Children of Light by Robert Stone

**A NOVEL EXCERPT**

**LU ANNE VERGER** chewed a piece of sugarless gum and brushed out her hair, hoping to see Rosalind and not some ugly thing. When she had been married to Robitaille he had accused her of constantly looking in mirrors. Because, she had told him, my face is my fortune.

They had told her to stay out of the sun, to keep the character’s genteel pallor. In the end it could not be done without the most rigorous efforts and they had relented and let her tan. It had been a good idea; with the right makeup and in the right colors, she photographed young and golden.

It was Edna in the glass now, not Rosalind. Lu Anne studied herself. Gone, that young Queen of the New Haven night. Sometimes it seemed to Lu Anne that she missed Rosalind the way she missed her children. She turned to study herself in profile.

Years ago in Boulanger, a judge who was one of her ex-husband’s relatives had called her “a lousy mother,” right out in court, in front of her daughter and in front of her own mother and daddy. Now she was Edna Pontellier. Of Edna, Kate Chopin had written:

*She was fond of her children in an uneven impulsive way. She would sometimes gather them passionately to her heart; she would sometimes forget them.*

You lost it all anyway, Lu Anne thought. You lost the child inside yourself, then the person that grew there, then the children you never bore and the children you did. The boys, the men, the skin outside, the self inside. Feelings came and went like weather. You could not tell if they were real. You could not tell if they were your own. You could never even be sure that you were there. People pretended.

“She looks fine,” Lu Anne told herself in the glass. The unseen Friends buzzed. They were all guilty agitation, old-auntly admonitions.

Don’t say she *look*fine, she heard one whisper. Say she *is* fine.

Lu Anne smiled, lowered her head and put a finger across her lips.

“Lee?” It was the voice of the writer, Lowndes. “Your car is here.”

She stood up and went out; meeting his eyes, her own gaze faltered and he saw it.

At the door, Billy Bly, the stuntman, was waiting for her with the driver. Seeing each other, they both blushed.

“Hi,” he said, and glanced quickly at Lowndes behind her. “They told me to ride over with you. See if there was anything you wanted.”

“Just your good company, Brother Bly,” she said. She introduced him to Lowndes; they got in the hosed-down Lincoln that would carry them to the set.

Looking out the car window as they approached the sea, she was struck by the uncanny light. The sky seemed to threaten a storm out of season.

“You look fine, Lu Anne,” Billy Bly said. She laughed. They had sent him out as her protector, replacing Jack Best. A heavy-handed touch, she thought.

“I *am*fine, Billy,” she told him. She was aware of Lowndes, a watching darkness on the seat beside her. “I *am.*”

**At the end** of the road was the great laager of trailers and light trucks that marked the borders of the Grand Isle set.

In the center of an enormous clearing stood a grove of live oaks that had been trucked in from the Tamaulipas coast. They stood beside this alien shore looking as natural, as firmly rooted and grave in authority as the ancient trees of her home place, garlanded, like those, in beards of Spanish moss. The open ground between the grove and the beach was covered in anthemis vines that seemed to bear the same white and yellow flowers as Lu Anne’s native camomile but lacked the apple fragrance. This air was too thin, she thought, to bear the scents of home.

Getting out of the car, she stood and looked over the scene. In the strange light it had a sinister magic.

**Lu Anne said nothing.** She had been hoping to save Edna’s walk down the beach for a special day, even perhaps for the last day of location. But they were shooting out of sequence for reasons of economy. There were at least ten days of filming on the Grand Isle set.

**Things were under control.** The landscape was a bit overbright, that was all. She was not saying inappropriate things, and the only voices she heard were concealed under the wind or in the sound of the sea and she knew them for illusion and paid them no mind.

Vera Ricutti, the wardrobe mistress, overtook her on the way to the trailer.

“I just been looking at these seals,” she said excitedly. “There must have been dozens. These darling little seals,” she exclaimed, “with their little faces sticking up out of the water.”

“Oh, I would love to see them,” Lu Anne enthused. “I hope they come back.”

“So cute!” Vera said as they went into Lu Anne’s trailer. “You gotta see them.”

The assistant director’s voice sounded across the laager. “Joy, please? Driver? Everybody ready? I want quiet, the director wants to hear the sound on this. Right,” Hueffer shouted. His voice was turning hoarse. “Quiet! Roll! Action!”

Vera closed the door of Lu Anne’s air-conditioned trailer. Lu Anne herself sat down before her mirror, wiping her brow with Kleenex. Everything in the mirror was shipshape. She felt ready to work.

As she undressed, Vera held up a light-colored corset for her inspection.

“See what we got for you? This goes on first.”

“My God,” Lu Anne said, lifting her arms for the fit, “is this thing wool?”

“It’s a synthetic. This is the same one you had on at the fittings except we made it out of lighter stuff and put a zipper on it. But the real ones, the ones they wore then—they were real wool. This one was for tennis and jumping around in.”

“I can’t believe they went around in wool corsets in Louisiana in summer.”

“So they shouldn’t see your bod sweat, that was why they had it. No underarm stain and your dress couldn’t stick. We tried this number out on Joy and it photographs O.K. Anyway, we got another dozen white dresses if you do sweat it up.”

“I’m a sweater,” Lu Anne said when she was zipped in. “But I mean, how could they play tennis in woolen corsets?”

“India,” Vera said. “Africa. The white ladies wore woolen corsets. The locals, I guess they got to let their jugs dangle.”

The door opened and Josette Darré, the hairdresser, came in. There was a thin film of frost between Lu Anne and Josette; they never spoke except about the business at hand. Josette was a sullen Parisian hippie. She had rebuffed Lu Anne’s French with a pout and an uncomprehending shrug and that, for Lu Anne, had been that.

Josette stood by while Lu Anne got into her dress and stood before the mirror, letting Vera tie her loops behind and straighten her hem. Then she sat down to let Josette work on her hair, making faces at herself in the glass.

“Lucky locals,” she said, wiping her forehead again.

The was a knock at the door and Joe Ricutti, who was the makeup man, came into the trailer. He was laughing.

“That McIntyre kid is a barrel of laughs,” he rasped. “She’s in her own musical.”

“I don’t know,” Vera said in a weary tone. Vera was Joe’s wife; they worked together most of the time. “Where do they find them?”

Josette stepped aside; Joe Ricutti stepped in behind Lu Anne’s chair. Lu Anne raised an upturned hand and the makeup man squeezed it. They made small talk and gossiped while Joe gently held her chin and turned her face from side to side, examining her profile in the mirror. His fingertips delicately probed beneath her bones; in his free hand he held a makeup brush. Lu Anne sat, a prisoner, listening to the trolley outside and watching as Joe found the soft spots around her jaw, the lines to be disguised. She examined the stringiness at the base of her throat and it made her think of a dry creek bottom—cracks, dry sticks, desiccation where it had been serene, smooth and cool and pleasing.

