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# JR

## BY WILLIAM GADDIS

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WILLIAM GADDIS, one of America's outstanding novelists, received the National Book Award in 1976 for *JR*, his second novel. Mr. Gaddis is the recipient of a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters. His other books include *The Recognitions* (1955), *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985), and *A Frolic of His Own* (1994).

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WILLIAM GADDIS

*with an Introduction by* FREDERICK R. KARL

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### INTRODUCTION

It is altogether fitting that William Gaddis's novel of voices, *J R*, first published in 1975, should be reissued in Penguin's Twentieth-Century Classics series. For *JR* has become just that, part of the canon of fictions that help define what America was like in the post-World War II years. Although the novel experienced very rocky reviews, and was neglected for many years despite having won the National Book Award, it has remained alive and well through a cadre of devoted readers both inside and outside of the academy. For many readers, as well as for students, it seemed a forbidding work, despite its power and intensity; and yet it is quite accessible once one gives it the opportunity to establish its own terms, in the way James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* have proven to be.

Some early reviewers such as George Steiner, writing in the *New Yorker*—traditionally unaccommodating to unconventional American fiction—deemed it an "unreadable text" and commended Gaddis for having the powers to sustain this unreadability for "over 726 pages." In the *New Republic*, Alfred Kazin, locked in to American realism, said Gaddis's novel is "like nothing else around, and is not a masterpiece." The reviews, incidentally, were not that different in gratuitous hostility and witlessness from those received by Gaddis's mammoth 1955 novel, *The Recognitions*.

Nevertheless, what we see occurring with both novels is something very curious and encouraging in American fiction: The two books have made their way despite opposition from hurried daily reviewers, professional hit men and women, and serious critics who have their own agendas. Furthermore, Gaddis has proven in both novels to be not only a technically adroit and comprehensive writer but a prophet, the kind of author Thomas Carlyle once labeled "a hero of literature." Clearly, if we want to understand

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America in the later 1950s, through the '60s and '70s, and then into the 1980s and early '90s, *The Recognitions* and *J R* should be our guides. Gaddis's labyrinthine novels capture the "real America"—inasmuch as anyone can—far more than those so-called realistic portrayals of American life that claim authenticity.

For Gaddis, everything in America is a metaphor, a cartoon version of who and what we are. This is a paradox as well as an irony, and his novels are attempts to unravel the conundrum. The unraveling, not unexpectedly, requires considerable adroitness. His twin metaphors in *JR* are counterfeiting—A theme continuous with the major thrust of *The Recognitions*—And invisibility, also reminiscent of the earlier novel. Creating a tension or counterpoint with energy and action, counterfeiting uses imitative forms and derivative artificial life posing as the "real"; whereas invisibility is a negation of spatiality and expansiveness, a substitution of murkiness and shadows for light, intense innerness for movement.

The context for this is a unique format, an extraordinary page. Print appears within a great void. The novel's unattributed sources create a spatial emptying out, a denial of expectation, in which only words coming, seemingly, from nowhere can attempt to fill the void. In some respects, *J R* recalls Stéphane Mallarmé's great symbolist poem of 1897, "A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance." In that, the words on the page suggest not the presence of something but what is absent or what might possibly be. The matter there—And we have *JR* in mind—is a mere suggestion of the major element, what is omitted or invisible; and the reader is forced to think not of what he or she is given, but of what is being held back. That withheld material may prove to be more important—Although as readers we can never know, for the very point of holding back is to maintain invisibility. In such a formulation, whether the Mallarmé poem or Gaddis's novel, the incompleteness and lack of center of the artwork are what the reader must grapple with. Emptiness or absence is not a lack of meaning but the very nature of meaning. *J R*'s use of the void, of emptiness confronting words, of words struggling to assert themselves against a sea of space and against the inarticulation of the speaker, of language welling up not as expression but as a survivor of absence, is to turn language into a huge metaphor of America.

Language in this way plays the role of an intruder, even as it communicates the counterfeit and suggests the invisible. As an intruder, it becomes a quasivisual as well as an aural image. We see or experience it differently, just as we hear it differently, since it comes, apparently, out of nowhere or nothing. Stated another way, when words are intruders on the page—when they have no stated source, no attributed voice—they become like notes or sounds breaking the silence; and language in this respect becomes almost indistinguishable from musical notation. Not surprisingly, *JR* is loaded with musical imagery. *The Recognitions*, we recall, ended with *Gotterdammerung*, the tumbling down of the walls that suggests the twilight of the gods in Wagner's Ring Cycle; and *J R* begins with a school production of *Das Rheingold*, which Wagner intended as the overture or entrance into the remainder of the Ring. Not surprisingly, also, our *J R*, or Junior, of the title, our sixth-grader, is Alberich in the school production, the dwarfish Alberich whose love of gold helps turn the Ring into a story of greed and power working against the potential for human love. This is one way to read the novel.

If the business of America is counterfeiting, imitation, fakery, Gaddis has discovered a way in: through a discontinuous, aborted language serving as a vehicle for both the energy and the depletion of American ideals. Yet we should add that *JR* also has undertones of idealism; it is not all negation, in which *J R*'s riotous ventures are simply forms of greed, a Huck Finn for the postwar era. Alongside *J R* is the composer, Edward Bast, who must learn that all the get-rich policies of his young business partner are destructive of his own talents; and that his sole recovery must come not through outside temptations but through himself. Bast is a man seemingly destined to be a classic Gaddis failure; he cannot even inherit a fortune for lack of a birth certificate. Yet he possesses integrity and some dim purpose. The possible conventionality and even sentimentality of this plotting is, fortunately, contravened by Gaddis's sense of play, his parodic vision, his ability to limn a living American language, his capacity for turning jargon and lingo and entire vocabularies into self-mockery. Yet through it all, through the composer's trial by counterfeit values, he does not lose sight of the fact that what finally

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counts is Bast's own talent, his belief in himself. It is not earned easily.

Bast is constantly undercut not only by counterfeiterers who tempt him with outlandish money-making schemes, not only by those like Crawley who want him to write "zebra music" for a big game film; but by institutions that should be supporting him. The school from which he is dismissed is concerned less with education than with contracts, real estate deals, mortgages, stock options, sales, and the like. The chief educational tool seems to be not classroom instruction but field trips, as students come and go, mill around, get on and off one form of transportation or another. The principal of the school operation, Whiteback, also heads a bank; and all the moves the school makes interact with business, not with education. Whenever any school activity arises, Whiteback is interrupted on his telephone by bank business; until school and bank become interchangeable in the incomplete, unattributed speech which characterizes most dialogue. So intermixed are they, in fact, that one scheme seriously advanced is to advertise in textbooks certain products to appeal to the student, depending on his or her level: in advanced algebra or French III, for example, deodorant tampons. Within this context, J R, a sixth-grader, is keyed into money-making as the chief education tool; and he moves accordingly. The school becomes his base for a vast capitalistic enterprise.

Once this is established, and it takes a good many pages, Gaddis is unbending in guiding J R toward his fortune, all based on his taking advantage of special offers in catalogs, in filling out coupons and claiming free samples or calculating how he can make use of military surplus and other detritus in a throwaway society. But because nearly all of J R's operation lies tucked away in the seams of an unifying dialogue, in which there is only an occasional insert of third-person narrative, the element of invisibility persists. While the dashes indicating dialogue do offer the reader some minimal help, the original plan, with no differentiation between dialogue and narration, is far purer and much closer to what the novel suggests: that the line between dialogue and narration should be invisible, since what occurs as the theme of the novel is also invisible. Method and content intermix and reinforce each other.

Once J R activates the elements of a throwaway society, he puts into motion an almost seamless delivery of goods and materials to an apartment on New York's East 96th Street. This apartment, incidentally, is not only a warehouse for J R's enterprises, it is also a meeting ground for several of the characters in the novel: the floundering Bast, the failed writer Gibbs, the streetwise Rhoda, and others. Nevertheless, nearly all of the energy flowing in and around J R's activities is "beyond" or "outside," not quite visible. Since so little is definitely stated, and so much is suggested, we may feel Gaddis is carrying on an extended, obsessively detailed dialogue with himself; that he is the programmer and he receives the printout. All voices echo against each other, a true universe of words delivered, heard or misheard, and then recycled. Only language counts, and yet it is bastardized, discontinuous, severely seamed, dislodged often from sense, and given, on most occasions, no defined voice. One recognizes speakers only by virtue of their words, and not surprisingly one of the chief conduits for all information is the telephone, another the mails. In both of these mediums, words are disengaged from their speaker by some mechanical device; the speaker remains hidden, as it were, even if identified.

The author's vision lies here, in that world where words come at us from every side, engulf us, inundate our attempts to be anything except a conduit for language; and yet at the same time, Gaddis recognizes that words create something, even when they seem to subvert meaning. If they can become part of an arrangement, they are the stuff of art. We may be damned by words, but we may also be saved by them. Not a small child, but Bast ("enough"? "bastard"?) will lead us.

