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THE FIRST TEN YEARS

EDITED BY OTTO PENZLER

THE BEST OF
The Best American
Mystery Stories™

The First Ten Years
1997–2006

Edited and with an Introduction
by **Otto Penzler**, *Series Editor*



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Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Introduction](#)
[Hot Springs](#)
[The Weekender](#)
[The Dark Snow](#)
[Karen Makes Out](#)
[Red Clay](#)
[Faithless](#)
[Poachers](#)
[Running Out of Dog](#)
[Lobster Night](#)
[The Paperhanger](#)
[It Is Raining in Bejucal](#)
[Midnight Emissions](#)
[Home Sweet Home](#)
[All Through the House](#)
[Disaster Stamps of Pluto](#)
[When All This Was Bay Ridge](#)
[Case Closed](#)
[Loyalty](#)
[Her Lord and Master](#)
[Improvisation](#)
[Contributors' Notes](#)
[About the Editor](#)

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Introduction

It is noteworthy to point out that 2014 marks the one hundredth anniversary of the publication of the first volume of *The Best American Short Stories*, the distinguished annual series that quite likely is the most important and influential publishing venture of its kind. The 1915 first edition was edited by Edward O'Brien, who continued in that role until 1941. In his twenty-seven years as the editor, in a time when countless thousands of short stories were being published in hundreds of magazines (he once claimed that he read eight thousand stories a year), he attempted to produce volumes that ignored merely popular writers while highlighting those whose works he believed would be the most enduring. An early admirer and champion of Ernest Hemingway, for instance, O'Brien selected his story "My Old Man" before it had been published and then helped Hemingway find a publisher for his first book.

The Best American Mystery Stories cannot claim equal longevity, having its first edition published in 1997, nor can it claim to have discovered Hemingway's successor to the title of the greatest American author of the century and a Nobel Prize winner, as Hemingway was back when the prize was based purely on literary merit not a political statement as it has been so often in recent years.

But it can make some significant claims. Wait—not claims, but irrefutable facts, which is a different kettle of mackerel.

This collection memorializes a small selection of these points of pride. The stories contained here are my personal selection (having been the series editor since its inception) of the best work that has appeared in the first decade of the distinguished life of *The Best American Mystery Stories*. There can be little doubt that the series takes it as a badge of honor that it has published a Nobel Laureate (Alice Munroe), Pulitzer Prize winners (John Updike, Elizabeth Strout), and National Book Award winners (Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, Pete Dexter, Louise Erdrich).

It is no less heartwarming to note that quite a few authors had never had a book published before their stories were selected for inclusion in one of the annual volumes. There are, in fact, too many to document, but among those who are included in this collection is Tom Franklin, whose memorable story "Poachers" won the Edgar Allan Poe Award, given by the Mystery Writers of America, and became the title story of his first book, *Poachers: Stories*. He has gone on to write three novels on his own and one with his wife, Beth Ann

Fennelly. His most recent solo effort, *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*, was nominated for an Edgar and won the British Crime Writers' Association Gold Dagger Award.

Christopher Coake's shocking story "All Through the House" paved the way for his first book contract and served as the centerpiece of *We're in Trouble: Stories* which he followed with the highly acclaimed novel *You Came Back*.

Lou Manfredo introduced his New York cop Joe Rizzo in the short story "Case Closed." He later decided to use it as the opening chapter of his first novel, *Rizzo's War*, which has been followed by two others in a series that has been compared to the 87th Precinct novels of Ed McBain.

The contributors to the books in *The Best American Mystery Stories* series, it is evident, run the gamut, from the most honored authors in America, the superstars, to beginners trying to establish themselves in a difficult profession, the rookies. Their stories were selected for only one reason: their excellence. No story was ever picked because it was by a "name" or because it was a bestseller or because it was written by a friend or because it appeared in an important publication. Neither were any selected because of someone's idea of an appropriate demographic. Criticism has been leveled at the series because the books did not contain some arbitrarily cited notion of what *should* have been in them: more young authors, more women, more detective stories, more Southern writers, more stories from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, more cozy writers. Conversely, there have been cries about what should *not* have been in these books: too many noir writers, too many crime stories, too many "literary" stories, too many Southern writers, too many stories from *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, too many stories with dirty words, blah, blah, blah. These comments have been offered by those who abuse the privilege of being stupid, but I thank them for their interest.

It may be redundant for me to write this again, as regular readers of this series will attest (as they roll their eyes and find the repetition as annoying as gnats to a tightrope walker) that I have already explained it in each of the previous seventeen volumes, but it falls into the category of fair warning to state that many people regard a "mystery" as a detective story. I regard the detective story as one subgenre of a much bigger genre, which I define as any short work of fiction in which a crime, or the threat of a crime, is central to the theme or the plot. While I love good puzzles and tales of pure ratiocination, few of these are written today as the mystery genre has evolved (for better or worse, depending upon your point of view) into a more character-driven form of literature, with more emphasis on the why of a crime's commission than an examination of "who done it" or how it was "perpetrated." The line between mystery fiction and

general fiction has become more and more blurred in recent years, producing fewer memorable detective stories but more significant literature.

It is an honor and a pure joy, making me as happy as a teenager with car keys, to be asked to select my favorite stories from that glorious first decade of *The Best American Mystery Stories*. The pursuit of the best stories in this exciting genre of literature is an enormous undertaking, albeit not an unpleasant one. It is a year-long quest, largely enabled by my invaluable colleague, Michele Slung, who culls the mystery magazines, both print and electronic, for suitable stories, just as she does short story collections (works by a single author) and anthologies (works by a variety of authors), popular magazines, electronic magazines, and, perhaps the richest trove to be mined, literary journals. As the fastest and smartest reader I have ever known, she looks at about three thousand to five thousand stories a year, largely to determine which are mysteries (you can't tell a story by its title), and then to determine which are worth serious consideration. I then read the harvested crop, passing along the best fifty (or at least those I liked best) to the guest editor, who selects twenty to be reprinted, with the other thirty being listed in an honor roll as "Other Distinguished Mystery Stories."

While I have largely agreed with my guest editors in their selections, it is comforting to know that my choices for the stories to be included in this collection won't be overridden. It would be impossible to overpraise the efforts of the guest editors who have contributed so much time and effort to make the volumes in this series so outstanding. Because the guest editors are some of the most successful authors in America, the demands on their time cannot be calculated, keeping them busier than Lucille Ball in a candy factory.

In addition to writing their books, they are asked to promote them, heading off on tours with late-night or early-morning flights (and we all know how much fun passing through security lines at the airport can be), giving interviews, writing blogs, making bookshop appearances to sign books, meeting sales people and executives at their publishing houses, and so on. Because they are successful not only in America, they are often asked to do the same things in various countries around the world. They are frequently asked to read other authors' books and provide quotes for their dust jackets or in advertisements (and because they are exceptionally nice people, it is difficult for them to turn down a request from another author's agent, editor, esteemed colleague, or friend). They are relentlessly asked to speak at charity events and colleges and other schools, to make appearances at mystery conventions and book trade shows, and to show up to receive an award or be a guest of honor at some event or other. These are all flattering and pleasant on an individual basis but cumulatively can wear down

the strongest person. And I haven't mentioned the notion that these guest editors might have personal lives replete with spouses, children, parents, and friends who also make demands on their time.

It cannot be with glee, then, that any of them received my request to be a guest editor, which they undoubtedly found as welcome as getting gum in their hair. Mostly, they were too courteous and gracious to respond in the manner in which they undoubtedly would have preferred. Deep, genuine, heartfelt thanks then go out to the guest editors of the first ten volumes in the series: Robert B. Parker, Sue Grafton, Ed McBain, Donald E. Westlake, Lawrence Sanders, James Ellroy, Michael Connelly, Nelson DeMille, Joyce Carol Oates, and Scott Turow. (This takes nothing away from the guest editors of the subsequent volumes, and I hope there will be an opportunity to properly acknowledge them at another time.)

So here you have it. This modest-sized collection, it is hoped, will appeal to the most discriminating and demanding taste. It is the culmination of ten years' worth of reading, of literary treasure hunting that offers a trove that would satisfy Goldilocks. If you are encountering some of these stories for the first time, I envy you.

O. P.

JAMES CRUMLEY

Hot Springs

FROM *Murder for Love*

AT NIGHT, EVEN in the chill mountain air, Mona Sue insisted on cranking the air conditioner all the way up. Her usual temperature always ran a couple of degrees higher than normal, and she claimed that the baby she carried made her constant fever even worse. She kept the cabin cold enough to hang meat. During the long, sleepless nights, Benbow spooned to her naked, burning skin, trying to stay warm.

In the mornings, too, Mona Sue forced him into the cold. The modern cabin sat on a bench in the cool shadow of Mount Nihart, and they broke their fast with a room-service breakfast on the deck, a robe wrapped loosely about her naked body while Benbow bundled into both sweats and a robe. She ate furiously, stoking a furnace, and recounted her dreams as if they were gospel, effortlessly consuming most of the spread of exotic cheeses and expensively unseasonable fruits, a loaf of sourdough toast, and four kinds of meat, all the while aimlessly babbling through the events of her internal night, the dreams of a teenage girl, languidly symbolic and vaguely frightening. She dreamed of her mother, young and lovely, devouring her litter of barefoot boys in the dark Ozark hollows. And her father, home from a Tennessee prison, his crooked member dangling against her smooth cheek.

Benbow suspected she left the best parts out and did his best to listen to the soft southern cadences without watching her face. He knew what happened when he watched her talk, watched the soft moving curve of her dark lips, the wise slant of her gray eyes. So he picked at his breakfast and tried to focus his stare downslope at the steam drifting off the large hot-water pool behind the old shagbark lodge.

But then she switched to her daydreams about their dubious future, which were as deadly specific as a .45 slug in the brainpan: after the baby, they could flee to Canada; nobody would follow them up there. He listened and watched with the false patience of a teenage boy involved in his first confrontation with pure lust and hopeless desire.

Mona Sue ate with the precise and delicate greed of a heart surgeon, the pad of her spatulate thumb white on the handle of her spoon as she carved a perfect curled ball from the soft orange meat of her melon. Each bite of meat had to be

balanced with an equal weight of toast before being crushed between her tiny white teeth. Then she examined each strawberry poised before her darkly red lips as if it might be a jewel of great omen and she some ancient oracle, then sank her shining teeth into the fleshy fruit as if it were the mortal truth. Benbow's heart rolled in his chest as he tried to fill his lungs with the cold air to fight off the heat of her body.

Fall had come to the mountains, now. The cottonwoods and alders welcomed the change with garish mourning dress, and in the mornings a rime of ice covered the windshield of the gray Taurus he had stolen at the Denver airport. New snow fell each night, moving slowly down the ridges from the high distant peaks of the Hard Rock Range, and slipped closer each morning down the steep ridge behind them. Below the bench the old lodge seemed to settle more deeply into the narrow canyon, as if hunkering down for eons of snow, and the steam from the hot springs mixed with wood smoke and lay flat and sinuous among the yellow creek willows.

Benbow suspected, too, that the scenery was wasted on Mona Sue. Her dark eyes seemed turned inward to a dreamscape of her life, her husband, R. L. Dark, the pig farmer, his bull-necked son, Little R. L., and the lumpy Ozark offal of her large worthless family.

"Coach," she'd say—she thought it funny to call him Coach—interrupting the shattered and drifting narrative of her dreams. Then she would sweep back the thick black Indian hair from her face, tilt her narrow head on the slender column of her neck, and laugh. "Coach, that ol' R. L., he's a-comin'. You stole somethin' belonged to him, and you can bet he's on his way. Lit'l R. L., too, prob'ly, cause he tol' me once he'd like to string your guts on a bob-wire fence," she recited like a sprightly but not very bright child.

"Sweetheart, R. L. Dark can just barely cipher the numbers on a dollar bill or the spots on a card," Benbow answered, as he had each morning for the six months they'd been on the run. "He can't read a map that he hasn't drawn himself, and by noon he's too drunk to fit his ass in a tractor seat and find his hog pens . . ."

"You know, Puddin', an ol' boy's got enough a them dollar bills, or stacks a them Franklins like we do," she added, laughing, "he can hire-out that readin' part, and the map part too. So he's a-comin'. You can put that in your mamas' piggy bank."

This was a new wrinkle in their morning ritual, and Benbow caught himself glancing down at the parking lot behind the lodge and at the single narrow road up Hidden Springs Canyon, but he shook it off quickly. When he made the fateful decision to take Mona Sue and the money, he vowed to go for it, never

glancing over his shoulder, living in the moment.

And this was it. Once more. Leaving his breakfast untouched, again, he slipped his hand through the bulky folds of Mona Sue's terry cloth robe to cradle the warm ripening fullness of her breasts and the long, thick nipples, already rock-hard before his touch, and he kissed her mouth, sweet with strawberry and melon. Once again, he marveled at the deep passionate growl from the base of her throat as he pressed his lips into the hollow, then Benbow lifted her small frame—she nestled the baby high under the smooth vault of her rib cage and even at seven months the baby barely showed—and carried her to the bedroom.

Benbow knew, from recent experience, that the horse wrangler who doubled as room-service waiter would be waiting to clear the picnic table when they came out of the house to finish the coffee. The wrangler might have patience with horses but not with guests who spent their mornings in bed. But he would wait for long minutes, silent as a Sioux scout, as Mona Sue searched her robe for his tip, occasionally exposing the rising contour of a breast or the clean scissoring of her long legs. Benbow had given him several hard looks, which the wrangler ignored as if the blunt stares were spoken in a foreign tongue. But nothing helped. Except to take the woman inside and avoid the wrangler altogether.

This morning Benbow laid Mona Sue on the featherbed like a gift, opened her robe, kissed the soft curve of her swollen belly, then blew softly on her feathery pubic hair. Mona Sue sobbed quickly, coughed as if she had a catfish bone caught in her throat, her long body arching. Benbow sobbed, too, his hunger for her more intense than the hunger growling in his empty stomach.

While Mona Sue had swelled through her pregnancy, Benbow had shed twenty-seven pounds from his blocky frame. Sometimes, just after they made love, it seemed as if her burning body had stolen the baby from his own muscled flesh, something stolen during the tangle of love, something growing hard and tight in her smooth, slim body.

As usual, they made love, then finished the coffee, ordered a fresh pot, tipped the wrangler, then made love again before her morning nap.

While Mona Sue slept, usually Benbow would drink the rest of the coffee as he read the day-old Meriwether newspaper, then slip into his sweats and running shoes, and jog down the switchbacks to the lodge to laze in the hot waters of the pools. He loved it there, floating in the water that seemed heavier than normal, thicker but cleaner, clearer. He almost felt whole there, cleansed and healthy and warm, taking the waters like some rich foreign prince, fleeing his failed life.

Occasionally, Benbow wished Mona Sue would interrupt her naps to join him, but she always said it might hurt the baby and she was already plenty hot with

her natural fevers. As the weeks passed, Benbow learned to treasure his time alone in the hot pool and stopped asking her.

So their days wound away routinely, spooling like silk ribbons through their fingers, as placid as the deeply still waters of the pool.

But this noon, exhausted from the run and the worry, the lack of sleep and food, Benbow slipped effortlessly into the heated gravity of Mona Sue's sleeping body and slept, only to wake suddenly, sweating in spite of the chill, when the air conditioner was switched off.

R. L. Dark stood at the foot of their bed. Grinning. The old man stretched his crinkled neck, sniffing the air like an ancient snapping turtle, testing the air for food or fun, since he had no natural enemies except for teenage boys with .22s. R. L. had dressed for the occasion. He wore a new Carhart tin coat and clean bib overalls with the old Webley .455 revolver hanging on a string from his neck and bagging the bib pocket.

Two good ol' boys flanked him, one bald and the other wildly hirsute, both huge and dressed in Kmart flannel plaid. The bald one held up a small ball-peen hammer like a trophy. They weren't grinning. A skinny man in a baggy white suit shifted from foot to foot behind them, smiling weakly like a gun-shy pointer pup.

"Well, piss on the fire, boys, and call the dogs," R. L. Dark said, hustling the extra .455 rounds in his pocket as if they were his withered privates, "this hunt's done." The old man's cackle sounded like the sunrise cry of a cannibalistic rooster. "Son, they say you coulda been some kinda football coach, and I know you're one hell of a poker player, but I'd a never thought you'd come to this sorry end—a simple-minded thief and a chickenfuckin' wife stealer." Then R. L. brayed like one of the old plow mules he kept in the muddy bottoms of the White. "But you can run right smart, son. Gotta say that. Sly as an old boar coon. We might still be a-lookin' if'n Baby Doll there ain't a called her mama. Collect. To brag 'bout the baby."

Jesus, Benbow thought. Her mother. A toothless woman, now shaped like a potato dumpling, topped with greasy hair, seasoned with moles.

Mona Sue woke, rubbing her eyes like a child, murmuring, "How you been, Daddy Honey?"

And Benbow knew he faced a death even harder than his unlucky life, knew even before the monster on the right popped him behind the ear with the ball-peen hammer and jerked his stunned body out of bed as if he were a child and handed him to his partner, who wrapped him in a full nelson. The bald one flipped the hammer and rapped his nuts smartly with it, then flipped it again and began breaking the small bones of Benbow's right foot with the round knob of

the hammerhead.

Before Benbow fainted, harsh laughter raked his throat. Maybe this was the break he had been waiting for all his life.

Actually, it had all been Little R. L.'s fault. Sort of. Benbow had spotted the hulking bowlegged kid with the tiny ears and the thick neck three years earlier, when the downward spiral of his football coaching career had led him to Alabamphilia, a small town on the edge of the Ozarks, a town without hope or dignity or even any convincing religious fervor, a town that smelled of chicken guts, hog manure, and rampant incest, which seemed to be the three main industries.

Benbow first saw Little R. L. in a pickup touch-football game played on the hardscrabble playground, and knew from the first moment that the boy had the quick grace of a deer, combined with the strength of a wild boar. This kid was one of the best natural running backs he'd ever seen. Benbow also found out just as quickly that Little R. L. was one of the redheaded Dark boys, and the Dark boys didn't play football.

Daddy R. L. thought football was a silly game, a notion with which Benbow agreed, and too much like work not to draw wages, with which once again Benbow agreed, and if'n his boys were going to work for free, they were damn well going to work for him and his hog operation, not some dirt-poor pissant washed-up football bum. Benbow had to agree with that, too, right to R. L.'s face, had to eat the old man's shit to get to the kid. Because this kid could be Benbow's ticket out of this Ozark hell, and he intended to have him. This was the one break Benbow needed to save his life. Once again.

It had always been that way for Benbow, needing that one break that never seemed to come. During his senior year at the small high school in western Nebraska, after three and a half years of mostly journeyman work as a blocking back in a pass-crazy offense, Benbow's mother had worked double shifts at the truck-stop café—his dad had been dead so long nobody really remembered him—so they could afford to put together a videotape of his best efforts as a running back and pass receiver to send down to the university coaches in Lincoln. Once they had agreed to send a scout up for one game, Benbow had badgered his high school coach into a promise to let him carry the ball at least twenty times that night.

But the weather screwed him. On what should have been a lovely early October Friday night, a storm raced in from Canada, days early, and its icy wind blew Benbow's break right out of the water. Before the game it rained two hard

inches, then the field froze. During the first half it rained again, then hailed, and at the end of the second quarter it became a blinding snow squall.

Benbow had gained sixty yards, sure, but none of it pretty. And at halftime the Nebraska scout came by to apologize but if he was to get home in this weather, he had to start now. The lumpy old man invited Benbow to try a walk-on. Right, Benbow thought. Without a scholarship, he didn't have the money to register for fall semester. *Damn*, Benbow thought as he kicked the water cooler, and *damn it to hell*, he thought as his big toe shattered and his senior season ended.

So he played football for some pissant Christian college in the Dakotas where he didn't bother to take a degree. With his fused toe, he had lost a step in the open field and his cuts lost their precision, so he haunted the weight room, forced thick muscle over his running back's body, and made himself into a solid if small fullback, but good enough to wrangle an invitation to one of the postseason senior bowl games. Then the first-string fullback, who was sure to be drafted by the pros, strained his knee in practice and refused to play. *Oh, God*, Benbow thought, *another break*.

But God foxed this one. The backfield coach was a born-again fundamentalist named Culpepper, and once he caught Benbow neither bowing his head nor even bothering to close his eyes during a lengthy team prayer, the coach became determined to convert the boy. Benbow played along, choking on his anger at the self-righteous bastard until his stomach cramped, swallowing the anger until he was throwing up three times a day, twice during practice and once before lights-out. By game day he'd lost twelve pounds and feared he wouldn't have the strength to play.

But he did. He had a first half to praise the football gods, if not the Christian one: two rushing touchdowns, one three yards dragging a linebacker and a corner, the other thirty-nine yards of fluid grace and power; and one receiving, twenty-two yards. But the quarterback had missed the handoff at the end of the first half, jammed the ball against Benbow's hip, and a blitzing linebacker picked it out of the air, then scored.

In the locker room at halftime, Culpepper was all over him like stink on shit. *Pride goeth before a fall!* he shouted. *We're never as tall as we are on our knees before Jesus!* And all the other soft-brain cliches. Benbow's stomach knotted like a rawhide rope, then rebelled. Benbow caught that bit of vomit and swallowed it. But the second wave was too much. He turned and puked into a nearby sink. Culpepper went mad. Accused him of being out of shape, of drinking, smoking, and fornicating. When Benbow denied the charges, Culpepper added another, screamed *Prevaricator!* his foamy spittle flying into Benbow's face. And that was that.

Culpepper lost an eye from the single punch and nearly died during the operation to rebuild his cheekbone. Everybody said Benbow was lucky not to do time, like his father, who had killed a corrupt weighmaster down in Texas with his tire thumper, and was then killed himself by a bad Houston drug dealer down in the Ellis Unit at Huntsville when Benbow was six. Benbow was lucky, he guessed, but marked “Uncoachable” by the pro scouts and denied tryouts all over the league. Benbow played three years in Canada, then destroyed his knee in a bar fight with a Chinese guy in Vancouver. Then he was out of the game. Forever.

Benbow drifted west, fighting fires in the summers and dealing poker in the winter, taking the occasional college classes until he finally finished a PE teaching degree at Northern Montana and garnered an assistant coach’s job at a small town in the Sweetgrass Hills, where he discovered he had an unsuspected gift for coaching, as he did for poker: a quick mind and no fear. A gift, once discovered, that became an addiction to the hard work, long hours, loving the game, and paying the price to win.

Head coach in three years, then two state championships, and a move to a larger school in Washington State. Where his mother came to live with him. Or die with him, as it were. The doctors said it was her heart, but Benbow knew that she died of truck-stop food, cheap whiskey, and long-haul drivers whose souls were as full of stale air as their tires.

But he coached a state championship team the next year and was considering offers from a football power down in northern California when he was struck down by a scandalous lawsuit. His second-string quarterback had become convinced that Benbow was sleeping with his mother, which of course he was. When the kid attacked Benbow at practice with his helmet, Benbow had to hit the kid to keep him off. He knew this part of his life was over when he saw the kid’s eye dangling out of its socket on the grayish pink string of the optic nerve.

Downhill, as they say, from there. Drinking and fighting as often as coaching, low-rent poker games and married women, usually married to school-board members or dumb-shit administrators. Downhill all the way to Alabamphilia.

Benbow came back to this new world propped in a heap on the couch in the cottages living room, with a dull ache behind his ear and a thousand sharp pains in his foot, which was propped in a white cast on the coffee table, the fresh cast the size of a watermelon. Benbow didn’t have to ask what purpose it served. The skinny man sat beside him, a syringe in hand. Across the room, R. L.’s bulk stood black against a fiery sunset, Mona Sue sitting curled in a chair in his shadow, slowly filing her nails. Through the window, Benbow could see the

Kmart twins walking slow guard tours back and forth across the deck.

“He’s comin’ out of it, Mr. Dark,” the old man said, his voice as sharp as his pale nose.

“Well, give him another dose, Doc,” R. L. said without turning. “We don’t want that boy a-hurtin’ none. Not yet.”

Benbow didn’t understand what R. L. meant as the doctor stirred beside him, releasing a thin, dry stench like a limestone cavern or an open grave. Benbow had heard that death supposedly hurt no more than having a tooth pulled, and he wondered who had brought back that bit of information as the doctor hit him in the shoulder with a blunt needle, then he slipped uneasily into an enforced sleep like a small death.

When he woke again, Benbow found little changed but the light. Mona Sue still curled in her chair, sleeping now, below her husband’s hulk against the full dark sky. The doctor slept, too, leaning the fragile bones of his skull against Benbow’s sore arm. And Benbow’s leg was also asleep, locked in position by the giant cast resting on the coffee table. He sat very still for as long as he could, waiting for his mind to clear, willing his dead leg to awaken, and wondering why he wasn’t dead, too.

“Don’t be gettin’ no ideas, son,” R. L. said without turning.

Of all the things Benbow had hated during the long Sundays shoveling pig shit or dealing cards for R. L. Dark—that was the trade he and the old man had made for Little R. L.’s football services—he hated the bastard calling him “son.”

“I’m not your son, you fucking old bastard.”

R. L. ignored him, didn’t even bother to turn. “How hot’s that there water?” he asked calmly as the doctor stirred.

Benbow answered without thinking. “Somewhere between 98 and 102. Why?”

“How ’bout half a dose, Doc?” R. L. said, turning now. “And see ’bout makin’ that boy’s cast waterproof. I’m thinkin that hot water might take the edge off my rheumatism and I for sure want the coach there to keep me company . . .”

Once again Benbow found the warm, lazy path back to the darkness at the center of his life, half listening to the old man and Mona Sue squabble over the air conditioner.

After word of his bargain with R. L. Dark for the gridiron services of his baby son spread throughout every tuck and hollow of the county, Benbow could no longer stop after practice for even a single quiet beer at any one of the rank honky-tonks that surrounded the dry town without hearing snickers as he left. It seemed that whatever he might have gained in sympathy, he surely lost in

respect. And the old man treated him worse than a farting joke.

On the Saturdays that first fall, when Benbow began his days exchanging his manual labor for Little R. L.'s rushing talents, the old man dogged him all around the hog farm on a small John Deere tractor, endlessly pointing out Benbow's total ignorance of the details of trading bacon for bread and his general inability to perform hard work, complaining at great length, then cackling wildly and jacking the throttle on the tractor as if this was the funniest thing he'd ever seen. Even knowing that Little R. L. was lying on the couch in front of the television and soothing his sore muscles with a pint jar of 'shine couldn't make Benbow even begin to resent his bargain, and he never even bothered to look at the old man, knowing that this was his only escape.

Sundays, though, the old man left him alone. Sunday was Poker Day. Land-rich farmers, sly country lawyers with sharp eyes and soft hands, and small-town bankers with the souls of slave traders came from as far away as West Memphis, St. Louis, and Fort Smith to gather in R. L.'s double-wide for a table stakes hold 'em game, a game famous in at least four states, and occasionally in northern Mexico.

On the sabbath he was on his own, except for the surly, lurking presence of Little R. L., who seemed to blame his coach for every ache and pain, and the jittery passage of a slim, petulant teenage girl who slopped past him across the muddy farmyard in a shapeless feed-sack dress and oversized rubber boots, trailing odd, throaty laughter, the same laughter she had when one of the sows decided to dine on her litter. Benbow should have listened.

But these seemed minor difficulties when balanced against the fact that Little R. L. gained nearly a hundred yards a game his freshman year.

The next fall, the shit-shoveling and the old man's attitude seemed easier to bear. Then when Benbow casually let slip that he had once dealt and played poker professionally, R. L.'s watery blue eyes suddenly glistened with greed, and the Sunday portion of Benbow's bargain became both easier and more complicated. Not that the old man needed him to cheat. R. L. Dark always won. The only times the old man signaled him to deal seconds was to give hands to his competitors to keep them in the game so the old man could skin them even deeper.

The brutal arid dangerous monotony of Benbow's life continued, controlled and hopeful until the fall of Little R. L.'s junior year, when everything came apart. Then back together with a terrible rush. A break, a dislocation, and a connection.

On the Saturday afternoon after Little R. L. broke the state rushing record the night before, the teenage girl stopped chuckling long enough to ask a question.

“How long you have to go to college, Coach, to figure out how to scoot pig shit off concrete with a fire hose?”

When she laughed, Benbow finally asked, “Who the fuck are you, honey?”

“Mrs. R. L. Dark, Senior,” she replied, the perfect arch of her nose in the air, “that’s who.” And Benbow looked at her for the first time, watched the thrust of her hard, marvelous body naked beneath the thin fabric of her cheap dress.

Then Benbow tried to make conversation with Mona Sue, made the mistake of asking Mona Sue why she wore rubber boots. “Hookworms,” she said, pointing at his sockless feet in old Nikes. *Jesus*, he thought. Then *Jesus wept* that night as he watched the white worms slither through his dark, bloody stool. Now he knew what the old man had been laughing about.

On Sunday a rich Mexican rancher tried to cover one of R. L.’s raises with a Rolex, then the old man insisted on buying the fifteen-thousand-dollar watch with five K cash, and when he opened the small safe set in the floor of the trailer’s kitchen, Benbow glimpsed the huge pile of banded stacks of one-hundred-dollar bills that filled the safe.

The next Friday night Little R. L. broke his own rushing record with more than a quarter left in the game, which was good because in the fourth quarter the turf gave way under his right foot, which then slid under a pursuing tackle. Benbow heard the *pop* all the way from the sidelines as the kid’s knee dislocated.

Explaining to R. L. that a bargain was a bargain, no matter what happened with the kid’s knee, the next day Benbow went about his chores just long enough to lure Mona Sue into a feed shed and out of her dress. But not her rubber boots. Benbow didn’t care. He just fucked her. The revenge he planned on R. L. Dark a frozen hell in his heart. But the soft hunger of her mouth and the touch of her astonishing body—diamond-hard nipples, fast-twitch cat muscle slithering under human skin, her cunt like a silken bag of rich, luminous seed pearls suspended in heavenly fucking fire—destroyed his hope of vengeance. Now he simply wanted her. No matter the cost.

Two months later, just as her pregnancy began to show, Benbow cracked the safe with a tablespoon of nitro, took all the money, and they ran.

Although he was sure Mona Sue still dreamed, she’d lost her audience. Except for the wrangler, who still watched her as if she were some heathen idol. But every time she tried to talk to the dark cowboy, the old man pinched her thigh with horny fingers so hard it left blood blisters.

Their mornings were much different now. They all went to the hot water. The doctor slept on a poolside bench behind Mona Sue, who sat on the side of the

pool, her feet dangling in the water, her blotched thighs exposed, and her eyes as vacant as her half-smile. R. L. Dark, Curly, and Bald Bill, wearing cutoffs and cheap T-shirts, stood neck-deep in the steamy water, loosely surrounding Benbow, anchored by his plastic-shrouded cast, which loomed like a giant boulder under the heavy water.

A vague sense of threat, like an occasional sharp sniff of sulfur, came off the odd group and kept the other guests at a safe distance, and the number of guests declined every day as the old man rented each cabin and room at the lodge as it came empty. The rich German twins who owned the place didn't seem to care who paid for their cocaine.

During the first few days, nobody had much bothered to speak to Benbow, not even to ask where he had hidden the money. The pain in his foot had retreated to a dull ache, but the itch under the cast had become unbearable. One morning, the doctor had taken pity on him and searched the kitchen drawers for something for Benbow to use to scratch beneath the cast, finally coming up with a cheap shish kebab skewer. Curly and Bald Bill had examined the thin metal stick as if it might be an Arkansas toothpick or a bowie knife, then laughed and let Benbow have it. He kept it holstered in his cast, waiting, scratching the itch. And a deep furrow in the rear of the cast.

Then one morning as they stood silent and safe in the pool, a storm cell drifted slowly down the mountain to fill the canyon with swirling squalls of thick, wet snow, and the old man raised his beak into the flakes and finally spoke: "I always meant to come back to this country," he said.

"What?"

Except for the wrangler slowly gathering damp towels and a dark figure in a hooded sweatshirt and sunglasses standing inside the bar, the pool and the deck had emptied when the snow began. Benbow had been watching the snow gather in the dark waves of Mona Sue's hair as she tried to catch a spinning flake on her pink tongue. Even as he faced death, she still stirred the banked embers glowing in Benbow's crotch.

"During WW Two," the old man said softly, "I got in some trouble over at Fort Chaffee—stuck a noncom with a broomstick—so the Army sent me up here to train with the Tenth Mountain. Stupid assholes thought it was some kinda punishment. Always meant to come back someday . . ."

But Benbow watched the cold wind ripple the stolid surface of the hot water as the snowflakes melted into it. The rising steam became a thick fog.

"I always liked it," Benbow said, glancing up at the mountain as it appeared and disappeared behind the roiling clouds of snow. "Great hunting weather," he

added. "There's a little herd of elk bedded just behind that first ridge." As his keepers' eyes followed his upslope, he drifted slowly through the fog toward Mona Sue's feet aimlessly stirring the water. "If you like it so much, you old bastard, maybe you should buy it."

"Watch your tongue, boy," Curly said as he cuffed Benbow on the head. Benbow stumbled closer to Mona Sue.

"I just might do that, son," the old man said, cackling, "just to piss you off. Not that you'll be around to be pissed off."

"So what the fuck are we hanging around here for?" Benbow asked, turning on the old man, which brought him even closer to Mona Sue.

The old man paused as if thinking. "Well, son, we're waitin' for that baby. If'n that baby has red hair and you tell us where you hid the money, we'll just take you home, kill you easy, then feed you to the hogs."

"And if it doesn't have red hair, since I'm not about to tell you where to find the money?"

"We'll just find a hungry sow, son, and feed you to her," the old man said, "startin' with your good toes."

Everybody laughed then: R. L. Dark threw back his head and howled; the hulks exchanged high-fives and higher giggles; and Benbow collapsed underwater. Even Mona Sue chuckled deep in her throat. Until Benbow jerked her off the side of the pool. Then she choked. The poor girl had never learned to swim.

Before either the old man or his bodyguards could move, though, the dark figure in the hooded sweatshirt burst through the bar door in a quick, limping dash and dove into the pool, then lifted the struggling girl onto the deck and knelt beside her while enormous amounts of steaming water poured from her nose and mouth before she began breathing. Then the figure swept the hood from the flaming red hair and held Mona Sue close to his chest.

"Holy shit, boy," the old man asked unnecessarily as Bald Bill helped him out of the pool. "What the fuck you doin' here?"

"Goddammit, baby, lemme go," Mona Sue screamed. "It's a-comin'!"

Which roused the doctor from his sleepy rest. And the wrangler from his work. Both of them covered the wide wooden bench with dry towels, upon which Little R. L. gently placed Mona Sue's racked body. Curly scrambled out of the pool, warning Benbow to stay put, and joined the crowd of men around her sudden and violent contractions. Bald Bill helped the old man into his overalls and the pistol's thong as Little R. L. helped the doctor hold Mona Sue's body, arched with sudden pain, on the bench.

"Oh, Lordy me!" she screamed. "It's tearin' me up!"

“Do somethin’, you pissant,” the old man said to the wiry doctor, then slapped him soundly.

Benbow slapped to the side of the pool, holding on to the edge with one hand as he dug frantically at the cast with the other. Bits of plaster of Paris and swirls of blood rose through the hot water. Then it was off, and the skewer in his hand. He planned to roll out of the pool, drive the sliver of metal through the old man’s kidney, then grab the Webley. After that, he’d call the shots.

But life should have taught him not to plan.

As Bald Bill helped his boss into the coat, he noticed Benbow at the edge of the pool and stepped over to him. Bald Bill saw the bloody cast floating at Benbow’s chest. “What the fuck?” he said, kneeling down to reach for him.

Benbow drove the thin shaft of metal with the strength of a lifetime of disappointment and rage into the bottom of Bald Bill’s jaw, up through the root of his tongue, then up through his soft palate, horny brainpan, mushy gray matter, and the thick bones of his skull. Three inches of the skewer poked like a steel finger bone out of the center of his bald head.

Bald Bill didn’t make a sound. Just blinked once dreamily, smiled, then stood up. After a moment, swaying, he began to walk in small airless circles at the edge of the deck until Curly noticed his odd behavior.

“Bubba?” he said as he stepped over to his brother.

Benbow leaped out of the water; one hand grabbed an ankle and the other dove up the leg of Curly’s trunks to grab his nut sack and jerk the giant toward the pool. Curly’s grunt and the soft clunk of his head against the concrete pool edge was lost as Mona Sue delivered the child with a deep sigh, and the old man shouted boldly, “Goddamn, it’s a girl! A black-headed girl!”

Benbow had slithered out of the pool and limped halfway to the old man’s back as he watched the doctor lay the baby on Mona Sue’s heaving chest. “Shit fire and save the matches,” the old man said, panting deeply as if the labor had been his.

