. White linen placemats dotted the tables. Collections of huge steely knives and photographs of champion steers adorned the dark walls. A distracted hostess showed them to seats, along one side a banquette where Maria Concepcion sat and laid Benito, with one gentle hand atop his stomach. After a minute translating the menu, they gave the

choices to a vacant young waitress who wrote out their orders. Maria Concepcion then took Benito to the gloomy waiting vestibule of the ladies' room and there offered him breasts of milk which he secured happily, and fully satisfied himself, finishing off with a congratulatory burp, gurgling delightedly. When Maria had resettled Benito along with herself on the banquette the lunches arrived: yeasty soft brown rolls and bowls of crisp iceberg and salad greens tossed with red cherry tomatoes, mountainous platters of wedges of golden salty potato and extravagant browned vistas of steaming slabs of caramel-y smoky beefsteak, charred perfectly, floating with pinkly iridescent juices, dolloped with a slew of softly translucent onions. The tabletop disappeared under a jigsaw puzzle of overlapping bowls and saucers and servers and salvers and plates. Willie and his grandfather had ordered chicken-fried steaks. Curious, Angelo observed that the mallet-hacked for tenderization medallions of round steak still the circumference of a steer's leg had been dredged in a floury-dusted batter and deep-fried until golden tan and crisp, crinkled crunchy piping hot as if it had indeed been the juicy thigh of its namesake of a

southern fryer pullet. The whole tournedos, atop a toast raft, then ladled down with a becalmed smooth sea of deglazed peppercorn-flecked cream gravy was the portrait, sided by hunks of golden fried potato and a shovel of fried okra, of a rapacious fieldworker's lunch, fuel enough for a long afternoon of calf-corralling or well-digging. Angelo's own steak, perfectly sizzling grill outside and a rosy glow within, was large enough for the appetite of two; Maria looked upon her platter with *fiesta* awe as if, had she not been so hungry, that it would last for several future meals. Eagerness kept all except Maria from even a thought of saying grace. Forks and knives clattered against the platters.

"This is sure enough good kitchen food", said Mr. Galt, wiping a dollop of the thick cream gravy from the corner of his satisfied lips. They rotated smugly with satisfaction. "Better than you'll find back in the army." Willie smiled, convinced, stoking a forkful of warm okra into his waiting mouth, while Mr. Galt continued, "A young fellow needs good food, as long as he stays lean. A lean young fellow is a powerhouse can do anything." Willie, feeling complimented, smiled

again as if he had certainly heard all laudatory grandfather's reiterated congratulatory convictions before. "I was in the military back when," Mr. Galt thumped himself on the chest, then stabbed a morsel of the chicken-fried hiding beneath a camouflage of cream gravy. Maria smiled the benign feminine smile of listening to a burst of proud machismo, without really following at any rate with total understanding the entire conversation; while Angelo politely nodded and concluded that the sixty-ish Mr. Galt was still a rather solid able-bodied man with only a hint of aged paunchiness, unlike most of the other even younger diners in the restaurant who were largely suburbanites having a day in town or soft rotund office workers, fraternally indistinguishable except for the price of their clothes. "Oh that's right; back then in those days when they called you up, you went—no matter what else: wanting to get married, rushed up or you waited. Still—in those days then—men were proud to go for duty. They remembered that Americans—and the English, some—had saved the world." Angelo, tastebuds meltingly aquiver under a luscious hunk, rosy and buttery warm, of prime corn-fed beef, stared deep,

intently, into Mr. Galt's eyes to gauge whether there even lingered a recognition of as to if the Italians, Angelo's own recent ancestors, might have considered those weary dogface G.I.s as liberators, or not; but of course the aging man was simply reliving a robust national past, glorified, that he had not even barely been born yet to be a part of. Abel's pride in a young grandson and his enthusiasm had eluded his own promise to himself that the thought of conflict, of actual combatant activity, would not be mentioned on the farewell trip. Willie was convinced his troop involvement would remain humanitarian, the preferred wishful outcome of half the army and all its anxious mothers. Between bites Mr. Galt fixed Angelo, too, with an intense and shining stare. "Then the Americans put a lid on Korea; stopped a nasty move in Cuba; I was two years in service, served ten months in Vietnam but that was in '65 before it got really bad." He quieted, contemplative. "What a damned sad time that was. But I love and respect this country, proud of it; it's a great great country. Do what you want. Go as you please. Free as the flag. Where else can you eat until you pop?"

“Grandpa, I’ll try the best to see that you’re proud of the way I serve.”

Mr. Galt smiled. “Sonny, you know I am; you’re doing fine; volunteered for duty to this fine country; you couldn’t do better than what I see.”

