Interval in Sunlight, Ray Bradbury

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They moved into the Hotel de Las Flores on a hot green afternoon in late October. The inner patio was blazing with red and yellow and white flowers, like flames, which lit their small room.

The husband was tall and blackhaired and pale and looked as if he had driven ten thousand miles in his sleep; he walked through the tile patio, carrying a few blankets, he threw himself on the small bed of the small room with an exhausted sigh and lay there.

While he closed his eyes, his wife, about twenty-four, with yellow hair and horn-rim glasses, smiling at the manager, Mr Gonzales, hurried in and out from the room to the car. First she carried two suitcases, then a typewriter, thanking Mr Gonzales, but steadily refusing his help.

And then she carried in a huge packet of Mexican masks they had picked up in the lake town of Pátzcuaro, and then out to the car again and again for more small cases and packages, and even an extra tire which they were afraid some native might roll off down the cobbled street during the night.

Her face pink from the exertion, she hummed as she locked the car, checked the windows, and ran back to the room where her husband lay, eyes closed, on one of the twin beds.

‘Good God,’ he said, without opening his eyes, ‘this is one hell of a bed. Feel it. I told you to pick one with a Simmons mattress.’ He gave the bed a weary slap. ‘It’s as hard as a rock.’
‘I don’t speak Spanish,’ said the wife, standing there, beginning to look bewildered. ‘You should have come in and talked to the landlord yourself.’

‘Look,’ he said, opening his gray eyes just a little and turning his head. ‘I’ve done all the driving on this trip. You just sit there and look at the scenery. You’re supposed to handle the money, the lodgings, the gas

and oil, and all that. This is the second place we've hit where you got hard beds.'

'I'm sorry,' she said, still standing, beginning to fidget.
'I like to at least sleep nights, that's all I ask.'

'I said I was sorry.'
'Didn't you even feel the beds?'
'They looked all right.'
'You've got to feel them.' He slapped the bed and punched it at his side.

The woman turned to her own bed and sat on it, experimentally. 'It feels all right to me.'
'Well, it isn't.'
'Maybe my bed is softer.'
He rolled over tiredly and reached out to punch the other bed. 'You can have this one if you want,' she said, trying to smile.

'That's hard, too,' he said, sighing, and fell back and closed his eyes again.
No one spoke, but the room was turning cold, while outside the flowers blazed in the green shrubs and the sky was immensely blue. Finally, she rose and grabbed the typewriter and suitcase and turned toward the door.

'Where're you going?' he said.
'Back out to the car,' she said. 'We're going to find another place.'
'Put it down,' said the man. 'I'm tired.'
'We'll find another place.'

'Sit down, we'll stay here tonight, my God, and move tomorrow.'
She looked at all the boxes and crates and luggage, the clothes, and the tire, her eyes flickering. She put the typewriter down.

'Damn it!' she cried, suddenly. 'You can have the mattress off my bed. I'll sleep on the springs.'

He said nothing.
‘You can have the mattress off my bed,’ she said. ‘Only don’t talk about it. Here!’ She pulled the blanket off and yanked at the mattress.

‘That might be better,’ he said, opening his eyes, seriously.
‘You can have both mattresses, my God, I can sleep on a bed of nails!’ she cried. ‘Only stop yapping.’

‘I’ll manage.’ He turned his head away. ‘It wouldn’t be fair to you.’
‘It’d be plenty fair just for you to keep quiet about the bed; it’s not that hard, good God, you’ll sleep if you’re tired. Jesus God, Joseph!’

‘Keep your voice down,’ said Joseph. ‘Why don’t you go find out about Parícutin volcano?’
‘I’ll go in a minute.’ She stood there, her face red.

‘Find out what the rates are for a taxi out there and a horse up the mountain to see it, and look at the sky; if the sky’s blue that means the volcano isn’t erupting today, and don’t let them gyp you.’

‘I guess I can do that.’
She opened the door and stepped out and shut the door and Señor Gonzales was there. Was everything all right? he wished to know.

She walked past the town windows, and smelled the soft charcoal air. Beyond the town all of the sky was blue except north (or east or west, she couldn’t be certain) where the huge broiling black cloud rose up from the terrible volcano.

She looked at it with a small tremoring inside. Then she sought out a large fat taxi driver and the arguments began. The price started at sixty pesos and dwindled rapidly, with expressions of mournful defeat upon the buck-toothed fat man’s face, to thirty-seven pesos.

So! He was to come at three tomorrow afternoon, did he understand? That would give them time to drive out through the gray snows of land where the flaking lava ash had fallen to make a great dusty winter for

mile after mile, and arrive at the volcano as the sun was setting. Was this very clear?

‘Si, señora, ésta es muy claro, si!’
‘Bueno.’ She gave him their hotel room number and bade him good-by.

She idled into little lacquer shops, alone; she opened the little lacquer boxes and sniffed the sharp scent of camphor wood and cedar and cinnamon. She watched the craftsmen, enchanted, razor blades flashing in the sun, cutting the flowery scrolls and filling these patterns with red and blue color. The town flowed about her like a silent slow river and she immersed herself in it, smiling all of the time, and not even knowing she smiled.

Suddenly she looked at her watch. She’d been gone half an hour. A look of panic crossed her face. She ran a few steps and then slowed to a walk again, shrugging.

As she walked in through the tiled cool corridors, under the silvery tin candelabra on the adobe walls, a caged bird fluted high and sweet, and a girl with long soft dark hair sat at a piano painted sky blue and played a Chopin nocturne.

She looked at the windows of their room, the shades pulled down. Three o’clock of a fresh afternoon. She saw a soft-drinks box at the end of the patio and bought four bottles of Coke. Smiling, she opened the door to their room.

‘It certainly took you long enough,’ he said, turned on his side toward the wall.
‘We leave tomorrow afternoon at three,’ she said.
‘How much?’