There was a Friend in the room. I don’t like her, it said, the way she look. Lu Anne hushed it silently.

“I think,” she told Ricutti, “I think the kid’s a little long in the tooth for this one.”

Joe sang a few bars of protest. “Whaddaya talkin’ about? You look good! Look at yourself!”

He turned her head to reflect her profile and ran his finger from her forehead to the tip of her chin. “I mean look at that! That’s terrific.”

Gazing sidewise, she saw in the mirror Josette’s expressionless eyes.

Made-up, she sat for Josette’s last applications. Vera Ricutti brought forth a straw boater from one of several identical boxes and ceremoniously placed it on Lu Anne’s head. The Ricuttis drew back in admiration. Josette stood to one side, arms folded. Lu Anne caught a scent of lavender sachet. She saw the inhabited mask of Edna Pontellier before her.

**The Drogues** were watching Joy McIntyre ride her trolley on their tape monitor. Now, instead of standing and clinging to the pole, she sat on the car’s wooden bench. Her back was ramrod straight, her chin raised so that the weird light, refracted through overhanging tree boughs, played dramatically on her face, which was partly shadowed by her straw hat.

“The speed is perfect,” old Drogue said. “Make sure they keep it.”

“That kid,” young Drogue said of Joy McIntyre, “everything you put her in looks overdone.”

“Use her,” the old man said.

“Use her for what? She can’t act. Her diction’s a joke. She’s so flamboyant you can’t tell what your scene is gonna look like if you use her to light.”

“If you throw away that face,” old Drogue said, “ . . . a face like that, a body like that—you have no business in the industry.”

After a moment, the younger Drogue smiled. “You want to fuck her, Dad?”

“That’s my business.”

“Say the word.”

“I’ll manage my own sex life, thanks a whole lot.”

“Patty will flip. I can’t wait to tell her.”

“I told you,” the old man said, raising his voice, “mind your fucking business.”

In a humorous mood, young Drogue opened the trailer door to find Hueffer and Toby Blakely awaiting him.

“So,” he asked them, “is it gonna rain or what?”

“I honestly don’t think so,” Hueffer said.

Drogue studied his assistant for a long moment. “Hey,” he said to all present, “how about this guy?”

Hueffer blushed.

“Well,” Toby Blakely said, “obviously we can’t intercut with the trolley footage if it rains.”

“We’ll keep shooting if it rains,” young Drogue told them. “If it stops we’ll make rain to match.”

“Yessir,” Blakely said. “That’d be the thing to do. These *chubascos* can last an hour or they can last for three days.”

“The next scene is all that concerns me,” Drogue said. “I’ll be goddamned if I’m going to shoot the last scene of the picture in rain. If it rains for a week we’ll wait for a week.”

Hueffer and Blakely nodded soberly.

Young Drogue charged toward the setup in his loping stride. Hueffer and Blakely accompanied him. His father ambled along behind.

“So we’re home free, right? Rain or not.”

“Unless it rains tomorrow and not today,” Blakely said delicately. “And we still have the last scene to shoot.”

“Go away, Toby,” young Drogue said.

Hueffer and Blakely went back to the camera setup. Drogue had caught sight of the producer, Charlie Freitag, who was standing with his production manager in the eucalyptus grove beside the trolley tracks.

“He has to show up now,” young Drogue said bitterly. “Freak weather, there’s no cover set—Charlie arrives. You can show him four hours of magnificent dailies and he’ll give you five hours of handwringing because an extra stepped on a nail.”

“Well,” old Drogue said, “that’s his function.”

Lu Anne, sitting outside on her folding chair for Ricutti’s last ministrations, became aware of young Drogue’s spidery approach. She looked up at him and he offered his arm, parodying antique chivalry. When she rose to take it, she saw that the writer named Lowndes had not moved from the spot where they had left him. Charlie Freitag was speaking to him but he was watching her.

“Is that guy bothering you?” Walter Drogue asked. “That Lowndes?”

She told him that it was all right. But although it was her business to be watched, the concentrated scrutiny oppressed her. There were too many eyes.

“My ride?” she asked.

Drogue nodded. “I think you’re right about her sitting. It looks good. Would you like a rehearsal? I was thinking we might steal a jump on time if we shot it. If you were ready.”

“Yes,” she said, “let’s do it.”

Drogue looked her up and down. “Can you walk in the skirt? Are the shoes O.K. on this ground?”

“Costume’s fine. If you like the colors.”

Vera Ricutti hurried up and bent to Lu Anne’s hem, judging its evenness.

“The hatband to match the parasol,” she told Drogue. “That’s how they did it.”

“It’s pale green,” Drogue said. “Is pale green the color of death?”

*“Bien sûr,”* Lu Anne said.

“No rehearsal?”

“Just let me prep, Walter.”

“All right. Take care of it for me, kid.” As she was walking off, he called after her. “The old nothingness-and-grief routine.”

She gave him a smile. Under the huge gum trees she paced up and down. “If I must choose between nothingness and grief,” she recited, “I will choose grief.” The words were only sounds. Voices on the wind that stirred the trees took them up. Wild palms. Nothingness. Grief.

Joe Ricutti was weighting the elements of his portable makeup table against the breeze. Drogue stood beside him watching Lu Anne.

“How is she?” he asked the makeup man.

“Fine, Mr. Drogue. She talks normal. Pretty much.”

Drogue turned to Vera, who nodded silent assent.

Hueffer came up to them earnest and sweating.

“I had a thought, Walter.”

Drogue said nothing.

“What would happen if we used a sixteen-millimeter lens on her ride. Maybe even a fourteen?”

“Nothing would happen,” Drogue told him. “It would look like shit, that’s all.”

Hueffer pressed him. “Seriously?”

“If you like,” Drogue said pleasantly, “we’ll talk about it later. Let’s get everyone standing by.”

Hueffer went back to the setup.

“Standing by in two minutes,” he shouted. “Everybody out of the set.”

“He’s an asshole,” Drogue told the Ricuttis. “A gold-plated shithead.”

The Ricuttis made no reply. Joe Ricutti shrugged.

“If I must choose between nothingness and grief,” Lu Anne recited as she paced the dry ground, “I’ll have the biscuits and gravy. I’ll have the jambalaya and the oyster stew.”

It was Edna choosing. Lu Anne’s path took her toward the trolley and she saw them all watching her. Lowndes. Bly. Walker was coming down. But Edna was the one in trouble here. The pretty woman in the mirror.

“Hush,” said Lu Anne. Edna would be at home among the Long Friends.

Edna was independent and courageous. Whereas, Lu Anne thought, I’m just chickenshit and crazy. Edna would die for her children but never let them possess her. Lu Anne was a lousy mother, certified and certifiable. Who the hell did she think she was, Edna? Too good for her own kids? But then she thought: It comes to the same thing, her way and mine. You want more, you want to be Queen, you want to be Rosalind.

Edna walking into death was conscious only of the sun’s warmth. So it was written. Walker’s notes had her dying for life more abundant. All suicides died for life more abundant, Walker’s notes said.

