

A Short Story by Dennis Gilbert

# Proverbs, Proverbs,

For weeks Mr. Fisher searched for just the right words, for that sharp, summary, musical line that would throw everything into perspective. His speech, naturally, had been written far in advance; the text memorized; delivery set. But somehow the thing seemed to end on a flat, anti-climactic note, to fall off, to peter out, and the absence of that gelling, jarring, provocative line hung over him, disturbing as his mayonnaise special that poisoned half the town.

Leo Fisher was maker of proverbs, a collector of miniatures in wisdom, compassion, and plain good sense. Daily, as he swept the oiled-floored aisles of his store, as he stocked shelves and lettered signs advertizing bargains of the week, his imagination was busy making observations, extracting bits of philosophy, and translating them into words. In the evenings he retreated to his study; he donned an old tweed jacket and sometimes smoked a cigar. He read for inspiration. He thought. He pondered. And he wrote. Leo had married, raised two sons, paid off his house and his store, and sauntered thoughtfully and quietly into middle-age, observing, meditating, and writing about life.

He was not famous, even locally, for his sayings, though he had invented a great many. Nor had he published a

volume of his work; he expected to, someday. On the other hand, recognition wasn't prerequisite to a distinguished career. After all, he reasoned, the satisfaction came more from the work itself than from being asked to autograph books, from being kept up all night by eager students, from being pointed at on the street, hearing whispers: "That's Leo Fisher. Makes proverbs. A regular Confucius!"

Leo was a man of modest income. His wife suggested that his mind was not on his work. She reminded him that other storekeepers, in towns just as small and just as poor, made fortunes. They drove Cadillacs. They drank Canadian Club. But Leo's profits were not low because he was distracted, impractical, or even unambitious. Rather, he was a man with a sense of community; a sensitivity to the circumstances of his fellow citizens; a profound sympathy for the poor; and a belief that it was the right of every human being to have food to eat. It was in this frame of mind that he extended credit beyond reason, bought goods in great quantities in order to pass the savings on to his customers, hounded his distributors for more specials, and shaved his profits thinner and thinner until his son Bummy, manager of the produce department,

took home more money than he did himself. He and Rodney, the stockboy, and Mrs. Anderson, the cashier, worked very hard to perform a service that was rewarding in ways he thought far better than making money.

Naturally Sangerville's 150th birthday meant a great deal to him. He had not witnessed the centennial, and he would almost certainly miss the bicentennial. As a selectman and chairman of the planning committee, and as an ordinary citizen of the town, he wished from the bottom of his heart to present Sangerville and its people with a gift of real significance. He hadn't any money to establish a scholarship fund, nor a piece of land that could be made into a park or recreation facility. But he did have his talent, his words, and he could think of no gift more wonderful than a thought to live by, a saying that would teach compassion and give courage to the poor and make all men feel the wonder and beauty and joy of life. How he daydreamed about it! He saw it in elegant calligraphy, simply framed and hung in the little library in the town hall, like a diploma on the wall of a doctor's office; at the bottom, in fine, clear print the words, "Composed by Leo Fisher on the Occasion of the Sangerville Sesquicentennial". He saw it

too on samplers and on shellacked slices of pine and cedar. He heard it in the speech of the townspeople, and he suspected that it would somehow find its way onto his gravestone: "Here lies Leo Fisher, the man who said . . ." But what was it? His mind was as blank as a sheet of paper.

As the days passed and the celebration neared and the search for his rousing finale grew more and more hopeless, Leo became unsure of himself. Were his creative powers at an ebb? Had he peaked this early in life? On the day before the celebration he went home for lunch. He opened a book he hadn't read in years, *A Dictionary of Proverbs and Quotations*, an old gilt-edged volume with pages as stiff as cardboard. Inside was a cash register receipt dated May 15, 1939, a time when Patterson owned the store and Leo worked after school as a stockboy. On the reverse side of the receipt was a poem entitled "Ode to Purgatory", conceived, he imagined, during some tedious church service. He shuddered as he read it through, reflecting on the intensity of that secret embarrassment a man feels over the clumsy sentimentality of his early works. But in the final couplet he found his line:

"Though the road be long to that heav'nly clime,

We musn't forget such things take time.

