END OF A GAME

Nancy Huddleston Packer

Psychotherapy: Portraits in Fiction

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Introduction

"End of a Game" by Nancy Huddleston Packer

The course of individual psychotherapy, by its very nature, excludes significant others in the patient's life. The excluded spouse, especially, is vulnerable to feelings of anxiety and uncertainty. In "End of a Game," Nancy Huddleston Packer depicts the anguish of a spouse, Charles Andress, who is outside the therapy experience. He agonizes over his wife's relationship with her therapist and, like a jealous lover, envisions the therapist as a competitor. As can often happen when the outsider consults the therapist, Andress feels demeaned, ignorant, and embarrassed. With his wife he feels inadequate, plagued by the question "Why isn't*my* type of love healing?"

End of a Game

Nancy Huddleston Packer

Charles Andress once said, and believed, that he and his whole life could pretty well be summed up in eighteen or twenty categories, like sportswriter, husband, father of two, Democrat, ectomorph, WASP and so on. Of course he was not all that simple, but he believed himself to be usual, predictable, lacking in dark recesses. Therefore he was confused and shaken when he finally came to recognize that his wife's breakdown tyrannized over him, that he was unable to sustain even ten minutes without thinking about it.

If everything is all right between us as Caroline claims, he asked, then what could be wrong? With her? Me? His fingers pressed eight keys at once and jammed the typewriter. Answer the question: If everything is all right. . .

"Well now, how's our very own Grantland Red Smith Rice today?"

The face of Caroline, secret, sensual, smug (and sick, don't forget sick) vanished, and Charles looked up. Wilson. A lummox. Face like a pale tomato. A fair man, Charles chided himself that he did not have a quarrel with Wilson, who did not matter. With whom then? If everything is so goddamn all right?

"The boss says any time you say so, the presses can roll."

“I’m not finished,” said Charles. He jerked from the typewriter the sheet of yellow paper on which, after a sixty- not a fifty-minute hour, he had written only the heading of his column. “If you think this stuff is so easy to write, try it yourself.”

“What’d I do?” asked Wilson. “Pass along a message is all. I’m the boss? What’d I do?”

“You circle,” said Charles. “You wait.”

On a clean sheet of paper he typed his name and the name of his column: Now In This Corner. And relieved by that he remembered Wilson at whom he had thrown so small a punch. He said, “Sorry, I’m just edgy. I don’t feel good. Look . . .” but he said no more and Wilson walked away, not mattering in the least.

As if he had been more badgered than in fact he felt he had been, Charles quickly fought back by writing: By rule this column has never taken sides in personal disputes between a ballplayer and a manager. But sometimes the soundest rule must be broken. This is such a time. The very public hassle between manager George Wain and pitcher Wag Schumpeter promises to wreck our small pennant hope. We must take sides.

Hooked. For taking sides was precisely what Dr. Loeb had done from the beginning. Hid it though. Sleek Loeb, extending a hand . . . of what? Charitable contempt? Pure deception?

“Naturally you are concerned about your wife,” Loeb had said. “But of course you must realize that her difficulty comes from many years before your marriage. You are not responsible in that sense.” Charles had shrugged to convey that though he was no psychiatrist, he was no fool either, he understood something of breakdowns. Yet fool, he soon saw, was exactly what he was. It was days after the interview that he thought. My wife’s trouble comes from many years before she married me and I am not responsible for it; the difficulty is not the result of our marriage, it is the cause; the difficulty led to our marriage; I am a symptom; I don’t count.

If I am only a symptom, he imagined asking Loeb, how can she say everything is all right between us? Can everything be all right when I amount to so little? But if I were the cause, how then could anything be all right? And why, Dr. Loeb, do you who know her so little know her so well while I do not count.

Charles looked across the city room. A vast nervous amphitheater of a room, who could work there? The sports editor wore rimless glasses and weighed one hundred and twenty-six pounds and loved contact sports. Behind those rimless glasses, Charles thought, the harsh gaze was upon him: Can’t do the work any more, Andress?

