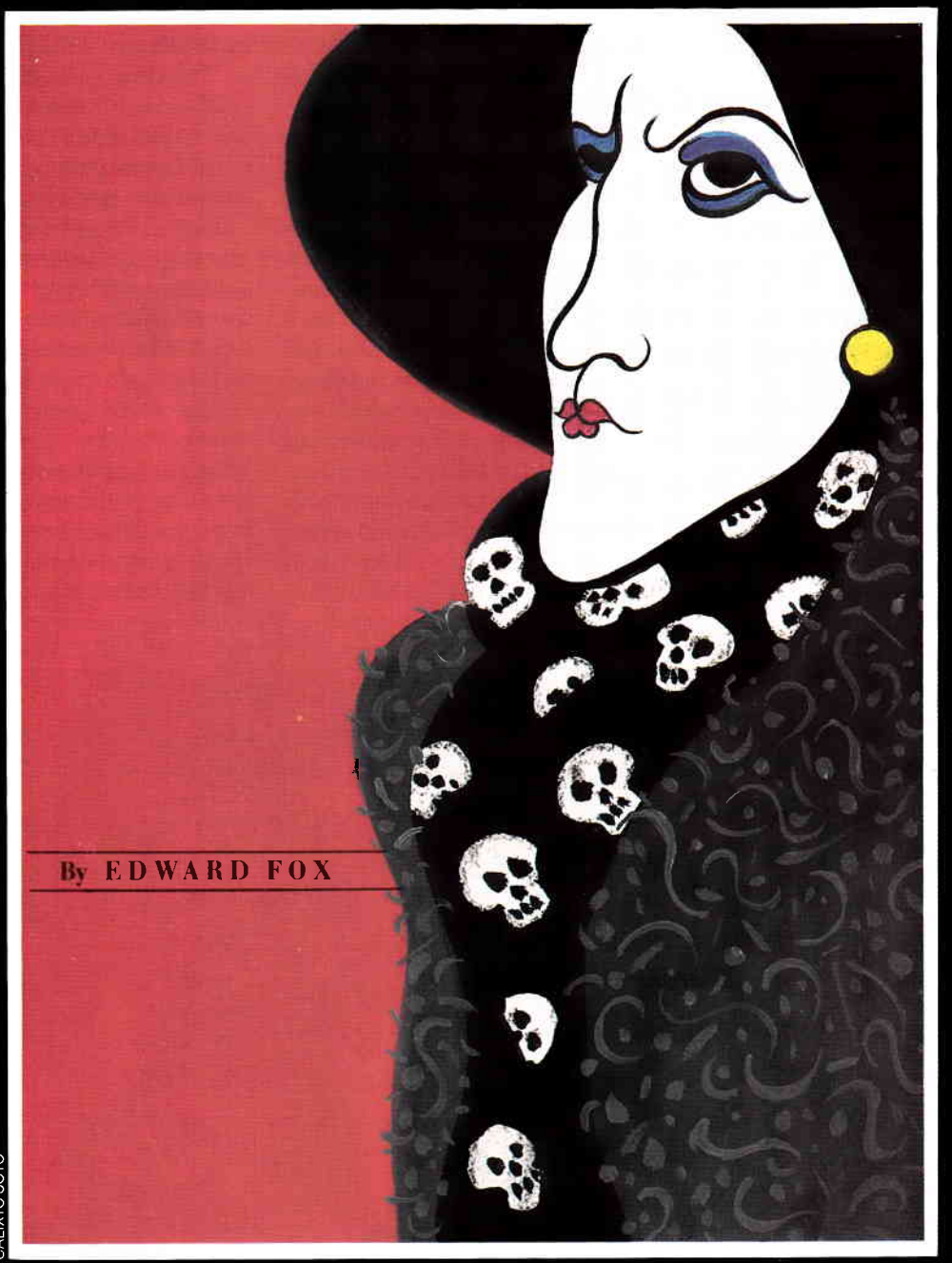
Fiction '88

Market Forces



By EDWARD FOX

CALIXTO SOTO

■ There are only a few people with whom I simply cannot bear to walk down the street. Unfortunately, one of them is my sister Louise. Even the shortest walk with her can turn into an ordeal, as

it is her custom to make loud, plainly audible remarks to people she sees on the street—specifically men—just as they are passing by her. She does this either because she does not like the look of them, or because she thinks they are looking at her, which she does not like either. She will say, "Stare at yourself, you're ugly enough," or, "What's that ape looking at?" It's no use trying to tell her. The reason people look at her is that she typically goes outside wearing bone-white makeup, bright blue eye shadow, a long black overcoat (well into summer), and a black silk scarf printed with a pattern of white skulls. Given her unusual height (approximately six feet two inches), her appearance is striking enough; but she does all she can to set off this difference with a touch (as Poe would put it) of the *bizarre*.

