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5620 words

JOHN LENNON IS DEAD

I.

I should have been grateful. Among that year's crop of post-docs, I was the only one to get a private office. It was on the top floor of the physics building. Yes, it was gray (even with the light on), and its single tiny window was placed so high that I would have had to stand on a filing cabinet to look out. But the University of Chicago had done its best, and I should have been grateful.

I quickly developed a habit of working for an hour or so in the morning, deciding that "the magic" wasn't going to happen that day, and going to browse in secondhand bookstores. There were two on 57th Street, Powell's and O'Gara's. I favored O'Gara's. It was closer, and I liked its "Pickwickian" atmosphere. (I was guessing: I'd never read Dickens.) Mr. O'Gara looked like the actor Lionel Jeffries, but he possessed an air of watchful self-confidence that was in none of Jeffries's characters. I asked him once if he'd read Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*. He took his pipe out of his mouth just long enough to reply, "Many times." It was the same when I asked about the price of a book in his front window, a Seventeenth Century printing of the first English translation of Augustine's *City of God*:

"Two thousand dollars."

The shop was deep, tall, and full of light. Its sturdy parallel shelves and well-scuffed hardwood floor testified to a long-established order (overseen by O'Gara's cat, who had the run of the place).

I did buy a few things in his shop during our first year in Chicago, 1981-1982, but mostly I read parts of books. These included: a history of the English jig; Isaac Asimov in German; the diary of a polar explorer; a Rosicrucian novel; a textbook on mapmaking. This hyper-dilettantish reading was a leftover from my adolescence, when I'd flipped through my parents' *Reader's Digest* almanacs and read the capsule articles on general topics, particularly the mini-biographies of famous people. My ideas of what scientific and artistic achievement would be like were based on the impressions created by those single paragraphs. In those days, sometimes, it hadn't seemed so difficult to make a life which others might want to remember in such a fashion.

I was moving my eyes over the score of a Mozart symphony, trying to hear the music in my head, when I looked up and saw that the street outside was getting dark, even though it wasn't very late.

I was puzzled, but then I understood. I'd read about how the days got shorter in autumn. The seasonal difference was barely noticeable in Southern California, where I grew up, and until that instant my belief in the phenomenon had been purely theoretical, like knowing that I'd weigh one-sixth as much on the Moon. It was mystical to see the book-fact sit up and connect with a fact-in-the-world—like meeting a fictional character come to life.

I put Mozart back and started home.

I'd left my briefcase in the office. It was Friday and I might want it, but I wasn't sure that I wanted to carry it. I'd stuffed it with library books: two thin ones on physics, a treatise on icon-painting, a history of legerdemain, the complete *Lord of the Rings* in French, and others I couldn't immediately name; also, a few physics papers. It probably weighed forty pounds.

I climbed the stairs. When I reached the office the telephone was ringing.

"Hello?"

"Finally!" Ruth said. "Where have you been?"

"I went for a walk."

"For four hours?"

"I was in and out. I was in the library for a while."

"Do you know the sun's going down?"

"I'm just leaving."

Our apartment was three blocks away, in a brownstone tenement owned by the University. Ruth didn't say anything when I walked in. I sat down in the living room and turned on the radio. *All Things Considered* was about to start.

The living room carpet was of a color which the Crayola Company used to call "burnt". Ruth was standing in the middle of it.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" she asked.

When I'd taken the post-doc it had seemed that, with this one step, I would finally rise to a level beyond any chance of failing.

"Maybe we shouldn't have come here."

"Tough *beans*."

"Sometimes," I said, "I do work in my office."

I followed her into the kitchen. She took a tomato out of the refrigerator and started to cut it up.

"What do you want to do?" she said.

"Something I'm good at."

“Who says you’re not good at this?”

“I’m not.”

“Do you want to fail? Is that how you’re going to get even with them?”

She meant the people who had encouraged me to come to Chicago.

“Not necessarily.”

She was using a lot of unnecessary force on the tomato.