"Things take time," he read. "Patience," he said aloud, reading it again. He read it again and again. Years in the field had taught him that one couldn't hope to grasp all that a proverb or a poem or even a story had to offer in only a few readings. For example, reading it another way, varying 'take', that is, 'take away' rather than 'require', it said that everything a man did used up some of his time. That made sense. A man had a specific allotment of time. No one knew how much he had, of course, but it was like a pocket full of money. Suppose you had a sum of money. You didn't know the amount, but until it ran out you were free to spend it wherever and however you pleased. Realizing that it would be gone someday, wasn't a man more likely to spend it wisely? To devote it to those things that made for a more rewarding life, and therefore a better world? Of course he was. Leo liked that. After all, it was the pattern by which he lived his own life.

Leo was getting excited about this. "Taking it a step further," he thought, "one finds the implication that life is short; fleeting; brief." The strand was thin and difficult to follow. "Let's see. Compared to eternity . . . The necessities, work, sleep, mowing the lawn and painting the house. They take up so much of a man's time that, by comparison, there is little left for the important undertakings." Leo wondered how

much of his own lifetime had gone into the pursuit of his art. He tried to estimate the fraction: one twentieth? one thirty-fifth? one fiftieth, perhaps. What if God said, "All right, Leo. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you two years, night and day, 'round the clock, to write your proverbs. That's it. If you spread it out over the course of your life, that's all you'd end up with anyway." Two years! That was nothing! What could a man hope to accomplish in two years?

Leo sensed a paradox. He was confused, and he had to begin again. Things take time: take your time, don't rush things, don't be afraid to wait. But there was so little free time! Leo remembered the intensity of activity that had characterized his earlier life, times when he had worked all day at the store, come home to work on his proverbs late into the night, and lain awake for the short time he had allowed for sleep, knowing that he would never accomplish half the work he had in mind. So how could a man be patient when he had so little time to devote to his life's work? "It doesn't make sense," he thought. "But it is probably sound advice." Leo had a great respect for paradoxes.

Later Leo remembered that the necessity of thinking this thing through had dissolved into a feeling, a wonderfully pleasant sensation that he had discovered an arrangement of words that reached into every corner of human experience, that touched everything a man did, from the cradle to the grave. Why, you could spend a lifetime explicating it, could fill volumes with its philosophies. [Perhaps some fellow would do that, after Leo's death.] The exhilaration of this great discovery raced through Leo's body. That was it. Of course! Things *did* take time! Wave after wave of the line's revelations broke over Leo as he made the ascent, driving all conscious thought, all definition from his mind, and suddenly it seemed that the relation of all things was clear to him. Reeling, overwhelmed, he collapsed into a chair, and the book of quotations fell soundlessly to the floor. Time passed [how much?], and the vision receded, leaving Leo, spent, triumphant, in the perfect contentment of its afterglow.

By the end of his lunch hour Leo had written a conclusion to his speech that opened broadly, narrowed quickly, pointed in one direction, and ended, like the twelve-gun salute over the graves of veterans on Memorial Day, with the breath-taking power of his newest and best proverb.

Sangerville is one of those northern New England textile boom towns that flourished on cheap labor at the turn of the century, then suddenly dried up with the collapse of the wool market, leaving the great mills along the river empty shells of sooty brick and broken windows, marooning the farmers who

had been lured off their stony land with the promise of cash money, leaving them pensionless and confused. It's ordinary enough: another little town that grew outward from a crossroads. But to Leo, a man inspired by the knowledge that he had created something of great beauty, it was as much a gem in the green ocean of northern woods as John of Gaunt's precious stone set in the silver sea. What industry, what cooperation the townspeople showed! The firemen were hard at work: one man, high on the hydraulic ladder, was decorating the town hall with bunting; others stacked cinder blocks for the barbecue pit; still others hammered at the speakers platform where soon Leo would make his donation to public domain. Spike Johnson, the lone member of the town crew, was mowing the lawn of the war memorial. It had been a good spring. The grass was thick and green and the mowing was slow, a step by step advance of pushing and pulling. In kitchens everywhere women were baking beans and pies and cookies, tasting their preserves, singing to themselves as they ironed their best summer dresses. In bedrooms, paunchy veterans tested the buttons of their uniforms and smiled sadly at the memories raised by the cocked hat and the jaunty figure in the mirror. Leo heard music in all this, a symphony of work and celebration: the percussive echoes of hammers, the staggered rhythm of hand saws, the crescendo and diminuendo of passing traffic against the basso continuo of Spike's lawnmower. Out of the distance came the melody. The high school band was practicing on the playground of the elementary school. And in that march that sounded like the tuning of instruments, that flat, discordant version of "Warming Up", he heard Leo Fisher the boy, playing a tarnished cornet that was now and forever snug in its pile-lined case, God only knew where, the loudest member of the band, the inspired first trumpeter who had blown so hard one Fourth of July he fainted and collapsed in the street, tripping the trombone player behind him and throwing the drum section into confusion. Leo reflected that life was full of such moments, little embarrassing incidents that one could only laugh at over the distance, as though they were the blunders of some young fellow no more related to one than the man in the moon. "Such things are a wonderful measure of time," he thought, and the memories of his youth, and the promise of the years to come inspired in his heart a love for the folks of his town that reached forward and backward through generations.