That morning in his unctuous sinister voice the sports editor had asked if Charles had anything interesting for the column. “For a change” hung

unspoken between them. Grateful to have an answer, Charles said, Yeah, a good-old-days piece, about Wain saying Schumpeter ought to see a psychiatrist. The editor had said, Better leave that to the medics, don't get in over your head. Charles had said, I guess you think people are more interested in high school basketball? The editor's teeth showed back to his molars. Better make it good then.

Charles wrote, Things have come to a pretty pass when the manager of a contending ball club publicly suggests that the team's only twenty-game winner ought to see a head-shrinker. No, psychiatrist. Thirty years ago many a manager would have said that a guy like Wag Schumpeter ought to have his head examined. Today, it's Go see a psychiatrist. In the first instance, invective, pure and simple, the prerogative of men who nurse ballplayers. In the second, diagnosis, partial but nonetheless first-step diagnosis. The emphasis is altogether different. Now I ask you, if everything was all right between them, what could be wrong? That is, if Wain had properly managed the erratic southpaw.

He had been the one to get Caroline started with Loeb. Hundreds of details had finally culminated in one conclusive episode. The draperies of the house drawn all day, every day, yet not a lamp lighted unless he lighted it. Not one social engagement in months. And the fatigue, too fatigued to go out to dinner with him, to go to a movie or a game, to be with him. And all that silence too, which he, fool that he was, had chalked up to the natural leveling

off of a marriage. Well, but she had never complained, never said a word, and the children were clean, fed, happy, miraculously undamaged. And of course there was his deeply held belief that theirs was a family graced by love. They quarreled so rarely, and when they did they were not killers, they split their differences. Oh yes oh yes, graced by love.

And then the one event he could not ignore or misunderstand. He had one day called home a dozen times, to get Caroline to go to the first night game of the season, and he had received no answer. He was not exactly worried, but by the day's end he was irritated that she had not anticipated that he might be worried. When he got home, eager to show off his annoyance, he found her sitting in darkness, while the children played in their rooms. He flipped the light switch, and he saw that her face was quite dirty, with driblets of food around her mouth, her hair was uncombed, and her dress was soiled and misbuttoned. She's off her rocker, he distinctly told himself, and the impact of the nasty phrase brought with it a strangling rush of terror.

Yet in his methodical, workmanlike, competent way, he set about rectifying things as best he could. After she went to bed, before 8:30 (and wasn't that a pattern he should have long since detected?), he called their family physician and got the name of a "very-first-rate man," Rudolph Loeb. Next day he called and made an appointment for Caroline.

That night as Caroline headed for bed, he called her to him. He thought she had worsened even that day. She stood before him like a repentant child, head lowered, eyes averted, fingers twisting. First Charles attempted to enfold her with words of love and confidence. Don't charge in. He pointed out the tensions he knew she suffered, the problems, the boredom.

"You overload the system," he said, laughing hopefully, "and it breaks down, like an electrical circuit." He felt awkward and heavy of tongue, and he thought she ought at least try to help him; she wasn't a deaf-mute. Finally he blurted out, "I think you need a psychiatrist, I've made an appointment for you."

He anticipated wrath and defense. Indeed, her anger would in some fashion have given the lie to his fears about her. But she offered no resistance. "I know I'm sick," she said. "I've known for weeks I was getting worse. I thought you'd hate me for it."

As her quick tears washed grime and powder and yesterday's lipstick down her broken face, he rocked and patted her. He felt very tender toward her, and he thought he had handled the situation quite well. Momentarily he regretted going for outside help without giving himself a chance to help her. But that night he heard her weeping as she slept.

