Roger Across the Looking Glass

Neal C. Chandler

The process is as invariable and explicable as the engineered logic of a machine. Yet for all its biological transparence, to Roger Talmage, educated, institutionally devout, and forty-two, the quite ordinary adjustment of his eyes from day to night vision has become a kind of erotic magic, at once marvelous, and necessary. Always he is astonished at how surely and how well, only seconds after Ellen has switched off the lamp, the darkness begins again to yield up her body; and not just her body, but a renewed, ideal body somehow abstracted and transformed from the manifestly forty-one-year-old woman who had reached for the lamp switch. He waits for this. Connives for it. Manufactures and orchestrates it. And his excitement grows and localizes as the veils slip steadily away, not to music — never to music — but to an ever more insistent rhythm, which, beginning in himself, soon patterns the silent ritual with the woman.

A breeze lifts the window shade and touches his back. He has already begun to sweat lightly, and the sudden chill abruptly summons him to his own body, to the comfortable strength of his supporting arms, the firmness of his chest. Roger Talmage has, in the past year, reclaimed his body from flaccid middle-age. He has made it hard again with brightly colored, vinyl-coated weights and countless early morning hours of running. At this moment a redeemed sense of self-possession makes every movement, though deliberate beyond mere intention, nonetheless unfrenzied, untroubled, and without the old anxieties of pleasure. Not unlike an Indian fakir who holds pain coolly at bay, Roger Talmage takes command of the pleasure in his body, accepting from his senses precisely and only that which he has first meted out with his will.

Through long years and until recently, sexual encounters with Ellen had been, to Roger, a burden of disappointment borne first painfully, then reluc-

---

NEAL CHANDLER, his wife, Rebecca, and a large and seasonally fluctuating number of children live in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. All members of the family are perpetually in school.

tantly, then hardly at all. As straightforwardly as he desired his wife, his desire often failed him just when it was most to be taken for granted, and he, as a consequence, was most vulnerable. Her frequent tears, and his own apologies and conjured explanations left him perplexed and humiliatingly insecure over a physical attraction which had once seemed obvious and elemental.

It is true Ellen did not complain. She did not keep accounts, and in fact, seemed all too anxious, sometimes tearfully, sometimes in bowed resignation, to accept his apparent disattraction as inevitable. When he could not dissuade her, he began in time to resent his wife's martyrdom as much as he might have resented a whore's derision. He certainly had no desire to administer her shame with his own; and so he began to avoid her body, coming to her only when his urgency and anger made a kind of success inevitable. At home he retreated into a patriarchal reserve posted carefully on one side with the children who seemed happy for the attention and on the other with steadily growing obligations at church and in the community. But as his active sensual life abated, a nagging preoccupation with sex grew. At odd moments of the work day he found himself as beset by breasts and thighs as if he were seventeen years old again; and when he had begun to masturbate, guilt and frustration quickly fed into lean and bitter, though always unspoken, reproach of the woman.

One day, his morning's ritual concern over a swollen waistline suddenly dropped into fathomless disgust at the sluggish intractability of his whole physical life. Standing before the mirror he held the rolls of soft, opalescent flesh between thumbs and forefingers, where, like his recalcitrant manhood, it lay, not defiantly, but in flat vegetable indifference to his person, his pride, his will. By the time he began to dress, he could hardly bear to touch himself, and when he had tied his shoes, he arose with genuine anger and not a little melodrama to leave the house and run eight wheezing, sweating blocks in his business suit before returning home to change his clothes and his life. In the following weeks and months he labored with the pious tenacity of an ascetic to bring his body to a controlled, mechanical leanness, and for the first time in almost nineteen years, took charge of his marriage bed.

None of this consciously enters Roger's mind as he coasts at the edge of his own excitement waiting for his wife's orgasm. Her breath begins to shorten. The muscles in her arms and shoulders tighten, and he opens his eyes to watch with a fascination that is only partly sensual. As his wife's excitement intensifies, his own, in fact, subsides until he becomes as much spectator as partner. Her face, obscured by the darkness, is less "Ellen" than woman. Mouth slightly open, eyes tightly shut, she seems outside herself, beyond her body, receding out into the blue darkness away from him, away from them.

Increasing his pace with the studied preoccupation of a technician, he directs her glide further, further out until the anticipated shudder erupts, shaking her body with the six-seven-eight seconds (he counts them) of silent rocking that leaves her gasping and disheveled on the pillow beneath him.

