

What's the Purpose of the Bayonet?

a story by George Garrett

1. *Hooray for the Old Nth Field*

We were the bums of the Army. There was no other unit like ours. We were the losers, the scum, flotsam and jetsam, the scrubs, the dregs, the lees, blacksheep, Falstaffs, ne'er-do-well uncles, and country cousins. Our outfit was formed up overseas, ostensibly composed of men from the regimental infantry companies who had an artillery MOS. What really happened in this case is as follows. They sent a letter down to all the infantry Company Commanders, letting them know about the new outfit and asking them if they had any men to spare who happened to have an artillery MOS. The Company Commander, sitting behind his polished and dusted, almost virginal desk, would puzzle out the letter and, as its contents dawned on him, a great big grin would light up his face and he'd holler for the First Sergeant and the Company Clerk. It's amazing how all the misfits, deadbeats, eightballs, VD cases, alcoholics, and walleyed, knock-kneed, slewfooted stockade-bait suddenly turned out to be trained artillerymen. Then an officer was flown over from the States to take charge of this pirate crew. Picture him the first time he realized what had happened. He's the man who sat down on the Whoopee Cushion. He's the Original who was sent out in search of a left-handed monkeywrench and a bucket of polka-dot paint. He's scheduled to be nailed to the cross in the company of thieves and tramps.

We were lucky. The CO they sent us was a bum himself. Somebody in the Pentagon had a nice sense of decorum. He was potbellyed and middle-aged. All his contemporaries were Bird Colonels or

Onestar Generals. He was still a Captain. He chewed on- an enormous two-bit stogie all day long and most of the time he forgot all about having it in his mouth. He didn't even take it out of his mouth when he saluted. No matter how clean his uniform was when he put it on, in fifteen minutes he looked like he'd slept in it on the ground. He had been through some hellish times in the War and he had come out the same man who went in. He was one of those men who valued the accident of living so highly they will never betray themselves for anything. Least of all ambition. He didn't seem to be the slightest bit sorry for being exactly what he was, and he didn't seem to be gnawed by the furtive wish to be anything or anybody else.

The first time the battery fell out for his inspection we looked like the early American cartoons of the Continental Militia.

"I'll be a sonofabitch," were his first words to the assembled troops. The rest of his speech was short and to the point.

"F—— you guys!" he said. "You are without a doubt the crummiest collection of decayed humankind I ever laid eyes on, so help me God. We deserve each other. If you want to be soldiers, try it. See if I care. First Sergeant, take charge of this so-called battery. I'm going to get drunk." The entire battery cheered him. We threw our helmet liners in the air. He just shrugged his shoulders and walked off the paradeground, slumped over, chewing on his cigar stub, feeling maybe the way Francis Drake and Henry Morgan sometimes used to feel.

It was the best outfit I was ever with in every way. You might not think so, but I'll tell you why. We were insideout men. All our vices were apparent. Our virtues were disguised. Talk all you want about your *camaraderie*, your *esprit de corps*. We had something better than that. We clung together hand in hand like men overboard. We found out that with sleight of hand we could soldier when we wanted to or if we had to. We found out that when we felt like it we could outmarch the infantry, outrun the airborne, and outdrive the armored.

Most of the time we were worthless, a crown of thorns to the Commanding General, a severe drain on the Taxpayer. Between inspections the billets we lived in were a pigsty. Off duty we drank and fought and whored. We always had beer and vino cooling in the breechings of our howitzers. Combat ready. Rust and dust were our constant companions, shooed out of sight only on very special occasions.

Needless to say the Army was ashamed to have us around. They stuck us up near the Yugoslav border in what used to be the Free Territory of Trieste, miles from anywhere, in a village called Padriano. Look it up in an atlas sometime. See if you can find it. We were supposed to guard the border. Before we came up there it had been pretty tense, but we soon discovered that the Yugoslav soldiers—called Jugs—were almost as notorious tramps as we were. We used to drink together and the border almost vanished. One time the Lady who used to be the Ambassadors to Italy came up and inspected us. They were so afraid they notified us a month ahead of time. After she left the CO called for the Battery Clerk, who was a college boy. “Say, son,” he said, “who in the hell *was* that Clara Bell Lou we fell out for?”