Is the telephone, then, the work of the devil? Why the persistence of telephones? The need for booths, making change, placing calls, finding a suitable language, and then gathering information without appearing? The telephone makes invisibility viable; it also makes for counterfeiting, since voices can be raised or lowered, disguised, mis-identified. A whole range of strategies is made possible by the telephone, even more effectively than with the mails, since with the latter a return address gives away identity. Only the radio can compete, and it is a brilliant stroke that in that critical 96th Street apartment

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a radio lies buried under the detritus so that its incessant sound cannot be turned off. Added to this is another very important factor, and that is that when J R does appear, it is as a voice, with an outpouring of American colloquial speech. The strategy is clear: J R cannot appear too often, since as a sixth-grader he will neither inspire confidence as a high-flying businessman nor prove intellectually stimulating. He must remain a disembodied, disguised voice, or else a signature on a printed form requesting free goods. His is a prophetic voice of American finance, concealed, buried, a high-roller in low-roller form. The telephone plays its role: While it may seem to damn him to deceptiveness, it also gives shape to his aspirations, optimism, and energies; and for Bast, also damned by the telephone, he learns what he must rebel against to validate himself.

Another form of damnation is linked to Gaddis's sense of "recycling." In this view, the goods of the world are not produced but merely redirected; so that use goes to detritus, back to use as a way in which money can be raised, and then the cycle re-begins. The basis of J R's fortune is a shipment of about a million navy forks. Originally ordered by the navy, the forks were then dumped as detritus, only to be picked up by J R through the mails and started through the system again, becoming the basis for further deals, all of which involve recycled materials, contracts, penny stocks (a prophetic view of the 1980s' indulgence in junk bonds), goods that, having become unfashionable and dysfunctional, are then returned into fashion. J R—A young Michael Milken prototype—is the new generation of entrepreneurs, and his fortune will result from his intuition that goods shuffling through the system become themselves the touchstones of wealth. Movement, not production, not increase, is all. Without money or visible goods—without anything produced—the J R Family of Companies becomes worth millions. It is a house of cards, all made possible by the telephone and mails (no fax as yet).

From the novel's very first word, Gaddis stresses the depersonalization of money-making as part of the wasteland in which people operate and thrive. The oral shorthand of the method, so to speak, the interrupted dialogue, the discontinuities are all integral elements of the depersonalization, a distinct part of the vision. As in *The Recognitions*, where identification is often difficult, Gaddis has tried to do for the oral American tradition what Joyce did for written English: rediscover it as a literary voice and defamiliarize it so it seems fresh. His is the poetry, flow, rhythm of routine speech, as much code as communication, as much gesture as word; in fact, a kind of code that has settled in as our major form of communication. Halfway through, we find J R on the phone to Bast:

... I mean about you remember that Ace Development Company which I bought all that stock of? Well see what just happened was this underwriter Mister Decker what he did was when he set it up all it had was these claims to explore for these virgin minerals see so to bring the stock up he found this here Alberta and Western Power Company to merge them by exchanging their stock but see this Alberta and Western was already losing like ten thousand dollars a month so he hires this shit Mister Wall see for ... No but he is because listen, they give him this big expense allowance and like this twenty-five percent sales commission to handle their financing so like remember I got those debentures which I was getting this interest on the Series B right after they put out the Series C? Well see like what he did was first he put out this Series A which then when the interest on it was due he put out this here Series B and used that money to pay it see, see then when the interest on the Series B was due he just put out this ... No but so what if he goes to jail, I mean I'm the one that... No like Piscator [a fly-by-night lawyer] just said maybe we have this lousy bunch of mineral rights and like drilling rights or something on these old Alberta right of ways so wait have you got a map there hey... ?

This is the language of politics (Reagan and Bush without syntax, Clinton without grammar, Perot with neither), television (anchors, sports announcers, interviewers), finance, advertisements and publicity, and our popular musical forms.

That the sound of voices has engulfed the meaning of the novel suggests more than the bombardment of the senses or the disorientation of expectations. "Meaning" is clearly not to be found

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solely in words or in passages, or in thematic development, certainly not in plot or character; rather, meaning derives from the assault on our ears, from the waves of Americanese suggesting how business is done. There is a loving sense of language rolling in like surf. The incomplete sounds are like the visual images in a stock market tape—part of an abbreviated, truncated language that, nevertheless, contains very large meanings; and in the same way, J R's periodic appearances—As if from some Wagnerian underworld—Are forms of a coded world that has replaced human communication. Although we hear voices, we do not hear humanity; although we see words, they are not words that shape up to orderliness; and although we recognize that the code must be penetrated, we are denied firm decoding. Gaddis has created something of a hologram: a three-dimensional photograph created by a reflection or an illumination; and he has done it not visually, but auditorily. Words take on not only their printed, sequential look, but a chaotic, disoriented sound, the buzz that lies just beyond us. In one respect, as readers we overhear; and Gaddis's novel is an act of "auditory voyeurism," if we can coin such a phrase.

However much depersonalization is one of the thematic presences of the novel, it is not for Gaddis the end of the matter. He insists on tensions, with the latter deriving from counterpointing depersonalized voices with their (futile) effort to communicate. These are virtually all desperately lonely voices reaching out to express themselves but coming away frustrated and baffled. Language fails them when they attempt to communicate, whether J R with Bast, or Jack Gibbs, another failed teacher at the school, or Mrs. Joubert, or even the people, like the lawyer Coen, who seem to call the financial tune. They all retreat before the bafflement of language, which somehow fails to connect. Yet the novel indicates they do not succumb; voices and language keep coming even if they miss their target, even if they have no differentiated target at all.

Ultimately, a novel in which language abounds and yet fails is a novel about how feeling, emotion, mutual response no longer function. Education, finance, acquisition, materiality, each of them neutral when separate, become highly inflammable when intermixed. The school is concerned with finance; J R is himself "educated" into catalog marketing, amassing goods, drawn to nonproductivity. The world of finance is itself bogus, based on counterfeit offers, legal scams, and unthinking responses, on surplus goods being invisibly circulated through the system; with the accumulation of materials based not on their usefulness but on their availability.

While *J R* tells us more bad things about the country than any other postwar American novel, not all of what it says is negative. On the contrary, Gaddis reveals the energy, the push, the optimism involved even in deals that might turn sour. *J R* returns us to the archetypal American boy, Huck Finn, and his—Gaddis's—use of colloquial language winds back to Twain and his effort to forge an American lingo. But echoes of an entire world of American writing reverberate through *J R*: not only Huck and Twain, but Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths in *An American Tragedy* and Fitzgerald's Jay Gatsby; in Bast, we sense Hemingway's defeated romantics. And in that 96th Street apartment, we have something of Melville's "white whale," something mysterious and unsinkable, with J R himself an indomitable Ahab slowly succumbing to watery depths. By recapitulating American literature, Gaddis has provided continuity with the grand themes of our major fictions, and by re-energizing the language in its most colloquial forms he has revealed something unique, in a sense a language within a language. At its best, the incomplete and interrupted passages rise to the intensity we associate with poetic expression; at their usual, they create their own terms and force the reader to reposition his or her expectations.

The silent movement of goods from J R's telephone orders to the apartment on 96th Street takes on qualities of a magical process. The myth of capitalism is being re-defined. If J R for a time has the "Midas touch," it is a touch that nobody really feels. It does not involve contact, physicality, anything tangibly occurring. Like the Tristero language in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Gaddis's has transformed the mailing system into a broader sense of the country's business; so that whatever creates wealth, or destroys creativity, or makes for achievement does so without leaving any real trace of itself. In this secretive, conspiratorial process, a serious man like Bast cannot flourish. He must either give

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way to its strange modes, one of which is to compose "zebra music" for a documentary, or distance himself, finally, from J R and his enterprises.

Because so much of the activity occurs on public telephones, or else in casual conversations against a background of competing sounds, the mainstream material, such as it is, leaves virtually no record; and the competing noise from television and radio at the school or in the apartment interacts with other forms of communication to create a confusion of realms. This is clearly Gaddis's point, part of his deconstruction of communication: to intermix noise and silence, to cross over various sounds so as to create misinformation, not fact, and to use the telephone as the instrument of unrecorded interchange so that once words float through wires they vanish. "Thin air" is the context for dialogue, for sources of information, for processes in which goods become transferred from one place to another. This is the making of a capitalistic myth of invisible and conspiratorial power.

Amidst this, almost the sole sustained figure, is J R himself, the sixth-grader, a corporate manager and financial plunger once he gets his enterprises going. After he has studied the market, and mastered futures, pork bellies, and margins, he decides to go for it. Mrs. Joubert, his sympathetic teacher who supposedly knows something of the market, cannot respond to his queries about "hedged commodities" or hedging in "futures" and the like. Yet while J R is obsessed with the ideology of money-making—pointing to water-fountain millionaires and light-bulb millionaires, even locker millionaires—she tries to divert him with images of the evening, the sky, the moon. Health, she suggests, lies outside, whereas he is linked to insider deals, financial coups, turning nothing into something—All interiors, mysterious and secretive presences. She wants to lure him to "left field," but his is the world of indoor sports, not baseball. In one respect, his education is a success, for he has assimilated the lessons of Whiteback, principal as well as bank owner. The course of this part of *JR* recalls Dickens's *Hard Times*, in which the schoolmaster, Gradgrind, has worked his magic on his student, Bitzer, who has absorbed all the worst features of the former's "choking" philosophy. In *JR*, with school and bank indistinguishable, the good student considers his education marketable.