"The world is yet unsettled!" cried Leo, his voice booming over the loud-speaker, echoing off buildings, careering down streets, invading people's houses, imposing as the voice in the burning

bush. By now he was used to the split-second delay between speaking and hearing, and he was picking up momentum. It was easier than he had thought, and it was much more fun. It was almost a struggle to keep his face from bursting into a grin of self-satisfaction. He'd picked up a few gestures, too: a decisive point of his index finger; an almost frightening hammering of his fist; a very significant downward cast of his eyes. His delivery was little short of superb. "Jesus!" he thought. "I should have been a politician."

He lowered his voice, thinking, "Let them relax a little. Then . . . POW!"

"As in the days of King Arthur . . . and sir Lancelot . . . and the queen Guinevere . . . when knights errant ventured into a rude, barbaric world . . . to uplift the downtrodden . . . and to punish the wicked . . . ignorance . . . and poverty . . . and suffering [the words slid off his tongue like something slimy and foul] . . . still flourish. We . . . as educated people . . . as citizens of this good town . . . must commit ourselves. The world cries out to us! To follow the examples . . . of the two great men . . . of whom I spoke earlier. Two of Sangerville's own sons . . . and in that . . . two men close to us all. [Point] The inventor of the machine gun! Sir Hiram Maxim! [Applause] And Sir Harry Oakes! Prospector . . . explorer . . . and discoverer of the most productive gold mine in Canada! [Applause] With ingenuity . . . and perseverance . . . with hard work and a good old American determination [head thrust forward] to get things done! . . . they brought light into a dark world . . . and made it a better place to live.

At this point Leo was aware of a murmuring against the silence of his pauses. He continued to speak, distracted by the noise which, like the sudden approach of an angry mob, grew and grew at a frightening rate until his thoughts were smothered and the cry of "Fight!" cut him off completely. [Later, reading the account in the county newspaper, Leo only shrugged. He called it simply the nature of Fortune that Spike Johnson and the stranger who won the beard-growing contest chose that crucial moment in his speech to tackle with each other. And he called it ironic that the county purveyor of the printed word should dedicate more space to the fight than to his speech.] The crowd gasped and parted, forming a ring around the two men. Spike threw a wild roundhouse and the stranger, stepping inside it, landed two quick jabs to the face and retreated. Spike staggered. The stranger danced from side to side. Spike shook off the blows and charged, swinging low. The stranger danced in front of the blow and caught it squarely in the pit of the stomach.

"Wait!" Leo called desperately. "Stop! We can't . . ." But his words

were lost. People cheered, delighted that the celebration included a good old-fashioned American fist fight; they clenched their fists; they gritted their teeth. Cries of "Hit 'im!" and "Wring 'is neck!" arose from the wordless roar of the spectators. Hovering over him, Spike tried to finish the stranger off, but he came up quick from underneath, scoring with a solid uppercut and then a hard right to the nose. Spike went down.

"Get the constable!" cried Leo in a panic. "Where's Fritz! Somebody get Fritz, for God's sake!" Already a wiry little man was making his way toward the fight from the front of the crowd. He wore a suit of dark work clothes that somehow resembled a uniform; on one shoulder was a patch stitched with gold thread. He sported a pistol on his right hip, and on his chest was a hand-hammered star made from a silver dollar. Ordinarily Leo had no patience for the belligerent, self-appointed keeper of the peace, thinking him no better than a vigilante, but now he watched with relief, even gratitude, as the shouting softened quite suddenly and an alley opened in the crowd before him. Fritz took the stranger by the arm to lead him away, and when the stranger resisted, only slightly, Fritz produced a homemade blackjack and struck him squarely in the temple. As far away as he was, Leo could hear the sickening slap of leather against flesh. Reeling, the stranger stumbled into the street. Fritz scurried after him, cranked one arm behind his back, and pushed him roughly toward his pick-up.