Angelo surveyed the changing bustle of the room, which smelled enticingly of smoke and seared crisp fat, of pepper and of lemon slices, and faint mixtures of perfume. Maria was looking down, and fingered a fold in Benito’s blanket. Angelo dug a fork into a fluffed mound of baked potato. “Times change day to day, but sometimes there is a constant. Do you not think everyone loves his very own country?”

“Well, the Cong fought for theirs, but they had no choice—kill or be killed, even by their own communist comrades. Now, camel-jockeys, they got no real country—despite all their huzzah I don’t believe they even think about owning it for real, it being just so much sand and rocks—all they can do is poke in it for oil for the king, or grow dope. I sure as shooting could toss proud out the window if all I could do was spend the time to grow something useless and evil as

some dope-flowers. They should diversify—even if it’s just opening a pancake shop. Try to live right. We Americans are good people—and we’ve got everything from Coca-Cola to Motorola, Disneyworld to Arnold Schwarzenegger. Everybody loves it here, and they’re lining up to get in.”

Angelo’s eyes stepped back, flashed back through cloudless azure space, remembered suddenly of the *caffè*-bars of Napoli and Montella. Those dim quaint rooms percolated in some nostalgic steamy longing as cozily comfortable and old-fashioned, unchanging and friendly, an immiscible old world that knew its own cherished conception of reality and those values that made it a constantly tended fragile garden of stability. They were, perhaps, the only last places—along with the eighty-year-old grandmother’s kitchen where the *gnocchi* was still lovingly made by hand instead of from a packaged pasteboard box—in the world where you could stop the overbearing steamroller, the pasta machine press, the new-fangled metal rolling pin, of time.

Mr. Galt sighed, eyes closed, patting a hand over his full

stomach. Piously approbative, he was not being overly zealous; he was simply stating the facts as he saw them. “Honest?” he seriously inquired, “Don’t you think this—look all around—is the best country in the world?”

Angelo, eyes poised above the remains of his turned-to-perfection succulent slab of buttery beef alongside the half-filled glass of his customary lunchtime *vino campagna*, leaned back against the banquette. He had to admit superlatively it was the most delectable immaculate plain-and-simple piece of luscious steak he had ever seen. Still in all, how lingered memories of the other side of the world, of *vitello*, Marsala, and *pomodoro* sliced as thick as chops, and salami, salmagundi. Before Angelo could speak, Willie’s napkin fluttered, and he piped in, “I grew up knowing, still know, most ways, it’s a great country—the greatest. Haven’t never seen anywhere else, yet—maybe soon enough—but I know they haven’t got the things we’ve got here. We’re the best country in the world—and proud to be. What could be any better?”

“It, I suppose, is a brave thing,” Angelo mused, fork tines

glistening with the juices redolent of meat, “to be willing to die, when young, for one’s country.”

“I don’t plan on dying—just don’t plan on it,” said Willie. “After —when I’ve put in my time—I’ve even after army training got the army to help me. I’ll be going to school on their help.”

Angelo thought of the time-worn shelved volumes in Italy, gathering dust on those shelves—Caesar, Ovid, Horace, St. Thomas Aquinas, Machiavelli, Dante, da Vinci, Boccacio, Vivaldi, Galileo, Goldoni, Verdi, the countless others—of which he himself had hardly read enough; but he was aware they were there, carefully and familiarly shelved, waiting silently. Could the youngster Willie ever learn about reading from those volumes? Would he? “It is a commendable thing, wanting to learn,” said Angelo. “Perhaps it is worth the risk of life.”

Maria looked to him, asking, “Risk?”

“Uh—*peligroso*,” Angelo indicated.

“Everything—all of life is a risk,” responded Willie. “It is a risk, of course, to be weak. And it is another kind of risk to be frightening,

aggressive, troublemaking. In the world we have now it is a risk being a peaceful country, but anyway, standing up still anyway, trying to promote good will and freedom everywhere. Risk comes out of the blue all the time. Tomorrow on a farm I could get my arm caught in a corn-sheller, or I could get hit by a truck on the highway, just as in the army I could even slip in the shower.”

Angelo agreed, “Yes, of course, you are right. Whatever we may think—or tell ourselves with comforting conviction—we are never really far from danger at any time.” He looked about, as if buzzing precipitately near to the mucilaginous amber of siren-voiced serenity and comfort, before alerting at the most vulnerable moment the warning to flight. “As in our everyday life it is very important to want to learn—to explore meaning and causality. It may be the *most* important thing—that which gives to our life a meaning. And everyone can learn, each opportunity; can love, and learn to love even more deeply, his own country in different ways. What is a ‘best’ country? In my trip to the States I have seen many places, most with people who rush very busy, to do something I am not sure what. They

do not sit in the evening sunset alone watching the colours of evening. People, or most, do not enjoy a long careful lunch as in my home country—though here there is much to enjoy, it too often overlooked, even at the moment of use. Though it is true prices are high here, but really not high as euros. Price and value are even not always the same.”