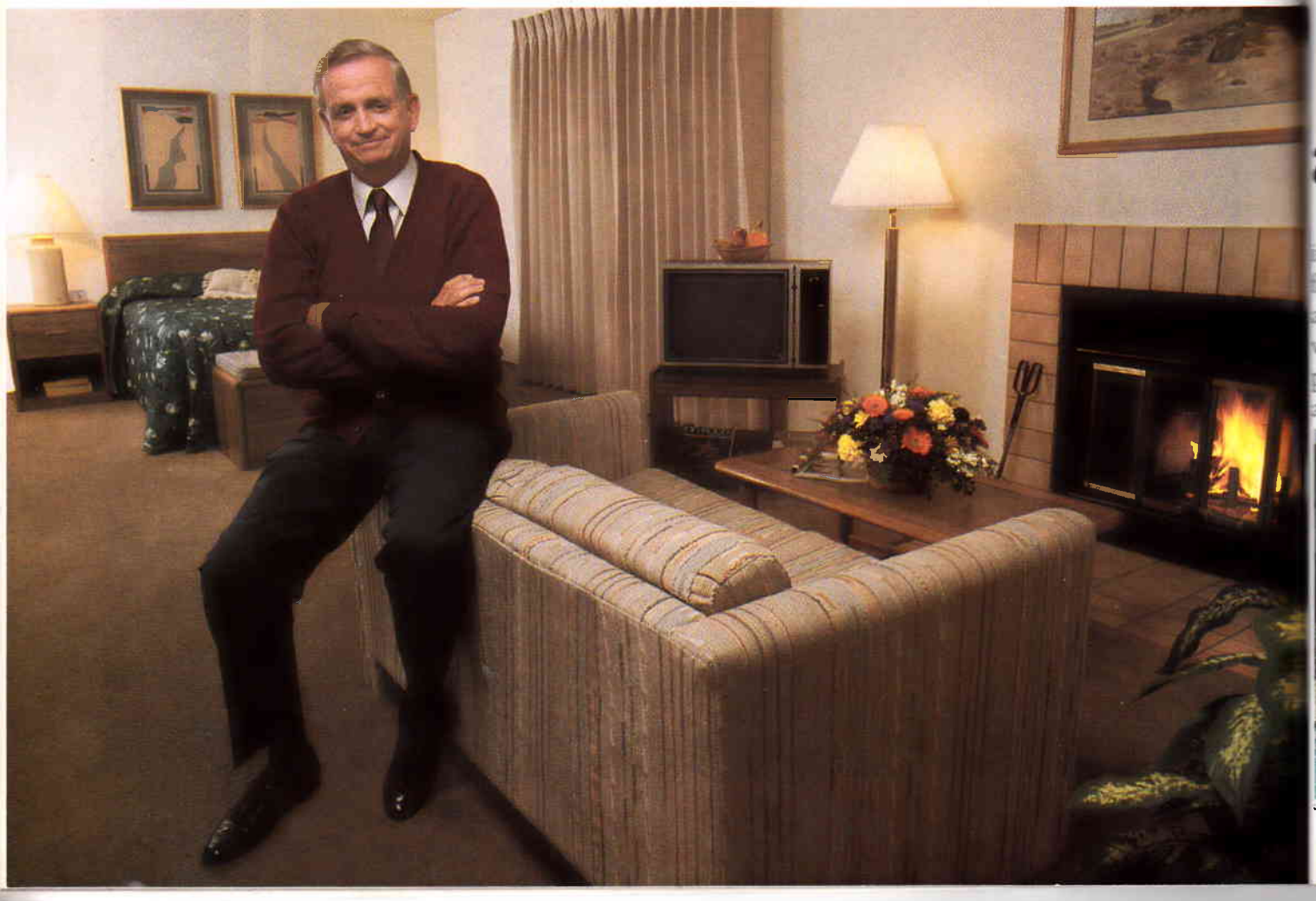
Although we live within a short distance of each other, we meet only every two months or so. We have dinner at a restaurant, which we alternate choosing. On this occasion, Louise chose a place in her own neighborhood, so she wouldn't have too far to walk. "I'll meet you there," I said. It was an Indian restaurant on Broadway with a sidewalk terrace. The whole of the Upper West Side passed within an inch of our table, on the other side of the glass enclosure. The terrace occupied half the width of the pavement, narrowing it and forcing pedestrians into a bottleneck. Their shopping carts and push-chairs scraped against the glass on the other side of which we, a world away, were dining. Louise and I had, essentially, the same conversation we always have, a nugget of contention burnished by time. Whenever I tried to say anything she would say, "Don't interrupt. Let me finish." She'd be a terrible talk show host.