Once a week they’d let a truckload of us go down to the city of Trieste to get civilized for an evening. We played hide and seek with the MP’s all over town. Even though we didn’t get down there often, we knew every whore in the city by her first name, which was a lot more than the Vice Squad was ever able to accomplish. Once, during the riots, this paid off. They alerted the Nth Field and made us put on the full combat costume—steel helmets, field packs, gas-masks, fixed bayonets, the works. We were taken down in trucks to the main square in Trieste. Thousands of people were milling around, shouting and screaming about something. Some of them had clubs and knives and rocks, and some of them, I guess, had small arms. When we dismounted and formed up and they saw our

guidon and saw what outfit we were, they started laughing and cheering. The whores were calling out to us by name. So we started laughing and yelling back to them. The whole riot was over in minutes. The only real trouble the Army had was rounding us up again to go back to Padricano. It took a couple of hours to smoke out all our guys who had headed for the first bar or trattoria they could find. A couple of them were dead drunk, and the local people carried them and all their gear and loaded them gently on the waiting trucks.

Eventually the Army just gave up on us. They broke up the outfit and sent us far and wide. They sent me up to Linz, Austria. The Army thought we were barbarians and maybe we were, but if you ever have to die with combat boots on, you could do worse than to do it with the Nth Field. Save me, good Lord, from companies and battalions of well-adjusted, dead-serious, cleancut, boyscout, post-office-recruiting-poster soldiers. Deliver me from mine enemies, West Point officers with spit-shined boots and a tentpole jammed up their rectums, and their immortal souls all wrapped up cutely like a birthday present containing at its secret heart something about as insipid as a shelled peanut. Save me from good people, on a piece of graphpaper, percentage-wise. Give me the bottom of the barrel, men who still have themselves to laugh at and something real to cry about, who, having nothing to lose and being victims of the absurd dignity of the human condition, can live with bravado at least, and, if they have to die, can die with grace like a wounded animal.

2. *Guts*

People take up boxing for a variety of reasons, none of them very sound. Show me a fighter, amateur or pro, and I'll show you a man who's got some impelling obsession, hidden maybe, that makes him want to destroy and be destroyed. I suppose with the pros, they get

over it with experience. They reach a point where they don't care much anymore; the original motivations have been lost, disguised, or maybe even satisfied. By that time there isn't much else they can do and it's just another dirty business.

The obvious reason I boxed in the Army was to get out of work. If you made the team you got to sleep through reveille and you didn't have to march or stand any inspections. Officers didn't harass you. You just went down to the Post Gym twice a day and worked out. The true reason why I took up boxing, way back in public school, is more complex. The easiest way to explain it without going into much detail is my size. I'm a natural welterweight. All the lacerations of flesh and spirit that go along with being small are partially compensated for by being given the opportunity to face another small man and try to heap some of the stinking weight of your own anguish on him.

Joe was just about my size. He had fought some professionally around Philadelphia. He started fighting in self-defense at the state prison where if a little man couldn't fight he was as good as gone. He was really good, he had class. He could make the light bag dance to any rhythm he set his fists to. He had a hundred different ways to skip rope. He could bob and weave like a machine when he was shadow boxing and when he hit the heavy bag it seemed to groan under his punches. He used to take it easy on me when we sparred and I learned a lot from Joe. I wasn't trying to be any competition for him. I just wanted to stay on the team as a substitute.

Often I'd go on pass with Joe. He had a shack—he was living off Post with what you'd probably call a whore, a big blonde about twice his size named, believe it or not, Hilda. He paid the rent, bought the groceries and some clothes for her, and now and then he'd bring her a present from the PX. In return she had to do his laundry, cook dinner for him, and make love like an eager rabbit. It wasn't a bad deal for some of those girls because jobs were scarce

and a lot of them might have been hungry otherwise. And it was a definite cut higher on the local social scale than being a regular prostitute. There were two big dangers: pregnancy and rotation. Sooner or later every soldier had to rotate home to the States. Once their man was gone they either had to find another one or become prostitutes. Pregnancy was something else. Either they took their chances with quack abortionists or they had a baby. The whole place was full of little GI bastards. Some of the girls had two or three.