Leo pointed at the dazed, bloody figure of Spike Johnson on the town hall lawn. "Somebody better h-help that man," he said in a tremulous voice. He was severely shaken. Calm returned quickly. Folks laughed and relived the highlights of the fight. But Leo had to clutch the sides of the podium to minimize the shaking of his hands and pull his routed thoughts back to earth.

"I urge you all," he said finally. For some reason he was awfully short of breath. "To work hard . . . toward that noble . . . and philanthropic . . . end. To help . . . to lay . . . the foundation . . . for the next . . . one hundred and fifty . . . years. To make the next . . . chapter . . . in Sangerville's history . . . as brilliant . . . and as fruitful . . . as the last."

Leo glanced ahead at the final paragraph. This was it. But it was all so confusing. He paused to organize his thoughts. The climax, he thought. With word and gesture and expression raise your listeners to . . . As though praying for guidance, he closed his eyes and bowed his head and tried to concentrate. On the platform behind him someone whispered, "Are you through?"

"Finally . . . a word of advice." He

paused for effect, then interjected casually, "I don't mean to end on a sobering note. I only wish to point out . . . that enthusiasm [here began the final crescendo, the drum roll preceding the climactic stunt of a circus act] . . . has nipped even the best [point] . . . intentions . . . in the bud. Rome wasn't built in a day . . . as they . . . say . . . nor does one battle [raised fist] . . . make a war. Work hard [flurry of eye contact]. Persevere. Be determined [up on his toes]. Try again! [hammering of his fist] And be comforted in failure . . . by this thought [reverent downward cast of the eyes]. Things [point] . . . take [point, swing] . . . time! [upward glance, both fists raised].

The spirit of the occasion; the agitation produced by the fight; the exhilaration of speaking publicly resurrected that excitement he had experienced in the discovery and first contemplation of the line. He staggered under the force of it, like a hero spent in some final but triumphant effort. Suddenly dizzy, he lost his balance; he clutched the podium; and blindness, the bright light of wisdom and love, passed over his eyes, revealing understanding in each uplifted face and the spirit of brotherhood breathing among his fellows. Summoning his last strength, Leo managed to say, quietly, humbly, "Thank you . . . thank you . . ." over the scattered applause.

The crowd dispersed with amazing speed. When Leo's sight returned he was staring at an empty lawn. He turned around. Confused, he fidgeted with his tie. He turned back to the podium and occupied himself with his speech, tapping the pages even on the slanted top, carefully folding them in half, then in half again, glancing narrowly about and wondering where in the hell everyone had gone. There were some people lined up at the barbecue pit, but they were hardly enough to account for the whole crowd. A boy eating a drumstick stared frankly at him. Again turning away from his phantom audience, Leo saw that a quick exit was the best course. He stuffed the speech in his pocket, checked his watch, switched off the microphone, and made for the stairs.

In the narrow, shaded corridor formed by the back of the speakers platform and the front of the town hall stood Madeleine LaBlanc, the librarian and secretary to the town manager. Although she was only an acquaintance, a fellow citizen, someone Leo saw when he paid his taxes or checked out a book, when she bought her groceries and when, in the evenings, he stood at the store window to watch her walk home from work [a walk that seemed to set in motion every muscle in her body], he was profoundly grateful for the distraction. He greeted her as one greets a long forgotten friend, exclaiming her name with great enthusiasm, "Madeleine!" he

cried. "Hello! How are you!"

For a moment Madeleine only smiled; then, in a voice so low Leo could hardly hear, she said, "What a marvelous, marvelous speech!" Her face glowed with pride. "Leo, it really was wonderful. It was so profound! So uplifting!" She moved very close to him and whispered playfully, "I never knew you were such a high-minded man." For some reason, though she had lived in Sangerville most of her life, Madeleine spoke with a slight accent.

Listening to her, Leo thought, "She really is a striking woman." Indeed, she was unlike the other women in town. She was Leo's age, his wife's age, yet she retained the trim figure of youth. She was stylish, always fashionably dressed. She read beauty magazines, exercised, and spent a great deal of money on cosmetics. She was the only woman in town, it seemed to Leo, who gave a damn about her appearance. Best of all, she had a brain in her head. Given the chance she would talk for hours on the subject of literature. She had even published a paper in a library magazine.

