

THE SECRET INTEGRATION

OUTSIDE it was raining, the first rain of October, end of haying season and of the fall's brilliance, purity of light, a certain soundness to weather that had brought New Yorkers flooding up through the Berkshires not too many weekends ago to see the trees changing in that sun. Today, by contrast, it was Saturday and raining, a lousy combination. Inside at the moment was Tim Santora, waiting for ten o'clock and wondering how he was going to get out past his mother. Grover wanted to see him at ten this morning, so he had to go. He sat curled in an old washing machine that lay on its side in a back room of the house; he listened to rain going down a drainpipe and looked at a wart that was on his finger. The wart had been there for two weeks and wasn't going to go away. The other day his mother had taken him over to Doctor Slothrop, who painted some red stuff on it, turned out the lights and said, "Now, when I switch on my magic purple lamp, watch what happens to the wart." It wasn't a very magic-looking lamp, but when the doctor turned it on, the wart glowed a bright green.

"Ah, good," said Doctor Slothrop. "Green. That means the wart will go away, Tim. It hasn't got a chance." But as they were going out, the doctor said to Tim's mother, in a lowered voice Tim had learned how to listen in on, "Suggestion therapy works about half the time. If this doesn't clear up now spontaneously, bring him back and we'll try liquid nitrogen." Soon as he got home, Tim ran over to ask Grover what "suggestion therapy" meant. He found him down in the cellar, working on another invention.

Grover Snodd was a little older than Tim, and a boy genius. Within limits, anyway. A boy genius with flaws. His inventions, for example, didn't always work. And last year he'd had this racket, doing everybody's homework for them at a dime an assignment. But he'd given himself away too often. They knew somehow (they had a "curve," according to Grover, that told them how well everybody was supposed to do) that it was him behind all the 90s and 100s kids started getting. "You can't fight the law of averages," Grover said, "you can't fight the curve." So they went to work earnestly on his parents to talk them into transferring him. Someplace. Anyplace. Expert though he might be on every school topic from igneous rocks to Indian raids, Grover was still too dumb, as Tim saw it, to cover up how smart he was. Whenever he had a chance to show it, he'd always weaken. In a problem like somebody's yard's a triangle, find the area, Grover couldn't resist bringing in a little trigonometry, which half the class couldn't even pronounce, or calculus, a word they saw from time to time in the outer-space comics and was only a word. But Tim and others were tolerant about it. Why shouldn't Grover show off? He had a hard time sometimes. It wasn't any use talking to people his own age about higher mathematics or higher anything else. He used to discuss foreign policy with his father, Grover confided to Tim, until one night they'd had a serious division of views over Berlin. "I know what they ought to do," Grover yelled (he always yelled — at walls, at anything else solid that happened to be around -to let you know it wasn't you he was mad at but something else, something to do with the scaled-up world adults made, remade and lived in without him, some inertia and stubbornness he was too small, except inside himself, to overcome), "exactly what they should do." But when Tim asked what, Grover only said, "Never mind. The thing we argued about isn't important. But now we don't talk; that *is* important. When I'm home now they let me alone and I let them alone." This year he was only home on weekends and Wednesdays. Other days he commuted twenty miles to college, a Berkshire men's college patterned on Williams but smaller, to take courses and talk to people about higher everything. The public school had won, had banished him. They didn't have time for him, and wanted everybody doing their own homework. It was apparently OK with Grover's father too, because of that estrangement over Berlin. "It isn't that he's stupid,

or mean," Grover yelled at his family's oil burner. "He isn't. It's worse than that. He understands things that I don't care about. And I care about things he'll never understand."

"I don't get it," said Tim. "Hey, Grover, what's 'suggestion therapy' mean?"

"Like faith healing," said Grover. "That how they're trying to get rid of that wart?"

"Yeah." He told about the red stuff that glowed green, and the lamp.

"Ultraviolet fluorescence," Grover said, having obvious fun with the words, "has no effect on the wart. They're trying to talk it away, but I just messed that up for them," and he started laughing, rolling around on the floor of the cellar, as if somebody was tickling him. "It won't work. When it wants to go away, it will, that's all. Warts have a mind of their own."

It tickled Grover any time he could interfere with the scheming of grownups. It never occurred to Tim to want to figure out why this was so. Grover himself cared only slightly about his own motives. "They think I'm smarter than I am," he hazarded once. "They have this idea about a 'boy genius,' I think-what one is supposed to be, you know. They see them on television or something, and that's what they want me to be like." He'd been very mad that day, Tim remembered, because a new invention hadn't worked out. A sodium grenade: two compartments, sodium and water, separated by a burst-diaphragm. When the sodium came in contact with the water, it would go off with a tremendous bang. But the diaphragm was too strong or something, and it wouldn't break. To make things worse, Grover had been reading *Tom Swift and His Wizard Camera*, by Victor Appleton. He kept coming across these Tom Swift books by apparent accident, though he had developed the theory lately that it was by design; that the books were coming across *him*, and that his parents and/or the school were deeply involved. Tom Swift books were a direct affront to him, as if he were expected to compete, to build even better inventions and make even more money on them and invest it more wisely than Tom Swift.

"I hate Tom Swift!" he yelled.

"Quit reading those books, then," Tim suggested.

But Grover couldn't; he tried, but he couldn't stop. Every time one of them popped up, as if from an invisible, malevolent toaster, he'd devour it. It was an addiction; he was haunted by Aerial Warships, Electric Rifles. "It's awful," he said, "the guy's a show-off, he talks funny, and he's a snob, and" — hitting his head to remember the word — "a racist."

"A what?"

"You know this colored servant Tom Swift has, remember, named Eradicate Sampson? Rad for short. The way he treats that guy, it's disgusting. Do they want me to read that stuff so I'll be like that?"

"Maybe that's how," said Tim, excited, having figured it out all at once, "how they want you to be with Carl." He meant Carl Barrington, a colored kid they knew. His family had moved here from Pittsfield not so long ago. The Barringtons lived in Northumberland Estates, a new development out across an abandoned quarry and a couple of rye fields from the older part of Mingeborough that Grover and Tim lived in. Like them, and Etienne Cherdlu, Carl was a nut for practical jokes, not just watching and laughing, but for actually playing them and thinking up new ones, this being one reason the four of them hung around together. The suggestion that Rad, a character in a book, had anything to do with Carl puzzled Grover.

"Don't they like Carl, or what?" he said.

"I don't think it's him. It's his mother and father."

"What did they do?"

Tim made a don't-ask-me face. "Pittsfield is a city," he said. "I guess you can do almost anything in a city. Maybe they ran a numbers game."

"You got that from watching television," Grover accused, and Tim said yeah and laughed. Grover said, "Does your mother know that you and me and Carl go out — you know — fool around?"

"I didn't tell her," Tim said. "She didn't say not to."

"Don't tell her," said Grover. Tim didn't. It wasn't that Grover ever gave orders, but there was an understanding among all of them that even though sometimes he was wrong about things, he still knew more than any of the rest of them and they ought to listen to him. If he told you that a wart wasn't going to go away, that it had a mind of its own, all the purple lights and green fluorescence in Massachusetts would not prevail. The wart would stay.

Tim looked at the wart, a little leery about it, as if it did have a separate intelligence. If he'd been a few years younger, he would have given the wart a name, but he was beginning to realize only little kids named things. Now he sat inside the washing machine he'd used last year for a space capsule, listened to the rain, began to think of getting old, and then older and older without bound, cut the thought off before it modulated to the matter of dying, decided to ask Grover today if he'd learned anything new about the other thing, the liquid nitrogen. "Nitrogen is a gas," Grover had told him, "I never heard of it being a liquid." That was all. But he might have something today. You never knew what he was going to come back from college with. Once he'd brought a multicolored model of a protein molecule, which was now in the hideout, along with the Japanese TV and the sodium stockpile, a bunch of old transmission parts from Etienne Cherdlu's father's junkyard, concrete bust of Alf Landon stolen in one of the weekly raids on Mingeborough Park, busted Mies van der Rohe chair salvaged from another of the old estates, not to mention assorted chandelier pieces, fragments of tapestries, teak newels, one fur overcoat they could hang around the neck of the bust and hide under sometimes, like in a tent.

Tim rolled out of the machine and went as quietly as he could into the kitchen to check the clock. It was a little past ten. Grover was never on time himself, but he always wanted other people to be. "Punctuality," he would declaim, rolling the word at you like an invincible purey, "is not one of your salient virtues." All you had to say to him then was "Huh?" and he'd forget it and get down to business. One of the reasons Tim liked him.

Tim's mother wasn't in the living room, the television was off, and at first he thought she might have gone out. He pulled his raincoat down off the hanger in the hall closet and started for the back door. Then he heard her dialing. He came around a corner, and there she was under the back stairs, holding the blue Princess telephone between her jaw and shoulder. She'd been dialing with one hand and holding the other in front of her in a tight, pale fist. There was a look on her face Tim had never seen before. A little - what do you call it, nervous? scared? -he didn't know. If she saw him there she gave no sign, though he'd made noise enough. The receiver stopped buzzing, and somebody answered.

"You niggers," his mother spat out suddenly, "dirty niggers, get out of this town, go back to Pittsfield. Get out before you get in real trouble." Then she hung up fast. The hand that was in a fist had been shaking, and now her other hand, once it let go of the receiver, started shaking a little too. She turned swiftly, as if she'd smelled him like a deer; caught Tim looking at her in astonishment.

"Oh, you," she said, beginning to smile, except for her eyes.

"What were you doing?" Tim said, which wasn't what he'd meant to ask.

"Oh, playing a joke, Tim," she said, "a practical joke."