Hilda and Joe seemed to have a happy shack. She always cooked up schnitzels with fried eggs on top, served with potatoes and Austrian beer. We weren't training so hard that we wouldn't drink beer. Not for three three-minute rounds.

"Hilda is the girl I used to think about in jail," Joe would say. "I didn't see a woman, not even a picture of one, for two years. I used to close my eyes and picture a big blonde, one with boobies the size of Florida grapefruit and a big soft ass as wide as an axhandle. I had to come all the way to Austria with the U.S. Army to find one along those lines."

Hilda used to laugh at that and she didn't seem to mind much when he compared her with his wife back home.

"Now you take my wife in Philly," he'd say. "Hilda is a pig along side of her, a slob. My wife is a real beauty. She even won a bathing-beauty contest when she was in high school. She could be in the movies if she wanted to I guess."

"Who do you love?" Hilda would say. "Tell him which one you love."

"That's easy. You, you big barrel of lard."

"Tell him which one is good in the bed."

"Well, hell now, Hilda, that ain't fair. Give the girl a chance. You've had a whole lot more experience."

I really admired Joe. I took everything he said for gospel and I studied his fighting movements and copied all the ones that I could.

Some of the other guys on the team said he was a fake. Wait and see, they said. We know his kind. Notice he don't like to muss his hair. He's a liar. He never was no kind of a fighter. He might of been in jail, but even that don't seem likely. I didn't pay any attention to them. I figured they were just jealous. I noticed none of them wanted to get in the ring with him.

Finally, the night of our first match came around. The gym was packed with people—troops, officers and their wives, and civilian employees. It's surprising to me how so many nice people and nice girls would come to see a thing like that. The same people would be sick at their stomachs if they saw a dogfight. To tell you the truth I can't think of anything uglier than a couple of men beating each other bloody under the bright lights for the amusement of a lot of people.

It was almost time for his bout when Joe came up to me.

"I'm sick," he said. "I can't fight tonight." He was supposed to fight a sergeant from Salzburg, a little guy with heavy muscles like a weightlifter who looked like he could really hit.

"The hell you're sick, Joe," somebody said. "You're chicken."

"I'm sick," he kept saying. "I'm too sick to go in there."

"Okay, Joe," I said. "I'll fight him for you."

"Don't be a knucklehead," somebody told me. "Let him fight his own match."

"Go ahead if you want to," Joe said. "I couldn't care less."

I just had time to slip on my trunks and get the gloves on before the fight. I went in there and jabbed him and kept moving. He turned out to be one of those big hitters who have to get both feet set flat before they can punch. So I just kept moving around him and sticking the jab in his face. After the first round he got mad and started to run at me like a bull. All I had to do for two rounds was to keep my left hand out and he'd run right into it. He was dazing himself. The madder he got, the less chance he had to get set and tag

me, and that's how come he lost the fight. We were both glad when it was over, him because it had been so frustrating and me because my luck would have run out in another round or so. As soon as it was over I ran back to tell Joe what had happened. He was sitting in the dressing room, crying.

"Joe," I said. "Joe, I won!"

"Think you're pretty good, don't you?"

"No," I said, "I was lucky."

"Listen," he said, "you'll never understand this, but tonight I just lost my heart for it. I was sitting here and it dawned on me that there wasn't no reason, none at all, to go in there and get beat around anymore. It made me sick."

"I can see how you'd feel."

"No you can't," he said. "You'll figure just like the rest of those guys that I was nothing but a big liar."

"No, I won't," I said. "I'm just glad I could win the fight."

"You rat," he said. "How do you think that makes me feel, you bastard?"