I was driving home a point about something our parents did years ago when she pointed her knife backhand at a person she saw on the street. "Look," she said.

"Who is it?" I said.

"That *boy* has been blessed by God with singular good fortune. He's been raised up above other mortals for special favor."

I saw a thin young man who gazed upward as he walked, plainly in another world. He wore a worn-looking brown corduroy jacket and a red checked shirt; he had curly brown hair and a pale, delicate face. A denizen: the sort of person who never leaves New York, ever, not for anything, with the accompanying narrowing of horizons. That's how he struck me. He stepped aside sharply to avoid a dog he nearly noticed too late.



"In what way?" I said, in a skeptical tone that suggested I already disagreed.

"He's my neighbor. He lives across the hall, in a huge apartment with about six bedrooms and a beautiful view of the river. The building is going co-op and his name is on the lease. That means he gets to buy it at the insider price, and if he doesn't do that, he can't be evicted, and because it's rent controlled, the rent hasn't gone up in years. He's sitting on a real estate gold mine. He could turn around and sell just the lease, let alone the apartment itself, for half a million dollars. Just for being in the right place at the right time."

I was interested in the comparison with my own situation: a studio the size of a glove compartment, in a homicidal neighborhood, for which I pay two-thirds of my salary. I step across at least one dope fiend every morning just to get to my mailbox; getting out the front door involves pushing against the body on the other side. Louise's apartment is almost as bad, but she has been here longer than I have.

Across the street, where my gaze fell, outside a drugstore a girl in a clown suit and pancake makeup was handing out flyers advertising the drugstore's specials this week (Ajax, Pampers, Listerine). She paced the area in front of the store with the homesick look of a junior sentry guarding the gate of a foreign legion post. Every time someone passed by, she would thrust her arm out and snap a flyer at them. Everyone did their best to give her a wide berth. It seemed like the worst job in the world.

But there are a lot of terrible jobs, I thought, and everyone wants them; and there are a lot of terrible apartments and everyone wants these, too. People will do anything for real estate nowadays, no matter how awful or expensive, and pay any amount, and pump the landlord's hand in gratitude for the privilege. The market forces us to act as we do. So when the market, unbidden, seems to drop a dollop of pure, raw gold into someone's midst, as it had in the case of the thin young man in a corduroy jacket, everyone desperately swarms about it like wasps on the lip of a jam jar.

Our dinner ended with the usual veiled threats and blackmail. We had our next one two months later, at a Chinese place near me.

"What happened?" I said.

"What do you mean, what happened?"

"To your friend, and his apartment."

"He's not my friend." The conversation teetered on the brink of a precipice.

"You know who I mean," I said. I offered an olive branch: "The one who was raised up above other mortals by fortune."

The nature of her answer made her drop her objection. She swelled up with her story.

"Well, the fact is that fortune rather cruelly cast him down after that one bright moment."

"And?"

This is what happened.

The name of the chap we'd seen walking down Broadway was Gustave. He had lived in the same apartment since he was an undergraduate. Roommates had come and gone over the years, finding jobs and moving out, but Gustave had remained. He worked in a bookstore 16 blocks away. To keep his rent down, as soon as one roommate moved out, he advertised for another. At this time Gustave's roommates were Flora, who was in publishing, and Jerome, who was involved in an arcane financial operation Louise didn't explain sufficiently for me to grasp. It had something to do with selling junk bonds in the Third World.