She smiled at his back, the bottles cold in her arms. ‘Only thirty-seven pesos.’
‘Twenty pesos would have done it. You can’t let these Mexicans take advantage of you.’

‘I’m richer than they are; if anyone deserves being taken advantage of, it’s us.’
‘That’s not the idea. They like to bargain.’

‘I feel like a bitch, doing it.’
‘The guide book says they double their price and expect you to halve it.’
‘Let’s not quibble over a dollar.’
‘A dollar is a dollar.’
‘I’ll pay the dollar from my own money,’ she said. ‘I brought some cold drinks—do you want one?’

‘What’ve you got?’ He sat up in bed.
‘Cokes.’
‘Well, you know I don’t like Cokes much; take two of those back, will you, and get some Orange Crush?’

‘Please?’ she said, standing there.
‘Please,’ he said, looking at her. ‘Is the volcano active?’
‘Yes.’
‘Did you ask?’

‘No, I looked at the sky. Plenty of smoke.’
‘You should have asked.’
‘The damn sky is just exploding with it.’
‘But how do we know it’s good tomorrow?’
‘We don’t know. If it’s not, we put it off.’
‘I guess that’s right.’ He lay down again.
She brought back two bottles of Orange Crush.
‘It’s not very cold,’ he said, drinking it.

They had supper in the patio: sizzling steak, green peas, a plate of Spanish rice, a little wine, and spiced peaches for dessert.

As he napkined his mouth, he said, casually, ‘Oh, I meant to tell you. I’ve checked your figures on what I owe you for the last six days, from Mexico City to here. You say I owe you one hundred twenty-five pesos, or about twenty-five American dollars, right?’

‘Yes.’
‘I make it I owe you only twenty-two.’
‘I don’t think that’s possible,’ she said, still working on her spiced peaches with a spoon.

‘I added the figures twice.’
‘So did I.’
‘I think you added them wrong.’
‘Perhaps I did.’ She jarred the chair back suddenly. ‘Let’s go check.’

In the room, the notebook lay open under the lighted lamp. They checked the figures together. ‘You see,’ said he, quietly. ‘You’re three dollars off. How did that happen?’
‘It just happened, I’m sorry.’
‘You’re one hell of a bookkeeper.’
‘I do my best.’
‘Which isn’t very good. I thought you could take a little responsibility.’

‘I try damned hard.’
‘You forgot to check the air in the tires, you get hard beds, you lose things, you lost a key in Acapulco, to the car trunk, you lost the air-pressure gauge, and you can’t keep books. I have to drive—’

‘I know, I know, you have to drive all day, and you’re tired, and you just got over a strep infection in Mexico City, and you’re afraid it’ll come back and you want to take it easy on your heart, and the least I could do is to keep my nose clean and the arithmetic neat. I know it all by heart. I’m only a writer, and I admit I’ve got big feet.’

‘You won’t make a very good writer this way,’ he said. ‘It’s such a simple thing, addition.’

‘I didn’t do it on purpose!’ she cried, throwing the pencil down. ‘Hell! I wish I had cheated you now. I wish I’d done a lot of things now. I wish I’d lost that air-pressure gauge on purpose.

I'd have some pleasure in thinking about it and knowing I did it to spite you, anyway. I wish I'd picked these beds for their hard mattresses, then I could laugh in my sleep tonight, thinking how hard they are for you to sleep on. I wish I'd done that on purpose. And now I wish I'd thought to fix the books. I could enjoy laughing about that, too.'

'Keep your voice down,' he said, as to a child.
'I'll be God damned if I'll keep my voice down.'
'All I want to know now is how much money you have in the kitty.'

She put her trembling hands in her purse and brought out all the money. When he counted it, there was five dollars missing.
'Not only do you keep poor books, overcharging me on some item or other, but now there's five dollars gone from the kitty,' he said.
'Where'd it go?'

'I don't know. I must have forgotten to put it down, or if I did, I didn't say what for. Good God, I don't want to add this damned list again. I'll pay what's missing out of my own allowance to keep everyone happy. Here's five dollars! Now, let's go out for some air, it's hot in here.'

She jerked the door wide and she trembled with a rage all out of proportion to the facts. She was hot and shaking and stiff and she knew her face was very red and her eyes bright, and when Señor Gonzales bowed to them and wished them a good evening, she had to smile stiffly in return.

'Here,' said her husband, handing her the room key. 'And don't, for God's sake, lose it.'

The band was playing in the green zócalo. It hooted and blared and tooted and screamed up on the bronze-scrolled bandstand.

The square was bloomed full with people and color, men and boys walking one way around the block, on the pink and blue tiles, women and girls walking the other way, flirting their dark olive eyes at one another, men holding each other's elbows and talking earnestly

between meetings, women and girls twined like ropes of flowers, sweetly scented, blowing in a summer night wind over the cooling tile designs, whispering, past the vendors of cold drinks and tamales and enchiladas.

The band precipitated 'Yankee Doodle' once, to the delight of the blonde woman with the horn-rim glasses, who smiled wildly and turned to her husband. Then the band hooted 'La Cumparsita' and 'La Paloma Azul,' and she felt a good warmth and began to sing a little, under her breath.

'Don't act like a tourist,' said her husband.
'I'm just enjoying myself.'
'Don't be a damned fool, is all I ask.'
A vendor of silver trinkets shuffled by. 'Señor?'
Joseph looked them over, while the band played, and held up one bracelet, very intricate, very exquisite. 'How much?'

'Veinte pesos, señor.'
'Ho ho,' said the husband, smiling. 'I'll give you five for it,' in Spanish.
'Five,' replied the man in Spanish. 'I would starve.'
'Don't bargain with him,' said the wife.
'Keep out of this,' said the husband, smiling. To the vendor. 'Five pesos, señor.'