"Why thank you," he said finally. "I'm glad someone liked it. Everyone left so suddenly, I was beginning to wonder if anyone had listened to a word of it."

"Oh, stop being so modest," said Madeleine. "I'm sure everyone enjoyed it. You couldn't help being moved. It was just that it was so hot out there. There was no shade and no place to sit but on the grass. And I imagine everyone was as thirsty as I was. But really, Leo. You shouldn't underestimate yourself so. No one ever got anywhere doing that. There isn't any sense in it." Madeleine spoke very quickly; her voice excited and urgent, she strung together many thoughts in a single speech as though she'd been saving them up and wanted to be sure they all were heard.

"Well I don't feel terribly confident," said Leo ponderously, "that I articulated just what I wanted to express. It's a difficult thing, you know. I do hope you're right, though." Leo could see that Madeleine was impressed by this kind of talk. At that moment her smile and the fragrance of her soap and her flowery sundress gave the impression of freshness and grace, and he wanted to impress her.

"Gosh, Madeleine," Leo said. "It seems like I haven't seen you for an awfully long time. You're looking just wonderful."

"Why thank you," said Madeleine. "Do I usually not?"

"Of course you do," said Leo. "Say, I have a good idea. Let's go and have a cup of coffee. What do you say?"

"I'm afraid I can't," said Madeleine. She turned Leo's wrist and looked at his watch. "I have to help at the bazaar,

You see? I'm late already."

"That's bad luck," said Leo. "Perhaps later, then?"

"I'll be there all day, I'm afraid. You know me, always volunteering. They needed someone to help serve. I can't say that I'm looking forward to it, particularly. All the old girls will be yacking about one uninteresting thing after another, trading their self-righteous gossip like they trade magazines at the beauty parlor. God, how I abhor that. Anyway, that's neither here nor there. What I was going to say was that I'm free this evening, if you happen to be in the neighborhood."

Leo was stunned, to say the least. Visions of adventure made holes in his speech. "Yes, well I . . ." he stammered. "That is . . . Perhaps I'll . . . But listen, Madeleine. I don't mean to dwell on this speech, but . . . That last line. You know, the 'Things take time'? Do you think it came across? I mean, I suppose it's the sort of thing that goes straight to the subconscious, lies dormant like a seed, and then, when conditions are right, it pops up. I've given that phenomenon a bit of thought. Made something of a substantial study of it, you might say. You know, modern psychology, and all that. Freud, for example. And of course Jung. Then there's the classics. Socrates, blah, blah, blah. You'd be interested to know blah, blah, blah, blah, blah . . ."

That evening Leo walked downtown with an ice cream wrapper stuck to the bottom of his shoe. The square was a dismal sight. Every inch of public property was covered with litter. The lawn of the war memorial was an expanse of greasy napkins, paper plates smeared with barbecue sauce, beer cans, styrofoam cups, and a staggering number of those souvenir banners Leo had insisted on handing out. He chased off two dogs who had knocked over a trash can and were pawing through the garbage for chicken bones and corn cobs, then sat down on the steps of the cafe to survey the scene. Nothing had been done to return the town to its normal state. The bunting still hung from the town hall eaves. The speakers platform still stood, sturdy and imposing as a permanent addition to the town architecture. And the barbecue pit, that ugly little burnt out bunker of cinder blocks and charred grates, the source of most of the litter on the streets, had been neither cleaned nor broken down. Leo found this especially irritating. He knew how it worked. Organization was difficult in Sangerville, God knew. Volunteers were nearly extinct. He foresaw himself shoveling ashes into a wash tub and hauling off the cinder blocks a few at a time in the trunk of his car.

Further down the street Spike Johnson was sweeping the sidewalk in front of the post office. Expressionless, he pushed his broom slowly and mechan-

cally; tapping it, pushing it, tapping it, he swept up winter sand along with the litter and raised around him a cloud of dust that blazed in the light of the setting sun. It seemed an impossible task for one man. Watching him, Leo felt personally responsible, and his first thought was to slip away before Spike saw him and demanded some help. Where the hell was the clean-up crew, he wondered. Had no one thought of that? Was it another instance in that unbroken line of oversight and bad planning that had plagued the celebration since its conception? Not enough parking space . . . not enough trash barrels . . . not enough public bathrooms . . .