“It is only the rich who can afford the time for easy living” said Willie. “Everyone else must run much faster just to stay in one place, and pray you keep from tripping.”

Angelo nodded, “I see. But, elsewhere, it is the thought of many that everyone in the States is rich, and plentifulness is at every hand, and they are seen by many others in the world as acquisitively pursuing a life that is meaningless. Of course, there are some also in Italy, more than perhaps ever before, who long to own a Thunderbird, or the Cadillac before it became hideously ugly, or even the Ferrari; but most are content to be more concerned with the perfect prosciutto, or the perfect fig, a well done espresso, or an acceptable bottle of chianti. A fountain or a holy madonna receives more

reverence, and deservedly, than Sony, or Neiman-Marcus, or Britney Spears' jet. Those small beautiful things—the everyday pleasures—are what is most important, when all is done and said: a simple pasta *carbonara*, that one perfect melon, still having dinner with your family together.” Angelo breathed deeply. His ideas—though still perhaps tumbled, forming somewhere in the back of his head—had spilled out. Now he had seen them blossom, grown like a summer's bounty of tomatoes. He looked about the room, at its corporate ambiance and sleek presentation, noticing the uniform blandness of its shiny veneers, and the artificial plastic cheer of the potted palms. Before him spread the array of empty devastated platters; the meal had indeed been delectable, and satisfyingly abundant. He insisted—in the American manner—on a take-home box for Maria, the only one who had not consumed the entire prodigious offerings. The waitress inquired if they would like desserts. No one seemed capable of entertaining more.

“I am stuffed,” sighed Mr. Galt.

Angelo gazed past the leftover box in Maria's lap to the blanket

down the banquette. Benito still slept, blissfully peaceful. Angelo leaned back from the devastated table, “It was a very substantial meal.” He turned to Maria to ask her, “And what do you think of the United States?”

“It is a country very big,” she said, “—full of many things.”

* * *

When they had reticently waddled, stumpily squat as overfed ducks, retracing back along the baking un-peopled sidewalks among the smogging belch of shuttling vehicular traffic, approaching the grimy littered façade of the concrete bus depot which they recognized, the automatic doors opened with a whoosh of chilled air, fizzing out toward the heavy clot of their wobbling bodies while they stood immobilized, waiting, behind a young couple squandering the entranceway, a young inert couple unconcerned to any but themselves. The young boy-ying was very blonde and pale, the yang-girl very tan with raspberry-burgundy hair shingled into a dusty cascade; both were covered with an overwhelming collection of various silver metal spikes and scraggly gangrenous-coloured tattoos.

He was re-adjusting her enormous backpack abristle with dangling additions and topped by two pillows, while his slight wan torso struggled under his own burden and tried to balance a lumpy duffel bag strapped atop his backpacked shoulders. No one seemed to offer a touch to help them for fear they might topple over into a mangled heap, entangled in their many loopy piercings. They struggled confident in themselves, but obviously. Aging Mr. Galt simmered to a visible impatience, but said nothing, wriggling, as Willie squeezed his elbow. Maria waited patiently as a burro by the roadside. Angelo had become accustomed to witnessing such utilitarian struggles amidst his travels and knew, from his own experiences, that it was really better to find their own weights than to receive confused help. The young pair, innocents disguised in this burdened way, continued to shuffle, poking, through the entry and into the shadows of the glum building. Just then a quickly passing woman, in a flurry, determinedly full speed ahead, strode directly past them, by-passing the stifled and groggy little group before they caught time to collect themselves. Angelo, caught unaware as the others, shrugged and seemed not to give it a

moment of thought; but all their startled eyes watched her sail off trailing in her wake a fluttering pink scarf and an overabundance of carnation perfume. Tossing away reluctance before their path could be intercepted again the stunned travelers haltingly following the now-mobile urchins, those *scugnizzi*, stepped inside the cool shade and looked once more about the room, a stale uncomfortable hutch, listening to the sigh of the automatic door swinging like a drowsy but necessary fan blowing them along. The crowded shelter was little more than a littered holding pen, where the stalled crowd shifted wearily, yet monotonously always still the same: shuffling or jostling, befuddled, over-warm, staring, resigned to stasis until departure. Inside one transparent moment a realization lurched into the sluggishly dozing mind of Angelo as sudden and obvious revelation: that these crowds did not mill about like restive cattle as the airport crowds did in their stainless pens, but instead these wallowed like swine in a humid slough—and while simultaneously, he noted, most Americanos were themselves so greatly removed from a real farm life as Pekingese lap dogs on a velvet pillow. Muzak—an odd and heavily-