There is no cry, no word, no sound but breathing. His own need has acutely reasserted itself, and he moves hard, violently. Already, though, there

is a satisfaction even greater than the pleasure his body is intent upon. If Roger Talmage were a less scrupulous man, he might recognize it as the exhilaration of revenge.

Uncommon winter sunlessness darkened the corridor tiles to the color of waxed cordovan, and Talmage, excused from class for a varsity debate meet, hurried through the halls past rows of gray metal lockers. Voices from a rehearsal in the auditorium registered vaguely and, passing one of the short, lighted entrance ramps, he glanced up. Then he stopped. On the ramp above him sat a girl. Her back toward him, she was leaning forward with an ear pressed to the crack between the yellow birch doors. Straight brown hair fell loosely to the middle of her back over a print dress which, pulled tight against one knee, revealed the long pale thigh of the other, extended leg. He stared at the white flesh against the dark tiles.

She must be cutting class to listen to the rehearsal. It was something by O'Neill, something intense and serious which he had already judged pretentious for a high-school cast. He judged himself beyond such an adolescent affectation, and it embarrassed him deeply. From the angle at which he watched her, he could not see her eyes, but he was immediately certain that they were tightly shut, her expression rapt and transported. Suddenly, she pulled away from the doors. He panicked, as desperate at being discovered as if he had been peering clandestinely through her bedroom window. But she only looked at him blankly, then leaned slowly forward against the doors again, leaving Roger almost grateful with relief.

In the ensuing weeks he encountered her everywhere. It seemed almost as if he had fallen into some invisible track running tightly and inevitably along the fact and data of her existence. She was, he learned without having inquired, a year younger than he, strange for all her prettiness, a "type" more than a girl, without discernable affiliations and often without shoes. She did not seem to have or to cultivate friends, though he saw her occasionally with other "types." He was surprised to discover she was Mormon. Certainly, he had never seen her in seminary where he knew virtually everyone. And she wrote poetry. A girl who had sat next to her all year in English and spoken with her exactly once told him. She turned in poems instead of class assignments and read Hemingway or D. H. Lawrence during exercises on pronoun usage.

Roger was transfixed with distaste, and when the English magazine printed some of her poems, he puzzled through them for a very long time in private, ready to turn the page at the least intrusion. He did not like what he read. The language was perhaps clever and cynical, but the poems seemed overheated, full of naive indigation. Haunted by the fear of being or of being thought immature, Roger had sometime since disassociated himself from his own adolescence, and he found the pretension of neatly rhymed social outrage almost unbearable. In the end he felt as embarrassed as he had at their first encounter in the corridor. He closed the little magazine firmly, as if to cover her shame once and for all and to put her behind him, but in fact he returned several times to reread the poems.

Almost involuntarily he had begun to look for her in the halls between classes. He said nothing, but he stared and knew that she — equally mute — had begun to acknowledge these encounters. The childishness of the game disturbed him. She was neither so attractive nor so strange as to explain his compulsion. And yet this embarrassed fixation on a girl he neither knew nor consciously wanted to know, in the end, proved stronger and more persistent than his attraction to any of the pretty and thoroughly reasonable girls he dated and kissed and coaxed in his father's Pontiac. Long after graduation, other girls forgotten, he still carried her strange memory like a small knot of scar tissue which one rediscovers from time to time in surprised moments of self-examination.

On Wednesday, 7 April 1959, Ellen Mitford Church and Roger Allen Talmage exchanged wedding vows in the Salt Lake Temple. The bride, daughter of Dr. Edward Church and a woman remarkable to those in attendance chiefly by her absence at the temple ceremony, was a graduate of the University of Utah where she had majored in English and helped edit the campus literary quarterly. In an ordinary white gown and an attitude of resolved optimism, Ellen was, even for a bride, more than ordinarily beautiful.

The groom, whose smiling parents presided over the event as a matter of habit, was then completing his junior year in business and American government. A returned missionary and honors student, he served in student government and belonged to the appropriate pre-professional and honors societies. At the insistence of his bride, he also wore white, though seasonally premature (as his mother could not help pointing out) and not nearly so well. He felt self-conscious about his winter pallor against the pale gabardine, and as the long evening wore on, his normal groom's anxieties seemed to grow out of reasonable proportion.

