LEE PATON

In 1958, the Off-Broadway movement was at its height. There were one or two theatre organizations like Circle in the Square or The Living Theatre with more-or-less permanent staffs and buildings of their own, but for the most part, every Off-Broadway production was a fly-by-night operation. Each new show represented an altogether new and separate theatrical venture. Someone, usually a young man with a rich father or wealthy connections, would decide he wanted to be a producer. He would find a script, raise some money, rent a theatre, hire a director, actors, set and costume designers, press agent, box office staff, and anyone else necessary to get a show on. Then, after three or four weeks of intensive rehearsal, the play opened for the critics from the daily newspapers. In a few rare instances the reviews were favorable and the show went on to a long and profitable run, but more often the reviews ranged from bad to awful and the play closed on Saturday night. After this some other young man with a rich father or wealthy connections would come along and the whole process would be repeated all over again.

There were a few hardy souls, however, who managed to produce show after show within this makeshift framework. They dreamt continually of the day when they would be financially secure, but in the meantime, they spent most of their energies trying to beat the problem of the steadily rising rents. In order to accomplish this they would get together just enough money to remodel an old dance hall or an abandoned movie house. By dint of hard work and sheer physical labor, they would manage to convert it into some semblance of a theatre. Then they would produce one or two shows, lose all their money, be forced to function in the capacity of landlords for a time, and when they proved unsuccessful at this, they would let the owner of the property foreclose while they moved on to build another theatre elsewhere. It would be hard to say what motivated them. Very few of them got rich – more often they were close to starvation. In many instances they were just one step ahead of the law. But nothing seemed to daunt them. Some bright and gem-like flame burned within them that no amount of adversity could extinguish.

One of the first of this intrepid band was Lee Paton. Still in her twenties, she had been part of the Off-Broadway movement almost from its inception. She had built three theatres, she had already lost two of them, and she was in danger of losing the third. She had presented the plays of Becket and Ionesco long before both of these men had become fashionable in this country. But perhaps her greatest success was a drama of social protest called Quits, the first of the plays by England's generation of angry young men to be produced on this side of the Atlantic. It had opened to the usual indifferent notices, but by her own will power and very little else, Lee had managed to keep it running for over six months. She blew up every harsh and adverse criticism she could find and emblazoned them across the front of her theatre. DRIED

SHAVING LATHER was printed in enormous letters on a sign over the marquee.

But after Quits, Lee had never again managed to get a successful show in her theatre. She had produced two or three plays which had opened to bad notices and quickly closed. At present the theatre was dark, and she had gotten in touch with Sam Cohn to see if he might be interested in the Sullivan Street Playhouse for my play, The Saintliness of Margery Kempe. Accordingly, when the rewrites were completed and casting had begun, he called her and made an appointment for us to meet at four-thirty on the following afternoon.

The next day, Sam, accompanied by James Price and myself, arrived at the Sullivan Street Playhouse right on time, but when he called up the back stairs to Lee's apartment above the theatre to tell her we were there, she shouted back that she was on the telephone. She said that she would be down in a minute and that we should take a look around the theatre while we were waiting for her. I flicked a few light switches but when no lights came on, we went into the deserted theatre and sat in darkness waiting for Lee to arrive. The heat was turned off so that the building was freezing cold, and we had to hug our overcoats to our bodies to keep warm.

About half an hour later, Lee came clattering down the stairs. She was wearing bedroom slippers and a ratty coat of some sort of imitation fur. In her hand she was carrying a flashlight. From the little bit that I could make out in its flickering beam, I could see that Lee was slightly given to plumpness, but in spite of this, she was a pretty girl with an open, friendly face whose most remarkable feature was her two enormous brown eyes. “Hello, dears,” she said.

“Don't tell me she's one of those,” I thought.

“I'm sorry to have kept you waiting,” Lee went on, “but I had a very important phone call.”

“Yeah, she's one of those, all right,” I thought.

“That's OK,” said Sam. “Do you know John Wulp?”

“No, I don't believe we've met,” said Lee, shaking my hand.

“And this is our director, Jim Price,” said Sam.

“How do you do?” said Lee. “I'm so pleased to meet you. I've heard a great deal about you from Sam.”

“Well,” said Sam, when the introductions were over.

“Well?” said Lee.

“So how have you been?” Sam knew Lee slightly from his job at William Morris.

“I'm fine.”

“You sound as though you've got a cold.”

“A little sore throat, that's all. I'm fine.”

“Why don't you turn on some heat in here?”

“I don't like a building to be too hot,” said Lee. “Did you take a look around?”

“I couldn't get the lights to go on,” I said.

“Isn't it silly?” said Lee. “The electrical company turned off all the lights.”

“Didn't you pay your bill this month?” said Sam.

“Honey, I know I paid my bill,” said Lee. “But as usual, the electric company has its records all fouled up and they insist that I didn't.”

“What will you do?” said Sam. “It's pretty hard to argue with the electrical company.”

“Well, they'll simply have to turn the lights back on again,” said Lee. “I mean, this is silly. My God, I'm not going to pay my electrical bill twice.”

The lining in Lee's coat was tattered and torn, and as she spoke, she kept tugging away at a scrap of material that had come loose.

“How are the rewrites coming?” said Lee, in an attempt to change the subject.

“They're done,” said Sam.

“And are you pleased with them?” she asked me.

“Lee, I think this play is going to be exciting,” I said.

“Yes?”

“I think it's going to be good.”

“Oh honey, I'm so happy for you,” said Lee. “Have you decided on a theatre yet?”

“We're looking now.”

“But you haven't decided yet?”

“We're thinking about The York.”

“The York's all wrong,” said Lee. “I think it would be a great mistake to do this play in The York.”

“Why?” said Sam.

“You don't want to do this play on a proscenium stage,” said Lee. “The way I look at it this play should be wild. It needs all the imagination in staging it can get.”

“Have you read the script?” I asked.

"Of course," said Lee. "Do you think I'd be talking to you right now if I hadn't?"

"Where do you think this play should be done?" said Sam.

"You know where I think it should be done," said Lee.

"This theatre's a little small," I said.

"Your play doesn't want to be done in a bigger theatre," said Lee. "It cries out for intimacy."

"I've never thought of the play in terms of an arena stage," I said.

"It was written for an arena stage," said Lee. "You know I'm not saying these things because I'm trying to sell you a theatre. You know that, don't you, honey? You know I love your play. I'm anxious to see that it gets the sort of production it deserves."

"Sure, I know that," I said.

"You can do marvelous things with this theatre," said Lee. "You remember when we did Quits? My God, David Brooks had actors rushing up and down the aisles, making entrances from all over the theatre. That's the sort of excitement your play needs.

David Brooks was a handsome musical comedy leading man. He had played the male lead in such shows as Bloomer Girl and Brigadoon. Apparently he had aspirations of becoming a director, and he had done a couple of shows with Lee Paton.

"Your play needs to be wild," said Lee. "After all, you've got that scene with the horse."

"We've cut the horse," I said.

"All my efforts have been to make the play more realistic," said James Price.

"Realistic?" said Lee. "My God, this theatre is perfect for a realistic play."

"I wish I could see a little bit more," said Sam.

"Take a look around," said Lee. She turned on the flashlight and hastily ran its beam around the theatre, revealing peeling plaster and walls that were badly in need of a coat of paint.

"Oh, I love this little theatre," said Lee. "You know, David Brooks and I practically built this place with our bare hands. I personally screwed every one of these seats in place."

"How many people does your theatre seat?" said Sam.

"A hundred and fifty," said Lee. "That's another advantage. You don't have any problems with the unions. You can hire a union press agent if you want, but there are no union men backstage or in the box office. Think how much money

you can save right there."

"Aren't the seats a little uncomfortable?" said James Price.

"I don't think so," said Lee. "I prefer a plain, wooden seat to an upholstered one. A wooden seat gives you more support for your back."

"How much is the weekly rent?" said Sam.

"Well, I'd rather not say a set amount," said Lee. "If you're interested, maybe we could work our some sort of deal."

"What do you mean?"

"How much money do you have set aside in your budget for rent?"

"That depends on the theatre."

"I'll tell you what. You give me four thousand dollars down, and I'll let you take over a half-interest in the lease on this theatre."

"Four thousand dollars!"

"You'd have to pay nearly that amount in advance rental on any Off-Broadway theatre."

"How long does the lease run?"

"Eight years."

"Eight years! What do I want an eight-year lease for?"

"Well, you'll probably be doing other shows," said Lee. "I mean, it's foolish to rent a theatre for just four to six weeks. You've got to have a long-range plan if you want to succeed Off-Broadway."