A few months ago, a letter arrived from the landlord saying the building was going co-op and and leaseholder would be given the opportunity to buy the apartment at a low, low insider price. The letter lay on the kitchen table all week, and its faint, diffident, computer-printed capitals, like bad needlepoint, gazed up at the ceiling, while the envelope from which it had been ripped carelessly lay, contorted and untouched, beside it. Flora and Jerome each took the opportunity, when no one else was about, to read the letter, and then put it back exactly where it was. There was no discussion of its contents and nobody moved it, because it was addressed to Gustave. And because Gustave was untidy he did not gather it up, and it remained in this position day after day, marinating in the juices of its own piquant meaning.

The letter, of course, was of vital importance to each of the apartment's three occupants. Since it was addressed to him, Gustave read the letter first. He quietly determined that thenceforth, under the new circumstances, there would be no more roommates. He had no feel for the financial dimension in particular of the real estate windfall he had reaped. He simply felt himself ever more snugly wrapped in the warm mantle of his

ing arrangement and wanted to enjoy it alone from now on. He thought of the winter ahead and evenings by the window, reading and watching the pedestrians outside trudge homeward through the sleet. Flora and Jerome, he assumed, would just move out, last of the species roommate, when the time came, which was in the remote enough future not to arouse undue immediate concern.

On the evening of the day of the letter's arrival, Jerome came home after a vexing day at his terminal, tugged loose the tie that had constricted his neck since six o'clock that morning, and collapsed with a whimper onto a kitchen chair. He pulled open the refrigerator from where he sat and gulped milk from the carton. He was young, overweight, and prematurely anxious. Not a week out of business school, he had begun to have second thoughts, but counseled himself that an acquisitive instinct is a terrible thing to waste. So he got a job in a division of a financial services firm and pulled a huge salary working from seven in the morning until seven at night (and later), sitting at a terminal and talking on the telephone.

He opened the refrigerator again, pulled out Flora's liter bottle of white wine, and took a long drink.

Fortified, he noticed the letter on the table and snatched it up.

Its contents agitated him considerably. This came completely out of the blue. He read it again, and bit his lower lip hard. He went to his room and shut the door.

Flora came home, shuffled through her mail with disgust, and pressed the playback button on her answering machine. She heard the sound of a succession of receivers dropping onto their cradles, some of them in a mist of long-distance static. She went into the kitchen, poured a large glass of wine from the liter bottle, picked up the letter, and read it. Then she ran to her room and closed the door.

She calmly thought about what she must do in the face of this disaster. She could never afford an apartment on the open market on an editor's salary.

Flora's and Jerome's trains of thought were identical at this stage; neither wanted to move out, but both wanted the other to move out, and both wanted the lease for themselves individually. Neither discussed these things with anyone else. Both were determined not to await fate's blow passively if they could help it. Both began to cast about for solutions to their problem.

Jerome reasoned that if Gustave

were unable, for some reason, to sign the papers transferring the title to the apartment to his name, Jerome could lay claim to the title himself.

So after considering all sides of the issue and the various options that lay open to him, he reluctantly decided to have Gustave kidnapped and held incommunicado for the period Jerome would need to assume, sign, and irrevocably hold the lease.

Pleased to have got the decision out of the way, and impressed by his own resolve, he went to work the next morning with a spring in his step. He made jokes at his terminal; he daydreamed about how he would redecorate the apartment to suit his own taste. After work he had to restrain himself from stepping into a decorator's shop. That night he dreamt of wallpaper swatches.

To perform the kidnapping, he hired a young man named Twan, whose number had been given to him by someone he knew at work with underworld connections.

Twan worked at a peep-show theater on West 42nd Street, between Seventh and Eighth avenues. His job involved sitting by the door on a chair and keeping out trouble. He was facetiously described as a security guard; actually he was a bouncer, a goon. He could knock you into the middle of next week, next month, or next year, depending on his mood.

Twan liked to keep in shape. During the summer he would lean back on his chair outside the theater and shout at passing women; now and then he would do push-ups on the sidewalk, with his mouth puckered forward. After 25 push-ups he would sit back down on the chair and drink malt liquor from a can in a paper bag and smoke cigarettes.

