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Approx. 5,460 Words

Ernie Miles

*Devoured by a nostalgia for paradise,
without having known a single attack of
true faith. . . .*

— E. M. Cioran

Ernie sagged on the rented bed, his round shoulders drooped, his face tipped forward (dim as some forlorn Madonna's). Eyeing the flesh pinched up by the cuffs of his lemon-bright shorts, he prodded each pale thigh in turn and sighed, "*Gotta* lose some weight."

Fay's voice sang out from the bath, asking what he'd said. He thought hard, couldn't recall, and her buoyant mood made him feel too tired to invent a reply. He focused instead on the crackle of her hair as she pulled it through the bristles of her brush. *Outer space static*, he thought, but knew it was only the arid southwestern air. "Ernie?" she called again, but kept on brushing.

He rose from the bed, moved to the window. Behind the motel, a ramshackle woodpile lay like a wave-battered lifeboat, the logs crooked and leprous under a dust of unseasonable snow. An easeless breath escaped his throat. These secretive outings were always too brief to relax — or were they too long? He missed his routine, and the chance of Muriel finding him out, which used to quicken his gratification, no longer aroused him. These days, Muriel would “understand.” His faithlessness would be a reaction — “quite common,” she’d say — to her illness and treatment. *Mastectomy* . . . the word slithered in his mind . . . and he suddenly wanted to rest his brow on the chilly glass. But spider webs clouded it, filaments sprinkled with cindery bodies of flies.

“You like?” Fay had entered the room behind him; he’d seen her glide forth like a ghost in the milky pane. He turned toward where she stood, hands on hips, twisting left, twisting right. She’d knotted the tails of her shirt, baring her warm stomach, and her freckled breasts gleamed with coconut oil, and her hair — lifted, barretted — glowed like brandy. “Ernie? Are you all right?”

He could only nod as she came forward, slipped her fragrant arms around his neck. Was he hungry? Ernie swallowed his voice like a teaspoon of sand. *I should be hard*, he thought. *We should make love*. But all he could imagine were the streaks of pink her nails would etch across his paunch. By the time he’d overcome his shame, she’d reached the door.

“What?” he asked.

She turned. “I said, ‘Suit yourself.’” The door swung wide, clapped the wall. Fay melted into the morning light.

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He looked up from his breakfast plate. Fay's stare — half puzzlement, half anger — told him she'd just asked him something. The half-furled map beside her elbow was a clue. "How far?" he tried.

Fay gave him a puzzled look, then said, "The point is, we just can't make both today."

"Uh huh." He drenched his eggs in hot sauce, stirred a sugar cube into his Sanka.

"Well?"

The coffee drilled his wisdom tooth, and Ernie winced; he must have sugared the cup already. "Let's hit the farthest while the day's still cool," he guessed.

"The shrine it is."

He watched her fold the map, studied her thumbnail, watching it crease the ragged edges, thinking hard, and harder . . . till he finally remembered she meant the D. H. Lawrence shrine; but in the same thankful heartbeat, realized he hadn't the slightest notion of where they were or how they'd come to be there. Only the arrival of the bill — LA CONQUISTA printed boldly along the bottom — sent his expanding panic into remission; and still, several hollow moments boxcarred through him before the drive to town returned, gushing into his mind like water from an immaculate mountain spring. . . .

"What?" He shot a dark look at Fay.

Her eyes widened. "What — ? Nothing. Or . . ." she paused, "I think I said, 'You're not eating.'"

How could he tell her he meant *before*? They'd been passing the Taos Bookshop, and she had said . . . — but now the words were gone, though her tone of voice still pierced him like a long thin wire. . . .

“Ernie,” she said evenly, “that was five or ten minutes ago.”

He swallowed. “Sorry.”

“Why? You certainly took the hint.” She gave an encouraging smile. Ernie glanced down: his plate was empty . . . wiped clean, he remembered now, with buttered toast. He felt the weight of the flab around his waist, felt it sagging over his belt.

“I haven't been much fun,” he said.

