

...in fact, he
...of course, was before I
...I was capable of.

I refer to him as the American because I did not know, or cannot remember, his name, but I am not sure that he was American at all. He spoke with a twang that might have been learned from the pictures, and he had a way of looking about him with narrowed eyes while he talked which reminded me of some film star or other. I could not take him seriously. I did a splendid impression of him - I have always been a good mimic - which made people laugh out loud in surprise and recognition. At first I thought he was quite a young man, but Daphne smiled and asked had I looked at his hands. (She noticed such things.) He was lean and muscular, with a hatchet face and boyish, close-cropped hair. He went in for tight jeans and high-heeled boots and leather belts with huge buckles. There was a definite touch of the cowpoke about him. I shall call him, let me see, I shall call him - Randolph. It was Daphne he was after. I watched him sidle up, hands stuck in his tight pockets, and start to sniff around her, at once cocksure and edgy, like so many others before him, his longing, like theirs, evident in a certain strained whiteness between the eyes. Me he treated with watchful affability, addressing me as friend, and even - do I imagine it? - as *pardner*. I remember the first time he sat himself down at our table, twining his spidery legs around the chair and leaning forward on an elbow. I expected him to fetch out a tobacco pouch and roll himself a smoke with one hand.

The waiter, Paco, or Pablo, a young man with hot eyes and aristocratic pretensions, made a mistake and brought us the wrong drinks, and Randolph seized the opportunity to savage him. The poor boy stood there, his shoulders bowed under the lashes of invective, and was what he had always been, a peasant's son. When he had stumbled away, Randolph looked at Daphne and grinned, showing a side row of long, fulvous teeth, and I thought of a hound sitting back proud as punch after delivering a dead rat at its mistress's feet. Goddamned spics, he said carelessly, and made a spitting noise out of the side of his mouth. I jumped up and seized the edge of the table and overturned it, pitching the drinks into his lap, and shouted at him to get up and reach for it, you sonofabitch! No, no, of course I didn't. Much as I might have liked to dump a table full of broken glass into his ludicrously overstuffed crotch, that was not the way I did things, not in those days. Besides, I had enjoyed as much as anyone seeing Pablo or Paco get his comeuppance, the twerp, with his soulful glances and his delicate hands and that horrible, pubic moustache.

Randolph liked to give the impression that he was a very dangerous character. He spoke of dark deeds perpetrated in a far-off country which he called Stateside. I encouraged these tales of derring-do, secretly delighting in the aw-shucks, 'tweren't-nuthin' way he told them. There was something wonderfully ridiculous about it all, the braggart's sly glance and slyly modest inflexion, his air of euphoric self-regard, the way he opened like a flower under the warmth of my silently nodding, awed response. I have always derived satisfaction from the little wickednesses of human beings. To treat a fool and a liar as if I esteemed him the soul of probity, to string him along in his poses and his fibs, that is a peculiar pleasure. He claimed he was a painter, until I put a few innocent

questions to him on the subject, then he suddenly became a writer instead. In fact, as he confided to me one night in his cups, he made his money by dealing in dope among the island's transient rich. I was shocked, of course, but I recognised a valuable piece of information, and later, when—

But I am tired of this, let me get it out of the way. I asked him to lend me some money. He refused. I reminded him of that drunken night, and said I was sure the *guardia* would be interested to hear what he had told me. He was shocked. He thought about it. He didn't have the kind of dough I was asking for, he said, he would have to get it for me somewhere, maybe from some people that he knew. And he chewed his lip. I said that would be all right, I didn't mind where it came from. I was amused, and rather pleased with myself, playing at being a blackmailer. I had not really expected him to take me seriously, but it seemed I had underestimated his cravenness. He produced the cash, and for a few weeks Daphne and I had a high old time, and everything was grand except for Randolph dogging my steps wherever I went. He was distressingly literal-minded in his interpretation of words such as *lend* and *repay*. Hadn't I kept his grubby little secret, I said, was that not a fair return? These people, he said, with an awful, twitching attempt at a grin, these people didn't fool around. I said I was glad to hear it, one wouldn't want to think one had been dealing, even at second-hand, with the merely frivolous. Then he threatened to give them my name. I laughed in his face and walked away. I still could not take any of it seriously. A few days later a small package wrapped in brown paper arrived, addressed to me in a semi-literate hand. Daphne made the mistake of opening it. Inside was a tobacco tin — Balkan Sobranie, lending an oddly cosmopolitan touch — lined with cotton wool, in which nestled a curiously whorled, pale, gristly

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piece of meat crusted with dried blood. It took me a moment to identify it as a human ear. Whoever had cut it off had done a messy job, with something like a breadknife, to judge by the ragged serration. Painful. I suppose that was the intention. I remember thinking: How appropriate, an ear, in this land of the toreador! Quite droll, really.

I went in search of Randolph. He wore a large lint pad pressed to the left side of his head, held in place by a rakishly angled and none-too-clean bandage. He no longer made me think of the Wild West. Now, as if fate had decided to support his claim of being an artist, he bore a striking resemblance to poor, mad Vincent in that self-portrait made after he had disfigured himself for love. When he saw me I thought he was going to weep, he looked so sorry for himself, and so indignant. You deal with them yourself now, he said, you owe them, not me, I've paid, and he touched a hand grimly to his bandaged head. Then he called me a vile name and skulked off down an alleyway. Despite the noonday sun a shiver passed across my back, like a grey wind swarming over water. I tarried there for a moment, on that white corner, musing. An old man on a burro saluted me. Nearby a tinny churchbell was clanging rapidly. Why, I asked myself, why am I living like this?