

Two Boys and a Girl

Gilbert saw her first. This was in late June, at a party.

She was sitting alone in the backyard, stretched out on a lawn chair, when he went to get a beer from the cooler. He tried to think of something to say to her, but she seemed complete in her solitude and he was afraid of sounding intrusive and obvious. Later he saw her again, inside—a pale, dark-haired girl with dark eyes and lipstick smears on her teeth. She was dancing with Gilbert's best friend, Rafe. The night after that she was with Rafe when he picked Gilbert up to go to another party, and again the night after that. Her name was Mary Ann.

Mary Ann, Rafe, and Gilbert. They went everywhere together that summer, to parties and movies and the lake, to the pools of friends, and on long aimless drives after Gilbert got off work at his father's bookstore. Gilbert didn't have a car, so Rafe did the driving; his grandfather had given him his immaculate old Buick convertible as a reward for getting into Yale. Mary Ann leaned against him with her bare white feet up on the dash, while Gilbert sprawled like a pasha in the back and handed out the beers and made ironic comment on whatever attracted his notice.

Gilbert was deeply ironic. At the high school where he and Rafe had been classmates, the yearbook editors voted him Most Cynical. That pleased him. Gilbert believed disillusionment to be the natural consequence, even the duty, of a mind that could cut through the authorized version to the true nature of things. He made it his business to take nothing on trust, to respect no authority but that of his own judgment, and to be elegantly unsurprised at the grossest crimes and follies, especially those of the world's anointed.

Mary Ann listened to what he said, even when she seemed to be occupied with Rafe. Gilbert knew this, and he knew when he'd managed to shock her. She clenched her hands, blinked rapidly, and a red splotch, vivid as a birthmark, appeared on the milky skin of her neck. It wasn't hard to shock Mary Ann. Her father, a captain in the Coast Guard, was the squarest human being Gilbert had ever met. One night when he and Rafe were waiting for Mary Ann, Captain McCoy stared at Gilbert's sandals and asked what he thought about the beatniks. Mrs. McCoy had doilies all over the house, and pictures of kittens and the Holy Land and dogs playing poker, and in the toilets these chemical gizmos that turned the water blue. Gilbert felt sorry for Mary Ann whenever he took a leak at her house.

In early August, Rafe went fishing in Canada with his father. He left Gilbert the keys to the Buick and told him to take care of Mary Ann. Gilbert recognized this as what the hero of a war movie says to his drab sidekick before leaving on the big mission.

Rafe delivered his instructions while he was in his room packing for the trip. Gilbert lounged on the bed watching him. He wanted to talk but Rafe was playing his six-record set of *I Pagliacci*, which Gilbert didn't believe he really liked, though Rafe made occasional humming noises as if he knew the whole score by heart. Gilbert thought he was taking up opera the same way he'd taken up squash that winter, as an accessory. He lay back and was silent. Rafe went about his business; he was graceful and precise, and he assembled his gear without waste of motion or hesitation as to where things were. At one point he walked over to the mirror and studied himself as if he were alone, and Gilbert was surprised by the anger he felt. Then Rafe turned to him and tossed the keys on the bed and spoke his line about taking care of Mary Ann.

The next day Gilbert drove the Buick around town all by himself. He double-parked in front of Nordstrom's with the top down and smoked cigarettes and watched the women come out as if he were waiting for one of them. Now and then he examined his watch and frowned. He drove onto a pier at the wharf and waved at one of the passengers on the boat to Victoria. She was looking down at the water and didn't see him until she raised her eyes as the boat was backing out of the slip, and caught him blowing her a kiss. She stepped away from the rail and vanished from sight. Later he went to La Luna, a bar near the university where he knew he wouldn't get carded, and took a seat from which he could see the Buick. When the bar filled up he walked outside and raised

the hood and checked the oil, right in front of La Luna's big picture window. To a couple walking past he said, "This damn thing drinks oil like it's going out of style." Then he drove off with the expression of a man with important and not entirely pleasant business to perform. He stopped and bought cigarettes in two different drugstores. He called home from the second drugstore and told his mother he wouldn't be in for dinner and asked if he'd gotten any mail. No, his mother said, nothing. Gilbert ate at a drive-in and cruised for a while and then went up to the lookout above Alki Point and sat on the hood of the Buick and smoked in a moody, philosophical way, deliberately ignoring the girls with their dates in the cars around him. A heavy mist stole in from the sound. Across the water the lights of the city blurred, and a foghorn began to call. Gilbert flipped his cigarette into the shadows and rubbed his bare arms. When he got home he called Mary Ann, and they agreed to go to a movie the following night.