"Lee, you're not in some sort of financial trouble?" said Sam.

"No, honey. Why do you ask?"

"I was just wondering."

"There are no debts on this theatre, if that's what you're worrying about. All my bills are paid up."

"Except the electricity and heat."

"I explained about the electricity."

"But you've only just met me. How do you know you want me for a partner in your lease? How do you know we'd get along?"

"I'm sure we could work together," said Lee. "I wouldn't make this offer to everybody. It's just that I love this

particular play so much." This must have sounded unconvincing even to Lee herself, for she immediately switched her tactics. "You couldn't make a better deal," she said. "For only four thousand dollars you get an eight-year lease on this theatre." And then, almost as an afterthought, she quickly added, "And the rent is only four hundred a week."

"You mean I have to pay a weekly rent in addition to the four thousand?" said Sam.

"Of course. What did you think? My God, you have to pay the rent each week?"

Sam was flabbergasted. "But I can rent any Off-Broadway theatre in New York for five hundred dollars a week with only six week's advance, and I don't have to pay any additional rent during those six weeks," he said.

"Yes, but how many Off-Broadway theatres are as nice as this one?" Lee countered.

A gelatin came loose from one of the overhead lights and fluttered to the floor.

"I'll have to think it over," said Sam.

"Will you call me tomorrow?" said Lee. "You have my number."

"Yeah, sure. I'll call you tomorrow."

"You won't forget?"

"I won't forget."

Later, when Sam, James Price, and I were standing on the sidewalk waiting for a taxicab, Sam turned to me with a look of disbelief upon his face. "That woman's mad!" he said.

Sam began serious negotiations to rend The York.

I was in total agreement with Sam's estimate of Lee, and for this reason, I was vaguely annoyed with myself when I found that I could not get her out of my mind. Everything about the girl was obviously phony from her ratty fur coat to her preposterous business deals. Moreover, I classified her among the bohemians, a strange tribe of people in whose presence I felt distinctly ill-at-ease. And yet, if she talked big, it was because her chances of success were so slim. She was a curious combination of bravery and vulnerability, and the fact that I could not clearly define my felling made it doubly difficult to forget her.

In spite of the failure of The Saintliness of Margery Kempe, I still thought I wanted to write more than anything else in the world. During the day, as I sat at my desk at This Week magazine whiling away the hours, I would make elaborate outlines in my head of the plays and novels I was convinced would free me from my economic bondage, but when

I got home at night, my energies always seemed to fail me so that I could not bring myself to sit down at my typewriter and get to work. Instead, I would eat my evening meal alone, and then, after I had done the dishes, after I had fallen asleep over a book and drowsed for a time, I would get up, throw cold water on my face to revive myself, comb my hair and brush my teeth, and go out to make the rounds of the neighborhood bars. It wasn't that I liked to drink especially – I never had more than a few beers in the course of an evening – but the bars were always filled with other young people like myself so that I usually could find someone with whom to while away a couple of hours in idle talk.

But then, just when my fortunes seemed at their lowest ebb, Lee Paton came back into my life. It had been nearly six months since our first meeting, and I had almost completely forgotten her. I certainly wasn't expecting ever to see or hear from her again, when one Saturday morning around 7:30 my telephone rang. I had been up late the night before so it awakened me out of a sound sleep. I got up out of bed, walked with my eyes still closed into the other room where the telephone was ringing, fumbled for it, found it, and dragged it back to bed with me before I answered.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, dear, how are you?" said a cheerful voice a the other end of the line.

"Huh?" I said,

"Oh, I'm sorry," said the voice. "I woke you up, didn't I? I called early to make sure I got you before you went out for the day."

I looked at my watch and winced. "Who is this?" I asked.

"It's Lee," said the voice.

"Lee who?" I said.

"Lee Paton, you remember me?" said the voice.

"Lee, of course I remember you," I said. "Forgive me. I'm not awake yet."

I poked a pillow behind my back and sat up in bed. I shook my head in an effort to bring myself to my senses. "What are you doing calling at this hour?" I said.

"No special reason," said Lee. "I just wanted to find out how you're doing."

"I'm doing all right."

"Yes?"

"I'm writing a new play," I lied.

"How's it coming?"

"It's coming all right, I guess."

"Yes?"

"I'll show it to you when it's done."

"I'm dying to read it."

The conversation came to a halt. "How are you doing?" I said.

"Just fine," said Lee

I couldn't think of anything more to say.

"John," said Lee. "I was wondering if you'd be willing to do me a favor."

"Here it comes," I thought. "Sure," I said. "What is it?"

"Do you suppose you could loan me a hundred and fifty dollars until Thursday?" said Lee.

"A hundred and fifty dollars!" I said.

"It's just until Thursday. I have a check coming in on Thursday and I'll pay you back then."

"What do you need a hundred and fifty dollars for?"

"Oh, it's that stupid electric company again. I owe them a hundred and fifty dollars and they say they're going to turn off my electricity unless I pay them right away. I don't seem to be able to make them understand that this is a theatre and we've got a performance tonight."

"Isn't there someone else you could ask?" I said. "A hundred and fifty dollars is a lot of money for me right now."

"I know," said Lee. "I hated to call you, but I heard you had a steady job and I thought, just this once, you might be willing to help me out. I'll pay you back by Thursday."

I thought for a minute. I knew there was little likelihood of my ever getting the money back, but impulsively, I decided to give Lee the hundred and fifty dollars she needed.

"All right," I said.

"You mean you'll do it?" said Lee.

"I should have my head examined," I said. "I don't have this sort of money to throw around."

"Oh, honey, I can't tell you how much I appreciate this," said Lee. "You don't need to worry about getting the money back either. I promise I'll pay you on Thursday, just as soon as this check I'm expecting comes in."

"I'd just like to know one thing," I said. "Have you been eating regularly?"

Lee didn't answer.

"Get dressed," I said. "I'm coming over to buy you breakfast."

Lee's apartment over the Sullivan Street Playhouse had to be seen in order to be believed. It was a rat's nest of old scenery, props, and costumes, with a dirty mattress on which I presumed that Lee slept spread out on the floor in one corner. From the surroundings it was apparent that Lee fancied herself not only as a theatrical producer, but also as an artist, for scattered here and there in the clutter I could see a series of enormous paintings executed in a dribble technique from which hollow-eyed and emaciated faces stared out at me. When I arrived, there was one other person in the room, a young black man dressed in a sweatshirt, blue jeans, and sneakers, but who this young man was or what function he served in Lee's life, I never figured out because Lee never introduced him and he never said a word during all the time that I was there.

On this second meeting, Lee was the same curious mixture of honesty and fakery that she had been on the first. She tried to make it sound as though her calling me was just a matter of chance. She said there were any number of people who would have been glad to come to her financial aid, but for some unexplained reason she had picked my name out of the blue. She told me that she could always get the money she needed from gangsters, but that she didn't like to deal with them. All the while she was speaking, I could imagine her desperately thumbing through her address book, calling every name and number she could find without success, until as a last faint hope she had tried me. But even though I was again annoyed by her all too obvious lies, at the same time, I was again impressed by the cheerfulness with which she tried to conceal the desperate nature of her plight. And no matter what my personal feelings about her, now that I was here, I had no choice but to give her the hundred and fifty dollars I had promised her.

While Lee rummaged through the debris of the apartment searching for a pen with which I might write a check, I nervously sat upon a gilded papier mache throne and waited for her – "Just make yourself at home," she said. It took her quite a while before she was able to locate a pen that worked at all, and even then that one was gnawed in two. But eventually, by spitting on it several times and shaking it violently, I was able to get the check written and handed it to her.

"Oh, honey, I don't know how to thank you for this," said Lee. "You've saved my life."

"You needn't bother to thank me," I said. "Just make sure you pay me back. I know you probably thought I was kidding when I told you on the telephone that I don't have any money to throw around, but believe me, that hundred and fifty dollars is just about all I have in this world."

There must have been something in the tone of my voice that forced Lee to pay attention to me. She had been reading the check, almost as if she couldn't believe her eyes, but now she looked up at me. "Don't you really have any

money?" she asked.

"What do you think I've been saying all along? Right now I've got exactly five dollars and forty-three cents in my bank account."

"But why would you do this for me? After all, you don't even know me."

"I guess I'm just a soft touch. Please don't destroy my faith in human nature."

This must have been more of an obligation on Lee that she was willing to bear. "I can't take this," she said, suddenly handing my check back to me.

"Don't be silly," I said, refusing to take it. "You need it more than I do."