Tim shrugged and went on out the back door. "I'm going out," he told her, without looking back. He knew she wouldn't give him any trouble now about it, because he'd caught her.

He ran out into the rain and past two wet lilac bushes, down a slope into long grass turned to hay, his sneakers soaked after only a couple-three steps. Grover Snodd's house, an older one than Tim's with a gambrel roof, edged out from behind a big maple to greet him. When he'd been younger Tim used to think of the house as a person, and say hello to it each time he came over, as if it actually were peeking around the maple at him, friendly, in a kind of game between friends. He still was not at the point where he could give this up completely; it would be cruel to the house to stop believing in it. So: "Hi, house," he said, as usual. The house had a face on the end, a pleasant old face, windows for eyes and nose, a face that always seemed to be smiling. Tim ran on by it, for just a moment only a shadow, dwarfed against the towering, benevolent face. The rain was coming down pretty hard. He skidded around a corner and up to another maple with pieces of board nailed to the side of the trunk. Up, slipping once, and out a long limb to Grover's window. Whistling, electronic sounds came from inside. "Grovie," Tim said, banging on the window. "Hey."

Grover opened the window and announced to Tim that he had a lamentable tendency to dilatoriness.

"Wha?" said Tim.

"I just heard a kid in New York," Grover told him as Tim climbed into the room. "There's something funny with the sky today, because — you know — I have trouble most of the time just getting Springfield." Grover was a radio ham. He put together his own transceiver rigs and test equipment. Not only the sky but these mountains, too, made incoming signals capricious. Grover's room, certain nights when Tim stayed over, filled as the hour grew late with disembodied voices, sometimes even from as far away as the sea. Grover liked to listen but he seldom transmitted to anybody. He had road maps stuck up on the wall and each time he heard a new voice he'd mark it on the map, along with the frequency. Tim had never seen him sleep. He'd still be up no matter what time Tim turned in, fooling with dials, pressing a huge pair of rubber earphones to his head. There was a speaker too; sometimes he had that on. Drifting in and out of sleep, Tim would hear, mixed with dreams, cops being called to investigate car wrecks or just noises or shadows that moved where everything should have been still, cabbies out to meet the night's trains and grouching mostly about coffee or cracking dry jokes with their dispatcher, some half of a chess game, tugs across the Dutch Hills taking a string of gravel barges down the Hudson, road workers in the autumn and winter working late getting out snow fence or plowing, a merchantman at sea now and then when the thing in the sky, the Heaviside layer, was right for it — all these coming down, filtering through to populate his dreams, so that in the morning he'd never know which had been real, which he'd hallucinated. Grover never was any help. Waking up, before he was fully out of dreams, Tim would say, "Grovie, what about the lost raccoon? The cops find him?" or, "What about that Canadian logger in the houseboat up the river?" And Grover would always answer, "I don't remember that." When Etienne Cherdlu stayed over too, he'd remember different things than Tim did: singing, or badger-watchers reporting in to some kind of headquarters, or bitter arguments, half in Italian, about pro football.

Étienne was supposed to be here today too. It was a regular Saturday-morning briefing session. Probably his father had kept him late again working over at the junkyard. He was a very fat kid who wrote his name "8oN," usually on telephone poles with "ha, ha" after it, in crayon, yellow keel swiped from road crews. Like Tim and Grover and Carl, Étienne loved to play practical jokes, only with him it was an obsession. Grover was a genius, Tim wanted someday to become a basketball coach, Carl might star on one of his teams, but Etienne, all he could see was a career somehow playing jokes. "That's crazy," kids would tell him. "A career? You mean a comedian or something on TV, a clown, what?" And Etienne, putting his arm around your shoulders (which, if you were alert enough, you realized he was doing not out of

friendship but to Scotch-tape a sign to you reading MY MOTHER WEARS COMBAT BOOTS, or KICK HERE, with an arrow), would tell you, "My father says everything's going to be machines when we grow up. He says the only jobs open will be in junkyards for busted machines. The only thing a machine *can't* do is play jokes. That's all they'll use people for, is jokes."

The kids might have been right: maybe he was a little crazy. He took chances nobody else would, letting air out of tires on cop cars, putting on skin-diving gear to stir up silt in the creek the paper mill used (which once stopped production for nearly a week), leaving silly and almost meaningless notes signed "The Phantom" on the principal's desk while she was out of her office teaching eighth grade - stuff like that. He hated institutions. His great enemies, his jokes' perpetual targets, were the school, the railroad, the PTA. He had gathered around him a discontented bunch the principal, when she was yelling at them, never failed to call "uneducable," a word none of them understood and which Grover wouldn't explain to them because it made him mad, it was like calling somebody a wop, or a nigger. Etienne's friends included the Mostly brothers, Arnold and Kermit, who sniffed airplane glue and stole mousetraps from the store, which for fun they would then cock, stand out in the middle of some empty field and throw at each other; Kim Dufay, a slender, exotic-looking sixth-grader with a blond pigtail that hung to her waist and was usually blue on the end from being dunked in inkwells, who had a thing about explosive chemical reactions and was responsible for replenishing the cache of sodium up at the hideout, smuggling the stuff out of the Mingeborough High School lab with the connivance of her boyfriend Gaylord, an infatuated sophomore shot-putter who just liked them young; Hogan Slothrop, the doctor's kid, who at the age of eight had taken to serious after-bedtime beer-drinking and at the age of nine got religion, swore off beer and joined the Alcoholics Anonymous, a step his father, who was what is known as permissive, gave his blessing to and which the local A.A. group tolerated because they thought having a kid around would be inspirational; Nunzi Passarella, who had begun his career in second grade by bringing somehow a full-grown pig in to Show-and-Tell Time, a quarter-ton Poland China sow, in the school bus and everything, and had gone on to found a Crazy Sue Dunham cult, in honor of that legendary and beautiful drifter who last century had roamed all this hilltop country exchanging babies and setting fires and who, in a way, was the patron saint of all these kids.

"Where's Carl?" Tim said after drying his head on one of Grover's sweat shirts.

"Down cellar," Grover said, "fooling with the rhinoceros feet." Which you could wear like shoes and which would be worn so come the first snowfall. "What's the matter?"

"My mother's been" — he had a hard time saying it because you were not supposed to tell on your mother — "bothering people. Again."

"Bothering Carl's folks?"

Tim nodded.

Grover frowned. "My mother has, too. I hear them talking about it, you know" — making a thumb at a pair of earphones running in a direct line off a bug he'd had planted for a year in his parents' bedroom—"it's called the race issue. For a long time I thought they meant a real race, cars or something."

"And she used that word again," Tim said. At which point Carl came in, without the rhinoceros feet, smiling and quiet, as if he'd had some kind of a bug on Grover's room too and knew what they'd been talking about.

"You want to listen?" Grover said, nodding at the ham equipment. "I had New York for a minute."

Carl said yeah, went over and put on the earphones and started tuning.

"Here's Etienne," said Tim. The fat boy hovered at the window like a slick balloon. He had grease on his face and was making cross-eyes. They let him in. "I got something

you'll get a real bang out of," Étienne said.

"What?" said Tim, who was still half thinking about his mother and was not too alert.

"This," said Etienne, and socked him with a paper bag full of rain water he'd been hiding in his shirt. Tim grabbed him and they wrestled around, Grover yelling at them to be careful of the radio gear, Carl lifting his feet and laughing whenever they rolled close. When they quit, Carl took off the earphones and hit the power switch and Grovie went to sit cross-legged on the bed, which meant the Inner Junta was in session.

"Progress reports first, I think," said Grover. "What have you got this week, Étienne?" He had this clipboard he always would snap the clip of rhythmically whenever he was thinking hard.

Étienne took out some papers he had folded in his back pocket and read, "Railroad. One new lantern, two torpedoes added to the arsenic."

"Arsenal," muttered Grover, writing on the clipboard.

"Yeah. Me and Kermie went out and did another count on cars at points Foxtrot and Quebec. Foxtrot showed seventeen cars, three trucks between four-thirty and — "

"I'll take the figures later," Grover said. "Can we do anything in that cut, on that stretch of track, then, or do too many cars come by up on the road? - that's the point."

"Oh," said Étienne. "Well, it was pretty heavy traffic, Grovie." He stuck his teeth out and did slant-eyes at Carl and Tim, who started laughing.

"Can you get out any later?" Grover said irritably. "Later at night, say about nine?"

"I don't know," said Étienne. "I'd have to sneak out and—"

"Well, sneak out," Grover said. "We need figures for the night, too."

"But he-he worries about me," Étienne said, "he really does."

Grover frowned at his clipboard, snapped the clip a couple of times, and said, "Well, how about the school? Anything on that?"

"I have a couple of more little kids lined up," Étienne said, "first-graders. They're always getting yelled at. They throw chalk. They throw anything. One of them has a real good arm, Grovie. We'd have to drill them a little with the sodium. That might be a problem."

Grover looked up. "Problem?"

"They might try to eat it or something. One of them" — giggling - "chews chalk. He says it tastes good."

"Well," said Grover, "keep looking. We need somebody, Étienne. It's a very vital area. We're going to *have* to demolish that boys' latrine. It's symmetry we're after."

"Cemetery?" said Tim, squinting his eyes and wrinkling his nose. "What do you want the cemetery for, Grovie?"

Grover explained the word to him. Sketched a rough plan view of the school building with chalk on his green-board on the wall. "Symmetry and timing," he yelled, "coordination."

"That's on my report card," said Étienne, "that word."

"Right," said Grover. "It means your arms and legs and head all work together in gym, and it's the same for us, in this thing, for a gang like ours, as it is for the parts of your body," but they'd quit listening. Étienne was pulling his mouth wide; Tim and Carl were taking turns socking each other in the arm. Grover snapped his clipboard real loud at them and they quit fooling around. "Etienne, anything more?"