“Careful.”

“What,” she said. “Do you want to help or something?”

“Do you need some?”

“No.”

“You know,” I said, “I do try.”

“Good for you. Look, I’m busy.” She was cutting the slices into squares. “A package came for you. Why don’t you go see what it is.”

“A package?”

“It’s leaning against the couch.”

I set the box on the coffee table. It was wide and flat, and it obviously held a book.

“It’s from Bertram,” I said. “He was that guy I tutored, the one who got married.”

Bertram and his fiancée had called just before we left Los Angeles. I never met the fiancée. I’d pictured a classic New York Jew: long black hair; high cheekbones; spectacles with bulky black frames; full lips; a big nose.

“Bert has told me so much,” she said. “We wanted to send you this small token of our appreciation.”

“Pictures of Scottish castles,” said Bertram. “Amanda picked it out. It’s quite lovely.”

“We know you’re moving,” said Amanda. “We wouldn’t dream of sending it now. But when you’re settled in Chicago, tell us your address, and we’ll send it then.”

I cut open the box, expecting something glossy and generic.

The volume was swaddled in cloth.

“Ruth, come see this.”

She whistled. “Linen.”

It was a leatherbound quarto of lithographs and engravings, and it was over a hundred and fifty years old. Ruth stood for a few minutes and watched while I reverently turned the cream-colored pages.

“That is something,” she said.

“Yeah,” I responded. “I wonder why he sent it.”

“You ‘wonder’?”

“It does seem a little extreme.”

From where I was sitting, I could see Ruth’s back reflected in the big living room window. At that moment her back was more expressive than her face.

She returned to the kitchen without saying anything. I got up and followed her. I had the book in my hands.

“What is it?” I asked.

She was scraping the bits of diced tomato into the salad bowl.

“You ‘wonder’.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I wonder. What’s wrong with that?”

She still didn’t say anything.

“Why won’t you tell me?”

II.

I did a lot of tutoring in graduate school. It was easy money, despite all the driving; which, to tell the truth, I didn’t really mind. I’d grown up in a small town, and the location of every one of its streets had been imprinted on my brain from an early age. Los Angeles presented an ever-receding horizon of ignorance. I may not have liked that, but I didn’t mind it.

I got called to gated communities in Beverly Hills; peeling, fourth-floor walk-ups beyond Western Avenue; San Fernando Valley tract houses; new-smelling condominiums on Wilshire Boulevard. I knew so much, and my students knew so little, it was sometimes a struggle not to despise them. I think I did struggle. A still small voice reminded me that someday I might want to insist on a right to not despise myself. You could call it “moral insurance”.

Bertram called me for the first time in January of 1980, when Ruth and I had been married for a year and a half.

She was in bed. It was around nine at night. Music was playing softly. In high school, when I was getting ready to go out into the wide world, it would have been classical music, because I’d suspected that a small-town boy would need a suit of armor “out there”: refined taste was going to be part of it.

But that night the music was Carly Simon.

The voice on the phone sounded aggressive but hesitant, and a little flat. I got the sense of overhearing somebody address a machine.

“I am calling for Harold Lind.” He had a trace of a British accent.

“I’m Harold Lind.”

“You tutor physics.”

“Yes.”

“May I ask at what levels?”

“Elementary through college.”

“Allow me to explain my situation.”

He was a graduate student at USC. He’d taken their battery of master’s exams, failed two, and could take them one more time. He hoped to do so in the fall.

“You are able to tutor at this level?”

“Yes.”

“I see,” he said. “Would you be available on Tuesdays, at four in the afternoon?”

“Yes.”

“Now we come . . . The question of payment. Your rate.”

“Ten dollars an hour.”

“That is reasonable.” He gave the address and phone number. “It is my parents’ house. My name is Bertram Pechnik.”