After the movie Gilbert drove Mary Ann back to her house, but instead of getting out of the car she sat where she was and they went on talking. It was easy, easier than he'd imagined. When Rafe was with them, Gilbert could speak through him to Mary Ann and be witty or deep or outrageous. In the moments they'd been alone, waiting for Rafe to rejoin them, he had always found himself tongue-tied, in a kind of panic. He'd cudgel his brains for something to say, and whatever he did come up

with sounded tense and sharp. But that didn't happen, not that night.

It was raining hard. When Gilbert saw that Mary Ann wasn't in any hurry to get out, he cut the engine and they sat there in the faint marine light of the radio tuning band with liquid shadows playing over their faces from the rain streaming down the windows. The rain drummed in gusts on the canvas roof but inside it was warm and close, like a tent during a storm. Mary Ann was talking about nursing school, about her fear that she wouldn't measure up in the tough courses, especially Anatomy and Physiology. Gilbert thought she was being ritually humble and said, Oh, come on, you'll do fine.

I don't know, she said. I just don't know. And then she told him how badly she'd done in science and math, and how two of her teachers had personally gone down to the nursing-school admissions office to help her get in. Gilbert saw that she really was afraid of failing, and that she had reason to be afraid. Now that she'd said so herself, it made sense to him that she struggled in school. She wasn't quick that way; wasn't clever. There was a simplicity about her.

She leaned back into the corner, watching the rain. She looked sad. Gilbert thought of touching her cheek with the back of his hand to reassure her. He waited a moment, then told her it wasn't exactly true that he was trying to make up his mind whether to go to the University of Washington or Amherst. He should have corrected that misunderstanding before. The actual truth was, he hadn't gotten

into Amherst. He'd made it onto the waiting list, but with only three weeks left until school began he figured his odds were just about nil.

She turned and regarded him. He couldn't see her eyes. They were dark pools with only a glint of light at the bottom. She asked why he hadn't gotten in.

To this question Gilbert had no end of answers. He thought of new ones every day, and was sick of them all. I stopped working, he said. I just completely slacked off.

But you should've gotten in wherever you wanted. You're smart enough.

I talk a pretty good game, I guess. He took out a cigarette and tapped the end against the steering wheel. I don't know why I smoke these damn things, he said.

You like the way they make you look. Intellectual.

I guess. He lit it.

She watched him closely as he took the first drag. Let me, she said. Just a puff.

Their fingers touched when he handed her the cigarette.

You're going to be a great nurse, he said.

She took a puff of the cigarette and blew the smoke out slowly.

Neither of them spoke for a time.

I'd better go in, she said.

Gilbert watched her go up the walkway to her house. She didn't hunch and run but moved sedately through the lashing rain, as if this were a night like any other. He waited until he saw her step inside, then turned the radio back up and drove away. He kept tasting her lipstick on the cigarette.

When he called from work the next day her mother answered and asked him to wait. Mary Ann was out of breath when she came to the phone. She said she'd been outside on a ladder, helping her dad paint the house. What are you up to? she asked.

I was just wondering what you were doing, he said.

He took her to La Luna that night, and the next. Both times they got the same booth, right near the jukebox. "Don't Think Twice, It's All Right" had just come out and Mary Ann played it again and again while they talked. On the third night some guys in baseball uniforms were sitting there when they came in. Gilbert was annoyed and saw that she was too. They sat at the bar for a time but kept getting jostled by the drinkers behind them. They decided to go someplace else. Gilbert was paying his tab when the baseball players stood up to leave, and Mary Ann slipped into the booth just ahead of an older couple who'd been waiting nearby.