"That's all. Oh, the PTA meeting Tuesday. I think I'll send Hogan again."

"You remember last time," Grover said with an effort, "what he did." The original idea had been that Hogan Slothrop would make a better infiltrator into the PTA meetings because of his experience with Alcoholics Anonymous, Grover's assumption being that Hogan knew most about the kinds of meetings grownups had. It was another miscalculation. It bothered Grover for a week that he'd judged things so wrong. What Hogan had tried to do, instead of just sit quiet, out of sight, taking notes, was horn in on

one meeting. "I mean," said Hogan, "I didn't see any harm in raising my hand, you know, and saying, 'My name is Hogan Slothrop, I am a school kid,' and then telling them what it was like."

"They don't want to know," said Grover.

"My mother does," Hogan said. "She asks me every day what I did in school, and I tell her."

"She doesn't listen," said Grover. They had thrown Hogan Slothrop out of the PTA meeting about the time he started up front to the podium to see if they'd let him recite the A.A.'s Twelve Steps. Literally threw him out — he was light and easy to lift.

"Why?" Grover screamed.

"There are meetings," Hogan tried to explain, "and meetings. The PTA does it all different. They have these rules, or something, and everybody is more, more ..."

"Formal," suggested Grover. "Official."

"Like they're playing some game, a new one I never heard of before," Hogan said. "At the A.A. we just talk."

Next PTA meeting Kim Dufay put on lipstick, did her hair in a French twist, dolled up in her most sophisticated clothes and a size 28A padded bra she'd conned her mother into buying her, and went in and did a pretty good job of passing. So she'd become the new infiltrator.

"And now," Etienne summarized, "Hogan feels bad about being replaced by a girl."

"I like Hogan," Grover said, "don't get me wrong, fellas. But can he function well in a highly structured situation, that's what I - "

"Wha?" said Tim and Carl in unison. It was a bit they'd worked up between them and it never failed to confound Grover. Grover shrugged, admitted there might be a morale problem and told Etienne OK, Hogan could try it again. Tim's report was next. His area of concern was money and drilling. At the moment everybody was occupied with the yearly dry run coming up. The code name for it was Operation Spartacus, which Grover had taken from the movie of the same name, having gone all the way over to Stockbridge one time to see it and been so impressed that for the month following he couldn't go by a mirror without making a Kirk Douglas face at himself in it. This would be the third year for Spartacus, the third dry run for the real uprising of the slaves, referred to only as Operation A. "What's the A for?" Tim had asked once. "Abattoir," Grover answered with a funny look. "Armageddon." "Show-off," Tim said, and forgot it. You didn't have to know what initials meant to drill kids.

"How's it shaping up, Tim?" asked Grover.

Tim wasn't too enthusiastic. "Without a good mock-up, Grovie, it just won't be worth much."

"Just to recap for the others now, Tim," Grover said, writing on the clipboard, "we're handling it more or less the same as last year, right?"

"Right. Using Fazzo's Field again and laying it down" -pointing at the sketch on the greenboard — "full size. But we're using the little stakes and red flags that Étienne got from the road crew this year instead of the lime." Last year too many little kids had been doing just great up until they got to the white outline of the school building, then they'd stopped short and stood around scuffing it into the grass with their shoes. In the critique held later Grover advanced the theory that the line figure in the grass might have reminded the little kids of chalk lines on a greenboard. With the lime there'd also been the problem of getting the thing erased when Spartacus was over. But stakes, then you could just pull up. Stakes were better.

"But not," said Tim, "still not as good as real walls. Even beaver board ones. Running across a line, making believe it's a door, that's one thing. But you need the door itself. You need real stairs, and real toilets to throw the sodium in, you know?"

"But two years ago you didn't feel that way," Grover pointed out.

Tim shrugged. "It just isn't that real anymore. For me. How do we know, when it's time, zero hour, that they'll do it the same way? Especially the little kids?"

"We don't," said Grover. "But we can't afford to build any real elaborate mock-up."

"We have about twenty-five bucks," Tim said. "They're really starting to come through with their milk money now, even some of the ones who, it isn't their turn, you know?"

Grover gave him a lidded look. "You been strong-arming them, Tim? I don't need any of that."

"No, Grovie, I swear, they're all doing it on their own. They say — a couple kids did — that they *believe* in us. Some of them don't like milk anyway, so they don't mind passing it up."

"Just see that they don't get too enthusiastic," Grover said. "The teachers might catch on. The idea is to have a more or less constant milk count every day, to rotate it, very gradually, very quietly. The daily take may be small that way but it's steady. You start getting these wild fluctuations, everybody handing you nickels at once, they'll get suspicious. Go easy. How's the other income? How's our fence in Pittsfield?"

"He wants furniture now," Tim said. "That's a problem. We can get furniture, from the Velour estate, from the Rosenzweig place, from two or three others. But how do we carry it to Pittsfield? We can't. And he's also quit accepting collect calls."

"Gah," said Grover, "then we might as well cross him off" too. See? You can't trust them. They start going cheap on you and that means they don't want you around anymore."

"Uh, how about," Tim put in, trying to keep Grover from getting started, "you know, that mock-up?"

"No, no," Grover said. "We need that money for other things." Tim flopped back on the rug and looked at the ceiling. "That's all, Tim? OK, Carl now. How's it going up the development?"

Carl was their organizer for all Northumberland Estates, the new part of Mingeborough. The old town would be easy enough to handle when it was time, but this development shopping center with its supermarket and bright new drugstore that sold Halloween masks, and parking lot always full of cars, even late into the night, bothered them. While it was being put up, the summer before last, Tim and Étienne used to go there evenings and play king-of-the-mountain on the piles of fill till it was dark; then they'd steal lumber, drain the gas tanks of graders and bulldozers, even bust a few windows if the peepers and frogs in Corrody's Swamp down the hill were singing loud enough. The kids didn't like the development much, didn't like it being called "estates" when each lot was only fifty by a hundred feet, nowhere near the size of the old Gilded Age estates, real ones, that surrounded the old town the way creatures in dreams surround your bed, higher and hidden but always there. Like Grover's house, the Big Houses of the estates also had faces, but without such plain, gambreled honesty: Instead there were mysterious deep eyes fringed in gimcrackery and wrought-iron masks, cheeks tattooed in flowered tiles, great port-cullised mouths with rows of dead palm trees for teeth, and to visit one of them was like reentering sleep, and the loot you came away with did not ever seem that real; whether you kept it to furnish the hideout with, or sold it to a fence like this antique shop in Pittsfield, it was the spoils of dream. But there was nothing about the little, low-rambling, more or less identical homes of Northumberland Estates to interest or to haunt, no chance of loot that would be any more than the ordinary, waking-world kind the cops hauled you in for taking; no small immunities, no possibilities for hidden life or otherworldly presence; no trees, secret routes, shortcuts, culverts, thickets that could be made hollow in the middle — everything in the place was out in the open, everything could be seen at a glance; and behind it, under it, around the corners of its houses and down the safe, gentle curves of its streets, you came back, you kept coming back, to nothing; nothing but the cheerless

earth. Carl was one of the few kids who lived there that the old-town kids could get along with. It was his job to drum up support, to win new converts, to scout out any strategic importance there might be to crossroads, stores, things like that. It wasn't a job the others envied him.

"There've been these phone calls," Carl mentioned, after he'd given a rundown on how his week had gone. "Practical jokers." He told some of the things they'd said.

"Jokes," Étienne said. "What's so funny? Call somebody up, call them names, that isn't a joke. It doesn't make any sense at all."

"What about it, Carl?" Grover wanted to know. "Think they suspect anything? Think they caught on what we're up to?"

Carl smiled and so they knew what he was going to say. "No, it's safe. Still safe."

"Then why the phone calls?" Grover said. "If not Operation A, then what?"

Carl shrugged and sat watching them, as if he knew what, knew everything, secrets none of them had even guessed at. As if there were after all some heart-in-hiding, some crypt to Northumberland Estates that had so far managed to elude the rest of them, and which Carl would only someday tell them about, as reward for their having been more ingenious in their scheming, or braver in facing up to their parents, or smarter in school, or maybe better in some way they hadn't yet considered but which Carl would let them know about when he was ready, through hints, funny stories, apparently casual changes of subject.

"End of the meeting," Grover announced. "Let's go over to the hideout."

The rain had fallen away to a sort of drifting mist. The four of them scrambled down the tree and ran out of Grover's yard, down the block, into and across a field among rain-flattened holidays of hay. Somewhere en route they nicked un a fat basset hound named Pierre.

who on sunny days slept in the middle of the state highway that briefly became Chickadee Street as it passed through Mingeborough. But rain did something to him, invigorated him. He romped around them like a puppy, yapping and trying, it looked like, to catch raindrops on his tongue. The sun would set tonight without anyone's seeing it — there was that kind of bleakness to the afternoon. You couldn't see any mountains because the clouds trailed too low. Tim, Grover, Étienne, Carl and Pierre went flickering over the field like shadows, out to a dirt road whose ruts were filled with rain now. The road wound down a little ridge into King Yrjö's woods, named after a European pretender who'd fled the eclipse then falling over Europe and his own hardly real shadow-state sometime back in the middle Thirties, trading a bucketful of jewels, the yarn went, for all this property. Why it had to be a bucketful, which sounded like an impractical way to carry jewels around, nobody ever explained. There were also supposed to have been three (some said four) wives, one official and the others morganatic, and a fiercely loyal aide, a cavalry officer seven feet tall with a full beard, spurred boots, gold epaulets and a shotgun he always carried with him and would not hesitate to use on anybody, especially a kid, caught trespassing. It was he who haunted the grounds. He still lived there though his king had long gone — at least, everybody believed he did — though no one had ever seen him outright, only heard his heavy boots crashing after you through the dead leaves, among the tree trunks and briers, as you ran in panic. You always got away. The king's exile, kids could sense, was something their parents were in on but was effectively cut off from the kids: There had been the falling dark, yes, and general flight, and a large war -all this without names and dates, pieced together out of talk overheard from parents, television documentaries, social-studies class if you happened to be listening, marines-in-action comics, but none of it that sharp, that specific; all of it in a kind of code, twilit, forever unexplained. King Yrjö's estate was the only real connection the kids had with whatever the cataclysmic

thing was that had happened, and it helped for the caretaker, the pursuer, to have been a soldier.