Little R. L. turned and jerked his father toward him by the front of his coat, hissing, “Shut the fuck up, old man.” Then he shoved him violently away, smashing the old man’s frail body into Benbow’s shoulder. Something cracked inside the old man’s body, and he sank to his knees, snapping at the cold air with his bloody beak like a gut-shot turtle. Benbow grabbed the pistol’s thong off his neck before the old man tumbled dead into the water.

Benbow cocked the huge pistol with a soft metallic click, then his sharp bark of laughter cut through the snowy air like a gunshot. Everything slowed to a stop. The doctor finished cutting the cord. The wranglers hands held a folded towel under Mona Sue’s head. Little R. L. held his gristled body halfway into a

mad charge. Bald Bill stopped his aimless circling long enough to fall into the pool. Even Mona Sue's cooing sighs died. Only the cold wind moved, whipping the steamy fog across the pool as the snowfall thickened.

Then Mona Sue screamed, "No!" and broke the frozen moment.

The bad knee gave Benbow time to get off a round. The heavy slug took Little R. L. in the top of his shoulder, tumbled through his chest, and exited just above his kidney in a shower of blood, bone splinters, and lung tissue, and dropped him like a side of beef on the deck. But the round had already gone on its merry way through the sternum of the doctor as if he weren't there. Which, in moments, he wasn't.

Benbow threw the pistol joyfully behind him, heard it splash in the pool, and hurried to Mona Sue's side. As he kissed her blood-spattered face, she moaned softly. He leaned closer, but only mistook her moans for passion until he understood what she was saying. Over and over. The way she once called his name. And Little R. L.'s. Maybe even the old man's. "Cowboy, Cowboy, Cowboy," she whispered.

Benbow wasn't even mildly surprised when he felt the arm at his throat or the blade tickle his short ribs. "I took you for a backstabber," he said, "the first time I laid eyes on your sorry ass."

"Just tell me where the money is, *old man*," the wrangler whispered, "and you can die easy."

"You can have the money," Benbow sobbed, trying for one final break, "just leave me the woman." But the flash of scorn in Mona Sue's eyes was the only answer he needed. "Fuck it," Benbow said, almost laughing, "let's do it the hard way."

Then he fell backward onto the hunting knife, driving the blade to the hilt above his short ribs before the wrangler could release the handle. He stepped back in horror as Benbow stumbled toward the hot waters of the pool.

At first, the blade felt cold in Benbow's flesh, but the flowing blood quickly warmed it. Then he eased himself into the hot water and lay back against its compassionate weight like the old man the wrangler had called him. The wrangler stood over Benbow, his eyes like coals glowing through the fog and thick snow. Mona Sue stepped up beside the wrangler, Benbow's baby whimpering at her chest, snow melting on her shoulders.

"Fuck it," Benbow whispered, drifting now, "it's in the air conditioner."

"Thanks, old man," Mona Sue said, smiling.

"Take care," Benbow whispered, thinking, *This is the easy part*, then leaned farther back into the water, sailing on the pool's wind-riffled, snow-shot surface, eyes closed, happy in the hot, heavy water, moving his hands slightly to stay

afloat, his fingers tangled in dark, bloody streams, the wind pushing him toward the cool water at the far end of the pool, blinking against the soft cold snow, until his tired body slipped, unwatched, beneath the hot water to rest.

JEFFERY DEAVER

The Weekender

FROM *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*

I LOOKED IN the rearview mirror and didn't see any lights, but I knew they were after us and it was only a matter of time till I'd see the cops. Toth started to talk, but I told him to shut up and got the Buick up to eighty. The road was empty, nothing but pine trees for miles around.

"Oh brother," Toth muttered. I felt his eyes on me, but I didn't even want to look at him, I was so mad.

They were never easy, drugstores.

Because, just watch sometime, when cops make their rounds they cruise drugstores more often than anyplace else. Because of the prescription drugs.

You'd think they'd stake out convenience stores. But those're a joke, and with the closed-circuit TV you're going to get your picture took, you just are. So nobody who knows the business, I mean really *knows* it, hits them. And banks, forget banks. Even ATMs. I mean, how much can you clear? Three, four hundred tops? And around here the Fast Cash button gives you twenty bucks. Which tells you something. So why even bother?

No. We wanted cash and that meant a drugstore, even though they can be tricky. Ardmore Drugs. Which is a big store in a little town. Liggett Falls. Sixty miles from Albany and a hundred or so from where Toth and me lived, farther west into the mountains. Liggett Falls is a poor place. You'd think it wouldn't make sense to hit a store there. But that's exactly why—because like everywhere else people there need medicine and hairspray and makeup, only they don't have credit cards. Except maybe a Sears or Penney's. So they pay cash.

"Oh brother," Toth whispered again. "Look."

And he made me even madder, him saying that. I wanted to shout, Look at what, you son of a bitch? But then I could see what he was talking about, and I didn't say anything. Up ahead. It was like just before dawn, light on the horizon. Only this was red, and the light wasn't steady. It was like it was pulsing, and I knew that they'd got the roadblock up already. This was the only road to the interstate from Liggett Falls. So I should've guessed.

"I got an idea," Toth said. Which I didn't want to hear but I also wasn't going to go through another shootout. Sure not at a roadblock where they was ready for us.

“What?” I snapped.

“There’s a town over there. See those lights? I know a road’ll take us there.”

Toth’s a big guy, and he looks calm. Only he isn’t really. He gets shook easy, and he now kept turning around, skittish, looking in the back seat. I wanted to slap him and tell him to chill.

“Where’s it?” I asked. “This town?”

“About four, five miles. The turnoff, it ain’t marked. But I know it.”

This was that lousy upstate area where everything’s green. But dirty green, you know. And all the buildings’re gray. These gross little shacks, pickups on blocks. Little towns without even a 7-Eleven. And full of hills they call mountains but aren’t.

Toth cranked down the window and let this cold air in and looked up at the sky. “They can find us with those, you know, satellite things.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You know, they can see you from miles up. I saw it in a movie.”

“You think the state cops do that? Are you nuts?”

This guy, I don’t know why I work with him. And after what happened at the drugstore, I won’t again.

He pointed out where to turn, and I did. He said the town was at the base of the Lookout. Well, I remembered passing that on the way to Liggett Falls that afternoon. It was this huge rock a couple of hundred feet high. Which if you looked at it right looked like a man’s head, like a profile, squinting. It’d been some kind of big deal to the Indians around here. Blah, blah, blah. He told me, but I didn’t pay no attention. It was spooky, that weird face, and I looked once and kept on driving. I didn’t like it. I’m not really superstitious, but sometimes I am.

“Winchester,” he said now, meaning what the name of the town was. Five, six thousand people. We could find an empty house, stash the car in a garage, and just wait out the search. Wait till tomorrow afternoon—Sunday—when all the weekenders were driving back to Boston and New York and we’d be lost in the crowd.

I could see the Lookout up ahead, not really a shape, mostly this blackness where the stars weren’t. And then the guy on the floor in the back started to moan all of a sudden and just about give me a heart attack.

“You. Shut up back there.” I slapped the seat, and the guy in the back went quiet.

What a night.

We’d got to the drugstore fifteen minutes before it closed. Like you ought to do. ’Cause mosta the customers’re gone and a lot’ve the clerks’ve left and

people're tired, and when you push a Glock or Smitty into their faces, they'll do just about anything you ask.

Except tonight.

We had our masks down and walked in slow. Toth getting the manager out of his little office, a fat guy started crying and that made me mad, a grown man doing that. He kept a gun on the customers and the clerks, and I was telling the cashier, this kid, to open the tills and, Jesus, he had an attitude. Like he'd seen all of those Steven Seagal movies or something. A little kiss on the cheek with the Smitty and he changed his mind and started moving. Cussing me out, but he was moving. I was counting the bucks as we were going along from one till to the next, and sure enough, we were up to about three thousand when I heard this noise and turned around and what it was, Toth was knocking a rack of chips over. I mean, Jesus. He's getting Doritos!

I look away from the kid for just a second, and what's he do? He pitches this bottle. Only not at me. Out the window. Bang, it breaks. There's no alarm I can hear, but half of them are silent anyway and I'm really pissed. I could've killed him. Right there. Only I didn't. Toth did.

He shoots the kid, blam, blam, blam. And everybody else is scattering and he turns around and shoots another one of the clerks and a customer, just bang, not thinking or nothing. Just for no reason. Hit this girl clerk in the leg, but this guy, this customer, well, he was dead. You could see. And I'm going, What're you doing, what're you doing? And he's going, Shut up, shut up, shut up . . . And we're like we're swearing at each other when we figured out we hadta get outa there.

So we left. Only what happens is, there's a cop outside. That's why the kid threw the bottle. And he's outa his car. So we grab another customer, this guy by the door, and we use him like a shield and get outside. And there's the cop, he's holding his gun up, looking at the customer we've got, and the cop, he's saying, It's OK, it's OK, just take it easy.

And I couldn't believe it, Toth shot him, too. I don't know whether he killed him, but there was blood so he wasn't wearing a vest it didn't look like, and I could've killed Toth there on the spot. Because why'd he do that? He didn't have to.

We threw the guy, the customer, into the back seat and tied him up with tape. I kicked out the taillights and burned rubber outa there. We made it out of Liggett Falls.

That was all just a half hour ago, but it seems like weeks.

And now we were driving down this highway through a million pine trees. Heading right for the Lookout.

Winchester was dark.

I don't get why weekenders come to places like this. I mean, my old man took me hunting a long time ago. A couple of times, and I liked it. But coming to places like this just to look at leaves and buy furniture they call antiques but's really just busted-up crap . . . I don't know.

We found a house a block off Main Street with a bunch of newspapers in front, and I pulled into the drive and put the Buick behind it just in time. Two state police cars went shooting by. They'd been behind us not more than a half mile, without the lightbars going. Only they hadn't seen us 'cause the broke taillights, and they went by in a flash and were gone, going into town.

Toth got into the house, and he wasn't very clean about it, breaking a window in the back. It was a vacation place, pretty empty and the refrigerator shut off and the phone, too, which was a good sign—there wasn't anybody coming back soon. Also, it smelled pretty musty and had stacks of old books and magazines from the summer.

We took the guy inside, and Toth started to take the hood off this guy's head and I said, "What the hell're you doing?"

"He hasn't said anything. Maybe he can't breathe."

This was a man talking who'd just laid a cap on three people back there, and he was worried about this guy *breathing*? Man. I just laughed. Disgusted, I mean. "Like maybe we don't want him to see us?" I said. "You think of that?" See, we weren't wearing our ski masks anymore.

It's scary when you have to remind people of stuff like that. I was thinking Toth knew better. But you never know.

I went to the window and saw another squad car go past. They were going slower now. They do that. After like the first shock, after the rush, they get smart and start cruising slow, really looking for what's funny—what's *different*, you know? That's why I didn't take the papers up from the front yard. Which would've been different from how the yard looked that morning. Cops really do that Columbo stuff. I could write a book about cops.

"Why'd you do it?"

It was the guy we took.

"Why?" he whispered again.

The customer. He had a low voice, and it sounded pretty calm, I mean considering. I'll tell you, the first time I was in a shootout I was totally freaked for a day afterwards. And I had a gun.

I looked him over. He was wearing a plaid shirt and jeans. But he wasn't a local. I could tell because of the shoes. They were rich-boy shoes, the kind you

see all the yuppies wear in TV shows about Connecticut. I couldn't see his face because of the mask, but I pretty much remembered it. He wasn't young. Maybe in his forties. Kind of wrinkled skin. And he was skinny, too. Skinnier'n me, and I'm one of those people can eat what I want and I don't get fat. I don't know why. It just works that way.

"Quiet," I said. There was another car going by.

He laughed. Soft. Like he was saying, What? So they can hear me all the way outside?

Kind of laughing *at* me, you know? I didn't like that at all. And sure, I guess you *couldn't* hear anything out there, but I didn't like him giving me any crap so I said, "Just shut up. I don't want to hear your voice."

He did for a minute and just sat back in the chair where Toth put him. But then he said again, "Why'd you shoot them? You didn't have to."

"Quiet!"

"Just tell me why."

I took out my knife and snapped that sucker open, then threw it down so it stuck in a tabletop. Sort of a *thunk* sound. "You hear that? That was a eight-inch Buck knife. Carbon tempered. With a locking blade. It'd cut clean through a metal bolt. So you be quiet. Or I'll use it on you."

And he gave this laugh again. Maybe. Or it was just a snort of air. But I was thinking it was a laugh. I wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but I didn't.

"You got any money on you?" Toth asked, and took the wallet out of the guy's back pocket. "Lookit," Toth said, and pulled out what must've been five or six hundred. Man.

Another squad car went past, moving slow. It had a spotlight and the cop turned it on the driveway, but he just kept going. I heard a siren across town. And another one, too. It was a weird feeling, knowing those people were out there looking for us.

I took the wallet from Toth and went through it.

Randall C. Weller Jr. He lived in Boston. A weekender. Just like I thought. He had a bunch of business cards that said he was vice president of this big computer company. One that was in the news, trying to take over IBM or something. All of a sudden I had this thought. We could hold him for ransom. I mean, why not? Make a half million. Maybe more.

"My wife and kids'll be sick worrying," Weller said. It spooked me, hearing that. First, 'cause you don't expect somebody with a hood over his head to say anything. But mostly 'cause there I was, looking right at a picture in his wallet. And what was it of? His wife and kids.

"I ain't letting you go. Now, just shut up. I may need you."

“Like a hostage, you mean? That’s only in the movies. They’ll shoot you when you walk out, and they’ll shoot me, too, if they have to. That’s the way they do it. Just give yourself up. At least you’ll save your life.”

“Shut up!” I shouted.

“Let me go and I’ll tell them you treated me fine. That the shooting was a mistake. It wasn’t your fault.”

I leaned forward and pushed the knife against his throat, not the blade ’cause that’s real sharp, but the blunt edge, and I told him to be quiet.

Another car went past, no light this time but it was going slower, and all of a sudden I got to thinking what if they do a door-to-door search?

“Why did he do it? Why’d he kill them?”

And funny, the way he said *he* made me feel a little better ’cause it was like he didn’t blame me for it. I mean, it was Toth’s fault. Not mine.

Weller kept going. “I don’t get it. That man by the counter? The tall one. He was just standing there. He didn’t do anything. He just shot him down.”

But neither of us said nothing. Probably Toth because he didn’t know why he’d shot them. And me because I didn’t owe this guy any answers. I had him in my hand. Completely, and I had to let him know that. I didn’t have to talk to him.

But the guy, Weller, he didn’t say anything else. And I got this weird sense. Like this pressure building up. You know, because nobody was answering his damn stupid question. I felt this urge to say something. Anything. And that was the last thing I wanted to do. So I said, “I’m gonna move the car into the garage.” And I went outside to do it.

I was a little spooked after the shootout. And I went through the garage pretty good. Just to make sure. But there wasn’t nothing inside except tools and an old Snapper lawnmower. So I drove the Buick inside and closed the door. And went back into the house.

And then I couldn’t believe what happened. I mean, Jesus . . .

When I walked into the living room, the first thing I heard was Toth saying, “No way, man. I’m not snitching on Jack Prescott.”

I just stood there. And you should’ve seen the look on his face. He knew he’d blown it big.

Now this Weller guy knew my name.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have to. Toth started talking real fast and nervous. “He said he’d pay me some big bucks to let him go.” Trying to turn it around, make it Weller’s fault. “I mean, I wasn’t going to. I wasn’t even thinking ’bout it, man. I told him forget it.”

“I figured that,” I said. “So? What’s that got to do with tellin’ him my name?”

“I don’t know, man. He confused me. I wasn’t thinking.”

I’ll say he wasn’t. He hadn’t been thinking all night.

I sighed to let him know I wasn’t happy, but I just clapped him on the shoulder. “OK,” I said. “S’been a long night. These things happen.”

“I’m sorry, man. Really.”

“Yeah. Maybe you better go spend the night in the garage or something. Or upstairs. I don’t want to see you around for a while.”

“Sure.”

And the funny thing was, it was that Weller gave this little snicker or something. Like he knew what was coming. How’d he know that? I wondered.

Toth went to pick up a couple of magazines and the knapsack with his gun in it and extra rounds.

Normally, killing somebody with a knife is a hard thing to do. I say normally even though I’ve only done it one other time. But I remember it, and it was messy and hard work. But tonight, I don’t know, I was all filled up with this . . . feeling from the drugstore. Mad. I mean, really. Crazy, too, a little. And as soon as Toth turned his back, I went to work, and it wasn’t three minutes later it was over. I drug his body behind the couch and then—why not—I pulled Weller’s hood off. He already knew my name. He might as well see my face.

He was a dead man. We both knew it.

“You were thinking of holding me for ransom, right?”

I stood at the window and looked out. Another cop car went past, and there were more flashing lights bouncing off the low clouds and off the face of the Lookout, right over our heads. Weller had a thin face and short hair, cut real neat. He looked like every ass-kissing businessman I’d ever met. His eyes were dark and calm, and it made me even madder he wasn’t shook up looking at that big bloodstain on the rug and floor.

“No,” I told him.

He looked at the pile of stuff I’d taken from his wallet and kept going like I hadn’t said anything. “It won’t work. A kidnapping. I don’t have a lot of money, and if you saw my business card and’re thinking I’m an executive at the company, they have about five hundred vice presidents. They won’t pay diddly for me. And you see those kids in the picture? It was taken twelve years ago. They’re both in college now”

“Where,” I asked, sneering. “Harvard?”

“One’s at Harvard,” he said, like he was snapping at me. “And one’s at Northwestern. So the house’s mortgaged to the hilt. Besides, kidnapping somebody by yourself? No, you couldn’t bring that off.”

He saw the way I looked at him, and he said, “I don’t mean you personally. I mean somebody by himself. You’d need partners.”

And I figured he was right. The ransom thing was looking, I don’t know, tricky.

That silence again. Nobody saying nothing and it was like the room was filling up with cold water. I walked to the window and the floors creaked under my feet, and that only made things worse. I remember one time my dad said that a house had a voice of its own, and some houses were laughing houses and some were forlorn. Well, this was a forlorn house. Yeah, it was modern and clean and the *National Geographics* were all in order, but it was still forlorn.

Just when I felt like shouting because of the tension, Weller said, “I don’t want you to kill me.”

“Who said I was going to kill you?”

He gave me this funny little smile. “I’ve been a salesman for twenty-five years. I’ve sold pets and Cadillacs and typesetters, and lately I’ve been selling mainframe computers. I know when I’m being handed a line. You’re going to kill me. It was the first thing you thought of when you heard him”—nodding toward Toth—“say your name.”

I just laughed at him. “Well, that’s a damn handy thing to be, sorta a walking lie detector,” I said, and I was being sarcastic.

But he just said, “Damn handy,” like he was agreeing with me.

“I don’t want to kill you.”

“Oh, I know you don’t *want* to. You didn’t want your friend to kill anybody back there at the drugstore either. I could see that. But people *got* killed, and that ups the stakes. Right?”

And those eyes of his, they just dug into me, and I couldn’t say anything.

“But,” he said, “I’m going to talk you out of it.”

He sounded real certain and that made me feel better. ‘Cause I’d rather kill a cocky son of a bitch than a pathetic one. And so I laughed. “Talk me out of it?”

“I’m going to try.”

“Yeah? How you gonna do that?”

Weller cleared his throat a little. “First, let’s get everything on the table. I’ve seen your face, and I know your name. Jack Prescott. Right? You’re, what? about five-nine, 150 pounds, black hair. So you’ve got to assume I can identify you. I’m not going to play any games and say I didn’t see you clearly or hear who you were. Or anything like that. We all squared away on that, Jack?”

I nodded, rolling my eyes like this was all a load of crap. But I gotta admit I was kinda curious what he had to say.

“My promise,” he said, “is that I won’t turn you in. Not under any

circumstances. The police'll never learn your name from me. Or your description. I'll never testify against you."

Sounding honest as a priest. Real slick delivery. Well, he was a salesman, and I wasn't going to buy it. But he didn't know I was onto him. Let him give me his pitch, let him think I was going along. When it came down to it, after we'd got away and were somewhere in the woods upstate, I'd want him relaxed. Thinking he was going to get away. No screaming, no hassles. Just two fast cuts and that'd be it.

"You understand what I'm saying?"

I tried to look serious and said, "Sure. You're thinking you can talk me out of killing you. Which I'm not inclined to do anyway. Kill you, I mean."

And there was that weird little smile again.

I said, "You think you can talk me out of it. You've got reasons?"

"Oh, I've got reasons, you bet. One in particular. One that you can't argue with."

"Yeah? What's that?"

"I'll get to it in a minute. Let me tell you some of the practical reasons you should let me go. First, you think you've got to kill me because I know who you are, right? Well, how long you think your identity's going to be a secret? Your buddy shot a cop back there. I don't know police stuff except what I see in the movies. But they're going to be looking at tire tracks and witnesses who saw plates and makes of cars and gas stations you might've stopped at on the way here."

He was just blowing smoke. The Buick was stolen. I mean, I'm not stupid.

But he went on, looking at me real coy. "Even if your car was stolen, they're going to check down every lead. Every shoeprint around where you or your friend found it, talk to everybody in the area around the time it vanished."

I kept smiling like it was nuts what he was saying. But this was true, shooting the cop part. You do that and you're in big trouble. Trouble that sticks with you. They don't stop looking till they find you.

"And when they identify your buddy"—he nodded toward the couch where Toth's body was lying—"they're going to make some connection to you."

"I don't know him that good. We just hung around together the past few months."

Weller jumped on this. "Where? A bar? A restaurant? Anybody ever see you in public?"

I got mad, and I shouted, "So? What're you saying? They gonna bust me anyway, then I'll just take you out with me. How's that for an argument?"

Calm as could be he said, "I'm simply telling you that one of the reasons you

want to kill me doesn't make sense. And think about this—the shooting at the drugstore? It wasn't premeditated. It was, what do they call it? Heat of passion. But you kill me, that'll be first degree. You'll get the death penalty when they find you."

When they find you. Right. I laughed to myself. Oh, what he said made sense, but the fact is, killing isn't a making-sense kind of thing. Hell, it *never* makes sense, but sometimes you just have to do it. But I was kind of having fun now. I wanted to argue back. "Yeah, well, I killed Toth. That wasn't heat of passion. I'm going to get the needle anyway for that."

"But nobody gives a damn about him," he came right back. "They don't care if he killed *himself* or got hit by a car accidentally. You can take that piece of garbage out of the equation altogether. They care if you kill *me*. I'm the 'Innocent Bystander' in the headlines. I'm the 'Father of Two.' You kill me, you're as good as dead."

I started to say something, but he kept going.

"Now, here's another reason I'm not going to say anything about you. Because you know my name, and you know where I live. You know I have a family, and you know how important they are to me. If I turn you in, you could come after us. I'd never jeopardize my family that way. Now let me ask you something. What's the worst thing that could happen to you?"

"Keep listening to you spout on and on."

Weller laughed hard at that. I could see he was surprised I had a sense of humor. After a minute he said, "Seriously. The worst thing."

"I don't know. I never thought about it."

"Lose a leg? Go deaf? Lose all your money? Go blind . . . Hey, that looked like it hit a nerve. Going blind?"

"Yeah, I guess. That'd be the worst thing I could think of."

That was a pretty damn scary thing, and I'd thought on it before. 'Cause that was what happened to my old man. And it wasn't not seeing anymore that got to me. No, it was that I'd have to depend on somebody else for, Christ, for everything, I guess.

"OK, think about this," he said. "The way you feel about going blind's the way my family'd feel if they lost me. It'd be that bad for them. You don't want to cause them that kind of pain, do you?"

I didn't want to, no. But I knew I *had* to. I didn't want to think about it anymore, I asked him, "So what's this last reason you're telling me about?"

"The last reason," he said, kind of whispering. But he didn't go on. He looked around the room, you know, like his mind was wandering.

"Yeah?" I asked. I was pretty curious. "Tell me."

But he just asked, “You think these people, they have a bar?”

And I’d just been thinking I could use a drink, too. I went into the kitchen, and of course they didn’t have any beer in the fridge on account of the house being all closed up and the power off. But they did have scotch, and that’d be my first choice anyway.

I got a couple of glasses and took the bottle back to the living room. Thinking this was a good idea. When it came time to do it, it’d be easier for him and for me both if we were kinda tanked. I shoved my Smitty into his neck and cut the tape his hands were tied with, then taped them in front of him. I sat back and kept my knife near, ready to go, in case he tried something. But it didn’t look like he was going to be a hero or anything. He read over the scotch bottle, kind of disappointed it was cheap. And I agreed with him there. One thing I learned a long time ago, you going to rob, rob rich.

I sat back where I could keep an eye on him.

“The last reason. OK, I’ll tell you. I’m going to *prove* to you that you should let me go.”

“You are?”

“All those other reasons—the practical ones, the humanitarian ones . . . I’ll concede you don’t care much about those—you don’t look very convinced. All right? Then let’s look at the one reason you should let me go.”

I figured this was going to be more crap. But what he said was something I never would’ve expected, and it made me laugh.

“For your own sake.”

“For me? What’re you talking about?”

“See, Jack, I don’t think you’re lost.”

“Whatta you mean, lost?”

“I don’t think your soul’s beyond redemption.”

I laughed at this, laughed out loud, because I just had to. I expected a hell of a lot better from a hotshot vice president salesman like him. “Soul? You think I got a soul?”

“Well, everybody has a soul,” he said, and what was crazy was, he said it like he was surprised that I didn’t think so. It was like I’d said, Wait a minute, you mean the earth ain’t flat? or something.

“Well, if I got a soul it’s taken the fast lane to hell.” Which was this line I heard in this movie and I tried to laugh, but it sounded flat. Like Weller was saying something deep and I was just kidding around. It made me feel cheap. I stopped smiling and looked down at Toth, lying there in the corner, those dead eyes of his just staring, staring, and I wanted to stab him again I was so mad.

“We’re talking about your soul.”

I snickered and sipped the liquor. “Oh yeah, I’ll bet you you’re the sort that reads those angel books they got all over the place now.”

“I go to church, but no, I’m not talking about all that silly stuff. I don’t mean magic. I mean your conscience. What Jack Prescott’s all about.”

I could tell him about social workers and youth counselors and all those guys who don’t know nothing about the way life works. They think they do. But it’s the words they use. You can tell they don’t know a thing. Some counselors or somebody’ll talk to me and they say, Oh, you’re maladjusted, you’re denying your anger, things like that. When I hear that, I know they don’t know nothing about souls or spirits.

“Not the afterlife,” Weller was going on. “Not mortality. I’m talking about life here on earth that’s important. Oh sure, you look skeptical. But listen to me. I really believe if you have a connection with somebody, if you trust them, if you have faith in them, then there’s hope for you.”

“Hope? What does that mean? Hope for what?”

“That you’ll become a real human being. Lead a real life.”

Real . . . I didn’t know what he meant, but he said it like what he was saying was so clear that I’d have to be an idiot to miss it. So I didn’t say nothing.

He kept going. “Oh, there’re reasons to steal, and there’re reasons to kill. But on the whole, don’t you really think it’s better not to? Just think about it: why do we put people in jail if it’s all right for them to murder? Not just us but all societies.”

“So, what? I’m gonna give up my evil ways?” I laughed at him.

And he just lifted his eyebrow and said, “Maybe. Tell me, Jack, how’d you feel when your buddy—what’s his name?”

“Joe Roy Toth.”

“Toth, when he shot that guy by the counter? How’d you feel?”

“I don’t know.”

“He just turned around and shot him. For no reason. You knew that wasn’t right, didn’t you?” And I started to say something. But he said, “No, don’t answer me. You’d be inclined to lie. And that’s all right. It’s an instinct in your line of work. But I don’t want you *believing* any lies you tell me. OK? I want you to look into your heart and tell me if you didn’t think something was real wrong about what Toth did. Think about that, Jack. You knew something wasn’t right.”

All right, I did. But who wouldn’t? Toth screwed everything up. Everything went sour. And it was all his fault.

“It dug at you, right, Jack? You wished he hadn’t done it.”

I didn’t say nothing but just drank some more scotch and looked out the

window and watched the flashing lights around the town. Sometimes they seemed close, and sometimes they seemed far away.

“If I let you go, you’ll tell ’em.”

Like everybody else. They all betrayed me. My father—even after he went blind, the son of a bitch turned me in. My first PO, the judges. Sandra . . . My boss, the one I knifed.

“No, I won’t,” Weller said. “We’re talking about an agreement. I don’t break deals. I promised I won’t tell a soul about you, Jack. Not even my wife.” He leaned forward, cupping the booze between his hands. “You let me go, it’ll mean all the difference in the world to you. It’ll mean that you’re not hopeless. I guarantee your life’ll be different. That one act—letting me go—it’ll change you forever. Oh, maybe not this year. Or for five years. But you’ll come around. You’ll give up all this, everything that happened back there in Liggett Falls. All the crime, the killing. You’ll come around. I know you will.”

“You just expect me to believe you won’t tell anybody?”

“Ah,” Weller said, and lifted his taped-up hands to drink more scotch. “Now we get down to the big issue.”

Again that silence, and finally I said, “And what’s that?”

“Faith.”

There was this burst of siren outside, and I told him to shut up and pushed the gun against his head. His hands were shaking, but he didn’t do anything stupid and a few minutes later, after I sat back, he started talking again. “Faith. That’s what I’m talking about. A man who has faith is somebody who can be saved.”

“Well, I don’t have any goddamn faith,” I told him.

But he kept right on talking. “If you believe in another human being, you have faith.”

“Why the hell do you care whether I’m saved or not?”

“Because life’s hard, and people’re cruel. I told you I’m a churchgoer. A lot of the Bible’s crazy. But some of it I believe. And one of the things I believe is that sometimes we’re put in these situations to make a difference. I think that’s what happened tonight. That’s why you and I both happened to be at the drugstore at the same time. You’ve felt that, haven’t you? Like an omen? Like something happens and is telling you you ought do this or shouldn’t do that.”

Which was weird ’cause the whole time we were driving up to Liggett Falls I kept thinking, something funny’s going on. I don’t know what it is, but this job’s gonna be different.

“What if,” he said, “everything tonight happened for a purpose? My wife had a cold, so I went to buy NyQuil. I went to that drugstore instead of 7-Eleven to save a buck or two. You happened to hit that store at just that time. You

happened to have your buddy”—he nodded toward Toth’s body—“with you. The cop car just happened by at that particular moment. And the clerk behind the counter just happened to see him. That’s a lot of coincidences. Don’t you think?”

And then—this sent a damn chill right down my spine—he said, “Here we are in the shadow of that big rock, that face.”

Which is 100 percent what I was thinking. Exactly the same—about the Lookout, I mean. I don’t know why I was. But I happened to be looking out the window and thinking about it at that exact same instant. I tossed back the scotch and had another and, oh man, I was pretty freaked out.

“Like he’s looking at us, waiting for you to make a decision. Oh, don’t think it was just you, though. Maybe the purpose was to affect everybody’s life there. That customer at the counter Toth shot. Maybe it was just his time to go—fast, you know, before he got cancer or had a stroke. Maybe that girl, the clerk, had to get shot in the leg so she’d get her life together, maybe get off drugs or give up drinking.”

“And you? What about you?”

“Well, I’ll tell you about me. Maybe you’re the good deed in my life. I’ve spent years thinking only about making money. Take a look at my wallet. There. In the back.”

I pulled it open. There were a half-dozen of these little cards, like certificates, RANDALL WELLER—SALESMAN OF THE YEAR, EXCEEDED TARGET TWO YEARS STRAIGHT. BEST SALESMAN OF 1992.

Weller kept going. “There are plenty of others back in my office. And trophies, too. And in order for me to win those, I’ve had to neglect people. My family and friends. People who could maybe use my help. And that’s not right. Maybe you kidnapping me, it’s one of those signs to make me turn my life around.”

The funny thing was this made sense. Oh, it was hard to imagine not doing heists. And I couldn’t see myself, if it came down to a fight, not going for my Buck or my Smitty to take the other guy out. That turning the other cheek stuff, that’s only for cowards. But maybe I *could* see a day when my life’d be just straight time. Living with some woman, maybe a wife, living in a house. Doing what my father and mother, whatever she was like, never did.

“If I was to let you go,” I said, “you’d have to tell ’em something.”

He shrugged. “I’ll say you locked me in the trunk and then tossed me out somewhere near here. I wandered around, looking for a house or something, and got lost. It could take me a day to find somebody. That’s believable.”

“Or you could flag down a car in an hour.”

“I could. But I won’t.”

“You keep saying that. But how do I *know*?”

“That’s the faith part. You don’t know. No guarantees.”

“Well, I guess I don’t have any faith.”

“Then *I’m* dead. And *your* life’s never gonna change. End of story.” He sat back, and it was crazy but he looked calm, smiling a little.

That silence again, but it was like it was really this roar all around us, and it kept going till the whole room was filled up with the sound of a siren.

“You just want . . . what do you want?”

He drank more scotch. “Here’s a proposal. Let me walk outside.”

“Oh, right. Just let you stroll out for some fresh air or something?”

“Let me walk outside and I promise you I’ll walk right back again.”

“Like a test?”

He thought about this for a second. “Yeah. A test.”

“Where’s this faith you’re talking about? You walk outside, you try to run and I’d shoot you in the back.”

“No, what you do is you put the gun someplace in the house. The kitchen or someplace. Somewhere you couldn’t get it if I ran. You stand at the window, where we can see each other. And I’ll tell you up front. I can run like the wind. I was lettered track and field in college, and I still jog every day of the year.”

“You know if you run and bring the cops back everything’s gonna get bloody. I’ll kill the first five troopers come through that door. Nothing’ll stop me, and that blood’ll be on your hands.”

“Of course I know that,” he said. “But if this’s going to work, you can’t think that way. You’ve got to assume the worst is going to happen. That if I run I’ll tell the cops everything. Where you are and that there’re no hostages here and that you’ve only got one or two guns. And they’re going to come in and blow you to hell. And you’re not going to take a single one down with you. You’re going to die and die painfully ’cause of a few lousy hundred bucks . . . But, but, but . . .” He held up his hands and stopped me from saying anything. “You gotta understand, faith means risk.”

“That’s stupid.”

“I think it’s just the opposite. It’d be the smartest thing you ever did in your life.”

“What’ll it prove?” I asked. But I was just stalling. And he knew it. He said patiently, “That I’m a man of my word. That you can trust me.”

“And what do I get out of it?”

And then this son of a bitch smiled that weird little smile of his. “I think you’ll be surprised.”

I tossed back another scotch and had to think about this.

Weller said, "I can see it there already. Some of that faith. It's there. Not a lot. But some."

And yeah, maybe there was a little. 'Cause I was thinking about how mad I got at Toth and the way he ruined everything. I didn't want anybody to get killed tonight. I was sick of it. Sick of the way my life had gone. Sometimes it was good, being alone and all. Not answering to anybody. But sometimes it was real bad. And this guy, Weller, it was like he was showing me something different.

"So," I said. "You just want me to put the gun down?"

He looked around. "Put it in the kitchen. You stand in the doorway or window. All I'm gonna do is walk down to the street and walk back."

I looked out the window. It was maybe fifty feet down the driveway. There were these bushes on either side of it. He could just take off, and I'd never find him.

All through the sky I could see lights flickering.

"Naw, I ain't gonna. You're nuts."

And I expected begging or something. Or getting pissed off, more likely—which is what happens to me when people don't do what I tell them. Or don't do it fast enough. But, naw, he just nodded. "OK, Jack. You thought about it. That's a good thing. You're not ready yet. I respect that." He sipped a little more scotch, looking at the glass. And that was the end of it.

Then all of a sudden these searchlights started up. They was some ways away, but I still got spooked and backed away from the window. Pulled my gun out. Only then I saw that it wasn't nothing to do with the robbery. It was just a couple of big spotlights shining on the Lookout. They must've gone on every night, this time.

I looked up at it. From here it didn't look like a face at all. It was just a rock. Gray and brown and these funny pine trees growing sideways out of cracks.

Watching it for a minute or two. Looking out over the town, and something that guy was saying went into my head. Not the words, really. Just the *thought*. And I was thinking about everybody in that town. Leading normal lives. There was a church steeple and the roofs of small houses. A lot of little yellow lights in town. You could just make out the hills in the distance. And I wished for a minute I was in one of them houses. Sitting there. Watching TV with a wife next to me. Like Sandy or somebody.

I turned back from the window and I said, "You'd just walk down to the road and back? That's it?"

"That's all. I won't run off, you don't go get your gun. We trust each other. What could be simpler?"

Listening to the wind. Not strong but a steady hiss that was comforting in a

funny way even though any other time I'da thought it sounded cold and raw. It was like I heard a voice. I don't know from where. Something in me said I ought to do this.

