A hundred times, Harper had said to himself: I am in Paris. At first he had whispered it with excitement, but as the days passed he began mouthing it in a discouraged way, almost in disbelief, in the humiliated tones of a woman who realizes that her lover is not ever going to turn up. His doubt of the city made him doubt himself.

He was in Paris waiting for a sum of money in cash to be handed to him. He was expected to carry this bundle back to the States. That was the whole of his job: he was a courier. The age of technology demanded this simple human service, a return to romance: he tucked his business under his arm – the money, the message – as men had a century ago. It was a delicate matter; also, it was illegal.

Harper had been hired for his loyalty and resourcefulness. His employer demanded honesty, but implied that cunning would be required of him. He had impressed his employer because he wasn't hungry and wasn't looking for work. And, a recent graduate of Harvard Business School, Harper was passionate about real estate investment. Afterward he discovered that real estate investment was carrying a flat briefcase with eighty-five thousand dollars in used hundreds from an Iranian in Paris to an office in Boston, to invest in an Arizona supermarket or a chain of hamburger joints. They probably didn't even eat hamburgers, the Iranians – probably against their religion; so much was. Money (he, from Harvard Business School, had to be told this) shows up in a luggage x-ray at an airport security check as innocently as laundry, like so many folded hankies.

I am in Paris. But his first sight of the place gave him the only impression that stayed with him: there were parts of Paris that resembled Harvard Square.

He had told his wife that he would be back by the following weekend, and had flown to Paris on Sunday believing that he could pick up the cash on Monday. A day to loaf, then home on Wednesday, and his surprised wife seeing him grinning in the doorway would say, 'So soon?'

He had not known that Monday was a holiday; this he spent furiously walking, wishing the day away. On Tuesday, he found Undershaw's office closed – Undershaw was the Iranian's agent, British: everyone got a slice. Harper's briefcase felt ridiculously light. That afternoon he tried the telephone. The line was busy; that made him hopeful. He took a taxi to the office but found it as he had that morning, locked, with no message on the dusty glass. On Wednesday he canceled his flight and tried again. This time there was a secretary in the outer office. She did not know Undershaw's name; she

was temporary, she explained. Harper left a message, marked it Urgent and returned to his hotel near Les Invalides and waited for the phone to ring. Then he regretted that he had left his number, because it obliged him to stay in his room for the call. There was no call. He tried to ring his wife, but failed; he wondered if the phone was broken. Thursday he wasted on three trips to the office. Each time, the secretary smiled at him and he thought he saw pity in her eyes. He became awkward under her gaze, aware that a certain frenzy showed in his rumpled clothes.

'I will take your briefcase,' she said. She was French, a bit buck-toothed and angular, not what he had expected.

Harper handed it over. Not realizing its lightness until it was too late, she juggled it and almost dropped it. Harper wondered whether he had betrayed his errand by disclosing the secret of its emptiness. A man with an empty briefcase must have a shady scheme.

The street door opened and a man entered. Harper guessed this might be Undershaw; but no, the fellow was young and a moment later Harper knew he was American – something about the tortoise-shell frames, the new raincoat, the wide-open face, the way he sat with his feet apart, his shoes and the way he tapped them. Brisk apology and innocent arrogance inhabited the same body. Still sitting, he spoke to the secretary in French. She replied in English. He gave her his name – it sounded to Harper like 'Bumgarner.' He turned to Harper and said, 'Great city.'

Harper guessed that he himself had been appraised. He said, 'Very nice.'

Bumgarner looked at his watch, did a calculation on his fingers, and said, 'I was hoping to get to the Louvre this afternoon.'

He is going to say, You can spend a week there and still not see everything.

But Bumgarner said, 'What part of the States are you from?'

Harper told him: Boston. It required less explanation than Melrose.

'I'm from Denver,' Bumgarner said, and before Harper could praise it, Bumgarner went on, 'I'm over here on a poetry grant. National Endowment for the Arts.'

'You write poems?' But Harper thought of his taxes, paying for this boy's poems, the glasses, the new raincoat.

Bumgarner smiled. 'I've published quite a number. I'll have enough for a collection soon.'

The secretary stared at them, seeing them rattling away in their own language. Bumgarner seemed to be addressing her as well as Harper.

‘I’ve been working on a long poem ever since I got here. It was going to be simple, but it’s become the history of Europe, and in a way kind of autobiographical.’