We were here first, the woman said to Mary Ann as Gilbert sat down across from her.

This is our booth, Mary Ann said, in a friendly, informative way.

How do you figure that?

Mary Ann looked at the woman as if she'd asked a truly eccentric question. Well, I don't know, she said. It just is.

Afterward it kept coming back to Gilbert, the way Mary Ann had said "our booth." He collected such observations and pondered them when he was away from her: her breathlessness when she came to the phone, the

habit she'd formed of taking puffs from his cigarettes and helping herself to his change to play the jukebox, the way she listened to him with such open credulity that he found it impossible to brag or make excuses or say things merely for effect. He couldn't be facetious with Mary Ann. She always thought he meant exactly what he said, and then he had to stop and try to explain that he'd actually meant something else. His irony began to sound weak and somehow envious. It sounded thin and unmanly.

Mary Ann gave him no occasion for it. She took him seriously. She wrote down the names of the books he spoke of—*On the Road*, *The Stranger*, *The Fountainhead*, and some others that he hadn't actually read but knew about and intended to read as soon as he found the time. She listened when he explained what was wrong with Barry Goldwater and *Reader's Digest* and the television shows she liked, and agreed that he was probably right. In the solemnity of her attention he heard himself saying things he had said to no one else, confessing hopes so implausible he had barely confessed them to himself. He was often surprised by his own honesty. But he stopped short of telling Mary Ann what was most on his mind, and what he believed she already knew, because of the chance that she didn't know or wasn't ready to admit she did. Once he said it, everything would change, for all of them, and he wasn't prepared to risk this.

They went out every night but two, once when Gilbert had to work overtime and once

when Captain McCoy took Mary Ann and her mother to dinner. They saw a couple more movies and went to a party and to La Luna and drove around the city. The nights were warm and clear and Gilbert put the top down and poked along in the right lane. He used to wonder, with some impatience, why Rafe drove so slowly. Now he knew. To command the wheel of an open car with a girl on the seat beside you was to be established in a condition that only a fool would hasten to end. He drove slowly around the lake and downtown and up to the lookouts and then back to Mary Ann's house. The first few nights they sat in the car. After that, Mary Ann invited Gilbert inside.

He talked; she talked. She talked about her little sister, Colleen, who had died of cystic fibrosis two years before, and whose long hard dying had brought her family close and given her the idea of becoming a nurse. She talked about friends from school and the nuns who had taught her. She talked about her parents and grandparents and Rafe. All her talk was of her affections. Unconditional enthusiasm generally had a wearying effect on Gilbert, but Mary Ann gave praise, it seemed to him, not to shine it back on herself or to dissemble some secret bitterness but because that was her nature. That was how she was, and he liked her for it, as he liked it that she didn't question everything but trusted freely, like a child.

She had been teaching herself the guitar, and sometimes she would consent to play and sing for him, old ballads about mine disasters and nice lads getting hanged for poaching and noblewomen drowning their babies. He could

see how the words moved her: so much that her voice would give out for moments at a time, during which she would bite her lower lip and gaze down at the floor. She put folk songs on the record player and listened to them with her eyes closed. She also liked Roy Orbison and the Fleetwoods and Ray Charles. One night she was bringing some fudge from the kitchen just as "Born to Lose" came on. Gilbert stood and offered his hand with a dandified flourish that she could have laughed off if she'd chosen to. She put the plate down and took his hand and they began to dance, stiffly at first, from a distance, then easily and close. **They fit perfectly.** Perfectly. He felt the rub of her hips and thighs, the heat of her skin. Her warm hand tightened in his. He breathed in the scent of lavender water with the sunny smell of her hair and the faint salt smell of her body. He breathed it all in again and again. And then he felt himself grow hard and rise against her, so that she had to know, she just had to know, and he waited for her to move away. But she did not move away. She pressed close to him until the song ended, and for a moment or two after. Then she stepped back and let go of Gilbert's hand and in a hoarse voice asked him if he wanted some fudge. She was facing him but managing not to look at him.