Fay reached across and took hold of his hand. “That's not so. You've just been a little . . . distracted. Listen,” her voice became confiding, “I don't even mind that promise you broke.”

“Promise?”

“You know.” She flashed a wicked grin. “Not to come in my mouth.”

Ernie grinned back. “That's the second biggest lie, you know.”

“Oh?” she said, all innocence. “What's the first?”

“The check's in the mail.”

Fay slapped his face gently, playful . . . and they both began to laugh. Ernie, in fact, felt tears sting his eyes . . . not because of the joke (a lame and musty one, at best), but because he'd told it in his truest salesman style. It made him feel somehow thirty again — thirty years old and forty pounds lighter. He motioned for the waiter. “You want another Bloody Mary?” he asked. “You may as well. The company's buying.”

“So — you write me off?”

He stared at Fay. Her smile was firm; her voice, though, was like a doll's . . . the kind produced by pulling a ring at the back of the simulacrum's neck. Her question played across her lips again. Ernie felt a string being drawn out through a hole in the back of his skull, and his brain coiled. He'd felt the same ache the night that Muriel first forced him to view her poor scarred nakedness. "I write off all my buyers," Ernie said at last.

Fay's smile deepened sharply. "Can't they tell I don't stock their shoddy science fiction?"

"All the better," he said. "Why preach to believers? But you — a few good meals, some drinks . . . and pretty soon you've learned to love mass market paperbacks. Right?"

Her laugh was barbed, disdainful. "Right," she said.

Ernie turned his face away, looked out the window, grinning and sweating. The spreading shadows streaking the Taos square had dwindled under the up-creeping sun. Sidewalks that earlier on had seemed so perfectly empty now were crowded with tourists, their clothing colorful, unnaturally vivid. The only motionless creatures were Indians — one in particular: leaning like a wind-snapped tree-branch against a cottonwood trunk, the old man seemed to be staring at Ernie from under the brim of his crow-colored hat. It was as though a debased Cipriano had arisen from the pages of Lawrence's fever-dream book about Quetzalcoatl. The Indian's eyeholes gaped, and one of his hands lay throbbing like a struggling bird inside his half-zipped, grimy jeans. A shameful sympathy flared in Ernie's cheeks. . . .

He broke the hollow gaze, looked down beside his hand: a tray had appeared, bearing a golden slice of plastic, two mint wafers in gleaming foil, a pen, and a leaf of paper crisp and dry. He threw a furtive glance at the Indian again, but the man was gone . . . vanished like a ghost. Ernie took the pen and saw his hand float above the "x," frozen like some wild night creature

caught in a glare of headlights. At last he stole a glance at the credit card, the unfamiliar letters of the name — then copied them like answers off of tests in high school: *Ernest R. Miles*, he wrote.

*

Ernie's heart was sizzling in stomach juices. He ground his teeth, remembering how Muriel had warned him away from spicy food — but not for his health. She hated the chalky paste his antacid tablets left in the corners of his mouth.

“They make your kisses sticky,” she'd told him.

He imagined caressing her solitary breast, pressing his lips to the scar where its twin had lolled so sweetly once . . . imagined his mouth suddenly fastened there. The thought of it made his asshole clench, sent a maggoty tremor wriggling through him until his face was bathed in sweat.

Just then the Mercury swerved, shuddered onto the dirt shoulder. The wheel jerked in Ernie's hands. Had Fay cried out? He jammed the pedal flat, the engine roared as they bumped back up to the road, the tires spitting gravel. Dust fountained in the rear view mirror, swirled away behind them. Ernie wanted to say something nonchalant, like “I was observing the scenery,” but sensed that Fay was not in a scolding mood, and so kept quiet. He forced his eyes to watch the road, the fenceless miles of sage, the low hills raw with arroyos. “God?” he said, turning to Fay in surprise. “Did you say, ‘God’?”

She gave him a sidelong glare. “Yes, I said ‘God,’ Ernie. As in ‘God, how absurd.’” Her smile alarmed him.

“What the hell is *that* supposed to mean? *Absurd* — ?” The wheel was struggling in his grasp.