Lee seemed on the verge of tears. "Oh, honey, I think this is one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me," she said. "I just wish there was something I could do for you." She thought for a moment, and then her face lit up with inspiration. "Wait a minute!" she said. "I have it."

I watched, bewildered, while Lee again rummaged through the debris, until at last, under a pile of old clothes, she found a camera in a brown leather case. "Here, I'd like for you to have this," she said, holding it out to me. "It's the only thing I own that has any value."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a Leica," said Lee. "It used to belong to my father. He was a professional photographer in Seattle where I grew up. After he died, I kept this camera to remember him by, but now I'd like for you to have it."

I hesitated. "That's terribly nice of you," I said. "But I couldn't take your father's camera. What if something should happen to it?"

"Go ahead, take it," said Lee, forcing it on me. "This way if for some reason I don't pay you back on Thursday, you can always pawn it and get a hundred and fifty dollars. I'm sure it's worth at least that much."

"You know I could never do that," I said.

"Well, then maybe you'll find some use for it," said Lee. "I mean, it's silly to have a perfectly good camera just lying around. My father would prefer it if he know someone was using it. He was an artist, you know what I mean? – he was a <u>real</u> artist. Whatever artistic abilities I have I inherited from him."

I stood holding the camera in my hand. As I faced Lee over the wreckage of her life contained within that shabby room, I felt that the camera was some sort of pledge between us, and the young black boy silently observing us was a witness to that pledge. Both Lee and I were lonely people. Both of us had known defeat. The money that I had offered to

her and the camera she had offered to me were our separate tokens that we had recognized this need in each other and responded to it. “I'll tell you what I'll do,” I said. “I'll just hold onto this camera until you can pay me back.”

“It's a deal,” said Lee.

We shook hands on our agreement, and then I slung the camera over my shoulder. “Well, it looks like I'm a photographer now,” I said. My face broke out in smiles. “Come on,” I said, taking her by the hand. “Let's get some breakfast, and after that I'll take your photograph. You'll be my very first subject.”

And so, Lee and I went out and had a hearty breakfast of scrambled eggs and bacon, and then, on our way back to the Sullivan Street Playhouse, we bought a roll of film and I loaded the camera. When I was all set, Lee posed for me, grinning broadly, in front of the theatre she and David Brooks had built. But all her brave smiles could not hide the fact that she had fallen on hard times. The current attraction at her theatre was obviously on its last legs. The hand-painted canvas banners she had made to advertise it had been torn by the wind and blurred by the rain, so that now it was almost impossible to read the name of the show. While I was taking the picture these remnants of Lee's former aspirations flapped and fluttered in the breeze like pennants of a lost crusade. I also noticed that in several of the windows of the building the panes of glass were missing.

Lee Paton

Lee never paid me back on Thursday, but then, I never tried to claim my debt either. Even if I never saw my hundred and fifty dollars again, I regarded the camera she had given me as adequate compensation for my loss. More important, I looked upon Lee as a friend. We called each other on the telephone from time to time, and occasionally, if I had any money to spend, we went out to dinner or a show.

But then, just as I had feared, Lee lost the Sullivan Street Playhouse for non-payment of rent, and after that she began a trek from one cheap hotel room to the next. Whenever I tried to get in touch with her, it seemed she had always moved just a few days before, so that after a while I pretty much lost track of her altogether. The next thing I heard of her was when I picked up the Theatre Section of The New York Times one Sunday and read in the headlines that she was planning to present Mother Courage on Broadway.

I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw this announcement. Mother Courage was regarded as Bertold Brecht's finest play. Rumors from abroad hailed it as a masterpiece, a theatrical tour-de-force requiring all the finest dramatic skills to bring it off. But even so, the play was so costly to mount that most of the leading Broadway producers had shied away from it as a risky commercial venture at best, and therefore Lee's audacity in even attempting it at all was to be wondered at. The odds against her chances of success were staggering, but no matter what the predictions of more seasoned showmen might be, she was convinced that she was going to recoup her fortunes with this show. There were some who called her stupid and some who called her mad, but no matter what the opinion of others, she plunged ahead with her plans, seemingly unaware of the pitfalls that surrounded her.

Over the next several weeks a steady stream of news items about the show appeared in the theatrical columns. Several of my former acquaintances were associated with Lee in the production. Bobby Willing had again invested a large sum of his mother's money and nominally he held the position of co-producer, while Max Brightman was the company lawyer and business manager. Somehow, between the three of them, they managed to raise enough money to mount the show. They got a promise from the Shuberts on a theatre. Katina Paxinous was imported from Greece to play the leading role. And, most incredible of all, David Brooks was engaged as the director. Apparently the only thing Lee neglected to do was get a clear title to the rights, because a few days before the play was set to go into rehearsal, the author's estate brought suit to prevent the production and the whole matter was taken to court.

I had re-established contact with Lee by telephone long before this, and I just happened to call her on the day her briefs were submitted. She sounded so low I asked her if she would like to go out for lunch, and when she said that she

would, I agreed to pick her up at her office around one o'clock. I knew that Lee had rented an office but I had never seen it before. When I arrived, it turned out to be a dingy little cubicle at the end of a long hallway in a building just off Times Square. Mother Courage was stenciled upon the glass door in big, gold letters.

In the months that I hadn't seen Lee, she had grown to an enormous size, but there was still something warm and appealing about her. She was all alone in the office and for a few minutes there was some debate as to whether or not she should leave the telephone unanswered in case there was some word from the court that very afternoon, but I finally persuaded her that it was all right to go.

When we got to the street it turned out to be snowing. It was just a few days before Christmas, so that carols blared from loudspeakers in the department stores and on street corners rheumy old men in ill-fitting Santa Claus costumes and straggly beards rang their bells. We decided to go to the Blue Ribbon and Lee took hold of my arm as she picked her was through the snow and slush dressed in a coat that was much too thin and a pair of black ballet slippers.

As we walked along, Lee explained away the legal complications of Mother Courage with the same assurance she had once told me my loan would be repaid in a few days. To hear her tell it, the other side didn't have a legal leg to stand on. The author's estate was simply trying to make life difficult for her.

“Oh, I've learned so much from the production of this show,” she said. “I've learned just how mean some people can be.”

By now we had reached the restaurant and been seated opposite each other at a table in a small side room whose dark paneled walls had been festooned with garlands and hung with wreaths. Even the usually dour German waiters seemed to have been affected by the gaiety of the holiday season and they moved with an unaccustomed sprightliness.

But the whole effect was wasted on Lee. It was obvious that her mind was far away in the courtroom where, at that very moment, her case was probably being argued. The more she spoke, however, the more unsound her position appeared to be, and I began to fear that any judge would be forced to rule against her. It seemed to me that she was peculiarly blind to what I regarded as the real source of her difficulties, and as her friend I felt it was my duty to attempt to open her eyes for her.

“I have a feeling there's more to this case than you realize,” I began. “Let's face it, Broadway producers haven't exactly been trampling over each other trying to get the rights to this show. I can't believe that anyone with a brain in his head would attempt to block a first-class production of this play unless he had some pretty good reason.”

“But what more could he want?” Lee protested. “I've got the money. I've got the theatre. I've got a big name star,

and certainly no one could ask for any better director than David Brooks."

"Now you've put your finger on the sore spot."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I may be entirely wrong, but I can't believe that any self-respecting playwright would let David Brooks touch one of his plays with a ten-foot pole."

"John, what are you saying? My God, David Brooks is a brilliant director. I mean, I've worked with him before. I know what he can do. I'm absolutely convinced that all he needs to become the hottest director on Broadway is one big break."

"Lee, you're not in love with this guy, are you?"

"What makes you ask a question like that?"

"I've just been putting two and two together. After all, you have done quite a few shows with him. You did build that theatre together. And certainly only a mother or someone who was in love with him could be so blind to David Brooks' faults as to mistake him for a brilliant director, much less a competent one."

"Well, it is true that I'm fond of him, but that has nothing to do with my decision to use him for this show."

"Where have I heard those very words before?"

"You're so smart, aren't you? All right, if you must know, David and I have been living together on and off for years. I mean, it isn't any secret. I thought everybody knew by now."

"And lately it's been more off than on."

"I wouldn't say that exactly."

"Oh come on, Lee, you can level with me."

"Ok, wise guy, have it your way. I suppose there's no denying the fact that we haven't been hitting it off for the last year or so."

"I see it all now," I said. "You thought if you produced this play for him it might bring the two of you back together again. And so you went barging forward without even bothering to secure the rights. Lee, you should have your head examined."