Caroline and Dr. Loeb set up a schedule. She would see him three mornings a week at 11:00. From the beginning, she had improved. Oh, not in a

straight, steady line, of course, she pointed out, but more like the business of the spiral. Or maybe three steps forward and two back. At the end of the first week, and with visible effort, she opened the draperies on the side of the house that faced the woods, the private side. Still, going to the grocery store frightened her, and anyway she kept the street-side draperies closed.

For nine months Caroline visited Dr. Loeb three times weekly, one hundred and fifty minutes weekly, seventy-five dollars weekly (forget that, for Pete's sake) plus the cost of a baby-sitter (honestly!) and the operation of the automobile (who minds? who minds?) and how the hell long does it take the cat to climb out of the well at three forward and two back?

I have nothing against psychiatry, Charles wrote. In fact, I sometimes think that every lefthander worth his salt ought to have a few preventive sessions on the sofa. Lefthanders are notoriously unstable, they list the wrong way. I happen to be a fair sandlot southpaw myself, and no harm is meant.

"He's a dear," said Caroline one Sunday afternoon at the end of the first month of treatment. "A funny, old-world little man; you'd expect a thick accent, but he's been in this country since he was six. No accent, but all the rest. Maybe foreign men understand better . . . " She let the sentence trail off, and as if her love of sunlight had never faltered, she threw open the draperies on the street side.

"Don't I understand you?" Charles asked, idly.

“We’re married, that’s different,” she said. She stared at him for a moment, looking stricken and afraid, and then she turned back to the draws of the draperies.

“Leave them alone,” Charles said quickly. “I understand you with love, he understands you with his mind. That’s the difference, all I do is love you.”

“That’s everything,” she said, “as long as everything is all right between us, that’s everything.” And joyous, she came to sit on his lap. “Damn the kids,” he said, “Sundays were always the best.”

She smiled with teasing pity, flirtatious and tender, a look he had forgotten that she owned, a look that stirred a desire that he had only been pretending to have. “Poor Charles, the kids are as hard on you as they sometimes are on me. Dr. Loeb said maybe we weren’t quite ready for all the responsibilities.”

“He did, did he? What else did he say?”

“Nothing,” said Caroline, standing up, straightening her skirt. “He practically never says a word. Maybe he didn’t even say that. Maybe I just thought he might. I do all the talking.”

“And what do you say then? I mean, about me.”

“Nothing. Just how much I love you.”

“That’s everything,” he said.

That's nothing. Very suddenly, the fact of his immense ignorance erupted in him. He knew nothing about her therapy, nothing about her sicknes, nothing about her. For this important time in her life, he was a stranger, a bystander. For all she apparently needed, she had Loeb. Bitterly he drew a poster: Andress Go Home.

He got up. "1 think I'll pull weeds. Somebody has to do something around this place. And you know what else I think I'll do? Go have a talk with your boyfriend. If you don't mind, of course." Impulse had spoken, brilliantly. How marvelous and powerful he was. He grinned at her, a grin that felt like oil around his lips, with a touch of malice.

"No I don't mind," she said. "Dr. Loeb said he'd be glad to talk to you any time." His grin dried to paste.

For the next two weeks, Charles's fantasies broke with increasing insistence into his work and sleep. In the evening following her visits to Loeb, he spent restless, agitated hours attempting to pry out of her what had happened. He hoped he was subtler than he felt. I was thinking about your mother today, he said, meaning were you talking about your mother with Dr. Loeb? We ought really to talk more don't you think? he said, meaning Did you talk about me with Dr. Loeb? I don't feel so good tonight, he said, meaning Do you love me, do you tell the doctor that you love me? And it seemed that what Caroline said in answer was always a kind of precise irrelevance. She told

him. Sometimes in detail, but she told him nothing he wanted to know.

Eventually he thought he detected a consciously devised pattern of telling intended to conceal, not reveal. Always she told him something outside herself, mother, friends, father. If he probed more deeply, she said Lord Lord I'll be months understanding that one. That evasion, too, he believed was calculated. But he was not sure.