Yet he had not bothered the Inner Junta at all. Years ago, somehow, it had become clear to only them that he never would. They'd since been all over the place and had seen no definite trace of him, though plenty of ambiguous ones. Which didn't disprove his existence, but did mean that they'd found the perfect place for a hideout. Real or make-believe, the giant cavalryman became their protector.

The road passed through a stand of pines, high in whose branches partridges whirred. Water dripped; shoes squished in the mud. After the trees came a sweep of what had once been smooth lawn, smooth as the back of a long wave out at sea, but now was full of weeds, rabbit holes, tall rye. According to Tim's father, years ago peacocks had come running downhill across the great lawn whenever a carriage had entered this stretch of the road, spreading out their brilliant tails. "Oh, yeah," Tim said, "like just before a program comes on in color. When are we getting a color TV, Dad?"

"Black and white's good enough," his father had said, and that was that. Tim had asked Carl once whether he had a color TV at home. "Why should I?" said Carl, and then almost immediately, "Oh! yeah." And bust out laughing. Tim knew as well as Étienne, the professional comic, when your listener had guessed your next line, so he didn't say anything else. He wondered why Carl laughed so hard. It wasn't that funny and even had a kind of logic to it. He did think of Carl as not only "colored" himself, but somehow more deeply involved with *all* color. When Tim thought about Carl he always saw him against blazing reds and ochres of this early fall, only last month, when Carl had just come to Minge-borough and they were still getting to be friends, and he thought that Carl must somehow carry around with him a perpetual Berkshire autumn, a Wonderful World of Color. Even in the grayness of this afternoon and this district they had entered (which, it seemed, was deprived of its just measure of light because part of it belonged to the past), Carl brought a kind of illumination, a brightening, a compensation for whatever it was about the light that was missing.

They left the road and plunged down through azalea bushes to the banks of an ornamental canal, part of a system of waterways and islands laid out toward the end of the last century, perhaps with some idea of a miniaturized or toy Venice for the New York candy magnate Ellsworth Baffy, who had caused this place to be built originally. Like many who put castles up among these inland hills, he was a contemporary of Jay Gould and his partner, the jolly Berkshire peddler Jubilee Jim Fisk. Once, right around this time of year, Baffy had held a masquerade ball in honor of the presidential candidate James G. Blaine, from which Blaine had been absent due to a storm and a mix-up in rail schedules. No one missed him. All the moneyed of Berkshire County congregated in the great ballroom of Baffy's spun-sugar manor house; the party lasted three days and the countryside was visited by the drunken wanderings of Pierrots pale in the light of the moon, hideous Borneo apes toting jugs of the local white lightning, lush and cherry-lipped actresses imported from New York, in silk capes, red corsets, long hose; wild Indians, princes of the Renaissance, characters from Dickens, paisley bulls, bears with nosegays; allegorical, garlanded girls named Free Enterprise, Progress, Enlightenment; a giant Maine lobster that never got to extend its claw to the candidate. It snowed, and the last morning of the party a pretty ballet girl dressed as Columbine was found in a quarry nearly dead; the toes of one foot were frostbitten so badly they had to be amputated. She never danced again, and in November Blaine lost the election and was also forgotten. After Baffy died the estate was bought by a retired train robber from Kansas and in 1932 was sold dirt cheap to a chain of hotels which couldn't afford to convert the place and eventually decided that King Yrjö's bucketful of jewels was better than paying the taxes on a white elephant. And now the King too was gone, and the house was empty again, except for the Junta, and one possible cavalry

officer.

Hidden among reeds was a flat-bottomed boat they'd found, patched up, and christened the *S. S. Leak*. They piled aboard, and Tim and Etienne rowed. Pierre sat with his paws up on the front end, like a figurehead. Downstream a frog jumped, and falling rain stippled the dark surface of the water. They splashed along under phony-Venetian bridges, some without floorboards so that you could look up and see the gray sky through them; past little landings whose untarred pilings had rotted and collected green slime; an open summerhouse with screening rusted through, which swayed even in soft winds; corroded statues of straight-nosed, fig-leaved youths and maidens, holding horns of plenty, crossbows, impossible Panpipes and stringed instruments, pomegranates, curling scrolls, and one another. Soon, over the tops of leafless willows, the Big House appeared, growing taller the closer they came — more turrets, crenellations, flying buttresses coming into sight at each stroke of the oars. The outside was in fairly lousy shape: a lot of shingling was off, paint had peeled, roof slates lay broken in piles where they'd slid and fallen. Windows had been mostly busted after years of forays by nervous kids double-dared to go in against the cavalry officer and his shotgun. And everywhere the smell of old—eighty-year-old - wood.

They tied the boat to an iron rung sunk in a kind of promenade, went ashore, and trooped around to a side entrance of the Big House. No matter how often they came to the hideout there was a feeling of ceremony, more than any of trespass, about going into the house: It took an effort to step from outside to inside. The inside was full of a pressure, an odor, that resisted intrusions, that kept them conscious of itself until they left again. None of them would go so far as to call it by any name, but they all knew it was there. Part of the ceremony was to look at one another and grin, embarrassed, before pushing on into the twilight that waited for them.

They skirted the edges of the room they'd entered, because hung right in the middle of the ceiling was a cobwebbed, flint-glass chandelier with dust piled in thick stalagmites on its upper facets, and they knew what would happen if you walked under it. The house was full of such mute injunctions: blind places you could be jumped out at from; stretches of warped floor that might suddenly open downward into dungeons or simple darkneses with nothing nearby to grab onto; doors that would not stay open behind you but were balanced to close quietly, unless you watched them. These places it was better to stay away from. The route to the hideout was thus like the way into reefed and perilous harbor. If there had been more than four going in, there would have been no danger at all; it would have been just a mob of kids running through an old house. If there had been fewer, it would have been impossible to get beyond the first room.

Creaking, or echoing, or left as dark-ribbed sneaker-prints in a fine layer of damp, the footsteps of the Junta carried them on into King Yrjö's house, past pier glasses that gave them back their images dark and faded, as if some part were being kept as the price of admission; through doorways where old velvet hung whose pile was worn away into maplike patterns, seas and land masses taught in no geography their schools knew; through the scullery, where they'd found a decades-old case of Moxie, of which there were still nine bottles left, Kim Dufay having busted one over the prow of the *S. S. Leak* at its christening, the other two drunk solemnly to celebrate last year's more or less successful Spartacus maneuvers and recently Carl Barrington's membership in the gang; then downstairs, between rows of empty wine racks, into empty utility rooms with empty workbenches and dead electric outlets dangling from overhead in the dark like armless spiders; at last to the house's most secret core, the room behind the ancient coal furnace that they'd found and fixed up and Etienne had spent a week booby-trapping. This is where they met and drew up the timetables; this is where they kept the sodium under kerosene in a five-gallon can; and the maps with the objectives marked on them, in an old roll-top desk they'd found empty; and the list of public enemies, which

no one but Grover had access to.

So the afternoon got darker, the rain came and went in gusts, sometimes thickening to a downpour, then easing off to a drizzle, and deep in the house, in the dry, cold room, the Junta plotted. Their plot had been going on now for three years, and it reminded Tim sometimes of dreams you got when you were sick and feverish, where there was something you had been told to do — find somebody important in an endless strange city full of faces and clues; struggle down the long, inexhaustible network of some arithmetic problem where each step led to a dozen new ones. Nothing ever seemed to change; no "objectives" were taken that didn't create a need to start thinking about new ones, so that soon the old ones were forgotten and let slip by default back into the hands of grownups or into a public no man's land again, and you would be back where you'd started. So what if Etienne (to take a major example) had managed to stop the paper mill last year for almost a week by messing up the water it used? Other things kept on, as if there were something basically wrong and self-defeating with the plot itself. Hogan Slothrop was supposed to have planted a smoke bomb in a PTA meeting the same evening, smoke them out and make off with all their minutes and financial statements, but he'd got a sudden call to go sit with another A.A. member, a stranger in town who had called the local chapter because he was in trouble and afraid.

"What's he afraid of?" Tim had wanted to know.

It had been a year before, in the early fall, a little past the opening of school. Hogan had come over to Tim's house right after supper, and the sky was still light, though the sun was down, and they had been out in Tim's back yard shooting baskets. Or Tim was: Hogan had had this conflict of commitments on his mind.

"Afraid he'll start drinking again," Hogan said, answering Tim's question. "I'm taking this along" — holding up a carton of milk. "If he wants to drink, he can drink this instead."

"Gah," said Tim, who didn't think much of milk.

"Listen," said Hogan, "you never outgrow your need for milk. Let me tell you about milk. How great it is."

"Tell me about beer," Tim said. Being lately fascinated with the idea of getting drunk.

Hogan took offense. "Don't make fun," he said. "I'm lucky I went through that when I did, that's what my father says. Look at this guy I got to go sit with. He's thirty-seven years old. Look at what a head start I got on him."