"Oh, Johnny, don't bawl me out. I don't know whether you've ever been in love, I mean really in love. But if you ever have been, you'll know what I've been through. You see, I don't care that David says he isn't sure whether or not he loves me any more. I still love him, and that's all that counts so far as I'm concerned. I'd do anything to hold on to him,

anything."

"And I suppose it doesn't bother you that the person you're in love with might not exist at all. Apparently it never even occurred to you that he might be nothing more than a figment of your imagination. Certainly it would be difficult to find one other person in New York who sees David Brooks the way you do."

"If you're still trying to tell me he isn't talented, I know you couldn't be more dead wrong."

"I'm beginning to realize what people mean when they say that love is blind. I don't see why they fail to mention it's also deaf and dumb."

"But you do know what I'm saying," said Lee. "You do understand the way I feel."

"Yes, I understand," I said.

Quite a few months went by before I heard from Lee Paton again. I had been up late the night before, and I had just dozed off when the telephone rang. I reached for it with my eyes still closed. "Hello," I muttered, only half awake.

"Hello, John," said a cheerful voice on the other end.

I had to think for a minute before I realized it was Lee. I hadn't heard from her since the previous Christmas. I knew that since that time her law case had dragged on interminably without solution, but that was about all.

"Lee, is that you?" I asked.

"My God, I woke you again, didn't I?" said Lee. "I thought surely you'd be up by now."

"What time is it?"

"It's after twelve."

"I was up all night," I said, by way of explanation for the fact that I was still in bed at such an hour.

"Aren't you something?" said Lee.

I yawned and stretched myself.

"Johnny, what are you doing today?"

"Nothing much. Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering whether I could see you."

"I don't have any money," I said.

"I don't want to borrow any money," said Lee. "My God, that isn't the only reason I call you."

"No, I just meant I don't have enough money to take you to lunch. I blew practically every cent I'd set aside for the

weekend last night. I've only got a few cents left in my pocket."

"I've got money. I just want to see you."

"Is something the matter?"

"I'd rather not discuss it over the telephone," said Lee, cryptically. When I didn't reply immediately, she quickly added, "Please, I need to talk to someone."

Lee sounded so desperate that I didn't have the heart to refuse. "Well, maybe we could have lunch together," I said. "Let's see, where would be a good place to meet? How about the lobby of the Grosvenor?"

"Where's the Grosvenor?"

"Oh, come on. You know where the Grosvenor is. It's where all the old ladies go."

"Thanks. That tells me a lot."

"It's on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Tenth Street, I think," I said, slightly annoyed. My brain was too foggy for me to try to think of all these small details. "Yes, I'm sure it's on the corner of Tenth Street. Take a taxi. You'll find it."

"All right," said Lee. "What time shall I meet you?"

"One o'clock."

"One o'clock."

"You'll be all right until then, won't you?" I asked.

"Yes, I'll be all right," said Lee. She hung up with a giggle.

I left my apartment a little after one o'clock and headed for the Grosvenor. I wanted to arrive a few minutes late because I knew that Lee would not be there on time, but when I finally got to the hotel there was still no sign of her. I went into the lobby and looked around, but all I saw were a few old ladies sitting on the couches. I went outside again and leaned my head against one of the metal poles that supported the canopy over the front entrance. I was still feeling somewhat drained and hungover from my experiences of the night before. Even though it was a dark day, the light hurt my eyes. I took out a pair of sunglasses and put them on. Then I lit a cigarette, but the taste made me so nauseous that I flicked it away after only a few puffs. Finally, I simply stared without focusing on anything at the church across the street.

Just at this moment, Lee came along. She was dressed entirely in black. She had on a black sheath dress and a black raincoat with some sort of floral design upon it in faded yellow and blue. She didn't have on black stockings, for

which I was grateful, and the shoes that she was wearing were very pretty with an open-work design around the edges. "She's got damned nice looking legs," I thought, with some surprise. Although Lee had told me she was dieting – she had even gone to a hypnotist to lose weight – she didn't look any thinner than the last time I saw her.

Neither of us had any particular place in mind to eat, so we decided to walk along until we found one that interested us. Lee linked her arm in mine and we headed in the direction of Eighth Street. As we strolled along, I again asked Lee how she was.

"I'm fine," she said. "And you?"

"I'm fine," I said.

"Yes?" Lee always made it sound like a question.

"It's a fine day," I said, gesturing toward the grey skies. "How could anyone help but be fine on such a fine day?"

"Yes!" said Lee. And then, for no particular reason, she said "Yes!" again.

We passed several hamburger places on Eighth Street, but none of these especially appealed to us. Then I remembered that the sidewalk restaurant at O'Henry's was still open, and the foul weather so exactly suited my mood that I said I thought it might be pleasant to sit out-of-doors. Lee said she didn't mind, and so, after I had warned her that I only had five dollars to spend, we decided to go there.

"We can always charge it to my Diner's Club card anyhow," said Lee. During the time she was trying to raise money for Mother Courage she had gotten a Diner's Club card so that she could take prospective backers out to fancy lunches in expensive restaurants without having to pay immediately. It didn't take her long to accumulate several thousand dollars worth of unpaid bills, but she didn't worry about these because she figured that just as soon as the show went into production she could pay back whatever she owed as a legitimate business expense out of the money she had raised. Now that it seemed more and more unlikely the show would ever be done, she had absolutely no way of meeting her debts, but nevertheless she had gotten so used to living on credit that she couldn't break herself of the habit.

"No," I said, firmly.

"Why not?"

"Well, it just isn't right. After all, you're a woman and I'm a man. I'm the one who's supposed to pay for meals, and everything."

"Oh, Johnny, you're funny," said Lee.

Arm in arm, we sauntered along talking about nothing in particular. When we were very nearly to the restaurant I

turned to Lee and said, “You really are fine?” It was a stupid question and I had no idea why I kept asking it.

“Oh, I'm fine,” said Lee, with a hysterical giggle. “David Brooks has gotten engaged.”

The announcement itself, coupled with Lee offhand manner of making it, struck me with a shock. Lee and I had come to a street corner and the light had turned green so that we were unable to cross. I felt I had to say something although I didn't know precisely what. “Well, that's interesting,” was the best I could do. “How do you feel about that?”

“I just told you,” said Lee. “I feel fine.”

The light changed and we walked across the street and found a table on the sidewalk of O'Henry's. There was no one else sitting out-of-doors, but I rather enjoyed the feeling of being alone. It gave me a curious pleasure to think that the summer had gone and left only the two of us behind. We were both shipwrecked people, castaways clinging to each other for support.

“Isn't this nice?” I said, as soon as we were seated. I was trying to avoid the subject of David Brooks' engagement as long as it was possible.

Lee agreed that it was nice.

A waiter, shivering in his shirtsleeves and straw hat, came to take our orders. I asked the price of everything on the menu while the young man stamped his feet on the pavement and blew on his fingers to keep warm. Finally, I ordered a hamburger because it was the cheapest thing I could find. But when it came to Lee's turn, she said she wanted a steak sandwich whether I could afford it or not. “Now, Johnny, don't be silly,” she said. “If you don't have enough money I'll take care of it.”

“What the Hell!” I thought.

We both ordered Bloody Marys.

“Jesus, Lee!” I said, as soon as the waiter was out of earshot. “I'm scared to death we're going to wind up washing dishes. Either that, or we'll be thrown in jail.”

“Don't worry,” said Lee. “It takes months for the Diner's Club to catch up with you, and even if they did, what could they do to me? I'd simply tell them I'd suffered some financial setbacks recently and they'd just have to be patient until they got their money.”

I looked dubious.

“You just don't understand how American business operates,” Lee blithely went on. “It's all based on a person's earning potential. It's true I don't have much money right now, but I have a terrific earning potential. Just as soon as my

show opens on Broadway, I'll have plenty of money to pay my bills. The Diner's Club is simply advancing me money now, so I'll have the opportunity to make more money later. I'm sure they regard the money I owe then as a loan."

"That's one way of looking at it," I said. "I don't know that the Diner's Club would agree with you."

By this time the waiter had arrived with our orders. Somehow he managed to crowd the Bloody Marys, the hamburger, and the steak sandwich all on the small table, and then he turned on his heels and left immediately, sighing and rolling his eyes towards heaven to register his disapproval at the very idea of anyone eating out-of-doors on such a day. Lee, for her part, didn't seem in any hurry to eat or drink. She just picked at her food and fingered her glass.

"So David Brooks has gotten himself engaged," I said, when I felt I couldn't avoid the subject any longer.

"David Brooks has gotten engaged," said Lee.

"Who's he engaged to?"

"Some girl in the woolen business."