Finally he decided that Loeb's willingness to talk to him should not keep a grown man from taking advantage of that willingness, and he went to see Loeb. He took his own lunch hour, and he thought he had taken Loeb's. I'll pay for it, he said. I'll pay the twenty-five an hour, just go on and take the rest of our savings. But the money was not at issue, and he denied to himself having thought about it. Other than just joking. A joke.

When he entered Loeb's office, he was unhappy and embarrassed, and he affected a nauseating jocularity not at all his style. Every aspect of his wife's condition was good for humor. When he told the doctor that he had recognized her illness because she was . . . dirty, he laughed. He laughed at his coming to see Loeb, lied and laughed that he was doing it to please the sick little girl (had even called her that). He finished up with a ribald psychiatric joke about the coarse sexual fantasies of a woman patient. He didn't think the joke was funny. Never had.

The sleek owl sat with hands lightly touching, the index fingers tapping

on the bridge of his nose, rocking and twirling his large, blue serge buttocks in the pea-green swivel chair. The smile that was not a smile, not sympathy, but removed, distant, powerful understanding brought forth from Charles an abject question, a sudden pleading surrender.

"What am I to do?"

The chair swiveled sideways and in that moment of silence Charles saw the bulging eyes, the beakish nose, the mobile, full lips. In a flash of rage, he asked himself why Caroline could not see all that vulgarity and egotism and sensuality. He came to his feet, his hand raised to forestall Loeb. "I'll just grin and bear it. Sorry I took your time." The decision was all his own.

"Just a moment, please," said Loeb. He motioned for Charles to sit. Sullen, nervous, Charles sat down, and instantly he believed that Loeb was about to tell him that Caroline was divorcing him. Why else had they wanted him to come? Why, if not to tell him this final irrevocably damaging thing, that Caroline did not love him? Why else had they connived to get him here?

"We never know," said Loeb, "why at any given moment a particular personality has what might be called a collapse, a breakdown. Sometimes there are more likely reasons than at other times. Naturally you are concerned about your wife, but of course you must realize that her difficulty comes from many years before your marriage. You are not responsible in that sense."

Shrugging, Charles gestured for Loeb to go on, he wasn't a fool, he understood the etiology. Momentarily he thought it would be fun to share with Caroline the asinine fantasy he had had that she was going to divorce him. But then he thought he would not share this with her when she would not share anything with him.

"Treatment," Loeb went on slowly, "is often very alarming and undermining for the whole family. In many cases it's a good idea for the wife or husband of the patient to have some supportive therapy. To help him through the trying months."

A key slipped in and turned a lock. Charles stood. "So that's it, so I'm the nut now."

Loeb was imperturbable. "Not at all. I only meant if the strain gets to be too much . . ."

"Look," said Charles, thumping his chest with his index finger, "I'm a measly sports-writer on a measly newspaper in a measly town. I have four mouths to feed and four bodies to clothe and four heads, at least at last count, to shelter. Bus fare is fifteen cents each way. Insurance, one hundred twenty a quarter. Retirement pension is twenty-five dollars a month, but what's twenty-five a month when it's twenty-five an hour. Savings? Going fast."

Loeb interrupted. "I'd be happy to arrange for payments over a period of years. It is not uncommon . . ."

“It isn’t the money, it isn’t the money,” Charles shouted. “If I woke up and found myself curled up like a baby sucking an inkwell, I still wouldn’t indulge myself in these little chats with you. Maybe you ought to take up golf, that would kill a lot of time.”

Dr. Loeb’s face showed neither anger nor amusement nor even recognition. He said, “I didn’t mean treatment with me. It’s unwise for a therapist to have two patients from the same family.”

Charles’ taut spirit went flabby, but he gamely concluded, “Just don’t you and Caroline get to planning anything for me, I’m a big boy, now. I don’t think I could get sick if I wanted to.”