stringed rendition of *Going to Kansas City*—dripped from the shadowy dust-fuzzy ceiling. Ceaselessly the crowded muddles had rearranged themselves, and the only available place to sit—scuffed and sticky, locale sporadically ignored by the token cleaning crews that offered service jobs inhabited only by immigrant laborers, keeping those docile workers silent and remote as feasible from the happily complacent citizens and passers-by—Angelo discovered was across from the refreshment corner. None of the companions, excepting curious Willie, could at this moment confront even so much as to gaze upon one more particle of food, especially the congealed glutinous of a fast food steam table, but though as Angelo necessarily offered, Maria took a hard plastic seat in the row facing the brightly lit signage, holding Benito on her knees. Benito happily sucked on his drool-soaked fist and, mumbling quietly, took in all the bobbling sights about him. Abel took a seat; and Willie stood in at-ease attention near the wall. The close air was massed with aromas of hot fat and over-frying onions and warm-buttered popcorn and the sounds of ice dispensers clumping into plastic cups. Angelo—unmoved, foreign, now distant

from the desire for food— stared at the heatlamp-radiated racks of oily salty fries, of pre-packed skimpy burgers, of rolling conveyors of sweating gelatinous hotdogs, and the doughy salty sunburned clumps that on the great plains passed for pizza. No one considered why it was necessary, they only deep in their slugging veins knew that it was, to have the giant vats of mayonnaise, yellow mustard, liquidy catsup, or the unnaturally green and gummy pickle bits that trailed along the orange formica countertop. Everywhere one looked, even down to the over-looked condiments, across this wide country were the leftover remnants of conspicuous abundance. Without much beyond idle insatiate-eyed interest a line of the bored, hoisting their gooey toddlers to see, shambled past the cordon pathway. Maria assumed the slack expression of the inertly waiting, and Abel and Angelo sighed aloud from their overfed stomachs. Since unable to nap, all Angelo could apportion his roaming eyes—however randomly entertaining with its changing array of the swaggering, the harried, the confused, the tired, the excited, and the merely wandering—was to watch the shifting flow, a multiplicitous antipasto—*abbondanza*—of the

traveling, interspersed with an incongruous number of the homeless and self-tranquilized and hustling, as they all in tight little swarms traversed between the benches of the concrete room. Above their heads *sotto voce* televisions half-droningly whispered about CNN-worthy events in every corner of the just-as-weary globe, their plodding scrawls prickly with the latest flashes of upheaval and horrors, the dead-panned and gruesome whispering soundtrack overridden by the scratchy intermittent squawking of announcements for departures to “Big Spring, El Paso, Los Cruces, Tucson and Los Angeles” or else to “Mount Pleasant, Longview, Shreveport, Jackson, Atlanta and points east.”

When the eventual crackling screech announced the departure of their coach on to Memphis, Abel and Willie, Angelo and Maria clutching little Benito, all huddled and joined a shapeless queue zagging toward what was the assumed proper door at gate Two. Another raggedy announcement, aided only by a semi-informative glance at the clock, came over the incomprehensible speakers. The muddled queue sidled in the manner of sleepwalkers toward the

threshold of the coach, the driver collecting their tickets and thus ascertaining if it was their proper destination. New arrivals deposited luggage and boxes into the hold, then scrambled, huffing and bungling, on board. At the rear the pale and pierced young couple struggled once more to accommodate their awkwardly precarious bundles; before them teetered a very tall woman with a mass of white-blond hair and dressed in a bright sundress the colour of lemon peel, smiling blissfully, her rosy face frosted with a generously applied crème of colours and powders. Angelo peered past other cluttered heads and noted, a ways in front, the crisp suit and flowery hat of the carnation-scented woman who had marched heedlessly past them before at the doorway, now approaching near the driver with an incongruously formidable—yet at the same time, and seemingly natural for her, deferential—stance. The waiting lingered on, the driver accepting the slips of printed paper at his customary and unperturbed speed.

When the semi-filled coach groaned out of the shadows of the terminal and ambled away as the sun scalding the mirrored-glass

towers was at its most dazzling intensity, then, as the reassurance of the air-conditioning calmed them in lulling motion so the anxious prattling occupants, only half-listening once again to the driver's admonitions against alcohol, radios, weapons, and profanity, settled into a quieter calm acceptance of their long seated journey ahead. The few older city streets fed into a grotesque and massive tangle of dangerously speeding and clogged freeways that coiled in ever-looping circles into the gross hastily hyper-developed sprawling blot of suburban tract housing and concrete shopping grids (no longer a shady-vined porchswing snapshot of small-town *Americanus*, U.S.A., the indivisible individuality remembered only by those of Abel Galt's generation) but an already crumbling pasteboard-box clutter of gaudy businesses and storefront charismatic-evangelical churches and nouveau-tasteless housing—how ceaselessly one could *always* purvey hot-tubs or designer surplus or rifles if not able to be the automobile dealership of the year or the scrubbed rosy office of a plastic surgeon. Then the sprawling rabble mass slimmed to a chain as the interstate loomed ahead and, past the last of the condo-apartment compounds