She walked on through the light and shadow of the huge trees. It was, she thought, such a disturbing light. She could see it when she closed her eyes.

The woods were filled with phantoms and she was looking for Edna. Only her children came to mind, as though they were lost and she was looking for them. As though she were lost.

In such a light, she had knocked on the door of their first house in town. It was the first time, so far as she could remember, that she had ever knocked on a door in the manner of grown-ups. For a long time—she remembered it as a long time—the door stood closed above and before her. Then, as she remembered, it had opened and her father loomed enormous in the doorway, his blank gaze fixed at the far and beyond.

So she had said: I’m down here, Daddy.

His swollen drunk face turned down to hers after a while. His eyes were red and lifeless.

I thought it was somebody real, he had said. Someone had laughed. Maybe he had laughed.

I’m real, Daddy.

Life more abundant, Lu Anne thought, that’s the ticket. That’s what we need.

Then they were ready and Ricutti was wiping her down.

“You been crying,” he said. He started to daub under her eyes. “Your eyes are all red.” When she stared at him he lowered the cloth.

I’m real, she thought.

“Let’s go with it.”

“I don’t know,” Joe Ricutti said. “Maybe he don’t want that, Lee.”

“Leave it,” she said. “Just get the damn sweat off me.”

When they were ready to roll she sat in her marks on the trolley bench. Drogue called for action, the trolley bore her along, and she saw that the field around her was filled with fake camomile. In that moment she found Edna. Edna knew what living was worth to her and the terms on which she would accept it. She knew the difference between living and not living and what happiness was.

It occurred to Lu Anne that she knew none of these things. Too bad, she thought, because I’m the one that’s real, not her. It’s me out here.

When they had pulled the trolley around for another take, she saw Walter looking at her through the viewfinder. Who does he think he’s looking at? she wondered. Or is he just seeing movies? Across the reflectors, she saw Bly and Lowndes and Charlie Freitag, all looking. She began to cry again.

“How about it, Edna?” Walter Drogue asked. He spoke without taking his eye from the viewfinder. “What’s it gonna be?” He was just chattering to keep their spirits up. “Nothingness or grief?”

“Beats me,” Lu Anne said.

**In the air-conditioned** gloom of their trailer, the Drogues, father and son, watched a videotape of the last take. It was Lu Anne on the trolley, a continuous medium-close shot. Eric Hueffer and Lise Rennberg, Drogue’s Swedish cutter, watched with them. They sat in a semicircle on folding metal chairs.

“We have some very nice cutaways for this if you need them,” she told the director.

“Neat,” young Walter Drogue said, and switched on an indirect light over his desk.

“Walter,” Eric Hueffer said good-humoredly, “just so you don’t think I’m a complete nut, could I offer my arguments for a fourteen-millimeter lens in that scene? Or the next one?”

“Interesting idea, Eric.”

“Well, jeez,” Hueffer said, “you dismissed it out of hand an hour ago.”

“Did I?” Walter asked. “How rash of me. Of course we could use a fourteen there, Eric. But we’d need painted backdrops instead of the trees. Do you think we could work that out?”

“Come on, Walter,” Eric said.

Lise Rennberg smiled sedately.

“Maybe we could use footage from *Caligari,* huh, Eric? To show that the character’s at the end of her tether?”

“Obviously I was wrong,” Hueffer said, and got out of his chair. He was a tall young man, almost a head taller than Walter Drogue junior, and his height compelled him to stoop when he stood in the trailer.

“Don’t even think about it,” young Drogue said.

When they were alone the Drogues ran the videotape over again.

“Man,” young Drogue said, watching the screen, “that’s what I call inhabited space.”

Old Drogue reached out and stopped the tape, freezing the frame.

“You had her crying?”

“She cried. I thought I’d keep it.” He turned to his father. “You don’t like it?”

“I like it but something bothers me.”

He started the tape over again, stopping it about where he had before, on very nearly the same frame.

“Something,” old Drogue said softly, and shook his head.

“What’s the trouble?” young Walter asked. “You want it shot through a fourteen too?”

“You’re very hard on that young man,” Drogue senior told his son. “He’s efficient. He’s enthusiastic. I mean . . . a fourteen-millimeter—it’s off the wall but you can see how he’s thinking. He comes out of the schools.”

“So do I,” Drogue junior said.

“Maybe if your name was Hueffer you’d be his A.D., huh? Then he could be sarcastic to you.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” his son told him. “You don’t know what it was like. You can’t.”

“If your name was such a burden,” old Drogue said, “you should have changed it.”

“I was Walter Drogue the Less.”

“Tough shit,” the old man said.

“And I was never allowed to be as much of a fool as fucking Hueffer.”

“Stop picking on him,” old Drogue said. “You’re lucky to have him. He could go all the way, that kid.”

“His day will come,” young Drogue said.

“Will that be good news for him?”

“He’ll get his own picture. Little by little things will get out of hand. He’ll try weird shit—like spooky lenses. He’ll try to do everything himself. Presently they’ll smell his blood. They’ll sabotage him and laugh at him behind his back. His actors will panic. His big opportunity will turn to shit before his eyes. He’ll be afraid to show his nose on his own set.”

“Well,” the old man said, “that’s how movies get made. Myself, I’m too superstitious to wish disaster on my own assistants.”

“It’s not my wish. It’s inevitable. It’s the kind of guy he is.”

Drogue senior started the tape again. He and his son watched Lu Anne take her ride.

“I could watch that for twenty seconds, couldn’t you?” young Drogue asked. “Do most of the ride in one continuous medium-close, then maybe cut away to her point of view?”

“Why did you have her cry?”

“Hell, she was crying. Why not?”

“It looks out of character.”

“Only to us.”

“What do you mean?” old Drogue demanded. “It’s her cracking up.”

“For Christ’s sake, Dad, don’t you think I know that? It’ll play just fine.”

“Ever try to edit around somebody going bananas? You end up as crazy as them.”

“Well, I have two options, don’t I? I can make her not be crazy. Or I can get the picture completed with her as she is. Which do you recommend?”

“She has a way of being crazy,” old Drogue said, “that photographs pretty well.”

“Right,” his son said.

“Some do, some don’t.”

“She does. Ever since her old man started packing, her energy level out there has been a hundred and twenty percent.”

“She could do a complete flip. She has before.”

“Then I guess I fly in Kurlander or nourish her with my blood or something.”

“You don’t have too far to go.”

“I have some of Walker’s literary scenes to do up in L.A. Some important interiors. I need her coherent for that.” They watched the trolley tape run to its completion. “I’ll have Walker down here. I’ve got that peckerhead novelist to keep amused. If I can get her through this weekend, I can get her the rest of the way.”

“Good luck,” the old man said.

They went out into the afternoon; young Drogue looked at the sky. Overhead the sky had cleared and the wind had slackened. The storm hung on the horizon out to sea, a distant menace.