Twilight settled. A car coasted down High Street from the direction of the church, paused at the stop sign, then turned onto Main Street. The driver accelerated. Swerving slightly, the car disappeared over the crest of a low hill, appeared again, then disappeared. The sounds of engine and exhaust and the tires against the pavement receded and died.

Leo crossed the street and checked the side door of his store, then went around to the front, where mischievous youth struck him a hateful blow: someone had defaced his storefront window. Across the polished plate glass, over the festive posters advertising the bargains of the week, bold, foot-high letters in soap shone eerie and luminous under the glow of flickering mercury vapor streetlights. It was a phrase Leo never used but one he heard often enough, a vulgar, offensive phrase. Quickly he rubbed out the letters, carefully he buffed the glass with his handkerchief, and he thought, "How unimaginative people are!"

He found the bar of soap on the pavement. It was a new bar, a brand of which Leo sold many. One corner was worn away and it was studded with grains of sand. Leo tossed it in his hand like a baseball, gauging its shape and weight, waiting for it to land just right, then flung it as hard as he could over the riverbank behind the store.

"Fuck you!" he said aloud, walking further down the street. Saying it did give one a certain sensation. "Fuck you! Fuck you!" he muttered, considering it as he would consider a saying of his own invention. It's hardly food for thought, he observed. Few two-word sayings were. There were exceptions, of course, like 'Know thyself'. But they were rare. On the other hand, one couldn't deny its place in mankind's permanent collection, and that was more than could be said for any of his own. It endured; it had endured; and it would last until the last breath went out of the last man. "Fuck you!" he said again, and he observed, "Socrates had nothing on the kid with the bar of soap."

Main Street, the highway, ran out

ahead of him in a broken line, disappearing over low rises, reappearing smaller and off-center, disappearing, vanishing finally in the dark distant hills. The sun had set, melting the horizon, and a lake of light, warm and pink, lay at the edge of evening. Beyond, the underside of a low layer of clouds reflected the red and gold of the receding day. It was a marvelous sight, and it seemed only right to imagine an enchanted, far-off world, a land of light and understanding. Leo's spirits rose. He put care behind him and his heart filled with a pleasant melancholy. He strolled comfortably along the broken, grass-infested sidewalk, passing the familiar houses of his neighbors, passing the old mill where he could see the dark plane of the river and hear the roar of white water pitching over the dam.

At the house where Madeleine lived he stopped. For a while he gazed up at the lighted windows of her apartment on the second floor, wondering what she was doing just then. Reading, most likely. Sewing perhaps. He wondered what she did to fill up her evenings. He made up his mind to go in and say hello. It was the least he could do . . .

Madeleine startled him from behind. "Do you make a habit of this?" she said, laughing at his surprise. "Who'd suspect the man who gave us that profound oratory today of being a peeping tom?" Her laugh was soft and friendly. She was carrying a book. "I followed you down the street," she explained. "I just closed the library. What a dull night! Not a single customer. Not that I expected any, but I needed the hours. You know, money money money. Finally, though, I got so bored I couldn't stand it and said to heck with it and decided to come home."

As they walked out of town Leo was delighted with Madeleine's company. He felt very romantic and he said, "I love these warm summer nights. How relaxing it is! How peaceful! When I was a kid I used to do anything to stay out late on nights like this. I'd just sit and listen and my mother would come to the door and yell my name out into the darkness, and I'd be sitting right there on the lawn, a few yards away, and she couldn't even see me. God, she used to get mad."

They walked as far as the baseball field and sat on one of the players' benches. Little by little it grew dark and then only the broken lines of lime between the bases and the tops of trees in the west, flat as ink, were visible. Sitting close to her, Leo gazed for a while up at the violet sky.

"You know something, Madeleine?" he said. "Sometimes when I look up at all that space, all that vastness! it seems to me that the life of a man is as small and insignificant as a louse. But you know, there are other times, times when I'm full of such feeling, such wonder, I

think, "There is something in me as measureless as time itself." Amazed at the eloquence of his own words, Leo leaned close to her. "Madeleine!" he exclaimed. "What a miracle it is! Imagine the infinity of time, the vastness of the universe . . . What a miracle of chance it is that we're here. Think of it!"