"You're supposed to plant that smoke bomb tonight," Tim said.

"Come on, Tim, you can do it for me, can't you?"

"Me and Grovie were going to go throw sodium," Tim said. "Remember? It's all got to come off at the same time."

"Well, then, tell Grovie I can't make it," Hogan said. "I'm sorry, Tim, I just can't." At about which point — wouldn't you know? — Grover showed up. They explained to him as diplomatically as they could — which, as usual, wasn't good enough, because Grover flew into a full-scale snit, called them both an assortment of names and stalked off into the darkness which had crept down off the mountains so slow and shifty they hadn't noticed.

"Looks like no sodium-throwing," ventured Hogan, after a while, "huh, Tim?"

"Yeah," said Tim. That's how it always was. Things never went off the way they should've; nothing progressed. Étienne had played frogman that day for nothing, nothing but laughs. The paper mill would start up again, people would go back to work, the insecurity and discontent Grover needed and had counted on for dark reasons he never confided would vanish, and everything would be the way it was.

"Uh come on, Tim," Hogan suggested in his Yogi Bear voice, which he used for cheering people up, "uh why don't you ride down to the hotel, uh and help me sit with

this guy?"

"That where he is?" Tim said. Hoge said yeah, the guy was just passing through, and for some reason nobody else wanted to go. Nancy, the secretary at the central A.A. office, had telephoned Hogan as a last resort. When he said OK, she said, "He'll go," to somebody in the office with her, and Hogan heard what sounded like a couple of people laughing.

Tim got his bike, yelled into the house that he'd be back, and they pedaled downhill through the gathering evening and then coasted into the town. It was good fall weather, a borderline time when some trees have jumped the gun and started to change color, and the insects get louder as the days pass, and some mornings, when the wind is out of the Northwest, you can look over, on the way to school, at the higher mountains and make out a few lonely hawks beginning to drift on South, following the crests of the ridges. In spite of all that day's pointlessness, Tim could still enjoy the feeling of coasting down toward the yellow clusters of lights, leaving behind two pages of arithmetic homework and a chapter of science he was supposed to read, not to mention a lousy movie, some romantic comedy dating from the 1940's which was on the only channel you could get up here. As Tim and Hogan zoomed by houses with doors and windows still open for the dark's first coolness they could glimpse the bluish fluorescence of screens, all tuned to the same movie, and pick up snatches of dialogue: "... Private, have you gone completely out of your ..."; "... I mean, there was a girl back home ..."; "... (splash, comical yell) Oh, sorry, sir, thought you were a Jap infiltrator . . ."; "How can I be a Jap infiltrator when we're five thousand . . ."; "I'll wait, Bill, I'll wait for you as long as ..." and on down, past the firehouse, where a few big kids were sitting around on the old La France engine, telling jokes and smoking, and by the candy store, which neither Tim nor Hogan felt like stopping in tonight, and all of a sudden there were parking meters and several blocks of diagonal parking, which meant you had to put on your brakes and keep an eye out for the traffic, By the time they got to the hotel the night had completely come, had set down on Mingeborough like a lid on a pot, and the stores had begun to close up.

They parked their bikes and went into the lobby. The night clerk, who'd just come on, gave them the fishy eye. "Alcoholics Anonymous?" he said. "You're kidding."

"I swear," said Hogan, showing him the carton of milk. "Call him up. Mr. McAfee, room 217." The clerk, who had the empty night facing him, rang the room and talked to Mr. McAfee. He had a funny look when he hung up.

"Well, it sounds like it's a nigger up there," he informed them.

"Can we go up?" Hogan asked.

The clerk shrugged. "He says he's expecting you. If you have any - you know - trouble, just knock his phone off the hook. See, it'll buzz down here."

"Sure," said Hogan. They went through the empty lobby, between facing rows of armchairs, and got in the elevator. Mr. McAfee was on the second floor. Tim and Hogan looked at each other on the way up but didn't say anything. At his door they knocked for a while before he'd answer. He wasn't much taller than they were. He was a Negro with a small mustache, wearing a gray cardigan and smoking.

"I thought he was kidding," said Mr. McAfee. "You guys really from the A.A. ?"

"He is," Tim said.

Then something seemed to happen to Mr. McAfee's face. "Oh," he said. "Well, that's pretty funny. They almost as funny up here as they are in Mississippi. OK, you done your bit now? You can go."

"I thought you wanted help," Hogan said, looking puzzled.

Mr. McAfee stood aside. "You're right about that. Yeah. You really want to come in?" He looked like he didn't care. They went in, and Hogan put his milk on the little writing desk in the corner. It was the first time either of them had been in any of the hotel's

rooms or spoken to anybody colored.

Mr. McAfee was a bass player, but without his instrument. He'd been over in Lenox at some music festival. He had no idea how he'd got over here.

"It happens sometimes," he said. "I get these blank periods. One minute I was in Lenox. Next thing I know, I show up in — what do you call it? — Mingeborough. That ever happen to you?"

"No," said Hoge. "The worst I ever got was sick."

"You off it now. Alcohol."

"Forever," Hogan said. "Now it's strictly milk."

"Well, that makes you a milko, man," said Mr. McAfee, with a wan smile.

"What am I supposed to do," said Hogan, "exactly?"

"Oh, talk," said Mr. McAfee. "Or I'll talk. Till I can get to sleep. Or somebody — Jill — can get here, come get me, you know?"

"Is that your wife?" Tim said.

"That's who went up the hill with Jack," Mr. McAfee said, and he laughed a little. "No, no kidding, that really happened."

"You want to talk about that?" Hogan said.

"No. I guess not."

So, instead, Tim and Hogan told Mr. McAfee about things like school, and the town, and what their parents did for a living; but soon, because they trusted him, they were also telling him the more secret things — Étienne messing up the paper mill, and the hideout, and the sodium stockpile.

"Yeah," cried Mr. McAfee, "that sodium. I remember.

I threw some in a toilet once — flushed the handle first, you know, then dropped in that sodium. Soon as it hit the water down there, *wham!* That was in Beaumont, Texas, where I used to live. School principal comes walking in the room, very straight face, holding a busted piece of a toilet bowl, like this, and he says, 'Which one of you gentlemen — is responsible — for this outrage?'

Hogan and Tim, giggling, told him about the time Etienne had sat up in a tree with a slingshot, shooting little pea-size sodium balls into the swimming pool at one of the estates during a cocktail party, and the way people scattered at the first explosions.

"Very fancy crowd you run with, there," said Mr. McAfee. "Estates and everything."

"Not us," Tim said. "We just sneak in at night, and swim in the pools then. The one up at Lovelace's estate is the nicest. You want to go there? It's warm enough."

"Yeah," said Hoge. "We could go there now. Come on."

"Well, you know," Mr. McAfee said. He looked embarrassed.

"Why not?" Hoge said.

"Well, you guys should be old enough to know why not," Mr. McAfee said, starting to get mad. He looked at their faces and then shook his head and said, even angrier, "I get caught and that's it, baby. I mean that's all."

"Nobody ever gets caught," Hogan said, trying to reassure him.

Mr. McAfee lay down on the bed and looked at the ceiling. "If they're the right color, nobody gets caught," he said quietly, but the kids heard him.

"So you're a better color than we are," Tim said, "for getting away at night. You're bigger and faster. If we can do it you can, Mr. McAfee, no kidding."

Mr. McAfee looked over at them. He lit another cigarette from the butt of the one he was smoking, never taking his eyes off the two kids. It was hard to tell what he was thinking. "Maybe later," he said after he'd squashed out the old cigarette. "Tell you why I'm nervous about that. It's the water in that pool, see. If you any kind of an alky, it can have a funny effect on you. Ever have that happen, Hogan?" Hogan shook his head no. "Well, I did once, while I was in the army."

"Were you in during World War II?" Tim asked. "Fighting the Japanese or anything?"

"No, I missed that," Mr. McAfee said. "I was too young."

"We missed it too," Hogan told him.

"No, I was in during Korea. Only I stayed Stateside all through it. I was in this band - army band, you know - at Fort Ord, California. All around there, up in the hills around Monterey, you have these little bars; anybody can just walk in, if they want to, and start playing. You have a lot of union guys, used to play around L.A. — you know — they get drafted and sent to Ord. Guys been in studio bands, most of them, so you're sitting in with some fine talent, a lot of times. One night we're in this kind of a roadhouse, four of us, and we're playing, and it's sounding pretty good. We're all juiced a little, drinking wine, there's a lot of wine — you know — from over in that valley there, whatever you call it. We just drinking wine and doing some - oh, some blues or something - and this lady comes in. White lady. Kind that sits out by the swimming pool and drinks cocktails at cocktail parties — right? — yeah. You got it. She's a very stout lady, not big fat, just stout, and she says she wants us to come play at a party she's having. So it's like a Tuesday or a Wednesday and we all kind of curious as to how *come* she's having a party such a funny time of the week, well she says it's been going on since the weekend — nonstop, you know - and we come to find out when we get there she's not putting *nobody* on, man. There it is — whooping, hollering, you can hear it for a mile. This baritone sax, some Italian kid, Sheldon somebody, he not halfway in the door there's two or three little chicks all over him, telling him — well, never mind about that — but we set up and get going, and the juice keeps coming on like a bucket brigade, people keep handing it up to you. You know what it is? Champagne. Solid champagne. All night long we drink this stuff, and about the time the sun comes up everybody's passed out, and we quit playing. I lay down next to the drums and go to sleep. Next thing I know I hear this girl, and she's laughing. I get up, the sun's in my eyes, it's only about nine or ten in the morning. I ought to feel horrible, man, but I feel great. I go walking out on this kind of little terrace, it's cold and outside there's fog, not all the way down to the ground, just hiding the tops of the trees, pine trees I guess, the trunks are these - you know - very straight. There's this white fog and downhill there's the ocean. Pacific Ocean, and from up the coast you can even hear that artillery practice back at Ord, wrapped up in the fog, *whoomp, whoomp*. That's how quiet it is. I go on out by the swimming pool, still wondering about this chick I heard laughing, all of a sudden here comes old Sheldon, running out around a corner, with this girl chasing him, and he slams into me, and the girl can't stop in time neither, and we all three of us fall in the pool with all our clothes on. And all I had to do was swallow a little bit of that water and you know what? I'm high all over again, just as high as I was during the night, on all that champagne. How about that?"