Despite the energy, the verve, the refusal to quit, the reinvention of the language, despite all this, we return to the novel's major thrust, a terrible indictment of what we have become in the postwar years. Typical is a passage that describes "Frigcom," an example of technological development gone crazy:

... Dateline New York, Frigcom, comma, a process now being developed to solve the noise pollution problem comma may one day take the place of records comma books comma even personal letters in our daily lives comma, according to a report released jointly today by the Department of Defense and Ray hyphen X Corporation comma a member of the caps J R Family of Companies period new paragraph. The still secret Frigcom process is attracting the attention of our major cities as the latest scientific breakthrough promising noise elimination by the placement of absorbent screens at what are called quote shard intervals unquote in noise polluted areas period operating at faster hyphen than hyphen sound speeds comma a complex process employing liquid nitrogen will be used to convert the noise shards comma as they are known comma at temperatures so low they may be handled with comparative ease by trained personnel immediately upon emission before the noise element is released into the atmosphere period....

Translation: Sounds can be frozen into a solid state. All institutions and practices having become sources of parody, only art, Bast's dim prospect, holds any hope of redemption, any chance of balancing venality and corruption.

One of the major conflicts in the novel is between the forces of order—those elements reviled above, in education, the media, finance—And those that create extreme disorder. What is compelling is that they are usually the same forces. Despite all the efforts to contain it, disorder always breaks through; it is systemic. The theme is the assault of disorder on order; the method, flow, stream, inundation. We catch glimpses of this early on, well before J R is clear in our mind. In the character of Jack Gibbs, we

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have someone who assimilated all the tensions of order and disorder. Gibbs is a kind of Panurge, a man of supreme disarray who is trying to find order in history in a book he is writing. Yet the book is itself part of Gibbs's disorder, inasmuch as after ten years of sporadic work on it, it exists only fragmentarily. In his efforts to complete this treatise on "a social history of mechanization and the arts"—A kind of parallel idea to what *J R* represents—he allows himself to be distracted, interrupted as he is by telephone calls and the chaos of his own life.

Nevertheless, his insights into disorder are clearly those that govern many parts of *JR*, since Gibbs understands that everything we consider order—information, knowledge, fact, detail—is itself an arbitrary imposition on a disorderly, rather different process. Since disorder is so threatening, he reasons, we have created an "orderly" version of things—the most orderly being mechanization—And thus we can come away assured that the world out there is reachable through a schematic imagination. Gibbs, then, is working against the grain, and of course in Gaddis's messy world he must fail, as does anyone who attempts either to tell the truth or to run up against received opinion. The best Gibbs can do is to read aloud from early passages, or relate his ideas, to Mrs. Joubert; for when he finds his notes in one of the hundreds of cartons littering the 96th Street apartment—Milton's Pandemonium redefined—he is incapable of ordering them into his thesis of disorder. He falls victim, as he must, to the very forces he is attempting to explain. He is part of Gaddis's grand plan of "American failure," which permeates all three of his novels and was, indeed, the subject of a course he taught at Bard College. Its thesis is straightforward: The American failure projects some inchoate ideal but is incapable of finding his (or her) way out of the morass, which can be accomplished only rarely through some form of art. All else is counterfeit. The failure screams "fake," while the successful ones deny that disorder has won.

The implications for this are large, and they have attracted an entire generation of the more innovative writers: those novelists willing to forgo more traditional narrative and more conventional forms of language. Joining the author of *J R* in these respects are Thomas Pynchon, whose novels seem to work in and out of Gaddis's, in a kind of give and take; Donald Barthelme, whose most successful short stories are obsessed with the disorder that lies beneath every aspect of our civilization; a little earlier, John Hawkes, an experimenter in jagged, often nonsequential language, a subverter of narrative process. To these we should add John Barth, a steady experimenter in the 1960s, and Joseph McElroy, the maker of arbitrary imaginary worlds. Behind and around them all is Borges, whose short fictions lie as a presence over nearly all innovative postwar American writing.

Although each writer has a different agenda, there is considerable overlap; for besides their commitment to an experimental strain in American fiction, they are concerned with the social and political residue lying in the interstices of order and disorder. Their verbal constructs are not solely self-reflexive, not merely bodies of words circling back upon themselves. They touch upon information and the way knowledge is transmitted; and how transmission affects our senses, our impressions, inevitably our experience of the realities around us. Of this group, Hawkes and McElroy may appear to be moving us further inward, without regard for larger reverberations; but all of the others, and even these two, are social critics as well as impressionists.

An example: Published within a year of each other, *J R* and Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* show a remarkable overlapping of concerns. In the first, America is a corporate empire; in the latter, it is part of a multinational cartel. Their barrage of words creates not a wall but a centrifugal force, thrusting us into the world, not away from it. For both, corporate empires embody tremendous energies, rocketry in Pynchon, but an equal burst in the rocket-like *J R*, a pint-sized phenomenon who touches on several important elements: art, the natural life, the question of information, the ways in which people arrange their experiences. He is like the bottled fuel that burns up to drive the rocket; his telephone calls, so essential to his empire, are made from inside the rocket, an uncanny image; and interrupted spurts of language are like the other forms of energy driving the engine. Junk may be the ultimate product, but along the way the body politic is infected.

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Parallel to these matters, there are other entanglements, reverberations, and modes of disorder in *J R*, one of them connected to inheritance. Taking hints from Dickens's *Bleak House* and its Jarndyce case languishing in Chancery, Gaddis has also integrated such legal complications into his novel. *JR* opens with a scene that involves an inheritance of shares of stock, and an attempt by a lawyer (Coen) to unravel the details so that the heirs can ultimately be cheated out of their due. Playing through is the entire question of what inheritance means when the heirs are diffused about the country, are unable to respond to what is theirs, are indeed unable to find out what is theirs. The point of the inheritance is not only money, but discovery, the detective element, sleuthing, conspiracy, deception. Disentangling the heirs means disentangling questions of authenticity and counterfeit. As in *The Recognitions*, with similar qualities at stake, Gaddis is interested in the chase because it creates not only confusion but unpredictability, uncertainty, indeterminacy. The heirs, such as they are, heave into sight, then vanish, or else become absorbed into other activities; the legal system, such as it is—And a preoccupation with Gaddis because of its potential for doubletalk—breaks down because it depends on complicity and mutuality. Clearly, the disarray of the inheritance theme is part of the more general disarray characterizing all other elements of the novel.

Along these lines, in the apartment, Gibbs and Eigen discuss a new board game called "Split," about divorce. Struggling against his own divorce and losing control of his child, Gibbs lays it out, in typical Gad-disease:

Wait wait listen Tom listen, idea make a million dollars God damn it listen. Invent a God damned parlor game where's the bottle listen, game about divorce sweep the God damned country parlor game call it Divorce how's that. Every God damned married couple young and old alike sublimate their God damned can't stand each other can't afford to split buy the God damned game for ten dollars sublimate their God damned divorce game call it Split make a million dollars how's that.

This passage and the following seem casual, throwaways, but are really integral parts of how the conflict between order and disorder falls prey to randomness. Gibbs speaks of tossing the dice and ending up with a \$2000 orthodontist bill, or he passes Go and owes alimony; or else he picks a card and pays his wife's back psychiatrist bills for \$1200. "Split" is endemic to the novel: incompatibility of people, obviously; more profoundly, the splits in society that victimize anyone unable to ride the financial crest; finally, the sheer disarray that awaits all. Happenstance is destiny. With the throw of the dice and the movement around a fateful series of circumstances, the board game is the arrangement *JR* in its largest sense presents. You land on strange squares, randomly, and that circumstantial event leads to a sequence of steps that can undermine the individual. In the throw of the dice, one is abandoned not only to chance but to consequences that are a form of doom.

In the background of all this is a complicated point of view that controls *J R*. There is a Calvinist sense of predetermination, of eternal damnation unless—by chance—one is among the elect. The game "Split" suggests that one enters the world of indeterminacy which, withal its uncertainty, has as a definite end financial and emotional distress. The "game" superficially involves the play between an uncertain throw and the destiny lying on the board's squares; or in more magisterial terms, between life as we move from one stage to another and the fate or doom awaiting us once we make our move. It is both an ironical and a paradoxical metaphor. Among other things, we can never know where we may end up, however optimistic the toss; just as in Calvinism, despite hopeful signs to the contrary, we may end up doomed and damned. Gaddis's Congregationalist background, with its overtones of Calvinism, rumbles through not only "Split" but the whole "play" of the novel. Whether one chooses, stumbles, or tosses the dice, the Protestant spirit of playing the game for all it is worth is constantly balanced out by the penalties waiting in the shadows.

In one of its ironies, the title would seem to indicate the world of the child. But *J R* or Junior is also a kind of pop title, a form of shorthand for the larger world, a metonymy. The title reflects the way



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Gaddis works, starting with seemingly minor details of an inheritance and then building slowly and conspiratorily into the making of an empire. After the "junior" quality of *JR* is validated, the sixth-grader takes on the legendary qualities of a Ford or Rockefeller or Carnegie, except that in his case he produces nothing but a paper trail and a warehouse of surplus goods. The pop title is suitable for the toy-like quality of the enterprises: whatever is excess or surplus becomes part of *JR*'s toy shop; and the "pop" element further derives not only from the popular game of finance but from the fact *JR* has plenty of pop and also seems to lack a pop or father. In the American mode, he recreates himself so as to emerge not as a junior but as someone larger than life, like those images in pop art that have been with us so long we ignore them until they call attention to themselves by being portrayed in places we do not expect.