'No, no, I would lose money. My last price is ten pesos.'
'Perhaps I could give you six,' said the husband. 'No more than that.'
The vendor hesitated in a kind of numbed panic as the husband tossed the bracelet back on the red velvet tray and turned away. 'I am no longer interested. Good night.'

'Señor! Six pesos, it is yours!'
The husband laughed. 'Give him six pesos, darling.'
She stiffly drew forth her wallet and gave the vendor some peso bills.
The man went away. 'I hope you're satisfied,' she said.

‘Satisfied?’ Smiling, he flipped the bracelet in the palm of his pale hand. ‘For a dollar and twenty-five cents I buy a bracelet that sells for thirty dollars in the States!’

‘I have something to confess,’ she said. ‘I gave that man ten pesos.’
‘What!’ The husband stopped laughing.
‘I put a five-peso note in with those one-peso bills. Don’t worry, I’ll take it out of my own money. It won’t go on the bill I present you at the end of the week.’

He said nothing, but dropped the bracelet in his pocket. He looked at the band thundering into the last bars of ‘Ay, Jalisco.’ Then he said, ‘You’re a fool. You’d let these people take all your money.’

It was her turn to step away a bit and not reply. She felt rather good. She listened to the music.
‘I’m going back to the room,’ he said. ‘I’m tired.’
‘We only drove a hundred miles from Pátzcuaro.’
‘My throat is a little raw again. Come on.’

They moved away from the music and the walking, whispering, laughing people. The band played the ‘Toreador Song.’ The drums thumped like great dull hearts in the summery night. There was a smell of papaya in the air, and green thicknesses of jungle and hidden waters.

‘I’ll walk you back to the room and come back myself,’ she said. ‘I want to hear the music.’
‘Don’t be naïve.’
‘I like it, damn it, I like it, it’s good music. It’s not fake, it’s real, or as real as anything ever gets in this world, that’s why I like it.’

‘When I don’t feel well, I don’t expect to have you out running around the town alone. It isn’t fair you see things I don’t.’

They turned in at the hotel and the music was still fairly loud. ‘If you want to walk by yourself, go off on a trip by yourself and go back to the United States by yourself,’ he said. ‘Where’s the key?’

‘Maybe I lost it.’

They let themselves into the room and undressed. He sat on the edge of the bed looking into the night patio. At last he shook his head, rubbed his eyes, and sighed. ‘I’m tired. I’ve been terrible today.’ He looked at her where she sat, next to him, and he put out his hand to take her arm. ‘I’m sorry. I get all riled up, driving, and then us not talking the language too well. By evening I’m a mess of nerves.’

‘Yes,’ she said.

Quite suddenly he moved over beside her. He took hold of her and held her tightly, his head over her shoulder, eyes shut, talking into her ear with a quiet, whispering fervency. ‘You know, we must stay together. There’s only us, really, no matter what happens, no matter what trouble we have. I do love you so much, you know that. Forgive me if I’m difficult. We’ve got to make it go.’

She stared over his shoulder at the blank wall and the wall was like her life in this moment, a wide expanse of nothingness with hardly a bump, a contour, or a feeling to it. She didn’t know what to say or do.

Another time, she would have melted. But there was such a thing as firing metal too often, bringing it to a glow, shaping it. At last the metal refuses to glow or shape; it is nothing but a weight.

She was a weight now, moving mechanically in his arms, hearing but not hearing, understanding but not understanding, replying but not replying. ‘Yes, we’ll stay together.’ She felt her lips move. ‘We love each other.’ The lips said what they must say, while her mind was in her eyes and her eyes bored deep into the vacuum of the wall. ‘Yes.’ Holding but not holding him. ‘Yes.’

The room was dim. Outside, someone walked in a corridor, perhaps glancing at this locked door, perhaps hearing their vital whispering as

no more than something falling drop by drop from a loose faucet, a running drain perhaps, or a turned book-leaf under a solitary bulb.

Let the doors whisper, the people of the world walked down tile corridors and did not hear.

‘Only you and I know the things.’ His breath was fresh. She felt very sorry for him and herself and the world, suddenly. Everyone was infernally alone. He was like a man clawing at a statue. She did not feel herself move. Only her mind, which was a lightless, dim fluorescent vapor, shifted. ‘Only you and I remember,’ he said, ‘and if one of us should leave, then half the memories are gone. So we must stay together because if one forgets the other remembers.’

Remembers what? she asked herself. But she remembered instantly, in a linked series, those parts of incidents in their life together that perhaps he might not recall: the night at the beach, five years ago, one of the first fine nights beneath the canvas with the secret touchings, the days at Sunland sprawled together, taking the sun until twilight. Wandering in an abandoned silver mine, oh, a million things, one touched on and revealed another in an instant!

He held her tight back against the bed now. ‘Do you know how lonely I am? Do you know how lonely I make myself with these arguments and fights and all of it, when I’m tired?’ He waited for her to answer, but she said nothing.

She felt his eyelid flutter on her neck. Faintly, she remembered when he had first flicked his eyelid near her ear. ‘Spider-eye,’ she had said, laughing, then. ‘It feels like a small spider in my ear.’ And now this small lost spider climbed with insane humor upon her neck.

There was something in his voice which made her feel she was a woman on a train going away and he was standing in the station saying, ‘Don’t go.’ And her appalled voice silently cried, ‘But you’re the one on a train! I’m not going anywhere!’

She lay back, bewildered. It was the first time in two weeks he had touched her. And the touching had such an immediacy that she knew the wrong word would send him very far away again.
She lay and said nothing.

Finally, after a long while, she heard him get up, sighing, and move off. He got into his own bed and drew the covers up, silently. She moved at last, arranged herself on her bed, and lay listening to her watch tick in the small hot darkness. 'My God,' she whispered, finally, 'it's only eightthirty.'