‘How long have you been in Paris?’

‘Two semesters.’

Harper thought: Doesn’t that just sum it up.

‘Are you interested in poetry?’ Bumgarner asked.

‘I read the usual things at college. Yeats, Pound, Eliot. “April is the cruellest month.”’ Bumgarner appeared to be waiting for him to say something more. Harper said, ‘There’s a lot of naive economic theory in Pound.’

‘I mean modern poetry.’

‘Isn’t that modern? Pound? Eliot?’

Bumgarner said, ‘Eliot’s kind of a back number.’

And Harper was offended. He had liked Eliot and found it a relief from marketing and accountancy courses; even a solace.

‘What do you think of Europe?’ Bumgarner asked.

‘That’s a tough one, like, “Is science good?”’ But seeing that Bumgarner looked mocked and wary, Harper added, ‘I haven’t seen much more than my hotel and this office. I can’t say.’

‘Old Europe,’ said Bumgarner. ‘James thought it corrupted you – Daisy Miller, Lambert Strether. I’ve been trying to figure it out. But it does do something to you. The freedom. All the history. The outlook.’

Harper said, ‘I can’t imagine any place that has more freedom than the States.’

‘Ever been to Colorado?’

‘No,’ said Harper. ‘But I’ll bet Europeans go. And for the same reason that characters in Henry James used to come here. To escape, find freedom, live a different life. Listen, this is a pretty stuffy place.’

‘Depends,’ Bumgarner said. ‘I met a French girl. We’re living together. That’s why I’m here. I mean, I have to see this lawyer. My wife and I have decided to go our separate ways.’

‘Sorry to hear it.’ He will go home, thought Harper, and he will regret his folly here.

‘It’s not like that. We’re going to make a clean break. We’ll still be friends. We’ll sell the house in Boulder. We don’t have any kids.’

Harper said, ‘Is this a lawyer’s office?’

‘Sure. Are you in the wrong place?’

‘Anywhere away from home is the wrong place,’ said Harper. ‘I’m in brokerage. I haven’t fallen in love yet. As a matter of fact, I’m dying to leave. Is Undershaw your lawyer?’

‘I don’t know Undershaw. Mine’s Haebler – Swiss. Friend of a friend.’ Then Bumgarner said, ‘Give Paris a chance.’

‘Paris is an idea, but not a new one,’ said Harper. ‘I tried to call my wife. The phones don’t work. Where do these people park? The restaurants cost an arm and a leg. Call this a city?’

Bumgarner laughed in a patronizing way; he didn’t argue. It interested Harper to discover that there were still Americans – poets – finding Paris magical. But this poet was getting a free ride: who was paying? Only businessmen and subsidized students could afford the place. Harper had had a meal at a small restaurant the previous day. The portions were tiny, the waiter was rude, the tables were jammed together, his knees ached from the forced confinement. The meal had cost him forty-seven dollars, with wine. No wonder poets had credit cards. It was a world he understood, but not one that he had expected.

Soon after, a tall man entered: Bumgarner’s lawyer. Recognizing him, Bumgarner galloped after him. Harper was annoyed that the poet had shown so little interest in him, and Eliot’s kind of a back number had stung him. The divorce: he would make it into a poem, deal with it like a specimen in a box and ask to be excused. But the other things – the dead phones, the restaurants, the bathtubs that couldn’t take your big end, the pillow bolster that was hard as a log, the expense account, the credit card – they couldn’t be poems. Too messy; they didn’t rhyme. Go home! Harper wanted to scream at Bumgarner. Europe’s more boring than Canada!

The secretary made a sorrowful click of her tongue when Harper rose to go. She had

to remind him that he had left his briefcase; empty, it hardly seemed to matter. He was thinking about his wife.

On Friday, Undershaw rang him at ten-thirty, moments before Harper, who had started sleeping late – it was boredom – was preparing to leave his hotel room. Undershaw said he had been out of town, but this was not an apology.

'I've come for the merchandise,' said Harper. He wanted to say, I've wasted a week hanging around for you to appear. He said, 'I'd like to pick up the bundle today.'

'Out of the question.'

Harper tried to press him, but gently: the matter was illegal.

Undershaw said, 'These things take time. I won't be able to do much before next week.'

'Monday?'

'I can't be that definite,' said Undershaw. 'I'll leave a message at your hotel.'