**Lu Anne was** having her hair combed out as Vera Ricutti folded the last of Edna Pontellier’s cotton dresses, putting the pins in a cardboard box.

“God,” Lu Anne said, “they did you up like a celestial. Then they turned you loose with more spikes and prongs than a bass lure. There must have been young boys cut to ribbons.”

“That taught them respect,” Joe Ricutti said. “They should bring it back.”

Shortly afterward young Drogue appeared at the trailer; Josette and the Ricuttis took their equipment and left, unbidden.

“How are you?” young Drogue asked. She told him that she was fine. The pins on the dress made her think of defense and escape. Thorns. If I could, she thought, I would emit the darkness inside me like a squid and blind them all and run.

“Let’s go for a walk,” Drogue said.

They walked in a wide circle among the trees, hand in hand, Lu Anne wearing the thin white beach robe over her underwear.

“The most important question to me,” Drogue told her, “is whether you want to do it tonight. If you don’t, we’ll wrap.”

She said, after all, it was just walking in the water. She told him she would do it and that was what he wanted to hear.

Back at the trailer Vera Ricutti asked her if there was anything she wanted. Darkness was what she thought she wanted. Cool and darkness.

“Just to put my feet up awhile,” she told Vera.

When she was in the cool and dark the Long Friends emerged and began to whisper. She lay stiff, her eyes wide, listening.

*Malheureuse,* a Friend whispered to her. The creature was inside her dresser mirror. Its face was concealed beneath black cloth. Only the venous, baby-blue-colored forehead showed and part of the skull, shaven like a long-ago nun’s. Its frail dragonfly wings rested against its sides. They always had bags with them that they kept out of sight, tucked under their wings or beneath the nunnish homespun. The bags were like translucent sacs, filled with old things. Asked what the things were, their answer was always the same.

*Les choses démodées.*

She turned to see it, to see if it would raise its face for her. Their faces were childlike and absurd. Sometimes they liked to be caressed and they would chew the tips of her fingers with their soft infant’s teeth. The thing in the mirror hid its face. Lu Anne lay back down and crossed her forearms over her breasts.

*Tu tombes malade,* the creature whispered. They were motherly.

“No, I’m dead,” she told it. “Mourn me.”

In the next moment she found herself fighting for breath, as though an invisible bar were being pressed down against her. She turned on the light and the Long Friends vanished into shadows like insects into cracks in the walls; their whispers withdrew into the hum of the cooler. Delirium was a disease of darkness.

Her pills were on a shelf in the trailer lavatory. She went in and picked up the tube. Her body convulsed with loathing at the sight of the stuff.

Outside, the sun was declining, almost toughing the uppermost layer of gray-blue storm cloud over the ocean. Wrapping the beach robe around her, she stood for a moment close to panic. She had no idea where to go, what to do. In the end she went to the nearest trailer, which was George Buchanan’s.

Buchanan rose in answer to her knock; he had set his John D. MacDonald mystery on the makeup counter.

“George,” she said breathlessly. “Hi.”

“Hi, Lu Anne.” He looked concerned and cross. He was a stern-faced man, a professional villain since his youth in the fifties. “I’m not here, you know. I’m hiding out.”

“Are you, George?”

“My son is with his girlfriend back at the bungalow. I came out here to give them al little . . . what shall we call it?”

“George,” she said in a girlish whine, “do you have a downer? Please? Do you?”

He looked stricken. He was so shocked by her request that he tried to make a joke of it.

“For you, Lu Anne, anything. But not that.”

“It was just a shot,” she said.

“Hey,” Buchanan said, “this is me, Buchanan. I’m into staying alive. I mean, Christ’s sake, Lu Anne, you know I don’t use that stuff. It tried to kill me.”

She shook her head in confusion.

“I mean, I can’t believe you asked me.”

She slammed his door shut, turned and saw Dongan Lowndes, the writer, apparently on the way to her trailer. He had seen her coming out of Buchanan’s quarters. He did a little double take to let her know that he had seen it.

“Mr. Lowndes,” she said. “I’m sorry but I can’t remember your first name.” She bit her lip; she could not seem to lose the whininess in her manner.

“Forget it,” Lowndes said. “Call me Skip.”

“Skip,” she said, “Skip, you wouldn’t have a downer on you? Or maybe back at your room?”

He stared at her. Had he taken the reference to his room for a proposition?

“No,” Lowndes said. “Or uppers or anything else.”

“Oh dear,” Lu Anne said. She smiled disarmingly for Lowndes. “I was hoping for a little something.”

“Sorry,” Lowndes said, looking as though he were. She saw that he was anxious to please her.

“Even liquor would do,” she said. “I don’t usually drink when I work, but now and then a small amount can prime a person.”

“Right,” Lowndes said, “well, I don’t drink anymore myself. I can’t. But can’t you send out to the hotel for it?”

She shifted her eyes from side to side broadly in a comic parody of guilt.

“I don’t want people to know.” She paused and sighed. “Dongan, could you?”

“Skip,” Lowndes said.

She looked at him impatiently.

“Skip,” he repeated. “Call me Skip.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” she said. “I can just see why your folks called you that. Could you get us a bottle, Skip, so we can sneak a slug down here?”

“I have trouble handling it,” Lowndes said. “I’m off the stuff.”

For a little while he looked at her, a faint fond smile playing about his thick lips.

“I guess I could, though.”

She opened her eyes wide and swallowed bravely. So go and do it, she was telling him, you shit-eating bird. The Long Friends cackled admonition.

“Scotch?” he asked. His gaze was sad. Whether he was begging for her favors or simply disillusioned, she could not tell and did not care.

“Yes,” she said, sounding absurdly eager, “that’d be nice.”

“I’ll go up and get a bottle,” he said. His voice wavered as he said it, like an adolescent’s.

Lu Anne did not feel particularly like drinking liquor but it seemed important that there be something to take.

“Oh great, Skip,” she said. “Now, you remember the car we came in, huh? Well, you just go back to that car and get him to take you up the hill and you can get us a jug. Only carry it in something, will you, because I don’t want people to think we’re a couple of old drunks.”

“Right,” Lowndes said. “I’ll brown-bag it.”

“And when you’re up there,” she said as he started for the car, “you ask them if a Mr. Walker has arrived, O.K.?”

“Mr. Walker,” Lowndes repeated. “And a plain brown wrapper.”

Across the clearing, Lu Anne saw Jack Glenn, the actor playing Robert Lebrun, in conversation with Joe Ricutti. She went over to them. A few years before, she had heard an agent describe Glenn—a natural who could fence, juggle, swing from vines and play comedy—as too small to be big. Whenever she repeated the story she got her laugh and people said it was a voice from Vanished Hollywood. But the agent had not vanished and Jack Glenn, at five feet nine inches, worked irregularly. Someone had told her it was because he was fair-skinned; a fair-skinned actor had to be taller. It was a matter of semiotics, the person had said.