Fay said, “I meant that lame excuse is all. ‘Observing the scenery.’ Come on, Ernie! *You* looking at *scenery*, on the road every week of your life? Admit your mind just wandered off. It’s not as if you got us killed.”

No, he thought, *we’re still alive*.

A splash of gall flared in his throat. He swallowed hard — like choking down a jalapeño as plump as his tongue. . . .

An hour later, able at last to swallow without pain, Ernie stood sullenly pressing his forehead against the cloudy window that looked in on Lawrence’s genius. Deep inside the disheveled cottage, he could barely distinguish the rustic writing table, some roughhewn straightbacked chairs, dozens of loose-spined volumes slouching together on narrow bookshelves — all of it snowy with dust, with silence. The flagrant carelessness seemed to push him backward, the sagging porch-steps whimpering under him. Not far off he discovered a shady island of ragged mountain grasses, and bending, collapsed there, hopeful that Fay hadn’t seen him. Finally, he found her down by the lower pasture, watching a couple of horses browsing, thick-bodied, thick-necked, docile but halterless. A halfhearted breathing had started somewhere above, touching the topmost cottonwood leaves . . . and suddenly Ernie was swimming in tree-shadow, grass-tips pricking the tender skin of his ankles. He lowered his eyelids against the punishing gusts, and when he could open them safely, he saw that the horses had huddled together, and stayed there now that the wind had diminished, stayed for the pleasure of — *what?* he wondered. *Of closeness*, he heard himself thinking. He absently watched their tails as they

rhythmically flicked them, almost in unison. *Flies*. . . . At the thought, a buzzing blossomed close beside him, threaded a delicate taproot into his ear; he shuddered, then knew that he'd heard it before — the intimate, whispery rush of the dark in his veins. Overhead, a raven coasted onto a cottonwood branch and started his jittery *chak chak chak*.

“Ernie!”

He pondered the distant voice: it was Fay's. He peered at the pasture. No one. The horses chortled, and Ernie stood. Now he could hear the ponderous headlong wind souging among the twisted piñons farther up the mountain, and stared with quiet ferocity at the far-off hills for balance.

“Ernie?” Fay was right beside him. “Hey — you're *scaring* me, Ernie. I'm *telling* you now.”

He turned. Wisps of hair, undone by the breeze, curled around her face like smoke. “Y'know,” he said, “I once peddled Lawrence books. Back when all the ‘decent’ stores shelved *Lady Chatterley* out of reach, if they stocked her at all. Took a bit of courage.”

“Really,” Fay replied. “Before my time, I guess.”

Ernie smiled, at peace inside the wind. “I knew this young buyer up in Denver. Worked a store a lot like yours, but in the burbs. Her name was Carol. Quit the business sometime back. Went into ladies' wear.”

“Good move,” Fay said. “We don't need dilettantes.”

“Her office was a cubby-hole,” he went on, floating back in time, in space. “But private. Quiet. She was paging through the catalogs and stopped at *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Brought a flush of color to her cheek. ‘I've heard about this book,’ she says — like there's a butterfly in her

voice, you know? I tell her it's a classic. Carol-types," he gently laughed, "they always love a classic." Then he stepped forward to the fence and gripped the rail. "She says, 'I think it's way too racy. All that heavy breathing, all that . . . well, I just don't know.' She touched a button on her blouse and whispered, 'Maybe you can sell me.' Well, I ask if we can close the door, and then I dig it out — the *book*, I mean. A real impressive thing: fake leather binding, fake gold edging the pages. I took my time so she could get the full effect, and when I found the place, I looked her in the eyes and said, 'The lady's married. But, as fate and World War One would have it, lovelessly — her husband's dead below the waist. And so, no passion, only obligations . . . guilt and obligations. Then she falls in love, but with a man beneath her station — rough, almost a beast. And after pushing him away for half the book, she drops her guard, her clothes . . . it's magical.'" He closed his eyes. "*Oh, and far down inside her the deeps parted and rolled asunder, in long, far-travelling billows, and ever, at the quick of her, the depths parted and rolled asunder.*" His voice trailed off. "Remember, Fay?"