I didn't say nothing else 'cause I was right on the edge and I was afraid he'd say something that'd make me change my mind. I just took the Smith & Wesson and looked at it for a minute, then put it on the kitchen table. I came back with the Buck and cut his feet free. Then I figured if I was going to do it I ought go all the way. So I cut his hands free, too. Weller seemed surprised I did that. But he smiled like he knew I was playing the game. I pulled him to his feet and held the blade to his neck and took him to the door.

"You're doing a good thing," he said.

I was thinking, Oh man, I can't believe this. It's crazy.

I opened the door and smelled cold fall air and woodsmoke and pine, and I heard the wind in the rocks and trees above our heads.

"Go on," I told him.

Weller didn't look back to check up on me . . . Faith, I guess. He kept walking real slow down toward the road.

I felt funny, I'll tell you, and a couple of times when he went past some real shadowy places in the driveway and could disappear I was like, oh man, this is all messed up. I'm crazy.

I almost panicked a few times and bolted for the Smitty but I didn't. When Weller got down near the sidewalk, I was actually holding my breath. I expected him to go, I really did. I was looking for that moment—when people tense up, when they're gonna swing or draw down on you or bolt. It's like their bodies're shouting what they're going to be doing before they do it. Only Weller wasn't doing none of that. He walked down to the sidewalk real casual. And he turned and looked up at the face of the Lookout, like he was just another weekender. Then he turned around. He nodded at me. Which is when the car came by. It was a state trooper. Those're the dark cars, and he didn't have the lightbar going. So he was almost on us before I knew it. I guess I was looking at Weller so hard I didn't see nothing else.

There it was, two doors away, and Weller saw it the same time I did.

And I thought, That's it. Oh, hell.

But when I was turning to get the gun, I saw this like flash of motion down by the road. And I stopped cold.

Could you believe it? Weller'd dropped onto the ground and rolled underneath a tree. I closed the door real fast and watched from the window. The trooper stopped and turned his light on the driveway. The beam—it was real bright—it moved up and down and hit all the bushes and the front of the house, then back

to the road. But it was like Weller was digging down into the pine needles to keep from being seen. I mean, he was *hiding* from those sons of bitches. Doing whatever he could to stay out of the way of the light.

Then the car moved on, and I saw the lights checking out the house next door and then it was gone. I kept my eyes on Weller the whole time, and he didn't do nothing stupid. I seen him climb out from under the trees and dust himself off. Then he came walking back to the house. Easy, like he was walking to a bar to meet some buddies.

He came inside and shook his head. Gave this little sigh, like relief. And laughed. Then he held his hands out. I didn't even ask him to.

I taped 'em up again with adhesive tape, and he sat down in the chair, picked up his scotch, and sipped it.

And damn, I'll tell you something. The God's truth. I felt good. Naw, naw, it wasn't like I'd seen the light or anything like that. But I was thinking that of all the people in my life—my dad or Sandy or Toth or anybody else—I never did really trust them. I'd never let myself go all the way. And here, tonight, I did. With a stranger and somebody who had the power to do me some harm. It was a pretty scary feeling, but it was also a good feeling.

It was a little thing, real little. But maybe that's where stuff like this starts. I realized then that I'd been wrong. I could let him go. Oh, I'd keep him tied up here. Gagged. It'd be a day or so before he'd get out. But he'd agree to that. I knew he would. And I'd write his name and address down, let him know I knew where him and his family lived. But that was only part of why I was thinking I'd let him go. I wasn't sure what the rest of it was. But it was something about what'd just happened, something between me and him.

"How you feel?" he asked.

I wasn't going to give too much away. No, sir. But I couldn't help saying, "I thought I was gone then. But you did right by me."

"And you did right, too, Jack." And then he said, "Pour us another round."

I filled the glasses to the top. We tapped 'em.

"Here's to you, Jack. And to faith."

"To faith."

I tossed back the whiskey, and when I lowered my head, sniffing air through my nose to clear my head, well, that was when he got me. Right in the face.

He was good, that son of a bitch. Tossed the glass low so that even when I ducked, automatically, the booze caught me in the eyes, and man, that stung like nobody's business. I couldn't believe it. I was howling in pain and going for the knife. But it was too late. He had it all planned out, exactly what I was going to do. How I was gonna move. He brought his knee up into my chin and knocked a

couple of teeth out, and I went over onto my back before I could get the knife out my pocket. Then he dropped down on my belly with his knee—I remembered I'd never bothered to tape his feet up again—and he knocked the wind out, and there I was lying, like I was paralyzed, trying to breathe and all. Only I couldn't. And the pain was incredible, but what was worse was the feeling that he didn't trust me.

I was whispering, "No, no, no. I was going to, man. You don't understand. I was going to let you go."

I couldn't see nothing and couldn't really hear nothing either, my ears were roaring so much. I was gasping, "You don't understand you don't understand."

Man, the pain was so bad. So bad . . .

Weller must've got the tape off his hands, chewed through it, I guess, 'cause he was rolling me over. I felt him tape my hands together, then grab me and drag me over to a chair, tape my feet to the legs. He got some water and threw it in my face to wash the whiskey out of my eyes.

He sat down in a chair in front of me. And he just stared at me for a long time while I caught my breath. He picked up his glass, poured more scotch. I shied away, thinking he was going to throw it in my face again, but he just sat there, sipping it and staring at me.

"You . . . I was going to let you go. I was."

"I know," he said. Still calm.

"You know?"

"I could see it in your face. I've been a salesman for twenty-five years, remember? I know when I've closed a deal."

I'm a pretty strong guy, 'specially when I'm mad, and I tried real hard to break through that tape but there was no doing it. "Goddamn you!" I shouted. "You said you weren't going to turn me in. You, all your goddamn talk about faith . . ."

"Shhhh," Weller whispered. And he sat back, crossing his legs. Easy as could be. Looking me up and down. "That fellow your friend shot back at the drugstore. The customer at the counter?"

I nodded slowly.

"He was my friend. It's his place my wife and I are staying at this weekend. With all our kids."

I just stared at him. His friend? What was he saying?

"I didn't know—"

"Be quiet," he said, real soft. "I've known him for years. Gerry was one of my best friends."

"I didn't want nobody to die. I—"

"But somebody did die. And it was your fault."

“Toth . . .”

He whispered, “It was your fault.”

“All right, you tricked me. Call the cops. Get it over with, you goddamn liar.”

“You really don’t understand, do you?” He shook his head. Why was he so calm? His hands weren’t shaking. He wasn’t looking around, nervous and all. Nothing like that. He said, “If I’d wanted to turn you in, I would just’ve flagged down that squad car a few minutes ago. But I said I wouldn’t do that. And I won’t. I gave you my word I wouldn’t tell the cops a thing about you. And I won’t.”

“Then what do you want?” I shouted. “Tell me.” Trying to bust through that tape. And as he unfolded my Buck knife with a click, I was thinking of something I told him.

Oh man, no . . . Oh, no.

“Yeah, being blind, I guess. That’d be the worst thing I could think of.”

“What’re you going to do?”

“What’m I going to do, Jack?” Weller said. He cut the last bit of tape off his wrists with the Buck, then looked up at me. “Well, I’ll tell you. I spent a good bit of time tonight proving to you that you shouldn’t kill me. And now . . .”

“What, man? What?”

“Now I’m going to spend a good bit of time proving to you that you should’ve.”

Then, real slow, Weller finished his scotch and stood up. And he walked toward me, that weird little smile on his face.

BRENDAN DUBOIS

The Dark Snow

FROM *Playboy*

WHEN I GET TO THE STEPS of my lakeside home, the door is open. I slowly walk in, my hand reaching for the phantom weapon at my side, everything about me extended and tingling as I enter the strange place that used to be mine. I step through the small kitchen, my boots crunching the broken glassware and dishes on the tile floor. Inside the living room with its cathedral ceiling the furniture has been upended, as if an earthquake had struck.

I pause for a second, looking out the large windows and past the enclosed porch, down to the frozen waters of Lake Marie. Off in the distance are the snow-covered peaks of the White Mountains. I wait, trembling, my hand still curving for that elusive weapon. They are gone, but their handiwork remains. The living room is a jumble of furniture, torn books and magazines, shattered pictures and frames. On one clear white plaster wall, next to the fireplace, two words have been written in what looks to be ketchup: GO HOME.

This is my home. I turn over a chair and drag it to the windows. I sit and look out at the crisp winter landscape, my legs stretched out, holding both hands still in my lap, which is quite a feat.

For my hands at that moment want to be wrapped around someone's throat.

After a long time wandering, I came to Nansen, New Hampshire, in the late summer and purchased a house along the shoreline of Lake Marie. I didn't waste much time, and I didn't bargain. I made an offer that was about a thousand dollars below the asking price, and in less than a month it belonged to me.

At first I didn't know what to do with it. I had never had a residence that was actually mine. Everything before this had been apartments, hotel rooms, or temporary officer's quarters. The first few nights I couldn't sleep inside. I would go outside to the long dock that extends into the deep blue waters of the lake, bundle myself up in a sleeping bag over a thin foam mattress, and stare up at the stars, listening to the loons getting ready for their long winter trip. The loons don't necessarily fly south; the ones here go out to the cold Atlantic and float with the waves and currents, not once touching land the entire winter.

As I snuggled in my bag I thought it was a good analogy for what I'd been doing. I had drifted too long. It was time to come back to dry land.

After getting the power and other utilities up and running and moving in the few boxes of stuff that belonged to me, I checked the bulky folder that had accompanied my retirement and pulled out an envelope with a doctor's name on it. Inside were official papers that directed me to talk to him, and I shrugged and decided it was better than sitting in an empty house getting drunk. I phoned and got an appointment for the next day.

His name was Ron Longley and he worked in Manchester, the state's largest city and about an hour's drive south of Lake Marie. His office was in a refurbished brick building along the banks of the Merrimack River. I imagined I could still smell the sweat and toil of the French Canadians who had worked here for so many years in the shoe, textile, and leather mills until their distant cousins in Georgia and Alabama took their jobs away.

I wasn't too sure what to make of Ron during our first session. He showed me some documents that made him a Department of Defense contractor and gave his current classification level, and then, after signing the usual insurance nonsense, we got down to it. He was about ten years younger than I, with a mustache and not much hair on top. He wore jeans, a light blue shirt, and a tie that looked as if about six tubes of paint had been squirted onto it, and he said, "Well, here we are."

"That we are," I said. "And would you believe I've already forgotten if you're a psychologist or a psychiatrist?"

That made for a good laugh. With a casual wave of his hand, he said, "Makes no difference. What would you like to talk about?"

"What should I talk about?"

A shrug, one of many I would eventually see. "Whatever's on your mind."

"Really?" I said, not bothering to hide the challenge in my voice. "Try this one on then, doc. I'm wondering what I'm doing here. And another thing I'm wondering about is paperwork. Are you going to be making a report down south on how I do? You working under some deadline, some pressure?"

His hands were on his belly and he smiled. "Nope."

"Not at all?"

"Not at all," he said. "If you want to come in here and talk baseball for fifty minutes, that's fine with me."

I looked at him and those eyes. Maybe it's my change of view since retirement, but there was something trustworthy about him. I said, "You know what's really on my mind?"

"No, but I'd like to know."

"My new house," I said. "It's great. It's on a big lake and there aren't any

close neighbors, and I can sit on the dock at night and see stars I haven't seen in a long time. But I've been having problems sleeping."

"Why's that?" he asked, and I was glad he wasn't one of those stereotypical head docs, the ones who take a lot of notes.

"Weapons."

"Weapons?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I miss my weapons." A deep breath. "Look, you've seen my files, you know the places Uncle Sam has sent me and the jobs I've done. All those years, I had pistols or rifles or heavy weapons, always at my side, under my bed or in a closet. But when I moved into that house, well, I don't have them anymore."

"How does that make you feel?" Even though the question was friendly, I knew it was a real doc question and not a from-the-next-barstool type of question.

I rubbed my hands. "I really feel like I'm changing my ways. But damn it. . . ."

"Yes?"

I smiled. "I sure could use a good night's sleep."

As I drove back home, I thought, Hell, it's only a little white lie.

The fact is, I did have my weapons.

They were locked up in the basement, in strongboxes with heavy combination locks. I couldn't get to them quickly, but I certainly hadn't tossed them away.

I hadn't been lying when I told Ron I couldn't sleep. That part was entirely true.

I thought, as I drove up the dirt road to my house, scaring a possum that scuttled along the side of the gravel, that the real problem with living in my new home was so slight that I was embarrassed to bring it up to Ron.

It was the noise.

I was living in a rural paradise, with clean air, clean water, and views of the woods and lake and mountains that almost broke my heart each time I climbed out of bed, stiff with old dreams and old scars. The long days were filled with work and activities I'd never had time for. Cutting old brush and trimming dead branches. Planting annuals. Clearing my tiny beach of leaves and other debris. Filling bird feeders. And during the long evenings on the front porch or on the dock, I tackled thick history books.

But one night after dinner—I surprised myself at how much I enjoyed cooking—I was out on the dock, sitting in a fifties-era web lawn chair, a glass of red

wine in my hand and a history of the Apollo space program in my lap. Along the shoreline of Lake Marie, I could see the lights of the cottages and other homes. Every night there were fewer and fewer lights, as more of the summer people boarded up their places and headed back to suburbia.

I was enjoying my wine and the book and the slight breeze, but there was also a distraction: three high-powered speedboats, racing around on the lake and tossing up great spray and noise. They were dragging people along in inner tubes, and it was hard to concentrate on my book. After a while the engines slowed and I was hoping the boats would head back to their docks, but they drifted together and ropes were exchanged, and soon they became a large raft. A couple of grills were set up and there were more hoots and yells, and then a sound system kicked in, with rock music and a heavy bass that echoed among the hills.

It was then too dark to read and I'd lost interest in the wine. I was sitting there, arms folded tight against my chest, trying hard to breathe. The noise got louder and I gave up and retreated into the house, where the heavy *thump-thump* of the bass followed me in. If I'd had a boat I could have gone out and asked them politely to turn it down, but that would have meant talking with people and putting myself in the way, and I didn't want to do that.

Instead, I went upstairs to my bedroom and shut the door and windows. Still, that *thump-thump* shook the beams of the house. I lay down with a pillow wrapped about my head and tried not to think of what was in the basement.

Later that night I got up for a drink of water, and there was still noise and music. I walked out onto the porch and could see movement on the lake and hear laughter. On a tree near the dock was a spotlight that the previous owners had installed and which I had rarely used. I flipped on the switch. Some shouts and shrieks. Two powerboats, tied together, had drifted close to my shore. The light caught a young muscular man with a fierce black mustache standing on the stern of his powerboat and urinating into the lake. His half a dozen companions, male and female, yelled and cursed in my direction. The boats started up and two men and a young woman stumbled to the side of one and dropped their bathing suits, exposing their buttocks. A couple others gave me a one-fingered salute, and there was a shower of bottles and cans tossed over the side as they sped away.

I spent the next hour on the porch, staring into the darkness.

The next day I made two phone calls, to the town hall and the police department of Nansen. I made gentle and polite inquiries and got the same answers from each office. There was no local or state law about boats coming to within a

certain distance of shore. There was no law forbidding boats from mooring together. Nansen being such a small town, there was also no noise ordinance.

Home sweet home.

On my next visit Ron was wearing a bow tie, and we discussed necktie fashions before we got into the business at hand. He said, "Still having sleeping problems?"

I smiled. "No, not at all."

"Really?"

"It's fall," I said. "The tourists have gone home, most of the cottages along the lake have been boarded up and nobody takes out boats anymore. It's so quiet at night I can hear the house creak and settle."

"That's good, that's really good," Ron said, and I changed the subject. A half-hour later, I was heading back to Nansen, thinking about my latest white lie. Well, it wasn't really a lie. More of an oversight.

I hadn't told Ron about the hang-up phone calls. Or how trash had twice been dumped in my driveway. Or how a week ago, when I was shopping, I had come back to find a bullet hole through one of my windows. Maybe it had been a hunting accident. Hunting season hadn't started, but I knew that for some of the workmen in this town, it didn't matter when the state allowed them to do their shooting.

I had cleaned up the driveway, shrugged off the phone calls, and cut away brush and saplings around the house, to eliminate any hiding spots for . . . hunters.

Still, I could sit out on the dock, a blanket around my legs and a mug of tea in my hand, watching the sun set in the distance, the reddish pink highlighting the strong yellows, oranges, and reds of the fall foliage. The water was a slate gray, and though I missed the loons, the smell of the leaves and the tang of woodsmoke from my chimney seemed to settle in just fine.

As it grew colder, I began to go into town for breakfast every few days. The center of Nansen could be featured in a documentary on New Hampshire small towns. Around the green common with its Civil War statue are a bank, a real estate office, a hardware store, two gas stations, a general store, and a small strip of service places with everything from a plumber to video rentals and Gretchen's Kitchen. At Gretchen's I read the paper while letting the mornings drift by. I listened to the old-timers at the counter pontificate on the ills of the state, nation, and world, and watched harried workers fly in to grab a quick meal. Eventually, a waitress named Sandy took some interest in me.

She was about twenty years younger than I, with raven hair, a wide smile, and a pleasing body that filled out her regulation pink uniform. After a couple weeks of flirting and generous tips on my part, I asked her out, and when she said yes, I went to my pickup truck and burst out laughing. A real date. I couldn't remember the last time I had had a real date.

The first date was dinner a couple of towns over, in Montcalm, the second was dinner and a movie outside Manchester, and the third was dinner at my house, which was supposed to end with a rented movie in the living room but instead ended up in the bedroom. Along the way I learned that Sandy had always lived in Nansen, was divorced with two young boys, and was saving her money so she could go back to school and become a legal aide. "If you think I'm going to keep slinging hash and waiting for Billy to send his support check, then you're a damn fool," she said on our first date.

After a bedroom interlude that surprised me with its intensity, we sat on the enclosed porch. I opened a window for Sandy, who needed a smoke. The house was warm and I had on a pair of shorts; she had wrapped a towel around her torso. I sprawled in an easy chair while she sat on the couch, feet in my lap. Both of us had glasses of wine and I felt comfortable and tingling. Sandy glanced at me as she worked on her cigarette. I'd left the lights off and lit a couple of candles, and in the hazy yellow light, I could see the small tattoo of a unicorn on her right shoulder.

Sandy looked at me and asked, "What were you doing when you was in the government?"

"Traveled a lot and ate bad food."

"No, really," she said. "I want a straight answer."

Well, I thought, as straight as I can be. I said, "I was a consultant, to foreign armies. Sometimes they needed help with certain weapons or training techniques. That was my job."

"Were you good?"

Too good, I thought. "I did all right."

"You've got a few scars there."

"That I do."

She shrugged, took a lazy puff off her cigarette. "I've seen worse."

I wasn't sure where this was headed. Then she said, "When are you going to be leaving?"

Confused, I asked her, "You mean, tonight?"

"No," she said. "I mean, when are you leaving Nansen and going back home?"

I looked around the porch and said, "This is my home."

She gave me a slight smile, like a teacher correcting a fumbling but eager student. “No, it’s not. This place was built by the Gerrish family. It’s the Gerrish place. You’re from away, and this ain’t your home.”

I tried to smile, though my mood was slipping. “Well, I beg to disagree.”

She said nothing for a moment, just studied the trail of smoke from her cigarette. Then she said, “Some people in town don’t like you. They think you’re uppity, a guy that don’t belong here.”

I began to find it quite cool on the porch. “What kind of people?”

“The Garr brothers. Jerry Tompkins. Kit Broderick. A few others. Guys in town. They don’t particularly like you.”

“I don’t particularly care,” I shot back.

A small shrug as she stubbed out her cigarette. “You will.”

The night crumbled some more after that, and the next morning, while sitting in the corner at Gretchen’s, I was ignored by Sandy. One of the older waitresses served me, and my coffee arrived in a cup stained with lipstick, the bacon was charred black, and the eggs were cold. I got the message. I started making breakfast at home, sitting alone on the porch, watching the leaves fall and days grow shorter.

I wondered if Sandy was on her own or if she had been scouting out enemy territory on someone’s behalf.

At my December visit, I surprised myself by telling Ron about something that had been bothering me.

“It’s the snow,” I said, leaning forward, hands clasped between my legs. “It’s going to start snowing soon. And I’ve always hated the snow, especially since . . .”

“Since when?”

“Since something I did once,” I said. “In Serbia.”

“Go on,” he said, fingers making a tent in front of his face.

“I’m not sure I can.”

Ron tilted his head quizzically. “You know I have the clearances.”

I cleared my throat, my eyes burning a bit. “I know. It’s just that it’s . . . Ever see blood on snow, at night?”

I had his attention. “No,” he said, “no, I haven’t.”

“It steams at first, since it’s so warm,” I said. “And then it gets real dark, almost black. Dark snow, if you can believe it. It’s something that stays with you, always.”

He looked steadily at me for a moment, then said, “Do you want to talk about it some more?”

“No.”

I spent all of one gray afternoon in my office cubbyhole, trying to get a new computer up and running. When at last I went downstairs for a quick drink, I looked outside and there they were, big snowflakes lazily drifting to the ground. Forgetting about the drink, I went out to the porch and looked at the pure whiteness of everything, of the snow covering the bare limbs, the shrubbery, and the frozen lake. I stood there and hugged myself, admiring the softly accumulating blanket of white and feeling lucky.

Two days after the snowstorm I was out on the frozen waters of Lake Marie, breathing hard and sweating and enjoying every second of it. The day before I had driven into Manchester to a sporting goods store and had come out with a pair of cross-country skis. The air was crisp and still, and the sky was a blue so deep I half-expected to see brushstrokes. From the lake, I looked back at my home and liked what I saw. The white paint and plain construction made me smile for no particular reason. I heard not a single sound, except for the faint drone of a distant airplane. Before me someone had placed signs and orange ropes in the snow, covering an oval area at the center of the lake. Each sign said the same thing: DANGER! THIN ICE! I remembered the old-timers at Gretchen's Kitchen telling a story about a hidden spring coming up through the lake bottom, or some damn thing, that made ice at the center of the lake thin, even in the coldest weather. I got cold and it was time to go home.

About halfway back to the house is where it happened.

At first it was a quiet sound, and I thought that it was another airplane. Then the noise got louder and louder, and separated, becoming distinct. Snowmobiles, several of them. I turned and they came speeding out of the woods, tossing up great rooster tails of snow and ice. They were headed straight for me. I turned away and kept up a steady pace, trying to ignore the growing loudness of the approaching engines. An itchy feeling crawled up my spine to the base of my head, and the noise exploded in pitch as they raced by me.

Even over the loudness of the engines I could make out the yells as the snowmobiles roared by, hurling snow in my direction. There were two people to each machine and they didn't look human. Each was dressed in a bulky jump suit, heavy boots, and a padded helmet. They raced by and, sure enough, circled around and came back at me. This time I flinched. This time, too, a couple of empty beer cans were thrown my way.

By the third pass, I was getting closer to my house. I thought it was almost

over when one of the snowmobiles broke free from the pack and raced across about fifty feet in front of me. The driver turned so that the machine was blocking me and sat there, racing the throttle. Then he pulled off his helmet, showing an angry face and thick mustache, and I recognized him as the man on the powerboat a few months earlier. He handed his helmet to his passenger, stepped off the snowmobile, and unzipped his jump suit. It took only a moment as he marked the snow in a long, steaming stream, and there was laughter from the others as he got back on the machine and sped away. I skied over the soiled snow and took my time climbing up the snow-covered shore. I entered my home, carrying my skis and poles like weapons over my shoulder.

That night, and every night afterward, they came back, breaking the winter stillness with the throbbing sounds of engines, laughter, drunken shouts, and music from portable stereos. Each morning I cleared away their debris and scuffed fresh snow over the stains. In the quiet of my house, I found myself constantly on edge, listening, waiting for the noise to suddenly return and break up the day. Phone calls to the police department and town hall confirmed what I already knew: Except for maybe littering, no ordinances or laws were being broken.

On one particularly loud night, I broke a promise to myself and went to the tiny, damp cellar to unlock the green metal case holding a pistol-shaped device. I went back upstairs to the enclosed porch, and with the lights off, I switched on the night-vision scope and looked at the scene below me. Six snowmobiles were parked in a circle on the snow-covered ice, and in the center, a fire had been made. Figures stumbled around in the snow, talking and laughing. Stereos had been set up on the seats of two of the snowmobiles, and the loud music with its bass *thump-thump-thump* echoed across the flat ice. Lake Marie is one of the largest bodies of water in this part of the country, but the camp was set up right below my windows.

I watched for a while as they partied. Two of the black-suited figures started wrestling in the snow. More shouts and laughter, and then the fight broke up and someone turned the stereos even louder. *Thump-thump-thump*.

I switched off the nightscope, returned it to its case in the cellar, and went to bed. Even with foam rubber plugs in my ears, the bass noise reverberated inside my skull. I put the pillow across my face and tried to ignore the sure knowledge that this would continue all winter, the noise and the littering and the aggravation, and when the spring came, they would turn in their snowmobiles for boats, and they'd be back, all summer long.

Thump-thump-thump.

At the next session with Ron, we talked about the weather until he pierced me with his gaze and said, "Tell me what's wrong."

I went through half a dozen rehearsals of what to tell him, and then skated to the edge of the truth and said, "I'm having a hard time adjusting, that's all."

"Adjusting to what?"

"To my home," I said, my hands clasped before me. "I never thought I would say this, but I'm really beginning to get settled, for the first time in my life. You ever been in the military, Ron?"

"No, but I know—"

I held up my hand. "Yes, I know what you're going to say. You've worked as a consultant, but you've never been one of us, Ron. Never. You can't know what it's like, constantly being ordered to uproot yourself and go halfway across the world to a new place with a different language, customs, and weather, all within a week. You never settle in, never really get into a place you call home."

He swiveled a bit in his black leather chair. "But that's different now?"

"It sure is," I said.

There was a pause as we looked at each other, and Ron said, "But something is going on."

"Something is."

"Tell me."

And then I knew I wouldn't. A fire wall had already been set up between Ron and the details of what was going on back at my home. If I let him know what was really happening, I knew that he would make a report, and within the week I'd be ordered to go somewhere else. If I'd been younger and not so dependent on a monthly check, I would have put up a fight.

But now, no more fighting. I looked past Ron and said, "An adjustment problem, I guess."

"Adjusting to civilian life?"

"More than that," I said. "Adjusting to Nansen. It's a great little town, but . . . I feel like an outsider."

"That's to be expected."

"Sure, but I still don't like it. I know it will take some time, but . . . well, I get the odd looks, the quiet little comments, the cold shoulders."

Ron seemed to choose his words carefully. "Is that proving to be a serious problem?"

Not even a moment of hesitation as I lied: "No, not at all."

"And what do you plan on doing?"

An innocent shrug. "Not much. Just try to fit in, try to be a good neighbor."

“That’s all?”

I nodded firmly. “That’s all.”

It took a bit of research, but eventually I managed to put a name to the face of the mustached man who had pissed on my territory. Jerry Tompkins. Floor supervisor for a computer firm outside Manchester, married with three kids, an avid boater, snowmobiler, hunter, and all-around guy. His family had been in Nansen for generations, and his dad was one of the three selectmen who ran the town. Using a couple of old skills, I tracked him down one dark afternoon and pulled my truck next to his in the snowy parking lot of a tavern on the outskirts of Nansen. The tavern was called Peter’s Pub and its windows were barred and blacked out.

I stepped out of my truck and called to him as he walked to the entrance of the pub. He turned and glared at me. “What?”

“You’re Jerry Tompkins, aren’t you.”

“Sure am,” he said, hands in the pockets of his dark-green parka. “And you’re the fella that’s living up in the old Gerrish place.”

“Yes, and I’d like to talk with you for a second.”

His face was rough, like he had spent a lot of time outdoors in the wind and rain and an equal amount indoors, with cigarette smoke and loud country music. He rocked back on his heels with a little smile and said, “Go ahead. You got your second.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Tell you what, Jerry, I’m looking for something.”

“And what’s that?”

“I’m looking for a treaty.”

He nodded, squinting his eyes. “What kind of treaty?”

“A peace treaty. Let’s cut out the snowmobile parties on the lake by my place and the trash dumped in the driveway and the hang-up calls. Let’s start fresh and just stay out of each other’s way. What do you say? Then, this summer, you can all come over to my place for a cookout. I’ll even supply the beer.”

He rubbed at the bristles along his chin. “Seems like a one-sided deal. Not too sure what I get out of it.”

“What’s the point in what you’re doing now?”

A furtive smile. “It suits me.”

I felt like I was beginning to lose it. “You agree with the treaty, we all win.”

“Still don’t see what I get out of it,” he said.

“That’s the purpose of a peace treaty,” I said. “You get peace.”

“Feel pretty peaceful right now.”

“That might change,” I said, instantly regretting the words.

His eyes darkened. "Are you threatening me?"

A retreat, recalling my promise to myself when I'd come here. "No, not a threat, Jerry. What do you say?"

He turned and walked away, moving his head to keep me in view. "Your second got used up a long time ago, pal. And you better be out of this lot in another minute, or I'm going inside and coming out with a bunch of my friends. You won't like that."

No, I wouldn't, and it wouldn't be for the reason Jerry believed. If they did come out I'd be forced into old habits and old actions, and I'd promised myself I wouldn't do that. I couldn't.

"You got it," I said, backing away. "But remember, Jerry. Always."

"What's that?"

"The peace treaty," I said, going to the door of my pickup truck. "I offered."

Another visit to Ron, on a snowy day. The conversation meandered along, and I don't know what got into me, but I looked out the old mill window's and said, "What do people expect, anyway?"

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You take a tough teenager from a small Ohio town, and you train him and train him and train him. You turn him into a very efficient hunter, a meat eater. Then, after twenty or thirty years, you say thank you very much and send him back to the world of quiet vegetarians, and you expect him to start eating cabbages and carrots with no fuss or muss. A hell of a thing, thinking you can expect him to put away his tools and skills."

"Maybe that's why we're here," he suggested.

"Oh, please," I said. "Do you think this makes a difference?"

"Does it make a difference to you?"

I kept looking out the window. "Too soon to tell, I'd say. Truth is, I wonder if this is meant to work, or is just meant to make some people feel less guilty. The people who did the hiring, training, and discharging."

"What do you think?"

I turned to him. "I think for the amount of money you charge Uncle Sam, you ask too many damn questions."

Another night at two A.M. I was back outside, beside the porch, again with the nightscope in my hands. They were back, and if anything, the music and the engines blared even louder. A fire burned merrily among the snowmobiles, and as the revelers pranced and hollered, I wondered if some base part of their brains was remembering thousand-year-old rituals. As I looked at their dancing and

drinking figures, I kept thinking of the long case at the other end of the cellar. Nice heavy-duty assault rifle with another night-vision scope, this one with crosshairs. Scan and track. Put a crosshair across each one's chest. Feel the weight of a fully loaded clip in your hand. Know that with a silencer on the end of the rifle, you could quietly take out that crew in a fistful of seconds. Get your mind back into the realm of possibilities, of cartridges and windage and grains and velocities. How long could it take between the time you said go and the time you could say mission accomplished? Not long at all.

"No," I whispered, switching off the scope.

I stayed on the porch for another hour, and as my eyes adjusted, I saw more movements. I picked up the scope. A couple of snow machines moved in, each with shapes on the seats behind the drivers. They pulled up to the snowy bank and the people moved quickly, intent on their work. Trash bags were tossed on my land, about eight or nine, and to add a bit more fun, each bag had been slit several times with a knife so it could burst open and spew its contents when it hit the ground. A few more hoots and hollers and the snowmobiles growled away, leaving trash and the flickering fire behind. I watched the lights as the snowmobiles roared across the lake and finally disappeared, though their sound did not.

The nightscope went back onto my lap. The rifle, I thought, could have stopped the fun right there with a couple of rounds through the engines. Highly illegal, but it would get their attention, right?

Right.

In my next session with Ron, I got to the point. "What kind of reports are you sending south?"

I think I might have surprised him. "Reports?"

"How I'm adjusting, that sort of thing."

He paused for a moment, and I knew there must be a lot of figuring going on behind those smiling eyes. "Just the usual things, that's all. That you're doing fine."

"Am I?"

"Seems so to me."

"Good." I waited for a moment, letting the words twist about on my tongue. "Then you can send them this message. I haven't been a hundred percent with you during these sessions, Ron. Guess it's not in my nature to be so open. But you can count on this. I won't lose it. I won't go into a gun shop and then take down a bunch of civilians. I'm not going to start hanging around 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. I'm going to be all right."

He smiled. "I have never had any doubt."

"Sure you've had doubts," I said, smiling back. "But it's awfully polite of you to say otherwise."

On a bright Saturday, I tracked down the police chief of Nansen at one of the two service stations in town, Glen's Gas & Repair. His cruiser, ordinarily a dark blue, was now a ghostly shade of white from the salt used to keep the roads clear. I parked at the side of the garage, and walking by the service bays, I could sense that I was being watched. I saw three cars with their hoods up, and I also saw a familiar uniform: black snowmobile jump suits.

The chief was overweight and wearing a heavy blue jacket with a black Navy watch cap. His face was open and friendly, and he nodded in all the right places as I told him my story.

"Not much I can do, I'm afraid," he said, leaning against the door of his cruiser, one of two in the entire town. "I'd have to catch 'em in the act of trashing your place, and that means surveillance, and that means overtime hours, which I don't have."

"Surveillance would be a waste of time anyway," I replied. "These guys, they aren't thugs, right? For lack of a better phrase, they're good old boys, and they know everything that's going on in Nansen, and they'd know if you were setting up surveillance. And then they wouldn't show."

"You might think you're insulting me, but you're not," he said gently. "That's just the way things are done here. It's a good town and most of us get along, and I'm not kept that busy, not at all."

"I appreciate that, but you should also appreciate my problem," I said. "I live here and pay taxes, and people are harassing me. I'm looking for some assistance, that's all, and a suggestion of what I can do."

"You could move," the chief said, raising his coffee cup.

"Hell of a suggestion."

"Best one I can come up with. Look, friend, you're new here, you've got no family, no ties. You're asking me to take on some prominent families just because you don't get along with them. So why don't you move on? Find someplace smaller, hell, even someplace bigger, where you don't stand out so much. But face it, it's not going to get any easier."

"Real nice folks," I said, letting an edge of bitterness into my voice.

That didn't seem to bother the chief. "That they are. They work hard and play hard, and they pay taxes, too, and they look out for one another. I know they look like hell-raisers to you, but they're more than that. They're part of the community. Why, just next week, a bunch of them are going on a midnight snow

run across the lake and into the mountains, raising money for the children's camp up at Lake Montcalm. People who don't care wouldn't do that."

"I just wish they didn't care so much about me."

He shrugged and said, "Look, I'll see what I can do. . . ." but the tone of his voice made it clear he wasn't going to do a damn thing.

The chief clambered into his cruiser and drove off, and as I walked past the bays of the service station, I heard snickers. I went around to my pickup truck and saw the source of the merriment.

My truck was resting heavily on four flat tires.

At night I woke up from cold and bloody dreams and let my thoughts drift into fantasies. By now I knew who all of them were, where all of them lived. I could go to their houses, every one of them, and bring them back and bind them in the basement of my home. I could tell them who I was and what I've done and what I can do, and I would ask them to leave me alone. That's it. Just give me peace and solitude and everything will be all right.

And they would hear me out and nod and agree, but I would know that I had to convince them. So I would go to Jerry Tompkins, the mustached one who enjoyed marking my territory, and to make my point, break a couple of his fingers, the popping noise echoing in the dark confines of the tiny basement.

Nice fantasies.

I asked Ron, "What's the point?"

He was comfortable in his chair, hands clasped over his little potbelly. "I'm sorry?"

"The point of our sessions?"

His eyes were unflinching. "To help you adjust."

"Adjust to what?"

"To civilian life."

I shifted on the couch. "Let me get this. I work my entire life for this country, doing service for its civilians. I expose myself to death and injury every week, earning about a third of what I could be making in the private sector. And when I'm through, I have to adjust, I have to make allowances for civilians. But civilians, they don't have to do a damn thing. Is that right?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Hell of a deal."

He continued a steady gaze. "Only one you've got."

So here I am, in the smelly rubble that used to be my home. I make a few half-

hearted attempts to turn the furniture back over and do some cleanup work, but I'm not in the mood. Old feelings and emotions are coursing through me, taking control. I take a few deep breaths and then I'm in the cellar, switching on the single lightbulb that hangs down from the rafters by a frayed black cord. As I maneuver among the packing cases, undoing combination locks, my shoulder strikes the lightbulb, causing it to swing back and forth, casting crazy shadows on the stone walls.