and McDonalds and gasoline stations, past motels and sports bars and Wal-Marts, threw itself headlong into a vista of billboards and pasture fences and sunburned hedgerows, scattered wind-whipped debris of flayed tire-rubber and plastic bags from the auto traffic blown heedlessly into the dry frontage. The coach sped along, churning the disappearing landscapes into a fume-soaked blur. Angelo stretched back into the distorted cushion of the worn sprung seat, which he could not manoeuvre to lean in a more favorable position. Still uncounted hours of the parching wind-flurried Texas grass and cloudless sky lay ahead. After staring through the window a long while Maria Concepcion began to believe, though it was a minty green with scraggly trees and dotted with cattle drinking-tanks brimming with flint-coloured water, that this landscape, green, soothing but overtly foreign to her red tired eyes, was as monotonous as the stretching desert she had left behind; she knew only, peacefully, that she was covering the miles across this broad land that led her to Ernesto. Abel and the grandson, Willie, dozed, lolling precipitously in their seats; also did many of the others. Then for a time Willie

listened, Angelo as well, as another passenger carried a mostly rambling and loud conversation about foreign oil interests and the possibilities of a bio-diesel fuel for the future of consumption. Angelo gazed beyond the windows, passed along through the wide sweltered fields, the occasional opaque-eyed herds of prostrated cattle, the farmsteads with the bright proud standard flagpoles brandishing the starred striped glorious flags. They passed within waving distance of the many trifling countryside towns, little more than a post office or a feed store; but gave not so much as a slow sashay as the interstate deftly passed by all of them. They sped past the frequent handlettered graying signs that succinctly proclaimed “John 3:16”, or the even more steadfast “Jesus wept. John 11:35 “. These pale spectral messages arose at intervals almost predictable from immersed in the summery landscape, appeared from the brushy roadside proclaiming their exhortations, glowing flamed tongues like gaunt and rangy evangelists giving a voice in the wilderness—then passed into the receding distance as a trail of echoes. Occasionally, one ragged signpost shouted out simply, “Repent.” Miles sped away,

falling behind into the distant trail of the long afternoon. When Maria roused from one of her frequent siestas it was as if in a newly discovered dreamland she looked about, the outside landscape now dense with further greenness of trees and the dot of now-blue ponds and the sudden watchful alertness of birds aflutter under the steady gaze of the brown somber hawks. Maria wondered if they were still in Texas, or where. The city of Chicago was an uncalculated distance—still remote and distantly unimaginable. By the clock Angelo had begun to wonder himself, although they were, he knew by his map and the outlines on the state signs. In the long late afternoon the driver, in a series of circular yaws, extricated them from the dash of the roadway and planted them amid a halted caravan of trucks in a concrete field where sentry poles of mercury-lights fizzled in the still light hazy air enclosing a rather desolate and tawdry-appearing cinderblock refuge, as inviting as a decimated quarry, yet designated a “pit stop”.

The spare five-street town of Cherokee Mound languished, placidly, nearby—itself the mournful site of another long-ago and

mostly-forgotten conveyance of travelers who had come to a misguided crumpled end there. In subsequent years a busy cotton-gin town flourished there, but also eventually disintegrated to its shrunken skeletal remains, sun-bleached dry and scattered across some pasture. Needless to imagine, it was unmentioned in any guidebook.

Still, a diversion nonetheless, a majority of the passengers disembarked from the stagnant coach, glad of a chance to stand and extend their legs in a stroll about the pavement, and rotely to wander inside the griminess of the little building for it contained a coffee machine and soda-vending machines and potato chips and sweets. On one side, under the somewhat wandering and tired eye of a cashier, spread the counter of ready-wrapped hamburgers and a spit of rotating hot frankfurters, also a cauldron of crusted stew, a tub of instant mashed potatoes, a tub of dubiously orange macaroni-and-cheese product. Beyond the paper plates was the utter annihilating destruction of a utilitarian grease-encrusted microwave oven: that most potently impotent aspiration—glowing with ill-masked

malevolence— to which modern foodstuff in the States could attain. The end of the line was a tray of wilted doughnuts. Opposite was where the vending machines arranged themselves, like bannered Miss America contestants, displaying their assets: the hottest coffee, the saltiest pretzels, the roundest fullest Oreo cookies, and much much more, invitingly arrayed, beckoning, with talents to entice.