'Go to sleep,' he said.

She lay in the dark, perspiring, naked, on her own bed, and in the distance, sweetly, faintly, so that it made her soul and heart ache to hear it, she heard the band thumping and brassing out its melodies.

She wanted to walk among the dark moving people and sing with them and smell the soft charcoal air of October in a small summery town deep in the tropics of Mexico, a million miles lost from civilization, listening to the good music, tapping her foot and humming. But now she lay with her eyes wide, in bed. In the next hour, the band played 'La Golondrina,' 'Marimba.' 'Los Viejitos,' 'Michoacán la Verde,' 'Barcarolle,' and 'Luna Lunera.'

At three in the morning she awoke for no reason and lay, her sleep done and finished with, feeling the coolness that came with deep night. She listened to his breathing and she felt away and separate from the world. She thought of the long trip from Los Angeles to Laredo, Texas, like a silver-white boiling nightmare.

And then the green technicolor, red and yellow and blue and purple, dream of Mexico arising like a flood about them to engulf their car with color and smell of rain forest and deserted town. She thought of all the small towns, the shops, the walking people, the burros, and all the arguments and near-fights.

She thought of the five years she had been married. A long, long time. There had been no day in all that time that they had not seen each other; there had been no day when she had seen friends, separately; he was always there to see and criticize.

There had been no day when she was allowed to be gone for more than an hour or so without a full explanation. Sometimes, feeling infinitely evil, she would sneak to a midnight show, telling no one, and sit, feeling free, breathing deeply of the air of freedom, watching the people, far realer than she, upon the screen, motioning and moving.

And now here they were, after five years. She looked over at his sleeping form. One thousand eight hundred and twenty-five days with you, she thought, my husband. A few hours each day at my typewriter, and then all the rest of each day and night with you. I feel quite like that man walled up in a vault in 'The Cask of Amontillado.' I scream but no one hears.

There was a shift of footsteps outside, a knock on their door. 'Señora,' called a soft voice, in Spanish. 'It is three o'clock.'
Oh, my God, thought the wife. 'Sh!' she hissed, leaping up to the door. But her husband was awake. 'What is it?' he cried.

She opened the door the slightest crack. 'You've come at the wrong time,' she said to the man in the darkness.
'Three o'clock, señora.'

'No, no,' she hissed, her face wrenching with the agony of the moment. 'I meant tomorrow afternoon.'
'What is it?' demanded her husband, switching on a light. 'Christ, it's only three in the morning. What does the fool want?'
She turned, shutting her eyes. 'He's here to take us to Parícutin.'
'My God, you can't speak Spanish at all!'
'Go away,' she said to the guide.

'But I arose for this hour,' said the guide.

The husband swore and got up. ‘I won’t be able to sleep now, anyway. Tell the idiot we’ll be dressed in ten minutes and go with him and get it over, my God!’
She did this and the guide slipped away into the darkness and out into the street where the cool moon burnished the fenders of his taxi.

‘You are incompetent,’ snapped the husband, pulling on two pairs of pants, two T-shirts, a sport shirt, and a wool shirt over that. ‘Jesus, this’ll fix my throat, all right. If I come down with another strep infection—’
‘Get back into bed, damn you.’
‘I couldn’t sleep now, anyway.’

‘Well, we’ve had six hours’ sleep already, and you had at least three hours’ this afternoon; that should be enough.’
‘Spoiling our trip,’ he said, putting on two sweaters and two pairs of socks. ‘It’s cold up there on the mountain; dress warm, hurry up.’ He put on a jacket and a muffler and looked enormous in the heap of clothing he wore. ‘Get me my pills. Where’s some water?’

‘Get back to bed,’ she said. ‘I won’t have you sick and whining.’ She found his medicine and poured some water.
‘The least thing you could do was get the hour right.’
‘Shut up!’ She held the glass.
‘Just another of your thick-headed blunders.’

She threw the water in his face. ‘Let me alone, damn you, let me alone. I didn’t mean to do that!’
‘You!’ he shouted, face dripping. He ripped off his jacket. ‘You’ll chill me, I’ll catch cold!’

‘I don’t give a damn, let me alone!’ She raised her hands into fists, and her face was terrible and red, and she looked like some animal in a maze who has steadily sought exit from an impossible chaos and has been constantly fooled, turned back, rerouted, led on, tempted, whispered to, lied to, led further, and at last reached a blank wall.

‘Put your hands down!’ he shouted.
‘I’ll kill you, by God, I’ll kill you!’ she screamed, her face contorted and ugly. ‘Leave me alone! I’ve tried my damnedest—beds, language, time, my God, the mistakes, you think I don’t know it? You think I’m not sorry?’

‘I’ll catch cold. I’ll catch cold.’ He was staring at the wet floor. He sat down with water on his face.
‘Here. Wipe your face off!’ She flung him a towel.
He began to shake violently. ‘I’m cold!’

‘Get a chill, damn it, and die, but leave me alone!’
‘I’m cold, I’m cold.’ His teeth chattered, he wiped his face with trembling hands. ‘I’ll have another infection.’
‘Take off that coat! It’s wet.’

He stopped shaking after a minute and stood up to take off the soggy coat. She handed him a leather jacket. ‘Come on, he’s waiting for us.’
He began to shiver again. ‘I’m not going anywhere, to hell with you,’ he said, sitting down. ‘You owe me fifty dollars now.’
‘What for?’

‘You remember, you promised.’

And she remembered. They had had a fight about some silly thing, in California, the first day of the trip, yes, by God, the very first day out. And she for the first time in her life had lifted her hand to slap him.

Then, appalled, she had dropped her hand, staring at her traitorous fingers. ‘You were going to slap me!’ he had cried. ‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘Well,’ he said quietly, ‘the next time you do a thing like that, you’ll hand over fifty dollars of your money.’ That’s how life was, full of little tributes and ransoms and blackmails. She paid for all her errors, unmotivated or not.