No, thought Harper. But he could not protest. He was a courier, no more than that. Undershaw did not owe him any explanation.

Harper had come to the city with one task to perform, and as he had yet to perform it his imagination wouldn't work. He had concentrated his mind on this one thing; thwarted, he could think of nothing else. He was on the hook. His boss had sent him here to hang. Paris seemed very small.

Waiting in Paris reminded Harper of his childhood, which was a jumpy feeling of interminable helplessness. And childhood was another country, too, one governed like this by secretive people who would not explain their schemes to him. He had suspected as a child that there were rules he did not know. In adulthood he learned that there were no particular rules, only arbitrary courtesies. Children were not important, because they had no power and no menace: it took a man twenty-eight years to realize that. You wait; but perhaps it is better, less humiliating, if people don't know you're waiting. Children were ignorant. The strength of adulthood lay in being dignified enough not to expose this impatience. It was worse for women. Now Harper could say to his wife: I know how you feel.

The weekend was dreary. Sunday in a Catholic country punished atheists by pushing them into the empty streets. Harper felt unwelcome. He did not know a soul except Bumgarner, who was smug and lucky and probably in bed with his 'mistress' – the poet from Colorado would have used that silly word. Harper lay on his bed alone,

studying the repetitions in the patterned wallpaper, and it struck him that it is the loneliest traveler who remembers his hotel wallpaper. He was exhausted by inaction; he wanted to go home.

He had been willing to offer the city everything. There were no takers. He thought: All travelers are like aging women, now homely beauties; the strange land flirts, then jilts and makes a fool of the stranger. There is less risk, at home, in making a jackass of yourself: you know the rules there. The answer is to be ladylike about it and maintain your dignity. But he knew as he thought this that he was denying himself the calculated risks that might bring him romance and a memory to carry away. There was no hell like a stranger's Sunday.

I'll leave a message at your hotel, Undershaw had said. That was a command. So Harper loitered in the hotel on Monday, and when he was assailed by the sense that he was lurking he went out and bought a Herald-Tribune; then he felt truant. At five there was no message. He decided to go for a walk, and soon he discovered himself to be walking fast toward Undershaw's office.

'He is not here,' the secretary said. She knew before he opened his mouth what Harper wanted.

To cover his embarrassment, Harper said, 'I knew he wasn't here. I just came to say hello.'

The girl smiled. She began to cram papers and envelopes and keys into her handbag.

'I thought you might want a drink,' said Harper, surprising himself at his invention.

The girl tilted her head and shrugged: it was neither yes nor no. She picked up her coat and switched off the lights as she walked to the door. Still, Harper was not sure what all this meant, until with resignation she said, 'We go.'

At the bar – she chose it; he would never have found it in that alley – she told him her name was Claire.

Harper began describing the emptiness he had felt on Sunday, how the only thing it was possible to do was go to church.

Claire said, 'I do not go to church.'

'At least we've got that in common.'

A man in the bar was reading a newspaper; the headline spoke of an election. Harper mentioned this.

Claire thrust forward her lower lip and said, ‘I am an anarchist.’ She pronounced the word anarsheest.

‘Does that mean you don’t take sugar?’ Harper playfully moved the sugar bowl to one side as she stirred her coffee.

She said, ‘You have a ring.’ She tapped it with a pretty finger. ‘Are you married?’

Harper nodded and made a private vow that he would not deceive his wife.

She said, ‘How is it possible to be married?’

‘I know,’ Harper said. ‘You don’t know anyone who’s happily married. Right? But how many single people are happy?’

‘Americans think happiness is so important.’

‘What do the French think is important?’

‘Money. Clothes. Sex. That is why we are always so sad.’

‘Always?’

‘We have no humor,’ she said, proving it in her solemn tone of voice. ‘We are – how do you say – melancholique?’

And Harper, who knew almost no French, translated the word. Then he complimented her on her English. Claire said that she had lived for two years in London, with an English family.

He wanted her to drink. She said she only drank wine, and that with meals. He took her to a restaurant – again she chose: a narrow noisy room. Why did they all look like ticket offices? Harper stared at the young men and women in the restaurant. The men had close-cropped hair and earrings, the women were white-faced and smoked cigarettes over their food. Harper said, ‘There’s something about this place.’

Claire smiled briefly.