He put on his cap and left. The next day he quit the team and went back with his regular outfit. I heard he even quit Hilda. I felt bad about it, but what could I do?

3. *The Art of Courty Love*

You can fool yourself quicker in a dozen ways than it takes to tell about it. Then, if you discover the irony of your self-deception, you are liable to turn right around and cast your guilt on somebody else. That truism, I suppose, explains how it was with Inge and me. Inge lived in an apartment just across a little field from an off-limits *gasthaus* where a few of us used to go in the evenings or on Saturday afternoon and drink beer. One Saturday I looked through the window and saw her hanging out her washing. She was a small woman,

curiously dainty and precise in her movements, with a pretty, troubled face. It was almost like watching a dance seeing her hanging out her washing in a brisk wind. For no good reason I said to myself I must have that woman. I'm not going to rest until I have that woman. I asked around about her and found out that she was a DP, a refugee from the old German part of Czechoslovakia. Nobody knew much about her except that she had shacked up with an officer for a while and that he had rotated to the States a year or so ago.

It took some doing. At first she didn't want to have anything to do with me.

"I don't like you," she said. "I don't even like your type. Little nervous men make me sick."

All right, I said to myself, we'll see. We'll see about that. I almost crawled for it. I tried everything I could think of. I kept coming around, bringing her food and gifts from the PX, spending my money like a drunk. One night I brought my portable record player and records and a bottle of wine. Once she heard the music playing I was home free.

"I hate you," she said. "All this time I have been living with so little, but you keep bringing things and now I start to want again. I want to eat good food and I want to wear good clothes again. I want to start to live good again."

That suited me fine. At the time it seemed like a big victory. I moved in and set up a shack. I felt like a rooster in the henyard. This is pretty hard to explain because it was easy enough to find a girl to shack with around Linz, but this had been a real quest. Inge did everything she was supposed to. She cooked and did my laundry and made love, but I could tell that she didn't like it at all. The truth is her barely concealed distaste added to my sense of pleasure. She used to be so ashamed she kept all the shades pulled down when I was in the apartment. She liked to make love in the dark, but I used to trick her by suddenly snapping on the bedside lamp to astonish

her in the light.

Inge had been married in Czechoslovakia, but her husband had been killed in the War and she didn't know where her children were. She was at least ten years older than I was. The American officer had been very good to her, she said, and he had promised to marry her. After he went to the States she never heard from him again. Still, she kept a leather-framed picture of him on her bureau, overseeing everything, a lean, good-looking, smiling man. She had a vague notion that someday, any day, the postman was going to bring her a letter from him telling her to pack her things and come to the States. We used to play a game with his picture. When she undressed to go to bed, she used to turn his face to the wall, but as soon as she wasn't looking, I would turn him around again.

Inge kept the apartment neat and trim—everything had its exact place. If you moved a bottle of perfume an inch on the bureau from where she had put it, she sensed right away that something in the room was out of order. She had some cheap jewelry and some knickknacks that she cared for like a saint's relics. She was very fastidious about her clothes and she used to bathe every day even though this meant a lot of trouble. The only thing to bathe in was a big washtub and she had to bring the water by the bucketload from a pump in the yard. On the other hand I used to go for days without taking a shower out at camp just to infuriate her. She stood this and a hundred small humiliations as well or better than anyone could be expected to under the circumstances.

Oh, I was as happy and thoughtless as an apple on a tree until another girl told me that Inge had an Austrian boyfriend and that whenever I was on guard or had some other night duty he came and stayed in my apartment. I could hardly believe that, but I decided I had to find out. I told her I was going to be on guard one night. After dark I came off Post and sneaked up close to the apartment. The shades were up and I looked in the window. She was all dressed up

in the best clothes I had bought her, dancing with a young Austrian. They danced and she was laughing as I'd never seen her do before, and all the time my portable record player was playing my records. I went over to the *gasthaus* and watched from the window. I sat up all night, fuming and tormented, and at dawn I saw him leave, blowing a kiss to her. As soon as he was out of sight, I ran across the field to the apartment and opened the door. She sat up in the bed, clutching the sheet over her breasts.