The woman who answered the Pechniks’ front door was no more than five feet tall, and plump all over. Her gray hair was tied tightly into a bun; which, with the smallness of her head, made her look even plumper. She wore a plaid dress with pleated shoulders and she had on a white apron that was embroidered with words from a language I didn’t recognize. A pungent coffee smell flowed out the door. I introduced myself.

“I am Lydia Pechnik. I am Bertram’s mother.”

I followed her to the kitchen, where the walls and the cupboards were stained to resemble mahogany. “Please call me Lydia,” she said. “You seem very young.”

She had a soft accent that might have been German.

“I’m twenty-five.”

“Oh, Bertram is thirty-four. He will be out very soon. Would you like some coffee? Perhaps tea?”

“Coffee, please.”

“Here is Bertram.”

Bertram Pechnik was bald from his forehead to his crown. When he entered the kitchen he glanced about like someone doing a Richard Nixon impersonation. He looked a few inches shorter than I was and he had a double chin. He wore black shoes, gray slacks with a belt, and a red polo shirt, neatly tucked. A fold of fat showed above his waist, but the way he slouched made it hard to tell if he was seriously overweight, or what his actual height was.

“Hello.”

He advanced toward me and stuck out his hand.

“Bertram, would you also like a cup?”

“No, mother.”

Mrs. Pechnik handed me the coffee. “I will leave you two gentlemen to your work.”

I followed him to a round table at the other end of the kitchen. It sat in a bay that looked out onto the front lawn. The lower parts of the windows had misted up from the rain that was falling.

The table was covered with books and scrawled-on papers. Three of the books—big floppy paperbacks—were Schaum’s Outlines. I’d never used a Schaum’s Outline. I’d

wondered what sort of people did. They were like pornography: one of those things you knew must sell well, because bookstores carry so many, but which you hardly ever saw anyone buy.

Bertram said, "I thought it prudent to begin with a review of classical mechanics."

He half-rose from his chair and turned an open Schaum's Outline to where I could read it.

"You are familiar with Schaum's Outline?"

"I've heard of them."

"I see," he said. "Most of the problems are straightforward. A few presented difficulties. I have marked these."

The first checked problem began: *An upright homogeneous rod of mass M and length L is struck with impulse J . . .*

We'd been working for forty minutes when he said, "I suppose my mother told you about my childhood."

"No, she didn't."

"My parents fled Poland before the war. I was born in England. We came to America in the Fifties. Do you know what the English mean by a 'public school'?"

"It's what we call a private school."

"Yes. My parents sent me to one, St. Cuthbert's. I was the only Jew. I hated it. Hated it. There was a uniform: a blazer, white ducks, and a beanie. I hated the beanie worst of all. But it didn't matter. You had to wear it. If you didn't wear the beanie you got demerits, and if you got too many demerits they whipped you. My father wanted to make an Englishman of me."

Mrs. Pechnik walked me to the door when the session was finished.

"Oh, Mr. Lind," she said, "it's pouring. Let me fetch you an umbrella. You can return it next week."

I pointed confidently. "My car's right there."

"I'm sorry that my husband was not home. He usually isn't at this hour. But he would enjoy meeting you. Perhaps—one of these afternoons?"

The rain drummed on the VW's roof. It overwhelmed the wipers and defogger, and I navigated home through a colorful, borderless world. I thought of Bertram Pechnik, leaning over his Schaum's Outlines, and I kept thinking: "What a strange fate you have."

I met Bertram's father three weeks later. Mrs. Pechnik led me into the living room before going to get their son.

All of the furniture in the room looked overstuffed and off-white.

"I am pleased to meet you, Mr. Lind. Kindly be seated. Bertram speaks very highly of your instruction."

He didn't look like his son. He had deep-set but pale, almost beige eyes, and a face that was simultaneously high-cheekboned and broad. One eye seemed larger than the other. Sometimes, when I recall his face, I see a flesh-colored eyepatch.

"Bertram says that you are pursuing a doctorate."

"In physics."

"Under what specialization? I have some scientific training."

I described phase transitions.