He turned to her approach. “Ah,” he said with his hand over his heart, *“Les Douleurs d’amour.”* He kissed her hand, correctly, with the appearance of a kiss. Glenn was nice-looking and bisexual but for whatever reason she had never been attracted to him. Perhaps because he was fair and short.

“I don’t suppose,” Lu Anne said, “that since we talked you’ve come into any . . . you know, into possession of . . .”

“What a coincidence that you should ask.”

“You have!” she exclaimed joyfully.

“No,” Jack Glenn said. “But I was just thinking about it myself. I was thinking of asking that guy.”

He pointed to a middle-aged Mexican in a safari jacket who was holding one of the trolley horses with a twitch, examining its leg. As he worked, he was humming “The Trolley Song” from *Meet Me in St. Louis.*

“Who is he?” she asked.

“The vet,” Glenn said.

“What?” she said.

“The vet,” Joe Ricutti told her. “For the horses. So they shouldn’t get sick.”

Lu Anne turned to watch him work.

“I never thought of Mexican locations as having vets.”

“I always thought they shot the horses,” Jack Glenn said archly. “Don’t they?”

“This is No Help City,” Lu Anne said. “I mean, it’s a very bad situation.”

“This unit doctor,” Glenn said, “you tell him you can’t sleep, he tells you how many gringos are locked up in Baja Norte. ‘One hundred twenty U.S. citizens in jail.’ That’s the only English sentence he knows. So I was just thinking, like hmm—there’s the vet. Maybe he has something nice for us.”

“Oh God,” Lu Anne cried in exasperation, “like horse tranques? How about an STP trip? Or some angel dust?”

“Get him to give you a shot,” Joe Ricutti said. “You’ll go off on the rail at Caliente and finish first at Del Mar.”

“Well,” Lu Anne said, “we’ll have to tough it out, won’t we? Everything will have a clear black line around it, like a death notice.”

Jack Glenn laughed. “You’re so weird, Lu Anne.”

“That’s why we’re all here,” she told him. “You included.”

“I don’t know how people can joke about drugs,” Glenn said in mock sadness. In fact, as Lu Anne well knew, Glenn was mainly indifferent to drugs. He was only trying to amuse. “We should get someone to score for us in L.A.,” he said. “Bring shit down with the dailies.”

“Maybe Joy got hold of some,” Lu Anne suggested.

Glenn shook his head.

“Well,” she said, “I’m going to lie down and die again.”

She went back across the field to her trailer and there was Lowndes, sitting on the three little metal steps with a brown bag beside him. He stood up and presented the bag.

“Got any ice?”

But of course she did not want Lowndes, only the liquor. Or something. She opened the trailer door, trying to think how she might get rid of him. He followed her into the trailer and closed the door behind them.

She had some weeks-old ice in the trailer. She smashed the tray repeatedly against the miniature sink to get the cubes free, brushing aside Lowndes’s gestures of assistance. There were two plastic glasses on her makeup table; she filled them with ice and whiskey and passed one to Lowndes.

“We’ll have to make this a quick one, Skip, O.K.? Because I’m not really through working, you see.” She could not keep her words from running together, so intensely did she want the drink and Lowndes out. “I just wanted something . . . you know, when I get out of the water to dry me out. Well,” she said, “I guess dry’s the wrong word, isn’t it? I just wanted something to keep me wet between takes, aha.”

He was a magazine writer, she reminded herself, an important one, and he was there to write about the picture. With fascinated horror, she watched his upper lip draw back to expose a line of unhealthy red gum. “Not,” she said gaily, “that I’m planning to play the scene loaded, because that’s not how I work. Hell no, why . . .” She broke off. The man in front of her seemed to grow more and more grotesque and she was no longer confident about the reality of what she was seeing. There was something familiar about him, familiar in a most unpleasant way. It might be that he reminded her of someone. Or it might be worse.

“It’s been a very long time since I had a drink,” Lowndes told her.

“Is that right?” she asked. “Well, here’s how.”

When they drank, Lowndes’s features puckered with distaste. His eyes watered.

“I’ll tell you what,” she said to Dongan Lowndes, “when I’m through this evening we’ll have a proper drink. We’ll sit around and drink and talk. How’s that?”

“I thought it would be all gnomes and agents and flacks,” Lowndes said. “I’d love to see you later.” He finished what was in his glass in a swallow and turned pale. “Shall we have dinner?”

“Yes, yes,” Lu Anne said, standing up. “Dinner it is.”

She gave him the one-hundred-and-eighty-degree smile. He was a starfucker, she thought, a cheap starfucker who wanted to get her in bed and then brag to all his colleagues about it and then, without fear or favor, humiliate her before all of with-it, literate America. Not, she thought, that it hadn’t been done before.

“Yeah, that’s great,” Lu Anne told him. “After work.” She put a hand on his arm to shove him toward the door. Then she realized that she must not shove, so the hand on his arm was transformed into something like an affectionate gesture. She plucked an imaginary thread from his shirt. After work—it was just like waiting tables again, only they knew where you lived.

“Are you working late?”

“Sundown. After six.”

“Well,” Lowndes said, “I’ll be in the bar around seven-thirty. I’ll see you there.”

“Is he here?”

“Who?”

“Gordon. Gordon Walker.”

“Gosh, I’m sorry. I forgot to ask. He’s the screenwriter, isn’t he? Is he a friend of yours?”

“Yes. Yes, an old friend. Hey, thanks for the scotch,” she called as he went out. “Skip.”

He had brought a full bottle of Dewar’s. The only problem was that it was whiskey and it would smell up her breath and the trailer, so she would have to rinse her mouth and spray evil-smelling deodorants around.

She sipped her first drink slowly. It changed things for her; changed the trailer from a ratty piece of aluminum machinery into a cool, well-appointed refuge. She turned the overhead lamps down a few degrees of intensity and found that she had created a happy kind of light. It was all so much nicer.

When she had finished her first drink, she poured a second into her plastic glass, half filling it. She wet her face with a cool towel, turned the air conditioning up and shivered comfortably.

Her copy of the script was on the makeup counter beside her chair, face down, open to the scene that was to follow. After a moment’s hesitation she picked it up, not at all sure if she was in the mood for work or Edna, Kate Chopin or Gordon Walker’s take on things in general. She had read it many times before.

The scene was the novel’s climax, her walk into the sea; if she opened her trailer door she would be able to see the grips at work on the setup for it.

*She moves like Cleopatra,* Walker had written, *as though impelled by immortal longings.* The lines of direction were addressed only to her, a part of their game of relentless Shakespearianizing, half purely romantic, half higher bullshit. He meant he wanted Edna going out like the Queen in *Antony and Cleo,* Act V, scene 2.

*She senses a freedom the scope of which she has never known. She has come beyond despair to a kind of exaltation.*

Well, Lu Anne thought. Well, now. She had a little scotch and put the script face down in her lap.

“Really, now, Gordon,” she said.