"What are you doing here?" she said. "What are you going to do?"

"You bitch," I said, starting to take off my belt. "I'm going to beat the living hell out of you."

"Please don't," she said. "Please, please don't touch me. I never said I loved you. You've been good to me but I never said I loved you."

"So what about the kraut?"

"I love him," she said. "That boy doesn't have any money, but I love him. You've got to understand."

"Okay," I said. "You go ahead and love who you want to. I won't lay a finger on you. I've got a better idea. I'm going to tear this place apart."

"Don't!" she said. "Don't do that."

"I'm going to tear this place to pieces and if you say anything about it to anyone I'll turn your name in to the CID as a whore."

That frightened her because if she was even arrested under suspicion of being a prostitute she was done for. As a DP she could never hold a job or be legally married in Austria, and certainly with that on her record she would never get to the States. I was in a terrible rage, more at myself than anything else, I guess. She sat in the bed sobbing hopelessly while I broke everything to pieces. I even smashed my own records and the player. I took her clothes out of the bureau drawers and off the hangers and ripped them into shreds

and ribbons. I tore that smiling photograph in half.

“You had no right,” she said.

I slammed the door and ran to catch the bus back to camp. At first I felt almost good about it, but after a day or two I began to realize how much I had fooled myself and what a terrible thing I had done. I went to the PX and bought a lot of things to take to her, but when I got to the apartment the landlady told me that Inge had run away and left no address. I paid her the rent we owed and went back to camp. I don't know where she went or could have gone. Salzburg probably, where there are a lot of troops. I never heard from her or found any trace of her again.

4. What's the Purpose of the Bayonet?

I always used to hate pulling stockade duty. They had some regular personnel up there, but the actual guarding was detailed to individual units. When your name came up on the list you had to move up there and guard the prisoners. This meant hours in the towers around the barbwire compound or else being a chaser. I hated being a chaser. You had to pick up a little group of prisoners at the gate in the morning and take them to whatever job they were supposed to do. You weren't allowed to smoke or talk to the prisoners. You were just there to shoot them if they tried to run away or refused to obey an order. You had to be spic and span and pass inspection every morning. It was almost as bad as being a prisoner yourself. Not quite.

This time I was assigned to a different job—the cage. In the center of the compound they had a building they had converted into a kind of stronghold for very serious cases—men who were being sent back to the States for long terms. They had double doors with armed guards outside, and inside they had two rows of cages with bars all the way around. It was kind of like a zoo. They kept the men in the

individual cages like wild beasts. They were afraid they would try to kill themselves rather than go back to the States and do time in Leavenworth. They wouldn't let them shave. Some of them grew long beards waiting for shipment. They wouldn't give them silverware with the chow. They had to eat it off the tray with their fingers. They were like savages. There weren't any windows but the room was always brightly lit. You could easily forget whether it was night or day. You couldn't hear a sound from the outside world. I had four hours on and eight hours off, sitting alone in the middle of the room at a big desk. I had a telephone and they called me every half hour to find out how everything was. If anything happened I was supposed to shoot the prisoners with a .45 pistol.

There were four men in the cages while I was there, two long-term AWOLS, a lifer who had killed his shack job while he was drunk, and a rapist. They said the rapist was going to hang when they got him back to the States. He seemed crazy as hell. He was filthy and obscene and he probably was guilty. He had been accused of raping a young Austrian girl and they threw the book at him. They gave him a big public trial and invited the local population to come and see the show. They had buses to pick them up, free lunch, and earphones for the trial so they could follow by interpreter what was going on. A real goodwill gesture.