So, too, *JR*—A boy who is ordinarily overlooked, "just another sixth-grader," a preteen with the usual juices—suddenly becomes visible in other ways once he begins to reshape junk. "Junior" is now seen operating in the context of adults, the lawyers, brokers, dealers, and the like who surround him. The title, finally, throws us into a crazy-quilt world in which younger and older crisscross and no longer have any conventional hold on us. Part of the disorder the novel communicates derives from *JR*'s precocity in baffling an adult world, an inversion of expectations. He is not victim, but victimizer; not conquered, but conqueror. Pop has triumphed over tradition.

Another area, not so much of pop culture, but of a parallel youthful world, concerns physicality, chiefly the way in which bodies and limbs are arranged and rearranged, as though in some Picasso-like reorientation of physical elements. Although there is little overt sexual play in *JR*, there is a good deal of rearrangement of bodies, touching, limbs intertwining, running into each other, twisting and becoming indistinguishable. The sixth-grader is awkward in his movements, so that his hands, knees, legs, elbows are constantly brushing others' limbs. He is, as the saying goes, "all arms and legs"; and this youthful awkwardness—particularly noticeable when he tries to get at the telephone—extends to other members of the cast. Jerky physical contact becomes part of the financial world, as though skewed body parts have replaced any emotional involvement. Early on, Bast's elbow catches Mrs. Joubert "a reeling blow in the breast" and she drops the sack of coins intended for a student field trip. The sack breaks—the sexual intimation is clear but goes no further until later, when Gibbs, not Bast, and Amy Joubert spend a weekend together. When Bast attempts to gather the coins on the ground, she tramples on his hand; further contact is then made, but through "reeling," "trampling," "blows." Gibbs is himself angular and awkward in his arrangement of his limbs, out of step, tripping on himself.

What does it all mean, this repetition of awkwardness? It would seem, at first, to be keyed in to the type of disorder that characterizes every other facet of the novel. Limbs are not graceful or symmetrical but, as part of the physical landscape, they reinforce how angular and out of shape everything is. In another respect, the difficulty with limbs suggests how feeling, love, romance have eluded these characters; so that for the most part, their physicality extends only to elbowing, brushing, grazing. In still another way, the difficulty in finding space for limbs, or for using limbs gracefully, is part of the artificiality of the entire enterprise. The body, which is supposed to be a fluid arrangement of tasteful parts, becomes like the cogs and gears, the pistons and rods of a machine; a robotic object rather than human, lacking softness or give. In such a scene, the body functions not as something that bends to another and seeks or gives pleasure, but as an element that falls outside human feeling. In a final respect, the entanglement of limbs suggests a jigsaw puzzle in which the parts have not yet been fitted together; or a puzzle in which they do not fit because they do not or cannot connect. Limbs fly free of the body they belong to. Elbows and knees, even hands, are disengaged parts. The fragmentation of the body is not only the collapse of a normalized world but the subverting of possibility, the undermining of meaningful human relationships.

What Gaddis is after is very big game, nothing less than capturing America in its most destructive postwar poses. He is, of course, presenting a metaphor of what we have become, but he is also prophesying where we are going and suggesting that a cultural hell—now and later—is the destiny of

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the players. A high moral sense lies in this: not the moral sense that is only condemnatory, but one that is outraged at the waste of human resources. People of considerable achievement and potentiality pass through the novel: Bast of course, but Jack Gibbs, platoons of legal experts and financial whizzes, the wizard J R himself, the humanitarian Amy Joubert. All of them, even the hypocrites and masters of scams, Whiteback, Crawley, and their ilk, have wasted their goods. All have been pre-empted, needless to say, by systems, ideas, attitudes, traditions, and conventions that subvert behavior, abort abilities, undermine human capacity, destroy potential. In their interaction, they have proven that social intercourse breeds contempt, that a narrowly focussed desire for achievement leads to waste. Only Bast may be salvageable, because he retains the face of humanity: the starving artist who hopes to practice his art but who, throughout the novel, is addled by everything calculated to suborn his craft.

In matters of form, that there are no chapters, no breaks, no interruption of the continuity of text all suggest that these voices emanating from undescribed presences are part of a particular temporal sequencing. While this may imply a kind of order, it is precisely the opposite. Time in *J R* is not only elusive but imaginatively created; so that present and past are caught up in a relentless, disorderly flow. The fragmentation of dialogue, character, and scene—All aspects of Gaddis's intense modernistic practices—reinforces the skewed flow of time: future caught up with past and present, past recapitulated in present, and present swept up by J R's various enterprises, some of them already past. In a further play on time, Gaddis keeps referring to "futures," those aspects of the stock market based on calculated risks, the potential performances of a given stock; but these "futures" are also linked to time, in that their performance paradoxically helps to define where the characters are in past and present.

As in so many modernistic fictions—one thinks especially of Virginia Woolf's novels or Joyce's—"real time" is located through various clocks; "novel time," however, breaks free of real time, to create a flow that parallels inner consciousness. The latter is attached to what art explores, while clock time is linked to the barren matters of the real world: dissolution of marriages, rejection of children by parents or the loss of the children, financial scams, and the rest. All of these are part of the contemporary scene, as Amy Joubert's marriage to Lucien breaks up and he attempts to remove his son from her custody; or Jack Gibbs, in a forlorn love for his cousin Stella, sees his marriage dissolve and further loses his daughter. The same is true of Thomas Eigen: a broken marriage, a lost child. J R himself seems parentless, a Dickens-like waif; and Edward Bast is slowly divested of his family, whether aunts, uncle, or others.

In the real world of time, there is only dissolution. In the world of inner time, the world of flow, there is the possibility of redress, the chance someone like Bast can overcome temptation to write his music and deny the role imposed by the pressures of the marketplace. None of this is obvious; as noted, what could be a sentimental or stereotypical scenario is avoided. The inner flow is buried, as are the events of the actual world; and the reader who wishes to engage the flow may miss the disengagement and dissolution occurring beyond. Or else, the reader succumbing to the horrific sequence of real events may not accept the flow—As we saw in most contemporary reviews of *JR*, where Gaddis's insistence on reader response to submerged elements was misread or ignored.

When all else has been explored, the world of the artist, ultimately, is the key to the novel. Initially, we see the school production of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*; but amidst bickering over money—gold is the theme of this first segment of the Ring cycle—the production is aborted. This gives way to another potential Bast production, his writing of an opera based on Tennyson's poem "Locksley Hall," but, more important, to his father's opera based on the Philoctetes legend. In that, Philoctetes is badly wounded—from a snake bite—And the stink from his open sore causes everyone to abandon him on an island. But he possesses the bow and arrows of Heracles, magic bow and magic arrows that lead to the Greek victory at Troy. Philoctetes has gradually taken on the role of the archetypal artist: wounded, isolated, suffering, abandoned, but possessing an ultimate weapon which society needs, his art or his

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craft. It is this quality that Bast must finally attune himself to, or else he is lost, becoming no different from those who dominate the school and the marketplace. In the artist's sense of things, time is flow: eternal, with past, present, and future fused, connected to an inner being or unity, not to clock or calendar. It is toward this that Bast, most often futilely, strives.

The novel yearns to illuminate the world of Yeats's fabulous golden bird or Keats's timeless Grecian Urn and Nightingale: those artifacts or parts of wondrous nature that exist outside of regularized time and that speak to us eternally. It is, Gaddis suggests, our sole way of breaking the cycle of deception, greed, hypocrisy, merchandising, and the like which have characterized the country since the 1950s. Bast's vision, which goes well beyond writing "zebra music," has qualities of unity and resolution; and when he has a "recognition" of what is necessary, he can validate himself through serving his talent. The novel is about how one emerges and becomes inviolate, if it is at all possible.

The deck is stacked, the odds formidable. Possibly representing the other eye of the storm, Eigen is an unknown author who has published a novel on which he labored for seven years. The publisher dropped the book cold on day of publication, and Eigen estimates that one copy—his total sales—is being passed around in classrooms. All of this is reminiscent of Gaddis's own *Recognitions*: small sale, hostile reception, but a following that read the "one copy." Since the publisher will not relinquish rights, Eigen foresees little relief; while authorship has given him the chance to emerge, it has also entrapped him. "Art," whatever form it takes, runs into that marketplace controlled by the likes of Crawley, Whiteback, J R, and their cronies and subsidiaries. Eigen's perhaps naive sense is that some things should be able to establish themselves apart from their purely commercial worth: his novel, Bast's music, talent itself. Gaddis is not so sure.

The decision Bast finally makes—After having been brought close to anomie through lack of sleep and malnourishment—is to pursue his inner vision. The value of art, he must believe, requires an inner vision that justifies the individual's experience and existence. That much is apparent. Less apparent is that art does make its way if the artist is persistent enough. Gaddis's own passage from the poor reception of *The Recognitions* to his composition of *J R* twenty years later indicates how the artist can emerge from the valley of death if he or she persists. Faulkner's sense of "endurance" is clearly part of Gaddis's energy, as is Melville's refusal to succumb after the dismissal of *Moby-Dick*. Melville and his great novel, in fact, play through Gaddis's entire career, as we have noted: the artist who initially had commercial successes, then wrote an awesome book, and began to fall into obscurity. Gaddis in his way came back, and that, too, is part of the inner vision, the result: *J R* and, later, *Carpenter's Gothic*.