The night air is cool and crisp, and I shuffle through the snow around the house as I load the pickup truck, making three trips in all. I drive under the speed limit and halt completely at all stop signs as I go through the center of town. I drive around, wasting minutes and hours, listening to the radio. This late at night and being so far north, a lot of the stations that I can pick up are from Quebec, and there's a joyous lilt to the French-Canadian music and words that makes something inside me ache with longing.

When it's almost a new day, I drive down a street called Mast Road. Most towns around here have a Mast Road, where colonial surveyors marked tall pines that would eventually become masts for the Royal Navy. Tonight there are no surveyors, just the night air and darkness and a skinny rabbit racing across the cracked asphalt. When I'm near the target, I switch off the lights and engine and let the truck glide the last few hundred feet or so. I pull up across from a darkened house. A pickup truck and a Subaru station wagon are in the driveway. Gray smoke is wafting up from the chimney.

I roll down the window, the cold air washing over me like a wave of water. I pause, remembering what has gone on these past weeks, and then I get to work.

The nightscope comes up and clicks into action, and the name on the mailbox is clear enough in the sharp green light, TOMPKINS, in silver and black stick-on letters. I scan the two-story Cape Cod, checking out the surroundings. There's an attached garage to the right and a sunroom to the left. There is a front door and two other doors in a breezeway that runs from the garage to the house. There are no rear doors.

I let the nightscope rest on my lap as I reach toward my weapons. The first is a grenade launcher, with a handful of white phosphorus rounds clustered on the seat next to it like a gathering of metal eggs. Next to the grenade launcher is a 9mm Uzi, with an extended wooden stock for easier use. Another night-vision scope with crosshairs is attached to the Uzi.

Another series of deep breaths. Easy enough plan. Pop a white phosphorus round into the breezeway and another into the sunroom. In a minute or two both ends of the house are on fire. Our snowmobiler friend and his family wake up and, groggy from sleep and the fire and the noise, stumble out the front door

onto the snow-covered lawn.

With the Uzi in my hand and the crosshairs on a certain face, a face with a mustache, I take care of business and drive to the next house.

I pick up the grenade launcher and rest the barrel on the open window. It's cold. I rub my legs together and look outside at the stars. The wind comes up and snow blows across the road. I hear the low *hoo-hoo-hoo* of an owl.

I bring the grenade launcher up, resting the stock against my cheek. I aim. I wait.

It's very cold.

The weapon begins trembling in my hands and I let it drop to the front seat.

I sit on my hands, trying to warm them while the cold breeze blows. Idiot. Do this and how long before you're in jail, and then on trial before a jury of friends or relatives of those fine citizens you gun down tonight?

I start up the truck and let the heater sigh itself on, and then I roll up the window and slowly drive away, lights still off.

"Fool," I say to myself, "remember who you are." And with the truck's lights now on, I drive home. To what's left of it.

Days later, there's a fresh smell to the air in my house, for I've done a lot of cleaning and painting, trying not only to bring everything back to where it was but also to spruce up the place. The only real problem has been in the main room, where the words GO HOME were marked in bright red on the white plaster wall. It took me three coats to cover that up, and of course I ended up doing the entire room.

The house is dark and it's late. I'm waiting on the porch with a glass of wine in my hand, watching a light snow fall on Lake Marie. Every light in the house is off and the only illumination comes from the fireplace, which needs more wood.

But I'm content to dawdle. I'm finally at peace after these difficult weeks in Nansen. Finally, I'm beginning to remember who I really am.

I sip my wine, waiting, and then comes the sound of the snowmobiles. I see their wavering dots of light racing across the lake, doing their bit for charity. How wonderful. I raise my glass in salute, the noise of the snowmobiles getting louder as they head across the lake in a straight line.

I put the wineglass down, walk into the living room, and toss the last few pieces of wood onto the fire. The sudden heat warms my face in a pleasant glow. The wood isn't firewood, though. It's been shaped and painted by man, and as the flames leap up and devour the lumber, I see the letters begin to fade: DANGER! THIN ICE!

I stroll back to the porch, pick up the wineglass, and wait.

Below me, on the peaceful ice of Lake Marie, my new home for my new life,
the headlights go by.

And then, one by one, they blink out, and the silence is wonderful!

ELMORE LEONARD

Karen Makes Out

FROM *Murder for Love*

THEY DANCED UNTIL Karen said she had to be up early tomorrow. No argument, he walked with her through the crowd outside Monaco, then along Ocean Drive in the dark to her car. He said, “Lady, you wore me out.” He was in his forties, weathered but young-acting, natural, didn’t come on with any singles-bar bullshit buying her a drink, or comment when she said thank you, she’d have Jim Beam on the rocks. They had cooled off by the time they reached her Honda and he took her hand and gave her a peck on the cheek saying he hoped to see her again. In no hurry to make something happen. That was fine with Karen. He said “Ciao,” and walked off.

Two nights later they left Monaco, came out of that pounding sound to a sidewalk café and drinks and he became Carl Tillman, skipper of a charter deep-sea fishing boat out of American Marina, Bahia Mar. He was single, married seven years and divorced, no children; he lived in a ground-floor two-bedroom apartment in North Miami—one of the bedrooms full of fishing gear he didn’t know where else to store. Carl said his boat was out of the water, getting ready to move it to Haulover Dock, closer to where he lived.

Karen liked his weathered, kind of shaggy look, the crow’s-feet when he smiled. She liked his soft brown eyes that looked right at her talking about making his living on the ocean, about hurricanes, the trendy scene here on South Beach, movies. He went to the movies every week and told Karen—raising his eyebrows in a vague, kind of stoned way—his favorite actor was Jack Nicholson. Karen asked him if that was his Nicholson impression or was he doing Christian Slater doing Nicholson? He told her she had a keen eye; but couldn’t understand why she thought Dennis Quaid was a hunk. That was okay.

He said, “You’re a social worker.”

Karen said, “A *social* worker—”

“A teacher.”

“What kind of teacher?”

“You teach Psychology. College level.”

She shook her head.

“English Lit.”

“I’m not a teacher.”

“Then why’d you ask what kind I thought you were?”

She said, “You want me to tell you what I do?”

“You’re a lawyer. Wait. The Honda—you’re a public defender.” Karen shook her head and he said, “Don’t tell me, I want to guess, even if it takes a while.” He said, “If that’s okay with you.”

Fine. Some guys, she’d tell them what she did and they were turned off by it. Or they’d act surprised and then self-conscious and start asking dumb questions. “But how can a girl do that?” Assholes.

That night in the bathroom brushing her teeth Karen stared at her reflection. She liked to look at herself in mirrors: touch her short blond hair, check out her fanny in profile, long legs in a straight skirt above her knees, Karen still a size six approaching thirty. She didn’t think she looked like a social worker or a schoolteacher, even college level. A lawyer maybe, but not a public defender. Karen was low-key high style. She could wear her favorite Calvin Klein suit, the black one her dad had given her for Christmas, her Sig Sauer .38 for evening wear snug against the small of her back, and no one would think for a moment she was packing.

Her new boyfriend called and stopped by her house in Coral Gables Friday evening in a white BMW convertible. They went to a movie and had supper and when he brought her home they kissed in the doorway, arms slipping around each other, holding, Karen thanking God he was a good kisser, comfortable with him, but not quite ready to take her clothes off. When she turned to the door he said, “I can wait. You think it’ll be long?”

Karen said, “What’re you doing Sunday?”

They kissed the moment he walked in and made love in the afternoon, sunlight flat on the window shades, the bed stripped down to a fresh white sheet. They made love in a hurry because they couldn’t wait, had at each other and lay perspiring after. When they made love again, Karen holding his lean body between her legs and not wanting to let go, it lasted and lasted and got them smiling at each other, saying things like “Wow,” and “Oh, my God,” it was so good, serious business but really fun. They went out for a while, came back to her yellow stucco bungalow in Coral Gables, and made love on the living room floor.

Carl said, “We could try it again in the morning.”

“I have to be dressed and out of here by six.”

“You’re a flight attendant.”

She said, “Keep guessing.”

Monday morning Karen Sisco was outside the federal courthouse in Miami with

a pump-action shotgun on her hip. Karen's right hand gripped the neck of the stock, the barrel extending above her head. Several more U.S. deputy marshals were out here with her, while inside, three Colombian nationals were being charged in District Court with the possession of cocaine in excess of five hundred kilograms. One of the marshals said he hoped the scudders liked Atlanta as they'd be doing thirty to life there pretty soon. He said, "Hey, Karen, you want to go with me, drop 'em off? I know a nice ho-tel we could stay at."

She looked over at the good-ole-boy marshals grinning, shuffling their feet, waiting for her reply. Karen said, "Gary, I'd go with you in a minute if it wasn't a mortal sin." They liked that. It was funny, she'd been standing here thinking she'd gone to bed with four different boyfriends in her life: an Eric at Florida Atlantic, a Bill right after she graduated, then a Greg, three years of going to bed with Greg, and now Carl. Only four in her whole life, but two more than the national average for women in the U.S. according to *Time* magazine, their report of a recent sex survey. The average woman had two partners in her lifetime, the average man, six. Karen had thought everybody was getting laid with a lot more different ones than that.

She saw her boss now, Milt Dancey, an old-time marshal in charge of court support, come out of the building to stand looking around, a pack of cigarettes in his hand. Milt looked this way and gave Karen a nod, but paused to light a cigarette before coming over. A guy from the Miami FBI office was with him.

Milt said, "Karen, you know Daniel Burdon?"

Not Dan, not Danny, Daniel. Karen knew him, one of the younger black guys over there, tall and good looking, confident, known to brag about how many women he'd had of all kinds and color. He'd flashed his smile at Karen one time, hitting on her. Karen turned him down saying, "You have two reasons you want to go out with me." Daniel, smiling, said he knew of one reason, what was the other one? Karen said, "So you can tell your buddies you banged a marshal," Daniel said, "Yeah, but you could use it, too, girl. Brag on getting *me* in the sack," See? That's the kind of guy he was.

Milt said, "He wants to ask you about a Carl Tillman."

No flashing smile this time, Daniel Burdon had on a serious, sort of innocent expression, saying to her, "You know the man, Karen? Guy in his forties, sandy hair, goes about five-ten, one-sixty?"

Karen said, "What's this, a test? Do I *know* him?"

Milt reached for her shotgun. "Here, Karen, lemme take that while you're talking."

She turned a shoulder saying, "It's okay, I'm not gonna shoot him," her fist tight on the neck of the twelve-gauge. She said to Daniel, "You have Carl under

surveillance?”

“Since last Monday.”

“You’ve seen us together—so what’s this do-I-know-him shit? You playing a game with me?”

“What I meant to ask, Karen, was how long have you known him?”

“We met last week, Tuesday.”

“And you saw him Thursday, Friday, spent Sunday with him, went to the beach, came back to your place . . . What’s he think about you being with the marshals’ service?”

“I haven’t told him.”

“How come?”

“He wants to guess what I do.”

“Still working on it, huh? What you think, he a nice guy? Has a sporty car, has money, huh? He a pretty big spender?”

“Look,” Karen said, “why don’t you quit dickin’ around and tell me what this is about, okay?”

“See, Karen, the situation’s so unusual,” Daniel said, still with the innocent expression, “I don’t know how to put it, you know, delicately. Find out a U.S. marshal’s fucking a bank robber.”

Milt Dancey thought Karen was going to swing at Daniel with the shotgun. He took it from her this time and told the Bureau man to behave himself, watch his mouth if he wanted cooperation here. Stick to the facts. This Carl Tillman was a *suspect* in a bank robbery, a possible suspect in a half-dozen more, all the robberies, judging from the bank videos, committed by the same guy. The FBI referred to him as “Slick,” having nicknames for all their perps. They had prints off a teller’s counter might be the guy’s, but no match in their files and not enough evidence on Carl Edward Tillman—the name on his driver’s license and car registration—to bring him in. He appeared to be most recently cherry, just getting into a career of crime. His motivation, pissed off at banks because Florida Southern foreclosed on his note and sold his forty-eight-foot Hatteras for nonpayment.

It stopped Karen for a moment. He might’ve lied about his boat, telling her he was moving it to Haulover; but that didn’t make him a bank robber. She said, “What’ve you got, a video picture, a teller identified him?”

Daniel said, “Since you mentioned it,” taking a Bureau wanted flyer from his inside coat pocket, the sheet folded once down the middle. He opened it and Karen was looking at four photos taken from bank video cameras of robberies in progress, the bandits framed in teller windows, three black guys, one white.

Karen said, "Which one?" and Daniel gave her a look before pointing to the white guy: a man with slicked-back hair, an earring, a full mustache, and dark sunglasses. She said, "That's not Carl Tillman," and felt instant relief. There was no resemblance.

"Look at it good."

"What can I tell you? It's not him."

"Look at the nose."

"You serious?"

"That's your friend Carl's nose."

It was. Carl's slender, rather elegant nose. Or like his. Karen said, "You're going with a nose ID, that's all you've got?"

"A witness," Daniel said, "believes she saw this man—right after what would be the first robbery he pulled—run from the bank to a strip mall up the street and drive off in a white BMW convertible. The witness got a partial on the license number and that brought us to your friend Carl."

Karen said, "You ran his name and date of birth . . ."

"Looked him up in NCIC, FCIC, and Warrant Information, drew a blank. That's why I think he's just getting his feet wet. Managed to pull off a few, two three grand each, and found himself a new profession."

"What do you want me to do," Karen said, "get his prints on a beer can?"

Daniel raised his eyebrows. "That would be a start. Might even be all we need. What I'd like you to do, Karen, is snuggle up to the man and find out his secrets. You know what I'm saying—intimate things, like did he ever use another name. . . ."

"Be your snitch," Karen said, knowing it was a mistake as soon as the words were out of her mouth.

It got Daniel's eyebrows raised again. He said, "That what it sounds like to you? I thought you were a federal agent, Karen. Maybe you're too close to him—is that it? Don't want the man to think ill of you?"

Milt said, "That's enough of that shit," standing up for Karen as he would any of his people, not because she was a woman; he had learned not to open doors for her. The only time she wanted to be first through the door was on a fugitive warrant, this girl who scored higher with a handgun, more times than not, than any marshal in the Southern District of Florida.

Daniel was saying, "Man, I need to use her. Is she on our side or not?"

Milt handed Karen her shotgun. "Here, you want to shoot him, go ahead."

"Look," Daniel said, "Karen can get me a close read on the man, where he's lived before, if he ever went by other names, if he has any identifying marks on his body, scars, maybe a gunshot wound, tattoos, things only lovely Karen would

see when the man has his clothes off.”

Karen took a moment. She said, “There is one thing I noticed.”

“Yeah? What’s that?”

“He’s got the letters f-u-o-n tattooed on his penis.”

Daniel frowned at her. “Foo-on?”

“That’s when it’s, you might say, limp. When he has a hard-on it says Fuck the Federal Bureau of Investigation.”

Daniel Burdon grinned at Karen. He said, “Girl, you and I have to get together. I mean it.”

Karen could handle “girl.” Go either way. Girl, looking at herself in a mirror applying blush-on. Woman, well, that’s what she was. Though until just a few years ago she only thought of women old enough to be her mother as women. Women getting together to form organizations of women, saying, Look, we’re different from men. Isolating themselves in these groups instead of mixing it up with men and beating them at their own men’s games. Men in general were stronger physically than women. Some men were stronger than other men and Karen was stronger than some too; so what did that prove? If she had to put a man on the ground, no matter how big or strong he was, she’d do it. One way or another. Up front, in his face. What she couldn’t see herself playing was this sneaky role. Trying to get the stuff on Carl, a guy she liked, a lot, would think of with tender feelings and miss him during the day and want to be with him. Shit . . . Okay, she’d play the game, but not undercover. She’d first let him know she was a federal officer and see what he thought about it.

Could Carl be a bank robber?

She’d reserve judgment. Assume almost anyone could at one time or another and go from there.

What Karen did, she came home and put a pot roast in the oven and left her bag on the kitchen table, open, the grip of a Beretta nine sticking out in plain sight.

Carl arrived, they kissed in the living room, Karen feeling it but barely looking at him. When he smelled the pot roast cooking Karen said, “Come on, you can make the drinks while I put the potatoes on.” In the kitchen, then, she stood with the refrigerator door open, her back to Carl, giving him time to notice the pistol. Finally he said, “Jesus, you’re a cop.”

She had rehearsed this moment. The idea: turn saying, “You guessed,” sounding surprised; then look at the pistol and say something like “Nuts, I gave it away.” But she didn’t. He said, “Jesus, you’re a cop,” and she turned from the refrigerator with an ice tray and said, “Federal. I’m a U.S. marshal.”

“I would never’ve guessed,” Carl said, “not in a million years.”

Thinking about it before, she didn’t know if he’d wig out or what. She looked at him now, and he seemed to be taking it okay, smiling a little.

He said, “But why?”

“Why what?”

“Are you a marshal?”

“Well, first of all, my dad has a company, Marshall Sisco Investigations. . . .”

“You mean because of his name, Marshall?”

“What I am—they’re not spelled the same. No, but as soon as I learned to drive I started doing surveillance jobs for him. Like following some guy who was trying to screw his insurance company, a phony claim. I got the idea of going into law enforcement. So after a couple of years at Miami I transferred to Florida Atlantic and got in their Criminal Justice program.”

“I mean why not FBI, if you’re gonna do it, or DEA?”

“Well, for one thing, I liked to smoke grass when I was younger, so DEA didn’t appeal to me at all. Secret Service guys I met were so fucking secretive, you ask them a question, they’d go, ‘You’ll have to check with Washington on that.’ See, different federal agents would come to school to give talks. I got to know a couple of marshals—we’d go out after, have a few beers, and I liked them. They’re nice guys, condescending at first, naturally; but after a few years they got over it.”

Carl was making drinks now, Early Times for Karen, Dewar’s in his glass, both with a splash. Standing at the sink, letting the faucet run, he said, “What do you do?”

“I’m on court security this week. My regular assignment is warrants. We go after fugitives, most of them parole violators.”

Carl handed her a drink. “Murderers?”

“If they were involved in a federal crime when they did it. Usually drugs.”

“Bank robbery, that’s federal, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, some guys come out of corrections and go right back to work.”

“You catch many?”

“Bank robbers?” Karen said, “Nine out of ten,” looking right at him.

Carl raised his glass. “Cheers.”

While they were having dinner at the kitchen table he said, “You’re quiet this evening.”

“I’m tired, I was on my feet all day, with a shotgun.”

“I can’t picture that,” Carl said. “You don’t look like a U.S. marshal, or any kind of cop.”

“What do I look like?”

“A knockout. You’re the best-looking girl I’ve ever been this close to. I got a pretty close look at Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, when they were here shooting *Scarface*? But you’re a lot better looking. I like your freckles.”

“I used to be loaded with them.”

“You have some gravy on your chin. Right here.”

Karen touched it with her napkin. She said, “I’d like to see your boat.”

He was chewing pot roast and had to wait before saying, “I told you it was out of the water?”

“Yeah?”

“I don’t have the boat anymore. It was repossessed when I fell behind in my payments.”

“The bank sold it?”

“Yeah, Florida Southern. I didn’t want to tell you when we first met. Get off to a shaky start.”

“But now that you can tell me I’ve got gravy on my chin . . .”

“I didn’t want you to think I was some kind of loser.”

“What’ve you been doing since?”

“Working as a mate, up at Haulover.”

“You still have your place, your apartment?”

“Yeah, I get paid, I can swing that, no problem.”

“I have a friend in the marshals lives in North Miami, on Alamanda off a Hundred and twenty-fifth.”

Carl nodded. “That’s not far from me.”

“You want to go out after?”

“I thought you were tired.”

“I am.”

“Then why don’t we stay home?” Carl smiled. “What do you think?”

“Fine.”

They made love in the dark. He wanted to turn the lamp on, but Karen said, no, leave it off.

Geraldine Regal, the first teller at Sun Federal on Kendall Drive, watched a man with slicked-back hair and sunglasses fishing in his inside coat pocket as he approached her window. It was 9:40, Tuesday morning. At first she thought the guy was Latin. Kind of cool, except that up close his hair looked shellacked, almost metallic. She wanted to ask him if it hurt. He brought papers, deposit slips, and a blank check from the pocket saying, “I’m gonna make this out for four thousand.” Began filling out the check and said, “You hear about the

woman trapeze artist, her husband's divorcing her?"

Geraldine said she didn't think so, smiling, because it was a little weird, a customer she'd never seen before telling her a joke.

"They're in court. The husband's lawyer asks her, 'Isn't it true that on Monday, March the fifth, hanging from the trapeze upside down, without a net, you had sex with the ringmaster, the lion tamer, two clowns, and a dwarf?'"

Geraldine waited. The man paused, head down as he finished making out the check. Now he looked up.

"The woman trapeze artist thinks for a minute and says, 'What was that date again?'"

Geraldine was laughing as he handed her the check, smiling as she saw it was a note written on a blank check, neatly printed in block letters, that said:

THIS IS NO JOKE
IT'S A STICKUP!
I WANT \$4,000 NOW!

Geraldine stopped smiling. The guy with the metallic hair was telling her he wanted it in hundreds, fifties, and twenties, loose, no bank straps or rubber bands, no bait money, no dye packs, no bills off the bottom of the drawer, and he wanted his note back. Now.

"The teller didn't have four grand in her drawer," Daniel Burdon said, "so the guy settled for twenty-eight hundred and was out of there. Slick changing his style—we *know* it's the same guy, with the shiny hair? Only now he's the Joker. The trouble is, see, I ain't Batman."

Daniel and Karen Sisco were in the hallway outside the central courtroom on the second floor, Daniel resting his long frame against the railing, where you could look below at the atrium, with its fountain and potted palms.

"No witness to see him hop in his BMW this time. The man coming to realize that was dumb, using his own car."

Karen said, "Or it's not Carl Tillman."

"You see him last night?"

"He came over."

"Yeah, how was it?"

Karen looked up at Daniel's deadpan expression. "I told him I was a federal agent and he didn't freak."

"So he's cool, huh?"

"He's a nice guy."

“Cordial. Tells jokes robbing banks. I talked to the people at Florida Southern, where he had his boat loan? Found out he was seeing one of the tellers. Not at the main office, one of their branches, girl named Kathy Lopez. Big brown eyes, cute as a puppy, just started working there. She’s out with Tillman she tells him about her job, what she does, how she’s counting money all day. I asked was Tillman interested, want to know anything in particular? Oh, yeah, he wanted to know what she was supposed to do if the bank ever got robbed. So she tells him about dye packs, how they work, how she gets a two-hundred-dollar bonus if she’s ever robbed and can slip one in with the loot. The next time he’s in, cute little Kathy Lopez shows him one, explains how you walk out the door with a pack of fake twenties? A half minute later the tear gas blows and you have that red shit all over you and the money you stole. I checked the reports on the other robberies he pulled? Every one of them he said to the teller, no dye packs or that bait money with the registered serial numbers.”

“Making conversation,” Karen said, trying hard to maintain her composure. “People like to talk about what they do.”

Daniel smiled.

And Karen said, “Carl’s not your man.”

“Tell me why you’re so sure.”

“I know him. He’s a good guy.”

“Karen, you hear yourself? You’re telling me what you feel, not what you know. Tell me about *him*—you like the way he dances, what?”

Karen didn’t answer that one. She wanted Daniel to leave her alone.

He said, “Okay, you want to put a wager on it, you say Tillman’s clean?”

That brought her back, hooked her, and she said, “How much?”

“You lose, you go out dancing with me.”

“Great. And if I’m right, what do I get?”

“My undying respect,” Daniel said.

As soon as Karen got home she called her dad at Marshall Sisco Investigations and told him about Carl Tillman, the robbery suspect in her life, and about Daniel Burdon’s confident, condescending, smart-ass, irritating attitude.

Her dad said, “Is this guy colored?”

“Daniel?”

“I *know* he is. Friends of mine at Metro-Dade call him the white man’s Burdon, on account of he gets on their nerves always being right. I mean your guy. There’s a running back in the NFL named Tillman. I forget who he’s with.”

Karen said, “You’re not helping any.”

“The Tillman in the pros is colored—the reason I asked. I think he’s with the

Bears.”

“Carl’s white.”

“Okay, and you say you’re crazy about him?”

“I like him, a lot.”

“But you aren’t sure he isn’t doing the banks.”

“I said I can’t believe he is.”

“Why don’t you ask him?”

“Come on—if he is he’s not gonna tell me.”

“How do you know?”

She didn’t say anything and after a few moments her dad asked if she was still diere.

“He’s coming over tonight,” Karen said.

“You want me to talk to him?”

“You’re not serious.”

“Then what’d you call me for?”

“I’m not sure what to do.”

“Let the FBI work it.”

“I’m supposed to be helping them.”

“Yeah, but what good are you? You want to believe the guy’s clean. Honey, the only way to find out if he is, you have to assume he isn’t. You know what I’m saying? Why does a person rob banks? For money, yeah. But you have to be dumb, too, considering the odds against you, the security, cameras taking your picture. . . . So another reason could be the risk involved, it turns him on. The same reason he’s playing around with you. . . .”

“He isn’t playing around.”

“I’m glad I didn’t say, ‘Sucking up to get information, see what you know.’”

“He’s never mentioned banks.” Karen paused. “Well, he might’ve once.”

“You could bring it up, see how he reacts. He gets sweaty, call for backup. Look, whether he’s playing around or loves you with all his heart, he’s still risking twenty years. He doesn’t know if you’re on to him or not and that heightens the risk. It’s like he thinks he’s Cary Grant stealing jewels from the broad’s home where he’s having dinner, in his tux. But your guy’s still dumb if he robs banks. You know all that. Your frame of mind, you just don’t want to accept it.”

“You think I should draw him out. See if I can set him up.”

“Actually,” her dad said, “I think you should find another boyfriend.”

Karen remembered Christopher Walken in *The Dogs of War* placing his gun on a table in the front hall—the doorbell ringing—and laying a newspaper over the

gun before he opened the door. She remembered it because at one time she was in love with Christopher Walken, not even caring that he wore his pants so high.

Carl reminded her some of Christopher Walken, the way he smiled with his eyes. He came a little after seven. Karen had on khaki shorts and a T-shirt, tennis shoes without socks.

"I thought we were going out."

They kissed and she touched his face, moving her hand lightly over his skin, smelling his after-shave, feeling the spot where his light earlobe was pierced.

"I'm making drinks," Karen said. "Let's have one and then I'll get ready." She started for the kitchen.

"Can I help?"

"You've been working all day. Sit down, relax."

It took her a couple of minutes. Karen returned to the living room with a drink in each hand, her leather bag hanging from her shoulder. "This one's yours." Carl took it and she dipped her shoulder to let the bag slip off and drop to the coffee table. Carl grinned.

"What've you got in there, a gun?"

"Two pounds of heavy metal. How was your day?"

They sat on the sofa and he told how it took almost four hours to land an eight-foot marlin, the leader wound around its bill. Carl said he worked his tail off hauling the fish aboard and the guy decided he didn't want it.

Karen said, "After you got back from Kendall?"

It gave him pause.

"Why do you think I was in Kendall?"

Carl had to wait while she sipped her drink.

"Didn't you stop by Florida Southern and withdraw twenty-eight hundred?"

That got him staring at her, but with no expression to speak of. Karen thinking, Tell me you were somewhere else and can prove it.

But he didn't; he kept staring.

"No dye packs, no bait money. Are you still seeing Kathy Lopez?"

Carl hunched over to put his drink on the coffee table and sat like that, leaning on his thighs, not looking at her now as Karen studied his profile, his elegant nose. She looked at his glass, his prints all over it, and felt sorry for him.

"Carl, you blew it."

He turned his head to look at her past his shoulder. He said, "I'm leaving," pushed up from the sofa and said, "If this is what you think of me . . ."

Karen said, "Carl, cut the shit," and put her drink down. Now, if he picked up her bag, that would cancel out any remaining doubts. She watched him pick up her bag. He got the Beretta out and let the bag drop.

“Carl, sit down. Will you, please?”

“I’m leaving. I’m walking out and you’ll never see me again. But first . . .” He made her get a knife from the kitchen and cut the phone line in there and in the bedroom.

He *was* pretty dumb. In the living room again he said, “You know something? We could’ve made it.”

Jesus. And he had seemed like such a cool guy. Karen watched him go to the front door and open it before turning to her again.

“How about letting me have five minutes? For old times’ sake.”

It was becoming embarrassing, sad. She said, “Carl, don’t you understand? You’re under arrest.”

He said, “I don’t want to hurt you, Karen, so don’t try to stop me.” He went out the door.

Karen walked over to the chest where she dropped her car keys and mail coming in the house: a bombé chest by the front door, the door still open. She laid aside the folded copy of the *Herald* she’d placed there over her Sig Sauer .38, picked up the pistol, and went out to the front stoop, into the yellow glow of the porch light. She saw Carl at his car now, its white shape pale against the dark street, only about forty feet away.

“Carl, don’t make it hard, okay?”

He had the car door open and half turned to look back. “I said I don’t want to hurt you.”

Karen said, “Yeah, well. . . .” raised the pistol to rack the slide, and cupped her left hand under the grip. She said, “You move to get in the car, I’ll shoot.”

Carl turned his head again with a sad, wistful expression. “No you won’t, sweetheart.”

Don’t say ciao, Karen thought. Please.

Carl said, “Ciao,” turned to get in the car, and she shot him. Fired a single round at his left thigh and hit him where she’d aimed, in the fleshy part just below his butt. Carl howled and slumped inside against the seat and the steering wheel, his leg extended straight out, his hand gripping it, his eyes raised with a bewildered frown as Karen approached. The poor dumb guy looking at twenty years, and maybe a limp.

Karen felt she should say something. After all, for a few days there they were as intimate as two people can get. She thought about it for several moments, Carl staring up at her with rheumy eyes. Finally Karen said, “Carl, I want you to know I had a pretty good time, considering.”

It was the best she could do.

MICHAEL MALONE

Red Clay

FROM *Murder for Love*

UP ON ITS SHORT SLOPE the columned front of our courthouse was wavy in the August sun, like a courthouse in lake water. The leaves hung from maples, and the flag of North Carolina wilted flat against its metal pole. Heat sat sodden over Devereux County week by relentless week; they called the weather “dog days,” after the star, Sirius, but none of us knew that. We thought they meant no dog would leave shade for street on such days—no dog except a mad one. I was ten that late August in 1959; I remembered the summer because of the long heat wave, and because of Stella Doyle.

When they pushed open the doors, the policemen and lawyers flung their arms up to their faces to block the sun and stopped there in the doorway as if the hot light were shoving them back inside. Stella Doyle came out last, a deputy on either side to walk her down to where the patrol car, orange as Halloween candles, waited to take her away until the jury could make up its mind about what had happened two months earlier out at Red Hills. It was the only house in the county big enough to have a name. It was where Stella Doyle had, maybe, shot her husband, Hugh Doyle, to death.

Excitement over Doyle’s murder had swarmed through the town and stung us alive. No thrill would replace it until the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Outside the courthouse, sidewalk heat steaming up through our shoes, we stood patiently waiting to hear Mrs. Doyle found guilty. The news stood waiting, too, for she was, after all, not merely the murderer of the wealthiest man we knew; she was Stella Doyle. She was the movie star.

Papa’s hand squeezed down on my shoulder and there was a tight line to his mouth as he pulled me into the crowd and said, “Listen now, Buddy, if anybody ever asks you, when you’re grown, ‘Did you ever see the most beautiful woman God made in your lifetime,’ son, you say ‘Yes, I had that luck, and her name was Stella Dora Doyle.’” His voice got louder, right there in the crowd for everybody to hear. “You tell them how her beauty was so bright, it burned back the shame they tried to heap on her head, burned it right on back to scorch their faces.”

Papa spoke these strange words looking up the steps at the almost plump woman in black the deputies were holding. His arms were folded over his seersucker vest, his fingers tight on the sleeves of his shirt. People around us had

turned to stare and somebody snickered.

Embarrassed for him, I whispered, "Oh, Papa, she's nothing but an old murderer. Everybody knows how she got drunk and killed Mr. Doyle. She shot him right through the head with a gun."

Papa frowned. "You don't know that."

I kept on. "Everybody says she was so bad and drunk all the time, she wouldn't let his folks even live in the same house with her. She made him throw out his own mama and papa."

Papa shook his head at me. "I don't like to hear ugly gossip coming out of your mouth, all right, Buddy?"

"Yes, sir."

"She didn't kill Hugh Doyle."

"Yes, sir."

His frown scared me; it was so rare. I stepped closer and took his hand, took his stand against the rest. I had no loyalty to this woman Papa thought so beautiful. I just could never bear to be cut loose from the safety of his good opinion. I suppose that from that moment on, I felt toward Stella Doyle something of what my father felt, though in the end perhaps she meant less to me, and stood for more. Papa never had my habit of symbolizing.

The courthouse steps were wide, uneven stone slabs. As Mrs. Doyle came down, the buzzing of the crowd hushed. All together, like trained dancers, people stepped back to clear a half-circle around the orange patrol car. Newsmen shoved their cameras to the front. She was rushed down so fast that her shoe caught in the crumbling stone and she fell against one of the deputies.

"She's drunk!" hooted a woman near me, a country woman in a flowered dress belted with a strip of painted rope. She and the child she jiggled against her shoulder were puffy with the fat of poverty. "Look 'it her"—the woman pointed—"look at that dress. She thinks she's still out there in Hollywood." The woman beside her nodded, squinting out from under the visor of the kind of hat pier fishermen wear. "I went and killed my husband, wouldn't no rich lawyers come running to weasel me out of the law." She slapped at a fly's buzz.

Then they were quiet and everybody else was quiet and our circle of sun-stunned eyes fixed on the woman in black, stared at the wonder of one as high as Mrs. Doyle about to be brought so low.

Holding to the stiff, tan arm of the young deputy, Mrs. Doyle reached down to check the heel of her shoe. Black shoes, black suit and purse, wide black hat—they all sinned against us by their fashionableness, blazing wealth as well as death. She stood there, arrested a moment in the hot immobility of the air, then she hurried down, rushing the two big deputies down with her, to the open door

of the orange patrol car. Papa stepped forward so quickly that the gap filled with people before I could follow him. I squeezed through, fighting with my elbows, and I saw that he was holding his straw hat in one hand, and offering the other hand out to the murderer. "Stella, how are you? Clayton Hayes."

As she turned, I saw the strawberry gold hair beneath the hat; then her hand, bright with a big diamond, took away the dark glasses. I saw what Papa meant. She was beautiful. Her eyes were the color of lilacs, but darker than lilacs. And her skin held the light like the inside of a shell. She was not like other pretty women, because the difference was not one of degree. I have never seen anyone else of her kind.

"Why, Clayton! God Almighty, it's been years."

"Well, yes, a long time now, I guess," he said, and shook her hand.

She shook the hand in both of hers. "You look the same as ever. Is this your boy?" she said. The violet eyes turned to me.

"Yes, this is Buddy. Ada and I have six so far, three of each."

"Six? Are we that old, Clayton?" She smiled. "They said you'd married Ada Hackney."

A deputy cleared his throat. "Sorry, Clayton, we're going to have to get going."

"Just a minute, Lonnie. Listen, Stella, I just wanted you to know I'm sorry as I can be about your losing Hugh."

Tears welled in her eyes. "He did it himself, Clayton," she said.

"I know that. I know you didn't do this." Papa nodded slowly again and again, the way he did when he was listening. "I know that. Good luck to you."

She swatted tears away. "Thank you."

"I'm telling everybody I'm sure of that."

"Clayton, thank you."

Papa nodded again, then tilted his head back to give her his slow, peaceful smile. "You call Ada and me if there's ever something we can do to help you, you hear?" She kissed his cheek and he stepped back with me into the crowd of hostile, avid faces as she entered the police car. It moved slow as the sun through the sightseers. Cameras pushed against its windows.

A sallow man biting a pipe skipped down the steps to join some other reporters next to us. "Jury sent out for food," he told them. "No telling with these yokels. Could go either way." He pulled off his jacket and balled it under his arm. "Jesus, it's hot."

A younger reporter with thin, wet hair disagreed. "They all think Hollywood's Babylon and she's the whore. Hugh Doyle was the local prince, his daddy kept the mills open in the bad times, quote unquote half the rednecks in the county.

They'll fry her. For that hat if nothing else."

"Could go either way," grinned the man with the pipe. "She was born in a shack six miles from here. Hat or no hat, that makes her one of them. So what if she did shoot the guy, he was dying of cancer anyhow, for Christ's sake. Well, she never could act worth the price of a bag of popcorn, but Jesus damn she was something to look at!"