When he had begun to worry that perspiration might be showing through his collar, he reacted with a magisterial brusqueness normally very foreign to his nature. He began to conduct the ceremonial introductions with an almost military impatience, prodding startled guests who up until that point, had made only very leisurely progress across the back court and around the keyhole to the spot just out-of-bounds where the reception line waited under a portable canopy of roses and candles. Roger had attended dozens of wedding receptions in this and other almost identical halls, but at some point during the evening the oppressive falseness of a barely camouflaged gymnasium took hold of his usually reticent imagination. It occurred to him that the entire reception was like nothing so much as the obligatory public handshaking of prizefighters before a bout. Standing next to him, literally at the edge of an arena, Ellen seemed as pliantly uncomplicated and lovely as a man could wish. But she was not uncomplicated. She remained somehow an enigma, and had he ever accused her of being obscure or difficult, she herself would have nodded in vague acknowledgment. Roger smiled mechanically and hurried the curious spectators along to his parents down the line, all the while waiting, half playfully and half in earnest for the sign that would send his bride and himself each to their respective corners to await the starting bell of the struggle of their lives.

It was, in fact, this very thought, or rather the accompanying picture of his slender bride trotting grimly away across the court in her soft white gown and twelve-ounce fighting gloves that rescued Roger. He laughed out loud, though carefully, and as his pulse quieted over this ambushed bit of paranoia, he managed to regain some of the studied calm and social grace expected of him.

Once again in control, he had only to look at Ellen as she was, standing beside him to dispel overwrought fears of an Ellen who had existed primarily in his adolescent imagination. The impression he had carried away from high-school had become a fixation, a kind of graven image, so rigid and ritual that, returning from his mission, it had literally been weeks into the first quarter of school before he had realized with astonishment that the long-limbed girl he regularly watched across the lecture hall was, in fact, his bizarre high-school poetess. She sat across from him in class with the erect propriety of someone waiting to speak in church. Her hair carefully cut, she wore narrow skirts and nylons and heels that did marvelous things for her legs. And when he asked her out, she obliged with a smile and a voice, which though more brittle than he would have liked, sounded reasonable and unpretentious.

The change had seemed incredible, almost perfect, as if she had undergone some marvelous conversion in anticipation of his return. During their courtship he began to see a hidden, higher purpose in the attraction that had so puzzled and disturbed him in high school.

It is true, he also encountered in her flashes of sarcasm as well as moments of withdrawal, but these were rare, and he came to view them merely as vestigial outbreaks of the old adolescent girl who chaffed at having been put off in favor of the new woman.

Only once during their engagement had there been unpleasantness. It came over a small thing, a poem she showed him in a moment of risked intimacy. She thought — or said she thought — it was funny — a certain way of looking at marriage. She had titled it "Stewardship," a word that seemed to address him directly and made him wary. He read it slowly, rereading the short lines in intense discomfort.

> There are tulips marching princesses at night.
> In gangs of one (or sometimes more)
> Our ladies struggle, chokechained, through the park
> And clutch their hemlines grimly
> To the one remaining breast
> And drag their tender shins
> Across the lawn,
> While tulips, pressing straight
> Toward the dawn,
> Harass the balking columns
> In a jealous fury, lest
> They lose their sweating charges to the dark.
> With thrashing leaves and flower roars,
> They prod their dour damsels toward the light.

When he had finished, her back was to him and she was busy with something at the desk. Her silence was transparent anticipation, but he had little to offer. He didn't find the poem funny. In fact, what little of it he could make sense of offended him, though he didn't say so. Instead he probed awkwardly for the point she was trying to make, but his questions only seemed to dismay her. She tried to explain that to some women getting married was a little like volunteering for the draft. You did so, not because you admired the military or looked forward to the war, but because rightly, or at least inevitably, you loved your country and because there was a great deal at stake.

The analogy, however, was mostly lost on Roger, and when he continued to frown through her explanations, Ellen broke off hopelessly in mid-sentence.

It was his turn to be hurt, and he struck back. He didn't want to trap her, didn't want her to feel forced into anything. If she didn't really love him, if she thought of him as some sort of roaring pansy who would march her around, then perhaps she'd prefer not to think about him at all. His words were just beginning to fall into cadence with his pride and his incomprehension, but Ellen was already crying, and what was the point? She assured him that she loved him. Apologized again and again for the poem. It was badly made. Didn't say what she really meant. Her regret was sincere, almost despairing. Apart from the poem, she was simply not able to convey to him what she had offered this one halting, disastrous time and would not offer again.