"It sounds great," Hogan said. "Except for the alcohol part of it, I mean."

"Yeah, it was great," said Mr. McAfee. "It's the only morning I remember that ever was." He didn't say anything for a while. Then the telephone rang. It was for Tim.

"Hey," said Grover on the other end, "can we come over there? Etienne needs a place to hide tonight." Having, it seems, got second thoughts about his attack on the paper mill earlier that day. It was dawning on him that he'd done something serious, and that the cops, if they got hold of him, would find out about other jobs he'd pulled, and be merciless. Grover's house would be the first place they'd think of to look. It would have to be someplace like the hotel if he wanted to stand a chance of escaping the dragnet. Tim asked Mr. McAfee, who said he guessed so, but reluctant.

"Don't worry," Hogan said. "Etienne's just scared. Like you are."

"Don't you ever get scared?" said Mr. McAfee. His voice had gone funny.

"Not about alcohol," said Hogan. "I guess I was never really that bad."

"Oh, you just passing. I see." He lay still on the bed, his face very black against the pillow. Tim realized that Mr. McAfee had been sweating a lot. It was running off the sides

of his neck and soaking into the pillowcase. He looked sick.

"Can I get you anything?" Tim asked, a little worried. When the man didn't answer, he repeated it.

"Just a drink," Mr. McAfee stage-whispered, pointing at Hogan. "See if you can talk your buddy there into letting me have something to relax with. No kidding, I really need something now."

"You can't," Hogan said. "That's the whole point. That's what I'm here for."

"You think that's what you're here for? You wrong." He stood up slowly, as if his stomach or something hurt, and picked up the telephone. "Can you send up a bottle, a fifth, of Jim Beam," he said, "and" — making an elaborate count of the people in the room — "three glasses? Oh.

Right. OK, only one glass. Oh, there is one glass already here." He hung up. "Cat don't miss a trick," he said. "They right on the ball in Mingeborough, Mass."

"Listen, what did you call us up for?" Hogan said. He was talking in an obstinate, rhythmic way that meant he was going to bust out crying any minute. "Why did you get in touch with the A.A. at all, if you were just going to get drunk anyway?"

"I needed help," explained Mr. McAfee, "and I thought they would help me. And they really helped, didn't they? Look at what they sent me."

"Hey," said Tim, and Hogan started to cry.

"OK," said Mr. McAfee. "Out, you guys. Go on home."

Hogan quit crying and got stubborn. "I'm staying."

"The hell you are. Go on. You're the big jokers in town, now you ought to know a joke when you see one. Go back to the A.A. and tell them they really put one over on you, man. Show them you can be — you know — just a gracious loser." Then they all stood looking at each other in the tiny room, with its four-color print of a bowl of chrysanthemums on the wall, its framed list of rules next to the door, its empty, dusty water pitcher and glass, its one armchair, its three-quarter beige-covered bed and its disinfectant smell, and it began to look as if none of them would ever go anyplace, just stand and turn into a kind of wax-museum scene; but then Grover and Etienne showed up, and the other kids let them in. Mr. McAfee made fists at his sides and went to the telephone again. "Get these kids out of here for me," he said, "would you? Please."

Étienne looked as if he were in a state of shock, and about twice as fat as usual. "I think the cops saw us," he kept saying. "Grovie, didn't they?" He was carrying all his skin-diving equipment, which he had an idea would be damning evidence if it were found at his house.

"He's nervous," Grover said. "What's wrong here — you having trouble?"

"We're trying to keep him from starting drinking," Hogan said. "He called A.A. for help, and now he says get out."

"I assume you are aware," Grover addressed the man, "of the positive correlation that exists between alcoholism and heart disease, chronic upper respiratory infection, cirrhosis of the liver - "

"There he is," said Mr. McAfee. In the door, which had been ajar, now appeared Beto Cufifo, the bellboy and town rum-dum, who would have been retired and living on Social Security except that he was Mexican and wanted back there for something like smuggling or auto theft — the charge varied depending on who he was telling it to. How he had first found his way into Berkshire County nobody would ever know. People were always mistaking him for the only kinds of probable outlander - French Canadian or Italian - and you felt he enjoyed that easy ambiguity and that's why he stuck around Mingeborough.

"One bottle of booze," Beto announced. "That's six-fifty."

"What is it, six-fifty, imported from someplace?" Mr. McAfee said. He had out his wallet and snuck a quick look inside. Tim could only see one bill, a single.

"Tell them at the desk," Beto said. "I just carry."

"Look, put it on my room bill, right?" Mr. McAfee said, reaching for the bottle.

Beto put the bottle behind his back. "He says you got to pay now." There were so many lines in his face you couldn't make out the expression too well, but Tim thought he was smiling; a nasty smile. Mr. McAfee took out the dollar and held it up to Beto.

"Come on. Just put it on my tab." Tim could see sweat pouring off him, though nobody else in the room even looked warm.

Beto took the dollar and said, "Now that's five-fifty. I'm sorry. You talk to him down at the desk, sir."

"Hey, you guys," Mr. McAfee said, "any you kids got any bread? I mean I need five and a half— you think you could lend that to me?"

"Not for whiskey," said Hogan, "not even if I had it." The rest of them took out their loose change and held it in their hands and looked to see, but it only came to maybe a dollar and a quarter.

"That still leaves four-twenty-five," announced Beto.

"Oh, you a regular adding machine," yelled Mr. McAfee. "Come on, boy, come on, let's see that bottle."

"You don't believe me," said Beto, gesturing at the telephone, "they'll tell you. Ask them."

For a second it looked like Mr. McAfee might call down. But finally he said, "Look, I'll split it with you, OK? Half that fifth. You must be pretty dry, all that work you do."

"I don't drink this stuff," said Beto. "I'm a wine man. Good night, sir." He started to close the door. Mr. McAfee jumped at him and made a grab for the bottle. Beto, taken by surprise, dropped it. It fell on the rug and rolled a foot or two. Mr. McAfee and Beto had hold of each other's arms and were struggling around, both very clumsy. Hogan picked up the bottle and ran out the door with it and Mr. McAfee saw him and said something like "Oh my God" and tried to get untangled from the bellboy. But by the time he could get to the door, Hogan had too good a head start, and Mr. McAfee must have known that. He just stood with his head on the doorjamb. Beto took out a comb and combed what there was of his hair. Then, hitching up his belt and glaring at Mr. McAfee, he walked around him and out into the hall, and backward all the way to the elevator, watching the colored man as if daring him to try it again.

Grover, Tim and Étienne stood around without knowing exactly what to do. Mr. McAfee had started making a noise in his throat, a sound none of them had heard come from a man before, though Norman, a stray, red kind of puppy who hung around with Pierre times when the hound wasn't sleeping, had once got hold of some chicken bones, which had stuck someplace inside him and Norman had lain out in the dark and made a sound something like it until Grover's father put the dog in his car and drove away with him. Mr. McAfee stood with his head resting on the side of the door, making the same sound. "Hey," Grover said finally, and went over and took the man's hand, which was only a little bigger than Grover's own but dark-colored, and pulled, and Tim said, yeah, come on, and little by little they pulled him away from the door, while Étienne turned down the beige spread on the bed, and they got him to lie down, and put the cover back over him. All of a sudden there was a siren outside. "Cops!" Étienne yelled, and took off for the bathroom. The siren went by the hotel, and Tim looked out and saw it was a fire engine heading out north, and by the time it was quiet in the room again they could hear water running in the bathtub, and Mr. McAfee crying. He'd rolled over on his stomach and was holding the pillow with both hands on either side of his head and crying, the way a little kid cries, sucking air in in a croak, then letting it out in a wail, over and over as if he was never going to stop.

Tim closed the door and sat on the desk chair. Grover sat in the armchair next to the bed, and that was how their night's vigil began. First there was the crying: all they could

do for that was sit and listen. Once the telephone rang. It was the clerk wanting to know if they were having any trouble, and Grover said, "No, he's all right. He'll be all right." Tim had to go in once to the bathroom, and there he found Étienne cowering submerged in a full tub, dressed in his frogman suit, looking like a black watermelon with arms and legs. Tim tapped him on the shoulder and Etienne started to thrash around, trying to go deeper. "No cops," Tim yelled as loud as he could. "It's Tim."

Étienne surfaced and took off his snorkel mask. "I'm hiding," he explained. "I tried to make soapsuds on top but there was only this real little bar of soap, and I guess it all wore off."