Her silence ached inside him, then his eyes unsealed. Nearby, a pine tree groaned, blown faintly from side to side. *Carol moved that way*, he thought. *First time I ever took a woman from behind*. Though once he'd thought his wife had offered . . . only to feel her shrink beneath him; "Christ!" she'd cried, shoving him off. "You think we're *animals*?"

"What?" Fay asked, annoyed as if she'd asked before. "I said, 'Remember *what*? The feeling or the book?"

"You *know* I mean the book," he said and sighed.

"Exactly."

Down below, the pair of horses now were drifting apart. He felt his fingers heavy on the fence, like dead meat: meat and bone. . . .

Then Fay caressed his waist. "I'm sorry. But all that sex as God-on-the-face-of-the-waters . . . Jesus, Ernie. That's just bullshit."

Ernie nodded. "Let's get going."

"Hey." She touched the hollow place between his thighs. "Sex *is* sex."

He knew she meant something, but couldn't grasp it. The wall of the Lawrence house had caught his eye. Across the rough adobe, Lawrence had drawn a bull with black horns, a primal shape like prehistoric cave paintings. Underneath: "Tnrrodarchulela." *Name of a God*, Ernie thought and smiled. Now Fay had begun to work his zipper down — but she stopped. A small blue Saab had crunched into the parking lot below.

"Damn," she frowned, then zipped him up and looked him in the eyes. "Hold that thought," she said.

He nodded. Then she took his hand and led him past the painted bull, up the weatherworn path toward the shrine. But soon the slope became too steep, and Fay let go.

Behind her Ernie puffed, his socked and sandaled feet skidding on the rock-chips scattered against erosion. "Pain is pain," he muttered, glancing upward . . . but luckily, Fay was climbing out of earshot. Minutes later his lungs began heaving in cramping spasms. An insect landed on his cheek, tickled slowly downward. Ernie felt it creeping over his lips, onto his tongue — and suddenly knew it was only a droplet of sweat. Its salty flavor reminded him of the evening he'd kissed his sobbing wife in her hospital bed. Nearly a year ago now — shortly before his body started going to hell. Another bitter droplet was worming into his gaping mouth.

God damned fucking cancer, Ernie thought, and thought of Muriel in her vigorous youth, as vivid in her movements as a dancer. Both of them were slender, then. Slender and lustful. Once, as Muriel lifted and rocked beneath him, her naked heels had almost cracked his backbone; a decade later his spine still creaked like a weakened branch in heavy weather — but truly, he knew his belly’s weight was to blame. *Fucking fat*. He blinked back tears.

“Ernie!” Fay called down, and Ernie turned his eyes toward the whitewashed structure farther up the slope where Fay stood waving.

What the hell? It’s like a glorified tool shed.

A chalk-white bird — a Phoenix, Ernie knew — clutched the crest of the roof, its wings outspread, its head cocked and glaring. “Exiled from the kingdom!” Fay cried, pointing toward the chained-off- plot of ground below the shrine. Ernie stopped, his chest aching, and squinted against the sun as Fay turned and melted into the shrine’s rectangular mouth. He cupped his hand above his brows for shade, picked out the wooden cross that marked the grave of Lawrence’s wife — “wife, shrew, and sullen Muse,” he’d read somewhere. Some wit, no doubt recalling the drollest book of poems Lawrence ever wrote, had placed a spray of pansies on the stones. The cross bore her first name only: “Frieda.”

Six little letters, Ernie thought, and trembling mopped his sweaty hair, raking the scalp with his fingertips over and over, as if that might erase the meager letters of Muriel’s name from his mind. Finally, Ernie turned, and climbed toward the shrine. Inside it the darkness was soothing. A “Guest Book” lay open on the scarred table, and on the wall above it Lawrence’s death certificate hung in a scalloped antique frame. Eyeing it, Ernie stumbled into the wooden balustrade that kept visitors back from the tomb itself. He gripped the rickety railing, feeling the

roughness of a hundred carved initials; rubbing their tangled Braille, he listened as Fay recited facts out of her guidebook.