Dazed by so many shiny metals and the faintly unappetizing commercial-grade soap smells, the limp passengers wandered in confusion. Abel and Willie had stopped to stand outside with the smokers, who puffed excitedly and gossiped. Maria slipped unobtrusively as possible inside the waiting room, cooing to Benito to keep him quiet, and staring at all the strange machinery covered in the stranger *norteameicano* writing. Others sidled past the colourful array of candy bars, crunchy mix, and cookie packets, as a line formed to slide in dollar bills for Nestea or Coca-Cola. Angelo watched. The cramped enclosure simulated hapless drones in an interior of a beehive dripping its honey on every sticky space, unaware that they could drown in its very excess. Angelo stumbled among the

conspicuous variety; he was still not even really hungry. But an awareness of thirst, however, splashed across his mind as he watched the others advance like ants on the picnic of glowing machines. Nearby, in an aura of concentration, a freckly pudgy boy emptied a few salted peanuts into a cold bottle of Dr Pepper, the dark liquid fizzing into a sparkling rim of foam under which floated the soaking infused peanut clumps. Maria smiled, taking a seat beside Angelo in the bolted row of hard plastic chairs. Angelo, his attention brought back to the boy, thought to try this child's trick himself; and after retrieving a really only lukewarm bottle from the machine set about imitating the boy's example, but carefully dropping the packet of peanuts one by one into the bottle mouth and watch the fizz rise around it. He took an exploratory drink, salty and sweet at the same time, liquid chill and softening crunch and a tingling sensation. Angelo, also young boy himself again, smiled.

Benito crackled uneasily with an abrupt whimper. Maria softly turned her attention down to him, bounced him in her arms a bit, then as unobtrusively as possible raised one corner on her tee-shirt to her

armpit and deftly unhooked the lacy front of a distinctly unmatronly silky orchid-coloured bra to expose a full round cocoa-coloured breast which with a quick massage she canted forward and clamped Benito's round mouth there, shushing him into a purring gurgle. Some men circling around noticed surreptitiously, but they only faintly smiled. Angelo hesitantly shifted away in his seat so as to appear unconcerned. He took a swig of the Dr Pepper, and rolled a damp peanut over his tongue. Benito nursed happily. His tiny clenched hands clung at the taut beautiful nourishing breast, where a sheen of rosiness began to glow just ever so near below the delicate surface. Warmth flowed from Maria like the milk. She and the quiet baby—caresses serene, private, nourishing liquid heartbeats—ascended from the world that pushed up against them.

Only a few peaceful undisturbed moments, touched with stilling calm, when abruptly then a someone, a stark shadow and stiffly upright wall of woman, was standing before Maria, shifting from one foot to the other back and forth on the hard grey tiles of the floor and weaving askance as if to block from view Maria and the baby. It was

that woman in the crisp suit with the pink scarf. Angelo, now startlingly close, could see that she was a bit older than she had appeared at a remove, perhaps she was a primpy middle-age, fifty-ish, with the frown lines deepening between her eyes. The abundant bouquet of flowers on her hat trembled like a windy gust atop her head. As she brightened a florid red while still swaying before them, Angelo leaned back in stunned silence, thinking the woman's sudden agitation the eruption of a freakish nervous mental seizure, or perhaps ptomaine, or maybe an imminent hysteria. Several moments stopped still before he could regain himself. The woman, otherwise so ordinary looking, continues to weave over Maria Concepcion and thrust out her arms into the air around her as if they were shields, her words from deep only sputters of "No" spuming to the surface, shuddering the flowers atop her hat. "Young woman, you must not do that," she hissed. Maria, shrunken aback flat against the hard plastic unforgiving chair, simply stared ahead wide-eyed and open-mouthed, clueless at the startling rush of loud clamorous *norteamericano* words hurled toward her. The scowling woman, a much deeper pink now

than her scarf, raised a hand, pointing, wagging a finger in the general direction where her icy pale eyes did not follow. “Shameful. Shameful.” Maria, immobile, stared at a blue vein in the pink woman’s forehead as it throbbed in a staccato pulse. “Have you lost your senses!? You must stop—stop this minute. And cover yourself.” Fumbling, Angelo pleaded only, “Signora. Signora?”

She turned on him, “Is that your child?”

“No, ah—no,” he crumpled.

“Oh, I see” she said, and stared down at him along the sharp straight line of her nose. The vein continued to throb. Angelo almost expected to see the woman pull a flaming sword of indignation from her large pocketbook.

Abel and Willie had rushed up for assistance, knowing not what that might be, when they had seen the disturbance kindle. Others nearby had retreated back, startled detachment, leaving ample space between themselves and the red-faced woman; they looked sidelong, whispering in the other direction, or stared into the dark coffee of their waxy Dixie-cups. Striding in, “Who are you?” Abel questioned.