"Come on in and help us," Tim said. So Etienne came back in, trailing pools of water all over the place, and sat on the floor; and then the three of them just sat, listening to the man cry. He cried for a long time, and then dozed off. Sometimes he would wake up and talk for long stretches, then sleep again. Now and then one of the kids would drop off too. For Tim it was a little like staying over at Grovie's house and hearing all those cops and merchant captains and barge tenders over the radio, all those voices bouncing off the invisible dome in the sky and down to Graver's antenna and into Tim's dreams. It was as if Mr. McAfee too were broadcasting from somewhere quite distant, telling about things Tim would not be sure of in the daylight: a brother who'd left home one morning during the depression and got on a freight and disappeared, later sending them this one postcard from Los Angeles, and Mr. McAfee, just a boy, deciding to follow him there the same way, only that first time he got no further than Houston; a Mexican girl he'd been with for a while, and she used to drink some stuff all the time, a word Tim couldn't make out, and she had a baby boy who'd died from a rattlesnake bite (Tim saw the snake, headed for him, and bounced up out of the dream in terror, yelling), and so one morning she'd just gone away, like his brother vanished into the same deserted morning, before the sun was even up; and nights when he would sit by himself down around the docks and look off into the black Gulf, where the lights ended, just cut off and left you this giant nothing; and gang scuffles, day after day, up and down the neighborhood streets, or fights out on the beach in the summer's harsh sun; and gigs in New York, L.A., bad gigs with tenor-sax bands it was better to forget only how do you?; cops who'd picked him up, tanks he had known, tankmates with names like Big Knife, Paco-from-the-Moon, one Francis X. Fauntleroy (who'd taken his last wrinkled half a Pall Mall as he slept one evil morning after mixing pot and wine with a projectionist buddy down under a drive-in movie screen outside Kansas City, a big curving thing, while a John Wayne picture exploded overhead).

"*Blood Alley*," Tim said, gentle. "Yeah, I saw it. I saw it too."

Mr. McAfee slept a little then, and came awake remembering aloud another girl he'd met on a bus who played tenor and had just left a white musician she'd been with — this was out of Chicago going west. The two of them sat in the back seat over the motor, singing scat choruses of different things back and forth at each other, and later on in the night she slept on his shoulder and her hair was shiny and sweet, and around Cheyenne she got off and said she guessed she'd go down to Denver, so he never saw her again after that last glimpse of her little figure wandering around the old brick railroad depot across the street from the bus station, among all these ancient cowboy-movie-looking baggage carts, carrying her sax case and waving once at him when the bus pulled out. And he remembered then how he'd left Jill once the same way, only then it had been Lake Charles, Louisiana, back then when Camp Polk was still going strong, and the streets were full of drunken soldiers singing:

Mine eyes have seen the misery of the coming of the draft, And the day I got the letter was the day I got the shaft.

They said, "My son, we need you, 'cause the army's understaffed."

And I'm in the F.T.A.

"The what?" said Grover.

"Future Teachers of America," said Mr. McAfee, "very clean-cut organization." And Jill was going on north, to St. Louis or someplace, and he was going back home, back to Beaumont, because his mother was sick. He and Jill had been living in Algiers, across the river from New Orleans, and that time it had been going on two months, not as long as their time in New York, not as short or disastrous as the time in L.A., and this time it had come only to a nostalgic, joint admission that there must be this good-bye at the junction point full of drunks out in the middle of a swamp in the middle of the night. "Hey, Jill," he said. "Hey, baby."

"Who do you want?" Grover said.

"His wife," said Tim.

"Jill?" the man on the bed said. His eyes were closed and he looked as if he were struggling to open them. "Is Jill here?"

"You said she was coming to get you," Tim said.

"No, no, she not coming, man, who told you that?" His eyes flew open suddenly, startling-white. "You got to call her. Hey? Hogan? Call her for me?"

"Tim," Tim said. "What's her number?"

"In my wallet." He took out the wallet, an old brown cowhide one that was bulging apart with papers and stuff. "Here." He looked through it, his fingers scattering things, pulling out old business cards from employment agencies and car dealers and restaurants all across the country, and a calendar from two years ago with dates for University of Texas football games printed on one side, and a four-for-a-quarter photograph of him in his army uniform and smiling, holding a girl in a white coat who was looking down and smiling a little too, and a spare shoelace, and somebody's lock of hair folded into an envelope with part of some hospital's name up in the corner, an old army driver's license that wasn't any good anymore, and a couple of pine needles, a piece of saxophone reed, all kinds of scraps of paper, different colors and shapes. One blue one said "Jill," and had an address in New York, and a telephone number.

"Here." He gave it to Tim. "Call her collect, You know how to make one of them?" Tim nodded. "You got to ask for an outside line. Person-to-person to Miss Jill" — snapping his fingers to call the name back—"ah, Jill Pattison. Yeah."

"It's late," Tim said. "Will she still be up?" Mr. McAfee didn't say anything. Tim got the line, and the long-distance operator, and placed the call. "You don't want me to give them *my* name."

"No, no, tell them Carl McAfee." Then the line seemed to go dead. When it came back on she was ringing. It rang a long time and then a man answered.

"No," he said, "no, she went out the Coast a week ago."

"Do you have another number where she can be reached?" said the operator.

"There's an address someplace." He went away. Silence fell on the line and it was right around then that Tim's foot felt the edge of a certain abyss which he had been walking close to — for who knew how long? — without knowing. He looked over it, got afraid, and shied away, but not before learning something unpleasant about the night: that it was night here, and in New York, and probably on whatever coast the man was talking about, one single night over the entire land, making people, already so tiny in it, invisible too in the dark; and how hard it would be, how hopeless, to really find a person you needed suddenly, unless you lived all your life in a house like he did, with a mother and father. He turned around to look at the man on the bed and there came to him a hint then of how lost Mr. McAfee really was. What would he do if they couldn't find this girl? And then the man came back and read an address, which Tim copied, and the operator wanted to know if she should try Los Angeles information.

"Yeah," said Mr. McAfee.

"But she can't come get you if she's in Los Angeles."

"But I got to talk to her."

So Tim listened while more clicks and whirs went out like heard fingers, groping across the whole country in the dark, trying to touch one person out of all the millions that lived in it. Finally a girl answered and said she was Jill Pattison. The operator told her she had a collect call from a Carl McAfee.

"Who?" she said.

Somebody knocked on the door, and Grover went and got it. The operator repeated Mr. McAfee's name, and the girl said "Who?" again. There were two policemen at the door. Étienne, who'd been sitting behind the bed, gave a yelp and scuttled away into the bathroom and jumped back in the tub with a great splash.

"Leon, down at the desk, thought we ought to look in," one of the cops said. "Did this man bring you kids up here?"

"The clerk knows he didn't," Grover said.

"What should I — " Tim said, waving the phone.

"Hang up," said Mr. McAfee. "Forget it." He tightened his hands into fists and lay looking at the cops.

"Fella," said the other cop, "bellboy says you didn't have the price of a bottle of whiskey a while ago."

"That's right," said Mr. McAfee.

"Room here's seven dollars a night. How were you going to pay for that?"

"I wasn't," said Mr. McAfee. "I'm a vagrant."

"Come on," said the first cop.

"Hey," Tim said, "you can't. He's sick. Call the A.A. -they know about him."

"Cool off, son," said the other cop. "He's going to get a nice free room tonight."

"Call Doctor Slothrop," Tim said. The cops had taken Mr. McAfee off the bed and were moving him toward the door.

"My things?" he said.

"Somebody'll take care of them. Come on. You kids too. It's time you were getting home."

Tim and Grover followed them down the hall, into the elevator, out through the lobby past the clerk and into the empty street, where the cops put Mr. McAfee into a patrol car. Tim wondered if either of their voices had ever come over the radio rig at Grover's, had ever figured in any of his dreams. "Be careful," he yelled at them. "He's real sick. You got to take care of him."

"Oh, we'll take care of him," said the cop who wasn't driving. "He knows it too, don't he? Look at him." Tim looked. All he could see were the whites of eyes, and cheekbones highlighted in sweat. Then the car took off, leaving the odor of rubber and a long screech hanging at the curb. That was the last they saw of him. They went down to the station house next day, but the cops said he'd been taken to Pittsfield, and there was no way at all of knowing whether they were telling the truth.

A few days later the paper mill started up again, and then there was that year's Operation Spartacus to worry about, and then the idea Nunzi Passarella came up with of getting car batteries from Étienne's father's junkyard, and a couple of old surplus spotlights and some sickly green cellophane, and rigging the lights up by the railroad cut just outside Mingeborough where the train had to slow down for a curve, getting at least fifty kids to put on rubber monster masks of various kinds, and capes and homemade bat outfits and such, then sit around on the slopes of the cut until the train came, switching on the sickly green spotlights just as it appeared around the curve, and see what happened. Only half the expected number of kids showed up but it was still a success, the train coming to a horrible grinding halt, ladies screaming, conductors

yelling, Étienne cutting the lights and the kids fleeing away up the sides of the cut and into the fields. Grover, who'd been sporting a zombie mask of his own design, had afterward said something curious: "I feel different now and better for having been green, even sickly green, even for a minute." Though they never talked about it, Tim felt the same way.

In the spring he and Étienne hopped a freight train for the first time in their lives, and rode to Pittsfield to see a merchant name of Artie Cognomen, a stout, poker-faced, onetime Bostonian who looked like a selectman and smoked a pipe with a bowl carved in the shape of Winston Churchill's head, complete with cigar. Artie sold practical jokes. "Have a very nice dribble glass in with the spring consignment," he informed them. "Also a wide selection in whoopee cushions, exploding cigars — " "No," said Étienne. "What kind of disguises you got?" Artie showed them all he had — wigs, fake noses, glasses with bug eyes on them — but what they finally settled for was a couple of mustaches you could clip to your nose and two little tins of blackface makeup. "You guys must be reactionaries or something," Mr. Cognomen told them. "This stuff has been sitting around for years. It may even have turned white. You trying to resurrect vaudeville or something?" "We're trying to resurrect a friend," Étienne answered right back without thinking, and then he and Tim looked at each other in surprise, as if some fourth person in the room had said it.