Maybe later, he said, and held out his hand again. May I have the honor?

She walked over to the couch and sat down. I'm so clumsy.

No you're not. You're a great dancer.

She shook her head.

He sat down in the chair across from her. She still wouldn't look at him. She put her hands together and stared at them.

Then she said, How come Rafe's dad picks on him all the time?

I don't know. There isn't any particular reason. Bad chemistry, I guess.

It's like he can't do anything right. His dad won't let him alone, even when I'm there. I bet he's having a miserable time.

It was true that neither Rafe's father nor his mother took much pleasure in their son. Gilbert had no idea why this should be so. But it was a strange subject to have boiled up out of nowhere like this, and for her to be suddenly close to tears about. Don't worry about Rafe, he said. Rafe can take care of himself.

The grandfather clock chimed the Westminster Bells, then struck twelve times. The clock had been made to go with the living room ensemble and its tone, tinny and untrue, set Gilbert on edge. The whole house set him on edge: the pictures, the matching Colonial furniture, the single bookshelf full of condensed books. It was like a house Russian spies would practice being Americans in.

It's just so unfair, Mary Ann said. Rafe is so sweet.

He's a good egg, Rafe, Gilbert said. Most assuredly. One of the best.

He is the best.

Gilbert got up to leave and Mary Ann did look at him then, with something like alarm. She stood and followed him outside onto the porch. When he looked back from the end of the walkway, she was watching him with her

arms crossed over her chest. Call me tomorrow, she said. Okay?

I was thinking of doing some reading, he said. Then he said, I'll see. I'll see how things go.

The next night they went bowling. This was Mary Ann's idea. She was a good bowler and frankly out to win. Whenever she got a strike she threw her head back and gave a great bark of triumph. She questioned Gilbert's score-keeping until he got rattled and told her to take over, which she did without even a show of protest. When she guttered her ball she claimed she'd slipped on a wet spot and insisted on bowling that frame again. He didn't let her, he understood that she would despise him if he did, but her shamelessness somehow made him happier than he'd been all day.

As he pulled up to her house Mary Ann said, Next time I'll give you some pointers. You'd be half decent if you knew what you were doing.

Hearing that "next time," he killed the engine and turned and looked at her. Mary Ann, he said.

He had never said so much before.

She looked straight ahead and didn't answer. Then she said, I'm thirsty. You want a glass of juice or something? Before Gilbert could say anything, she added, We'll have to sit outside, okay? I think we woke my dad up last night.

Gilbert waited on the steps while Mary Ann went into the house. Paint cans and brushes were arranged on top of the porch railing. Cap-

tain McCoy scraped and painted one side of the house every year. This year he was doing the front. That was just like him, to eke it out one side at a time. Gilbert had once helped the Captain make crushed ice for drinks. The way the Captain did it, he held a single cube in his hand and clobbered it with a hammer until it was pulverized. Then another cube. Then another. Etcetera. When Gilbert wrapped a whole tray's worth in a hand towel and started to whack it against the counter, the Captain grabbed the towel away from him. That's not how you do it! he said. He found Gilbert another hammer and the two of them stood there hitting cube after cube.

Mary Ann came out with two glasses of orange juice. She sat beside Gilbert and they drank and looked out at the Buick gleaming under the streetlight.

I'm off tomorrow, Gilbert said. You want to go for a drive?

Gee, I wish I could. I promised my dad I'd paint the fence.

We'll paint, then.

That's all right. It's your day off. You should do something.

Painting's something.

Something you like, dummy.

I like to paint. In fact I love painting.

Gilbert.

No kidding, I love to paint. Ask my folks. Every free minute, I'm out there with a brush.

Like fun.

So what time do we start? Look, it's only been three hours since I did my last fence and already my hand's starting to shake.

Stop it! I don't know. Whenever. After breakfast.

He finished his juice and rolled the glass between his hands. Mary Ann.

He felt her hesitate. Yes?

He kept rolling the glass. What do your folks think about us going out so much?

They don't mind. I think they're glad, actually.

I'm not exactly their type.

Hah. You can say that again.

What're they so glad about then?