Now that Stella Doyle was gone, people felt the heat again and went back to where they could sit still in the shade until the evening breeze and wait for the jury's decision. Papa and I walked back down Main Street to our furniture store. Papa owned a butcher shop, too, but he didn't like the meat business and wasn't very good at it, so my oldest brother ran it while Papa sat among the mahogany bedroom suites and red maple dining-room sets in a big rocking chair and read, or talked to friends who dropped by. The rocker was actually for sale but he had sat in it for so long now that it was just Papa's chair. Three ceiling fans stirred against the quiet, shady air while he answered my questions about Stella Doyle.

He said that she grew up Stella Dora Hibble on Route 19, in a three-room, tin-roofed little house propped off the red clay by concrete blocks—the kind of saggy-porched, pinewood house whose owners leave on display in their dirt yard, like sculptures, the broken artifacts of their aspirations and the debris of their unmendable lives: the doorless refrigerator and the rusting car, the pyre of metal and plastic that tells drivers along the highway "Dreams don't last."

Stella's mother, Dora Hibble, had believed in dreams anyhow. Dora had been a pretty girl who'd married a farmer and worked harder than she had the health for, because hard work was necessary just to keep from going under. But in the evenings Mrs. Hibble had looked at movie magazines. She had believed the romance was out there and she wanted it, if not for her, for her children. At twenty-seven, Dora Hibble died during her fifth labor. Stella was eight when she watched from the door of the bedroom as they covered her mother's face with a thin blanket. When Stella was fourteen, her father died when a machine jammed at Doyle Mills. When Stella was sixteen, Hugh Doyle, Jr., who was her age, my father's age, fell in love with her.

"Did you love her, too, Papa?"

"Oh, yes. All us boys in town were crazy about Stella Dora, one time or another. I had my attack of it, same as the rest. We were sweethearts in seventh grade. I bought a big-size Whitman's Sampler on Valentine's. I remember it cost every cent I had."

"Why were y'all crazy about her?"

"I guess you'd have to worry you'd missed out on being alive if you didn't feel that way about Stella, one time or another."

I was feeling a terrible emotion I later defined as jealousy. “But didn’t you love Mama?”

“Well, now, this was before it was my luck to meet your mama.”

“And you met her coming to town along the railroad track and you told your friends ‘That’s the girl for me and I’m going to marry her,’ didn’t you?”

“Yes, sir, and I was right on both counts.” Papa rocked back in the big chair, his hands peaceful on the armrests.

“Was Stella Dora still crazy about you after you met Mama?”

His face crinkled into the lines of his ready laughter. “No, sir, she wasn’t. She loved Hugh Doyle, minute she laid eyes on him, and he felt the same. But Stella had this notion about going off to get to be somebody in the movies. And Hugh couldn’t hold her back, and I guess she couldn’t get him to see what it was made her want to go off so bad either.”

“What was it made her want to go?”

Papa smiled at me. “Well, I don’t know, son. What makes you want to go off so bad? You’re always saying you’re going here, and there, ’cross the world, up to the moon. I reckon you’re more like Stella than I am.”

“Do you think she was wrong to want to go be in the movies?”

“No.”

“You don’t think she killed him?”

“No, sir, I don’t.”

“Somebody killed him.”

“Well, Buddy, sometimes people lose hope and heart, and feel like they can’t go on living.”

“Yeah, I know. Suicide.”

Papa’s shoes tapped the floor as the rocker creaked back and forth. “That’s right. Now you tell me, why’re you sitting in here? Why don’t you ride your bike on over to the ballpark and see who’s there?”

“I want to hear about Stella Doyle.”

“You want to hear. Well. Let’s go get us a Coca-Cola, then. I don’t guess somebody’s planning to show up in this heat to buy a chest of drawers they got to haul home.”

“You ought to sell air conditioners, Papa. People would buy air conditioners.”

“I guess so.”

So Papa told me the story. Or at least his version of it. He said Hugh and Stella were meant for each other. From the beginning it seemed to the whole town a fact as natural as harvest that so much money and so much beauty belonged together, and only Hugh Doyle with his long, free, easy stride was rich enough to match the looks of Stella Dora. But even Hugh Doyle couldn’t hold her. He was

only halfway through the state university, where his father had told him he'd have to go before he married Stella, if he wanted a home to bring her to, when she quit her job at Coldsteam's beauty parlor and took the bus to California. She was out there for six years before Hugh broke down and went after her.

By then every girl in the county was cutting Stella's pictures out of the movie magazines and reading how she got her lucky break, how she married a big director, and divorced him, and married a big star, and how that marriage broke up even quicker. Photographers traveled all the way to Thermopylae to take pictures of where she was born. People tried to tell them her house was gone, had fallen down and been used for firewood, but they just took photographs of Reverend Ballister's house instead and said Stella had grown up in it. Before long, even local girls would go stand in front of the Ballister house like a shrine, sometimes they'd steal flowers out of the yard. The year that *Fever*, her best movie, came to the Grand Theater on Main Street, Hugh Doyle flew out to Los Angeles and won her back. He took her down to Mexico to divorce the baseball player she'd married after the big star. Then Hugh married her himself and put her on an ocean liner and took her all over the world. For a whole two years, they didn't come home to Thermopylae. Everybody in the county talked about this two-year honeymoon, and Hugh's father confessed to some friends that he was disgusted by his son's way of life.

But when the couple did come home, Hugh walked right into the mills and turned a profit. His father confessed to the same friends that he was flabbergasted Hugh had it in him. But after the father died Hugh started drinking and Stella joined him. The parties got a little wild. The fights got loud. People talked. They said he had other women. They said Stella'd been locked up in a sanatorium. They said the Doyles were breaking up.

And then one June day a maid at Red Hills, walking to work before the morning heat, fell over something that lay across a path to the stables. And it was Hugh Doyle in riding clothes with a hole torn in the side of his head. Not far from his gloved hand, the police found Stella's pistol, already too hot from the sun to touch. The cook testified that the Doyles had been fighting like cats and dogs all night long the night before, and Hugh's mother testified that he wanted to divorce Stella but she wouldn't let him, and so Stella was arrested. She said she was innocent, but it was her gun, she was his heir, and she had no alibi. Her trial lasted almost as long as that August heat wave.

A neighbor strolled past the porch, where we sat out the evening heat, waiting for the air to lift. "Jury's still out," he said. Mama waved her hand at him. She pushed herself and me in the big green wood swing that hung from two chains to

the porch roof, and answered my questions about Stella Doyle. She said, "Oh, yes, they all said Stella was specially pretty. I never knew her to talk to myself."

"But if Papa liked her so much, why didn't y'all get invited out to their house and everything?"

"Her and your papa just went to school together, that's all. That was a long time back. The DoYLES wouldn't ask folks like us over to Red Hills."

"Why not? Papa's family used to have a *whole* lot of money. That's what you said. And Papa went right up to Mrs. Doyle at the courthouse today, right in front of everybody. He told her, You let us know if there's anything we can do."

Mama chuckled the way she always did about Papa, a low ripple like a pigeon nesting, a little exasperated at having to sit still so long. "You know your papa'd offer to help out anybody he figured might be in trouble, white or black. That's just him; that's not any Stella Dora Doyle. Your papa's just a good man. You remember that, Buddy."

Goodness was Papa's stock-in-trade; it was what he had instead of money or ambition, and Mama often reminded us of it. In him she kept safe all the kindness she had never felt she could afford for herself. She, who could neither read nor write, who had stood all day in a cigarette factory from the age of nine until the morning Papa married her, was a fighter. She wanted her children to go farther than Papa had. Still, for years after he died, she would carry down from the attic the yellow mildewed ledgers where his value was recorded in more than \$75,000 of out-of-date bills he had been unwilling to force people in trouble to pay. Running her sun-spotted finger down the brown wisps of names and the money they'd owed, she would sigh that proud, exasperated ripple, and shake her head over foolish, generous Papa.

Through the front parlor window I could hear my sisters practicing the theme from *The Apartment* on the piano. Someone across the street turned on a light. Then we heard the sound of Papa's shoes coming a little faster than usual down the sidewalk. He turned at the hedge carrying the package of shiny butcher's paper in which he brought meat home every evening. "Verdict just came in!" he called out happily. "Not guilty! Jury came back about forty minutes ago. They already took her home."

Mama took the package and sat Papa down in the swing next to her. "Well, well," she said. "They let her off."

"Never ought to have come up for trial in the first place, Ada, like I told everybody all along. It's like her lawyers showed. Hugh went down to Atlanta, saw that doctor, found out he had cancer, and he took his own life. Stella never even knew he was sick."

Mama patted his knee. "Not guilty; well, well."

Papa made a noise of disgust. "Can you believe some folks out on Main Street tonight are all fired up *because* Stella got off! Adele Simpson acted downright indignant!"

Mama said, "And you're surprised?" And she shook her head with me at Papa's innocence.

Talking of the trial, my parents made one shadow along the wood floor of the porch, while inside my sisters played endless variations of "Chopsticks," the notes handed down by ghostly creators long passed away.

A few weeks later, Papa was invited to Red Hills, and he let me come along; we brought a basket of sausage biscuits Mama had made for Mrs. Doyle.

As soon as Papa drove past the wide white gate, I learned how money could change even weather. It was cooler at Red Hills, and the grass was the greenest grass in the county. A black man in a black suit let us into the house, then led us down a wide hallway of pale yellow wood into a big room shuttered against the heat. She was there in an armchair almost the color of her eyes. She wore loose-legged pants and was pouring whiskey from a bottle into a glass.

"Clayton, thanks for coming. Hello there, little Buddy. Look, I hope I didn't drag you from business."

Papa laughed. "Stella, I could stay gone a week and never miss a customer." It embarrassed me to hear him admit such failure to her.

She said she could tell I liked books, so maybe I wouldn't mind if they left me there to read while she borrowed my daddy for a little bit. There were white shelves in the room, full of books. I said I didn't mind but I did; I wanted to keep on seeing her. Even with the loose shirt soiled and rumpled over a waist she tried to hide, even with her face swollen from heat and drink and grief, she was something you wanted to look at as long as possible.

They left me alone. On the white piano were dozens of photographs of Stella Doyle in silver frames. From a big painting over the mantelpiece her remarkable eyes followed me around the room. I looked at that painting as sun deepened across it, until finally she and Papa came back. She had a tissue to her nose, a new drink in her hand. "I'm sorry, honey," she said to me. "Your daddy's been sweet letting me run on. I just needed somebody to talk to for a while about what happened to me." She kissed the top of my head and I could feel her warm lips at the part in my hair.

We followed her down the wide hall out onto the porch. "Clayton, you'll forgive a fat old souse talking your ear off and bawling like a jackass."

"No such thing, Stella."

"And you *never* thought I killed him, even when you first heard. My God, thank you."

Papa took her hand again. “You take care now,” he said.

Then suddenly she was hugging herself, rocking from side to side. Words burst from her like a door flung open by wind. “I could kick him in the ass, that bastard! Why didn’t he tell me? To quit, to *quit*, and use *my* gun, and just about get me strapped in the gas chamber, that goddamn bastard, and never say a word!” Her profanity must have shocked Papa as much as it did me. He never used it, much less ever heard it from a woman.

But he nodded and said, “Well, good-bye, I guess, Stella. Probably won’t be seeing you again.”

“Oh, Lord, Clayton, I’ll be back. The world’s so goddamn little.”

She stood at the top of the porch, tears wet in those violet eyes that the movie magazines had loved to talk about. On her cheek a mosquito bite flamed like a slap. Holding to the big white column, she waved as we drove off into the dusty heat. Ice flew from the glass in her hand like diamonds.

Papa was right; they never met again. Papa lost his legs from diabetes, but he’d never gone much of anywhere even before that. And afterward, he was one of two places—home or the store. He’d sit in his big wood wheelchair in the furniture store, with his hands peaceful on the armrests, talking with whoever came by.

I did see Stella Doyle again; the first time in Belgium, twelve years later. I went farther than Papa.

In Bruges there are small restaurants that lean like elegant elbows on the canals and glance down at passing pleasure boats. Stella Doyle was sitting, one evening, at a table in the crook of the elbow of one of them, against an iron railing that curved its reflection in the water. She was alone there when I saw her. She stood, leaned over the rail, and slipped the ice cubes from her glass into the canal. I was in a motor launch full of tourists passing below. She waved with a smile at us and we waved back. It had been a lot of years since her last picture, but probably she waved out of habit. For the tourists motoring past, Stella in white against the dark restaurant was another snapshot of Bruges. For me, she was home and memory. I craned to look back as long as I could, and leapt from the boat at the next possible stop.

When I found the restaurant, she was yelling at a well-dressed young man who was leaning across the table, trying to soothe her in French. They appeared to be quarreling over his late arrival. All at once she hit him, her diamond flashing into his face. He filled the air with angry gestures, then turned and left, a white napkin to his cheek. I was made very shy by what I’d seen—the young man was scarcely older than I was. I stood unable to speak until her staring at me

jarred me forward. I said, “Mrs. Doyle? I’m Buddy Hayes. I came out to see you at Red Hills with my father Clayton Hayes one time. You let me look at your books.”

She sat back down and poured herself a glass of wine. “You’re *that* little boy? God Almighty, how old am I? Am I a hundred yet?” Her laugh had been loosened by the wine. “Well, a Red Clay rambler, like me. How ’bout that. Sit down. What are *you* doing over here?”

I told her, as nonchalantly as I could manage, that I was traveling on college prize money, a journalism award. I wrote a prize essay about a murder trial.

“Mine?” she asked, and laughed.

A waiter, plump and flushed in his neat black suit, trotted to her side. He shook his head at the untouched plates of food. “Madame, your friend has left, then?”

Stella said, “Mister, I helped him along. And turns out, he was no friend.”

The waiter then turned his eyes, sad and reproachful, to the trout on the plate.

“How about another bottle of that wine and a great big bucket of ice?” Stella asked.

The waiter kept flapping his fat quick hands around his head, entreating us to come inside. “*Les moustiques, madame!*”

“I just let them bite,” she said. He went away grieved.

She was slender now, and elegantly dressed. And while her hands and throat were older, the eyes hadn’t changed, nor the red-gold hair. She was still the most beautiful woman God had made in my lifetime, the woman of whom my father had said that any man who had not desired her had missed out on being alive, the one for whose honor my father had turned his back on the whole town of Thermopylae. Because of Papa, I had entered my adolescence daydreaming about fighting for Stella Doyle’s honor; we had starred together in a dozen of her movies: I dazzled her jury; I cured Hugh Doyle while hiding my own noble love for his wife. And now here I sat drinking wine with her on a veranda in Bruges; me, the first Hayes ever to win a college prize, ever to get to college. Here I sat with a movie star.

She finished her cigarette, dropped it spinning down into the black canal. “You look like him,” she said. “Your papa. I’m sorry to hear that about the diabetes.”

“I look like him, but I don’t think like him,” I told her.

She tipped the wine bottle upside down in the bucket. “You want the world,” she said. “Go get it, honey.”

“That’s what my father doesn’t understand.”

“He’s a good man,” she answered. She stood up slowly. “And I think Clayton

would want me to get you to your hotel.”

All the fenders of her Mercedes were crushed. She said, “When I’ve had a few drinks, I need a strong car between me and the rest of the cockeyed world.”

The big car bounced over the moon-white street. “You know what, Buddy? Hugh Doyle gave me my first Mercedes, one morning in Paris. At breakfast. He held the keys out in his hand like a damn daffodil he’d picked in the yard. He gave me *this* goddamn thing.” She waved her finger with its huge diamond. “This damn thing was tied to my big toe one Christmas morning!” And she smiled up at the stars as if Hugh Doyle were up there tying diamonds on them. “He had a beautiful grin, Buddy, but he was a son of a bitch.”

The car bumped to a stop on the curb outside my little hotel. “Don’t miss your train tomorrow,” she said. “And you listen to me, don’t go back home; go on to Rome.”

“I’m not sure I have time.”

She looked at me. “*Take* time. Just take it. Don’t get scared, honey.”

Then she put her hand in my jacket pocket and the moon came around her hair, and my heart panicked crazily, thudding against my shirt, thinking she might kiss me. But her hand went away, and all she said was, “Say hi to Clayton when you get home, all right? Even losing his legs and all, your daddy’s lucky, you know that?”

I said, “I don’t see how.”

“Oh, I didn’t either till I was a lot older than you. And had my damn in-laws trying to throw me into the gas chamber. Go to bed. So long, Red Clay.”

Her silver car floated away. In my pocket, I found a large wad of French money, enough to take me to Rome, and a little ribboned box, clearly a gift she had decided not to give the angry young man in the beautiful suit who’d arrived too late. On black velvet lay a man’s wristwatch, reddish gold.

It’s an extremely handsome watch, and it still tells me the time.

I only went home to Thermopylae for the funerals. It was the worst of the August dog days when Papa died in the hospital bed they’d set up next to his and Mama’s big four poster in their bedroom. At his grave, the clots of red clay had already dried to a dusty dull color by the time we shoveled them down upon him, friend after friend taking a turn at the shovel. The petals that fell from roses fell limp to the red earth, wilted like the crowd who stood by the grave while Reverend Ballister told us that Clayton Hayes was “a good man.” Behind a cluster of Mama’s family, I saw a woman in black turn away and walk down the grassy incline to a car, a Mercedes.

After the services I went driving, but I couldn’t outravel Papa in Devereux

County. The man at the gas pump listed Papa's virtues as he cleaned my windshield. The woman who sold me the bottle of bourbon said she'd owed Papa \$215.00 since 1944, and when she'd paid him back in 1966 he'd forgotten all about it. I drove along the highway where the foundations of tin-roofed shacks were covered now by the parking lots of minimalls; beneath the asphalt, somewhere, was Stella Doyle's birthplace. Stella Dora Hibble, Papa's first love.

Past the white gates, the Red Hills lawn was as parched as the rest of the county. Paint blistered and peeled on the big white columns. I waited a long time before the elderly black man I'd met twenty years before opened the door irritably.

I heard her voice from the shadowy hall yelling, "Jonas! Let him in."

On the white shelves the books were the same. The photos on the piano as young as ever. She frowned so strangely when I came into the room, I thought she must have been expecting someone else and didn't recognize me.

"I'm Buddy Hayes, Clayton's—"

"I know who you are."

"I saw you leaving the cemetery. . . ."

"I know you did."

I held out the bottle.

Together we finished the bourbon in memory of Papa, while shutters beat back the sun, hid some of the dirty glasses scattered on the floor, hid Stella Doyle in her lilac armchair. Cigarette burns scarred the armrests, left their marks on the oak floor. Behind her the big portrait showed Time up for the heartless bastard he is. Her hair was cropped short, and gray. Only the color of her eyes had stayed the same; they looked as remarkable as ever in the swollen face.

"I came out here to bring you something."

"What?"

I gave her the thin, cheap, yellowed envelope I'd found in Papa's desk with his special letters and papers. It was addressed in neat, cursive pencil to "Clayton." Inside was a silly Valentine card. Betty Boop popping bonbons in her pouty lips, exclaiming "Ooooh, I'm sweet on you." It was childish and lascivious at the same time, and it was signed with a lipstick blot, now brown with age, and with the name "Stella," surrounded by a heart.

I said, "He must have kept this since the seventh grade."

She nodded. "Clayton was a good man." Her cigarette fell from her ashtray onto the floor. When I came over to pick it up, she said, "Goodness is luck; like money, like looks. Clayton was lucky that way." She went to the piano and took more ice from the bucket there; one piece she rubbed around the back of her neck, then dropped into her glass. She turned, the eyes wet, like lilac stars. "You

know, in Hollywood, they said, ‘*Hibble?! What kind of hick name is that, we can’t use that!*’ So I said, ‘Use Doyle, then.’ I mean, I took Hugh’s name six years before he ever came out to get me. Because I knew he’d come. The day I left Thermopylae he kept yelling at me, ‘You can’t have both!’ He kept yelling it while the bus was pulling out. ‘You can’t have me and it both!’ He wanted to rip my heart out for leaving, for *wanting* to go.” Stella moved along the curve of the white piano to a photograph of Hugh Doyle in a white open shirt, grinning straight out at the sun. She said, “But I could have both. There were only two things I *had* to have in this little world, and one was the lead in a movie called *Fever*, and the other one was Hugh Doyle.” She put the photograph down carefully. “I didn’t know about the cancer till my lawyers found out he’d been to see that doctor in Atlanta. Then it was easy to get the jury to go for suicide.” She smiled at me. “Well, not easy. But we turned them around. I think your papa was the only man in town who *never* thought I was guilty.”

It took me a while to take it in. “Well, he sure convinced me,” I said.

“I expect he convinced a lot of people. Everybody thought so much of Clayton.”

“You killed your husband.”

We looked at each other. I shook my head. “Why?”

She shrugged. “We had a fight. We were drunk. He was sleeping with my fucking maid. I was crazy. Lots of reasons, no reason. I sure didn’t plan it.”

“You sure didn’t confess it either.”

“What good would that have done? Hugh was dead. I wasn’t about to let his snooty-assed mother shove me in the gas chamber and pocket the money.”

I shook my head. “Jesus. And you’ve never felt a day’s guilt, have you?”

Her head tilted back, smoothing her throat. The shuttered sun had fallen down the room onto the floor, and evening light did a movie fade and turned Stella Doyle into the star in the painting behind her. “Ah, baby, don’t believe it,” she said. The room stayed quiet.

I stood up and dropped the empty bottle in the wastebasket. I said, “Papa told me how he was in love with you.”

Her laugh came warmly through the shuttered dusk. “Yes, and I guess I was sweet on him, too, boop boop dedoo.”

“Yeah, Papa said no man could say he’d been alive if he’d seen you and not felt that way. I just wanted to tell you I know what he meant.” I raised my hand to wave good-bye.

“Come over here,” she said, and I went to her chair and she reached up and brought my head down to her and kissed me full and long on the mouth. “So long, Buddy.” Slowly her hand moved down my face, the huge diamond radiant.

News came over the wire. The tabloids played with it for a few days on back pages. They had some pictures. They dug up the Hugh Doyle trial photos to put beside the old studio glossies. The dramatic death of an old movie star was worth sending a news camera down to Thermopylae, North Carolina, to get a shot of the charred ruin that had once been Red Hills. A shot of the funeral parlor and the flowers on the casket.

My sister phoned me that there was even a crowd at the coroner's inquest at the courthouse. They said Stella Doyle had died in her sleep after a cigarette set fire to her mattress. But rumors started that her body had been found at the foot of the stairs, as if she'd been trying to escape the fire, but had fallen. They said she was drunk. They buried her beside Hugh Doyle in the family plot, the fanciest tomb in the Methodist cemetery, not far from where my parents were buried. Not long after she died, one of the cable networks did a night of her movies. I stayed up to watch *Fever* again.

My wife said, "Buddy, I'm sorry, but this is the biggest bunch of sentimental slop I ever saw. The whore'll sell her jewels and get the medicine and they'll beat the epidemic but she'll die to pay for her past and then the town'll see she was really a saint. Am I right?"

"You're right."

She sat down to watch a while. "You know, I can't decide if she's a really lousy actress or a really good one. It's weird."

I said, "Actually, I think she was a much better actress than anyone gave her credit for."

My wife went to bed, but I watched through the night. I sat in Papa's old rocking chair that I'd brought north with me after his death. Finally at dawn I turned off the set, and Stella's face disappeared into a star, and went out. The reception was awful and the screen too small. Besides, the last movie was in black and white; I couldn't see her eyes as well as I could remember the shock of their color, when she first turned toward me at the foot of the courthouse steps, that hot August day when I was ten, when my father stepped forward out of the crowd to take her hand, when her eyes were lilacs turned up to his face, and his straw hat in the summer sun was shining like a knight's helmet.

JOYCE CAROL OATES

Faithless

FROM *Kenyon Review*

1

THE LAST TIME my mother Cornelia Nissenbaum and her sister Constance saw their mother was the day before she vanished from their lives forever, April 11, 1923.

It was a rainy-misty morning. They'd been searching for their mother because something was wrong in the household; she hadn't come downstairs to prepare breakfast so there wasn't anything for them except what their father gave them, glutinous oatmeal from the previous morning hastily reheated on the stove sticking to the bottom of the pan and tasting of scorch. Their father had seemed strange to them, smiling but not-seeing in that way of his like Reverend Dieckman too fierce in his pulpit Sunday mornings, intoning the Word of God. His eyes were threaded with blood and his face was still pale from the winter but flushed, mottled. In those days he was a handsome man but stern-looking and severe. Gray-grizzled side-whiskers and a spade-shaped beard, coarse and grizzled too with gray, but thick springy-sleek black hair brushed back from his forehead in a crest. The sisters were fearful of their father without their mother to mediate among them, it was as if none of them knew who they were without her.

Connie chewed her lip and worked up her nerve to ask where was Momma? and their father said, hitching up his suspenders, on his way outside, "Your mothers where you'll find her."

The sisters watched their father cross the mud-puddled yard to where a crew of hired men was waiting in the doorway of the big barn. It was rye-planting season and always in spring in the Chautauqua Valley there was worry about rain: too much rain and the seed would be washed away or rot in the soil before it could sprout. My mother Cornelia would grow to adulthood thinking how blessings and curses fell from the sky with equal authority, like hard-pelting rain. There was God, who set the world in motion, and who intervened sometimes in the affairs of men, for reasons no one could know. If you lived on a farm there was weather, always weather, every morning was weather and every evening at sundown calculating the next day's, the sky's moods meant too much. Always

casting your glance upward, outward, your heart set to quicken.

That morning. The sisters would never forget that morning. We knew something was wrong, we thought Momma was sick. The night before having heard—what, exactly? Voices. Voices mixed with dreams, and the wind. On that farm, at the brink of a ten-mile descent to the Chautauqua River, it was always windy—on the worst days the wind could literally suck your breath away!—like a ghost, a goblin. An invisible being pushing up close beside you, sometimes even inside the house, even in your bed, pushing his mouth (or muzzle) to yours and sucking out the breath.

Connie thought Nelia was silly, a silly-baby, to believe such. She was eight years old and skeptical-minded. Yet maybe she believed it, too? Liked to scare herself, the way you could almost tickle yourself, with such wild thoughts.

Connie, who was always famished, and after that morning would be famished for years, sat at the oilcloth-covered table and ate the oatmeal her father had spooned out for her, devoured it, scorch-clots and all, her head of fair-frizzy braids lowered and her jaws working quickly. Oatmeal sweetened with top-milk on the very edge of turning sour, and coarse brown sugar. Nelia, who was fretting, wasn't able to swallow down more than a spoon or two of hers so Connie devoured that, too. She would remember that part of the oatmeal was hot enough to burn her tongue and other parts were icebox-cold. She would remember that it was all delicious.

The girls washed their dishes in the cold-water sink and let the oatmeal pan soak in scummy soapsuds. It was time for Connie to leave for school but both knew she could not go, not today. She could not leave to walk two miles to the school with that feeling *something is wrong*, nor could she leave her little sister behind. Though when Nelia snuffled and wiped her nose on both her hands Connie cuffed her on the shoulder and scolded, "Piggy-piggy."

This, a habit of their mother's when they did something that was only mildly disgusting.

Connie led the way upstairs to the big bedroom at the front of the house that was Momma and Pappa's room and that they were forbidden to enter unless specifically invited; for instance if the door was open and Momma was cleaning inside, changing bedclothes so she'd call out *Come in, girls!* smiling in her happy mood so it was all right and they would not be scolded. *Come in, give me a hand*, which turned into a game shaking out sheets, fluffing out pillowcases to stuff heavy goose-feather pillows inside, Momma and Connie and Nelia laughing together. But this morning the door was shut. There was no sound of Momma inside. Connie dared to turn the doorknob, push the door open slowly, and they saw, yes, to their surprise there was their mother lying on top of the

unmade bed, partly dressed, wrapped in an afghan. My God, it was scary to see Momma like that, lying down at such an hour of the morning! Momma, who was so brisk and capable and who routed them out of bed if they lingered, Momma with little patience for Connie's lazy-tricks as she called them or for Nelia's sniffles, tummyaches, and baby-fears.

"Momma?"—Connie's voice was cracked.

"Mom-ma?"—Nelia whimpered.

Their mother groaned and flung an arm across one of the pillows lying crooked beside her. She was breathing hard, like a winded horse, her chest rising and falling so you could see it and her head was flung back on a pillow and she'd placed a wetted cloth across her eyes mask-like so half her face was hidden. Her dark-blond hair was disheveled, unplaited, coarse and lusterless as a horse's mane, unwashed for days. That rich rank smell of Momma's hair when it needed washing. You remember such smells, the sisters would say, some of them not-so-nice smells, all your life. And the smell in their parents' forbidden room of—was it talcum powder, sweaty armpits, a sourish-sweet fragrance of bedclothes that no matter how frequently laundered with detergent and bleach were never truly fresh. A smell of bodies. Adult bodies. Yeasty, stale. Pappa's tobacco (he rolled his own crude paper cigarettes, he chewed tobacco in a thick tarry-black wad) and Pappa's hair oil and that special smell of Pappa's shoes, the black Sunday shoes always kept polished. (His work boots, etc., he kept downstairs in the closed-in porch by the rear door called the "entry.") In the step-in closet close by the bed, behind an unhemmed length of chintz, was a blue-speckled porcelain chamber pot with a detachable lid and a rim that curled neatly under it, like a lip.

The sisters had their own chamber pot—their potty, as it was called. There was no indoor plumbing in John Nissenbaum's farmhouse as in any farmhouse in the Chautauqua Valley well into the 1930s and in poorer homes well into the 1940s, and even beyond. One hundred yards behind the house, beyond the silo, was the outhouse, the latrine, the "privy." But you would not want to make that trip in cold weather or in rain or in the pitch-black of night, not if you could help it.

Of course the smell of urine and a fainter smell of excrement must have been everywhere, the sisters conceded, years later. As adults, reminiscing. But it was masked by the barnyard smell, probably. Nothing worse than pig manure, after all!

At least, we weren't *pigs*.

Anyway, there was Momma, on the bed. The bed that was so high from the floor you had to raise a knee to slide up on it, and grab on to whatever you could.

And the horsehair mattress, so hard and ungiving. The cloth over Momma's eyes she hadn't removed and beside Momma in the rumpled bedclothes her Bible. Face-down. Pages bent. That Bible her mother-in-law Grandma Nissenbaum had given her for a wedding present, seeing she hadn't one of her own. It was smaller than the heavy black family Bible and it was made of limp ivory-leather covers and had onionskin pages the girls were allowed to examine but not to turn without Momma's supervision; the Bible that would disappear with Gretel Nissenbaum, forever.

The girls begged, whimpered. "Momma? Momma, are you sick?"

At first there was no answer. Just Momma's breath coming quick and hard and uneven. And her olive-pale skin oily with heat like fever. Her legs were tangled in the afghan, her hair was strewn across the pillow. They saw the glint of Momma's gold cross on a thin gold chain around her neck, almost lost in her hair. (Not only a cross but a locket, too: when Momma opened it there was, inside, a tiny strand of silver hair once belonging to a woman the sisters had never known, Momma's own grandmother she'd loved so when she was a little girl.) And there were Momma's breasts, almost exposed!—heavy, lush, beautiful almost spilling out of a white eyelet slip, rounded like sacs holding warm liquid, and the nipples dark and big as eyes. You weren't supposed to stare at any part of a person's body but how could you help it?—especially Connie who was fascinated by such, guessing how one day she'd inhabit a body like Momma's. Years ago she'd peeked at her mother's big milk-swollen breasts when Nelia was still nursing, jealous, awed. Nelia was now five years old and could not herself recall nursing at all; would come one day to believe, stubborn and disdainful, that she had never nursed, had only been bottle-fed.

At last Momma snatched the cloth off her face. "You! Damn you! What do you want?" She stared at the girls as if, clutching hands and gaping at her, they were strangers. Her right eye was bruised and swollen and there were raw red marks on her forehead and first Nelia then Connie began to cry and Momma said, "Constance, why aren't you in school? Why can't you let me alone? God help me—always 'Momma'—'Momma'—'Momma.'" Connie whimpered, "Momma, did you hurt yourself?" and Nelia moaned, sucking a corner of the afghan like a deranged baby and Momma ignored the question, as Momma often ignored questions she thought nosy, none of your business; her hand lifted as if she meant to slap them but then fell wearily, as if this had happened many times before, this exchange, this emotion, and it was her fate that it would happen many times again. A close sweet-stale blood-odor lifted from Momma's lower body, out of the folds of the soiled afghan, that odor neither of the little girls could have identified except in retrospect, in adolescence at last detecting it in

themselves: shamed, discomforted, the secret of their bodies at what was called, invariably in embarrassed undertones, *that certain time of the month*.

So: Gretel Nissenbaum, at the time she disappeared from her husband's house, was having her period.

Did that mean something, or nothing?

Nothing, Cornelia would say sharply.

Yes, Constance would insist, it meant our mother was *not* pregnant. She wasn't running away with any lover because of *that*.

That morning, what confusion in the Nissenbaum household! However the sisters would later speak of the encounter in the big bedroom, what their mother had said to them, how she'd looked and behaved, it had not been precisely that way, of course. Because how can you speak of confusion, where are the words for it? How to express in adult language the wild fibrillation of children's minds, two child-minds beating against each other like moths, how to know what had truly happened and what was only imagined! Connie would swear that their mother's eye looked like a nasty dark-rotted egg, so swollen, but she could not say which eye it was, right or left; Nelia, shrinking from looking at her mother's bruised face, wanting only to burrow against her, to hide and be comforted, would come in time to doubt that she'd seen a *hurt eye* at all; or whether she'd been led to believe she saw it because Connie, who was so bossy, claimed she had.

Connie would remember their mother's words, Momma's rising desperate voice, "Don't touch me—I'm afraid! I might be going somewhere but I'm not ready—oh God, I'm so afraid!"—and on and on, saying she was going away, she was afraid, and Connie trying to ask where? where was she going? and Momma beating at the bedclothes with her fists. Nelia would remember being hurt at the way Momma yanked the spittle-soaked corner of the afghan out of her mouth, so roughly! Not Momma but *bad-Momma*, *witch-Momma* who scared her.

But then Momma relented, exasperated. "Oh come on, you damn little babies! Of course 'Momma' loves you."

Eager then as starving kittens the sisters scrambled up onto the high, hard bed, whimpering, snuggling into Momma's arms, her damp snarled hair, those breasts. Connie and Nelia burrowing, crying themselves to sleep like nursing babies, Momma drew the afghan over the three of them as if to shield them. That morning of April 11, 1923.

And next morning, early, before dawn. The sisters would be awakened by their father's shouts, "Gretel? Gretel!"

. . . *never spoke of her after the first few weeks. After the first shock. We learned to pray for her and to forgive her and to forget her. We didn't miss her.* So Mother said, in her calm judicious voice. A voice that held no blame.

But Aunt Connie would take me aside. The older, wiser sister. *It's true we never spoke of Momma when any grownups were near, that was forbidden. But, God! we missed her every hour of every day all the time we lived on that farm.*

I was Cornelia's daughter but it was Aunt Connie I trusted.

No one in the Chautauqua Valley knew where John Nissenbaum's young wife Gretel had fled, but all knew, or had an opinion of, why she'd gone.

Faithless, she was. A faithless woman. Had she not *run away with a man: abandoned her children.* She was twenty-seven years old and too young for John Nissenbaum and she wasn't a Ransomville girl, her people lived sixty miles away in Chautauqua Falls. Here was a wife who'd committed *adultery*, was an *adulteress*. (Some might say a *tramp*, a *whore*, a *slut*.) Reverend Dieckman, the Lutheran minister, would preach amazing sermons in her wake. For miles through the valley and for years well into the 1940s there would be scandalized talk of Gretel Nissenbaum: a woman who left her faithful Christian husband and her two little girls with no warning! no provocation! disappearing in the middle of a night taking with her only a single suitcase and, as every woman who ever spoke of the episode liked to say, licking her lips, *the clothes on her back*.

(Aunt Connie said she'd grown up imagining she had actually seen her mother, as in a dream, walking stealthily up the long drive to the road, a bundle of clothes, like laundry, slung across her back. Children are so damned impressionable, Aunt Connie would say, laughing wryly.)

For a long time after their mother disappeared, and no word came from her, or of her, so far as the sisters knew, Connie couldn't seem to help herself teasing Nelia saying "Mommy's coming home!"—for a birthday of Nelia's, or Christmas, or Easter. How many times Connie thrilled with wickedness deceiving her baby sister and silly-baby that she was, Nelia believed.

And how Connie would laugh, laugh at her.

Well, it was funny. Wasn't it?

Another trick of Connie's: poking Nelia awake in the night when the wind was rattling the windows, moaning in the chimney like a trapped animal. Saying excitedly, *Momma is outside the window, listen! Momma is a ghost trying to get YOU!*

Sometimes Nelia screamed so, Connie had to straddle her chest and press a pillow over her face to muffle her. If they'd wakened Pappa with such nonsense

there'd sure have been hell to pay.