Then this summer the Barringtons had moved into Northumberland Estates, and the kids, as usual, had advance word on it. Their parents suddenly seemed to spend more time talking about the coming of the Barringtons than anything else. They began to use words like "blockbusting" and "integration."

"What's integration mean?" Tim asked Grover.

"The opposite of differentiation," Grover said, drawing an x-axis, y-axis and curve on his greenboard. "Call this function of x. Consider values of the curve at tiny little increments of x" — drawing straight vertical lines from the curve down to the x-axis, like the bars of a jail cell — "you can have as many of these as you want, see, as close together as you want."

"Till it's all solid," Tim said.

"No, it never gets solid. If this was a jail cell, and those lives were bars, and whoever was behind it could make himself any size he wanted to be, he could always make himself skinny enough to get free. No matter how close together the bars were."

"This is integration," said Tim.

"The only kind I ever heard of," said Grover. Late that night they tuned in on Grover's parents' bedroom, to see if they could find out any thing new about the Negro family that was coming.

"They're worried up there," Mr. Snodd said. "They don't know whether to start selling now or try and stick it out. All it takes is one to panic."

"Well," said Grover's mother, "thank God they don't have any children, or there'd be a panic in the PTA, too."

Intrigued, they sent Hogan in to the next PTA meeting to see what was up. Hogan reported back the same thing: "They say there's no kids this time, but they ought to be looking ahead and making plans in case it ever does happen."

It was hard to see what their parents were all so scared of. As it turned out, not only scared but also misinformed. The day after the Barringtons finally did move in, Tim, Grover and Étienne went up to their house after school just to look around. They found the house no different from any others in the development; but then, leaning against a steel street light, watching them, they saw the kid. He was kind of rangy and dark, and he was wearing a sweater, even though it was warm out. The others introduced themselves and said they were going up to the overpass to drop water balloons on cars, and would he like to come along?

"What's your name?" Étienne said.

"Well," said the kid, snapping his fingers for it, "it's Carl. Yeah, *Carl* Barrington." Turned out he had a perfect eye for getting water balloons to splat right on a guy's windshield. They went over to the junkyard later and fooled around with ball bearings and busted automatic-transmission units, and then walked Carl home. The next day he was in school, and every day after that. He sat quietly in a seat in the corner that had been empty, and the teacher never called on him, though he was as smart as Grover on some things. A week or so later Grover learned the other meaning for integration, from watching Huntley and Brinkley, the only television show he ever looked at.

"It means white kids and colored kids in the same school," Grover said.

"Then we're integrated," Tim said. "Hey." "Yeah. They don't know it, but we're integrated." Then Tim's and Grover's folks, and even, according to Hogan, the progressive Doctor Slothrop, started in with the telephone calls, and the name-calling, and the dirty words they got so angry with kids for using. The only parent who was keeping out of it seemed to be Étienne's father. "He says why don't people stop worrying about Negroes and start worrying about automation," Étienne reported. "What's automation, Grovie?"

"I start studying it next week," said Grover. "I'll tell you then." But he didn't, because by that time they were all involved again with the arrangements for this year's Spartacus maneuvers. They began to spend more and more time up at the hideout at King Yrjö's, plotting. They knew by now, their third year at it, that the reality would turn out to be considerably less than the plot, that something inert and invisible, something they could not be cruel to or betray (though who would have gone so far as to call it love?) would always be between them and any clear or irreversible step, as much as the powdery fiction of the school's outline on Fazzo's Field had stopped the little kids last year. Because everybody on the school board, and the railroad, and the PTA and paper mill had to be somebody's mother or father, whether really or as a member of a category; and there was a point at which the reflex to their covering warmth, protection, effectiveness against bad dreams, bruised heads and simple loneliness took over and made worthwhile anger with them impossible.

Still, the four of them sat now in the secret room, which had grown cold with the approach of night, while Pierre, the basset hound, nosed restlessly in the corners. They agreed that Carl would run a time-motion study on letting air out of tires in the shopping center's parking lot, and Etienne would make more of an effort to obtain parts for the gigantic sodium catapult Grover had designed; and that Tim could begin each run-through of Operation Spartacus with a few more limbering-up exercises, taking the Royal Canadian Air Force plan as a point of departure. Grover allotted them the personnel they felt they would need, and then at last they adjourned. In single file they reran the house's gauntlet of shadows, resonances and dread possibilities, came out into the rain which had not stopped, and re-embarked on the *S. S. Leak*.

They rowed her as far as the culvert under the state highway, then walked through that, and skirted around a piece of the swamp to Fazzo's Field, to check out the maneuver site. Then they went over to the stretch of track beyond the point designated Foxtrot, and crouched among barren shadbushes whose berries they had eaten earlier in the year, and lobbed rocks down on the tracks to see how the angle of fire was. They couldn't tell too much because there was hardly any light left to the sky. So they walked the tracks back almost to the Minge-borough station, then cut over into town, where they little tired, sat in a row at the empty counter and ordered four lemon-limes with water. "Four?" said the lady behind the fountain. "Four," said Grover, and as usual she gave them a funny look. For a while they hung around the revolving wire racks, looking through comics; then they walked Carl home, through the quickening rain.

Even before they reached the Barringtons' block they felt something was wrong. Two cars and a pickup truck trailing garbage came tearing by from that direction, windshield wipers batting furiously, tires sending up wings of water that splashed the kids even though they jumped up on one of the lawns. Tim looked over at Carl, but Carl didn't say anything.

When they got to Carl's house they found the front lawn littered with garbage. For a while they only stood; then, as if compelled to do so, began kicking through it, looking for clues. The garbage was shin-deep all over the lawn, neatly spread right up to the property line. They must have brought it all in the pickup. Tim found the familiar A&P shopping bags his mother always brought home, and the skins of some big yellow oranges an aunt had sent them as a gift from Florida, and the pint box of pineapple sherbet Tim himself had bought two nights ago, and all the intimacy of the throwaway part, the shadow-half of his family's life for all the week preceding, the crumpled envelopes addressed to his father and mother, the stubs of the black De Nobili cigars his father liked to smoke after supper, the folded beer cans, always with the point coming in between the two e's of the word "beer," exactly the way his father did and had taught him how to do -ten square yards of irrefutable evidence. Grover was going around unfolding papers and turning over things and finding out that his garbage was there too. "And Slothrop's and Mostlys'," Étienne reported, "and I guess a lot of people from around the development here, too."

They'd been picking up garbage for about five minutes, throwing it in cans they found by the carport, when the front door opened and Mrs. Barrington started yelling at them.

"But we're cleaning it up," Tim said. "We're on your side."

"We don't need your help," the woman said. "We don't need any of you on our side. I thank our heavenly Father every day of my life that we don't have any children to be corrupted by the likes of you trash. Now get out, go on now." She started to cry.

Tim shrugged and threw away an orange peel he was holding. He considered getting a beer can to confront his father with, but then figured all that would get him was spanked, and hard, so he forgot about it. The three of them walked away, slowly, looking back now and then at the woman, who was still standing in her doorway. They'd gone two blocks before they realized that Carl was still with them.

"She didn't mean it," he said. "She just - you know -mad."

"Yeah," said Tim and Grover.

"I don't know" — the boy, now almost faded into the rain, gestured back at the house — "if I should go in now, or what. What should I do?"

Grover, Tim and Etienne looked at one another. Grover, as spokesman, said, "Why don't you lay low for a while?"

"Yeah," Carl said. They walked down to the shopping center and across the slick black parking lot that reflected greenish mercury-vapor lights, and a red supermarket sign, and a blue gas-station sign, and many yellow lights. They walked among these colors on the wide black pavement that seemed to stretch to the mountains.

"I guess I'll — you know — go up to the hideout, then," Carl said, "up to King Yrjö's place."

"At night?" Étienne said. "What about the calvary officer?"

"Cavalry," said Grover.

"He won't bother me," said Carl. "You know "

"We know," said Tim. Sure they did: Everything Carl said, they knew. It had to be that way: He was what grownups, if *they'd* known, would have called an "imaginary playmate." His words were the kids' own words; his gestures too, the faces he made, the times he had to cry, the way he shot baskets; all given by them an amplification or grace they expected to grow into presently. Carl had been put together out of phrases, images, possibilities that grownups had somehow turned away from, repudiated, left out

at the edges of towns, as if they were auto parts in Étienne's father's junkyard — things they could or did not want to live with but which the kids, on the other hand, could spend endless hours with, piecing together, rearranging, feeding, programming, refining. He was entirely theirs, their friend and robot, to cherish, buy undrunk sodas for, or send into danger, or even, as now, at last, to banish from their sight.

"If I like it," Carl said, "I might stay there awhile too." The others nodded, and then Carl broke loose and took off at a jogging run across the lot, waving his hand without looking back. When he'd vanished in the rain, the three kids put their hands in their pockets and started back for Grover's house.

"Grovie," said Étienne, "are we still integrated? If he doesn't come back? Hops a freight somewhere or something?"

"Ask your father," said Grover. "I don't know anything." Étienne picked up a handful of wet leaves and stuffed them down Grover's back. Grover kicked water at him but missed and splashed Tim. Tim jumped up and shook a branch, showering Grover and Étienne. Étienne tried to push Tim over Grover, who'd got down on all fours, but Tim caught on and pushed Grover's face in the mud. That was how they left the lights of the shopping center and took leave of Carl Barrington, abandoning him to the old estate's other attenuated ghosts and its precarious shelter; and rollicked away into that night's rain, each finally to his own house, hot shower, dry towel, before-bed television, good night kiss, and dreams that could never again be entirely safe.