"Will my son be studying these 'phase transitions' with you?"

"No. They're a new area."

"It must be a great burden, to keep up with a rapidly changing field. Do your studies leave time for other intellectual pursuits?"

"I read," I said. "History. Science fiction. I like to listen to music."

"Do you have a favorite historical period?"

"American, I think. The Civil War."

"Lincoln was a remarkable leader," he said. "I have made a study of the life of Bismarck."

His glance told me to turn around: Bertram was in the doorway.

Every week I met with my advisor and we talked about my work. Sometimes what I had to show was impressive, but usually it wasn't. On bad days, my ideas and little theorems seemed like helpless, home-made things, struggling to look store-bought: I'd think of the lopsided, ineptly frosted layer cakes from church bake sales, of which my mother would always buy one, out of pity.

But on the good days, it seemed that I might still escape my past.

With very little work, I'd got all As in high school. In college, by working hard (and being scared), I'd got mostly As. Nobody had ever found me out: seen me as the small-town mediocrity who had escaped his cage. Now, at the end of grad school, they still might catch me, but maybe not for long. Very soon, I would have a PhD in physics.

I'd wanted the degree since I was thirteen years old. I saw it as something like the Last Judgment. When I got it, ordinary time would stop, and I would rise into another plane of existence, where I would be eternally safe.

Getting that degree was the last thing I had to do.

Near the end of May, the Pechniks left for a month-long trip to England. My final session with Bertram lasted two and a half hours. It consisted of a quick review followed by an oral exam. I'd actually been quite casual about making up the questions, and I felt a strange embarrassment when I saw how vigorously Bertram attacked them.

At the end, when his mother was about to walk in, he told a story that stayed with me for a long time.

“In high school I didn’t have many friends. I was once asked to go driving in a car which belonged to a certain boy’s father. His parents were out of town, and I knew that he didn’t have permission, but I went along. There were three other boys in the car.

“Almost immediately I regretted it. They insisted on driving very fast. I tell you quite frankly, I was scared. When I asked them to be careful they laughed at me. Finally I demanded to be let out. They obliged, in a manner of speaking. They left me in the worst part of East Los Angeles. Fortunately, there was a gas station close by. My father came to get me. We arrived home after two in the morning. It was humiliating.

“I went to bed. At school two days later I heard the news. They’d all been killed in a crash. But that wasn’t the worst of it. The crash happened only an hour after they let me out.

“You can imagine how I felt. Think of it: only an hour.”

Three months later, the solution of my thesis problem came, seemingly of itself. I was sitting on our twenty-five-dollar, Salvation Army couch, and I was alone in the apartment.

I wrote down a formula and drew a picture. I drew another picture; I wrote another formula.

And there it was.

I remember the moment before, and I remember the moment after. But the event itself: gone. It’s as if I’d leaped over an instant in time while a clever impostor occupied my body.

I spent three days checking the calculations, before showing it all to my advisor. At first he didn’t understand, so I had to do it again. Midway through he stopped me.

He pointed: “Why is that true?”

I explained it. His face took on a strange expression, as if he thought I’d metamorphosed into a psychopath.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No.” He smiled. “I’m impressed, that’s all.”

It was a week or two later when he suggested I apply to the University of Chicago.

To me, my response felt natural:

“Why?”

For a moment he looked like an actor whose colleague has missed a cue.

“Your thesis leaves a lot of questions unanswered. Chicago is *the* place to answer them.”

“Oh.”

“Meanwhile—” There was the look again. “Is something wrong?”

I shook my head.

“I can write you a strong letter,” he said, “if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I’m not worried.”

That was when I started taking long walks. When Ruth asked me about them, I told her they helped me think.

“That’s a lot of thinking.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“I didn’t say that. I just said, that’s a lot of thinking.”

“I have to think, you know.”

“Sure.”

One Saturday, after I’d been out for five hours, Ruth told me that “a student” had called.

“I think his name was Bernie. Here’s his number.”

I recognized it.