A dollar here, a dollar there. If she spoiled an evening, she paid the dinner bill from her clothing money. If she criticized a play they had just

seen and he had liked it, he flew into a rage, and, to quiet him, she paid for the theater tickets. On and on it had gone, swifter and swifter over the years.

If they bought a book together and she didn't like it but he did and she dared speak out, there was a fight, sometimes a small thing which grew for days, and ended with her buying the book plus another and perhaps a set of cuff links or some other silly thing to calm the storm. Jesus!

'Fifty dollars. You promised if you acted up again with these tantrums and slappings.'
'It was only water. I didn't hit you. All right, shut up. I'll pay the money. I'll pay anything just to be let alone; it's worth it, and five hundred dollars more, more than worth it. I'll pay.'

She turned away. When you're sick for a number of years, when you're an only child, the only boy, all of your life, you get the way he is, she thought. Then you find yourself thirty-five years old and still undecided as to what you're to be—a ceramist, a social worker, a businessman. And your wife has always known what she would be—a writer.

And it must be maddening to live with a woman with a single knowledge of herself, so sure of what she would do with her writing. And selling stories, at last, not many, no, but just enough to cause the seams of the marriage to rip.

And so how natural that he must convince her that she was wrong and he was right, that she was an uncontrollable child and must forfeit money. Money was to be the weapon he held over her. When she had been a fool she would give up some of the precious gain—the product of her writing.

'Do you know,' she said, suddenly, aloud, 'since I made that big sale to the magazine, you seem to pick more fights and I seem to pay more money?'
'What do you mean by that?' he said.

It seemed to her to be true. Since the big sale he had put his special logic to work on situations, a logic of such a sort that she had no way to combat it. Reasoning with him was impossible. You were finally cornered, your explanations exhausted, your alibis depleted, your pride in tatters. So you struck out. You slapped at him or broke something, and then, there you were again, paying off, and he had won.

And he was taking your success away from you, your single purpose, or he thought he was, anyway. But strangely enough, though she had never told him, she didn't care about forfeiting the money.

If it made peace, if it made him happy, if it made him think he was causing her to suffer, that was all right. He had exaggerated ideas as to the value of money; it hurt him to lose it or spend it, therefore he thought it would hurt her as much. But I'm feeling no pain, she thought, I'd like to give him all of the money, for that's not why I write at all, I write to say what I have to say, and he doesn't understand that.

He was quieted. 'You'll pay?'
'Yes.' She was dressing quickly now, in slacks and jacket. 'In fact, I've been meaning to bring this up for some time. I'm giving all the money to you from now on. There's no need of my keeping my profits separate from yours, as it has been. I'll turn it over to you tomorrow.'

'I don't ask that,' he said, quickly.
'I insist. It all goes to you.'

What I'm doing, of course, is unloading your gun, she thought. Taking your weapon away from you. Now you won't be able to extract the money from me, piece by piece, bit by painful bit. You'll have to find another way to bother me.

'I—' he said.
'No, let's not talk about it. It's yours.'

'It's only to teach you a lesson. You've a bad temper,' he said. 'I thought you'd control it if you had to forfeit something.'

‘Oh, I just live for money,’ she said.

‘I don’t want all of it.’
‘Come on now.’ She was weary. She opened the door and listened. The neighbors hadn’t heard, or if they had, they paid no attention. The lights of the waiting taxi illuminated the front patio.

They walked out through the cool moonlit night. She walked ahead of him for the first time in years.

Parícutin was a river of gold that night. A distant murmuring river of molten ore going down to some dead lava sea, to some volcanic black shore.

Time and again if you held your breath, stilled your heart within you, you could hear the lava pushing rocks down the mountain in tumblings and roarings, faintly, faintly. Above the crater were red vapors and red light.

Gentle brown and gray clouds arose suddenly as coronets or halos or puffs from the interior, their undersides washed in pink, their tops dark and ominous, without a sound.

The husband and the wife stood on the opposite mountain, in the sharp cold, the horses behind them. In a wooden hut nearby, the scientific observers were lighting oil lamps, cooking their evening meal, boiling rich coffee, talking in whispers because of the clear, night-explosive air. It was very far away from everything else in the world.

On the way up the mountain, after the long taxi drive from Uruapan, over moon-dreaming hills of ashen snow, through dry stick villages, under the cold clear stars, jounced in the taxi like dice in a gambling-tumbler, both of them had tried to make a better thing of it.

They had arrived at a campfire on a sort of sea bottom. About the campfire were solemn men and small dark boys, and a company of

seven other Americans, all men, in riding breeches, talking in loud voices under the soundless sky.

The horses were brought forth and mounted. They proceeded across the lava river. She talked to the other Yankees and they responded. They joked together. After a while of this, the husband rode on ahead.

Now, they stood together, watching the lava wash down the dark cone summit.
He wouldn't speak.

'What's wrong now?' she asked.

He looked straight ahead, the lava glow reflected in his eyes. 'You could have ridden with me. I thought we came to Mexico to see things together. And now you talk to those damned Texans.'
'I felt lonely. We haven't seen any people from the States for eight weeks. I like the days in Mexico, but I don't like the nights. I just wanted someone to talk to.'

'You wanted to tell them you're a writer.'
'That's unfair.'

'You're always telling people you're a writer, and how good you are, and you've just sold a story to a large-circulation magazine and that's how you got the money to come here to Mexico.'
'One of them asked me what I did, and I told him. Damn right I'm proud of my work. I've waited ten years to sell some damn thing.'

He studied her in the light from the fire mountain and at last he said, 'You know, before coming up here tonight. I thought about that damned typewriter of yours and almost tossed it into the river.'

'You didn't!'