“Well,” she said, “they ran his body through the fire and walled the ashes up. They thought he’d rise again — the women in his cult. But there he is.” She gestured toward the tomb.

Ernie frowned, gazing into the green and violet flowers painted across the silver wall. They somehow made him remember the party after the spring sales meeting, how the famous poet (they published one every year for show) had thrown his arm around him like a brother, bringing his liquored mouth up close to Ernie’s ear to breathe a few gin-soaked words . . . words he couldn’t think of now, though at the time they’d made him shiver.

“The body’s fire banked in its grate of bones.” Oh yes. *Quoting himself, no doubt.*

“Now what is *that* supposed to mean?” Fay said, her Nikon raised. “I ask you if there’s light enough to shoot, and you —”

“Ought to be more,” he said so fast that Fay seemed startled. The tape inside his chest had jumped to fast-forward. “That’s *all*, folks!” Ernie joked.

Fay shook her head, adjusted the f-stop, aimed and clicked.

Ernie closed his eyes, relieved . . . then realized his cock had stiffened blindly. Back in high school, guys had called them “boners” — a word that made him think of the horny old ghost in Taos. Acid squirted in his mouth, and his eyes welled up. He tightened his grip on the balustrade. And when his vision cleared, he discovered that Fay had vanished. Gingerly, Ernie stepped to the doorway, squinted into the blaze of noonday. He had a view of Fay, her nipples budding under her summer cotton blouse, but he felt his penis wither, seeing her crouched at Frieda’s grave, snapping pictures. Down the slope, the people from the Saab were climbing

toward him: a frizz-haired kid, his girl — both of them pallid and almost skeletal. Ernie watched with envy. The girl especially was lean: breastless, hipless. Ernie studied her movements intently, almost brutally, feeling a force pushing at his back like wind. He gripped the doorway's edge a moment. Then he let it go.

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As soon as lunch was over Ernie found he couldn't recall what he'd ordered — just that when the waitress set it down, the food seemed unfamiliar. Still, he ate. And now fell to gazing at the plate, the streaks of chili sauce and sour cream, congealed grease dotting the smears like code. *Fat*, he thought.

“I feel so guilty.” Fay was talking on and on. He dodged her gaze, groped for the feeling in her voice, though more intent on how her lips now bared her teeth, now hid them. “Where'll they come from? All the Lawrences, the Joyces. I'm not sure I'd recognize them, Ernie. Me — ‘The Snob.’ They call me that, you know. My ‘colleagues.’ Hah!” she laughed — a dry, sharp laugh.

And Ernie laughed, too . . . though his whole mind was given over to counting the beats in the artery under his jaw. Fay continued, angry and mocking by turns, as Muriel had (he remembered) those first days after the surgery. Ernie felt a bitter smile twist his mouth. How many months had gone by back then, while every thought of touching her nakedness made his stomach wince? And yet she'd taken his cowardice for a kindness: gentle concern.

“. . . pure censorship. Don't you think?”

On Fay's upper lip there was a small birthmark the color of a trapdoor spider. Why hadn't he . . . "noticed" leaped to mind, but other words were spilling from his lips, obeying their own rules: he himself couldn't seem to hear them, only felt them lift him from his seat.

He'd already passed the salad bar when Fay's querulous calling reached him. He turned and raised a loosened fist to his ear, mouthed the word "phone." She nodded, shrugged, her smile drawn thin. The pay phone hung in a tubular glass booth. The curving door didn't fold, but slid on rollers. *Star Trek*, Ernie thought, a fantasy always brought on by these and other devices — those elevators in pricey hotels, even glassed-in shower stalls. Ernie stepped inside the bright transporter, shut the door. The dream of crumbling into starry sparks slowed his response to the operator — a voice he thought he knew. "What number, sir?" she asked three times, then told him no, her name wasn't Carol. He told the number. It rang — or rather, buzzed. Buzzed in his ear like a fly. He shut his eyes to shut it out.

"Yes, of course," Muriel was saying. "I'll accept the charges. Ernie?" she asked, a faint breath of apprehension in her voice.