“Aren’t you going to call him?” she asked.

It could only mean one thing. “Not right now.”

But that night he called during dinner.

“Hello?”

“This is Bertram Pechnik.” He spoke the words like a BBC announcer. “I wanted to tell you. I took the test. I passed it. I passed with *distinction*.”

Another phone got picked up.

“Professor Lind,” said Mrs. Pechnik, “we are so proud of Bertram. So proud and happy.”

“I’m—” I said. “That’s wonderful.”

“We want to invite you and your wife to have dinner at our house,” she said.

I was slowly understanding what had happened.

“I think Ruth will like that.”

(“Like what?” she mouthed.)

“And afterwards,” said Mrs. Pechnik, “let’s go to a movie. It will be our treat. Do you know this theater, the Nuart?”

“We go there all the time,” I said.

“Then it’s settled. Think of a date. Perhaps a month from now?”

“We’ll look at our calendar.”

“We won’t let you get away, Professor Lind!”

We hung up, and I explained everything to Ruth.

“Do I know this guy?” she asked.

“I told you about him. Maybe you forgot. He’s a little weird.”

On the night, three weeks later, it was threatening rain when we arrived at the house. Bertram’s father greeted us. I hadn’t realized how tall he was, or that I didn’t know his first name.

“Alfred,” he said. “It is an honor to finally meet you, Mrs. Lind.”

The conversation at the table stayed close to politics. Bertram's father did most of the talking.

"In the Thirties, when we all knew that war was coming, I asked myself, Where on earth is the most likely to remain untouched? After long thought, I decided on, of all places, *Hawaii*. Can you imagine? Practically where the war started, at least for the Americans."

"But we didn't move there," said his wife.

"No, we did not. We have lived in this house for twenty-five years."

He praised the recently-passed Proposition 13, which had scaled back property taxes all over the state, and he commented on the mismanagement of the government under Jerry Brown. Then he asked me,

"Among all of the American presidents since the Second World War, which two do you think have had the highest IQ's?"

I guessed Kennedy and Johnson. He answered,

"Jimmy Carter and Richard Nixon. Yes: and yet they were not what one would call successful presidents. The great political leaders—men like Bismarck—they are intelligent, granted—but they must have something more—how to describe it? It is *a sense of reality*."

Then it was time to leave.

There used to be a lot of theaters like the Nuart, before video killed them. It showed a different movie every night or every other night, with weekend midnight showings of *Eraserhead* and *Pink Flamingoes*. The playbill was roughly equal parts classics (*Citizen Kane*, *The Godfather*), art-house crap (*The Shout*, *Freaks*), and porn (*The Opening of Misty Beethoven*, *The Private Afternoons of Pamela Mann*). It had a concrete floor, overlain by a thin layer of rubbery carpet, which ended a couple of yards short of the screen. Some of the seats were sprung, and many others had been ripped, then mended with gray tape. The outside of the building was of Edward-Hopperish red brick. It was hard to imagine that it would ever be anything but a movie theater, or maybe a Pentecostal church.

The rain had come and gone, and a wet stony smell came up from the pavement. The temperature was around fifty: what I, in my Californian innocence, would have called a cool evening. Santa Monica Boulevard glittered with the smeared lights of restaurants and stores.

We were about a half-dozen places from the front. The rest of the ticket line snaked around into an alley.

I asked Mrs. Pechnik what the film, *Dersu Uzala*, was about.

"He is a hunter," she began.

But then a commotion at the entrance made us turn. A tall man about my age had come out of the theater and was calling to the crowd. He wore a light plaid, short-sleeved

shirt and he was holding a paper soda cup with a straw sticking out.

“Everybody? Everybody? People?”

“Everybody!”

For a few seconds the only sound was the hissing of wet tires.

“You don’t know who I am. But somebody had the radio on, and we just heard the news. So I’m going to tell you.

“John Lennon is dead.