Yet we cannot leave it at that, with the artist in some kind of difficult and troubling triumph. For other artists in the novel—the above-mentioned Eigen and Gibbs, the painter Schepperman, the would-be writer Schramm—suggest that the nobility of their inner vision is hardly matched by their basic human impulses. They are part of the general failure characterizing the novel. They contribute to the dissolution of civil ties, the hostility between parents and children, the inability of adults to act like adults, the entropy that underlies all systems and leads to a gradual loss, the commercialism at the heart of virtually all transactions, the breakdown of viable educational policies, the consuming greed of radio and television advertisers, and the destruction of means of communication. In all these, they are part of the problem even as they hold themselves above, in some more sacred realm. Gaddis's ultimate vision is not that artists can save us—Although they have saving graces—but that inevitably every form of behavior and activity is tainted, corrupted, polluted. As in a Hawthorne fiction, some shadow of evil lurks everywhere, and America is a quite imperfect Eden. For that, even art, even sacred visions, offer few solutions.

—Frederick R. Karl  
New York University

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

### OTHER BOOKS BY WILLIAM GADDIS

*The Recognitions* (1955) *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985)

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**JR**

*For Matthew*

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Once more unto the breach, dear friend, once more

—Money ... ? in a voice that rustled.

—Paper, yes.

—And we'd never seen it. Paper money.

—We never saw paper money till we came east.

—It looked so strange the first time we saw it. Lifeless.

—You couldn't believe it was worth a thing.

—Not after Father jingling his change.

—Those were silver dollars.

—And silver halves, yes and quarters, Julia. The ones from his pupils. I can hear him now...

Sunlight, pocketed in a cloud, spilled suddenly broken across the floor through the leaves of the trees outside.

—Coming up the veranda, how he jingled when he walked.

—He'd have his pupils rest the quarters that they brought him on the backs of their hands when they did their scales. He charged fifty cents a lesson, you see, Mister...

—Coen, without the h. Now if both you ladies...

—Why, it's just like that story about Father's dying wish to have his bust sunk in Vancouver harbor, and his ashes sprinkled on the water there, about James and Thomas out in the rowboat, and both of them hitting at the bust with their oars because it was hollow and wouldn't go down, and the storm coming up while they were out there, blowing his ashes back into their beards.

—There was never a bust of Father, Anne. And I don't recall his ever being in Australia.

—That's just what I mean, about stories getting started.

—Well, it can't help repeating them before a perfect stranger.

—I'd hardly call Mister Cohen a stranger, Julia. He knows more about our business than we do ourselves.

—Ladies, please. I haven't come out here simply to dig into your intimate affairs but since your brother died intestate, certain matters will have to be dealt with which otherwise might never come up at all. Now to return to this question of ...

—I'm sure we have nothing to hide. Lots of brothers don't get on, after all.

—And do come and sit down, Mister Cohen.

—You might as well tell him the whole story, Julia.

—Well, Father was just sixteen years old. As I say, Ira Cobb owed him some money. It was for work that Father had done, probably repairing some farm machinery. Father was always good with his hands. And then this problem came up over money, instead of paying Father Ira gave him an old violin and he took it down to the barn to try to learn to play it. Well his father heard it and went right down, and broke the violin over Father's head. We were a Quaker family, after all, where you just didn't do things that didn't pay.

—Of course, Miss Bast, it's all... quite commendable. Now, returning to this question of property...

—That's what we're discussing, if you'll be a little patient. Why, Uncle Dick, Father's older brother, had walked all the way back to Indiana, every step of the way from the Andersonville prison.

—And after that business of the violin, Father left home and went to teaching school.

—The one thing he'd wanted, all his life, was to own as far as he could see in any direction. I hope we've cleared things up for you now.

—We might if he came back here and sat down. He won't find anything gazing out the window.

—I had hoped, said Mister Coen from the far end of the room, where he appeared to steady himself against the window frame, —I expected Mrs Angel to be with us here today, he went on in a tone as drained of hope as the gaze he had turned out through evergreen foundation planting just gone sunless

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with stifling the prospect of roses run riot only to be strangled by the honeysuckle which had long since overwhelmed the grape arbor at the back, where another building was being silently devoured by rhododendron before his eyes.

—Mrs Angel?

—The daughter of the decedent.

—Oh, that's Stella's married name isn't it. You remember, Julia, Father used to say...

—Why, Stella called earlier, you told me yourself Anne. To say she was taking a later train.

—That name was changed from Engels, somewhere along the way...

—I'm afraid I'll miss her then, I have to be in court...

—I scarcely see the need for that, Mister Cohen. If Stella's husband is so impatient he's hiring lawyers and running to court...

—You're losing a button here, Mister Cohen. Thomas had the same trouble when he got stout. He couldn't keep a crease in anything either.

—Miss... Bast. I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear. My court appearance today has nothing whatsoever to do with this matter. There is no reason for any of this to ever come into court. In fact, believe me Miss Bast... both of you ladies, the last thing I would wish would be to ... to see you ladies in court. Now. You must understand that I am not here simply as Mister Angel's attorney, I am here as counsel for General Roll...

—You remember back when Thomas started it, Julia? And we thought it was a military friend he'd made?

—Of course it was James who had friends in the military.

—Yes, he'd run off to war, you know, Mister Cohen. A drummer boy in the Spanish war.

—The... Spanish war? he murmured vaguely, braced against the back of the Queen Anne chair before the empty hearth.

—Yes. He was only a child.

—But... the Spanish war? That was 'thirty-seven, wasn't it? or 'thirty-eight?

—Oh, not so long ago as that. I think you mean 'ninety-seven, or 'ninety-eight was it, Anne? When they sank the Maine?

—Who? That's one I never heard. Do you feel unwell, Mister Cohen?

—Yes, Thomas ran off right after James did, but he was too small for the war of course. He joined a Tom show passing through town, playing clarinet in the entreact and they also let him look after the dogs, finding livery stables to put them up in. You might have noticed his scar, Mister Cohen, where one of the bloodhounds tore open his thumb. He carried it with him right into the grave, but you're not leaving us so soon, Mister Cohen? Of course if we've answered all your questions, I know you must be a busy man.

—Mister Cohen might like a nice glass of cold water.

—No, it isn't... water that I need. If you ladies, you... just for a moment, if you'll give me your undivided attention...

—We have no objection at all, Mister Cohen. We're telling you everything we can think of.

—Yes but, some of it is not precisely relevant...

—If you'll simply tell us what it is you want to know, instead of wandering around the room here waving your arms. We want to see this settled as much as anyone.

—Yes ... thank you, Miss Bast. Precisely. Now. As we are all aware, the bulk of your brother's estate consists of his controlling share in the General Roll Corporation...

—Share! I think Thomas had at least forty shares, or forty-five was it Anne? Because we have...

—Precisely, Miss Bast. Since its founding, General Roll has been a closely held company owned by members of your family. Under the guidance of the decedent, and more recently that of his son-in-law Mister Angel, General Roll has prospered substantially...

—You certainly wouldn't know it from the dividends, Mister Cohen. There simply have not been any.

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—Precisely. This is one of the difficulties we face now. Since your brother, and more recently his son-in-law, have wished to build the company larger rather than simply extract profits from it, its net worth has grown considerably, and with that growth of course have come certain obligations which the company right now is being hard pressed to satisfy. Since no buy-sell arrangement had been made with the decedent prior to his death, no cross-purchase plan providing life insurance on each of the principals or an entity plan that would have allowed the company itself to buy up his interest, in the absence of any such arrangements as these, the money which will be required to pay the very substantial death taxes...

—Julia, I'm sure Mister Cohen only is complicating things unnecessarily...

—Crowned by the complications inherent in any situation in which the decedent dies intestate...

—Julia, can't you...

—Further complicated by certain unresolved and somewhat delicate aspects of the family situation which I have come out here today to discuss with...

—Mister Cohen, please! Do sit down and come to the point.

—Yes, after all Julia, you remember. Charlotte died without leaving a will and Father simply sat down and parceled things out. Of course I think that James always felt...

—Yes, James made it quite clear how he felt. Do sit down here, Mister Cohen, and stop waving that piece of paper around.

—It's... simply the waiver I mentioned, he said giving it up and seating himself in the Queen Anne chair whose arm came off in his hand.

—Julia? I thought Edward had fixed that.

—It was the side door latch he fixed, Anne.

—It didn't work when I let Mister Cohen in. He had to come round by the back.

—I thought you came in at the side, Mister Cohen.

—Well I let him in, Julia. After all.

—I thought Edward had...

—Let him in?

—No. Fixed the latch.

Mister Coen, finished fitting the arm of the chair back into place, leaned carefully away from it. — That is the waiver I brought out for your nephew Edward to sign, he said resting his elbows on the scarcely more firm support of his knees. —A, a mere formality in this case. Of course, where there's a will...

—There's a way. You're quite witty today Mister Cohen, but believe me Anne I think this is Thomas' will, the tangle things are in right now.

—Yes, just look at these obituaries, and why Mister Cohen ever brought them out unless to tangle things up still further. To read them it's hard even knowing who's dead. Did you see this one? It's all about James. James, and no mention of Thomas at all.

—I simply included it because ... he began in a tone that seemed to echo the deep, as he fixed the newspaper streamer flown before his glazed eyes. —Word comes in to a newspaper of a death, if someone there is in a hurry and just hears the last name, he might grab the obituary that's already written on someone like your brother James, as prominent as your brother James, they keep one written and up to date against the day...

—But James isn't dead! he's just away...

—Abroad, accepting some sort of award.

—Yes, yes in fact, I think if you'll read that clipping...