‘That guy in the corner,’ Harper said. ‘He’s gay.’ Claire squinted at Harper. ‘A pederast.’

Claire glanced at the man and made a noise of agreement.

Harper smiled. ‘A sodomite.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I am a sodomite. But he is a pederast. Un pédé.’

‘I knew there was something about this place.’ Harper’s scalp prickled.

‘You seem a bit shocked.’

‘Me?’ Harper tried to laugh.

‘Didn’t you do it at school? Playing with the other boys?’

‘They would have killed me. I mean, the teachers. Anyway, I didn’t want to. What about you?’

She thrust out her lower lip and said, ‘Of course.’

‘And now?’

‘Of course.’

The food came. They ate in silence. Harper could think of nothing to say. She was an anarchist who had just disclosed that she was also a lesbian. And he? A courier with an empty briefcase, killing time. He thought of the poet Bumgarner: Paris belonged to him. Harper could not imagine the feeling, but Bumgarner would know what to say now.

‘It is easier for a woman,’ said Claire. He guessed that she had perceived his confusion. ‘I don’t care whether I make love to a man or a woman. Though I have a fiancé – he is a nice boy.

It is the personality that matters. I like clever men and stupid women.’

‘That guy who was in the office the other day,’ Harper said. ‘He’s a poet. He writes poems.’

Claire said, ‘I hate poems.’

It was the most passionate thing she had said so far, but it killed his ardor.

In the twilight, under a pale watery-blue sky, they walked past biscuity buildings to the river. Although this was his eighth day in Paris, Harper’s yearning for home had deserted him, and he could ignore his errand, which seemed trivial to him now. He no longer felt humiliated by suspense; and another thing released him: the girl Claire,

who was neither pretty nor ugly, seemed indifferent to him. It did not matter whether he slept with her or not – he felt no desire, so there could be no such thing as failure. He enjoyed this perverse freedom, walking along the left bank of the Seine, on a mild spring evening, feeling no thrill, only a complacent lack of urgency. But that was how it was, in spite of Paris; and urgency had been no help the previous week. He did not speak French. The churches and stonecrusts were familiar; he recognized them from free calendars and jigsaw puzzles and the lids of fancy cookie tins. He had never been overseas before. It was the stage set he had imagined, but he felt unrehearsed.

'I'm tired,' he said, to give Claire an excuse to go home.

She shrugged as she had before, but now the gesture irritated him because she did it so well, using her shoulders and hands and sticking out her lower lip.

'I'm staying at a hotel near Les Invalides,' he said. 'Would you like a drink there?'

She shrugged again. This one meant yes – it was pliable and positive.

By the time they found a taxi rank it was ten-thirty. There was traffic – worse than Boston – and they did not arrive at the hotel until after eleven. The concierge stepped from behind a palm to tell Claire the bar was closed.

Harper said, 'We can drink in my room,' although he had nothing there to drink.

In the room, Harper filled a tumbler with water from the sink. This he brought to Claire and presented it with a waiter's flourish. She drank it without a word.

He said, 'Do you like it?'

'Yes. Very much. It is a pleasant drink.'

'Would you like some more?'

'Not now,' she said.

He sat beside her on the bed, and kissed her with a clownish sweetness, holding her elbows, and she responded innocently, putting her cool nose against his neck. Then she said, 'Wait.'

She untied the drawstring at her waist and shook herself out of her dress. She did this quickly, like someone impatient to swim. When she was naked they kissed again, and he was almost alarmed by the way her tongue insisted in his mouth and her foraging hands pulled clumsily at his clothes. Soon after, they made love, and in the darkness, when it had ended, Harper thought he heard her whimper with dissatisfaction.

He woke. She was across the room, speaking French.

‘What is it?’

‘I am calling a taxi, to go home.’

‘Don’t go,’ he said. ‘Besides, I don’t think the phone works.’

‘I have to take my pill.’

The phone worked. I am in Paris: he said it in a groggy foolish voice.

Claire, who was dressing, said, ‘Pardon?’

The next day was a repetition of the previous day. He waited at the hotel for Undershaw to ring. At four, he went to the office. This time there were no preliminaries; only romance required them, and this was no romance. Harper was glad of that, and glad too that he was not particularly attracted to Claire. Since his marriage – and he was happy with his wife – he had not been attracted to any other woman. It did not make him calm; indeed, it worried him, because he knew that if he did fall for another woman it would matter and he would have to leave home. They skipped the bar, ate quickly, then hurried to the hotel and went to bed, hardly speaking.