“Somebody shot him, outside his apartment in New York.” He brought the straw to his mouth and drank. “John Lennon is dead. It was on the news. I thought I should tell you that.” He looked over all of us.

“That’s what I had to say.”

But he didn’t go back inside. He stayed, and he waited for something. I watched the disappointment settle in his eyes, while the thing he waited for did not come. There was disappointment, and a sense of exposure, as if he was realizing how strange he must look.

He waited a few seconds more.

He took another drink, and went inside.

“Who is John Lennon?” Mrs. Pechnik asked.

“One of the Beatles, mother.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Musicians,” said Bertram’s father. “Rock music.”

Mrs. Pechnik and I went back to talking about the movie. A few minutes later, the front doors opened.

I remember only one scene from *Dersu Uzala*. Dersu and his friend, a Russian Army officer (who was also the film’s narrator), had traveled far from the officer’s surveying party, when they saw that the sun was going down. They were in a subarctic marshland. To spend the night without shelter meant death. But there was nothing, not even wood to burn—only the long grasses. Dersu shouted, “Gather grass!” and the sky darkened while they collected grass into a pile that grew three, four, five feet high. They ran faster and faster, piling it up, until, in the vanishing twilight, the exhausted officer fainted.

Then it was morning. Dersu was pulling grass away from his friend’s face. The two men had spent the night swaddled in the great mound.

The officer said, “It was only then that I realized that Dersu had saved my life.”

III.

The days shortened and the cold deepened. The fresh snow stung like powdered acid; treacherous shields of ice clung to the sidewalks. The weather made all of the cold I had ever experienced before feel like something I had watched on television.

Or maybe I was the one who had been on television.

Ruth and I came to an agreement. The post-doc would last only two years. My next job could be at a small college. I would want some publications on my resume when I applied: I would work my thesis into a paper. That meant no more long walks and no more afternoons spent in bookstores.

I got asked to give a seminar talk. It was scheduled for the end of January. I started preparing it the day after New Year's, 1982.

Almost nobody was around during the winter break. It was easy to pretend that I was the last surviving monk of an obscure scholarly order. The pretense was supported by the fact that snow had covered the window in my office. It was as if the whole building had been buried.

Several times, writing the notes, I thought I'd found a fatal error in my thesis, and my mouth went dry. But then I read further and saw how, eighteen months ago, I had met the difficulty and disabled it; and then I'd forgotten all about it. I was like a stroke victim or an amnesiac, recovering a vanished life.

The seminars took place in a pale, salmon-colored classroom on the second floor. Its windows were frosted from decades of chalkdust, and the audience sat in the sort of wobbly wooden desks I remembered from elementary school. At the appointed hour, I stood before the blackboard and watched the physicists enter. They glanced forward impersonally, noted my presence, and found their seats.

A thrill of stage fright flowed through me: it was not unpleasant.

The room was about half full when the door stopped opening and closing. It was a minute past the start time.

The chairman of the seminar committee stood up. "I think we should begin," he said. "Today's speaker is Harold Lind. He will talk to us on 'Domain formation in magnetized superfluids'."

In grad school I'd once come close to blowing a talk. Something that had seemed to work on paper wasn't working on the board. I'd stood there staring, desperately thinking. The solution finally came, but, a moment before it did, I experienced a fantasy in which I was singing,

*Whenever I feel afraid
I whistle a happy tune—*

That image returned as I was deriving the main equation. I raised my voice to cover an almost-laugh.

A man in the back had a question. He was a Russian, visiting from Leningrad.

"Yes?"

"I do not see motivation for your work."

"We're trying to characterize the magnetization of superfluids," I said.

“Yes, yes. But your result . . .”

His voice trailed off.

“It’s a theoretical problem,” I said.

The man in front of the Russian turned and whispered to him, beginning a conversation that went on for over a minute, while everybody stared at them.

Suddenly they stopped.

“You may continue your lecture,” said the Russian. “Sorry!”