—That seems to be about all James does now, going about to accept awards.

—It's not as though he didn't deserve them, Julia. Don't give Mister Cohen the wrong idea, there's no telling the stories he'll carry back with him.

—I... ladies I assure you, all I wish to carry back is this waiver with your nephew's signature. Since

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your brothers were not, ahm, especially close, and the decedent died intestate, the cooperation of the survivors is ...

—You make us sound like a shipwreck, Mister Cohen.

—Well now that you speak of it, Miss Bast...

—I think I know what he's trying to say. He's going to drag up those old stories about James and Thomas not getting on.

—I don't think he could sit there and name two brothers who went out of their way for one another as often as James and Thomas did. Neither of them had a single job that the other didn't claim to have got for him.

—The Russian Symphony...

—And Sousa's Band? Of course there was a certain competitive spirit between the boys. No one denies that, Mister Cohen. We had a family orchestra, you know, and they practiced three and four hours a day. Every week Father gave a dime to the one who showed the most improvement. From the time they were six, until they left home...

—Yes, Julia played the ... where are you going now, Mister Cohen? If you'll just sit still for a minute, I'm sure we can find some black thread. I can sew that button back on while we're chatting.

—While I wait to talk with your nephew Edward...

—Whatever that paper is you've brought there, I don't think he'll be in any hurry to sign it.

—Yes, I remember Father telling us to never sign anything we didn't read carefully.

—But... ladies! I want him to read it, I urge him to read it. I urge you to read it! It's only a few lines, the merest formality, a waiver to permit the appointment of the decedent's daughter, one Stella, Mrs Angel, as administrator of her father's estate, so that we may submit to the court...

—Mister Cohen, you distinctly said that you hoped to keep us all out of court. Didn't you hear him say that, Anne?

—Yes, I certainly did. And I'm not at all sure what James will say about these goings on.

—James has a great instinct for justice, Mister Cohen, and in spite of his being a composer he knows more than a little about the law. If we're all obliged to end up in court in order to settle what's right and wrong here...

—Madam, Miss Bast, please I... I implore you, there is no such issue at stake, and there is no reason there ever should be. The law, Miss Bast, let me tell you, the law...

—Do be careful of that lamp, Mister Cohen.

—There's no question of justice, or right and wrong. The law seeks order, Miss Bast. Order!

—Now Mister Cohen, if you'll just sit still. I've found some black thread right here in the basket.

—And an agreement within a legal framework is made for the protection of all concerned. Now...

—Perhaps you would like to take off your jacket. I'm just afraid you will spill those papers.

—Yes. Thank you. No. Now...

—It's carpet thread, and should hold quite well. It will probably outlast the suit itself.

—Let me assure you that signing this waiver will not in any way affect any claim your nephew may have upon the estate of the decedent. But because of his somewhat equivocal position...

—I got it for Father's overcoat buttons. It always outlasted the coats themselves.

—I don't know what you're inferring, Mister Cohen, but...

—This is as I understand it, Miss Bast, your nephew Edward's position in the family. His mother, who was known as Nellie...

—She wasn't simply known as Nellie. That was Nellie's Christian name, even though a lot of people thought it was a nickname. But I see no reason to start prying...

—I think when James is done his memoirs, can you raise your arm a little Mister Cohen? A lot of prying people will have surprises, and after all the gossip that followed...

—Ladies, I am not here to pry! But in the legal disposition of your brother's estate, his relationship to Nellie and your nephew Edward is extremely pertinent. Now as I understand it, your brother Thomas



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had one child, Stella, by his first wife, who then died...

—I -wouldn't really say who then died, Mister Cohen. Why, she was still alive when...

—Of course, forgive me. At any rate Thomas remarried, one Nellie, who in due course appears to have separated from him, in order to cohab... ahm, to ...

—Yes, to marry James. Precisely. But I would hardly say in due course, Mister Cohen. I think we were all really quite surprised.

—I don't know, Anne. Nellie was flighty.

—I remember James using that word, now that you say it. It was when Rachmaninoff was visiting, I remember because he'd just had his fingers insured. Hand me those scissors please, Mister Cohen?

—However, yes, thank you, here... now, however, in the absence of any record of legally contracted marriage between the said Nellie and James...

—My dear Mister Cohen...

—Or indeed any evidence of legal and binding divorce between the aforesaid Nellie and the decedent...

—It scarcely seems necessary...

—And although it appears to have been known that this Nellie aforesaid was the, living as the, ahm, the wife of the decedent's brother James at the time she bore her son Edward, and had been so living for some indefinite time prior to that event, nonetheless in the continued absence of a birth certificate attesting to those circumstances of his, ahm, provenience, Edward is in a position to exert a substantial claim upon the estate in question, and therefore...

—I scarcely understand a word you've said, Mister Cohen, and where you got that piece of paper you're reading from...

—But I wrote it, Miss Bast, it's...

—His glasses are rather like the ones that James lost that summer up near Tannersville, aren't they Julia.

—And the idea of digging up all this gossip again. Why, Edward's been perfectly happy here, and James has been a fine father to him, there's never been any question at all, why...

—But I don't question that, Miss Bast. The point is simply that in regards to your brother's estate, until his position is clearly established, he ... what...

—Just a little thread here still hanging, if you'll hold still...

—Yes, thank you again for the button, Miss Bast, but...

—Are you leaving so soon?

—No I simply hope I think may be ... maybe think better on my feet...

—He's spilling those papers there, Julia.

—Miss Bast, and... yes, thank you Miss Bast, and therefore...

—After Nellie died, Mister Cohen.

—To the contrary notwithstanding...

—James brought him here then, you know, and we've practically brought him up ourselves. James' work has always made such demands. That's his studio there at the back, you can see it right out that side window, and we'd often miss him for days at a time...

—But the point, the point Miss Bast, the point of law at issue here is ...

—Julia, I think I heard something, it sounded like hammering, someone hammering...

—The presumption, you see, the presumption of legitimacy while not conclusive and rebuttable in the first instance remains one of the strongest presumptions known to the law, and will not fail, Miss Bast, yes, where is it, Hubert versus Cloutier, it will not fail unless common sense and reason are outraged by a holding that it abides...

—There's no question that at the time, Julia, we all thought James' behavior outrageous...

—In general this presumption is not even overcome by evidence of the wife's adultery, in regard to your nephew's claim even when this adultery is established as of about the commencement of the usual

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period of gestation, as held in *Bassel versus the Ford Motor Company*...

—Mister Cohen please, Edward has nothing against the Ford Motor Company or anyone else, now...

—I am merely stating the legal position open to him, Miss Bast, in the event he should elect to pursue...

—Hammering, didn't you hear it?

—Possibly your testimony and that of your brother James regarding the period of his cohabitation with the said Nellie prior to Edward's birth, since there is merely a *prima facie* presumption that, just a moment, here, yes, that a child born in wedlock is legitimate where husband and wife had separated and the period of gestation required, in order that the husband may be the father, while a possible one, is exceptionally long and contrary to the usual course of nature, you see? Now in bringing a proceeding to establish the right to the property of a deceased person, the burden is on the claimant to show his kinship with the decedent, where kinship is an issue, of course, as in this instance of basing a claim on the alleged fact that claimant is decedent's child, and... yes, that while in the first instance, where is it yes, proof of filiation from which a presumption of legitimacy arises will sustain the burden and will establish the status of legitimacy and heirship if no evidence tending to show illegitimacy is introduced, the burden to establish legitimacy does not shift and claimant must establish his legitimacy where direct evidence, as well as evidence of potent... is this word potent? potent, yes potent circumstances, tending to disprove his claim of heirship, is introduced. Now, regarding competent evidence to prove filiation...

—Mister Cohen, I assure you there is no need to go on like this, if...

—Ladies, I have no choice. In settling an estate of these proportions and this complexity it is my duty to make every point which may bear upon your nephew's legal rights absolutely crystal clear to you and to him. Now.

—It's kind of him, Julia, but I must say...

—You understand that to proceed without taking into consideration your nephew's possible rights in this estate would be to jeopardize the status of everyone concerned, since to hold a child a bastard is not permissible unless there is no judicial escape from that conclusion...

—Mister Cohen!

—And it is incumbent upon the party assuming the fact of illegitimacy to disprove every reasonable possibility to the contrary, and as apparently obtains here, in the case of a child conceived or born in wedlock, it must be shown that the husband of the mother could not possibly have been the father of the child.

—Crystal clear indeed Mister Cohen!

—Crystal clear, and while I am aware that you ladies may find certain legal terms somewhat obscure, nonetheless in pursuing other evidence tending to support illegitimacy, a declaration of the deceased mother, for example, might be admissible, or any similar characterizations of family relationships tending, as part of a series of *res gestae*, to throw light...

—Nellie was never one to write letters.

—Or photographs, he came on in a flourish of papers at the wall behind him—for the purpose of comparing the physical characteristics of the child with those of the husband and such other man...

—Just behind your left shoulder Mister Cohen, that's always been my favorite picture of James. There, the two men sitting in the tree, the other one was Maurice Ravel. It shows James' profile off so nicely, though he always felt that our Indian blood...

—I don't think that's anything to get into now, Anne.

—It's quite all right, ladies. I have it here somewhere...

—Really, Anne...

—Yes, here, even where territorial statute provides for the legitimacy of the issue of marriages null in law, the issue of a white man and Indian woman has been held illegitimate...