Dr. Loeb stood in a posture of dismissal. “Of course it’s purely up to you, Mr. Andress.” And days later Charles thought, I am a fool, I don’t count, but I am not sick.

Charles wrote, If Schumpeter put himself in the hands of a psychiatrist, then quite obviously control of the team would shift from Wain to the doctor, at least when Schumpeter was on the mound. The psychiatric relationship permeates all others. Put it this way: If George Wain husbands the team, the doctor is—no, for God’s sake scratch that. Let no man put asunder the relationship between a ballplayer and his manager. Christ. Take the case, the real case, of James Piersall. Scratch out Christ, but keep Piersall. Charles reconstructed the case of James Piersall. It took two full paragraphs. That was

nice. Facts, facts.

"I know you got more important things on your mind," said Wilson, "but these are times that try men's souls."

"What?" asked Charles.

"The boss says, 'See what's with Red Smith over there.' I see, I believe it's dolls. But Charles, friend, the out-of-town edition goes to bed in thirty minutes and you know it don't sleep good without that old Andress hot water bottle to snuggle up with."

"How do vultures know, Wilson, the precise moment to quit circling and go for the flesh? Smell? Sight? ESP?"

"How would I know?" said Wilson.

"The human counterpart," said Charles, "can spot a weakened condition ten desks off, knows a wound when it sticks its finger in one. You keep circling my desk and I'll begin to think I'm sick, dying, dead." I am sick, he thought.

"You sure talk sick," said Wilson. "Thirty minutes."

Charles said to himself, Thirty minutes. He wrote, All joking aside, it is not in the purview of the sportswriter to comment on psychiatry, pro or con. I am only pointing out the ramifications of Wain's contention. The real point is that when any manager goes outside the normal channels of communication between players and himself, he is only admitting that the battle is already

lost. Time for a change?

He closed his eyes. Could he run it? Would they print it? Was it that much worse than yesterday's, that much better than tomorrow's? Would there come a time when he could not write at all? And so what? I'm dying, I'm going home.

He clipped together the two sheets of yellow paper, folded them lengthwise, wrote his name on the outside like a student, put on his hat, gave Wilson an ugly wink and floated out of the city room. Dolls, he thought. Oh to be Wilson, say to be racing home now for a quickie. Andress, ardent lover. Yet lover, he thought, was a role he played but rarely now, and with painful, unreleased, unsexual tension. It mattered too much now. Each occasion of their coming together he thought was an opportunity for a miracle, to reestablish them where he once had thought they were, graced by love. As each miracle failed, he felt farther from her, less her lover, profoundly desperate. And in a strange turnabout of their roles, it became Caroline who pursued him and with an apparent disregard for everything except pure sexual pleasure.

Ah darling (he pretended that he heard her say), we had such a good session today, Dr. Loeb and I, but don't ask what. Want me? Go to bed with me? Now now now. Thus the excitement engendered by Loeb found fulfillment with Charles. He was degraded. Even so, even so, he attempted to

turn these seemingly unguarded moments into occasions for prying her secrets from her. With her wariness brought low by lust, what might he not elicit from her?

Answer: damn little. Even then, there she mastered him. He feared for himself: how long before the effort broke him?

Out of the aborted interview with Loeb had come his compulsion to trap Caroline into admissions she would not know she made. At the beginning, his little traps—suitable for snarling lies as well as truths, for separating them—snapped shut often before he was fully aware that he was at that moment attempting to trap her. Innocently he asked a question; guiltily he listened. But eventually nothing was accidental; he knew exactly what he was about, was ashamed of it, and was exultant.

That first night after his visit to Loeb he had said, "Went to see your boyfriend today." He felt an acid anger, remembering the nasty phrase *supportive therapy.* "Maybe I will, maybe I won't."

"What?" she asked. "Maybe you'll what?"

In the mirror he watched his face, turned it right and left. "You know," he said. Conniver, name it. The first trap was thus set.