Of course, that was the spirit of the book and its ending. But exaltation beyond despair? She had never found anything beyond despair except more despair.

There were some questions to take up, some questions for the writer here. Did Walker really believe in exaltation beyond despair? Did that mean she had to? Would she be able to play it? For that she had an answer which was: absolutely, you betcha. We play them whether they’re there or not. And once we’ve played them they’re there and there they stay, just like Marcel Herrand’s Larcenaire, Henry Fonda’s Wyatt Earp, Jimmy Dean’s Jimmy Dean. Exaltation beyond despair, she thought. Christ, I can stand that out in the middle of the floor and tap-dance on the son of a bitch.

It was wearying to have to think about despair, to have to think about Edna and Walker and what was there and what was not. About the last especially, she wasn’t sure she had the right to an opinion. Who knew what was there and what wasn’t? The liquor made her head ache. Who could say what exaltations there were?

What if walking by the water one day you broke through it? You’re walking into the water like our Edna and bam! Life more abundant.

That’s a trick, she thought suddenly. That’s a mean trick, because Walker was right about the lure of life more abundant. To go for it was dying. That kind of abundance, going for that was dying.

That was what he had meant. That, and *Antony and Cleopatra,* Act V, scene 2.

Very clever, Walker, she thought, but a pretty tough one to lay on your old pal. He had rewritten the ending over the past year, not the action but the emotional tone in his descriptions. It occurred to her that he might think he was about to die. Or be wishing himself dead, or her.

There was, she decided, no point in getting upset about it. It was only the script, and the script an adaptation from what was only a book. *Beyond despair to a kind of exaltation* as far as she knew was nothing more than a theatrical convention, just as walking into the drink at sunset was only movies. Her trouble with Walker was that, down deep, she thought he knew everything. The past, the present and future, all the answers. But he was just a writer, as she was what she was.

She drank a little more; a confusion of emotions assailed her, her head ached. She took a couple of aspirin, turned out the lights and slumped into a chair with her legs up on the lounger, the glass in her hand.

What’s going on, Walker? she thought. What’s happening here? Who are we and what are we playing at? Where does one thing leave off and the other stuff commence?

“I’m real,” she said aloud. Having so declared, she had to have a drink and think about it. I know that I am. I know what’s me and what’s not me. That’s all I know. She finished what was in her plastic glass and threw it gently onto the makeup counter.

It was not quite dark inside the trailer. The late-afternoon sunlight hurled itself against every hatch, every weld and seam in the big metal compartment. The Long Friends came out to gossip and brush her with their wings. They were always there when it was dark and reality in question. Their lavender sachet breath was cloying, narcotic.

“Hush now,” she told them.

They prattled on about secrets. Much of their talk was about things that must never be known, ruinous scandals, undetected crimes.

The incessant undercurrent of noise drove her to rise and turn on the overhead lamps. Only one of the Long Friends remained with the light, curled up in the darkest corner, smiling vacantly.

The ones born aren’t enough for you, the Friend said. The ones unborn, they’re too many.

“Don’t *unborn* me,” Lee said. “Really,” she said, “really, you have a nerve giving that abortion crap to me. I gave life to four and you took one back.” She turned to the corpse-like creature in the corner. “Want me to lie awake nights? No, thanks.” She cursed it in Creole French until it raised chalk-white splayed fingers to stop its ears. Watching it do so, she raised her own hands to the side of her head.

“You’re a sickness,” she said without looking at it, “that I breathed in from a graveyard.”

She had an inward vision of a hot September day that sometimes came to her in dreams. She was small, always a child in her dreams, and walking a sandy road down home. On one side of the road, government pines were planted in rows and beyond them tupelos grew beside the motionless river. She crossed herself walking beside a cemetery wall; the oven graves on the far side were invisible to her. She held her breath as long as she could but she could hold it only so long. It was before the hurricane and the high water, just before they’d moved to town, the same summer she remembered her father huge and drunk in the doorway, looking past her for somebody real. Sometimes it pleased her to imagine she had breathed in the Long Friends that day, although it was years before she began to hear and finally to see them.

She turned and looked at the one in the corner. The rough cloth in which it had wrapped itself, the colorless god’s-eye pattern of its wing seemed as vividly present as anything in the trailer.

“Do you love me?” she asked. She began to laugh and cut herself off. Her prescription pills were in the pill case in her carry bag. She took them out, poured them into her hand and mentally counted them. There were enough to put her out forever. That was what she had wanted to see. All right, she thought. There were enough—there would be enough tomorrow. Next year and the year after that. It was always there. She put the pills back into their plastic capsule.

Resting her brow on her hand, she tried to think about the scene she was about to play. Cleopatra. Immortal longings and exaltation beyond despair. She clenched her teeth and shook her head violently, wrapping the beach robe closer about her shoulders. Then she began to sing.

Her song was a wordless prayerful hum. Years before, she had sung in convincing imitation of the saintly folk sopranos of her youth; she had no training but she liked to sing. As she sang, she relaxed, closed her eyes and let her arms go limp beside her. The song located her to that September day when walking beside the burial ovens she had breathed in some evil fateful thing.

Save me, she sang. That was what the song was about. Somebody, save me.

She leaned her head back, clasped her hands and let her voice rise in a strong tremolo. The song summoned up such a wave of sadness, of recollected hopes, old loves and losses that she thought she would die.

Where’s my exaltation beyond despair? she thought. There’s nothing here but this dreaming child, all unhappy.

She let her song rise again and spread out her arms. In Louisiana the old black people called that kind of singing a *bajo* or a *banjo* song, a homesick blues for where you’ve never been, which for them was Africa but for her was God only knows.

Be there, Lu Anne sang. Be there, Sweet Jesus. Be there.

She leaned back in the lounger, exhausted. When she turned to the mirror she saw her own secret eyes. No other person except her children and the Long Friends had ever seen them.

She got to her feet, transfixed by what she saw in the mirror. The shock made her see stars as though she had been struck in the face. She watched the secret-eyed image in the glass open its mouth; she tried to look away.

Clusters of hallucination lilacs sprang up everywhere, making a second frame for the mirror, sprouting from between her legs. In her terror she called on God.

Suddenly the place was filled with ugly light, sunlight at once dingy and harsh. Trash light. Josette was standing in the open doorway, wide-eyed and pale. She took a step backward, her lip was trembling. It was the first time Lu Anne had ever seen the Frenchwoman show anything other than unsmiling composure.

Look, you little bitch! Lu Anne thought. Then she was not sure whether she had not said it aloud. Look at my secret eyes!

Vera Ricutti and her husband were behind Josette; Vera had a costume over her arm, a gray cotton garment and a blue bandana. The Ricuttis looked up at Lu Anne with something that might be reverence.

“What’s wrong, kid?” Vera Ricutti asked.

“I was prepping,” Lu Anne said. The accusatory malice and disgust she saw in Josette’s eyes made her feel sick.

“You were screaming!” the girl cried. She turned to the Ricuttis for confirmation. “She was screaming in there!”