Once, I might have been twelve, I asked if my grandfather had spanked or beaten them.

Aunt Connie, sitting in our living room on the high-backed mauve-brocade chair that was always hers when she came to visit, ignored me. Nor did Mother seem to hear. Aunt Connie lit one of her Chesterfields with a fussy flourish of her pink-frosted nails and took a deep satisfied puff and said, as if it were a thought only now slipping into her head, and like all such thoughts deserving of utterance, "I was noticing the other day, on TV, how brattish and idiotic children are, and we're supposed to think they're cute. Pappa wasn't the kind to tolerate children carrying on for a single minute." She paused, again inhaling deeply. "None of the men were, back there."

Mother nodded slowly, frowning. These conversations with my aunt seemed always to give her pain, an actual ache behind the eyes, yet she could no more resist them than Aunt Connie. She said, wiping at her eyes, "Pappa was a man of pride. After she left us as much as before."

"Hmmm!" Aunt Connie made her high humming nasal sound that meant she had something crucial to add, but did not want to appear pushy. "Well—maybe more, Nelia. More pride. After." She spoke insinuatingly, with a smile and a glance toward me.

Like an actress who has strayed from her lines, Mother quickly amended, "Yes, of course. Because a weaker man would have succumbed to—shame and despair—"

Aunt Connie nodded briskly. "—might have cursed God—"

"—turned to drink—"

"—so many of 'em *did*, back there—"

"—but not Pappa. He had the gift of faith."

Aunt Connie nodded sagely. Yet still with that strange almost-teasing smile.

"Oh indeed, Pappa did. That was his gift to us, Nelia, wasn't it?—his faith."

Mother was smiling her tight-lipped smile, her gaze lowered. I knew that, when Aunt Connie left, she would go upstairs to lie down, she would take two aspirins and draw the blinds, and put a damp cold cloth over her eyes and lie down and try to sleep. In her softening middle-aged face, the hue of putty, a young girl's face shone rapt with fear. "Oh yes! His faith."

Aunt Connie laughed heartily. Laugh, laugh. Dimples nicking her cheeks and a wink in my direction.

Years later, numbly sorting through Mother's belongings after her death, I would discover, in a lavender-scented envelope in a bureau drawer, a single strand of

dry, ash-colored hair. On the envelope, in faded purple ink *Beloved Father John Allard Nissenbaum 1872–1957*.

3

By his own account, John Nissenbaum, the wronged husband, had not had the slightest suspicion that his strong-willed young wife had been discontent, restless. Certainly not that she'd had a secret lover! So many local women would have dearly wished to change places with her, he'd been given to know when he was courting her, his male vanity, and his Nissenbaum vanity, and what you might call common sense suggested otherwise.

For the Nissenbaums were a well-regarded family in the Chautauqua Valley. Among the lot of them they must have owned thousands of acres of prime farmland.

In the weeks, months, and eventually years that followed the scandalous departure, John Nissenbaum, who was by nature, like most of the male Nissenbaums, reticent to the point of arrogance, and fiercely private, came to make his story—*his side of it*—known. As the sisters themselves gathered (for their father never spoke of their mother to them after the first several days following the shock), this was not a single coherent history but one that had to be pieced together like a giant quilt made of a myriad of fabric-scrap.

He did allow that Gretel had been missing her family, an older sister with whom she'd been especially close, and cousins and girlfriends she'd gone to high school with in Chautauqua Falls; he understood that the two-hundred-acre farm was a lonely place for her, their next-door neighbors miles away, and the village of Ransomville seven miles. (Trips beyond Ransomville were rare.) He knew, or supposed he knew, that his wife had harbored what his mother and sisters called *wild imaginings*, even after nine years of marriage, farm life, and children: she had asked several times to be allowed to play the organ at church, but had been refused; she reminisced often wistfully and perhaps reproachfully of long-ago visits to Port Oriskany, Buffalo, and Chicago, before she'd gotten married at the age of eighteen to a man fourteen years her senior . . . in Chicago she'd seen stage plays and musicals, the sensational dancers Irene and Vernon Castle in Irving Berlin's *Watch Your Step*. It wasn't just Gretel wanting to take over the organ at Sunday services (and replacing the elderly male organist whose playing, she said, sounded like a cat in heat), it was her general attitude toward Reverend Dieckman and his wife. She resented having to invite them to an elaborate Sunday dinner every few weeks, as the Nissenbaums insisted; she allowed her eyes to roam the congregation during Dieckman's sermons, and stifled yawns behind her gloved hand; she woke in the middle of the night, she

said, wanting to argue about damnation, hell, the very concept of grace. To the minister's astonished face she declared herself "not able to *fully accept* the teachings of the Lutheran Church."

If there were other more intimate issues between Gretel and John Nissenbaum, or another factor in Gretel's emotional life, of course no one spoke of it at the time.

Though it was hinted—possibly more than hinted?—that John Nissenbaum was disappointed with only daughters. Naturally he wanted sons, to help him with the ceaseless work of the farm; sons to whom he could leave the considerable property, just as his married brothers had sons.

What was generally known was: John woke in the pitch-dark an hour before dawn of that April day, to discover that Gretel was gone from their bed. Gone from the house? He searched for her, called her name, with growing alarm, disbelief. "Gretel? Gret-el!" He looked in all the upstairs rooms of the house including the bedroom where his sleep-dazed, frightened daughters were huddled together in their bed; he looked in all the downstairs rooms, even the damp, dirt-floor cellar into which he descended with a lantern. "Gretel? Where are you?" Dawn came dull, porous and damp, and with a coat yanked on in haste over his nightclothes, and his bare feet jammed into rubber boots, he began a frantic yet methodical search of the farm's outbuildings—the privy, the cow barn and the adjoining stable, the hay barn and the corncrib where rats rustled at his approach. In none of these save perhaps the privy was it likely that Gretel might be found, still John continued his search with growing panic, not knowing what else to do. From the house his now terrified daughters observed him moving from building to building, a tall, rigid, jerkily moving figure with hands cupped to his mouth shouting, "Gretel! Gret-el! Do you hear me! Where are you! Gret-el!" The man's deep, raw voice pulsing like a metronome, ringing clear, profound, and, to his daughters' ears, as terrible as if the very sky had cracked open and God himself was shouting.

(What did such little girls, eight and five, know of God—in fact, as Aunt Connie would afterward recount, quite a bit. There was Reverend Dieckman's baritone impersonation of the God of the Old Testament, the expulsion from the Garden, the devastating retort to Job, the spectacular burning bush where fire itself cried *HERE I AM!*—such had already been imprinted irrevocably upon their imaginations.)

Only later that morning—but this was a confused, anguished account—did John discover that Gretel's suitcase was missing from the closet. And there were garments conspicuously missing from the clothes rack. And Gretel's bureau drawers had been hastily ransacked—underwear, stockings were gone. And her

favorite pieces of jewelry, of which she was childishly vain, were gone from her cedarwood box; gone, too, her heirloom, faded-cameo hairbrush, comb, and mirror set. And her Bible.

What a joke, how people would chuckle over it—Gretel Nissenbaum taking her Bible with her!

Wherever in hell the woman went.

And was there no farewell note, after nine years of marriage?—John Nissenbaum claimed he'd looked everywhere, and found nothing. Not a word of explanation, not a word of regret even to her little girls. *For that alone we expelled her from our hearts.*

During this confused time while their father was searching and calling their mother's name, the sisters hugged each other in a state of numbness beyond shock, terror. Their father seemed at times to be rushing toward them with the eye-bulging blindness of a runaway horse—they hurried out of his path. He did not see them except to order them out of his way, not to trouble him now. From the rear entry door they watched as he hitched his team of horses to his buggy and set out shuddering for Ransomville along the winter-rutted Post Road, leaving the girls behind, erasing them from his mind. As he would tell afterward, in rueful self-disgust, with the air of an enlightened sinner, he'd actually believed he would overtake Gretel on the road—convinced she'd be there, hiking on the grassy shoulder, carrying her suitcase. Gretel was a wiry-nervous woman, stronger than she appeared, with no fear of physical exertion. A woman capable of anything!

John Nissenbaum had the idea that Gretel had set out for Ransomville, seven miles away, there to catch the midmorning train to Chautauqua Falls, another sixty miles south. It was his confused belief that they must have had a disagreement, else Gretel would not have left; he did not recall any disagreement in fact, but Gretel was after all an *emotional woman*, a *highly strung woman*; she'd insisted upon visiting the Hausers, her family, despite his wishes, was that it?—she was lonely for them, or lonely for something. She was angry they hadn't visited Chautauqua Falls for Easter, hadn't seen her family since Christmas. Was that it? *We were never enough for her. Why were we never enough for her?*

But in Ransomville, in the cinderblock Chautauqua & Buffalo depot, there was no sign of Gretel, nor had the lone clerk seen her.

"This woman would be about my height," John Nissenbaum said, in his formal, slightly haughty way. "She'd be carrying a suitcase, her feet would maybe be muddy. Her boots."

The clerk shook his head slowly. "No sir, nobody looking like that."

“A woman by herself. A”—a hesitation, a look of pain—“good-looking woman, young. A kind of a, a way about her—a way of”—another pause—“making herself known.”

“Sorry,” the clerk said. “The 8:20 just came through, and no woman bought a ticket.”

It happened then that John Nissenbaum was observed, stark-eyed, stiff-springy black hair in tufts like quills, for the better part of that morning, April 12, 1923, wandering up one side of Ransomville’s single main street, and down the other. Hatless, in farm overalls and boots but wearing a suit coat—somber, gunmetal-gray, of “good” wool—buttoned crooked across his narrow muscular torso. Disheveled and ravaged with the grief of a betrayed husband too raw at this time for manly pride to intervene, pathetic some said as a kicked dog, yet eager too, eager as a puppy he made inquiries at Meldron’s Dry Goods, at Elkin & Sons Grocers, at the First Niagara Trust, at the law office of Rowe & Nissenbaum (this Nissenbaum, a young cousin of John’s), even in the Five & Dime where the salesgirls would giggle in his wake. He wandered at last into the Ransomville Hotel, into the gloomy public room where the proprietor’s wife was sweeping sawdust-strewn floorboards. “Sorry, sir, we don’t open till noon,” the woman said, thinking he was a drunk, dazed and swaying-like on his feet, then she looked more closely at him: not knowing his first name (for John Nissenbaum was not one to patronize local taverns) but recognizing his features. For it was said the male Nissenbaums were either born looking alike, or came in time to look alike. “Mr. Nissenbaum? Is something wrong?” In a beat of stymied silence Nissenbaum blinked at her, trying to smile, groping for a hat to remove but finding none, murmuring, “No ma’am, I’m sure not. It’s a misunderstanding, I believe. I’m supposed to meet Mrs. Nissenbaum somewhere here. My wife.”

Shortly after Gretel Nissenbaum’s disappearance there emerged, from numerous sources, from all points of the compass, certain tales of the woman. How rude she’d been, more than once, to the Dieckman’s!—to many in the Lutheran congregation! *A bad wife. Unnatural mother.* It was said she’d left her husband and children in the past, running back to her family in Chautauqua Falls, or was it Port Oriskany; and poor John Nissenbaum having to fetch her home again. (This was untrue, though in time, even to Constance and Cornelia, it would come to seem true. As an elderly woman Cornelia would swear she remembered “both times” her mother ran off.) A shameless hussy, a tramp who *had an eye* for men. *Had the hots* for men. *Anything in pants.* Or was she *stuck-up, snobby.* Marrying into the Nissenbaum family, a man almost old enough to be her father, no mystery there! Worse yet she could be sharp-tongued, profane. Heard to utter such words as *damn, goddamn, hell.* Yes and *horseballs, bullshit.*

Standing with her hands on her hips fixing her eyes on you, that loud laugh. And showing her teeth that were too big for her mouth. She was *too smart for her own good*, that's for sure. She was *scheming, faithless*. Everybody knew she flirted with her husband's hired hands, she did a hell of a lot more than flirt with them, ask around. Sure she had a *boyfriend*, a *lover*. Sure she was an *adulteress*. Hadn't she run off with a man? She'd run off and where was she to go, where was a woman to go, except *run off with a man*? Whoever he was.

In fact, he'd been sighted: a tower operator for the Chautauqua & Buffalo railroad, big redheaded guy living in Shaheen, twelve miles away. Or was he a carpet-sweeper salesman, squirrely little guy with a mustache and a smooth way of talking, who passed through the valley every few months but, after April 12, 1923, was never seen there again.

Another, more attractive rumor was that Gretel Nissenbaum's lover was a thirty-year-old Navy officer stationed at Port Oriskany. He'd been transferred to a base in North Carolina, or was it Pensacola, Florida, and Gretel had no choice but run away with him, she loved him so. *And three months pregnant with his child*.

There could have been no romance in the terrible possibility that Gretel Nissenbaum had fled on foot, alone, not to her family but simply to escape from her life; in what exigency of need, what despondency of spirit, no name might be given it by any who have not experienced it.

But, in any case, where had she *gone*?

Where? Disappeared. Over the edge of the world. To Chicago, maybe. Or that Army base in North Carolina, or Florida.

We forgave, we forgot. We didn't miss her.

The things Gretel Nissenbaum left behind in the haste of her departure.

Several dresses, hats. A shabby cloth coat. Rubberized "galoshes" and boots. Undergarments, mended stockings. Knitted gloves. In the parlor of John Nissenbaum's house, in cut-glass vases, bright yellow daffodils she'd made from crepe paper; hand-painted fans, teacups; books she'd brought with her from home—*A Golden Treasury of Verse*, Mark Twain's *Joan of Arc*, Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise*, missing its jacket cover. Tattered programs for musical shows, stacks of popular piano music from the days Gretel had played in her childhood home. (There was no piano in Nissenbaum's house, Nissenbaum had no interest in music.)

These meager items, and some others, Nissenbaum unceremoniously dumped into cardboard boxes fifteen days after Gretel disappeared, taking them to the

Lutheran church, for the “needy fund”; without inquiring if the Hausers might have wanted anything, or whether his daughters might have wished to be given some mementos of their mother.

Spite? Not John Nissenbaum. He was a proud man even in his public humiliation. It was the Lord’s work he was thinking of. Not mere *human vanity*, at all.

That spring and summer Reverend Dieckman gave a series of grim, threatening, passionate sermons from the pulpit of the First Lutheran Church of Ransomville. It was obvious why, what the subject of the sermons was. The congregation was thrilled.

Reverend Dieckman, whom Connie and Nelia feared, as much for his fierce smiles as his stern, glowering expression, was a short, bulky man with a dull-gleaming dome of a head, eyes like ice water. Years later when they saw a photograph of him, inches shorter than his wife, they laughed in nervous astonishment—was that the man who’d intimidated them so? Before whom even John Nissenbaum stood grave and down-gazing.

Yet: that ringing, vibrating voice of the God of Moses, the God of the Old Testament, you could not shut out of consciousness even hours, days later. Years later. Pressing your hands against your ears and shutting your eyes tight, tight.

“‘Unto the WOMAN He said, I will GREATLY MULTIPLY thy sorrow and thy conception; IN SORROW shalt thou bring forth children: and thy desire shall be to THY HUSBAND, and he shall RULE OVER THEE. And unto Adam He said, Because thou hast harkened unto the voice of THY WIFE, and has eaten of THE TREE, of which I commanded thee saying, THOU SHALT NOT EAT OF IT: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shall thou eat of it all the days of thy life: THORNS ALSO AND THISTLES shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; in the SWEAT OF THY FACE shalt thou eat bread, till thou return to the ground; for out of it thou wast taken: for DUST THOU ART, and UNTO DUST SHALT THOU RETURN.’” Reverend Dieckman paused to catch breath like a man running uphill. Greasy patches gleamed on his solid face like coins. Slowly his ice-eyes searched the rows of worshipers until as if by chance they came to rest on the upturned yet cowering faces of John Nissenbaum’s daughters, who sat in the family pew, directly in front of the pulpit in the fifth row, between their rigid-backed father in his clothes somber as mourning and their Grandmother Nissenbaum also in clothes somber as mourning though badly round-shouldered, with a perceptible hump, this cheerless dutiful grandmother who had come to live with them now that their mother was gone.

(Their other grandparents, the Hausers, who lived in Chautauqua Falls and

whom they'd loved, the sisters would never see again. It was forbidden even to speak of these people, *Gretel's people*. The Hausers were to blame somehow for Gretel's desertion. Though they claimed, would always claim, they knew nothing of what she'd done and in fact feared something had happened to her. But the Hausers were a forbidden subject. Only after Constance and Cornelia were grown, no longer living in their father's house, did they see their Hauser cousins; but still, as Cornelia confessed, she felt guilty about it. Father would have been so hurt and furious if he'd known. *Consorting with the enemy* he would deem it. *Betrayal*.)

In Sunday school, Mrs. Dieckman took special pains with little Constance and little Cornelia. They were regarded with misty-eyed pity, like child lepers. Fattish little Constance prone to fits of giggling, and hollow-eyed little Cornelia prone to sniffles, melancholy. Both girls had chafed, reddened faces and hands because their Grandmother Nissenbaum scrubbed them so, with strong gray soap, never less than twice a day. Cornelia's dun-colored hair was strangely thin. When the other children trooped out of the Sunday school room, Mrs. Dieckman kept the sisters behind, to pray with them. She was very concerned about them, she said. She and Reverend Dieckman prayed for them constantly. Had their mother contacted them, since leaving? Had there been any . . . hint of what their mother was planning to do? Any strangers visiting the farm? Any . . . unusual incidents? The sisters stared blankly at Mrs. Dieckman. She frowned at their ignorance, or its semblance. Dabbed at her watery eyes and sighed as if the world's weight had settled on her shoulders. She said half-chiding, "You should know, children, it's for a reason that your mother left you. It's God's will. God's plan. He is testing you, children. You are special in his eyes. Many of us have been special in his eyes and have emerged stronger for it, and not weaker." There was a breathy pause. The sisters were invited to contemplate how Mrs. Dieckman with her soft-wattled face, her stout-corseted body and fattish legs encased in opaque support hose, was a stronger and not a weaker person, by God's special plan. "You will learn to be stronger than girls with mothers, Constance and Cornelia—" (these words *girls with mothers* enunciated oddly, contemptuously). "You are already learning: feel God's strength coursing through you!" Mrs. Dieckman seized the girls' hands, squeezing so quick and hard that Connie burst into frightened giggles and Nelia shrieked as if she'd been burned, and almost wet her panties.

Nelia acquired pride, then. Instead of being ashamed, publicly humiliated (at the one-room country schoolhouse, for instance: where certain of the other children were ruthless), she could be proud, like her father. *God had a special feeling for*

me. God cared about me. Jesus Christ, his only son, was cruelly tested, too. And exalted. You can bear any hurt and degradation. Thistles and thorns. The flaming sword, the cherubims guarding the garden.

Mere girls with mothers, how could they know?

4

Of course, Connie and Nelia had heard their parents quarreling. In the weeks, months before their mother disappeared. In fact, all their lives. Had they been queried, had they had the language, they might have said *This is what is done, a man, a woman—isn't it?*

Connie, who was three years older than Nelia, knew much that Nelia would not ever know. Not words exactly, these quarrels, and of a tone different from their father shouting out instructions to his farm hands. Not words but an eruption of voices. Ringing through the floorboards if the quarrel came from downstairs. Reverberating in the windowpanes where wind thinly whistled. In bed, Connie would hug Nelia tight, pretending Nelia was Momma. Or Connie was herself Momma. If you shut your eyes tight enough. If you shut your ears. Always after the voices there came silence. If you wait. Once, crouched at the foot of the stairs it was Connie?—or Nelia?—gazing upward astonished as Momma descended the stairs swaying like a drunk woman, her left hand groping against the railing, face dead-white and a bright crimson rosebud in the corner of her mouth glistening as she wiped, wiped furiously at it. And quick-walking in that way of his that made the house vibrate, heavy-heeled behind her, descending from the top of the stairs a man whose face she could not see. Fiery, and blinding. God in the burning bush. God in thunder. *Bitch! Get back up here! If I have to come get you, if you won't be a woman, a wife!*

It was a fact the sisters learned, young: if you wait long enough, run away and hide your eyes, shut your ears, there comes a silence vast and rolling and empty as the sky.

There was the mystery of the letters my mother and Aunt Connie would speak of, though never exactly discuss in my presence, into the last year of my mother's life.

Which of them first noticed, they couldn't agree. Or when it began, exactly—no earlier than the fall, 1923. It would happen that Pappa went to fetch the mail, which he rarely did, and then only on Saturdays; and, returning, along the quarter-mile lane, he would be observed (by accident? the girls weren't spying) with an opened letter in his hand, reading; or was it a postcard; walking with uncharacteristic slowness, this man whose step was invariably brisk and

impatient. Connie recalled he'd sometimes slip into the stable to continue reading, Pappa had a liking for the stable which was for him a private place where he'd chew tobacco, spit into the hay, run his callused hands along a horse's flanks, think his own thoughts. Other times, carrying whatever it was, letter, postcard, the rarity of an item of personal mail, he'd return to the kitchen and his place at the table. There the girls would find him (by accident, they *were not* spying) drinking coffee laced with top-milk and sugar, rolling one of his clumsy cigarettes. And Connie would be the one to inquire, "Was there any mail, Pappa?" keeping her voice low, unexcited. And Pappa would shrug and say, "Nothing." On the table where he'd dropped them indifferently might be a few bills, advertising flyers, the *Chautauqua Valley Weekly Gazette*. Nelia never inquired about the mail at such times because she would not have trusted her voice. But, young as ten, Connie could be pushy, reckless. "Isn't there a letter, Pappa? What is that, Pappa, in your pocket?"

And Pappa would say calmly, staring her full in the face, "When your father says *nothing*, girl, he means *nothing*."

Sometimes his hands shook, fussing with the pouch of Bugler and the stained cigarette-roller.

Since the shame of losing his wife, and everybody knowing the circumstances, John Nissenbaum had aged shockingly. His face was creased, his skin reddened and cracked, finely stippled with what would be diagnosed (when finally he went to a doctor) as skin cancer. His eyes, pouched in wrinkled lids like a turtle's, were often vague, restless. Even in church, in a row close to Reverend Dieckman's pulpit, he had a look of wandering off. In what he called his earlier life he'd been a rough, physical man, intelligent but quick-tempered; now he tired easily, could not keep up with his hired men whom he more and more mistrusted. His beard, once so trim and shapely, grew ragged and uneven and was entirely gray-grizzled, like cobwebs. And his breath—it smelled of tobacco juice, wet, rank, sickish, rotted.

Once, seeing the edge of the letter in Pappa's pocket, Connie bit her lip and said, "It's from *her*, isn't it!"

Pappa said, still calmly, "I said it's *nothing*, girl. From *nobody*."

Never in their father's presence did either of the sisters allude to their missing mother except as *her*, *she*.

Later when they searched for the letter, even for its envelope, of course they found nothing. Pappa had burned it in the stove probably. Or torn it into shreds, tossed into the garbage. Still, the sisters risked their father's wrath by daring to look in his bedroom (the stale-smelling room he'd moved to, downstairs at the rear of the house) when he was out; even, desperate, knowing it was hopeless,

poking through fresh-dumped garbage. (Like all farm families of their day, the Nissenbaums dumped raw garbage down a hillside, in the area of the outhouse.) Once Connie scrambled across fly-buzzing mounds of garbage holding her nose, stooping to snatch up—what? A card advertising a fertilizer sale, that had looked like a picture postcard.

“Are you crazy?” Nelia cried. “I hate you!”

Connie turned to scream at her, eyes brimming tears. “Go to hell, horse’s ass, I hate *you!*”

Both wanted to believe, or did in fact believe, that their mother was not writing to their father but to them. But they would never know. For years, as the letters came at long intervals, arriving only when their father fetched the mail, they would not know.

This might have been a further element of mystery: why the letters, arriving so infrequently, arrived only when their father got the mail. Why, when Connie, or Nelia, or Loraine (John’s younger sister, who’d come to live with them) got the mail, there would never be one of the mysterious letters. *Only when Pappa got the mail.*

After my mother’s death in 1981, when I spoke more openly to my Aunt Connie, I asked why they hadn’t been suspicious, just a little. Aunt Connie lifted her penciled eyebrows, blinked at me as if I’d uttered something obscene —“Suspicious? Why?” Not once did the girls (who were in fact intelligent girls, Nelia a straight-A student in the high school in town) calculate the odds: how the presumed letter from their mother could possibly arrive only on those days (Saturdays) when their father got the mail; one day out of six mail-days, yet never any day except that particular day (Saturday). But as Aunt Connie said, shrugging, it just seemed that that was how it was—they would never have conceived of even the possibility of any situation in which the odds wouldn’t have been against them, and in favor of Pappa.

5

The farmhouse was already old when I was first brought to visit it: summers, in the 1950s. Part red brick so weathered as to seem without color and part rotted wood, with a steep shingled roof, high ceilings, and spooky corners; a perpetual odor of woodsmoke, kerosene, mildew, time. A perpetual draft passed through the house from the rear, which faced north, opening out onto a long incline of acres, miles, dropping to the Chautauqua River ten miles away like an aerial scene in a movie. I remember the old wash room, the machine with a hand-wringer; a door to the cellar in the floor of that room, with a thick metal ring as a handle. Outside the house, too, was another door, horizontal and not vertical.

The thought of what lay beyond those doors, the dark, stone-smelling cellar where rats scurried, filled me with a childish terror.

I remember Grandfather Nissenbaum as always old. A lean, sinewy, virtually mute old man. His finely cracked, venous-glazed skin, red-stained as if with earth; narrow rheumy eyes whose pupils seemed, like the pupils of goats, horizontal black slats. How they scared me! Deafness had made Grandfather remote and strangely imperial, like an old almost-forgotten king. The crown of his head was shinily bald and a fringe of coarse hair bleached to the color of ash grew at the sides and back. Where once, my mother lamented, he'd been careful in his dress, especially on Sundays, for churchgoing, he now wore filth-stained overalls and in all months save summer long gray-flannel underwear straggling at his cuffs like a loose, second skin. His breath stank of tobacco juice and rotted teeth, the knuckles of both his hands were grotesquely swollen. My heart beat quickly and erratically in his presence. "Don't be silly," Mother whispered nervously, pushing me toward the old man, "—your grandfather *loves you*." But I knew he did not. Never did he call me by my name, Bethany, but only "girl" as if he hadn't troubled to learn my name.

When Mother showed me photographs of the man she called Pappa, some of these scissored in half, to excise my missing grandmother, I stared, and could not believe he'd once been so handsome! Like a film actor of some bygone time. "You see," Mother said, incensed, as if the two of us had been quarreling, "—this is who John Nissenbaum really is."

I grew up never really knowing Grandfather, and I certainly didn't love him. He was never "Grandpa" to me. Visits to Ransomville were sporadic, sometimes canceled at the last minute. Mother would be excited, hopeful, apprehensive—then, who knows why, the visit would be canceled, she'd be tearful, upset, yet relieved. Now, I can guess that Mother and her family weren't fully welcomed by my grandfather; he was a lonely and embittered old man, but still proud—he'd never forgiven her for leaving home, after high school, just like her sister Connie; going to the teachers' college at Elmira instead of marrying a local man worthy of working and eventually inheriting the Nissenbaum farm. By the time I was born, in 1951, the acreage was being sold off; by the time Grandfather Nissenbaum died, in 1972, in a nursing home in Yewville, the two hundred acres had been reduced to a humiliating seven acres, now the property of strangers.

In the hilly cemetery behind the First Lutheran Church of Ransomville, New York, there is a still-shiny black granite marker at the edge of rows of Nissenbaum markers, JOHN ALLARD NISSENBAUM 1872–1957. Chiseled into the stone is *How long shall I be with you? How long shall I suffer you?* Such angry words of Jesus Christ's! I wondered who had chosen them—not Constance or

Cornelia, surely. It must have been John Nissenbaum himself.

Already as a girl of eleven, twelve, I was pushy and curious, asking my mother about my missing grandmother. *Look, Mother, for God's sake where did she go? Didn't anybody try to find her?* Mother's replies were vague, evasive. As if rehearsed. That sweet-resolute stoic smile. Cheerful resignation, Christian forgiveness. For thirty-five years she taught high school English in the Rochester public schools, and especially after my father left us, and she became a single, divorced woman, the manner came easily to her of brisk classroom authority, that pretense of the skilled teacher of weighing others' opinions thoughtfully before reiterating one's own.

My father, an education administrator, left us when I was fourteen, to remarry. I was furious, heartbroken. Dazed. *Why? How could he betray us?* But Mother maintained her Christian fortitude, her air of subtly wounded pride. *This is what people will do, Bethany. Turn against you, turn faithless. You might as well learn, young.*

Yet I pushed. Up to the very end of her life, when Mother was so ill. You'd judge me harsh, heartless—people did. But for God's sake I wanted to know: what happened to my Grandmother Nissenbaum, why did nobody seem to care she'd gone away? Were the letters my mother and Connie swore their father received authentic, or had he been playing a trick of some kind? And if it had been a trick, what was its purpose? *Just tell me the truth for once, Mother. The truth about anything.*

I'm forty-four years old, I still want to know.

But Mother, the intrepid schoolteacher, the good Christian, was impenetrable. Inscrutable as her pappa. Capable of summing up her entire childhood *back there* (this was how she and Aunt Connie spoke of Ransomville, their pasts: *back there*) by claiming that such *hurts* are God's will, God's plan for each of us. A test of our faith. A test of our inner strength. I said, disgusted, what if you don't believe in God, what are you left with then?—and Mother said matter-of-factly, “You're left with yourself, of course, your inner strength. Isn't that enough?”

That final time we spoke of this, I lost patience, I must have pushed Mother too far. In a sharp, stinging voice, a voice I'd never heard from her before, she said, “Bethany, what do you want me to tell you? About my mother?—my father? Do you imagine I ever knew them? Either of them? My mother left Connie and me when we were little girls, left us with *him*, wasn't that her choice? Her selfishness? Why should anyone have gone looking for her? She was trash, she was *faithless*. We learned to forgive, and to forget. Your aunt tells you a different

story, I know, but it's a lie—I was the one who was hurt, I was the youngest. Your heart can be broken only once—you'll learn! Our lives were busy, busy like the lives of us grown women today, women who have to work, women who don't have time to moan and groan over their hurt feelings, you can't know how Connie and I worked on that farm, in that house, like grown women when we were girls. Father tried to stop both of us going to school beyond eighth grade—imagine! We had to walk two miles to get a ride with a neighbor, to get to the high school in Ransomville; there weren't school buses in those days. Everything you've had you've taken for granted and wanted more, but we weren't like that. We hadn't money for the right school clothes, all our textbooks were used, but we went to high school. I was the only 'farm girl'—that's exactly what I was known as, even by my teachers—in my class to take math, biology, physics, Latin. I was memorizing Latin declensions milking cows at five in the morning, winter mornings. I was laughed at, Nelia Nissenbaum was *laughable*. But I accepted it. All that mattered was that I win a scholarship to a teachers' college so I could escape the country, and I did win a scholarship and I never returned to Ransomville to live. Yes, I loved Pappa—I still love him. I loved the farm, too. You can't not love any place that's taken so much from you. But I had my own life, I had my teaching jobs, I had my faith, my belief in God, I had my destiny. I even got married—that was extra, unexpected. I've worked for everything I ever got and I never had time to look back, to feel sorry for myself. Why then should I think about *her*?—why do you torment me about *her*? A woman who abandoned me when I was five years old! In 1923! I made my peace with the past, just like Connie in her different way. We're happy women, we've been spared a lifetime of bitterness. *That* was God's gift to us." Mother paused, breathing quickly. There was in her face the elation of one who has said too much, that can never be retracted; I was stunned into silence. She plunged on, now contemptuously, "What are you always wanting me to admit, Bethany? That you know something I don't know? What is your generation always pushing for, from ours? Isn't it enough we gave birth to you, indulged you, must we be sacrificed to you, too? What do you want us to tell you—that life is cruel and purposeless? that there is no loving God, and never was, only accident? Is that what you want to hear, from your mother? That I married your father because he was a weak man, a man I couldn't feel much for, who wouldn't, when it came time, hurt me?"

And then there was silence. We stared at each other, Mother in her glisten of fury, daughter Bethany so shocked she could not speak. Never again would I think of my mother in the old way.

What Mother never knew: In April 1983, two years after her death, a creek that runs through the old Nissenbaum property flooded its banks, and several hundred feet of red clayey soil collapsed overnight into the creek bed, as in an earthquake. And in the raw, exposed earth there was discovered a human skeleton, decades old but virtually intact. It had been apparently buried, less than a mile behind the Nissenbaum farmhouse.

There had never been anything so newsworthy—so sensational—in the history of Chautauqua County.

State forensic investigators determined that the skeleton had belonged to a woman, apparently killed by numerous blows to the head (a hammer, or the blunt edge of an ax) that shattered her skull like a melon. Dumped into the grave with her was what appeared to have been a suitcase, now rotted, its contents—clothes, shoes, underwear, gloves—scarcely recognizable from the earth surrounding it. There were a few pieces of jewelry and, still entwined around the skeleton's neck, a tarnished gold cross on a chain. Most of the woman's clothing had long ago rotted away and almost unrecognizable too was a book—a leather-bound Bible?—close beside her. About the partly detached, fragile wrist and ankle bones were loops of rusted baling wire that had fallen loose, coiled in the moist red clay like miniature sleeping snakes.

TOM FRANKLIN

Poachers

FROM *Texas Review*

AT DAWN, ON THE first day of April, the three Gates brothers banked their ten-foot aluminum boat in a narrow slough of dark water. They tied their hounds, strapped on their rifles, and stepped out, ducking black magnolia branches heavy with rain and Spanish moss. The two thin younger brothers, denim overalls tucked into their boots, lugged between them a styrofoam cooler of iced fish and coons and possums. The oldest brother—bearded, heavysset, twenty years old—carried a Sunbeam Bread sack of eels in his coat pocket. Hooked over his left shoulder was the pink body of a fawn they'd shot and skinned, and, over the right, a stray dog to which they'd done the same. With the skins and heads gone and the dog's tail chopped off, they were difficult to tell apart.

The Gateses climbed the hill, clinging to vines and saplings, slipping in the red clay, their boots coated and enormous by the time they stepped out of the woods. For a moment they stood in the road, looking at the gray sky, the clouds piling up. The two younger ones, Scott and Wayne, set the cooler down. Kent, the oldest, removed his limp cap and squeezed the water from it. He nodded and his brothers picked up the cooler. They rounded a curve and crossed a one-lane bridge, stopping to piss over the rail into creek water high from all the rain, then went on, passing houses on either side: dark warped boards with knotholes big enough to look through and cement blocks for steps. Black men appeared in doors and windows to watch them go by—to most of these people they were something not seen often, something nocturnal and dangerous. Along this stretch of the Alabama River, everyone knew that the brothers' father, Boo Gates, had married a girl named Anna when he was thirty and she was seventeen, and that the boys had been born in quick succession, with less than a year between them.

But few outside the family knew that a fourth child—a daughter, unnamed—had been stillborn, and that Boo had buried her in an unmarked grave in a clearing in the woods behind their house. Anna died the next day and the three boys, dirty and naked, watched their father's stoop-shouldered descent into the earth as he dug her grave. By the time he'd finished it was dark and the moon had come up out of the trees and the boys lay asleep upon each other in the dirt like wolf pups.

The name of this community, if it could be called that, was Lower Peachtree, though as far as anybody knew there'd never been an Upper Peachtree. Scattered along the leafy banks of the river were ragged houses, leaning and drafty, many empty, caving in, so close to the water they'd been built on stilts. Each April floods came and the crumbling land along the riverbank would disappear and each May, when the floodwaters receded, a house or two would be gone.

Upriver, near the lock and dam, stood an old store, a slanting building with a steep, rusty tin roof and a stovepipe in the back. Behind the store the mimosa trees sagged, waterlogged. In front, beside the gas pump, long green steps led up to the door, where a red sign said OPEN. Inside to the right, like a bar, a polished maple counter covered the entire wall. Behind the counter hung a rack with wire pegs for tools, hardware, fishing tackle. The condoms, bullets, and tobacco products, the rat poison and the Old Timer knife display were beneath the counter.

The store owner, Old Kirxy, had bad knees, and this weather settled around his joints like rot. For most of his life he'd been married and lived in a nice house on the highway. Two-story. Fireplaces in every bedroom. A china cabinet. But when his wife died two years ago, cancer, he found it easier to avoid the house, to keep the bills paid and the grass mowed but the door locked, to spend nights in the store, to sleep in the back room on the Army cot and to warm his meals of corned beef and beef stew on a hot plate. He didn't mind that people had all but stopped coming to the store. As long as he served a few long-standing customers, he thought he'd stick around. He had his radio and one good station, WJDB of Thomasville, and money enough. He liked the area, knew his regulars weren't the kind to drive an hour to the nearest town. For those few people, Kirxy would go once a week to Grove Hill to shop for goods he'd resell, marking up the price just enough for a reasonable profit. He didn't need the money, it was just good business.