It was the first and last time she willingly showed him anything she had written. For his own part, Roger had had two painful exposures to Ellen's poetry, and her subsequent reluctance to share it with him was an arrangement which satisfied his sense of propriety quite as naturally as the prohibition which kept him from following her into the ladies' room.

With their marriage, however, from the very first moment, fixed proprieties and intimacies somehow entered into flux. Pre-established safelines threatened — though uninvited — to dissolve, and late on the night of his wedding, Roger Talmage, no longer a virgin, and only mildly disappointed at the awkwardness of his first performance, lay awake nursing the sense of foreboding that had distracted him during the reception. Finally, raising up on one elbow, he looked intently down at his wife. There remained something startling and severe in this soft sleeping girl, something he was not prepared to accept yet apparently was unable to exorcise. He ran an experimental finger from the base of her breast over the rising and falling ribcage to the deep female curve of her waist, then carefully laying the palm of his hand flat against the vulnerable flesh of her stomach, retraced the same course letting his mind slip quickly away from the sudden resolve that had brought him to his elbow — that he should pray over her — into warm obliterating desire.

When she awoke they caressed and struggled with an intensity that overwhelmed the awkwardness of their first lovemaking. Roger found himself swept far beyond the still measured space of his fantasies, and in this night and the nights to follow, his young wife's pale thighs against the pale sheets became a vision he would carry into the dreams of old age as the burden of what had been lost.

When children came she would find herself, settle into the responsibility, the reward. But children came and he was disappointed, though not in her performance as a mother. She showed the intense affection and pedigogical determination he expected of motherhood's call on a woman. Still, she was not settled, not at peace with herself, and the vague disappointment he felt only distantly mirrored her own. In some deeply withheld, inarticulable way she felt disloyal to her family. The estrangement put the woman at fierce odds with the wife and mother, a struggle that flashed out regularly in petty explosions, followed always by disproportionate declarations of remorse. Roger, who did not easily lose his temper, was annoyed at this lack of self-control, and when with the passing of time his wife's dramatic swings of emotion seemed to resolve themselves into a kind of ironic aloofness, he was at worst relieved. She had become more remote, and in uncomfortable moments he recognized that the calm she displayed was shallow and cynically self-imposed. Nevertheless, it was calm. She had gotten herself under control.

Working late at the office on an April evening, he received a call from Ellen. With steel in her voice, she announced that she had had a difficult day with the children and was going to her room. He, she regretted, would have to see to their care for the rest of the evening. Then she hung up. Preoccupied with his work and on the edge of anger, he called back immediately, only to get six-year-old Allison on the phone. The child was obviously upset. She said her mother had already gone to her room and wouldn't open the door or answer her knocking. The baby was crying in the background.

With no choice, he gave Allison instructions about herself, her little brother, and the baby, and then after making her repeat them, hung up the phone and began to clear his desk. When he drove into the garage, he had fully formulated his anger, and as soon as the children were put to bed and the kitchen passably cleaned, he went upstairs to confront his wife.

Reaching the bedroom door, however, he opened it much more cautiously than he had intended. Nor was he prepared for what he encountered inside. The room was dark, and while his eyes made their adjustment, he found himself listening in stunned amazement to what sounded like anxious, even desperate pleading. As the room's contours emerged, he discovered Ellen kneeling on the floor in a posture of what appeared to be prayer, though not decorously posed at the side of the bed as he would have expected, had he ever imagined her praying alone like this. Instead, she was rocking awkwardly back and forth on her knees in front of the open window and stammering out into the moonless night in nearly hysterical sobs and rapid conspiratorial whispers whose vehemence and unintelligibility made him physically recoil.

Amazed, his mind stuttered, then began to conjure urgent explanations: the woman raving on his carpet was not his wife at all but some poor, deranged creature, who having lost her way into his bedroom, was hissing out her fear and imagined betrayal into what she supposed to be the vast, dark, and averted face of God. He would have to call the authorities.

Roger closed the door of his bedroom with the absolute haste and stealth of someone who has committed a dangerous indiscretion. In the hall again,

it occurred to him for the first time that perhaps his wife needed professional help. The thought embarrassed and unnerved him, but he held on to it, faced it, until it was he, who was praying, apologizing for this monstrous excess in his wife's behavior, and pleading for her recovery. He was seriously frightened and willing to do whatever was necessary to help Ellen get control of herself again.