“I was singing,” Lu Anne said quietly.

Josette looked up at her with a twisted triumphant smile; Vera Ricutti was holding her by the arm.

“Don’t tell me!” she shouted at Lu Anne. “You were screaming.”

“I was prepping.”

The woman shrugged and grunted.

Joe Ricutti came forward and spoke quietly to her and she walked away.

“We’ll take care of it,” Joe said in his gravelly voice. “We’ll talk to Eric. I mean, you don’t have to take that from her.”

Lu Anne stood in the trailer doorway, her beach robe undone, leaning one elbow on her wrist and chewing her little finger.

“Shit,” she said.

Vera stepped up and gently urged her back inside.

“So you were screaming. You got a right.”

“Absolutely,” Joe Ricutti said.

**Joe Ricutti** had set up shop under a beach umbrella beside the bathhouse. He sponged and powdered Lu Anne’s face and gave her a neck rub. Josette worked on her hair, no more sulkily distant than was usual. The gaffer and best boy were winding cable for an arc. Lu Anne had a look at the sun and picked up her worn copy of Kate Chopin’s novel. The wording was a solo *Liebestodt,* death as liberation.

*Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded upon its accustomed peg,* Chopin had written.

When Josette finished with her hair, Lu Anne stood up.

“I’m going to walk it through,” she told Ricutti, and reading as she walked, set out for the bathhouse.

*She put it on, leaving her clothing in the bathhouse. But when she was beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant prickling garments from her, and for the first time in her life, she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited it.*

“Clear the set, please,” Eric Hueffer intoned through his megaphone. “If you’re not working, we don’t want you on the set. Clear the set, everybody, please.” The Peruvian continuity girl made the announcement in Spanish, for the Mexicans.

Lu Anne leaned her head against the side of the bathhouse and thought of Edna naked in the open air for the first time. How sad it was, she thought. There was no way to film it. She had never thought of herself like Edna, but some things, she thought, they’re the same for everyone. A little Edna in all of us.

Naked for the first time, the open air. In the heat of the day it should be. A beach on the Gulf, midday, the water just cool, the sun hot on your body, the wind so still you can smell your own skin.

She finds out who she is and it’s too much and she dies. Yes, Lu Anne thought, I know about that. I can do that, me.

Too bad about the sunset, because it was clichéd and banal. Low-rent theatrics. Middle-income. Middlebrow theatrics.

She strolled at the water’s edge, reading. No one had called for quiet but the gaffer and the best boy spoke in low voices.

*How strange and awful it seemed to stand under the sky! how delicious. She felt like some newborn creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that she had never known.*

*The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body, in its soft close embrace.*

The cosmic fuck. Well, Lu Anne thought, who better than me? But the drowned people she had seen in the church hall after the hurricane down home had not looked particularly fulfilled.

She read the line aloud again: *“The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body, in its soft close embrace.”* She looked out to sea. That’s how it would seem to Edna. Something out there for me. Life more abundant. You let it go and you lie back and you let it happen. You don’t have to keep your clothes on or your mouth shut, your legs crossed or your hair up or your asshole tight. You don’t have to worry. You don’t have to do a goddamn thing but . . .

“Miss Verger, please,” Eric Hueffer called into his megaphone. Mechanically, she turned back toward her chair and the makeup table. Ricutti put a dry sponge to her temples. Josette ran a comb through her hair.

“Please, everyone,” Hueffer was telling the stragglers, “if we don’t need you, we don’t want you here.”

Lu Anne read on about Edna Pontellier’s last swim.

*She thought of Leonce and the children. They were a part of her life. But they need not have thought that they could possess her body and soul.*

Well, Lu Anne thought, nothing is free, Edna. Her life had not afforded her the opportunity to experience that sentiment. No doubt it was dreadful. *A Doll’s House.* Empty days. Childbirth. Massa having his nights out with the boys, his quadroon sweetie. The kids night and day. She decided it did not do for her to think about children.

They were waiting for her. She put the book down and stood up and Drogue came up to her, guiding her toward the bathhouse, telling her about the shot, how to come out, where to take the suit off, when to go into the water.

*The mercy of the sun,* Lu Anne thought. The informing words. *Awful. Naked. Delicious. Sensuous. Soft close embrace.* Dying was always fun. *Immortal longings. Exaltation beyond despair.* So much popcorn, she thought. To get the character you had to go down and inside to where your grief was. The place your truest self inhabited was the place you could not bear.

She stopped and leaned against Drogue. They were at the door of the bathhouse, and the camera was advancing on her. Two Mexican grips waited beside the Titan, privileged characters who were expected not to take it wrong when she undressed.

“O.K., partner?” Drogue asked.

“I’m fucked, honey,” she told him. “Life’s a condom.”

She looked into his panic-stricken face. He’s seeing it, she thought. Yes, she thought, behold the glory, Jim. Look at me shining, I’m the Queen of Lights.

“How about a half-moon on the bathhouse door, Walter? I could come out and do Judy Canova.” She bared her front teeth at him.

“Great,” Walter Drogue the younger said. “Only—some other time, maybe?”

“Have no fear,” she told the director. She stepped inside the bathhouse, closing the door behind her. There was only one of them inside.

How can you dare speak so to them? it asked gently in the old language. They don’t understand you. It’s we alone who do.

“Which one are you?” she asked it wearily. It was Marie Ange, she knew.

“Marie Ange,” she sighed. “Monkey-face. Go away, eh? *Va-t’en.*”

Eric was calling for quiet.

She raised her eyes into the darkness. “Oh, darkness above,” she prayed, “help your sister darkness below.”

She crossed herself quickly. She hadn’t meant such a terrible prayer. She thought that she might go to church in town that evening.

Drogue’s voice cut through the silence on the other side of the door.

“Action!”

She opened the door and walked out into the golden sunlight and caught a quick glimpse of Charlie Freitag, the producer. She fixed her gaze on a point above the reddening horizon where the sun’s fading glare might light her eyes yet not dazzle her. At the appointed mark, she stopped and lowered the shoulder straps of her one-piece gray bathing suit. It was not, she thought, of any thwarted love that Edna died. The suit peeled away easily as she eased her torso free. She kept her eyes on their quarter of the sky.

It was dangerous to probe one’s inward places. The chemistry was volatile, fires might start and burn out of control. What if I, Lu Anne thought, who cannot see past mirrors, should confront myself there? My self.

If I, who see everything in mirrors, who cannot approach the glass without some apprehension, were to see my inward self there, I would not die. But Edna might.

Medusa, she thought. That’s what that’s about. It’s your own face that turns you to stone, your own secret eyes.

Poor Edna. Poor Edna gets a sight of herself, she explodes, crashes, burns. Never knew she was there. Catches fire like the feckless child of family legend, little Great-Aunt Catastrophe in her going-to-mass dress on Christmas morning, alight from the Christmas candles, a torch-child spinning around the parlor.