'No, but I locked it in the car. I'm tired of it and the way you've ruined the whole trip. You're not with me, you're with yourself, you're the one

who counts, you and that damned machine, you and Mexico, you and your reactions, you and your inspiration, you and your nervous sensitivity, and you and your aloneness.

I knew you'd act this way tonight, just as sure as there was a First Coming! I'm tired of your running back from every excursion we make to sit at that machine and bang away at all hours. This is a vacation.'
'I haven't touched the typewriter in a week, because it bothered you.'

'Well, don't touch it for another week or a month, don't touch it until we get home. Your damned inspiration can wait!'

I should never have said I'd give him all the money, she thought. I should never have taken that weapon from him, it kept him away from my real life, the writing and the machine. And now I've thrown off the protective cloak of money and he's searched for a new weapon and he's gotten to the true thing—to the machine! Oh Christ!

Suddenly, without thinking, with the rage in her again, she pushed him ahead of her. She didn't do it violently. She just gave him a push. Once, twice, three times. She didn't hurt him. It was just a gesture of pushing away.

She wanted to strike him, throw him off a cliff, perhaps, but instead she gave these three pushes, to indicate her hostility and the end of talking. Then they stood separately, while behind them the horses moved their hoofs softly, and the night air grew colder and their breath hissed in white plumes on the air, and in the scientists' cabin the coffee bubbled on the blue gas jet and the rich fumes permeated the moonlit heights.

After an hour, as the first dim furnacings of the sun came in the cold East, they mounted their horses for the trip down through growing light, toward the buried city and the buried church under the lava flow. Crossing the flow, she thought, Why doesn't his horse fall, why isn't he thrown onto those jagged lava rocks, why? But nothing happened. They rode on. The sun rose red.

They slept until one in the afternoon. She was dressed and sitting on the bed waiting for him to waken for half an hour before he stirred and rolled over, needing a shave, very pale with tiredness.

‘I’ve got a sore throat,’ was the first thing he said.
She didn’t speak.
‘You shouldn’t have thrown water on me,’ he said.

She got up and walked to the door and put her hand on the knob.
‘I want you to stay here,’ he said. ‘We’re going to stay here in Uruapan three or four more days.’
At last she said. ‘I thought we were going on to Guadalajara.’

‘Don’t be a tourist. You ruined that trip to the volcano for us. I want to go back up tomorrow or the next day. Go look at the sky.’

She went out to look at the sky. It was clear and blue. She reported this.
‘The volcano dies down, sometimes for a week. We can’t afford to wait a week for it to boom again.’
‘Yes, we can. We will. And you’ll pay for the taxi to take us up there and do the trip over and do it right and enjoy it.’

‘Do you think we can ever enjoy it now?’ she asked.
‘If it’s the last thing we do, we’ll enjoy it.’
‘You insist, do you?’

‘We’ll wait until the sky is full of smoke and go back up.’
‘I’m going out to buy a paper.’ She shut the door and walked into the town.

She walked down the fresh-washed streets and looked in the shining windows and smelled that amazingly clear air and felt very good, except for the tremoring, the continual tremoring in her stomach. At last, with a hollowness roaring in her chest, she went to a man standing beside a taxi.

‘Señor,’ she said.

‘Yes?’ said the man.
She felt her heart stop beating. Then it began to thump again and she went on: ‘How much would you charge to drive me to Morelia?’

‘Ninety pesos, señora.’
‘And I can get the train in Morelia?’
‘There is a train here, señora.’
‘Yes, but there are reasons why I don’t want to wait for it here.’

‘I will drive you, then, to Morelia.’
‘Come along, there are a few things I must do.’

The taxi was left in front of the Hotel de Las Flores. She walked in, alone, and once more looked at the lovely garden with its many flowers, and listened to the girl playing the strange blue-colored piano, and this time the song was the ‘Moonlight Sonata.’ She smelled the sharp crystalline air and shook her head, eyes closed, hands at her sides. She put her hand to the door, opened it softly.

Why today? she wondered. Why not some other day in the last five years? Why have I waited, why have I hung around? Because. A thousand becauses. Because you always hoped things would start again the way they were the first year. Because there were times, less frequent now, when he was splendid for days, even weeks, when you were both feeling well and the world was green and bright blue.

There were times, like yesterday, for a moment, when he opened the armor-plate and showed her the fear beneath it and the small loneliness of himself and said, ‘I need and love you, don’t ever go away, I’m afraid without you.’ Because sometimes it had seemed good to cry together, to make up, and the inevitible goodness of the night and the day following their making up.

Because he was handsome. Because she had been alone all year every year until she met him. Because she didn’t want to be alone again, but now knew that it would be better to be alone than be this way because only last night he destroyed the typewriter; not physically, no, but with

thoughts and words. And he might as well have picked her up bodily and thrown her from the river bridge.

She could not feel her hand on the door. It was as if ten thousand volts of electricity had numbed all of her body. She could not feel her feet on the tiled floor. Her face was gone, her mind was gone.

He lay asleep, his back turned. The room was greenly dim. Quickly, soundlessly, she put on her coat and checked her purse. The clothes and typewriter were of no importance now. Everything was a hollowing roar. Everything was like a waterfall leaping into clear emptiness. There was no striking, no impact, just a clear water falling into a hollow and then another hollow, followed by an emptiness.

She stood by the bed and looked at the man there, the familiar black hair on the nape of his neck, the sleeping profile. The form stirred.
'What?' he asked, still asleep.
'Nothing,' she said. 'Nothing. And nothing.'

She went out and shut the door.
The taxi sped out of town at an incredible rate, making a great noise, and all the pink walls and blue walls fled past and people jumped out of the way and there were some few cars which almost exploded upon them, and there went most of the town and there went the hotel and that man sleeping in the hotel and there went—

Nothing.
The taxi motor died.
No, no, thought Marie, oh God, no, no, no.
The car must start again.