“I am Mrs. Maeleen Smithfield,” puffing herself, “if it is any of your business,” she huffed, “and just so you will know, a traveler, and what is more, conscientious of the Way and a positive Christian person—Saviour’s beacon toward heaven, if praise be—then I cannot sit by here and allow this young wom...woman to expose herself, stark naked shameless chest, to the world.”

“Un-huh” humped Abel. Benito began to squirm; but refused to completely stop suckling, though the edge of Maria’s tee-shirt had fallen across part of his face. The scent of the carnation cologne blossomed about them into the air. Angelo, on the brink of embarrassment, flailing hands pressing down on the air around the torrent of words, could only try to hear the woman’s tumult out, saying to her “Madam, please.”

“This is a public place,” the woman was still winding tense. “Pushing her...her chest out, naked, in front of all these people—men—in a public place. Stop it. It’s outrageous. What would Jesus think if he were sitting here?”

Abel looked at her, his own chin now jutting in and out, and

motioned Willie to advance in, but unobtrusively, and bundle Maria and Angelo away. He smiled calmly. "I don't know," he said, "that Jesus would really be paying that much attention." Cohering into a closely-knit convergence, they skittered away and out the door, leaving the woman mouth-opened and fuming.

When the coach rolled away they were, in half an hour—after a passenger stop where other travelers departed and boarded and shifted in Texarkana—across the borderline and roaming into Arkansas. Lengthened shadows stretched across the grey roadway, and there those assembled passengers seemed caught in a bubble of quietness, floating between the abundant darkening growths of trees that had risen now around them. They were mostly pines, dark sturdy guardian-like soldierly. They were thick and straight, furry with long-needed deep green in the slanted fade of light. Up the aisle and diagonally ahead of them, Angelo could recognize the hat of the woman who had startled them with her tirade about the breasts of Maria Concepcion in a public place. She was unwrapping a small neat parcel of food, which smelled of fried chicken wafting over the coach,

but she now quiet as a whispered supplication was precisely setting about an arrangement of chicken and pickles as if a Sunday school picnic. Contemplative in a quiet spot herself, Maria gazed out the window on her side; and Angelo gazed ahead or out the window opposite. It would soon be evening, the thick clinging pines hiding the lowered sun in the western sky, beginning now to glow golden grapefruit or liquidy raspberry above the tops of the trees. Angelo, in the dimming light, eased Maria into a conversation of Italian-Spanish and sign language mixed with enough English and they somehow made it work until each was in a place of satisfactory understanding. And though there was not a lot to tell she told him some of her village life in Coyotevia, even less than the miniscule village lives of Angelo's native Campania. Angelo spoke to her of his extravagantly fueled trip through the States and what he had seen, and all the varied foods he had tried across the tremendous miles he had traveled. What Maria did not understand in English Angelo assumed she enjoyed hearing anyway, as she sat rapt in attention, watching his full-curved lips forming each unfamiliar word. His meandering tale simmered in

recollection, garnished full of his own reverential pauses which indicated his expectant awe while surrounded by the broil of excitement on entering the threshold of this land of huge terrain and vast promise, fabulous territory, spread-eagled, intertwined into a tapestry, a kaleidoscopic wonder from the moment he dropped into the airport. Outside the pressurized windows Boston's Logan (according to one in-flight magazine one of the world's un-safest because of its crowded and constrained runways leading into the chilly bay), drizzled over with blustery grey and damp in an early light August fog, it was like entering the far side of the moon, at the very least the other far side of this dusty earth clod, that side known only to those outside its realm by Hollywood-exported films, newspaper accounts, satellite broadcasts, a cousin's snapshots, seen distantly as miniature as if looking through the wrong end of a nautical spyglass. He reminisced to her, as well as to his own suffused memory, of the seafood at Logan airport, of all the cuisines of the world gathered in the ragout of New York City, the vinaigrette of Washington D.C., of scarlet lobster and deviled eggs and golden boiled fresh corn, of riding

down on the *Palmetto*, of the crab soup and the hominy in Charleston, the fried fish and spaghetti in Jacksonville. He told her of—only a short streetcar ride away from the raucous pitcher beer and red-beans-and-rice oyster *halles* of the *Vieux Carre*—the blessed best, (and also his adopted personal favorite place) and the exquisite food at Commander's Palace in colourfully patch-worked New Orleans oozing the cordial soft accents of precious ease and gracious *joie de vivre*. He dreamily recounted sitting, candlelit, cushioned inside a convivial *toile*-restored room in an antique house, pampered, amidst a sea of white tablecloths and momentous silver, surrounded by the comforting hush of women in Chanel suits and pearls older even than himself and men in conservative proper blue suits and polished quiet ties; and the dreamily ladled turtle soup that was starrily a taste of heaven, delicately brothy with just an assertion of pepper. So elegantly smooth was the *ecrevisse* bisque, bits of plump pink-fleshed morsels floating languidly in a creamy bath. Shucked fleshy oysters nestled in their own brine, glistening and shimmering, pearly. Perfect adorned fillets of flounder splended the white china plates and sparkles of

luncheon wine filled the goblets. That was sublime eating, perfect food and refinement, exquisite tastes in an estimable atmosphere—a meal connoting once in a lifetime enjoyment—and *crème brulee* to top it off, superlative, sweet, rich, creamy, crunchy, smooth, and velvety-silky. The meal was perfection; the service elegant; the setting dreamy apropos.