In the pitch dark of early morning, he waited for her to make her telephone call. But she was asleep. He woke her. She was startled, then seemed to remember where she was. He said, ‘Don’t you have to go?’

She muttered rapidly in French, then came fully awake and said, ‘I brought my pill.’

Harper slept badly; Claire emitted gentle satisfied snores. In the morning she opened her eyes wide and said, ‘I had a cauchemar.’

‘Really?’ The word, which he knew, bewitched him.

She said, ‘You have a beautiful word in English for cauchemar.’

‘Cauchemar is a beautiful word,’ he said, and quoted,

How much it means that I say this to you –

Without these friendships – life, what cauchemar!

‘I don’t understand,’ she said.

‘A poem,’ said Harper.

She pretended to shudder. She said, ‘What is cauchemar in English?’

‘Nightmare.’

‘So beautiful,’ she said.

‘What was your cauchemar about?’

‘My – nightmare’ – she smiled, savoring the word – ‘it was about us. You and me. We were in a house together, with a cat. It was quite an ordinary cat, but it was very hungry. I wanted to make love with you. That is my trouble, you see. I am too direct. The cat was in our bedroom.’

‘Where was this bedroom – Europe?’

‘Paris,’ she said. ‘The cat was so hungry it was sitting on the floor and crying. We couldn’t make love until we had fed it. We gave it some food. But when the cat ate the food it caught fire and burned – oh, it was horrible! Each time it swallowed it burned some more. It did not burn like a cat, but like a human, like Jan Palach. You know Jan Palach?’

Harper did not know the name. He said, ‘A saint?’ – because her tone seemed to describe a martyr.

‘No, no, no,’ said Claire. She was troubled.

Harper said, ‘It’s about being a lesbian – your dream. Killing the cat, us making love.’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘I have thought of that.’

Her troubled look had left her; now she was abstracted, her features stilled by thought.

A fear rose in Harper that he was not in Europe at all, but trapped in a strange place with a sad crazy woman. He had made a great mistake in becoming involved with her. It was worse when they were dressing, for the telephone rang and Harper panicked and screamed, ‘Don’t touch it!’ He imagined that it was his wife, and he felt guilty and ashamed to be in this room with this incomprehensible woman. He had never loved his wife more. He seized the phone: Undershaw.

‘It’s ready. You can come over.’

‘Thank you,’ said Harper, tongue-tied with gratitude. He turned to Claire. ‘I’ve got to go to the office.’

But she was buckling her small watch to her wrist. ‘Look at the time,’ she cried. ‘I’m late!’

They arrived separately – it was his idea – so that no one would suspect what they had done. Harper, who had spent days wishing to punch Undershaw in the face, introduced himself to the gray, rather tall Englishman feeling no malice at all. He took the parcel of money and locked himself in a small room to count it. He repeated the procedure, and when he was satisfied the amount was correct he packed the money in neat bundles in the briefcase. And, as if he knew how long it took to count eighty-five thousand dollars, Undershaw knocked at the door just as Harper finished.

‘If everything’s in order I’ll be off then,’ said Undershaw.

‘Take care,’ said Harper, and watched him go.

In the outer office, Claire was filling her handbag. Harper paused, because he believed it was expected of him to ask her out to dinner – he would not be able to leave until the next day.

Claire said, ‘I can’t see you tonight. I am meeting a woman. I may have an adventure. You can stay – shut the door and it will lock.’

‘I hope she’s nice,’ said Harper. ‘Your woman.’

‘Yes,’ said Claire, ladylike in concentration. She went to the door and stuck out her lower lip. ‘She is my fiancé’s girl friend.’

When she had left, Harper wanted to sit down. But the chairs disgusted him. There were four of them in this dreadful yellow room, this rallying place for the crooked – they were not evil, but idle. The room had held Bumgarner, and Claire, and Undershaw; and now they had gone on their tired errands. But their snailtracks were still here. There are rooms – his hotel room was one – in which the weak leave their sour hope behind; from which they set out to succeed at small deceptions and fail in the hugest way. Harper wanted to be home. He felt insulted and had never hated himself more. The briefcase, weighted with money, reminded him that he was still in Paris, and that he would have to complete his own shameful errand before he could look for a new job in the United States of America.