"No I don't," she said. "Tell me, tell me. He wants to send me away, doesn't he? Away some place."

Her mouth moved in the circular motion of her anxiety and her face grew haggard. Thwarted, stung, soft with love, he went to her.

"No, nothing about you. Me. He thought it might be a good idea if I get some supportive therapy. That's all." In the quiet moments before sleep that night he recalled Caroline's tears and he wondered if they were real or were the dishonest agents of the conspiracy with Loeb. He touched her shoulder and forgave himself.

Frequently in the following weeks when he thought he was at the point of an important revelation, she broke into tears. Her timing was superb. Please, Charles, please, what do you want, what are you after. The sad, broken, harrowed face. Always he was deeply ashamed and vowed never again to harass her. But even as he vowed, he saw forming on the edge of his awareness a new, more intricate plan. And when that too failed, brought on its accompaniment of tears, he roared with injury and anger, and planned anew.

Hearing the baby cry out in sleep one evening, Charles said, "I guess the kids really get their lumps in these sessions with Loeb. They sure can get on my nerves." He tensed, waiting.

She appeared thoughtful. "Well, today I told him we were getting a two-wheeler for her birthday. I guess I'm still uncertain about it. She's so little."

After a pause Charles asked, "What else did you say about her?"

"Nothing."

The trap snapped the air. Injured, he said, "Two-wheelers, the most important thing about your kid is a goddamn two-wheeler. For twenty-five an hour you sit talking about two-wheelers. You don't bother to say whether you love her or want to pinch her head off. You have a nervous breakdown, you say you have a nervous breakdown, and your children don't count enough to even discuss them except two-wheelers."

She held out her hand. "Charles," she said.

"Or me either, I guess. What's the most important thing about me? That I'm a lousy sportswriter and you and your boyfriend are having a lot of sport on my twenty-five dollars?"

"Please don't," she said.

"Well what do you say then? What do you tell him that I'm too dumb to understand? What's he give you I don't? What are you trying to do to me?" When the echo of his anger died away, he heard her weeping.

"I love you," he said, searching out a talisman to quiet her. "Even when I think I'm losing my mind, I know I love you, Caroline."

"But you don't know that I love you," she said in a drowning voice.

"That too, mostly." He went to her and began to touch and pat her, tentatively as a small child touches and pats a baby.

In bed that night Caroline said, “You mustn’t mind too much this getting angry.”

“You just get well and I’ll be all right.”

“I think I am getting better,” she said. “Of course it’s a backward and forward thing. Dr. Loeb says . . .”

Dr. Loeb says. Charles sang out: Take me out to the ballgame, set me out in the crowd, buy me some peanuts and crackerjacks. I don’t care if you never get well.

Like the traps, the explosions developed their own patterns, as if he were caught in a rhythmic cycle. Try as he did, and he did—smiling larger than he ever felt, talking desperately of other matters, even admitting his anguish to Caroline as if naming would relieve him—he could not control his outbursts. Nor could he confine them and his anxiety to his home. Shortly the quality of his work declined so that even he noticed. He turned in a shorter and shorter and duller and duller column later and later. His colleagues looked at him, puzzled. Look, he told the sports editor, my wife’s not well, give me a break. This department rode me for three years, I was the only one anybody was reading and you know it. Can’t I ride a while? The sports editor said, Buddy you been riding, what’s the trouble, you splitting up with the wife? Hell no, said Charles, hell no, she’s just sick. He walked hurriedly away, sickened.

For among the many visions that obsessed him was that of her having left him. Deeply grieved, he lived alone forever. Others found him tragic. Now that, he said to remind himself that he still had his good old sense of humor, is what I call funny. The scene shifted to comedy and Caroline and Loeb scampered off. The owl and the pussycat go to sea in a beautiful pea-green swivel chair. Floating amidst the high waves. Drowning. No. Danced by the light of the moon, the moon, they danced by the light of the moon.