The Russian, Lyadov, was already famous (seven years later, he won the Nobel). He had given the seminar the week before. I’d sat near the back and watched him stride before the board, waving his massive arms with the rhythm of his speech—until that rhythm became all I could follow, while my mind ran over and over the course of my talk-to-be.

Nobody had any more questions. At the end we adjourned to the physics lounge for cookies and coffee.

The room had a vaguely Edwardian decor: wall-to-wall, Persian-looking carpet; chairs and sofas with carved armrests and antimacassars; lamps with fake Tiffany shades. Yellow sunlight slanted in through casemented windows and enhanced the antique feel.

I was looking south, across the snow-covered Quad.

“Mister Lind.”

It was Lyadov.

“Yes?”

“I am afraid—I still do not entirely understand—your motivation for research. What is—your goal?”

I tried to repeat a short speech I’d once heard on the importance of domains in superfluids.

He stopped me.

“Yes, yes. So much—we agree. But your particular result, I don’t understand: What is its place in such program?”

Before I could answer, he said, “For example, paper of Lansky and Molotov, 1979. You know it?”

“No.”

He described it.

“Like your work, and with simpler method.” He gave me the reference. “It has been translated.” Somebody on the other side of the lounge called Lyadov’s name. “I must go. Thank you for most interesting talk. Good-bye.”

Two days passed before I found the nerve to look up the paper. I noted its date: it had appeared in print a month before I got my degree.

It was fifty-eight pages long. I didn't read so much as dance over hot coals, studying each result just closely enough to know that it wasn't mine, and leaping to the next one.

I almost missed it, on the forty-seventh page:

"We observe in passing that our scheme yields an improved estimate for the constant of criticality when applied to superfluidic domain formation. If we set λ equal to ϵ_0/τ in formula (4.11), and substitute this into the equation of state (2.2), the value of $\tilde{c} \leq 2\pi/\log 2$ follows after a routine computation, which we leave to the interested reader."

It was the heart of my thesis.

I put the journal down.

My moist hands had warped its cover.

At dinner Ruth asked what was wrong.

"Is something wrong?" I replied.

"You haven't said a thing."

I told her what I'd found.

"I don't understand," she said.

"It means they lied to me."

"Who lied to you?"

I named everyone who had encouraged me to come to Chicago. "My thesis is shit."

"If that's so, why did they hire you?"

"To fucking humiliate me."

"Oh!" She got up and started to clear the table. "You didn't know about this Lansky thing. Do you think they did?"

I didn't answer.

"Well, did they?"

"I suppose not."

"Are *they* incompetent?"

"It doesn't matter with them."

She kept clearing the table, and we didn't say anything for a few minutes.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "Start hanging out in bookstores again?"

"What difference would it make?"

"You're ridiculous."

It was my night to wash the dishes. I didn't complain. I was grateful for the time to be alone. I stared at my reflection in the window over the sink and wondered what I would do with the rest of my life.

Ruth came in. "Are you talking to yourself?"

I'd been telling my reflection: "You've come a long way to fail."

"Not that I know of."

She stood behind me and we looked at each other's reflections.

"I have dishes to wash," I said.

Ruth put her arms around me.

"What?" I asked.

She didn't move.

She kissed me, and let me go.

"You have dishes to wash."

Weeks passed. I went back to research, really working now: making something new. The bad news about my thesis had got out. In a year, my situation could be desperate.

I observed that the days were lengthening.

The castles book still lay on our coffee table. It reminded me of Bertram's stories, and what his father had said about intelligent presidents. When I worked late in our apartment, and the radio played the Beatles, I'd think of the man who had walked out of the theater the night John Lennon was shot. His loss, like the Pechniks' pride in their son, must have seemed to fill the whole universe; but both of them had passed through me as if I were a ghost.

There came a night in April when I worked until dawn, and Ruth came out and asked me why I was crying. I remember the tears; I forget what I said. Months needed to pass before I could tell her that I had cried because I had finally understood the sadness of the fact that the Beatles could never come together again.