"Girl, I *crumble* for you!" he shouted at a girl in No Excuses jeans.

"You want a pint of blood, I even *bleed*!" he howled. He barked like a dog, and clucked like a chicken.

Occasionally he would have to escort some sulky person out of the theater, or not let someone else in.

Twan was sassing the late rush hour crowd that was waiting for the buses in front of the Chinese fast food place next door when Raymond, the manager, called him inside.

"Phone!"

"Huh?" Twan said.

"Phone! I said, phone! There's a phone call for you! Someone wants to talk to you. Make it quick, big guy. Let's go."

Twan held the pay phone's receiver apprehensively about twelve inches from his ear, giving it a worried sideways glance. Raymond watched him from behind the narrow counter on which he rested his pudgy arms. The counter was painted red and the walls and ceiling were covered with red wallpaper. A miniature chandelier hung from the ceiling. The pay phone hung on the wall beside a framed set of stills from the film loops and their lewd titles in rampant capital letters.

Twan said (while Raymond listened in curiously, as Twan had never had a telephone call at work before): "Yeah? What? Oh, huh. Yeah. Yeah yeah. Um, OK," in an uninterested tone, and then hung up.

Raymond said, "Who was that?"

"Friend of mine," Twan said.

Jerome had taken the subway a long way uptown and called Twan from a pay phone under an elevated railway track. He slowly punched in the digits, which he read from a scrap of paper. While the number was ringing, he turned over the glossy fragment on which the number had been written. It had been torn from a pornographic magazine and showed a luridly-lit portion of flushed anatomy. His heart pounded. He could feel himself descending.

As soon as the phone was answered, Jerome had to pause while a train rumbled overhead. (That's a dead giveaway, he thought.) He gave Twan his instructions.

"First, I've arranged for you to get a bottle of stuff that will put him to sleep and make him forget everything. It's what they use to put the elephants to sleep at the zoo. That way when he comes around he won't know what's happened to him. All I want you to do is pick him up on the street near the store where he works, give him a shot of that stuff, and then take him as far as you can from the city for a few days. If he wakes up, which he shouldn't, give him another shot. When you pick him up, don't hurt him, OK? *Don't hurt him.* Don't even hit him unless you have to. This has to look like a drug-related robbery. As soon as you get to a place you think is safe, call me and I'll tell you what to do about bringing him back. I'll give you $300 in expenses and a $1,500 fee on completion. OK? Look, Twan, listen, when you call me, don't call me at home, call me at work, all right? Very good. You have my number, right? I'll talk to you later. Thank you. Thank you. Bye."

By the following evening it was all arranged. Some time after eight o'clock, Gustave left the bookstore, sniffing the mild evening air. He carried a copy of a delicious new book, heavy with the perfume of literary fashion. The sky was a grayish pink over the shadowy apartment buildings of Broadway, many of which contained "luxury" studio apartments that rented for as much as $2,000 a month (like the El Maracaibo, where the faucets come off in your hand). Soon, he gloated (Gustave was now beginning to gloat), he would not have to worry about such matters. He was *hors de commerce.*

He turned a corner, paying no

attention to the beige Rambler in front of him that took up half the sidewalk. Two men waited in the car, one at the wheel, one in the back. The passenger door facing the sidewalk swung open into Gustave's path; rough hands reached out and grabbed him, drawing him into the car with as little difficulty as one might a Labrador on a leash, so feeble was Gustave's resistance. As soon as he started to whimper, Twan slapped a palm across his mouth and held it there for a long time. Stunned with fear, Gustave bounced on the springy seat as the car descended the curb and screeched down the narrow street. Before he could think, he felt a deep, steely sting in his thigh; then the lights went out.

The two men took him to a social club in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, in a dismal storefront under a Pentecostal church. But not to socialize. They laid him out on a mattress in a small, dark back room and passed the time in the front playing chess, of which they were both proficient players. Bets were placed by the club members, who knew nothing about Gustave. Every time he completed a move, Twan would smack the clock that stood between them on the table so hard that the pieces would jump off the board, and there would be an argument about where they had been. Things became quite hilarious. Everyone in the social club crowded around them. They drank peach brandy from the bottle. Every two or three hours, Twan or the other (they took turns) got up and checked on Gustave in his tiny room. If he stirred, they gave him a jab. From time to time they would go out for pizza and cigarettes. Twan called Jerome once, and then came back to the game.