"I think . . . I mean . . ." he tried.

At the far, narrow end of a shrinking tunnel, Ernie saw the cashier counting change from the bill into Fay's open hand. A moment later she turned and saw him watching, then waved absently and headed toward the ladies' room. *She didn't notice*, Ernie thought, appalled. How could she fail to see he'd become a blizzard of flickering light?

"Are you all right?" a voice was asking. "You never call collect."

With a jolt, he understood that something was terribly wrong. He could feel his body's atoms mixing with atoms of granite. The beam was shooting him into a mass of solid rock!

“Talk to me, Ernie.”

There’d be nothing left, nothing but a smear of consciousness . . . a sickly, fleeting luster in flecks of quartz.

“Say something, now. For God’s sake. . . .”

He gathered his strength. “The wind was strong in the mountains.”

What gripped down firmly in his groin was not the silence that followed. The operator must have caught the error . . . the transporter beam was being reversed!

“What’s this all about?”

“The wind,” he breathed. “And the old Indian pulling his cock in the plaza.” Ernie shivered. The beam had unsheathed his body safely from the rock. He could almost picture Muriel now — could imagine her twisting the button on the front of her blouse: her nervous habit.

“What the hell do you want?”

“I’m gaining weight,” Ernie hissed. “Fat!” He thought of the last of his atoms settling into place and laughed pointedly. “Two hundred pounds in the last five seconds?”

“Oh God.”

“*Oh God,*” he sneered. “Fifty more!”

“Listen, Ernie. You come home now. Leave the car at the airport. God — I don’t even know where you are!”

“I’m here. Three hundred pounds! Disgusting. Like sex from behind. Like words. *Static,* Muriel.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “Cold sperm in your mouth.”

Across the lobby Fay was browsing racks of tourist booklets. Ernie's gaze began to pour like sun-warmed honey over her arms, her ungathered breasts. Delicious, the heaviness her body made in his heart! Muriel was saying "God" over and over.

"Shut up!" Ernie barked. "God is God, and this isn't fucking Dial-A-Prayer." The line went dead.

He ground his teeth, clutched the droning receiver. Then, before he replaced it, Ernie pressed the plastic mouthpiece, scarred with black holes, hard against his lips. His body tingled. He knew there were atoms out of place — maybe millions utterly lost in transmission. He stepped out of the phone booth, caught Fay's curious look and grimaced, pointing a finger at his temple and making a circular motion — the motion he frequently used to refer to his boss. Fay gave him a halfhearted grin. Her eyes were green and shining like rain-wet poplar leaves. They were wide open and terribly clear.

*

"Listen. 'Hernando de Alvarado discovered Taos Pueblo in 1540.'" Fay waved the guidebook like a broken fan. "Can you believe they say 'discovered'? As if the Indians count for nothing."

Ernie shook his head, but kept his counsel, letting Fay read on. He tried wiping everything out but the sound of her voice. After a while he felt his body expanding, assuming the car-shape molded for him by years on the road. He felt the throbbing of the engine in his chest, the simian cries of tires climbing his spine, his face becoming smooth, hard and glassy, all the

insects flaring like words he'd passed over for so many years and not understood. Without a word from Fay, he steered onto the rough gravel road to Taos Pueblo, eased the car to a stop beside a reddish brown pockmarked face. The gate-keeper cranked his thumb toward a sign, held out his hand. With ceremonial slowness Ernie placed a five dollar bill on the creased brown palm, then eased forward through the wooden gate.

“We drove through the gate,” Ernie murmured as he parked the car, and saw Fay eyeing him in a sidelong way that made him feel famished — but he said nothing. (In later years, when he would recount the incident, taking care to claim he'd been alone—an omission meant to spare Muriel's feelings—and to end with the blue door's slam, he would always begin, “I swear this happened, but sometimes it seems like a dream.”) The two climbed out of the car and made their way into the pueblo.