"Some girl in the woolen business, huh? What's her name?"

"Grace."

"Grace?"

"Isn't that something?"

"Grace?" I said again. "And you say she isn't in the theatre?"

"No, she promotes wool. I don't know, she works for some sort of wool foundation."

"How did David Brooks ever meet a girl in the woolen business?"

"I don't know. He's been going with her on and off for over a year now."

"Well, that's fine for David Brooks, isn't it?" I said

"Yes, it's fine for David Brooks," said Lee. She raised her Bloody Mary and stared at it sadly for a few seconds before taking a drink.

I tried to change the subject, but it was no use. Whenever the conversation got away from the topic of her relationship with David Brooks, Lee stared distantly across Sixth Avenue, she pulled at a lock of hair. "Oh Hell, Lee," I said at last. "I don't know what to say. You haven't told me how you actually feel about all this."

"Oh, I'm fine now," she said. "I went through four days there, I'm telling you, but I'm fine now."

"But you still care about him?"

"Yes, I still care about him."

"Ah, love," I said.

After the good reviews came out, there was an initial spurt of publicity for Red Eye of Love. Several newspapers and magazines did follow-up articles about various people involved in the show, with me coming in for more than my share of attention. Life Magazine did a short article on me. My name even appeared in a gossip column of the Daily News romantically linked with some girl I had never met.

But in spite of all the good reviews and all the favorable publicity, Red Eye of Love never made any money. During the first few weeks of the run, the box office receipts were just about equal to the operating expenses but after all, with the approach of warm weather, business began to fall off and it continued to dwindle as the Summer progressed.

I did everything I could to promote the show. I quit my job at This Week Magazine so the I could devote all my energies to keeping it running through the Summer months. Every evening I stood on the street corners in Greenwich Village or in front of movie houses or other Off-Broadway theatres passing out handbills with the reviews of the play reprinted on them. On Monday nights when the theatre would have ordinarily been dark, I showed avant-garde films, I sponsored dance concerts and programs of mime in order to make extra money to meet the weekly expenses of the show. But business never seemed to improve.

Some said it was because we had opened so close to Summer that the show never attracted large audiences. They told me if we could just keep alive until Labor Day, business would get better. Others said it was the location of The Living Theater that kept audiences away. They assured us that if we moved to a theatre that was more centrally located, the number of people wandering in off the street to buy tickets would vastly swell my weekly box office take.

Somehow we managed to keep the show going through the Summer, and then we decided to act upon everyone's advice. Sam and I borrowed enough money to move to The Provincetown Playhouse right in the heart of Greenwich Village, and, over the Labor Day weekend, we made the transfer. The following Saturday, the weather turned suddenly cold and business took such a turn for the better that the house for the second performance was entirely sold out. Encouraged by this sign, Sam and I organized a hasty party in my apartment to celebrate.

It was a wild and desperate party.

Everyone who was in any way connected with the show came, and, of course, they all brought friends. My apartment was so crowded that it was almost impossible to move.

The cast and crew shared our elation at the sudden spurt in business. They were convinced that all the nights when they had played to nearly empty houses were behind them at last. They had endured the hot weather, and now that this ordeal had been passed, they felt bound together by the experience. People who, for one reason or another, had been feuding all summer long made up their differences. Men and women kissed. Men stood with their arms around each other's shoulders. So much liquor was consumed that after a while, all the hugging and kissing became a means of support, and then, because the guests found themselves in such proximity, they sang songs together and joined in close, if boozy, harmony. The party did not break up until nearly five o'clock in the morning.

Lee Paton came by herself, but I didn't have a chance to say more than a few words to her in all the mobs of people. I knew that by now she had given up her struggle to present Mother Courage and the author's estate had assigned the rights to Jerome Robbins, but other than that, I had no information on where she was living or how.

After everyone else had left, however, I discovered Lee sleeping on my bed. I tried to wake her, but without any luck, and so weary as I was, I was forced to spend the night on the couch in my living room.

The next morning, Lee awoke with a shudder. At first she didn't recognize the unfamiliar surroundings of my apartment and for a few minutes she couldn't figure out in whose bed she was sleeping.

"Where am I?" said Lee.

"Good morning, Lee," I said, from the couch in the living room. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Johnny, is that you?" said Lee. "What am I doing in your apartment?"

"Don't you remember?" I said. "You spent the night here."

"My God! What time is it?"

"It's about six o'clock in the morning by my watch."

"Oh, my God. You mean I spent the entire night here on your bed? Where did you sleep?"

"I slept out here in the living room."

"My God!"

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," said Lee, somewhat dubiously.

"No, I mean did you sleep all right?"

"I slept fine."

"I tried to cover you up the best I could. I hope you weren't too cold during the night."

"My God! I can't imagine what happened to me. I've never done anything like this before in my life. Why didn't you wake me?"

"Lee, nobody could wake you," I said. "We all tried, but nobody was able to. You fell sound asleep on all the coats and everybody was shaking you trying to wake you up so they could get their coats and go home, but you were passed out cold."

"My God!" said Lee. "You mean everybody at the party was pawing me? Did I disgrace myself? Did I make a terrible fool of myself?"

"Nobody thought anything about it," I said. "It was that kind of party."

"I swear I've never done anything like this before in my life," said Lee. "It must have been that I was so tired from the amount of work I've been doing lately that all I needed was one drink and it put me to sleep."

"Don't worry about it."

"You have no idea how hard I've been working lately."

"Forget it."

"What time is it?" said Lee.

"I told you," I said. "It's six o'clock in the morning."

"I must look a mess," said Lee. "Johnny, have you seen my handbag any place around?"

Lee appeared in the doorway of the living room, her dress rumpled, her hair disheveled, clutching the blanket that I had thrown over her the night before tightly to her breast.

"It's right here."

"Would you mind handing it to me?"

Lee draped the blanket around her shoulders and sat down on the foot of the couch where I had spent the night. She kept staring straight in front of her and blinking her eyes as if she were having trouble getting them to focus.

"Lee, what the Hell have you got in this thing?" I said when I picked up her large leather handbag that she always carried with her everywhere she went.

"Why?"

"It weighs a ton. I don't see how you lug it around with you."

"Honey, did I give you a present of two bottles of champagne last night at the party?" said Lee.

"Not that I remember."

"That must be what's in the handbag. Look and see."

"You're right," I said. "There are two bottles of champagne in here. No wonder it's so heavy."

"Isn't that dumb of me?" said Lee. "I must have forgotten to give them to you."

"Lee, where did you ever get the money to buy two bottles of champagne?"

"Never you mind."

"And Mumm's Extra Dry at that. How did you know Mumm's was my favorite brand?"

"I just knew."

"Come on, Lee, tell me how you got it. What did you do, rob a liquor store?"

"I have my ways," said Lee, as she reached for her handbag.

"Yes, I know you," I said. "You probably did rob a liquor store, but I don't care how you got it. It might be a little warm, but we're going to have champagne for breakfast. I love champagne for breakfast."

"Aren't we something?"

"It will be like having a party of our own."

"Aren't we <u>just</u> something?"

Lee fished in her handbag until she found a small pocket mirror which she immediately opened and held to the light in such a way that she could see her reflection in it. "My God, I <u>do</u> look a mess," she said.

After this she began fishing in her handbag until she found a comb and then she began combing her hair. In the meantime, I was working the cork out of the champagne bottle. It exploded with a loud pop and champagne began to spill over the top of the bottle and onto the floor.

"Oh, catch it before it spills," said Lee.

I poured two glasses of champagne. "What shall we drink to?" I said.

"I don't know," said Lee. "You name a toast."

"Let's drink to success," I said, raising my glass.

"Oh, Johnny--," said Lee.

I could see that there were tears forming in Lee's eyes. "Why, Lee, what's the matter?" I said.

"Oh, Johnny, I'm such a mess," said Lee.

"You're not still brooding about the last night? I told you no one thought anything about it."

"It isn't only last night. It's everything. Everything is so – horrible."

Lee began to cry.

"I mean, like that little man behind the desk in the hotel where I live," she said, through her tears. "Just because I told him where to get off when he made a pass at me, is that any reason to persecute a poor, defenseless little bird?"

"What man? What bird?"

"He's a horrid little man anyhow – with bad teeth. I can't imagine why he thinks anyone would have him."

"Would you mind calming down just long enough to tell me what you're talking about?"

Lee fished in her handbag until she found a rumpled Kleenex, and then she wiped her eyes and blew her nose in an attempt to bring her emotions under control.