Poor old Edna, little Dixie honey, sees her own self on the shield of hot blue sky and dies. Sees all that freedom, that great black immensity of righteous freedom and swoons, Oh My. And dies.

Stepping out of the suit, Lu Anne tossed it aside and walked on toward the water. All at once she was reminded of Walker, but whether it was of something he had told her or something in the script, she could not recall. Something of him had come to her mind for a moment and gone. She stepped into the warm water; two brawny men in swimming trunks stood waist deep just outside the shot, a third waited thirty or so feet out, resting on a float with a coiled length of line.

Shoulders back, head high, she walked along the inclining sandy bottom. The camera tracked with her, eye to eye, and when she lost her footing and pushed off, she was aware of it pulling back and hovering overhead as she swam out from shore.

When Drogue called cut, the man with the float advanced toward her but she turned back. Wading out of the water she heard a little clatter of applause.

“Where’s the crew?” Lu Anne asked, shaking her hair. Vera Ricutti brought her a beach robe.

“We cleared the set,” Drogue told her. “We thought it would be friendlier just us.”

“Well, Walter,” she said happily, “if you-all are going to applaud I would like a lot of applause rather than a little.”

“Shall we bring them back?” he asked. “Want a claque?” He strode away from her, calling for his soldiers.

“O.K., *muchachos!*” Once more for protection.”

“Arc’s ready if you want it,” Hueffer told him.

“I don’t want it. I want reflectors in place.”

Lu Anne went to the trailer to have her hair dried and combed.

**Light was fading;** the sun seemed to hang suspended above a thin curl of purple cirrus cloud. They were running out of clear sky. A gray wall of rain was approaching from the northwest; the wind carried a few fat drops to spatter on the beach and people looked at the sky in alarm. In the end, the rain held off and they had time for two more takes of Lu Anne going into the water.

“I’ll give it to you two ways, Walter,” Lu Anne said.

Drogue was on the crane with Blakely and the camera operator. Eric Hueffer stood beside the truck watching the sky.

“Anything you want, babe,” Drogue told her.

Action was called, Lu Anne flung her suit aside and went in.

Vera brought her the robe and they started back to her trailer.

“That was the James Mason ‘think I’ll do a few laps around Catalina between Old-Fashioneds’ one,” she called to Drogue as she went by.

As they set up for the sky and ocean shot, Drogue looked grim.

“Watch this,” he told his assistant. “We’re gonna have the Lu Anne Happy Hour.”

“Is that a bad sign?” Hueffer asked him.

“Fuckin’ right. But it’s the up side.”

She came out again for their last take of the day and repeated the scene. The bathing suit was tossed aside. Numb with self-recognition, Edna went to her death.

“Hey, Lee,” Hueffer asked her as she came out of the water, “what was that called?”

“That,” she told him, clutching the robe about her shoulders, “is called Lupe Velez Takes a Dunk.”

Hueffer broke up. Drogue, Blakely, even the operator chortled as they clung to their uneasy perches.

When Lu Anne had passed, the laughter froze on Drogue’s face. He looked at Blakely and shrugged.

“She’s funny,” he said.

**Late in the afternoon,** as the highway curved down from the Cerro Encantada, Walker found himself driving within sight of the sea. He pulled over at the next turnoff, got out of the car and walked to the end of a promontory from which he could see the ocean and the trail that lay ahead of him. The sun was low and losing its fire, the ocean a cool darkening blue that made him shiver in the desert heat. Between the ridge on which he stood and the sea lay the Honda Valley. It was every variety of green—delicate pastel in the circular irrigated cotton fields, silver-green in the stands of eucalyptus, a sinister reptilian emerald along the base of its canyon walls. Miles away, perhaps as much as an hour of cautious driving over the tortuous highway, a paved road descended in figure-of-eight switchbacks to the valley. He could make out the hotel buildings. From where he stood they seemed to rest precariously in the folds of a red table rock that commanded the coastal plain.

As his gaze swept up the valley, he saw sharp glints of reflected sunlight from the seaside edge of one of the eucalyptus groves. Before a line of wooden structures, tiny human figures went to and fro along the shore. The sunlight was striking silver-paper reflectors, metal and glass. It took him a moment to understand that he was seeing *The Awakening* unit at work.

There was a copy of Peterson’s *Western Birds* and a pair of binoculars behind the rear seat of the Buick; Walker’s wife was a birdwatcher and he had driven her car to Seattle. He took the glasses, walked back to the edge of the ridge and picked out the unit. He saw a woman in an old-fashioned gray bathing suit walking toward the water. As he watched, the woman stopped short and sauntered back to the spot from which she had begun.

Walker watched her start again, noted the camera crane on its track and the figures on the turret. A sound man attended the woman like an acolyte, carrying his boom aloft. He saw the woman remove a bandana from around her head and toss it to the sand. He saw her walk on, remove her bathing suit and stand naked and golden in the sun. He was seeing, he supposed, what he had come to see.

It was very strange to see them as he did—tiny distant figures at the edge of an ocean, acting out a vision compounded of his obsessions and emotions. He had never been so in love, he thought, as he was with the woman who stood naked on the beach in front of that camera and several dozen cold-eyed souls. It was as though she were there for him, for something that was theirs. He felt at the point of understanding the process in which his life was bound, as though the height on which he stood was the perspective he had always lacked. Will I understand it all now, he wondered, understand it with the eye, like a painting?

The sense of discovery, of imminent insight excited him. He was dizzy; he checked his footing on the uneven ground, his closeness to the edge. Her down there, himself on a rock miles away—that’s poetry, he thought. The thing was to get it straight, to understand.

He saw them dress her again, saw her walk, lose the bandana, then the bathing suit in what, from where he stood, read as a series of effortless moves. Tears came to his eyes. But perhaps it was not poetry, he thought. Only movies.

The seed of meaning he had touched between his teeth began to slip away. He was struck by the silence between their place and his; he strained for the director’s voice, the sound of the sea. Gulls were what he heard, and wind in the mesquite.

What had it been? Almost joy, he thought, a long-lost thing, something pleasurable for its own sake. It had slipped away.

Fuck it, he thought. I got something almost as good.

He went back to his car, looked up and down the road to see that he would not be surprised and managed with some difficulty to do a few lines. Some of his cocaine blew onto the car seat and he had to brush it away and see it scatter on the wind.

It had been just like a dream, he thought, the same disappearing resolution, the same awakening to the same old shit. It wasn’t there. Or was hardly there—a moment’s poetry, a moment’s movies. Hardly enough there to count, not for the likes of him.

The coke was no help. It had been something like a daydream, provoked by the smell of the wind and the dizzying height and his impatience to see her; no drug would bring it back. Rather, the drugs gave him the jitters—made him feel exposed, out there in the open beside the road, pursued and out of breath. When he went out to the ridge again and fixed his binoculars on the naked figure he saw it was not Lu Anne but a younger woman who somewhat resembled her. There’s your poetry, he thought. Your movies.