The taxi driver leaped out, glaring at God in his Heaven, and ripped open the hood and looked as if he might strangle the iron guts of the car with his clawing hands, his face smiling a pure sweet smile of incredible hatred, and then he turned to Marie and forced himself to shrug, putting away his hate and accepting the Will of God.
'I will walk you to the bus station,' he said.

No, her eyes said. No, her mouth almost said. Joseph will wake and run and find me still here and drag me back. No.
'I will carry your bag, señora,' the taxi driver said, and walked off with it, and had to come back and find her still there, motionless, saying no, no, to no one, and helped her out and showed her where to walk.

The bus was in the square and the Indians were getting into it, some silently and with a slow, certain dignity, and some chattering like birds and shoving bundles, children, chickens' baskets, and pigs in ahead of them.

The driver wore a uniform that had not been pressed or laundered in twenty years, and he was leaning out the window shouting and laughing with people outside, as Marie stepped up into the interior of hot smoke and burning grease from the engine, the smell of gasoline and oil, the smell of wet chickens, wet children, sweating men and damp women, old upholstery which was down to the skeleton, and oily leather. She found a seat in the rear and felt the eyes follow her and her suitcase, and she was thinking: I'm going away, at last I'm going away. I'm free. I'll never see him again in my life, I'm free, I'm free.

She almost laughed.

The bus started and all of the people in it shook and swayed and cried out and smiled, and the land of Mexico seemed to whirl about outside the window, like a dream undecided whether to stay or go, and then the greenness passed away, and the town, and there was the Hotel de Las Flores with its open patio, and there, incredibly, hands in pockets, standing in the open door but looking at the sky and the volcano smoke, was Joseph, paying no attention to the bus or her and she was going away from him, he was growing remote already, his figure was dwindling like someone falling down a mine shaft, silently, without a scream.

Now, before she had even the decency or inclination to wave, he was no larger than a boy, then a child, then a baby, in distance, in size, then

gone around a corner, with the engine thundering, someone playing upon a guitar up front in the bus, and Marie, straining to look back, as if she might penetrate walls, trees, and distances, for another view of the man standing so quietly watching the blue sky.

At last, her neck tired, she turned and folded her hands and examined what she had won for herself. A whole lifetime loomed suddenly ahead, as quickly as the turns and whirls of the highway brought her suddenly to edges of cliffs, and each bend of the road, even as the years, could not be seen ahead. For a moment it was simply good to lie back here, head upon jouncing seat rest, and contemplate quietness.

To know nothing, to think nothing, to feel nothing, to be as nearly dead for a moment as one could be, with the eyes closed, the heart unheard, no special temperature to the body, to wait for life to come get her rather than to seek, at least for an hour. Let the bus take her to the train, the train to the plane, the plane to the city, and the city to her friends, and then, like a stone dropped into a cement mixer, let that life in the city do with her as it would, she flowing along in the mix and solidifying in any new pattern that seemed best.

The bus rushed on with a plummeting and swerving in the sweet green air of the afternoon, between the mountains baked like lion pelts, past rivers as sweet as wine and as clear as vermouth, over stone bridges, under aqueducts where water ran like clear wind in the ancient channels, past churches, through dust, and suddenly, quite suddenly the speedometer in Marie's mind said, A million miles, Joseph is back a million miles and I'll never see him again. The thought stood up in her mind and covered the sky with a blurred darkness.

Never, never again until the day I die or after that will I see him again, not for an hour or a minute or a second, not at all will I see him.

The numbness started in her fingertips. She felt it flow up through her hands, into her wrists and on along the arms to her shoulders and through her shoulders to her heart and up her neck to her head.

She was a numbness, a thing of nettles and ice and prickles and a hollow thundering nothingness. Her lips were dry petals, her eyelids were a thousand pounds heavier than iron, and each part of her body was now iron and lead and copper and platinum.

Her body weighed ten tons, each part of it was so incredibly heavy, and, in that heaviness, crushed and beating to survive, was her crippled heart, throbbing and tearing about like a headless chicken.

And buried in the limestone and steel of her robot body was her terror and crying out, walled in, with someone tapping the trowel on the exterior wall, the job finished, and, ironically, it was her own hand she saw before her that had wielded the trowel, set the final brick in place, frothed on the thick slush of mortar and pushed everything into a tightness and a self-finished prison.

Her mouth was cotton. Her eyes were flaming with a dark flame the color of raven wings, the sound of vulture wings, and her head was so heavy with terror, so full of an iron weight, while her mouth was stuffed with invisible hot cotton, that she felt her head sag down into her immensely fat, but she could not see the fat, hands.

Her hands were pillows of lead to lie upon, her hands were cement sacks crushing down upon her senseless lap, her ears, faucets in which ran cold winds, and all about her, not looking at her, not noticing, was the bus on its way through towns and fields, over hills and into corn valleys at a great racketing speed, taking her each and every instant one million miles and ten million years away from the familiar.
I must not cry out, she thought. No! No!

The dizziness was so complete, and the colors of the bus and her hands and skirt were now so blued over and sooted with lack of blood that in a moment she would be collapsed upon the floor, she would hear the surprise and shock of the riders bending over her.

But she put her head far down and sucked the chicken air, the sweating air, the leather air, the carbon monoxide air, the incense air, the air of

lonely death, and drew it back through the copper nostrils, down the aching throat, into her lungs which blazed as if she swallowed neon light. Joseph, Joseph, Joseph, Joseph.

It was a simple thing. All terror is a simplicity.
I cannot live without him, she thought. I have been lying to myself. I need him, oh Christ, I, I…
'Stop the bus! Stop it!'