Madeleine smiled. "What a beautiful thing to say!" she whispered. "What a lovely, lovely thought!"

Inspired by her uplifted, inviting face, Leo kissed her. For a while they sat in silence. He put his arm around her. She rested her head on his shoulder and held onto his arm. Leo clenched his fist, tightened his bicep. He felt young and rugged. A tilted half moon, pale as milk, rose above the treetops, lending form to the landscape. Objects solidified and advanced out of the darkness: the bases, the backstop, across the field the scoreboard advertising fair prices at Leo's IGA. In the wash of moonlight Madeleine's face was plain and pale, and Leo thought her simply beautiful.

"Except," she said, sighing. "It's too bad it has to be here."

Leo laughed. "What on earth do you mean?" he said. "What's wrong with this place? The night is beautiful, the breeze is warm, we're alone . . ."

"Oh, I don't mean this place; this bench or this ball diamond." She thought for a moment, then said, "I can't tell you what it was like, Leo, listening to you today. Imagine, there I was, surrounded by the same rude, stupid people I've been surrounded by all my life; expecting nothing more; and suddenly I looked up and there was a man who seemed to think that there was more to life than personal satisfaction, or physical gratification; who gave his time and thoughts to the more important things; who actually seemed to believe in something. You inspired me, Leo. Really, you did."

Madeleine sat up. She held his arm with both her hands, as though he might try to get away. "We're different, aren't we, Leo?" she said urgently. "It is true, isn't it? We're not like the others. We're bright, intelligent people, and here we are, stranded in this wretched town. It's as though we're shipwrecked, isn't it? Is it any wonder that we're . . . drawn to each other? Leo, I . . . Why do you laugh? Leo, why are you laughing? Am I talking foolishly?"

"Oh no, no," said Leo. "It's just that, well, I never thought of myself, or you, for that matter, as any different than anyone else."

Madeleine turned away, hurt. "I don't understand you," she said. "I don't. You seem to be happy, and for the life of me I can't imagine how any intelligent, sensitive being can bear this provincial life. Good God, what is there here? The town office; the library; the same mindless work, day in, day out; the same

people; the same conversations; meanness, ignorance . . .

"When you're young, it's different. The world is bright and full of promise. The days are long. Time is yours to play with. But now, God! this age is horrible enough without having to be stuck here. It's a world without movement, or variation. It's overwhelming. It's suffocating!" She covered her face with her hands and wept.

Leo shook his head in amazement. He had known Madeleine . . . how many years? Practically all his life. And to think that she, or anyone in this town, lived in misery, let despair grow until it eclipsed all that was pleasant and good in this life was beyond his understanding. And yet, she sat beside him now, weeping quietly. He didn't know what to say. He scooped up a handful of pebbles, tossed them in his hand like coins, shook them like dice, threw them onto the ground. "I'm terribly sorry you feel this way, Mad," he said. "But you've got to be a little philosophical about all this. Don't cry."

"Oh, to hell with being philosophical," she said.

Leo touched her, thinking how suddenly all her grace and charm had dissolved into this shivering, unhappy figure. "I'm sorry," he said. "But listen, it isn't all that bad. I'm here . . ."

Madeleine dried her tears. "Forgive me, Leo," she said. "I didn't mean to drag you into this. It's just that I've been feeling blue lately, and when I listened to your speech today, I thought perhaps you'd understand. Let's forget it, all right?"

"Sure," said Leo. But he did understand. He felt quite sure he understood, and he had a heart full of sympathy for those who saw but couldn't reach, those who needed but couldn't get. He clipped Madeleine lightly on the shoulder. "Come on," he said. "Let's go home."

Returning to town, Leo followed the smell of smoke to the lot next to the post office. Spike was burning the litter he had swept up. His fire was at the back of the lot, under a row of fir trees on the crest of the riverbank, out of range of the streetlights. He knelt close to it, watching it carefully. The flames illuminated his broad face in flashes; his teeth, protrudent, savage, sparkled. He poked the fire with a stick. The smoke thickened; rose; settled into the layer that had formed above the streetlights; drifted out over the river.

From the edge of the lot Leo looked up the street at his store. He was proud of it. It was a solid, handsome building, and he had maintained it well. In the plate glass window he could see the reflection of the row of streetlights that ran out onto the highway behind him. He thought of how he had run his life, like his store, just over breaking even. He had always traded fairly. It was good business. You couldn't go wrong . . .