"It isn't as though I haven't been working," she said. "My God, I've never worked so hard in my life. You saw what happened last night. I just passed out because I was so tired. One drink and I passed out. I've never done anything like that before. You know how it is in our business, Johnny. You can sometimes work as hard on the projects that don't work out as those that do. Things just haven't been working out for me lately."

"What sort of trouble are you in now?"

"One week's rent," said Lee. "That's all I owe them – one lousy week's rent. Every other hotel in New York allows you a grace period of more than a week. All the best hotels do that – even the Waldorf. I mean, when you count up all the money I've paid that hotel of mine in rent. You'd think they would be willing to trust me until some money comes in again. I've kept right up in my rent every week for six months now, and I mean, my God, it isn't as though I was trying to cheat them. It isn't as though I was trying to run off without paying my bill."

"Lee, have you been dispossessed from your hotel again?"

"I don't mind that so much," said Lee, avoiding the question. "My God, I can find hundreds of hotels in New York much nicer than that flea bag where I've been staying. What upsets me is their manner of doing it. After all the money I've paid them in rent, I don't think that man on the desk had any right to treat me the way he did. I've a good mind to report him to the police."

"What did he do to you?"

"It isn't me, it's Chipper!" said Lee. "He's holding Chipper a prisoner until I pay my bill. I mean, can you imagine how an experience like this is going to affect a bird like Chipper? You know how sensitive he is. You know how he has to have someone to talk to him. You know how he needs his special diet."

And once again, Lee burst into tears at the thought of her pet parakeet being held a hostage by the desk man in her hotel.

“God damn it, Lee!” I exploded. “I don't have any money any more.”

“I know that, honey.”

“I'm not in the same sort of financial position I was in when I had a steady job at This Week.”

“Honey, I'm not asking you to help me.”

“Well, what am I going to do? I can't let you be thrown out in the street, can I? I can't let you starve.”

Lee didn't answer.

“Do you have any place where you can stay?” I said.

Lee still didn't answer.

“Do you?” I said.

“No,” said Lee, weakly.

“I suppose you can stay here,” I said. “But you'll have to sleep on the couch. It may not be very polite of me, but I'm not going to give up my bed.”

“This couch is fine.”

“It's sort of hard.”

“I like a hard surface to sleep on,” said Lee.

“It's the best I can do,” I said. “This apartment wasn't designed for two people.”

“I won't get in your way, I promise you,” said Lee. “It will probably be only for a few weeks anyhow. I have a friend who's leaving for Florida in a couple of weeks, and maybe she'll let me stay in her apartment while she's gone.”

“Perhaps we could find some work for you around the theatre.”

“I'll do anything.”

“I'll talk to Sam about it.”

“Oh, would you, Johnny?” said Lee. “I'd appreciate that. I'd be willing to do anything. I'm very good in the box office.”

“We'll see what Sam has to say,” I said.

“Chipper is going to love it here,” said Lee. “He'll go crazy when he sees all this sunlight.”

“I forgot all about Chipper,” I said. “How much money do you need to get him out of hock?”

"I'm not exactly sure," said Lee.

"You must know," I said. "How much is one week's rent?"

"Well, actually I owe them for slightly more than one week," said Lee.

"Lee, how many weeks are you behind in your rent?" I said.

"Only three," said Lee. "I mean, that's not very much when you think about it – only three week's rent."

"At how much a week?"

"Twelve dollars."

"So then you owe them thirty-six dollars altogether."

"Plus the phone bill."

"How much does the phone bill come to?"

"The man at the desk says I owe them fifty dollars."

"What do I look like, I'm made of money?" I exploded a second time. "I haven't had a cent to my name since the show opened."

"I know that, honey," said Lee. "I wouldn't ask you to do this for me except that I'm so worried about Chipper."

"Well, I suppose I can scrape the money together somehow," I said.

"I'll pay you back."

"Sure."

"No, I really mean it. I'll pay you back just as soon as I can lay my hands on some money."

"Where have I heard that before?"

"We'd better drink our champagne before it goes flat," said Lee. She dried her tears and picked up her glass.

"Cheers," I said.

"Cheers," said Lee.

We drank our champagne in silence.

When Lee arrived at my apartment that afternoon, she was carrying her large leather handbag stuffed with toilet articles and slung over her shoulder, a small suitcase with a few clothes in it, a battered portable typewriter, her black raincoat over one arm, and a birdcage containing Chipper. These were her only possessions in the world.

Within a few days she was completely ensconced in her new surroundings. She had set up a small working area

within handy reach of the telephone, and here she sat surrounded by telephone directories and theatre party lists, a small card file bulging with names and addresses, her portable typewriter, and Chipper. She had not yet begun work, however, because I had not had a chance to talk to Sam about her. I knew that Sam disapproved of Lee, and I hesitated to mention the subject.

"Johnny, do you think it's a good idea to leave your camera lying around on the bookshelf like that?" said Lee, one morning not long after her arrival. She was idly taking inventory of all the objects in the room.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never thought about it. Why?"

"Well, it's such an invitation for someone to steal. I mean, there are people in and out of the apartment all day long. There's the janitor. There's the cleaning lady."

"Cleo wouldn't steal."

"I just don't think it's safe," said Lee.

"Maybe not," I said. "The way I look at it the camera's insured, and if someone wants it bad enough to steal it, he must need it more than I do."

"You wouldn't feel that way if it actually happened," said Lee.

"It's hard to tell," I said. "I'm not a very religious person, but I believe that getting a camera the way I did was some sort of sign from God, and if the camera was ever taken away from me, well, I suppose that would be some sort of sign from God too."

"I was the first person to pose for you," said Lee. "Do you remember that day in front of the treater?"

"That was a nice picture," I said.

"You never showed me the other pictures you did about a year ago," said Lee.

"I'll show them to you sometime," I said. "I'll have to dig them out. They're around here someplace."

"Did I look so awful?" said Lee. "Is that why you won't show them to me?"

"You weren't the sweet young thing you were in the first photograph," I said. "But you look all right."

Lee Paton

"I must look horrible if you're too embarrassed to show them to me," said Lee.

"You look fine," I said. "I'll show them to you sometime. They're around the apartment someplace."

"Johnny, are you awake?" said Lee.

It was late at night and she had just let herself into the apartment. I had turned out the lights long ago, but I had been unable to sleep and I was just lying in bed with my eyes closed. After a few cool days, the weather had suddenly become hot again.

"Is that you, Lee?"

"If you're asleep, I won't disturb you."

"That's all right. I can't get to sleep anyhow."

Lee came into my bedroom, but she did not turn on the light. She stood by the side of my bed talking to me. "How did it go at the theatre tonight?" she asked.

"Lousy."

"How many people were there?"

"About thirty."

"It's this weather," said Lee. "Who wants to go to the theatre in weather like this. It was so hot today I didn't feel like moving a muscle. I felt actually sick."

"It's always something," I said. "If it isn't the location of the theatre, it's something else. Lee, is this show ever going to make it?"

"You mustn't get discouraged."

"All summer long I kept telling myself if I could just keep the show open until Labor Day everything would be all right."

"It will be, honey. Your business will start to pick up just as soon as the cold weather starts."

"First it was Labor Day, now it's the cooler weather."

"I know what you're going through," said Lee. "I went through exactly the same thing with Quits until the show finally found its audience. My God, some nights the actors played to twenty or thirty people in the early stages of the run. But as soon as word-of-mouth got around business began to pick up and we were sold out every performance for months."

"How much did you finally lose?" I said.

"That isn't the point," said Lee. "The point is that you've got to keep a show running until it finds its audience."

" – Or you're so heavily in debt you have to close," I said. "Either that, or you wind up in jail."

"You've kept the show running this long, you mustn't give up now," said Lee.

"Lee, what the Hell do I think I'm doing?" I said. "What's wrong with people like us that makes us keep plugging away at something when we know it's hopeless. For months now I've grabbed at every little straw in the wind, but business never gets any better. We just keep pouring money back into the show in order to keep it running, when anyone with an ounce of sense would have closed it long ago."

"It will come," said Lee. "I'm telling you, the business with come."

"It's so unfair," I said. "You read the reviews we got. With reviews like that, we should have played to packed houses for years, but audiences have stayed away in droves. We should have been making money hand over fist, but instead we've mortgaged ourselves right up to our ears – we're in debt to everybody. By all the rules we should have had a success on our hands, but somehow it never materialized. It all seems so unfair, especially when you want a success so much you can practically taste it."

Lee said something, but I didn't hear what it was. I was thinking of something else.

"Honey, do you mind if I turn on the light and we talk for a few minutes?" said Lee.

"No, go ahead," I said.