You're not Rafe.

What, they don't like Rafe?

Oh, they like him, a lot. A whole lot. They're always saying how if they had a son, and so on. But my dad thinks we're getting too serious.

Ah, too serious. So I'm comic relief.

Don't say that.

I'm not comic relief?

No.

Gilbert put his elbows on the step behind him. He looked up at the sky and said carefully, He'll be back in a couple of days.

I know.

Then what?

She leaned forward and stared into the yard as if she'd heard a sound.

He waited for a time, aware of every breath he took. Then what? he said again.

I don't know. Maybe ... I don't know. I'm really kind of tired. You're coming tomorrow, right?

If that's what you want.

You said you were.

Only if you want me to.

I want you to.

Okay. Sure. Tomorrow, then.

Gilbert stopped at a diner on the way home. He ate a piece of apple pie, then drank coffee and watched the cars go past. To an ordinary person driving by he supposed he must look pretty tragic, sitting here alone over a coffee cup, cigarette smoke curling past his face. And the strange thing was, that person would be right. He was about to betray his best friend. To cut Rafe off from the two people he trusted most, possibly, he understood, from trust itself. Himself, too, he would betray—his belief, held deep under the stream of his flippancy, that he was steadfast and loyal. And he knew what he was doing. That was why this whole thing was tragic, because he knew what he was doing and could not do otherwise.

He had thought it all out. He could provide himself with reasons. Rafe and Mary Ann would have broken up anyway, sooner or later. Rafe was moving on. He didn't know it, but he was leaving them behind. He'd have roommates, guys from rich families who'd invite him home for vacation, take him skiing, sailing. He'd wear a tuxedo to debutante parties where he'd meet girls from Smith and Mount Holyoke, philosophy majors, English majors, girls with ideas who were reading the same books he was reading and other books too, who could say things he wouldn't have expected them to say. He'd get interested in one of these girls and go on road trips with his friends to her college. She'd come to New

Haven. They'd rendezvous in Boston and New York. He'd meet her parents. And on the first day of his next trip home, honorable Rafe would enter Mary Ann's house and leave half an hour later with a sorrowful face and a heart leaping with joy. There wouldn't be many more trips home, not after that. What was here to bring him all that way? Not his parents, those crocodiles. Not Mary Ann. Himself? Good old Gilbert? Please.

And Mary Ann, what about Mary Ann? Once Rafe double-timed her and then dropped her cold, what would happen to that simple good-heartedness of hers? Would she begin to suspect it, stand guard over it? He was right to do anything to keep that from happening.

These were the reasons, and they were good reasons, but Gilbert could make no use of them. He knew that he would do what he was going to do even if Rafe stayed at home and went to college with him, or if Mary Ann was somewhat more calculating. Reasons always came with a purpose, to give the appearance of a struggle between principle and desire. But there'd been no struggle. Principle had power only until you found what you had to have.

Captain McCoy was helping Mrs. McCoy into the car when Gilbert pulled up behind him. The Captain waited as his wife gathered her dress inside, then closed the door and walked back toward the Buick. Gilbert came around to meet him.

Mary Ann tells me you're going to help with the fence.

Yes, sir.

There's not that much of it—shouldn't take too long.

They both looked at the fence, about sixty feet of white pickets that ran along the sidewalk. Mary Ann came out on the porch and mimed "hi."

Captain McCoy said, Would you mind picking up the paint? It's that Glidden store down on California. Just give 'em my name. He opened his car door, then looked at the fence again. Scrape her good. That's the secret. Give her a good scraping and the rest'll go easy. And try not to get any paint on the grass.

Mary Ann came through the gate and waved as her parents drove off. She said that they were going over to Bremerton to see her grandmother. Well, she said. You want some coffee or something?

I'm fine.

He followed her up the walk. She had on cut-offs. Her legs were very white and they flexed in a certain way as she climbed the porch steps. Captain McCoy had set out two scrapers and two brushes on the railing, all four of them exactly parallel. Mary Ann handed Gilbert a scraper and they went back to the fence. What a day! she said. Isn't it the most beautiful day? She knelt to the right of the gate and began to scrape. Then she looked back at Gilbert watching her and said, Why don't you do that side over there? We'll see who gets done first.