Good thing he still had his sense of humor. Could still laugh at his wife. His sick wife. In the sudden inner quiet he heard the dying of laughter, and he longed to say, But what of me?

As he reached home, walking the block and a half from the bus stop, he heard the carillon of the Episcopal church sing out 12:00. As he put his hand on the doorknob, the significance of the hour came to him: Caroline would be bidding goodbye to Dr. Loeb, the small, soft fluttering hand held overlong in the moist, throbbing hand of the doctor.

"Hello," he called out when he opened the door. Silence. The house was empty. He thought he had never felt such emptiness before, as if it had been not simply departed but irrevocably deserted. In a rush of panic and passion, he went in a running walk from room to room, seeking out signs of the final leave-taking. He found the kitchen as he had left it that morning, cream-sodden cheerios plastered on the sides of the bowl, a gnawed, damp piece of

toast, a half-filled coffee cup, a nearly empty bottle of curdling milk on the drainboard. Caroline had left the mess to him. In her desperate desire to leave him, she had not had the consideration, that dreg of love, to clean up after their last meal together.

Methodically he set about straightening the kitchen, dropping the contents of plates into the disposal, rinsing, stacking, scraping fried egg off the formica table top, wiping indefinable nastiness from the high chair, and saying over and over to himself, This is really funny.

When he heard the front door open and close, he was not surprised. He knew he had been only challenging a toy disaster, only playing a game of tragedy. Whatever else was wrong, Caroline was not capable of an act at once cruel and calculated. He was very touched by this knowledge.

"Nap time," he heard her say. "You've had a lovely morning and it's time to rest, both of you now."

Charles lay flat against the wall. He did not want to see his children. He did not want to weigh them into whatever course he intended taking. What was it anyway? Why had he come?

When Caroline came out of the bedroom, he was standing in the hallway. She looked a question: Why are you here. Indeed. He shrugged: Just am. Mildly perplexed and expectant, she slipped her arm around him and they walked into the living room.

"Where's everybody been?" he asked.

"The sitter was sick." She explained that she had taken the children to a friend while she kept her appointment with Loeb.

"How was it?" he asked.

"Fine. They ate lunch and apparently had the time of their lives." Charles gave her his rigid back to look at. "I meant Loeb."

"That was fine too. Why are you home so early?"

"And why are you evasive so early? And so late?"

Caroline looked puzzled. "Evasive?"

"Evasive," said Charles. "It won't work any more, Caroline. I want to know what's going on, I have that right. And I don't mean two-wheelers. I mean you. I mean me. Don't try to evade it. What did you talk about today with Loeb?"

"The grocery store," said Caroline evenly. "Why I still have to get there when the doors first open. Do you mind telling me what's going on?" She sat down.

Charles closed his eyes. Was he nauseated, or only imagining it? Was he dizzy? Sick? "Do you mind telling *me* what is going on? I'm home so early and so late for you to tell *me* what is going on."

"Tell you what?" she asked in a pinched voice. "Minute by minute? Word for word? 'Good morning, Dr. Loeb,' I said. 'Good morning, Mrs. Andress,' he said. 'Nice day,' I said. No, he said that. I said 'Yes isn't it.' "

"Laugh," he said.

"I'm not. But don't you see I just can't tell you bang like that? I don't even understand it myself yet. You're not a psychiatrist."

Charles sighed, for her benefit. For himself, he wept. "What did you say about me?"

"Your name didn't come up."

"I don't count," he said. "My name didn't come up. I don't matter." When Caroline started to stand, he shoved her back in the chair. The roughness of his gesture surprised him. He said, "Please, Caroline, help me. Don't you see?" With clenched fists, he was a supplicant.

She looked closely at him. "What is it you want?"

"What is it you want?" he mimicked her. "You don't even know there's anything wrong, do you? If I had both legs sawed off like bleeding stumps, you'd be more concerned with a pulled muscle in your little finger."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said. She seemed puzzled, but oh so well, so reasonable.