"If the light bothers your eyes, I won't turn it on."

"I don't mind."

Lee turned on the lamp on the dresser and then sat down on the floor, her back resting against the wall.

"Why don't you get a chair from the other room?" I said. "You'd be more comfortable."

"This is fine," said Lee. "I hope you don't mind me keeping you up like this, but something marvelous happened to me today and I just had to talk to someone."

"What's up?"

"Oh, Johnny, I think I've got the money to build a new theatre."

"How did you manage that?"

"You mustn't breathe a word of this to anyone," said Lee. "You promise you won't tell a soul?"

"Who am I going to tell?"

"Promise."

"I promise."

"Well, it isn't altogether definite yet, but I think this man from Pittsburgh is going to put up the whole amount."

"How much do you figure this new theatre of yours is going to cost?"

"I'd say about twenty-five thousand dollars as a rough estimate."

"Wow!"

"That isn't much for an Off-Broadway theatre nowadays. I've been through this whole business so many times before I know how to cut corners."

"And you say this man from Pittsburgh is putting up the entire cost?"

"Isn't that marvelous?" said Lee. "I mean, just as soon as I have my own theatre again, I can get back on my feet. Even if I don't have a show of my own running at the time, I know I won't have any trouble renting the theatre. With the Off-Broadway theatre the way it is today, I'm sure I'll be able to keep it booked solid for fifty-two weeks of the year."

"What's his name?"

"Who?"

"The man from Pittsburgh."

"I'd rather not say."

"How did you get in touch with him?"

"I can't tell you that. You understand I can't divulge my sources of money."

"Well, what sort of person is he?"

"I don't know. I've never met him."

"You've never met him!"

"I've only talked to him on the telephone, but he sounded very nice."

"I should imagine he would sound nice if he offered you twenty-five thousand dollars."

"He's going to be in New York in a day or two and we'll settle the details then."

"Lee, are you sure about this?" I said.

"What do you mean?" said Lee. "Of course, I'm sure. My God, I didn't dream the whole thing up."

"It just sounds pretty fishy too that some guy from Pittsburgh you've never met is going to hand you twenty-five thousand dollars, just like that," I said.

"You think I'm a fool, don't you?" said Lee.

"I didn't say that."

"No, but I can tell. You think I'm a fool."

"I think you're not always as practical as you might be."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, like that whole business with Mother Courage," I said. "That was pretty impractical."

"You mean about the rights," said Lee.

"Not only the rights," I said. "Although God knows it was foolish to try and go ahead with the production without the rights. But I mean the whole business, with David Brooks and all."

"You've never liked David, have you?"

"That's not the point," I said. "I don't know why we always seem to get on the subject of David Brooks anyhow. The point I'm trying to get across to you is that I worry because you let yourself get carried away with things, and then when they don't turn out the way you expect them to, you're hurt."

"I know," said Lee.

"God knows, I hope this man from Pittsburgh comes through for you, but just don't build all your hopes on him," I said.

"I know," said Lee. "I know what you're trying to tell me. Its true that I get excited about things, but that's just because I want so much for them to happen. David might not have been the greatest director in the world, but what you've got to remember is that we built a theatre together. When we worked on a show we were like one person. I could tell what he was thinking even before he said it. Things like that mean something, Johnny. I know that some of my schemes haven't always worked out the way I hoped they would. I know that you never agreed with my choice of director, but remember I was the first person who wanted to do Mother Courage on Broadway at a time when nobody else thought it was a commercial play, and I would have done a good job of it if they'd let me. I know this man from Pittsburgh might not show up with the twenty-five thousand dollars. After all, I'm no fool. I've been around this business for a long time. I've had lots of things fall through before. But no matter what happens to you, you've got to have faith in people and the things you want to do. My God, if I didn't have that, what would I have left? I might as well go out and kill myself. I mean, you've got to keep hoping. You've got to keep trying."

"Get rid of her!" said Sam Cohn. He was talking with me in the lobby of The Provincetown Playhouse.

"Lee's only going to be staying with me for a couple of days," I said.

"Yeah, and then what's she going to do?"

"I don't know. She's got some friend who's giving her an apartment."

"Giving?"

"Well, lending. I don't know. This friend is going to Florida for a couple of months, or something."

"Get rid of her," said Sam. "I'm warning you to get her out of your apartment fast before she's had a chance to move in or else you're going to have her on your hands for good."

"I can't just dump her in the street," I protested.

"That's her problem," said Sam. "What are you, the Salvation Army? I don't see how you can stand to have her around anyhow. She'd make me nervous – fat slob. She's bounced checks all over town. She's borrowed money from everybody I know. Did she ever pay you the two hundred she borrowed from you?"

"I'm not worried about it."

"No, that's two hundred dollars you'll never see again."

"It's closer to five hundred now."

"Well, then you're an even bigger chump than I thought you were."

"I don't expect to get the money back," I said.

"Under the circumstances, I'd say that's wise," said Sam. "I wouldn't leave any small change lying around the apartment either if I were you."

"Lee wouldn't steal."

"I wouldn't put it past her."

"No, I'm sure that Lee's honest. You can accuse her of a lot of things, but I'm convinced she'd never steal – not anything big. As a matter of fact, that's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What?"

"I thought maybe Lee could work for us."

"Doing what?"

"I don't know. I thought maybe she could help out in the box office."

"You're out of your mind!"

"Sam, I'm telling you Lee wouldn't steal. I mean, not if she was working for us. I'm sure she wouldn't steal

anything if it was in the line of business."

"I'm not letting that woman near this box office," said Sam.

"Well, maybe she could do promotion work," I said.

"How?"

"I thought she could call people on the telephone and try to line up theatre parties for the show. After all, she does know the Off-Broadway theatre. She's been working at it for years."

"Are you kidding?" said Sam. "As soon as anyone heard it was Lee Paton on the phone, they'd run the other way."

"We need all the help selling tickets we can get," I said.

"If you want her to try and line up theatre parties, let her do it on her own phone," said Sam. "I'm not going to let Lee Paton run up a big phone bill at company expense so she can make a lot of personal calls about whatever crackpot theatre deal she's cooking up now."

"It would only be for a few weeks until she can get on her own two feet again."

"Before it was a few days. Now it's a few weeks."

"I'm only trying to help the poor kid out."

"Poor kid! She knows the score."

"I can't help feeling sorry for her."

"Look, John, you're a nice guy, and all that, but don't let your personal feelings get in your way," said Sam. "For the first time you and I have a success on our hands. We may not be making any money, but we've got a success. We can't afford to get our names linked up with Lee Paton. You know as well as I do that in this business it's who you associate with that counts."

"Lee's always been nice to me," I said.

"What's the matter with you?" said Sam. "Do you have some sort of compulsion to destroy yourself? Do you want to be a failure all your life? Listen to me. I'm talking to you for your own good. You and I have been together a long time. You're just beginning to make it. People are saying nice things about your work as a director on this show. You've got your name and picture in all the newspapers. Why do you want to blow it all on Lee Paton. So she's been nice to you. Do you think it was because she was interested in you, John Wulp? You can bet your sweet ear trumpet it wasn't. She was interested in you because she thought she could get a few bucks out of you. You've got to be realistic in this business. Lee Paton might have been a useful person to know at one time, but not any more. She's had it in New York. She's a deadbeat,

a bum."

"Lee needs someone right now," I said.

"Get rid of her!" said Sam.

"You do understand, don't you, Lee?" I said.

"Of course, honey, I understand," said Lee.

"It's just that I'm not used to living with anybody. Like in the morning, when I go to the bathroom to brush my teeth, I'm not used to seeing a woman's dress drying over the bathtub. I'm not used to seeing a woman's stockings hanging there. Things that can be very upsetting to a man if he's not used to them."

"You don't need to explain, honey. I understand."

"Where will you go?"

"I don't know. I'll have to make a few phone calls. Chipper and I will find a place, won't we, Chipper? It will take me a few days. It's all right if Chipper and I stay here for a few days until we've found a place, isn't it?"

"I feel like Hell."

"Honey, don't. My God you've been wonderful to put us up this long. Chipper and I should be out of your way by the end of the week."

"It's just that I haven't had any time to myself since the play opened. I'm on the go from morning till night trying to promote the show."

"Honey, I understand," said Lee.

"I've got to have some time to lead my <u>own</u> life," I said.

After Lee moved out of my apartment, I lost track of her for a time. When I next heard of her, she was living with Bob Heide.