There wasn't much to scrape, some blisters, a few peeling patches here and there. This

fence is in good shape, Gilbert said. How come you're painting it?

It goes with the front. When we paint the front, we always paint the fence.

It doesn't need it. All it needs is some re-touching.

I guess. Dad wanted us to paint it, though. He always paints it when he paints the front.

Gilbert looked at the gleaming white house, the bright weedless lawn trimmed to the nap of a crewcut.

Guess who called this morning, Mary Ann said.

Who?

Rafe! There was a big storm coming in so they left early. He'll be back tonight. He sounded really great. He said to say hi.

Gilbert ran the scraper up and down a picket.

It was so good to hear his voice, Mary Ann said. I wish you'd been here to talk to him.

A kid went by on a bicycle, cards snapping against the spokes.

We should do something, Mary Ann said. Surprise him. Maybe we could take the car over to the house, be waiting out front when he gets back. Wouldn't that be great?

I wouldn't have any way to get home.

Rafe can give you a ride.

Gilbert sat back and watched Mary Ann. She was halfway down her section of the fence. He waited for her to turn and face him. Instead she bent over to work at a spot near the ground. Her hair fell forward, exposing the nape of her neck. Maybe you could invite someone along, Mary Ann said.

Invite someone. What do you mean, a girl?

Sure. It would be nice if you had a girl. It would be perfect.

Gilbert threw the scraper against the fence. He saw Mary Ann freeze. **It would not be perfect, he said.** When she still didn't turn around, he stood and went up the walk and through the house to the kitchen. He paced back and forth. He went to the sink, drank a glass of water, and stood with his hands on the counter. He saw what Mary Ann was thinking of, the two of them sitting in the open car, herself jumping out as Rafe pulled up, the wild embrace. Rafe unshaven, reeking of smoke and nature, a little abashed at all this emotion in front of his father but pleased, too, and amused. And all the while Gilbert looking coolly on, hands in his pockets, ready to say the sly mocking words that would tell Rafe that all was as before. That was how she saw it going. As if nothing had happened.

Mary Ann had just about finished her section when Gilbert came back outside. I'll go get the paint, he told her. I don't think there's much left to scrape on my side, but you can take a look.

She stood and tried to smile. Thank you, she said.

He saw that she had been in tears, and this did not soften him but confirmed him in his purpose.

Mary Ann had already spread out the tarp, pulling one edge under the fence so the drips wouldn't fall on the grass. When Gilbert

opened the can she laughed and said, Look! They gave you the wrong color.

No, that's exactly the right color.

But it's *red*. We need white. Like it is now.

You don't want to use white, Mary Ann. Believe me.

She frowned.

Red's the perfect color for this. No offense, but white is the worst choice you could make.

But the house is white.

Exactly, Gilbert said. So are the houses next door. You put a white fence here, what you end up with is complete boredom. It's like being in a hospital, you know what I mean?

I don't know. I guess it is a lot of white.

What the red will do, the red will give some contrast and pick up the bricks in the walk. It's just what you want here.

Well, maybe. The thing is, I don't think I should. Not this time. Next time, maybe, if my dad wants to.

Look, Mary Ann. What your dad wants is for you to use your own head.

Mary Ann squinted at the fence.

You have to trust me on this, okay?

She sucked in her lower lip, then nodded. Okay. If you're sure.

Gilbert dipped his brush. The world's bland enough already, right? Everyone's always talking about the banality of evil—what about the evil of banality?

They painted through the morning and into the afternoon. Every now and then Mary Ann would back off a few steps and take in what they'd done. At first she kept her thoughts to herself. The more they painted, the more she

had to say. Toward the end she went out into the street and stood there with her hands on her hips. It's interesting, isn't it? Really different. I see what you mean about picking up the bricks. It's pretty red, though.

It's perfect.

Think my dad'll like it?

Your dad? He'll be crazy about it.

Think so? Gilbert? Really?

Wait till you see his face.