Brownish-yellow walls were stacked against the sky's hard blue, riddled by tiny windows. Men in hats pulled so low the brims concealed their eyes bent and straightened as they made their ways higher up, heaving shovel-loads of mushy late-spring snow off the roofs. A dog trotted past, a loosely packed sack of quarreling bones that nearly made Ernie laugh out loud. Instead, he threw back his head and watched the bulky clouds scudding. *Wind's up there*, he thought. *Down here . . . nothing*. He studied how the sunlight poured in smooth sheets down the adobe walls, interrupted only by the click of Fay's Nikon; each shutter-snap stopped the world. And here was a young girl, wrapped in tawny wool with a scarlet splash of scarf, hauling a bucket of water up the ancient, rocky slope from a swollen creek — utterly unaware of how the world was being killed and born again with each fresh photo. Ernie closed his eyes to focus on the Nikon's irregular ticking, and realized it sounds the way a clock must sound to God: a gross

scarification of seamless time. Then Fay touched his arm, and silently they started toward the walls.

Up close, the pueblo had an eerie feel, not picturesque at all: a labyrinth of looming surfaces and stony paths. Fay went right, Ernie left. He turned a corner, another, another — each one spilling emptiness into the next. He stopped, standing still to listen: wind was washing over him like a rush of grieving voices.

Farther on, he found a freshly painted door; it seemed the broken slats were held together by the dusky blue color itself. It stood half-open. Creeping close, he peered inside. Beneath a table, a ragged mongrel gave up licking himself, studied Ernie intently, but did not move. A woman, turned away, was stirring a steaming iron kettle. The *tock tock* of her wooden spoon struck like a muffled bell in Ernie's chest. And when she turned, reaching for something on the roughhewn table, he saw the infant's nut-brown head at her breast, and the breast itself: cinnamon dark, and firm, and nothing to do with death.

Then something whizzed past his head, thumping the wall behind him. He wrenched his head around. The remnants of a snowball clung to the rugged adobe. Ernie turned again, glancing upward — no one — then downward: the blue door had just clapped shut. Suddenly, blood was flaring in his cheeks.

“A what?” Fay had just appeared around a bend in the ancient street. She touched his arm lightly, said the words again . . . and then stepped back. “It's getting late,” she said, and after a moment touched his cheek.

Ernie whispered, “*Sex with the dead*,” staring into her sea-green eyes. “Now I remember. What the hell was that?”

Her eyebrows pursed, she seemed to struggle with the words, and then she nodded slowly. “Driving into town this morning. Yes. I simply meant,” she said, “the Taos Bookshop gang. The way they live off Lawrence, peddling signed editions. Shit! They *hate* him, really. What he stood for. God as sex is what they sell . . . and that is such a damned disservice to his work.”

Ernie glanced at the blue door, then — *saw* it, as if he’d never seen a door before. It was a bruise . . . an eternal bruise! The way the pansies laid on Frieda’s shabby grave had made a garland of bruises. He understood. All the worlds — all the stars and planets — nothing but traces of bitter blows suffered in secret. Nausea’s glacial water gushed in his stomach . . . then he started, feeling Fay’s shaking hands cupping his face, his time-stricken face, and let them twist it gently toward her own. Her eyes were bright with fear, or sudden insight . . . who could say? Not Ernie Miles, spiraling downward into the fires of universal cancer, feeling it even in the cradling hands that wanted only to comfort him. He looked at Fay, saw her clearly: glistening eyes; trembling lips; the bottomless hunger shining out from the bones of her upturned face.

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Outside Taos, cradled in sage and cactus, a car crouched on the sandy shoulder of a nameless, numberless road. Twilight deepened around it. Behind the steering wheel sagged a portly man, flabby arms stretched along the seat-back. Face down in his lap, the head of a young woman bobbed with a kind of sleepy vigor . . . like a suckling infant’s. The sun was bleeding away beyond the distant mountains, and in the failing light the man’s eyes gleamed for an instant

— then closed completely. Moments later a dry wind rose and mingled with the woman's fitful breathing. As for the man, his face relaxed in the swelling dusk like a loosened fist, or the face of a painted saint . . . growing more and more vacant as the mouth fell open. . . .