At about midnight they gave Gustave an extra-large dose, and left him for the night. He was in the same position when they returned the next morning.

Two days before the new lease was due to be signed, Jerome called the landlord and explained the unfortunate situation. He had Gustave's name struck from the lease and his own put in its place. He would explain the situation to Gustave when he returned: no one knew his whereabouts, so Jerome had stepped in. Everything would be fine.

Out in Bay Ridge, Twan's friend said he wanted his share of the fee, $750.

Both men agreed that $750 was hardly the big money.

Twan's friend said, "What if we bust him?" That way they could charge Jerome twice as much, because a murder costs twice as much as a kidnapping.

"Good idea," Twan said. They carried Gustave into the garbage-strewn yard behind the building and emptied the rest of the bottle of elephant tranquilizer into his body.

They called Jerome and demanded the higher fee. Jerome agreed to pay it, plus $500 extra for them never to call him again. He went chalk white at his desk, and lowered the receiver slowly into its cradle, so it did not make a sound. He spoke to no one in the office for the rest of the day.

When he came back to the apartment that night, Flora said, "Where's Gustave?"

Sweat exploded from his body. "No idea." This was strictly true. There was a pause.

"Well, wherever he is, I hope he comes back tomorrow night because I'm having a dinner party and I want you both to be here."

"How nice," Jerome said.

The previous Monday, Flora had taken a personal day off work. After Jerome and Gustave had left for the day, she opened the Yellow Pages and looked for chemical companies. She had read some-

where that a chemical called diphenyl acetone was the active component in certain types of rat poison. She called around, asking to purchase a quantity of this compound. No one produced it. Someone she talked to told her, "There's only one plant in the United States that makes it in small quantities, and it's in West Virginia." She wrote down the name and found the number. It was in Nitro, West Virginia, a small town a few miles outside Charleston, the capital.

She rented a car and drove to Nitro. The drive took fourteen hours and she slept in a motel just off I-64. The next day she went to the plant and bought the smallest possible quantity of diphenyl acetone, a drum. Two men carried it into the back of her car, and she drove with it back to New York. As soon as she returned, she kicked the shoes out of the bottom of her closet and rolled the drum into it.

That Friday night she cooked a splendid dinner for eight people. Just before serving the main course, she dashed into her room, levered open the drum, and measured out a coffee-spoon of diphenyl acetone, which is a liquid. Back in the kitchen, she poured the liquid into the middle of a plate and placed a pair of quails on it, and gave that plate to Jerome. It was enough to kill about 10,000 normal-sized rats.

The dinner was a huge success, marred only by the disturbing departure from the table of Jerome, clutching his abdomen.

"He's under a lot of pressure at work," Flora said. This also was strictly true.

After the guests had left, and Jerome had been taken to the emergency room in an ambulance, Flora sat alone at the long dining table, still covered with the dishes and debris of dinner, and smoked a cigarette. She watched the boats glide down the Hudson River, drift-

ing constellations of red and white lights. The apartment was now hers.

Jerome spent two weeks in intensive care. Since he was unable, due to illness, to sign the lease, Flora came forward and signed it herself.

The day after the dinner party, Flora loaded the drum into the trunk of her car and drove to a garbage dump in New Jersey, where she unloaded the drum. Seagulls shrieked and circled above her as she heaved the heavy cardboard cylinder to the edge of the dump. It stuck out like a sore thumb.

To hell with it, she thought, looking back at it through her rear view mirror, and she started the ignition.

My sister's narrative ended. She placed two fingers against her pale cheekbone. She wore green nail polish.

"What happened then?" I asked.

"You're being rather slow today," she said.

"Just tell me."

"The police came, of course. Jerome was charged with murder while he was still in the hospital. Flora has been charged with illegal chemical dumping. It's the only charge that is sticking at the moment. They're both out on huge bails, which their families put up."

"So who gets the apartment?"

"The detective who is leading the investigation. He pulled seniority." A pause, and a sigh of dreary resolution: "I suppose I might as well tell you now that he and I are getting married next month, and I'm moving in."

The white-shirted delivery boy from the Chinese restaurant cycled against the traffic up the one-way street. "What are you going to do with your apartment?" I asked. □