This particular guy used to worry me more than all the rest. They had their moods, but all in all they seemed resigned. He didn't seem to know what was going on. I don't think he had the faintest notion he was going to hang. He used to talk to me all the time about what he was going to do when he got home. He received mail once in a while, but the people writing him didn't have any idea he was even in trouble. He either talked about home or else he paced up and down his cage silently and you could tell there was a big blowoff coming. After a while he'd start hollering at the top of his voice, crazy things. I remember he used to yell questions and an-

swers like the ones from basic training, the one they yelled at you in bayonet drill. “What’s the purpose of the bayonet?” they’d yell. And everybody was supposed to answer back, “Kill! Kill! Kill!” He’d carry on like that. The rest of the prisoners put up with it most of the time, but sometimes it got on their nerves and then a couple of the regular stockade people had to come in and hold him while the doctor gave him a shot that knocked him out cold.

The officer in charge at the stockade was a recent graduate of West Point and he was plenty mad to have a dirty little job like that. He used to come in the cage and take it out on the prisoners. He never touched them, he just teased and harassed them hoping that one of them would give him an excuse to get tough. Helpless men like that seem to bring out the worst in some people. One day he was standing in front of the cage of one of the AWOL’s, telling him terrible stories about Leavenworth: how rough they were going to treat him there for the next ten years. The guy finally got tired of just listening and walked over to the bars. He cleared his throat and spat in the Lieutenant’s face. The Lieutenant didn’t flinch or move a muscle, I’ll say that for him. He just took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his face clean.

“That’s going to cost you,” he said.

He was right. A day or so later they came in and shaved and cleaned the guy, put a uniform on him, and took him away to be court-martialed.

“It was worth it,” he told me when they brought him back. “It was worth a little more time just to get a shave and a bath and a clean uniform on. I’ll spit again if he gives me half a chance.”

The Lieutenant must have been satisfied. He never bothered that particular prisoner again, except in little ways like taking chow off of his tray. Finally some MP’s from Livorno showed up to take the prisoners to the ship.

“So long, old sport,” the rapist told me. “I’ll see you on Times

Square.”

“In a pig’s eye you will,” the MP guarding him said. “You’re going to hang, buddy.”

That was the last that I saw of any of them. I was put back outside as a chaser and I was glad to be back in the fresh air and in the open view of the world again. The first day one of my prisoners, a seventeen-year-old kid who was pulling sixty days for some minor infraction, started to act up. He asked me what I was going to do if he tried to run away.

“I’m going to kill you if you try and run, fatface,” I told him. “Because if I don’t kill you, they’ll throw you in the cage and in a week you’ll wish you were dead.”

He shut up and went to work.

5. *Torment*

There are always things going on out of sight. Creatures move in disguise and there’s a vigorous invisible life everywhere. You have to poke around or have an accident to discover it. Trip over a decayed log or just roll it upside down and you’ll find a swarm of white wormy life, or death if you want to call it that, lively death; and I know no matter how content your eyes are with the green sweetness and your nose with the winey odor of the woods, you’ll turn away almost sick at your stomach. On the other hand, in innocence, in ignorance, you may be fascinated by the idea of corruption, just as leaning over a fence and watching a great-bellied sow wallow in the dungy mud you may have wished to be a lot less than human. Knowledge is always something else. If somebody rubs your face in the filth you may yearn for even two-legged dignity.

When I was a boy we had an old leather-bound set of books purporting to be the history of the world and even before I could read I used to rifle those pages for the illustrations of great events. Before I

ever went to school I had an idea about Pyramids and the Fall of Rome and the Storming of the Bastille. As a matter of fact that first experience of history, flipping pages and looking for pictures, ruined me for any of the conventional ways of looking at history. Your first impressions, like your first wounds, are deepest. So I've always had a kind of haphazard view of time. What difference does it make whether you begin or end with the Fall of Rome?

There's one picture I remember quite well from another period of my childhood. It was a favorite of mine during the nervous time of early puberty when a woman is only a sign or signal of desire and might as well be two-dimensional. Next to the rather vapid girls in underwear available in the Sears Roebuck Catalogue the best pornographic material I had access to in those days was in *The History of the World*. There was one especially titillating picture—"The Inquisition in Session." It showed a full-blown woman as naked as God made her, hiding her face. A huge executioner with a black mask on had just ripped away the last shreds of her clothes. In the background there was a raised bench with ecclesiastical dignitaries, bored or leering, and in one corner there were instruments of torture, whips, and irons heating red-hot on a fire. It was a perfect field day for undeveloped sexuality. An innocent's paradise.