—It is Cherokee blood you understand, Mister Cohen. They were the only tribe to have their own

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alphabet.

—Notwithstanding that the alleged marriage may have been conducted in accordance with the customs of the Indians on an Indian reservation within the territory and that, I think, should settle that. It's not an area to meddle in, Miss Bast.

—He might like to see that picture of Charlotte in the headdress, when she was touring with...

—Now. There appears to be another sister somewhere. Carlotta.

—That's precisely who Anne is talking about. She's right behind you there, Mister Cohen.

—She what? who... ?

—Do be careful, you're going to break something. She's there, just above the building with the dome. That's one of James' Masonic lodges. Charlotte's wearing a green felt hat, but of course the color doesn't show in the picture. She bought it to get married in.

—She did this place over you know, Mister Cohen. After her stroke, which was why she left the stage. She made quite a name on the Keith Circuit where she introduced... what was that song, Julia. I know the sheet music is around somewhere, probably over in James' studio. She's wearing a hat made to look like a daisy. That was why she took the name Carlotta, of course.

—And she died of the stroke?

—Why, certainly not. She carried right on, with a beaded bag on her withered, arm, and except for a slight limp when she was tired you'd never know what she had gone through. She spent most of her winters in Cairo.

—Cai... ro? that... that would be, Egypt? Perhaps ... The tremor seemed to pass through his voice right out his arm snagged in mid-air upon his wristwatch, —when I've talked with your nephew Edward, will he be down...

—If Mister Cohen would just come to the point here, we might not need to bother Edward at all.

—Yes, Mister Cohen. If you'll just tell us how we can work things out for him...

—Work things out for him? He's not an infant, is he?

—Infant! He's bigger than you are, Mister Cohen, and you scarcely need shout.

—Taller, Julia, but I wouldn't say bigger. I just took in the waist on those gray trousers...

—By ... by infant I meant merely a, an infant in law, a, someone under the age of twenty-one.

—Edward? Let me think, Julia. Nellie died the year that James finished his opera, and...

—No, she died the year he started it, Anne. Or rather he started it the year she died, and so that would make...

—His opera Philoctetes. Maybe you know it, Mister Cohen?

—There's no way he could, Anne. It's never performed.

—Well, there was the winter when James was in Zurich. Perhaps Mister Cohen has...

—Ope! dropped his glasses...

—I hope they didn't break? That's a good way to take off weight, Mister Cohen. Bending up and down from the floor like that. I met the woman who told me about it in the ladies' room at A and S's. She was doing it with a deck of cards. She threw the whole deck out on the floor, and then stooped to pick them up one by one. I'm sure some of the weight goes in perspiration, but perhaps Mister Cohen...

—Mister Cohen seems to perspire quite freely...

—If we're patient with him a little bit longer, I think that all he really is after is Edward to sign this piece of paper.

—You have nothing else up your sleeve, Mister Cohen?

—I... thank you for your patience, yes all I need is a copy of his birth certificate.

—There. You see, Anne?

—To establish his parenthood and his age. I had, I assumed he had passed his majority and fervently hope so, so, so that I won't have to deal ... to inconvenience you ladies further, the validity of his signature, you see, of course, on this waiver, depending upon his legal capacity to contract, although of

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course a minor may be emancipated...

—Emancipated! I assure you Mister Cohen...

—Which entitles him to keep his own earnings, but...

—Every penny that Edward earns...

—In no way enlarges his capacity to contract, as in *Masus v. Manon*, I mean *Mason v. Wright*, yes, the contracts of an infant being voidable by him but not void, though this may not apply to necessities, these however being relative. Now, comparing the voidable contract which is in itself not void to that of a lunatic, when of course his contract is made before he has been judicially declared incompetent, you ladies deserve...

—Oh Julia.

—Poor Edward.

—You see? You ladies deserve every protection, because the infant himself is the only one who can take advantage of infancy. The defense of infancy is not available to the adult, and this infant may disaffirm any time he likes. His mere intention to disaffirm is sufficient. In an action brought against him by creditors, assignees by purchase or in bankruptcy, sureties, or anyone else with a collateral interest in the contract, the mere setting up of infancy as a defense is sufficient, and none of them has available the defense of the infant, which is that of infancy.

—As far as his age goes, Edward himself...

—For your own protection, ladies. This birth certificate. Because this infant, ladies, this infant may disaffirm any time he wishes to, even if he has misrepresented his age in the first place in order to get the other party to contract with him, remember that ladies. Remember *Danziger v. the Iron Clad Realty Company*.

—I think he's going for a glass of water, Julia.

—That door, Mister Cohen.

—Failing any adoption papers, which could of course change the picture substantially, since the adopted child has the same legal rights as the blood child. Therefore if the child were the natural child of the decedent's brother but had been adopted by the decedent, he would of course have every right to participate in this estate. If on the other hand he...

—He's going to get into Reuben, Julia.

—James never really adopted Reuben.

—In the distribution of this estate that is to say, since in order to satisfy taxes part of this estate will have to be sold...

—They're after our trees right now.

—I suppose it does look like an estate to them, Julia, stuck in their tiny pasteboard houses on little shirttails of land.

—Forcing your holdings to go public...

—They take for granted everything's for sale.

—Proper evaluation will have to be made, of course, in terms of the prevailing market...

—That's what the water people said, when they went into court and swore up and down that back in our trees was the only place they could possibly put up their pumping station.

—Since no part of the estate involved has ever been offered publicly before.

—I heard hammering out there last night, Julia.

—I thought I heard the sound of a truck myself.

—Or a tractor, the kind they knock down trees with.

—Would they do that? even the water people? come in knocking down our trees at night?

—They were there this morning.

—The water people? Why didn't you call me!

—No the trees Anne, the trees.

—I'm glad you saw them. I didn't really look.

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—I can't say I did either. But I know that passing the kitchen window I would have missed them if they'd been gone.

—Perhaps Mister Cohen looked when he came in.

—The oaks, Mister Cohen?

—And some locust?

—It's the oaks, though, Anne, that really stand out.

—Before the advent of such a sale, you would, of course, receive adequate notice.

—What Mister Cohen considers adequate, I can't even read them without a glass, Anne? have you seen the latest one? I had it here just a moment ago.

—It's right there on the mantel, a picture of a castle? James' hand has never been easy Mister Cohen, and he tries to get so much on one postcard...

—Anne I'm talking about the local paper, Mister Cohen means these legal notices they tuck off in the back in type so small that no one can read it, in language no one can understand. In fact if he has a moment now, he might be willing to translate something...

—But Julia he's just broken his glasses.

—Here it is yes, yes this second column here Mister Cohen. No, right down here. It looks to me like they're up to something with the old Lemp home.

—Do they have a picture of it there? It was always the grandest house in town, and when we were just girls Mister Cohen...

—This is simply a legal notice, Anne. They don't print pictures in a legal notice. Can you see through the breakage, Mister Cohen?

—It's a shame that Mister Cohen can't see it, a white Victorian with a tower and a porte cochere along one side, and those copper beeches on the lawn. When Julia and I were girls Mister Cohen we used to imagine living there. We dreamt that some great stroke of fortune would...

—So far as I can make out here Miss Bast, this is simply a petition for a zoning change to turn the place into a nursing home...

—Old Mrs Lemp never was well of course, was she.

—It's her son we mentioned earlier Mister Cohen, the attorney you should be taking all this up with.

—But Julia someone should warn Mister Cohen, when he says the law has no interest in justice...

—Ladies I, please I seem to be having difficulty making myself clear but I assure you...

—He made himself quite clear didn't he Julia but I think he should be forewarned, if Mister Lemp took no interest in justice Father would never have chosen him.

—Even James holds him in high regard, and James can be most critical.

—Yes and Thomas, Julia, after all, he had Mister Lemp begin the suit against that dreadful little man who started that musical instrument company and stole every idea Thomas had.

—They're not instruments at all, Mister Cohen. The Jubilee Musical Instrument Company is what he calls it but all they make are machines that play tunes, and that lawsuit, Anne, I think it was really James' idea. He was someone James held in great contempt.

—He had something to do with that awful family, that politician out west somewhere whose family owned stock in the little company Thomas took on there may even be some there in the drawer, when he was looking for sheeps' intestines to ...

—We needn't go into that right now Anne, if Mister Cohen has no more questions...

—But ladies I, this newspaper here I understood it was the local paper...

—Well of course it is it comes every week, it's the only way we keep up with things.

—But it's, I just noticed it's from a town in Indiana I'm afraid when you said local I thought, your attorney Mister Lemp is, is in Indiana?

—Did you think he would be in Timbuctoo?

—No no I, I simply meant that if, that a nearby lawyer who might be more familiar with local situations...

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—He's quite familiar with them thank you Mister Cohen. I wrote him last week about this bingo parlor, Anne.

—But I meant, to go back to your nephew ladies some clue possibly regarding his age just, on your income taxes for instance do you recall listing him as a deduction?

—You talk about adequate notice Mister Cohen, this went up right under our noses. The holy name of something or other, they play there every Wednesday night and park their cars right up in our hedge.

—I see yes because if he is that would indicate he is still a minor though I, I trust he's not disabled?

—We'd better be thankful to still have the hedge. It deadens the noise from the road, James says.

—You might tell Mister Cohen about those two women who came pounding on the door last week, staring in through these living room windows they thought it would make a nice teen center.

—I see yes you see your nephew ladies, your nephew Edward, in the event he is still a minor, he ...