Most of the night he sat up in the living room brooding, praying, devising strategies. When he arose late the next morning, Allison was already in school, and the younger children, excited by his presence so long after his usual time of departure, vied for his attention. Ellen, matter-of-factly busy and looking as unexceptional as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had taken place, served him his breakfast with an apology. She was sorry to have been so abrupt on the phone; sorry to have burdened him with the children, when she knew how busy he was at the office; but the day had been terribly frustrating, and she had gone to bed with a headache. Could he forgive her just this once?

When she had finished she smiled dutifully and anticipating — or perhaps not requiring — his forgiveness, went on with her work. "I don't think," he murmured wrestling absently with the two-year-old on his lap and trying hard to concentrate past the eggs on his plate, "I don't think you can get there from here." It was nearly a week before he slept the entire night through again without waking at least once to reassure himself that his wife was lying quietly and sanely at his side.

When her mother was dying of cancer, Roger drove Ellen to the country club development on the Monterey Peninsula where her parents had retired. Her father was not well and not able, nor for that matter, anxious, to take care of a wife from whom he had been comfortably estranged most of their married lives. Roger stayed four days before returning to Salt Lake. He found each succeeding day alarmingly more painful. Not that he would mourn his mother-in-law. They had established no bond between them. Nor had she been close to Ellen. She seldom telephoned, never wrote, and even her interest in the children seemed to him more ceremonial than real. She was, by her nature and, as far as he could tell, independent of specific cause, an undeterrably angry woman, who stood resolutely aloof from the things and people he most valued. In their Mormon community, before she left it, she had cultivated an aura of rebellion and acerbic iconoclasm which, quite obviously, she enjoyed at the expense of her family.

For her part, Ellen was, as in almost all things, dutiful but ambivalent toward her mother. As a girl she had suffered from her parents' habitual fighting — the permanent climate of civilized warfare which made room only for combatants and camp followers. And because her mother was the more aggressive, the more articulate adversary, she had sided emotionally with her father who rewarded her ever after by spoiling and exploiting her expansively.

Now, as Ellen's mother sat emaciated and distracted by pain in the garden that was her only remaining fondness, she seemed to Roger as proud and unreconcilable as ever she had been in her life, yet Ellen cared for her with an

unself-conscious patience and concern that startled him. He was dumbfounded, not just by the expression of his wife's obvious love, but by the bare fact of it at all. In all their married lives he had never experienced anything like the unrestrained affection she inexplicably seemed to be squandering on an irascible old woman, whom he knew she had struggled not to hate, and who even now made no attempt to acknowledge her daughter's attentions.

On his last day in California, weary of his father-in-law's relentlessly political Mormonism, he stood alone at the kitchen window watching Ellen read to her mother who sat rigid, white fists clenched and trembling, in her metal lounge chair on the lawn. When suddenly she slept, Ellen covered the still tense arms and shoulders with a sweater and, folding her own arms defensively against the cool ocean breeze, wept silently over her mother's head to the golf course beyond and far out over the Pacific.

Solitary and unnoticed, Roger felt a voyeur's sense of guilty alienation. Suddenly he needed very much to be at home on his own high ground with his own people. But the long trip back through the desolate Nevada mountains only increased his jealousy and estrangement. Ellen was, he knew, a good wife to him. Moreover, she strove with all the ferocity lost in that old-fashioned word to be what he wanted. Still, her behavior toward him, now and as long as he could remember, had always been tempered by the almost palpable will that imposed it. It was as if she had taken him on like some sort of commendable regimen, a diet or an exercise program, not for his own sake or for love of him, but because it had been the right and proper thing to do.

He wanted to go away to somewhere clean and simple, somewhere absolutely barren of voices and complication, where he might pray his life with all its attachments clear and straight and tractable again. But he knew in reserve and in the end that the dark feelings which oppressed him were just that . . . feeling, emotion, self-indulgence. For what was he to pray? A chastened wife? Was he to protest this newfound love for her mother, to condemn his wife's sudden and unexplained capacity for forgiveness? Answers were easy and inevitable, of course, but like all answers that are merely right, they brought no peace. He was deeply offended, yet with no object for his anger but an absence. He possessed in Ellen a gift that had paled and disappeared in the possessing. She remained in many ways his obsession. He desired her as much as ever he had, but he did so — and this both shamed and puzzled him most of all — almost entirely in her absence. His intense affair with his wife proceeded nearly unabated, but only in his imagination, and always apart from her, as if he alone were living out their intimate lives together.