Bob Heide was also a playwright, although there were no indications that he worked very hard at his craft. He had once sold a script to television, and occasionally a one-act play that he had written would be done as part of a special Monday night performance in some Off-Broadway theatre, but never with any great success. He lived in a seedy two-room apartment in Greenwich Village. He seldom ventured out-of-doors during the day – indeed, he usually slept until noon or one o'clock. But every night around eleven or twelve he would set forth from his apartment to make the rounds of the

Greenwich Village bars and all-night coffee houses. There he could be seen, either slouched over a cup of coffee or standing with a glass of beer in his hand, seldom talking himself, but listening with an amused grin and nodding his head up and down, whether in agreement with whatever the speaker happened to be saying or with the music from the juke box it was impossible to tell. His interest in sex was as vague as his interest in all other areas of life. He professed to be a homosexual, but his visits to the bars and coffee houses seemed to be more for the purpose of being with other people and hearing what was going on rather than anything else. How he supported himself was also a mystery. Apparently he got a small income from his parents, but just enough to keep himself alive.

I had met Bob a couple of times before, so when I spotted him one night, sitting all by himself at the counter of the Riker's on Sheridan Square, I went in and sat down beside him. I ordered a cup of coffee, and when I asked Bob if I could treat him, he ordered a second cup for himself.

"How's Lee?" I said.

"I don't know," said Bob. "I haven't seen her lately." In the glare of the overhead fluorescent lights he looked even more pallid than usual.

"I thought she was staying with you," I said.

"She was, but she moved out," said Bob. "Lately she's been running around with this very undesirable element."

"What do you mean?"

"Haven't you heard what happened to Lee?"

"No, I haven't heard a word from her since she moved out of my apartment. I think she's mad at me."

"I don't know. If she was, she didn't say anything about it. She was working very hard there for a time."

"What was she working on?"

"She was trying to get the money to build this new theatre. You knew about that?"

"I thought some guy from Pittsburgh was going to put up all the dough."

"That fell through."

"Poor Lee, I was afraid it might."

"When the theatre deal fell though, Lee started running around with this very undesirable element."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever meet this painter named Al Gasher?"

"No, I never heard of him. Who is he?"

"He's a painter. Lee's been living with him at his studio ever since the theatre deal fell through."

"How did she hook up with him?"

"I don't know. So far as I'm concerned, he's a very undesirable element."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, hostile. He's always on dope."

"What sort of painter is he?"

"He's an action painter. You know, he's one of these people who throws paint at the canvas."

"No, I mean is he any good?"

"I don't personally like what he does. Personally, I feel he's a very undesirable element."

"You keep saying that. Does he ever sell any of his paintings?"

"I don't think so. I think he had this idea he was going to live off Lee."

"He's in for a shock."

"I don't know. I can't figure the whole business out."

"Is he good-looking?"

"Not especially. He's one of these Village types. You know, with a beard and sandals."

"Well, maybe it's some sort of sexual thing," I said. "Whenever you can't figure out the reason for something it's usually sex. I mean, it must be hard for a girl like Lee to find a man in New York. Nowadays everyone is either queer or so self-centered he isn't interested in anyone but himself. Lee couldn't have gotten much satisfaction out of her relationship with David Brooks, and you and I were no help to her."

"Maybe not, but I don't see how this thing with Al Gasher can last either," said Bob. "So far as I'm concerned, he's a very undesirable element."

A few days later, on a warm Sunday afternoon in October, I saw Lee strolling through Greenwich Village arm in arm with a bearded man wearing sandals who I supposed must be Al Gasher. Lee had dyed her hair a hideous straw blonde color and the dye seemed to have removed all the softness from her hair so that it stood out upon her head like a fright wig. At first I didn't recognize her and we both passed without speaking, but when it finally dawned on me that it was Lee I had just passed, I stopped and turned to talk to her. By this time, however, she had already been swallowed up in the mobs of people out taking the air. I could not tell whether Lee had not seen me or whether she had deliberately passed me by

without speaking. I wondered if she was still angry with me or if she was embarrassed to introduce me to Al Gasher.

I watched Lee from a distance. I was debating whether or not I should go back and speak to her when I saw the two of them, Lee and Al Gasher, stop before the sidewalk fruit stand across from the corner at the intersection of Eighth Street and Sixth Avenue. They stared for a few minutes at the oranges and grapefruits, the apples and pears, the grapes and plums set out on display in their packing cases, and then Al Gasher turned and started to move on, but Lee lingered behind. She looked to see if any of the clerks were watching her, and when she saw that they were all busy with other customers, she reached down, grabbed a bright red apple, and quickly dropped it into her large leather handbag. Then she sauntered on as if nothing had happened.

Months afterward, I received an assignment to do some photographs. I had not had any occasion to use my camera since the day Lee had mentioned it to me, but when I went to the bookcase where she had seen it, the camera was not there. For several days I hunted high and low for it. I hunted in all the cabinets and closets of my apartment. I hunted under the bed, under the dresser, under the sofa and chairs. I removed every book from the bookshelves and hunted behind each one. I practically tore my rooms apart. But the missing camera was nowhere to be found.

I thought of calling the police, but decided against it. There was no sign that my apartment had been broken into and nothing else was missing, so it would have just lead to embarrassing questions if I reported a robbery.

One night, several weeks later, around eleven o'clock, I was walking past the Riker's near Sheridan Square in Greenwich Village. I happened to notice Bob Heide sitting at his accustomed place at the counter having a cup of coffee, so I went in and sat down beside him. (At the time I was thinking of moving to Nantucket. If I were to leave New York, I wondered, and then came back again several years later, would I find Bob Heide still in this same place, still having his nightly cup of coffee? I imagined I would, because even though Bob might age physically – his hair was already beginning to thin and what remained of it was dyed – it seemed unlikely that he would age any further mentally. While his friends grew older and settled into the patterns of a more mature existence, with wives and families, with lovers, with careers, Bob appeared to be doomed always to live in the same one-room apartment, always to wander the streets of Greenwich Village at night, always to frequent the same bars and coffee shops. No matter how old he got to be, it was difficult to picture him as anything but a shy and awkward child, somewhat mentally challenged, but inquisitive in spite of his deficiencies.)

Bob Heide registered no emotion on seeming me again. We made idle conversation for a few minutes about the

state of the theatre and sundry other matters, but then I got down to the one subject that really interested me. “Whatever happened to Lee Paton?” I asked.

“You mean you haven't heard what happened to Lee?” said Bob.

“The last I heard of her was what you told me a couple of months ago.”

“Well, the whole business is very funny.”

“What do you mean?”

“You remember Al Gasher?”

“You mean the one with the beard and sandals?”

“That's the one.”

“No, I never met him.”

“Then how do you know he had a beard and sandals?”

“I saw him, but I never met the guy,” I said. “I saw him one day with Lee, but she pretended not to see me. Go ahead and tell me what happened.”

“Well, as I say, the whole business is very funny. Lee always told me she couldn't stand him. She said the only reason she went with was because she was afraid he would beat her up if she didn't.”

“That doesn't sound like the ideal basis for a relationship.”

“No, but the next thing I knew she was living with him.”

I shook my head. “Lee's crazy,” I said.

“I kept getting these mysterious phone calls late at night. She'd always say she couldn't talk for more than a few minutes because she'd just escaped him and was calling from the pay phone of a nearby drugstore. Either that or she'd talk very low so he couldn't hear her. She told me she was being help prisoner against her will. And then she'd ask if I could loan her five dollars.”

“That sounds like Lee all right.”

“Yes, but that isn't the end of it. The next thing I heard she had married him.”

“Married him!”

“What do you make of that?”

I was at a loss for words. “I don't know,” I said. “She must have cared for the guy more than she was willing to tell you. I mean, you don't marry someone if you can't stand him. Maybe it was some sort of sexual thing between them

and she was embarrassed to talk about it.

"Well, the whole business is very funny."

"What are they going to live on?"

"I don't know. He's one of these action painters – didn't I tell you that? You know, lots of bright paint thrown on the canvas. She was being kept prisoner in his studio."

"But you told me he wasn't any good."

"I never thought much of his paintings, but it probably doesn't make any difference anyhow because they've gone to live with her mother in Seattle."

"Her mother! Seattle! That must be an interesting situation. I wonder what her mother thinks about having an action painter around the house."

"The whole business is very funny."

I thought for a minute. "I can't help wishing her luck," I said at last. "Lee had a rough time of it."

"The last thing I heard she was trying to organize some sort of dramatic group in Seattle."

"Oh well, it will probably do her good to get away from New York for a while. Things had gotten to be impossible for her here."

"Somehow I can't imagine her in Seattle," said Bob. "I have the feeling she'll be back."

"Yes, I suppose so," I said.