—Looking in from the road they said it looked empty. Just what were they doing looking in from the road?

—To protect his interests as well as your own re, recalling Egnaczyk versus Rowland where the infant sought to recover his car and disaffirm the repair contract the infant lost out in this case ladies, the defense of infancy in this case ladies, in this case the court refused to permit it, using infancy as a sword instead of a shield ... there! I heard something. Don't I hear him now? your nephew coming downstairs at last?

—Edward?

—Hammering, Julia.

—Yes, it couldn't be Edward. He left long ago, didn't he Anne?

—I think I heard him leave when I was sewing that button on. He has class today you know, Mister Cohen. At the Jewish temple, rehearsing Wagner...

—He's ... left? You mean, while I've been waiting, you just let him go? He ... I don't understand...

—We don't interfere with his comings and goings but don't think we haven't wondered ourselves. Why he wants to teach at the Jewish temple.

—And what's got into them, doing Wagner.

—That table Mister Cohen, do be careful...

—You're not leaving us?

—I'm, yes, leaving... leaving this waiver for him, for you... somebody to sign, and your, I mean his birth certificate, here is his card, if you will give it to me, I mean if you will give him my card Miss Bast and urge him to get in touch with me so I won't have to ... to inconvenience you further...

—Our counterfeit quarter, Julia, we wanted to show it to Mister Cohen. It was such a crude job, Mister Cohen, the copper showing right through at the edges, and one of our own tradesmen passed it on us. Can you see it, there on the mantel?

—I don't think he can see a thing, Anne. But it wasn't on the mantel this morning.

—That one sticks, Mister Cohen. You'd best use the side.

—It's the side that sticks, Julia. He'd better use the back. **Out** through the kitchen Mister Cohen...

—And Mister Cohen... ? Once you're out there if you'll just take a look? in the back? for the trees?

—And he might listen, Julia... pursued him through the presence of potatoes and green beans with strings like packing thread disintegrating with a smoked pork butt on the kitchen stove since near dawn, followed him as far as the corner of the house where a hanging gutter streaked clapboards and glass whenever it rained.

—I don't think he's paid us any attention. Just see him out there, my! He is in a hurry.

Avoiding an apple tree, its entire top blown out the year before, which redeemed itself now with a bumper crop of tasteless fruit in brave colors and curious shapes, —he looks like someone's chasing him.

—He was certainly full of gossip, for a perfect stranger.

—I do wonder what James will have to say.

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—James will say what he's always said. He knows I've never believed it, for one.

—But even if you are right, Julia. If they weren't married till Edward was born, he's been Edward's father all these years.

—You remember what Father used to say, the devil paying the piper for all the good tunes.

—Yes. There he goes now... The car crept up the drive past trees which appeared to stagger without even provocation of a breeze, rearing their splintered amputations in all directions, an atmosphere of calamity tempered, to the south, by a brooding bank of oak, by several high locusts serenely distinct against the sky in the west. —It was naughty of James.

—I hope he gets out through the hedge all right.

—Did you hear that crash last night? and the sirens? It's a wonder they aren't all killed.

—Listen...!

To the squeal of brakes, the car burst out into the world trailing a festoon of privet, swerved at the immediate prospect of open acres flowered in funereal abundance to regain the pavement and lose it again in a brief threat to the candy wrappers and beer cans nestled along the hedge line up the highway, that quickly out of sight to the windows' half-shaded stare from the roof pitches frowning over the hedge to where it ended, and a yellow barn took up, and was gone in a swerving miss for the pepperidge tree towering ahead, past shadeless windows in a naked farmhouse sprawl at the corner where the road trimmed neatly into the suburban labyrinth and things came scaled down to wieldy size, dogwood, then barberry, becomingly streaked blood-red for fall.

Past the firehouse, where once black crêpe had been laboriously strung in such commemoration as that advertised today on the sign OUR DEAR DEPARTED MEMBER easy to hang and store as a soft drink poster, past the crumbling eyesore dedicated within recent memory as the Marine Memorial, past the graveled vacancy of a parking lot where a house, ravined by gingerbread, had held out till scarcely a week before, and through the center of town where all allusion to permanence had disappeared or was being slain within earshot by shrieking electric saws, and the glint of chrome that streaked the glass bank front across the resident image of bank furniture itself apparently designed to pick up and flee at a moment's notice doors or no doors, opened, as they were now, to dispense the soft music hovering aimlessly about a man pasteled to match the furniture, crowding the high-bosomed brunette at the curb with —something, Mrs Joubert, something I'd meant to ask you but, oh wait a moment, there's Mister Best, or Bast is it? Mister Bast... ? He's music appreciation, you know.

—He?

—What? Oh there, coming out? No, no that's Vogel. Coach Vogel. You know him, the coach? Coach? Good morning...

—Good what? Oh, Whiteback. Good morning, didn't see you. I just robbed your bank.

—I didn't see you, called Mister Whiteback, and waved. —He what did he do? The sun in my eyes ... It caught him flat across the lenses, erasing any life behind them in a flash of inner vacancy as he returned to —here, this young man coming here is Bast, you could probably tell he's in the arts, can't you. Mister Bast? I was just telling Mrs Joubert here, if she thinks she's pressed for space you've had to rehearse all the way over to the Jewish temple since we had to take the cafeteria over for the driver training, right? Mister Bast is helping out Miss Flesch on her Ring to have it ready for Friday, the Foundation is sending out a team to give our whole in-school television program the once over and giving them a look at Miss Flesch's Ring will give a real boost to the cultural aspect of, things. Not to slight your efforts Mrs Joubert. She has the new television course in, is it sixth grade social studies Miss Joubert? What's in the paper bag, you haven't robbed the bank, Mrs Joubert?

—This? No, it's just money, she said, and shook the paper sack. —Not mine, my class. It's what they've saved to buy a share in America. We're taking a field trip in to the Stock Exchange to buy a share of stock. The boys and girls will follow its ups and downs and learn how our system works, that's why we call it our share...

—In what.

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—In America, yes, because actually owning it themselves they'll feel...

—No, I mean what stock.

—That's our studio lesson today deciding which one, if you want to look in on our channel. We have a resource film from the Exchange itself, too.

—Teaching our boys and girls what America is all about...

—Stick 'em up!

Bast's elbow caught Mrs Joubert a reeling blow in the breast, she dropped the sack of coins and he stood for an instant poised with raised hand posed in pursuit of that injury before the flush that spread from her face to his sent him stooping to recover the sack by the top, spilling the coins from its burst bottom into the unmown strip of grass, and left him kneeling down where the wind moved her skirt.

—Poor child, why they let him run around loose...

—It's the testing... Mister Whiteback withdrew a foot where his clocked ankle was nudged in pursuit of a dime, glancing down as it prospered to a quarter under Mrs Joubert's expensively shod instep, and his voice was sheared off by an inhuman scream.

—What was that! ... oh Mister Bast, I'm sorry, I didn't hurt you... ? She withdrew her heel from the back of his left hand as Bast got the nickel with his right, looking up from her flexed knee to start to speak.

—Those saws, they're doing the trees in the next block, widening Burgoyne Street, said Mister Whiteback above. —I'll drop you, if ... Mister Bast? he retired in the box step of the rhumba now spilling from the bank out across the walk and into the grass where Bast was going at it as though finding money lost by someone else, —if you can just pick the rest of it up and drop it off for Mrs Joubert's studio lesson?

—It was twenty-four dollars...

—And still get to your rehearsal, Mister Bast. To have it ready for Friday, we want to show this Foundation team how we're motivating this cultural drive in our youngsters, it's all in preparation for the cultural festival next spring you know, Miss Joubert... watch his hand there yes, to show we can make this cultural drive pay off like never before in mass consumers, mass distribution, mass publicity, just like automobiles and bathing suits...

—And sixty-three cents, Mrs Joubert finished, a gentle bulge rippling from her knee as she shifted her weight in departure to disappear in the swirl of her skirt as the quarter bounding from the billowing trouser cuff drew Bast in a headlong lunge after the exhaust of Whiteback's car shearing from the curb, rounding the corner into Burgoyne Street to course through the shrieks of saws and limbs dangling in unanesthetized aerial surgery, turning at last into the faculty parking lot and into Gibbs' limited vista from a second floor classroom window watching Mrs Joubert alight and come toward the portal beneath him, knuckles gone white where he grasped the cold radiator staring down into the loose fullness of her approach till it was gone beneath the sill, and he turned back to the darkened classroom to face the talking face in flattened animation on the screen itself until the tension of watching without listening broke the surface in a slight twitch of his own lip and turned him back to the window looking down, now into the wide eye of a camera aimed up at himself and the frieze of teachers similarly abandoned in windows surmounting the dedication of the school hewn over the entrance.

—EBΦM ΣΑΟΗ ΑΘΘΦΒΡ ...

—Oh, can you read it? asked the young man with the camera, lowering it to join the congregation of cameras, meters, and accessories strung from what convenient protrusions his lank figure afforded.

—Not exactly read it, said his companion, a scrap of paper spread on the back of a heavy book in the crook of his arm. —But I thought I'd copy it down, it might make a good epigraph for the book when I find out what it means. And get some of those blank faces. There, the one at that window having a smoke in the boys' washroom while his class is being taught by television, speaking of technological unemployment.

—I don't think that's a point the Foundation wants you to stress, particularly. But it's your book.



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