Even the older children were long since asleep, but agitation at the prospect of his wife's return kept Roger awake and led him finally to cross a border he had carefully avoided all his married life. He had never really entered Ellen's study — hardly paying attention to the tiny room at the end of the hall except to note occasionally, when the door was open, that she kept it strewn with books and papers in a disarray apparently and singularly immune to her compulsion for order elsewhere in the house. He accepted the room, as he did her

writing in general, as useful not for its own sake — involuntarily, he disliked any corner of disorder — but as a kind of therapy.

As he entered now, he did so with a sense of trespass that kept him standing nervously in the center of the room for a minute or more surveying the tangle on the writing table and reading miscellaneous book titles. When this initial disquietude had passed, however, he seated himself and reached purposefully for the notebooks which, unlike almost all other objects in view, lay neatly stacked and at right angles to the edge of the table. He smiled at the spiral bound, wide-ruled paper as he turned the pages of the first notebook. He hadn't handled one of these since leaving high school, and it confirmed to him a latent suspicion that Ellen's retreat here was a kind of withdrawal into adolescence.

The pages of the notebook were crowded with illegible scribblings blurred over and over again by erasures. Occasionally he came across a page on which a single poem had been painstakingly written out, only to be spoiled again by marginal notes and new erasures, then carefully recopied on a second or perhaps a third page. He read some of these, but even after careful rereading, knew he must be missing the point. He found precious little to help him understand his wife, though in the swaggering, nose-thumbing rhythms into which the poems often fell and in their consistently acid tone and choice of words, he believed he clearly heard the sharp-tongued and patronizing disaffection of his mother-in-law. It was the same dissenting sarcasm that had offended him in the published high-school poems so many years before and which apparently persisted unchanged and unmatured in the woman who kept his house and his nearly grown children just beyond the study door.

He started several other poems but, unable to get through more than the first few lines of any of them, began to be annoyed with himself and with the entire enterprise. It was not only somehow deceitful, it was futile as well. Flipping rapidly through the pages, he wanted to make a quick end of this and be gone. Then he was brought up short. "To Roger Across the Looking Glass," the title addressed him point blank from the page, leaving him no choice at all but to stop and examine the poem that followed. Checking backward and forward in the notebook, he found fully seven attempts at a clean version of the text, and when he had counted them all, he turned to the final still unamended, unerased version and without raising the notebook from the table, began to read.

> If all our time, that never is,
> (when all of space, ranged in those three
> impaling ranks of "Let There Be,"
> bears down through you to bury me)
> had boiled to metamorphic fizz
>
> that overspills the looking glass
> and bubbles down its frosted sides
> to make of tidy seconds, tides
> and of the virgin minutes, brides
> who loose their limbs in laughing gas;

or if our plaster point of view
had crumbled through the program lace
to filter softly into grace;
or had the gerund taken place
just one, sweet, saving once. Then you

and I and maybe even God,
instead of casting poisoned bread
and sleeping with the empty dead
in sovereign corners of the bed,
might well have kissed what we have clawed
or managed, somehow, through the blow
to touch the wound.
But no. The drain
extending down our pillowed plane
dispels the circle, drives us sane.
There is no orphic afterglow.
And so

I'll rest for now to write some more,
though writing more is counting sheep;
Perhaps there's watching when I weep?
Perhaps the dark my soul will keep?
Perhaps . . .

The poem, even in its seventh version, was still unfinished but Roger didn't notice. When he had read it several times he closed the notebook, yet remained motionless in his seat. Inside, he was as contracted and bewildered as if he had been struck viciously from behind. There was and would be no attempt at comprehension, but from that moment all of the vague temptations to prayer that had distracted him over the preceeding weeks vanished behind a single, sullen preoccupation. Somehow he must see to it that these notebooks never fell into the hands of the children.