The reality of torment is somewhat less appealing. I used to pull Courtesy Patrol downtown in Linz. We had an office in the main police station and whenever we were off duty we used to gather around the stove in that room. It seems to me it was always cold in Austria. The police station was a big gloomy building, cold and high-ceilinged, poorly lighted. In the rooms around us the local police carried on their daily jobs with a muted efficiency. You could hear their heavy boots sometimes in the hall and there was always the faint insect noise of a distant typewriter, but most of the time the place seemed as quiet and decorous as a tomb. We had a feeling of awe for those cops. They were all big, handsome men and they never

seemed to relax from a dignified, unsmiling position of attention. Their high boots gleamed and their uniforms were immaculate. Next to them we felt like a bunch of civilians in costume.

Every once in a while the authorities would decide to crack down on prostitution in the town. Sometime around midnight they'd wheel out the trucks and be gone, and in an hour or so they'd start bringing in the night's catch. Then there was some excitement in the halls. The whores would be shepherded in, old ones and young ones, fat ones and skinny ones, in all stages of dress and undress, expensive ones as shiny and clean as a model in an advertisement, cheap ones with black ruined teeth and an itchy look. They all seemed dazed or numb. They were taken down our hall and through a door at the end. After that crowds of cops went down there, too, and pretty soon you could hear military band music being played on some kind of loudspeaker. Once I got curious about what was going on. I asked the interpreter they had assigned to our office about it. He just grinned and shrugged.

"See for yourself," he said. He was an easygoing guy who was happy just to sit around the office and smoke our cigarettes.

I went down the hall and opened the door into the blaring military band music. It was a hell of a sight. They had all the whores stripped and the cops were running around among them beating them with rubber truncheons. It was like a picture out of Dante's *Inferno*. The women were all crying and screaming and begging and praying. The cops were running around in circles like crazy sheepdogs. They'd beat at random and then spontaneously single out an individual and beat her down to the floor, the truncheons blurring with fury and speed. Some of the cops had their shirts off. They had wild faces like men hopped up on dope. One man sat on a table where the record player was, changing the records, smoking and just watching. When the whores were like this, naked, scared, and in pain, they all looked alike, just poor flesh and bones suffering. But

the worst thing was the blood. Nobody ever talks about the blood of beatings. Their faces were swollen and bleeding from broken noses, cheeks and jaws, split lips. Their bodies were bleeding from dark bruises and cuts. The floor was slick with blood like the back of a butchershop. They were slipping and falling in it, cops and whores alike.

I shut the door and went back to the office.

“So?” the interpreter said. “Now you have seen our show.”

I felt so numb I didn’t want to say anything.

“Why?” I said finally. “Why do they do it?”

He shrugged. “There is no severe penalty for prostitution,” he said. “They try to scare them.”

“Does it work?”

“No,” he said. “It’s the same ones all the time. They can’t afford to be anything else.”

“What’s the sense of it then?”

“Maybe some of them leave town,” he said. “Who knows?”

I went to the window and looked out at the soft, foggy winter’s night and the old sleeping city. All those people sleeping safe and sound for the time being, having dreams, rooting among the wreckage of their absurd, forlorn desires. Down the street the Beautiful Blue Danube flowing. On the other side of the bridge, the Russian zone, the lonely Rusky guard stamping his boots, blowing on his hands, thinking about the big spaces back home. And me sick. I was sick thinking about the fine avenues and boulevards of this world where you walk with your head up, strut if you want to like a god, and meanwhile all the time there’s an invisible world breeding and thriving. In back rooms, in hidden corners, behind blank smiles, all over the world people are suffering and making other people suffer. The things God has to see because He cannot shut His eyes! It’s almost too much to think about. It’s enough to turn your stomach against the whole inhuman race.