The bus stopped at her scream, everyone was thrown forward. Somehow she was stumbling forward over the children, the dogs barking, her hands flailing heavily, falling; she heard her dress rip, she screamed again, the door was opening, the driver was appalled at the woman coming at him in a wild stumbling, and she fell out upon the gravel, tore her stockings, and lay while someone bent to her; then she was vomiting on the ground, a steady sickness; they were bringing her bag out of the bus to her, she was telling them in chokes and sobs that she wanted to go that way; she pointed back at the city a million years ago, a million miles ago, and the bus driver was shaking his head.

She half sat, half lay there, her arms about the suitcase, sobbing, and the bus stood in the hot sunlight over her and she waved it on; go on, go on; they're all staring at me, I'll get a ride back, don't worry, leave me here, go on, and at last, like an accordion, the door folded shut, the Indian copper-mask faces were transported on away, and the bus dwindled from consciousness.

She lay on the suitcase and cried, for a number of minutes, and she was not as heavy or sick, but her heart was fluttering wildly, and she was cold as someone fresh from a winter lake. She arose and dragged the suitcase in little moves across the highway and swayed there, waiting, while six cars hummed by, and at last a seventh car pulled up with a Mexican gentleman in the front seat, a rich car from Mexico City.

'You are going to Uruapan?' he asked politely, looking only at her eyes.
'Yes,' she said at last. 'I am going to Uruapan.'
And as she rode in this car, her mind began a private dialogue:

‘What is it to be insane?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Do you know what insanity is?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘Can one tell? The coldness, was that the start?’

‘No.’
‘The heaviness, wasn’t that a part?’
‘Shut up.’
‘Is insanity screaming?’
‘I didn’t mean to.’

‘But that came later. First there was the heaviness, and the silence, and the blankness. That terrible void, that space, that silence, that aloneness, that backing away from life, that being in upon oneself and not wishing to look at or speak to the world. Don’t tell me that wasn’t the start of insanity.’

‘Yes.’
‘You were ready to fall over the edge.’
‘I stopped the bus just short of the cliff.’

‘And what if you hadn’t stopped the bus? Would they have driven into a little town or Mexico City and the driver turned and said to you through the empty bus, “All right, señora, all out.” Silence.

“All right, señora, all out.” Silence. “Señora?” A stare into space. “Señora!” A rigid stare into the sky of life, empty, empty, oh, empty. “Señora!” No move. “Señora.’ Hardly a breath. You sit there, you sit there, you sit there, you sit there, you sit there.

‘You would not even hear. “Señora,” he would cry, and tug at you, but you wouldn’t feel his hand. And the police would be summoned beyond your circle of comprehension, beyond your eyes or ears or body. You could not even hear the heavy boots in the car. “Señora, you must leave the bus.” You do not hear. “Señora, what is your name?” Your

mouth is shut. “Señora, you must come with us.” You sit like a stone idol.

“Let us see her passport.” They fumble with your purse which lies untended in your stone lap. “Señora Marie Elliott, from California. Señora Elliott?” You stare at the empty sky. “Where are you coming from?

Where is your husband?” You were never married. “Where are you going?” Nowhere. “It says she was born in Illinois.” You were never born, “Señora, señora.” They have to carry you, like a stone, from the bus. You will talk to no one. No, no, no one. “Marie, this is me, Joseph.” No, too late. “Marie!” Too late, “Don’t you recognize me?” Too late. Joseph. No Joseph, no nothing, too late, too late.’

‘That is what would have happened, is it not?’
‘Yes.’ She trembled.
‘If you had not stopped the bus, you would have been heavier and heavier, true? And silenter and silenter and more made up of nothing and nothing and nothing.’
‘Yes.’

‘Señora,’ said the Spanish gentleman driving, breaking in on her thoughts. ‘It is a nice day, isn’t it?’
‘Yes,’ she said, both to him and the thoughts in her mind.

The old Spanish gentleman drove her directly to her hotel and let her out and doffed his hat and bowed to her.
She nodded and felt her mouth move with thanks, but she did not see him. She wandered into the hotel and found herself with her suitcase back in her room, that room she had left a thousand years ago. Her husband was there.

He lay in the dim light of late afternoon with his back turned, seeming not to have moved in the hours since she had left. He had not even known that she was gone, and had been to the ends of the earth and had returned. He did not even know.

She stood looking at his neck and the dark hairs curling there like ash fallen from the sky.

She found herself on the tiled patio in the hot light. A bird rustled in a bamboo cage. In the cool darkness somewhere, the girl was playing a waltz on the piano.

She saw but did not see two butterflies which darted and jumped and lit upon a bush near her hand, to seal themselves together. She felt her gaze move to see the two bright things, all gold and yellow on the green leaf, their wings beating in slow pulses as they were joined. Her mouth moved and her hand swung like a pendulum, senselessly.

She watched her fingers tumble on the air and close on the two butterflies, tight, tighter, tightest. A scream was coming up into her mouth. She pressed it back. Tight, tighter, tightest.
She felt her hand open all to itself. Two lumps of bright powder fell to the shiny patio tiles. She looked down at the small ruins, then snapped her gaze up.

The girl who played the piano was standing in the middle of the garden, regarding her with appalled and startled eyes.
The wife put out her hand, to touch the distance, to say something, to explain, to apologize to the girl, this place, the world, everyone. But the girl went away.

The sky was full of smoke which went straight up and veered away south toward Mexico City.
She wiped the wing-pollen from her numb fingers and talked over her shoulder, not knowing if that man inside heard, her eyes on the smoke and the sky.

‘You know…we might try the volcano tonight. It looks good. I bet there’ll be lots of fire.’

Yes, she thought, and it will fill the air and fall all around us, and take hold of us tight, tighter, tightest, and then let go and let us fall and we'll be ashes blowing south, all fire.
'Did you hear me?'

She stood over the bed and raised a fist high but never brought it down to strike him in the face.

The end