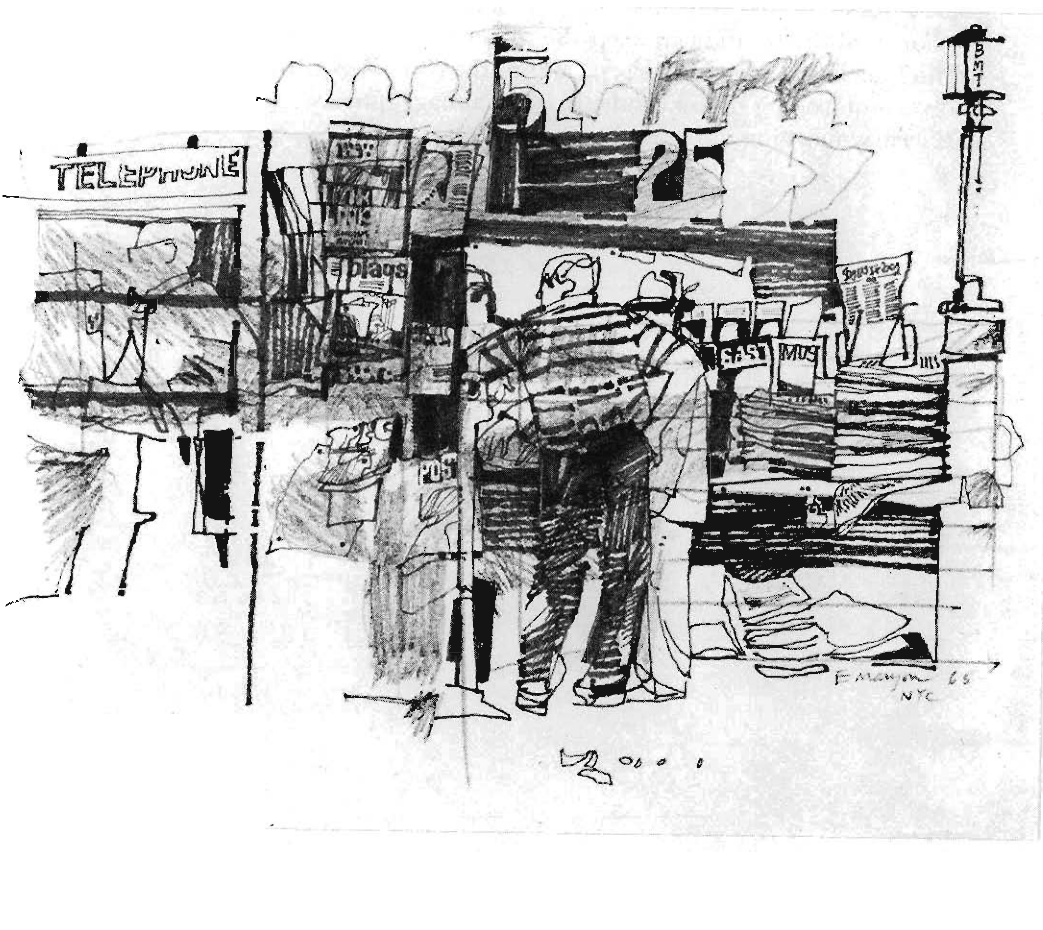
The narrow confluence of pain and of pleasure begins now to skate over Roger's senses like a blade, and he closes his eyes to concentrate on the deepening lines of intersection. Iridescence in his nerves grows, and as it does the body locked under his driving embrace begins to change, to metamorphize (rapidly becoming) not Ellen, but his smiling receptionist, then the dark wife of a client, then yet another woman and another and another in an accelerating whirl drawing him surely, swiftly, steeply down into the singular, piercing, world-devouring whine of his genitals.

Afterward he washes carefully in the bathroom. There is no hurry. This still novel sense of control is by itself a wonder to be savored and admired. He does not want to surrender it too soon to sleep.

When he has brushed his teeth and buttoned his pajamas, it is well after midnight. In the bedroom Ellen is lying in almost precisely the same position

in which he left her. Her eyes are closed, but he does not think she is asleep. It surprises him that she has made no effort to dress or to clean up, for Ellen is normally fastidious. The lapse, in fact, annoys him, and as he climbs into bed, the way she lies there across from him, garmentless and unwashed strikes him as somehow defiant. The surge of anxiety is all too familiar and after a time he reaches out for reassurance. Taking his wife's hand he whispers, "Goodnight, Ellen." And then, after weighing it for a moment, adds, "I love you." Her answer is barely audible but comes immediately and with a certainty that confirms her wakefulness. "Thank you, Roger," she says, and the finality in her voice denies him any response. He can hardly say, "You're welcome."

For a while, needing to keep the upper hand, he listens to her breathing, waiting for her to give in to sleep. But in the end his own weariness seduces his resolve, and, rolling onto his side, Roger Talmage quickly loses track of his wife in the early morning darkness.


TELEPHONE
52
25
BMT
POST