Liquor-wise, the county was dry, but that didn't stop Kirxy from selling booze. For his regulars, he would serve plastic cups of the cheap whiskey he bought in the next county or bottles of beer he kept locked in the old refrigerator in back. For these regulars, he would break packages of cigarettes and keep them in a cigar box and sell them for a dime apiece, a nickel stale. Aspirins were seven cents each, Tylenol tablets nine. He would open boxes of shotgun shells or cartridges and sell them for amounts that varied, according to caliber, and he'd been known to find specialty items—paperback novels, explosives, and, once, a rotary telephone.

At Euphrates Morrisette's place, the Gates brothers pounded on the back door. In

his yard a cord of wood was stacked between two fence-posts and covered by a green tarp, brick halves holding the tarp down. A tire swing, turning slowly and full of rainwater, hung from a white oak. When Morrisette appeared—he was a large, bald black man—Kent held out the fawn and dog. Morrisette put on glasses and squinted at both. “Hang back,” he said, and closed the door. Kent sat on the porch edge and his brothers on the steps.

The door opened and Morrisette came out with three pint jars of homemade whiskey. Each brother took a jar and unscrewed its lid, sniffed the clear liquid. Morrisette set his steaming coffee cup on the windowsill. He fastened his suspenders, looking at the carcasses hanging over the rail. The brothers were already drinking.

“Where’s that girl?” Kent asked, his face twisted from the sour whiskey.

“My stepdaughter, you mean?” Morrisette’s Adam’s apple pumped in his throat. “She inside.” Far away a rooster crowed.

“Get her out here,” Kent said. He drank again, shuddered.

“She ain’t but fifteen.”

Kent scratched his beard. “Just gonna look at her.”

When they left, the stepdaughter was standing on the porch in her white nightgown, barefoot, afraid, and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. The brothers backed away clanking with hardware and grinning at her, Morrisette’s jaw clenched.

Sipping from their jars, they took the bag of eels down the road to the half-blind conjure woman who waited on her porch. Her house, with its dark drapes and empty parrot cages dangling from the eaves, seemed to be slipping off into the gully. She snatched the eels from Kent, squinting into the bag with her good eye. Grunting, she paid them from a dusty cloth sack on her apron and muttered to herself as they went up the dirt road. Wayne, the youngest, looked back, worried that she’d put a hex on them.

They peddled the rest of the things from their cooler, then left through the dump, stumbling down the ravine in the rain, following the water’s edge to their boat. In the back, Kent wedged his jar between his thighs and ran the silent trolling motor with his foot. His brothers leaned against the walls of the boat, facing opposite banks, no sound but rain and the low hum of the motor. They drank silently, holding the burning whiskey in their mouths before gathering the will to swallow. Along the banks, fallen trees held thick strands of cottonmouth, black sparkling creatures dazed and slow from winter, barely able to move. If not for all the rain, they might still be hibernating, comatose in the banks of the river or beneath the soft yellow underbellies of rotten logs.

Rounding a bend, the brothers saw a small boat downriver, its engine clear,

loud, and unfamiliar. Heading this way. The man in the boat lifted a hand in greeting. He wore a green poncho and a dark hat covered with plastic. Kent shifted his foot, turning the trolling motor, and steered them toward the bank, giving the stranger a wide berth. He felt for their outboard's crank rope while Scott and Wayne faced forward and sat on the boat seats. The man drawing closer didn't look much older than Kent. He cut his engine and coasted up beside them, smiling.

"Morning, fellows," he said, showing a badge. "New district game warden."

The brothers looked straight ahead, as if he wasn't there. The warden's engine was steaming, a flock of geese passed overhead. Wayne slipped his hands inside the soft leather collars of two dogs, who'd begun to growl.

"You fellows oughta know," the warden said, pointing his long chin to the rifle in Scott's hands, "that it's illegal to have those guns loaded on the river. I'm gonna have to check 'em. I'll need to see some licenses, too."

When he stood, the dogs jumped forward, toenails scraping aluminum. Wayne pulled them back, glancing at his brothers.

Kent spat into the brown water. He met the warden's eyes, and in an instant knew the man had seen the telephone in the floor of their boat.

"Pull to the bank!" the warden yelled, drawing a pistol. "Y'all are under arrest for poaching!"

The Gateses didn't move. One of the dogs began to claw the hull and the others joined him. A howl arose.

"Shut those dogs up!" The warden's face had grown blotchy and red.

The spotted hound broke free and sprang over the gunnel, slobber strung from its teeth, and the man most surprised by the game warden's shot was the game warden himself. His face drained of color as the noise echoed off the water and died in the bent black limbs and the cattails. The bullet had passed through the front dog's neck and smacked into the bank behind them, missing Wayne by inches. The dog collapsed, and there was an instant of silence before the others, now loose, clattered overboard into the water, red-eyed, tangled in their leashes, trying to swim.

"Pull to the goddamn bank!" the warden yelled. "Right now!"

Scowling, Kent leaned and spat. He laid his .30-30 aside. Using the shoulders of his brothers for balance, he made his way to the prow. Scott, flecked with dog blood, moved to the back to keep the boat level. At the front, Kent reached into the water and took the first dog by its collar, lifted the kicking form, and set it streaming and shivering behind him. His brothers turned their faces away as it shook off the water, rocking the whole boat. Kent grabbed the rope that led to the big three-legged hound and pulled it in hand over hand until he could work

his fingers under its collar. He gave Wayne a sidelong look and together they hauled it in. Then Kent grabbed for the smaller bitch while Wayne got the black and tan.

The warden watched them, his hips swaying with the rise and fall of the current. Rain fell harder now, spattering against the aluminum boats. Kneeling among the dogs, Kent unsnapped the leash and tossed the spotted hound overboard. It sank, then resurfaced and floated on its side, trailing blood. Kent's lower lip twitched. Wayne whispered to the dogs and placed his hands on two of their heads to calm them—they were retching and trembling and rolling their eyes fearfully at the trees.

Scott stood up with his hands raised, as if to surrender. When the man looked at him, Kent jumped from his crouch into the other boat, his big fingers closing around the game warden's neck.

Later that morning, Kirxy had just unlocked the door and hung out the OPEN sign when he heard the familiar rattle of the Gates truck. He sipped his coffee and limped behind the counter, sat on his stool. The boys came several times a week, usually in the afternoon, before they started their evenings of hunting and fishing. Kirxy would give them the supplies they needed—bullets, fishing line, socks, a new cap to replace one lost in the river. They would fill their truck and cans with gas. Eighteen-year-old Wayne would get the car battery from the charger near the wood-burning stove and replace it with the drained one from their boat's trolling motor. Kirxy would serve them coffee or Cokes—never liquor, not to minors—and they'd eat whatever they chose from the shelves, usually candy bars or potato chips, ignoring Kirxy's advice that they ought to eat healthier: Vienna sausages, Dinty Moore, or Chef Boyardee.

Today they came in looking a little spooked, Kirxy thought. Scott stayed near the door, peering out, the glass fogging by his face. Wayne went to the candy aisle and selected several Hershey bars. He left a trail of muddy boot prints behind him. Kirxy would mop later.

"Morning, boys," he said. "Coffee?"

Wayne nodded. Kirxy filled a styrofoam cup, then grinned as the boy loaded it with sugar.

"You take coffee with your sweet'ner?" he said.

Kent leaned on the counter, inspecting the hardware items on their pegs, a hacksaw, a set of Allen wrenches. A gizmo with several uses, knife, measuring tape, awl. Kirxy could smell the booze on the boys.

"Y'all need something?" he asked.

"That spotted one you give us?" Kent said. "Won't bark no more."

“She won’t?”

“Naw. Tree ’em fine, but won’t bark nary a time. Gonna have to shoot her, I expect.”

His mouth full of chocolate, Wayne looked at Kirxy. By the door, Scott unfolded his arms. He kept looking outside.

“No,” Kirxy said. “Ain’t no need to shoot her, Kent. Do what that conjure woman recommends. Go out in the woods, find you a locust shell stuck to a tree. This is the time of year for ’em, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Locust shell?” Kent asked.

“Yeah. Bring it back home and crunch it up in the dog’s scraps, and that’ll make her bark like she ought to.”

Kent nodded to Kirxy and walked to the door. He went out, his brothers following.

“See you,” Kirxy called.

Wayne waved with a Hershey bar and closed the door.

Kirxy stared after them for a time. It had been a year since they’d paid him anything, but he couldn’t bring himself to ask for money; he’d even stopped writing down what they owed.

He got his coffee and limped from behind the counter to the easy chair by the stove. He shook his head at the muddy footprints on the candy aisle. He sat slowly, tucked a blanket around his legs, took out his bottle and added a splash to his coffee. Sipping, he picked up a novel—Louis L’Amour, *Sackett’s Land*—and reached in his apron pocket for his glasses.

Though she had been once, the woman named Esther wasn’t much of a regular in Kirxy’s store these days. She lived two miles upriver in a shambling white house with magnolia trees in the yard. The house had a wraparound porch, and when it flooded you could fish from the back, sitting in the tall white rocking chairs, though you weren’t likely to catch anything. A baby alligator maybe, or sometimes bullfrogs. Owls nested in the trees along her part of the river, but in this weather they seemed quiet; she missed their hollow calling.

Esther was fifty. She’d had two husbands and six children who were gone and had ill feelings toward her. She’d had her female parts removed in an operation. Now she lived alone and, most of the time, drank alone. If the Gates boys hadn’t passed out in their truck somewhere in the woods, they might stop by after a night’s work. Esther would make them strong coffee and feed them salty fried eggs and greasy link sausages, and some mornings, like today, she would get a faraway look in her eyes and take Kent’s shirt collar in her fingers and lead him upstairs and watch him close the bathroom door and listen to the sounds of his

bathing.

She smiled, knowing these were the only baths he ever took.

When he emerged, his long hair stringy, his chest flat and hard, she led him down the hall past the telephone nook to her bedroom. He crawled into bed and watched her take off her gown and step out of her underwear. Bending, she looked in the mirror to fluff her hair, then climbed in beside him. He was gentle at first, curious, then rougher, the way she liked him to be. She closed her eyes, the bed frame rattling and bumping, her father's old pocket watch slipping off the nightstand. Water gurgled in the pipework in the walls as the younger brothers took baths, too, hoping for a turn of their own, which had never happened. At least not yet.

"Slow, baby," Esther whispered in Kent's ear. "It's plenty of time . . ."

On April third it was still raining. Kirxy put aside his crossword to answer the telephone.

"Can you come on down to the lock and dam?" Goodloe asked. "We got us a situation here."

Kirxy disliked smart-assed Goodloe, but something in the sheriff's voice told him it was serious. On the news, he'd heard that the new game warden had been missing for two days. The authorities had dragged the river all night and had three helicopters in the air. Kirxy sat forward in his chair, waiting for his back to loosen a bit. He added a shot of whiskey to his coffee and gulped it down as he shrugged into his denim jacket, zipping it up to his neck because he stayed cold when it rained. He put cotton balls in his ears and set his cap on his bald head, took his walking cane from beside the door.

In his truck, the four-wheel-drive engaged and the defroster on high, he sank and rose in the deep ruts, gobs of mud flying past his windows, the wipers swishing across his view. The radio announcer said it was sixty degrees, more rain on the way. Conway Twitty began to sing. A mile from the lock and dam Kirxy passed the Grove Hill ambulance, axle-deep in mud. A burly black paramedic wedged a piece of two-by-four beneath one of the rear tires while the bored-looking driver sat behind the wheel, smoking and racing the engine.

Kirxy slowed and rolled down his window. "Y'all going after a live one or a dead one?"

"Dead, Mr. Kirxy," the black man answered.

Kirxy nodded and sped up. At the lock and dam, he could see a crowd of people and umbrellas and beyond them he saw the dead man, lying on the ground under a black raincoat. Some onlooker had begun to direct traffic. Goodloe and three deputies in yellow slickers stood near the body with their

hands in their pockets.

Kirxy climbed out and people nodded somberly and parted to let him through. Goodloe, who'd been talking to his deputies, ceased as Kirxy approached and they stood looking at the raincoat.

"Morning, Sugarbaby," Kirxy said, using the childhood nickname Goodloe hated. "Is this who I think it is?"

"Yep," Goodloe muttered. "Rookie game warden of the year."

With his cane, Kirxy pulled back the raincoat to reveal the white face. "Young fellow," he said.

There was a puddle beneath the dead man. Twigs in his hair and a clove of moss in his breast pocket. With the rubber tip of his cane, Kirxy brushed a leech from the man's forehead. He bent and looked into the warden's left eye, which was partly open. He noticed his throat, the dark bruises there.

Goodloe unfolded a handkerchief and blew his nose, then wiped it. "Don't go abusing the evidence, Kirxy." He stuffed the handkerchief into his back pocket.

"Evidence? Now, Sugarbaby."

Goodloe exhaled and looked at the sky. "Don't shit me, Kirxy. You know good and well who done this. I expect they figure the law don't apply up here on this part of the river, the way things is been all these years. Them other wardens scared of 'em. But I reckon that's fixing to change." He paused. "I had to place me a call to the capital this morning. To let 'em know we was all outa game wardens. And you won't believe who they patched me through to."

Kirxy adjusted the cotton in his right ear.

"Old Frank David himself," the sheriff said. "Ain't nothing ticks him off more than this kind of thing."

A dread stirred in Kirxy's belly. "Frank David. Was he a relation of this fellow?"

"Teacher," Goodloe said. "Said he's been giving lessons to young game wardens over at the forestry service. He asked me a whole bunch of questions. Regular interrogation. Said this here young fellow was the cream of the crop. Best new game warden there was."

"Wouldn't know it from this angle," Kirxy said.

Goodloe grunted.

A photographer from the paper was studying the corpse. He glanced at the sky as if gauging the light. When he snapped the first picture, Kirxy was in it, like a sportsman.

"What'd you want from me?" he asked Goodloe.

"You tell them boys I need to ask 'em some questions, and I ain't fixing to traipse all over the county. I'll drop by the store this evening."

“If they’re there, they’re there,” Kirxy said. “I ain’t their damn father.”

Goodloe followed him to the truck. “You might think of getting ’em a lawyer,” he said through the window.

Kirxy started the engine. “Shit, Sugarbaby. Them boys don’t need a lawyer. They just need to stay in the woods, where they belong. Folks oughta know to let ’em alone by now.”

Goodloe stepped back from the truck. He smacked his lips. “I don’t reckon anybody got around to telling that to the deceased.”

Driving, Kirxy turned off the radio. He remembered the Gates brothers when they were younger, before their father shot himself. He pictured the three blond heads in the front of Boo’s boat as he motored upriver past the store, lifting a solemn hand to Kirxy where he stood with a broom on his little back porch. After Boo’s wife and newborn daughter had died, he’d taught those boys all he knew about the woods, about fishing, tracking, hunting, killing. He kept them in his boat all night as he telephoned catfish and checked his trotlines and jugs and shot things on the bank. He’d given each of his sons a specific job to do, one dialing the rotary phone, another netting the stunned catfish, the third adjusting the chains which generated electricity from a car battery into the water. Boo would tie a piece of clothesline around each of his sons’ waists and loop the other end to his own ankle in case one of the boys fell overboard. Downriver, Kent would pull in the trotlines while Wayne handed him a cricket or cockroach or catalpa worm for the hook. Scott took the bass, perch, or catfish Kent gave him and slit its soft cold belly with a fillet knife and ran two fingers up into the fish and drew out its palmful of guts and dumped them overboard. Sometimes on warm nights cottonmouths or young alligators would follow them, drawn by blood. A danger was catching a snake or snapping turtle on the trotline, and each night Boo whispered for Kent to be careful, to lift the line with a stick and see what he had there instead of using his bare hand.

During the morning they would leave the boat tied and the boys would follow their father through the trees from trap to trap, stepping when he stepped, not talking. Boo emptied the traps and rebaited them while behind him Kent put the carcass in his squirrel pouch. In the afternoons, they gutted and skinned what they’d brought home. What time was left before dark they spent sleeping in the feather bed in the cabin where their mother and sister had died.

After Boo’s suicide, Kirxy had tried to look after the boys, their ages twelve, thirteen, and fourteen—just old enough, Boo must’ve thought, to raise themselves. For a while Kirxy let them stay with him and his wife, who’d never had a child. He tried to send them to school, but they were past learning to read

and write and got expelled the first day for fighting, ganging up on a black kid. They were past the kind of life Kirxy's wife was used to living. They scared her, the way they watched her with eyes narrowed into black lines, the way they ate with their hands. The way they wouldn't talk. What she didn't know was that from those years of wordless nights on the river and silent days in the woods they had developed a kind of language of their own, a language of the eyes, of the fingers, of the way a shoulder moved, a nod of the head.

Because his wife's health wasn't good in those days, Kirxy had returned the boys to their cabin in the woods. He spent most Saturdays with them, trying to take up where Boo had left off, bringing them food and milk, clothes and new shoes, reading them books, teaching them things and telling stories. He'd worked out a deal with Esther, who took hot food to them in the evenings and washed and mended their clothes.

Slowing to let two buzzards hop away from a dead deer, Kirxy lit a cigarette and wiped his foggy windshield with the back of his hand. He thought of Frank David, Alabama's legendary game warden. There were dozens of stories about the man—Kirxy had heard and told them for years, had repeated them to the Gates boys, even made some up to scare them. Now the true ones and the fictions were confused in his mind. He remembered one: A dark, moonless night, and two poachers use a spotlight to freeze a buck in the darkness and shoot it. They take hold of its wide rack of horns and struggle to drag the big deer when suddenly they realize that now three men are pulling. The first poacher jumps and says, "Hey, it ain't supposed to be but two of us dragging this deer!"

And Frank David says, "Ain't supposed to be none of y'all dragging it."

The Gates boys came in the store just before closing, smelling like the river. Nodding to Kirxy, they went to the shelves and began selecting cans of things to eat. Kirxy poured himself a generous shot of whiskey. He'd stopped by their cabin earlier and, not finding them there, left a quarter on the steps. An old signal he hadn't used in years.

"Goodloe's coming by tonight," he said to Kent. "Wants to ask if y'all know anything about that dead game warden."

Kent shot the other boys a look.

"Now I don't know if y'all've ever even seen that fellow," Kirxy said, "and I'm not asking you to tell me." He paused, in case they wanted to. "But that's what old Sugarbaby's gonna want to know. If I was y'all, I just wouldn't tell him anything. Just say I was at home, that I don't know nothing about any dead game warden. Nothing at all."

Kent shrugged and walked down the aisle he was on and stared out the back

window, though there wasn't anything to see except the trees, ghostly and bent, when the lightning came. His brothers took seats by the stove and began to eat. Kirxy watched them, remembering when he used to read to them, *Tarzan of the Apes* and *The Return of Tarzan*. The boys had wanted to hear the books over and over—they loved the jungle, the elephants, rhinos, gorillas, the anacondas thirty feet long. They would listen intently, their eyes bright in the light of the stove, Wayne holding in his small dirty hand the Slinky Kirxy had given him as a Christmas present, his lips moving along with Kirxy's voice, mouthing some of the words: *the great apes; Numa the lion; La, Queen of Opar, the Lost City*.

They had listened to his Frank David stories the same way: the game warden appearing beside a tree on a night when there wasn't a moon, a tracker so keen he could see in the dark, could follow a man through the deepest swamp by smelling the fear in his sweat, by the way the water swirled; a bent-over shadow slipping between the beaver lairs, the cypress trees, the tangle of limb and vine, parting the long wet bangs of Spanish moss with his rifle barrel, creeping toward the glowing windows of the poacher's cabin, the deer hides nailed to the wall. The gator pelts. The fish with their grim smiles hooked to a clothesline, turtle shells like army helmets drying on the windowsills. Any pit bull or mutt meant to guard the place lying with its throat slit behind him, Frank David slips out of the fog with fog still clinging to the brim of his hat. He circles the cabin, peers in each window, mounts the porch. Puts his shoulder through the front door. Stands with wood splinters landing on the floor at his feet. A hatted man of average height, clean-shaven: no threat until the big hands come up, curl into fists, the knuckles scarred, blue, sharp.

Kirxy finished his drink and poured another. It burned pleasantly in his belly. He looked at the boys, occupied by their bags of corn curls. A Merle Haggard song ended on the radio and Kirxy clicked it off, not wanting the boys to hear the evening news.

In the quiet, Kirxy heard Goodloe's truck. He glanced at Kent, who'd probably been hearing it for a while. Outside, Goodloe slammed his door. He hurried up the steps and tapped on the window. Kirxy exaggerated his limp and took his time letting him in.

"Evening," Goodloe said, shaking the water from his hands. He took off his hat and hung it on the nail by the door, then hung up his yellow slicker.

"Evening, Sugarbaby," Kirxy said.

"It's a wet one out there tonight," Goodloe said.

"Yep." Kirxy went behind the counter and refilled his glass. "You just caught the tail end of happy hour. That is, if you're off the wagon again. Can I sell you a tonic? Warm you up?"

“You know we’re a dry county, Kirxy.”

“Would that be a no?”

“It’s a watch your ass.” Goodloe looked at the brothers. “Just wanted to ask these boys some questions.”

“Have at it, Sugarbaby.”

Goodloe walked to the Lance rack and detached a package of Nip-Cheese crackers. He opened it, offered the pack to each of the boys. Only Wayne took one. Smiling, Goodloe bit a cracker in half and turned a chair around and sat with his elbows across its back. He looked over toward Kent, half-hidden by shadow. He chewed slowly. “Come on out here so I can see you, boy. I ain’t gonna bite nothing but these stale-ass cheese crackers.”

Kent moved a step closer.

Goodloe took out a notepad and addressed Kent. “Where was y’all between the hours of four and eight A.M. two days ago?”

Kent looked at Scott. “Asleep.”

“Asleep,” Scott said.

Goodloe snorted. “Now come on, boys. The whole dern county knows y’all ain’t slept a night in your life. Y’all was out on the river, wasn’t you? Making a few telephone calls?”

“You saying he’s a liar?” Kirxy asked.

“I’m posing the questions here.” Goodloe chewed another cracker. “Hell, everybody knows the other game wardens has been letting y’all get away with all kinds of shit. I reckon this new fellow had something to prove.”

“Sounds like he oughta used a life jacket,” Kirxy said, wiping the counter.

“It appears”—Goodloe studied Kent—“that he might’ve been strangled. You got a alibi, boy?”

Kent looked down.

Goodloe sighed. “I mean—Christ—is there anybody can back up what you’re saying?”

The windows flickered.

“Yeah,” Kirxy said. “I can.”

Goodloe turned and faced the storekeeper. “You.”

“That’s right. They were here with me. Here in the store.”

Goodloe looked amused. “They was, was they. OK, Mr. Kirxy. How come you didn’t mention that to me this morning? Saved us all a little time?”

Kirxy sought Kent’s eyes but saw nothing there, no understanding, no appreciation. No fear. He went back to wiping the counter. “Well, I guess because they was passed out drunk, and I didn’t want to say anything, being as I was, you know, giving alcohol to young’uns.”

“But now that it’s come down to murder, you figured you’d better just own up.”

“Something like that.”

Goodloe stared at Kirxy for a long time, neither would look away. Then the sheriff turned to the boys. “Y’all ever heard of Frank David?”

Wayne nodded.

“Well,” Goodloe said. “Looks like he’s aiming to be this district’s game warden. I figure he pulled some strings, what he did.”

Kirxy came from behind the counter. “That all your questions? It’s past closing and these young’uns need to go home and get some sleep.” He went to the door and opened it, stood waiting.

“All righty then,” the sheriff said, standing. “I expect I oughta be getting back to the office anyhow.” He winked at Kirxy. “See you or these boys don’t leave the county for a few days. This ain’t over yet.” He put the crackers in his coat. “I expect y’all might be hearing from Frank David, too,” he said, watching the boys’ faces. But there was nothing to see.

Alone later, Kirxy put out the light and bolted the door. He went to adjust the stove and found himself staring out the window, looking into the dark where he knew the river was rising and swirling, tires and plastic garbage can lids and deadwood from upriver floating past. He struck a match and lit a cigarette, the glow of his ash reflected in the window, and he saw himself years ago, telling the boys those stories.

How Frank David would sit so still in the woods waiting for poachers that dragonflies would perch on his nose, gnats would walk over his eyeballs. Nobody knew where he came from, but Kirxy had heard that he’d been orphaned as a baby in a fire and found half-starved in the swamp by a Cajun woman. She’d raised him on the slick red clay banks of the Tombigbee River, among lean black poachers and white-trash moonshiners. He didn’t even know how old he was, people said. And they said he was the best poacher ever, the craftiest, the meanest. That he cut a drunk logger’s throat in a juke joint knife-fight one night. That he fled south and, underage, joined the Marines in Mobile and wound up in Korea, the infantry, where because of his shooting ability and his stealth they made him a sniper. Before he left that country, he’d registered over a hundred kills, communists half a world away who never saw him coming.

Back home in Alabama, he disappeared for a few years, then showed up at the state game warden’s office, demanding a job. Some people heard that in the intervening time he’d gotten religion.

“What makes you think I ought to hire you?” the head warden asked.

“Because I spent ten years of my life poaching right under your goddamn nose,” Frank David said.

The Gates boys’ pickup was the same old Ford their father had shot himself in several years earlier. The bullet hole in the roof had rusted out but was now covered with a strip of duct tape from Kirxy’s store. Spots of the truck’s floor were rusted away, too, so things in the road often flew up into their laps: rocks, cans, a king snake they were trying to run over. The truck was older than any of them, only one thin prong left of the steering wheel and the holes of missing knobs in the dash. It was a three-speed, a column shifter, the gear-stick covered with a buck’s dried ball sack. The windows and windshield, busted or shot out years before, hadn’t been replaced because most of their driving took them along back roads after dark or in fields, and the things they came upon were easier shots without glass.

Though he’d never had a license, Kent drove, he’d been doing this since he was eight. Scott rode shotgun. Tonight both were drinking, and in the back Wayne stood holding his rifle and trying to keep his balance. Below the soles of his boots the floor was soft, a tarry black from the blood of all the animals they’d killed. You could see spike antlers, forelegs, and hooves of deer. Teeth, feathers, and fur. The brittle beaks and beards of turkeys and the delicate, hinged leg bone of something molded in the sludge like a fossil.

Just beyond a NO TRESPASSING sign, Kent swerved off the road and they bounced and slid through a field in the rain, shooting at rabbits. Then they split up, the younger boys checking traps—one on each side of the river—and Kent in the boat rebaiting their trotlines the way his father had shown him.

They met at the truck just before midnight, untied the dogs, and tromped down a steep logging path, Wayne on one end of four leashes and the lunging hounds on the other. When they got to the bottomland, he unclipped the leashes and loosed the dogs and the brothers followed the baying ahead in the dark, aiming their flashlights into the black mesh of trees where the eyes of coons and possums gleamed like rubies. The hounds bayed and frothed, clawed the trunks of trees and leaped into the air and landed and leaped again, their sides pumping, ribs showing, hounds that, given the chance, would never stop eating.

When the Gateses came to the river two hours later, the dogs were lapping water and panting. Wayne bent and rubbed their ears and let them lick his cheeks. His brothers rested and drank, belching at the sky. After a time, they leashed the hounds and staggered downstream to the live oak where their boat was tied. They loaded the dogs and shoved off into the fog and trolled over the still water.

In the middle, Scott lowered the twin chains beside the boat and began dialing the old telephone. Wayne netted the stunned catfish—you couldn't touch them with your hand or they'd come to—and threw them into the cooler, where in a few seconds the waking fish would begin to thrash. In the rear, Kent fingered his rifle and watched the bank in case a coyote wandered down, hunting bullfrogs.

They climbed up out of the woods into a dirt road in the misty dawn, plying through the muddy yards and pissing by someone's front porch in plain sight of the black face inside. A few houses down, Morrisette didn't come to his door, and when Kent tried the handle it was locked. He looked at Scott, then put his elbow through the glass and reached in and unlocked it.

While his brothers searched for the liquor, Wayne ate the biscuits he found wrapped in tin foil on the stove. He found a box of Corn Flakes in a cabinet and ate most of them, too. He ate a plate of cold fried chicken liver. Scott was in a bedroom looking under the bed. In the closet. He was going through drawers, his dirty fingers among the white cloth. In the back of the house Kent found a door, locked from the inside. He jimmied it open with his knife, and when he came into the kitchen, he had a gallon jar of whiskey under his arm and Euphrates' stepdaughter by the wrist.

Wayne stopped chewing, crumbs falling from his mouth. He approached the girl and put his hand out to touch her, but Kent pushed him hard, into the wall. Wayne stayed there, a clock ticking beside his head, a string of spit linking his two opened lips, watching as his brother ran his rough hands up and down the girl's trembling body, over the nipples that showed through the thin cloth. Her eyes were closed, lips moving in prayer. Looking down, Kent saw the puddle spreading around her bare feet.

"Shit," he said, a hand cupping her breast. "Pissed herself."

He let her go and she shrank back against the wall, behind the door. She was still there, along with a bag of catfish on the table, when her stepfather came back half an hour later, ten gallons of whiskey under the tarp in his truck.

On that same Saturday Kirxy drove to the chicken fights, held in Heflin Bradford's bulging barn, deep in woods cloudy with mosquitoes. He passed the hand-painted sign that'd been there forever, as long as he could remember, nailed to a tree. It said JESUS IS NOT COMING.

Kirxy climbed out of his truck and buttoned his collar, his ears full of cotton. Heflin's wife worked beneath a rented awning, grilling chicken and sausages, selling Cokes and beer. Gospel music played from a portable tape player by her head. Heflin's grandson Nolan took the price of admission at the barn door and stamped the backs of white hands and the cracked pink palms of black ones.

Men in overalls and baseball caps that said CAT DIESEL POWER or STP stood at the tailgates of their pickups, smoking cigarettes, stooping to peer into the dark cages where roosters paced. The air was filled with windy rain spits and the crowing of roosters, the ground littered with limp, dead birds.

A group of men discussed Frank David, and Kirxy paused to listen.

“He’s the one caught that bunch over in Warshington County,” one man said. “Them alligator poachers.”

“Sugarbaby said two of ’em wound up in the intensive care,” another claimed. “Said they pulled a gun and old Frank David went crazy with an ax handle.”

Kirxy moved on and paid the five-dollar admission. In the barn, there were bleachers along the walls and a big circular wooden fence in the center, a dome of chicken wire over the top. Kirxy found a seat at the bottom next to the back door, near a group of mean old farts he’d known for forty years. People around them called out bets and bets were accepted. Cans of beer lifted. Kirxy produced a thermos of coffee and a dented tin cup. He poured the coffee, then added whiskey from a bottle that went back into his coat pocket. The tin cup warmed his fingers as he squinted through his bifocals to see which bird to bet on.

In separate corners of the barn, two bird handlers doused their roosters’ heads and asses with rubbing alcohol to make them fight harder. They tightened the long steel curved spurs. When the referee in the center of the ring indicated it was time, the handlers entered the pen, each cradling his bird in his arms. They flashed the roosters at one another until their feathers had ruffled with bloodlust and rage, the roosters pedaling the air, stretching their necks toward each other. The handlers kept them a breath apart for a second, then withdrew them to their corners, whispering in their ears. When the referee tapped the ground three times with his stick, the birds were unleashed on each other. They charged and rose in the center of the ring, gouging with spur and beak, the handlers circling the fight like crabs, blood on their forearms and faces, ready to seize their roosters at the referee’s cry of “Handle!”

A clan of Louisiana Cajuns watched. They’d emerged red-eyed from a van in a marijuana cloud: skinny, shirtless men with oily ponytails and goatees and tattoos of symbols of black magic. Under their arms, they carried thick white hooded roosters to pit against the reds and blacks of the locals. Their women had stumbled out of the van behind them, high yellow like Gypsies, big-lipped, big-chested girls in halter-tops tied at their bellies and miniskirts and red heels.

In the ring the Cajuns kissed their birds on the beaks, and one tall, completely bald Cajun wearing gold earrings in both ears put his bird’s whole head in his mouth. His girl, too, came barefoot into the ring, tattoo of a snake on her shoulder, and took the bird’s head into her mouth.

“Bet on them white ones,” a friend whispered to Kirxy. “These ones around here ain’t ever seen a white rooster. They don’t know what they’re fighting.”

That evening, checking traps in the woods north of the river, Wayne kept hearing things. Little noises. Leaves. Twigs.

Afraid, he forced himself to go on so his brothers wouldn’t laugh at him. Near dark, in a wooden trap next to an old fencerow, he was surprised to find the tiny white fox they’d once seen cross the road in front of their truck. He squatted before the trap and poked a stick through the wire at the thin snout, his hand steady despite the way the fox snapped at the stick and bit off the end. Would the witch woman want this alive? At the thought of her he looked around. It felt like she was watching him, as if she were hiding in a tree in the form of some animal, a possum, a swamp rat. He stood and dragged the trap through the mud and over the land while the fox jumped in circles, growling.

A mile upstream, Scott had lost a boot to the mud and was hopping back one-footed to retrieve it. It stood alone, buried to the ankle. He wrenched it free, then sat with his back against a sweet gum to scrape off the mud. He’d begun to lace the boot when he saw a hollow tree stump, something moving inside. With his rifle barrel, he rolled the thing out—it was most of the body of a dead catfish, the movement from the maggots devouring it. When he kicked it, they spilled from the fish like rice pellets and lay throbbing in the mud.

Downstream, as night came and the rain fell harder, Kent trolled their boat across the river, flashlight in his mouth, using a stick to pull up a trotline length by length and removing the fish or turtles and rebaiting the hooks and dropping them back into the water. Near the bank, approaching the last hook, he heard something. He looked up with the flashlight in his teeth to see the thing untwirling in the air. It wrapped around his neck like a rope, and for an instant he thought he was being hanged. He grabbed the thing. It flexed and tightened, then his neck burned and went numb and he felt dizzy, his fingertips buzzing, legs weak, a tree on the bank distorting, doubling, tripling into a whole line of fuzzy shapes, turning sideways, floating.

Kent blinked. Felt his eyes bulging, his tongue swelling. His head about to explode. Then a bright light.

His brothers found the boat at dawn, four miles downstream, lodged on the far side in a fallen tree. They exchanged a glance, then looked back across the river. A heavy gray fog hooded the water and the boat appeared and dissolved in the ghostly limbs around it. Scott sat on a log and took off his boots and left them standing by the log. He removed his coat and laid it over the boots. He handed

his brother his rifle without looking at him, left him watching as he climbed down the bank and, hands and elbows in the air like a believer, waded into the water.

Wayne propped the second rifle against a tree and stood on the bank holding his own gun, casting his frightened eyes up and down the river. From far away a woodpecker drummed. Crows began to collect in a pecan tree downstream. After a while Wayne squatted, thinking of their dogs, tied to the bumper of their truck. They'd be under the tailgate, probably, trying to keep dry.

Soon Scott had trolled the boat back across. Together they pulled it out of the water and stood looking at their brother who lay across the floor among the fish and turtles he'd caught. One greenish terrapin, still alive, a hook in its neck, stared back. They both knew what they were supposed to think—the blood and the sets of twin fang marks, the black bruises and shriveled skin, the neck swollen like mumps, the purple bulb of tongue between his lips. They were supposed to think *cottonmouth*. Kent's hands were squeezed into fists and they'd hardened that way, the skin wrinkled. His eyes half open. His rifle lay unfired in the boat, as if indeed a snake had done this.

But it wasn't the tracks of a snake they found when they went to get the white fox. The fox was gone, though, the trap empty, its catch sprung. Scott knelt and ran his knuckles along the rim of a boot print in the mud—not a very wide track, not very far from the next one. He put his finger in the black water that'd already begun to fill the track: not too deep. He looked up at Wayne. The print of an average-sized man. In no hurry. Scott rose and they began.

Above them, the sky cracked and flickered.

Silently, quickly—no time to get the dogs—they followed the trail back through the woods, losing it once, twice, backtracking, working against the rain that fell and fell harder, that puddled blackly and crept up their legs, until they stood in water to their calves, rain beading on the brims of their caps. They gazed at the ground, the sky, at the rain streaming down each other's muddy face.

At the truck, Wayne jumped in the driver's seat and reached for the keys. Scott appeared in the window, shaking his head. When Wayne didn't scoot over, the older boy hit him in the jaw, then slung open the door and pulled Wayne out, sent him rolling over the ground. Scott climbed in and had trouble getting the truck choked. By the time he had the hang of it, Wayne had gotten into the back and sat among the wet dogs, staring at his dead brother.