Now the sun outside the windows was hidden, and a blue cool twilight enveloped them. As he continued talking obsessively Maria fished the packets of crackers from her skirt pocket and topping them from a packet of catsup she ate as Angelo, his dark eyes following her movements, recounted his adventures as a degustationist. The coach rattled on through the pines and then across the flat charcoal-grey delta of Arkansas. Angelo piqued her attentiveness that when in Memphis they would go to a guidebook-touted place called the Rendezvous, where they would procure the alleged best barbequed ribs in Memphis. In a day or two he would continue by railroad his journey to Chicago on the *City of New Orleans*, speeding north to Chicago in more comfort and style than this lazy coach. He asks Maria

if she would rather accompany him or go on her trip by coach, the less fast way.

Meantime, they roll along in the darkness, occasionally seeing if Willie and Abel are awake and in a mood to converse, until they soon all can see past the Arkansas greyhound racetracks and Wal-marts and service stops and fried chicken joints, the twinkling lights of another city ahead, and the bridge that would cross the broad dark Mississippi into the downtown heart of musical blue Memphis. They were straining ready to get up and walk about, tired of sitting; it seeming like an eternity for the coach to navigate the turns and twists that would bring them to rest at the depot on Union Avenue. Eventually pulled into their cubbyhole at the terminal, but they were not yet allowed to exit the door as several badged officers entered the coach and announced to all to stay seated. The officers accompanied a pair of sniffing dogs. Inching forward from the back of the coach the dogs investigate the passenger seats while the officers search the carry-on bags overhead, feeling apparently for possible undefined contraband, once or twice offering an up close look to the authoritative K-9s.

Maria fidgeted, terrified, not knowing the reason or implications of the intrusion; Willie sat obeying as a good soldier; Angelo blasé and accustomed to border crossings; Abel certain that it was no more than a customary search for drugs or illegal weapons. Everyone else sat rigid or agitated in the puddle of their own thoughts. It did not take really as long as it seemed, the realization of a routine. The officers, terse and unperturbed by what they had or had not found, cleared the immobile passengers to exit the coach. Maria and Angelo, along with Abel and Willie, stepped off and filed singly through the night air and into the yellow light of the waiting room. It was a little past nine o'clock. Sorting their plans, and storing their baggage, it seemed that Abel and Willie were, as well, traveling by the *City of New Orleans* with Angelo tomorrow. Maria was, naturally, vacillating undecided about joining them or continuing her trip to Chicago in the wee hours of the early dawn by yet another coach. They would discuss the merits at dinner, for now they must hurry to find the "best barbequed ribs in Memphis" where they would sit and think and fill themselves with victuals, heartwarming and saucy and simple. Out they passed in to

the slight fog of the night streets, marching past the corner of the august Peabody Hotel, faint echoes of music reverberating from Beale Street, and across the avenue to the alleyway entrance of the Rendezvous, like some dark leftover speakeasy where one slyly said “Joe sent me.”

Maria, looking around herself as if in a trance, bemusedly collected more of strange city sights; and Angelo’s blinking eyes, tired but roaming, still absorbed details like a tourist camera. A sometimes patient, sometimes restless, curving line waited inside the doorway. The troupe joined the line. Black waiters in white shirts scurried giant trays piled with pork ribs and coleslaw and beer past the line, weaving in and out the open spaces. The spicy smells of the warm rib rub floated above them, underlaid with a hint of smoke and juicily dripping fat. Maria turned in line to Angelo. “When you are to leave the United States?” she asked.

He pulled out his airline ticket from his little traveling bag that held his pens and passport and paperback book and map and mints and essentially had been on this trip his closest constant companion

accompanying him into bars and restaurants and delicatessens and coffee nooks and read its details to her. “Alitalia airlines. JFK to Roma. Five thirty p.m.,” he said. “Fourteenth of September, 2001.” Angelo tapped the edge of the ticket folder against his forehead, then slips it back into the bag pocket.

Maria nodded. “*Septiembre. Si. Sept...em...ber. Que linda en otoño*—in autumn.” She smiled.

--J. F. Lowe