“This: I have a wife and she prefers a stranger to her husband. I have a good job but I can’t get the work done right any more. Don’t you see what’s happening? It’s simple: we have got to start thinking about me for a change.”

He stopped, waited, expected her sudden tears. He feared them and he desired them. Waiting, momentarily he saw clearly that her crying gave him a kind of respite, meant she cared. Then cry.

“I think of you all the time,” she said quietly. “I know this therapy is difficult for you . . .”

“Christ,” said Charles. “You’re not sick, you’re not the sick one. I am.”

“I love you,” she said.

“Don’t try that, I invented that trick myself. Love excuseth all things.”

“I’m getting better,” she said. “Please be patient. Please don’t make it hard on me now.”

He closed his eyes, felt the drumbeat of his eyeballs. “You don’t care if I’m sick or well. I don’t count.” Action presented itself, a course of action sang clean, through all the noise. He opened his eyes and laughed close to her face, and he felt a tinny jingling excitement. He walked over to the telephone in the front hall and dialed the newspaper office.

Caroline came to stand beside him, her hand making tentative gestures of affection toward him. He ignored her. “What are you doing?” she finally

asked. “At least tell me what you’re doing.”

“I’m quitting my job. I can’t make it any more.”

“Don’t, Charles, please. This isn’t good. Are you teasing?”

Teasing, did she dare ask teasing? “Wilson in sports,” he told the switchboard, thinking that it was fitting and proper to give the satisfaction to Wilson who also did not count at all. Heat rose in his face and filled his head and eyes and he felt tenderly sorry for himself. “You and Loeb, you and your boyfriend, you never gave a damn what you were doing to me. Well now you know.”

Just before Caroline brought her hands to her eyes, he saw her face begin to sag and break. Never mind about that, he’d not fall for that again. She walked away. He looked beyond her to the living room. The sunshine was too bright, unpleasant, dust motes swam in the glare. But the pursuit of darkness was Caroline’s way, not his. He would not close the curtains, he would choose another way. As he waited for Wilson, many books and stories, many case histories and even ancient family legends, pictures and fantasies of chaos and misery crossed his memory, and in each Charles Andress was the star. Yet none quite suited him, and so, waiting, he wondered on what downward spiral he would set himself—how, if not in her darkness or another’s shriek, he would find his own escape. What awfulness awaited him? What safety?

But at once he faltered, for already he began to hear the sound of his

wife's weeping, her shattered sobs. Not fair, not fair, he protested, this is my time. As Wilson said "Who is this?" Charles vowed he would not hang up the telephone, not surrender. But of course he did. All games must end for Charles. After all, he was who he was, and neither mockery nor longing changed that. Regretfully, he acknowledged that he was unable to desert himself or her.

She did not look up at the bang of the telephone. Her face was against her knees, her hands raised as if warding off blows.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I love you, Caroline."

Later, he thought, a small lie to his boss would tide him over, provide an excuse for his strange behavior. I thought I had something serious, he imagined himself saying, but it was only a bellyache. And tomorrow words would surely fall more easily upon the yellow paper, more quickly, better words, for surely today he had finally come against the limits of himself. And yet tomorrow night perhaps—he had to face this—he would again attempt to ensnare his wife in revelations; but his attempts would be half-hearted, useless, would not persuade even himself. And he would no doubt be furious again at his failure just as he had been today, but not so furious as today. He would again grow quiet as now he had, and sooner quiet than today. Eventually he might even forbear, since no other course was possible for him. He was, after all, a limited man. Limited. Momentarily he ached with that

knowledge. And then he bestirred himself to go to his wife, for it was she who was sick, before whom opened darkness and flux, who needed him, toward whom he had a duty to perform. Whom he loved. Gently he stroked her cheek and allowed himself to ask silently, Well, she is sick, isn't she?