At their cabin, they carried Kent into the woods. They laid him on the ground and began digging near where their sister, mother, and father were buried in their

unmarked graves. For three hours they worked, the dogs coming from under the porch and sniffing around Kent and watching the digging, finally slinking off and crawling back under the porch, out of the rain. An hour later the dogs came boiling out again and stood in a group at the edge of the yard, baying. The boys paused but saw or heard nothing. When the dogs kept making noise, Scott got his rifle and fired into the woods several times. He nodded to his brother and they went back to digging. By the time they'd finished, it was late afternoon and the hole was full of slimy water and they were black with mud. They each took off one of Kent's boots and Scott got the things from his pockets. They stripped off his shirt and pants and lowered him into the hole. When he bobbed to the top of the water, they got stones and weighted him down. Then shoveled mud into the grave.

They showed up at Esther's, black as tar.

"Where's Kent?" she asked, holding her robe closed at her throat.

"We buried him," Scott said, moving past her into the kitchen. She put a hand over her mouth, and as Scott told her what they'd found she slumped against the door, looking outside. An owl flew past in the floodlights. She thought of calling Kirxy but decided to wait until morning—the old bastard thought she was a slut and a corruption. For tonight she'd just keep them safe in her house.

Scott went to the den. He turned on the TV, the reception bad because of the weather. Wayne, a bruise on his left cheek, climbed the stairs. He went into one of the bedrooms and closed the door behind him. It was chilly in the room and he noticed pictures of people on the wall, children, and a tall man and a younger woman he took to be Esther. She'd been pretty then. He stood dripping on the floor, looking into her black and white face, searching for signs of the woman he knew now. Soon the door opened behind him and she came in. And though he still wore his filthy wet clothes, she steered him to the bed and guided him down onto it. She unbuckled his belt, removed his hunting knife, and stripped the belt off. She unbuttoned his shirt and rubbed her fingers across his chest, the hair just beginning to thicken there. She undid his pants and ran the zipper down its track. She worked them over his thighs, knees, and ankles and draped them across the back of a chair. She pulled off his boots and socks. Pried a finger beneath the elastic of his underwear, felt that he'd already come.

He looked at her face. His mouth opened. Esther touched his chin, the scratch of whiskers, his breath on her hand.

"Hush now," she said, and watched him fall asleep.

Downstairs, the TV went off.

When Goodloe knocked, Esther answered, a cold sliver of her face in the cracked door. "The hell you want?"

"Good evening to you, too. The Gateses here?"

"No."

Goodloe glanced behind him. "I believe that's their truck. It's kinda hard to mistake, especially for us trained lawmen."

She tried to close the door but Goodloe had his foot in it. He glanced at the three deputies who stood importantly by the Blazer. They dropped their cigarettes and crushed them out. They unsnapped their holsters and strode across the yard, standing behind Goodloe with their hands on their revolvers and their legs apart like TV deputies.

"Why don't y'all just let 'em alone?" Esther said. "Ain't they been through enough?"

"Tell 'em I'd like to see 'em," Goodloe said. "Tell 'em get their boots."

"You just walk straight to hell, mister."

Wayne appeared behind her, naked, lines from the bed linen on his face.

"Whoa, Nellie," Goodloe said. "Boy, you look plumb terrible. Why don't you let us carry you on down to the office for a little coffee? Little cake." He glanced back at one of the deputies. "We got any of that cinnamon roll left, Dave?"

"You got a warrant for their arrest?" Esther asked.

"No, I ain't got a warrant for their arrest. They ain't under arrest. They fixing to get questioned, is all. Strictly informal." Goodloe winked. "You reckon you could do without 'em for a couple of hours?"

"Fuck you, Sugarbaby."

The door slammed. Goodloe nodded down the side of the house and two deputies went to make sure nobody escaped from the back. But in a minute Wayne came out dressed, his hands in his pockets, and followed Goodloe down the stairs, the deputies watching him closely, and watching the house.

"Where's your brothers?" Goodloe asked.

He looked down.

Goodloe nodded to the house and two deputies went in, guns drawn. They came out a few minutes later, frowning.

"Must've heard us coming," Goodloe said. "Well, we got this one. We'll find them other two tomorrow." They got into the Blazer and Goodloe looked at Wayne, sitting in the back.

"Put them cuffs on him," Goodloe said.

Holding his rifle, Scott came out of the woods when the Blazer was gone. He returned to the house.

“They got Wayne,” Esther said. “Why didn’t you come tell him they was out there?”

“He got to learn,” Scott said. He went to the cabinet where she kept the whiskey and took the bottle. She watched him go to the sofa and sit down in front of the blank TV. Soon she joined him, bringing glasses. He filled both, and when they emptied them he filled them again.

They spent the night like that, and at dawn they were drunk. Wearing her robe, Esther began clipping her fingernails, a cigarette smoking in the ashtray beside her. She’d forgotten about calling Kirxy.

Scott was telling her about the biggest catfish they’d ever called up: 100 pounds, he swore, 150. “You could of put your whole head in that old cat’s mouth,” he said, sipping his whiskey. “Back fin long as your damn arm.”

He stood. Walked to the front window. There were toads in the yard—with the river swelling they were everywhere. In the evenings there were rainfrogs. The yard had turned into a pond and each night the rainfrogs sang. It was like no other sound. Esther said it kept her up at night.

“That, and some other things,” she said.

Scott heard a fingernail ring the ashtray. He rubbed his hand across his chin, felt the whiskers there. He watched the toads as they huddled in the yard, still as rocks, bloated and miserable-looking.

“That catfish was green,” Scott said, sipping. “I swear to God. Green as grass.”

“Them goddamn rainfrogs,” she said. “I just lay there at night with my hands over my ears.”

A clipping rang the ashtray.

He turned and went to her on the sofa. “They was moss growing on his nose,” he said, putting his hand on her knee.

“Go find your brother,” she said. She got up and walked unsteadily across the floor and went into the bathroom, closed the door. When she came out, he and the bottle were gone.

Without Kent, Scott felt free to do what he wanted, which was to drive very fast. He got the truck started and spun off, aiming for every mud hole he could. He shot past a house with a washing machine on the front porch, two thin black men skinning a hog hanging from a tree. One of the men waved with a knife. Drinking, Scott drove through the mountains of trash at the dump and turned the truck in circles, kicking up muddy roostertails. He swerved past the Negro church and the graveyard where a group of blacks huddled, four warbling poles over an open grave, the wind tearing the preacher’s hat out of his hands and a

woman's umbrella reversing suddenly.

When he tired of driving, he left the truck in their hiding place, and using trees for balance, stumbled down the hill to their boat. He carried Kent's rifle, which he'd always admired. On the river, he fired up the outboard and accelerated, the boat prow lifting and leveling out, the buzz of the motor rising in the trees. The water was nearly orange from mud, the cypress knees nothing but knobs and tips because of the floods. Nearing the old train trestle, he cut the motor and coasted to a stop. He sat listening to the rain, to the distant barking of a dog, half a mile away. Chasing something, maybe a deer. As the dog charged through the woods, Scott closed his eyes and imagined the terrain, marking where he thought the dog was now, and where he thought it was now. Then the barking stopped, suddenly, as if the dog had run smack into a tree.

Scott clicked on the trolling motor and moved the boat close to the edge of the river, the rifle across his knees. He scanned the banks, and when the rain started to fall harder he accelerated toward the trestle. From beneath the crossties, he smelled creosote and watched the rain as it stirred the river. He looked into the gray trees and thought he would drive into town later, see about getting Wayne. Kent had never wanted to go to Grove Hill—their father had warned them of the police, of jail.

Scott picked up one of the catfish from the night before. It was stiff, as if carved out of wood. He stared at it, watching the green blowflies hover above his fist, then threw it over into the cattails along the bank.

The telephone rig lay under the seat. He lifted the chains quietly, considering what giant catfish might be passing beneath the boat this very second, a thing as large as a man's thigh with eyes the size of ripe plums and skin the color of mud. Catfish, their father had taught them, have long whiskers that make them the only fish you can "call." Kirxy had told Scott and his brothers that if a game warden caught you telephoning, all you needed to do was dump your rig overboard. But, Kirxy warned, Frank David would handcuff you and swim around the bottom of the river until he found your rig.

Scott spat a stream of tobacco into the brown water. Minnows appeared and began to investigate, nibbling at the dark yolk of spit as it elongated and dissolved. With his rifle's safety off, he lowered the chains into the water, a good distance apart. He checked the connections—the battery, the telephone. He lifted the phone and began to dial. "Hello?" he whispered, the thing his father had always said, grinning in the dark. The wind picked up a bit, he heard it rattling in the trees, and he dialed faster, had just seen the first silver body bob to the surface when something landed with a clatter in his boat. He glanced over.

A bundle of dynamite, sparks shooting off the end, fuse already gone. He

looked above him, the trestle, but nobody was there. He moved to grab the dynamite, but his cheeks ballooned with hot red wind and his hands caught fire.

When the smoke cleared and the water stopped boiling, silver bodies began to bob to the surface—largemouth bass, bream, gar, suckers, white perch, polliwogs, catfish—some only stunned but others dead, in pieces, pink fruit-like things, the water blooming darkly with mud.

Kirxy's telephone rang for the second time in one day, a rarity that proved what his wife had always said: bad news came over the phone. The first call had been Esther, telling him of Kent's death, Wayne's arrest, Scott's disappearance. This time Kirxy heard Goodloe's voice telling him that somebody—or maybe a couple of somebodies—had been blown up out on the trestle.

"Scott," Kirxy said, sitting.

He arrived at the trestle, and with his cane hobbled over the uneven tracks. Goodloe's deputies and three ambulance drivers in rubber gloves and waders were scraping pieces off the crossties with spoons, dropping the parts in ziplock bags. The boat, two flattened shreds of aluminum, lay on the bank. In the water, minnows darted about, nibbling.

"Christ," Kirxy said. He brought a handkerchief to his lips. Then he went to where Goodloe stood on the bank, writing in his notebook.

"What do you aim to do about this?" Kirxy demanded.

"Try to figure out who it was, first."

"You know goddamn well who it was."

"I expect it's either Kent or Scott Gates."

"It's Scott," Kirxy said.

"How do you know that?"

Kirxy told him that Kent was dead.

"I ain't seen the body," Goodloe said.

Kirxy's blood pressure was going up. "Fuck, Sugarbaby. Are you one bit aware what's going on here?"

"Fishing accident," Goodloe said. "His bait exploded."

From the bank, a deputy called that he'd found most of a boot. "Foot's still in it," he said, holding it up by the lace.

"Tag it," Goodloe said, writing something down. "Keep looking."

Kirxy poked Goodloe in the shoulder with his cane. "You really think Scott'd blow himself up?"

Goodloe looked at his shoulder, the muddy cane print, then at the storekeeper. "Not on purpose, I don't." He paused. "Course, suicide does run in their family."

"What about Kent?"

“What about him?”

“Christ, Sugarbaby—”

Goodloe held up his hand. “Just show me, Kirxy.”

They left the ambulance drivers and the deputies and walked the other way without talking. When they came to Goodloe’s Blazer, they got in and drove without talking. Soon they stopped in front of the Gateses’ cabin. Instantly hounds surrounded the truck, barking viciously and jumping with muddy paws against the glass. Goodloe blew the horn until the hounds slunk away, heads low, fangs bared. The sheriff opened his window and fired several times in the air, backing the dogs up. When he and Kirxy got out, Goodloe had reloaded.

The hounds kept to the edge of the woods, watching.

His eye on them, Kirxy led Goodloe behind the decrepit cabin. Rusty screens covered some windows, rags of drape others. Beneath the house, the dogs paced them. “Back here,” Kirxy said, heading into the trees. Esther had said they’d buried Kent, and this was the logical place. He went slowly, careful not to bump a limb and cause a small downpour. Sure enough, there lay the grave. You could see where the dogs had been scratching around it.

Goodloe went over and toed the dirt. “You know the cause of death?”

“Yeah, I know the cause of death. His name’s Frank fucking David.”

“I meant how he was killed.”

“The boys said snakebite. Three times in the neck. But I’d do an autopsy.”

“You would.” Goodloe exhaled. “OK. I’ll send Roy and Avery over here to dig him up. Maybe shoot these goddern dogs.”

“I’ll tell you what you’d better do first. You better keep Wayne locked up safe.”

“I can’t hold him much longer,” Goodloe said. “Unless he confesses.”

Kirxy pushed him from behind, and at the edge of the woods the dogs tensed. Goodloe backed away, raising his pistol, the grave between them.

“You crazy, Kirxy? You been locked in that store too long?”

“Goodloe,” Kirxy gasped. The cotton in his left ear had come out and suddenly air was roaring through his head. “Even you can’t be this stupid. You let that boy out and he’s that cold-blooded fucker’s next target—”

“Target, Kirxy? Shit. Ain’t nothing to prove anybody killed them damn boys? This one snakebit, you said so yourself. That other one blowing himself up. Them dern Gateses has fished with dynamite their whole life. You oughta know that—you the one gets it for ’em.” He narrowed his eyes. “You’re about neck deep in this thing, you know. And I don’t mean just lying to protect them boys neither. I mean selling explosives illegally, to minors, Kirxy.”

“I don’t give a shit if I am!” Kirxy yelled. “Two dead boys in two days and

you're worried about dynamite? You oughta be out there looking for Frank David."

"He ain't supposed to be here for another week or two," Goodloe said. "Paperwork—"

He fired his pistol then. Kirxy jumped, but the sheriff was looking past him, and when Kirxy followed his eyes he saw the dog that had been creeping in. It lay slumped in the mud, a hind leg kicking, blood coloring the water around it.

Goodloe backed away, smoke curling from the barrel of his pistol.

Around them the other dogs circled, heads low, moving sideways, the hair on their spines sticking up.

"Let's argue about this in the truck," Goodloe said.

At the store Kirxy put out the OPEN sign. He sat in his chair with his coffee and a cigarette. He'd read the same page three times when it occurred to him to phone Montgomery and get Frank David's office on the line. It took a few calls, but he soon got the number and dialed. The snippy young woman who answered told Kirxy that yes, Mr. David was supposed to take over the Lower Peachtree district, but that he wasn't starting until next week, she thought.

Where was he now? Kirxy wanted to know.

"Florida?" she said. "No, Louisiana. Fishing." No sir, he couldn't be reached. He preferred his vacations private.

Kirxy slammed down the phone. He lit another cigarette and tried to think.

It was just a matter, he decided, of keeping Wayne alive until Frank David took over the district. There were probably other game wardens who'd testify that Frank David was over in Louisiana fishing right now. But once the son of a bitch officially moved here, he'd have motive and his alibi wouldn't be as strong. If Wayne turned up dead, Frank David would be the chief suspect.

Kirxy inhaled smoke deeply and tried to imagine how Frank David would think. How he would act. The noise he would make or not make as he went through the woods. What he would say if you happened upon him. Or he upon you. What he would do if he came into the store. Certainly he wasn't the creature Kirxy had created to scare the boys, not some wild ghostly thing. He was just a man who'd had a hard life and grown bitter and angry. Probably an alcoholic. A man who chose to uphold the law because breaking it was no challenge. A man with no obligation to any other men or a family. Just to himself and his job. To some goddamned game-warden code. His job was to protect the wild things the law had deemed worthy: dove, duck, owls, hawks, turkeys, alligators, squirrels, coons, and deer. But how did the Gates boys fall into the category of trash animal—wildcats or possums or armadillos, snapping turtles, snakes? Things

you could kill any time, run over in your truck and not even look at in your mirror to see dying behind you? Christ. Why couldn't Frank David see that he—more than a match for the boys—was of their breed?

Kirxy drove to the highway. The big .30-06 he hadn't touched in years was on the seat next to him, and as he steered he pushed cartridges into the clip, then shoved the clip into the gun's underbelly. He pulled the lever that injected a cartridge into the chamber and took a long drink of whiskey to wash down three of the pills that helped dull the ache in his knees, and the one in his gut.

It was almost dark when he arrived at the edge of a large field. He parked facing the grass. This was a place a few hundred yards from a fairly well-traveled blacktop, a spot no sane poacher would dare use. There were already two or three deer creeping into the open from the woods across the field. They came to eat the tall grass, looking up only when a car passed, their ears swiveling, jaws frozen, sprigs of grass twitching in their lips like the legs of insects.

Kirxy sat watching. He sipped his whiskey and lit a cigarette with a trembling hand. Both truck doors were locked and he knew this was a very stupid thing he was doing. Several times he told himself to go home, let things unfold as they would. Then he saw the faces of the two dead boys. And the face of the live one.

When Boo had killed himself, the oldest two had barely been teenagers, but it was eleven-year-old Wayne who'd found him. That truck still had windows then, and the back windshield had been sprayed red with blood. Flies had gathered at the top of the truck in what Wayne discovered was a twenty-two-caliber hole. Kirxy frowned, thinking of it. Boo's hat still on his head, a small hole through the hat, too. The back of the truck was full of wood Boo'd been cutting, and the three boys had unloaded the wood and stacked it neatly beside the road. Kirxy shifted in his seat, imagining the boys pushing that truck for two miles over dirt roads, somehow finding the leverage or whatever, the goddamn strength, to get it home. To pull their father from inside and bury him. To clean out the truck. Kirxy shuddered and thought of Frank David, then made himself think of his wife instead. He rubbed his biceps and watched the shadows creep across the field, the tree line dim and begin to disappear.

Soon it was full dark. He unscrewed the interior light bulb from the ceiling, pulled the door lock up quietly. Holding his breath, he opened the door. Outside, he propped the rifle on the side mirror, flicked the safety off. He reached through the window, felt along the dash for the headlight switch, pulled it.

The field blazed with the eyes of deer—red hovering dots staring back at him. Kirxy aimed and squeezed the trigger at the first pair of eyes. Not waiting to see

if he'd hit the deer, he moved the gun to another pair. He'd gotten off five shots before the eyes began to disappear. When the last echo from the gun faded, at least three deer lay dead or wounded in the glow of his headlights. One doe bleated weakly and bleated again. Kirxy coughed and took the gun back into the truck, closed the door, and reloaded in the dark. Then he waited. The doe kept bleating and things in the woods took shape, detached, and whisked toward Kirxy over the grass like spooks. And the little noises. Things like footsteps. And the stories. Frank David appearing in the bed of somebody's *moving truck* and punching through the back glass, grabbing and breaking the driver's arm. Leaping from the truck and watching while it wrecked.

"Quit it," Kirxy croaked. "You damn schoolgirl."

Several more times that night he summoned his nerve and flicked on the headlights, firing at any eyes he saw or firing at nothing. When he finally fell asleep just after two A.M., his body numb with painkillers and whiskey, he dreamed of his wife on the day of her first miscarriage. The way the nurses couldn't find the vein in her arm, how they'd kept trying with the needle, the way she'd cried and held his fingers tightly, like a woman giving birth.

He started awake, terrified, as if he'd fallen asleep driving.

Caring less for silence, he stumbled from the truck and flicked on the lights and fired at the eyes, though now they were doubling up, floating in the air. He lowered the gun and for no good reason found himself thinking of a time when he'd tried fly-fishing, standing in his yard with his wife watching from the porch, *Tarzan of the Apes* in her lap, him whipping the line in the air, showing off, and then the strange pulling you get when you catch a fish, Betty jumping to her feet, the book falling, and her yelling that he'd caught a bat, for heaven's sake, a *bat*!

He climbed back into the truck. His hands shook so hard he had trouble getting the door locked. He bowed his head, missing her so much that he cried, softly and for a long time.

Dawn found him staring at a field littered with dead does, yearlings, and fawns. One of the deer, only wounded, tried to crawl toward the safety of the trees. Kirxy got out of the truck and vomited colorless water, then stood looking around at the foggy morning. He lifted his rifle and limped into the grass in the drizzle and, a quick hip shot, put the deer out of its misery.

He was sitting on the open tailgate trying to light a cigarette when Goodloe and a deputy passed in their Blazer and stopped.

The sheriff stepped out, signaling for the deputy to stay put. He sat beside Kirxy on the tailgate, the truck dipping with his weight. His stomach was growling and he patted it absently.

“You old fool,” Goodloe said, staring at Kirxy and then at the field. “You figured to make Frank David show himself?” He shook his head. “Good Lord Almighty, Kirxy. What’ll it take to prove to you there ain’t no damn game warden out there? Not yet, anyhow.”

Kirxy didn’t answer. Goodloe went to the Blazer and told the deputy to pick him up at Kirxy’s store. Then he helped the old man into the passenger seat and went around and got in the driver’s side. He took the rifle and unloaded it, put its clip in his pocket.

“We’ll talk about them deer later,” he said. “Now I’d better get you back.”

They’d gone a silent mile when Kirxy said, “Would you mind running me by Esther’s?”

Goodloe shrugged and turned that way. His stomach made a strangling noise. The rain and wind were picking up, rocking the truck. The sheriff took a bottle of whiskey from his pocket. “Medicinal,” he said, handing the bottle to Kirxy. “It’s just been two freak accidents, is all, Kirxy. I’ve seen some strange shit, a lot stranger than this. Them Gateses is just a unlucky bunch. Period. I ain’t one to go believing in curses, but I swear to God if they ain’t downright snakebit.”

Soon Goodloe had parked in front of Esther’s and they sat waiting for the rain to slack. Kirxy rubbed his knees and looked out the windows where the trees were half-submerged in the rising floodwaters.

“They say old Esther has her a root cellar,” Goodloe said, taking a sip. “Shit. I expect it’s full of water this time of year. She’s probably got cottonmouths wrapped around her plumbing.” He shuddered and offered the bottle. Kirxy took it and sipped. He gave it back and Goodloe took it and drank, then drank again. “Lord if that don’t hit the spot.

“When I was in the service,” Goodloe went on, “over in Thailand? They had them little bitty snakes, them banded kraits. Poison as cobras, what they told us. Used to hide up under the commode lid. Every time you took you a shit, you had to lift up the lid, see was one there.” He drank. “Yep. It was many a time I kicked one off in the water, flushed it down.”

“Wait here,” Kirxy said. He opened the door, his pants leg darkening as the rain poured in, cold as needles. He set his knee out deliberately, planted his cane in the mud and pulled himself up, stood in water to his ankles. He limped across the yard with his hand blocking the rain. There were two chickens on the front porch, their feathers fluffed out so that they looked strange, menacing. Kirxy climbed the porch steps with the pain so strong in his knees that stars popped near his face by the time he reached the top. He leaned against the house, breathing hard. Touched himself at the throat where a tie might’ve gone. Then he rapped gently with the hook of his cane. The door opened immediately. Dark

inside. She stood there, looking at him.

“How come you don’t ever stop by the store anymore?” he asked.

She folded her arms.

“Scott’s dead,” he said.

“I heard,” Esther said. “And I’m leaving. Fuck this place and every one of you.”

She closed the door and Kirxy would never see her again.

At the store, Goodloe nodded for the deputy to stay in the Blazer, then he took Kirxy by the elbow and helped him up the steps. He unlocked the door for him and held his hand as the old man sank in his chair.

“Want those boots off?” Goodloe asked, spreading a blanket over Kirxy’s lap.

He bent and unlaced the left, then the right.

“Pick up your foot.

“Now the other one.”

He set the wet boots by the stove.

“It’s a little damp in here. I’ll light this thing.”

He found a box of kitchen matches on a shelf under the counter among the glass figurines Kirxy’s wife had collected. The little deer. The figure skater. The unicorn. Goodloe got a fire going in the stove and stood warming the backs of his legs.

“I’ll bring Wayne by a little later,” he said, but Kirxy didn’t seem to hear.

Goodloe sat in his office with his feet on the desk, rolling a cartridge between his fingers. Despite himself, he was beginning to think Kirxy might be right. Maybe Frank David *was* out there on the prowl. He stood, put on his pistol belt and walked to the back, pushed open the swinging door and had Roy buzz him through. So far he’d had zero luck getting anything out of Wayne. The boy just sat in his cell wrapped in a blanket, not talking to anybody. Goodloe had told him about his brother’s death, and he’d seen no emotion cross the boy’s face. Goodloe figured that it wasn’t this youngest one who’d killed that game warden, it’d probably been the others. He knew that this boy wasn’t carrying a full cylinder, the way he never talked, but he had most likely been a witness. He’d been considering calling in the state psychologist from the Searcy Mental Hospital to give the boy an evaluation.

“Come on,” Goodloe said, stopping by Wayne’s cell. “I’m fixing to put your talent to some good use.”

He kept the boy cuffed as the deputy drove them toward the trestle.

“Turn your head, Dave,” Goodloe said, handing Wayne a pint of Old Crow.

The boy took it in both hands and unscrewed the lid, began to drink too fast.

“Slow down there, partner,” Goodloe said, taking back the bottle. “You need to be alert.”

Soon they stood near the trestle, gazing at the flat shapes of the boat on the bank. Wayne knelt and examined the ground. The deputy came up and started to say something, but Goodloe motioned for quiet.

“Just like a goddern bloodhound,” he whispered. “Maybe I oughta give him your job.”

“Reckon what he’s after?” the deputy asked.

Wayne scrambled up the trestle, and the two men followed. The boy walked slowly over the rails, examining the spaces between the crossties. He stopped, bent down, and peered at something. Picked it up.

“What you got there, boy?” Goodloe called, going and squatting beside him. He took a sip of Old Crow.

When Wayne hit him, two-handed, the bottle flew one way and Goodloe the other. Both landed in the river, Goodloe with his hand clapped to his head to keep his hat on. He came up immediately, bobbing and sputtering. On the trestle, the deputy tackled Wayne and they went down fighting on the crossties. Below, Goodloe dredged himself out of the water. He came ashore dripping and tugged his pistol from its holster. He held it up so that a thin trickle of orange water fell. He took off his hat and looked up to see the deputy disappear belly-first into the face of the river.

Wayne ran down the track, toward the swamp. The deputy came boiling ashore. He had his own pistol drawn and was looking around vengefully.

Goodloe climbed the trestle in time to see Wayne disappear into the woods. The sheriff chased him for a while, ducking limbs and vines, but stopped, breathing hard. The deputy passed him.

Wayne circled back through the woods and went quickly over the soft ground, half-crawling up the sides of hills and sliding down the other sides. Two hollows over, he heard the deputy heading the wrong direction. Wayne slowed a little and just trotted for a long time in the rain, the cuffs rubbing his wrists raw. He stopped once and looked at what he’d been carrying in one hand: a match, limp and black now with water, nearly dissolved. He stood looking at the trees around him, the hanging Spanish moss and the cypress knees rising from the stagnant creek to his left.

The hair on the back of his neck rose. He knelt, tilting his head, closing his eyes, and listened. He heard the rain, heard it hit leaves and wood and heard the puddles lapping at their tiny banks, but beyond those sounds there were other

muffled noises. A mockingbird mocking a blue jay. A squirrel barking and another answering. The deputy falling, a quarter mile away. Then another sound, this one close. A match striking. Wayne began to run before opening his eyes and crashed into a tree. He rolled and ran again, tearing through limbs and briars. He leaped small creeks and slipped and got up and kept running. At every turn he expected Frank David, and he was near tears when he finally stumbled into his family graveyard.

The first thing he saw was that Kent had been dug up. Wooden stakes surrounded the hole and fenced it in with yellow tape that had words on it. Wayne approached slowly, hugging himself. Something floated in the grave. With his heart pounding, he peered inside. A dog.

Wary of the trees behind him, he crept toward their backyard, stopping at the edge. He crouched and blew into his hands to warm his cheeks. He gazed at the dark windows of their cabin, then circled the house, keeping to the woods. He saw the pine tree with the low limb they used for stringing up larger animals to clean, the rusty chain hanging and the iron pipe they stuck through the back legs of a deer or the rare wild pig. Kent and Scott had usually done the cleaning while Wayne fed the guts to their dogs and tried to keep the dogs from fighting.

And there, past the tree, lay the rest of the dogs. Shot dead. Partially eaten. Buzzards standing in the mud, staring boldly at him with their heads bloody and their beaks open.

It was dark when Kirxy woke in his chair; he'd heard the door creak. Someone stood there, and the storekeeper was afraid until he smelled the river.

"Hey, boy," he said.

Wayne ate two cans of potted meat with his fingers and a candy bar and a box of saltines. Kirxy gave him a Coke from the red cooler and he drank it and took another one while Kirxy got a hacksaw from the rack of tools behind the counter. He slipped the cardboard wrapping off and nodded for Wayne to sit. The storekeeper pulled up another chair and faced the boy and began sawing the handcuff chain. The match dropped out of Wayne's hand but neither saw it. Wayne sat with his head down and his palms up, his wrists on his knees, breathing heavily, while Kirxy worked and the silver shavings accumulated in a pile between their boots. The boy didn't lift his head the entire time, and he'd been asleep for quite a while when Kirxy finally sawed through. The old man rose, flexing his sore hands, and got a blanket from a shelf. He unfolded it, shook out the dust, and spread it over Wayne. He went to the door and turned the dead bolt.

The phone rang later. It was Goodloe, asking about the boy.

“He’s asleep,” Kirxy said. “You been lost all this time, Sugarbaby?”

“That I have,” Goodloe said, “and we still ain’t found old Dave yet.”

For a week they stayed there together. Kirxy could barely walk now, and the pain in his side was worse than ever, but he put the boy to work, sweeping, dusting, and scrubbing the shelves. He had Wayne pull a table next to his chair, and Kirxy did something he hadn’t done in years: took inventory. With the boy’s help, he counted and ledgered each item, marking them in his long green book. The back shelf contained canned soups, vegetables, sardines, and tins of meat. Many of the cans were so old that the labels flaked off in Kirxy’s hand, so they were unmarked when Wayne replaced them in the rings they’d made not only in the dust but on the wood itself. In the back of that last shelf, Wayne discovered four tins of Underwood Deviled Ham, and as their labels fell away at Kirxy’s touch, he remembered a time when he’d purposely unwrapped the paper from these cans because each label showed several red dancing devils, and some of his Negro customers had refused to buy anything that advertised the devil.

Kirxy now understood that his store was dead, that it no longer provided a service. His Negro customers had stopped coming years before. The same with Esther. For the past few years, except for the rare hunter, he’d been in business for the Gates boys alone. He looked across the room at Wayne, spraying the windows with Windex and wiping at them absently, gazing outside. The boy wore the last of the new denim overalls Kirxy had in stock. Once, when the store had thrived, he’d had many sizes, but for the longest time now the only ones he’d stocked were the boys’.

That night, beneath his standing lamp, Kirxy began again to read his wife’s copy of *Tarzan of the Apes* to Wayne. He sipped his whiskey and spoke clearly, to be heard over the rain. When he paused to turn a page, he saw that the boy lay asleep across the row of chairs they’d arranged in the shape of a bed. Looking down through his bifocals, Kirxy flipped to the back of the book to the list of other Tarzan novels—twenty-four in all—and he decided to order them through the mail so Wayne would hear the complete adventures of Tarzan of the Apes.

In the morning, Goodloe called and said that Frank David had officially arrived—the sheriff himself had witnessed the swearing-in—and he was now this district’s game warden.

“Pretty nice fellow,” Goodloe said. “Kinda quiet. Polite. He asked me how the fishing was.”

Then it’s over, Kirxy thought.

A week later, Kirxy told Wayne he had to run some errands in Grove Hill. He’d

spent the night before trying to decide whether to take the boy with him but had decided not to, that he couldn't watch him forever. Before he left he gave Wayne his .30-06 and told him to stay put, not to leave for anything. For himself, Kirxy took an old .22 bolt action and placed it in the back window rack of his truck. He waved to Wayne and drove off.

He thought that if the boy wanted to run away, it was his own choice. Kirxy owed him the chance, at least.

At the doctor's office the young surgeon frowned and removed his glasses when he told Kirxy that the cancer was advancing, that he'd need to check into the hospital in Mobile immediately. It was way past time. "Just look at your color," the surgeon said. Kirxy stood, thanked the man, put on his hat, and limped outside. He went by the post office and placed his order for the Tarzan books. He shopped for supplies in the Dollar Store and the Piggly Wiggly, had the checkout boys put the boxes in the front seat beside him. Coming out of the drugstore, he remembered that it was Saturday, that there'd be chicken fights today And possible news about Frank David.

At Heflin's, Kirxy paid his five-dollar admission and let Heflin help him to a seat in the bottom of the stands. He poured some whiskey in his coffee and sat studying the crowd. Nobody had mentioned Frank David, but a few old-timers had offered their sympathies on the deaths of Kent and Scott. Down in the pit the Cajuns were back, and during the eighth match—one of the Louisiana whites versus a local red, the tall bald Cajun stooping and circling the tangled birds and licking his lips as his rooster swarmed the other and hooked it, the barn smoky and dark, rain splattering the tin roof—the door swung open.

Instantly the crowd was hushed. Feathers settled to the ground. Even the Cajuns knew who he was. He stood at the door, unarmed, his hands on his hips. A wiry man. He lifted his chin and people tried to hide their drinks. His giant ears. The hooked nose. The eyes. Bird handlers reached over their shoulders, pulling at the numbered pieces of masking tape on their backs. The two handlers and the referee in the ring sidled out, leaving the roosters.

For a full minute Frank David stood staring. People stepped out the back door. Climbed out windows. Half-naked boys in the rafters were frozen like monkeys hypnotized by a snake.

Frank David's gaze didn't stop on Kirxy but settled instead on the roosters, the white one pecking out the red's eyes. Outside, trucks roared to life, backfiring like gunshots. Kirxy placed his hands on his knees. He rose, turned up his coat collar, and flung his coffee out. Frank David still hadn't looked at him. Kirxy planted his cane and made his way out the back door and through the mud.

Not a person in sight, just tailgates vanishing into the woods.

From inside his truck, Kirxy watched Frank David walk away from the barn and head toward the trees. Now he was just a bowlegged man with white hair. Kirxy felt behind him for the .22 rifle with one hand while rolling down the window with the other. He had a little trouble aiming the gun with his shaky hands. He pulled back the bolt and inserted a cartridge into the chamber. Flicked the safety off. The sight of the rifle wavered between Frank David's shoulders as he walked. As if an old man like Kirxy were nothing to fear. Kirxy ground his teeth: that was why the bastard hadn't come to his deer massacre—an old storekeeper wasn't worth it, wasn't dangerous.

Closing one eye, Kirxy pulled the trigger. He didn't hear the shot, though later he would notice his ears ringing.

Frank David's coat bloomed out to the side and he missed a step. He stopped and put his hand to his lower right side and looked over his shoulder at Kirxy, who was fumbling with the rifle's bolt action. Then Frank David was gone, just wasn't there, there were only the trees, bent in the rain, and shreds of fog in the air. For a moment, Kirxy wondered if he'd even seen a man at all, if he'd shot at something out of his own imagination, if the cancer that had started in his pancreas had inched up along his spine into his brain and was deceiving him, forming men out of the air and walking them across fields, giving them hands and eyes and the power to disappear.

From inside the barn, the rooster crowed. Kirxy remembered Wayne. He hung the rifle in its rack and started his truck, gunned the engine. He banged over the field, flattening saplings and a fence, and though he couldn't feel his toes, he drove very fast.

Not until two days later, in the VA hospital in Mobile, would Kirxy finally begin to piece it all together. Parts of that afternoon were patchy and hard to remember: shooting Frank David, going back to the store and finding it empty, no sign of a struggle, the .30-06 gone, as if Wayne had walked out on his own and taken the gun. Kirxy could remember getting back into his truck. He'd planned to drive to Grove Hill—the courthouse, the game warden's office—and find Frank David, but somewhere along the way he passed out behind the wheel and veered off the road into a ditch. He barely remembered the rescue workers. The sirens. Goodloe himself pulling Kirxy out.

Later that night two coon hunters had stumbled across Wayne, wandering along the river, his face and shirt covered in blood, the .30-06 nowhere to be found.

When Goodloe had told the semiconscious Kirxy what happened, the storekeeper turned silently to the window, where he saw only the reflected face

of an old, failed, dying man.

And later still, in the warm haze of morphine, Kirxy lowered his eyelids and let his imagination unravel and retwine the mystery of Frank David: it was as if Frank David himself appeared in the chair where Goodloe had sat, as if the game warden broke the seal on a bottle of Jim Beam and leaned forward on his elbows and touched the bottle to Kirxy's cracked lips and whispered to him a story about boots going over land and not making a sound, about rain washing the blood trail away even as the boots passed. About a tired old game warden taking his hand out of his coat and seeing the blood from Kirxy's bullet there, feeling it trickle down his side. About the boy in the back of his truck, handcuffed, gagged, blindfolded. About driving carefully through deep ruts in the road. Stopping behind Esther's empty house and carrying the kicking boy inside on his shoulder.

When the blindfold is removed, Wayne has trouble focusing but knows where he is because of her smell. Bacon and soap. Cigarettes, dust. Frank David holds what looks like a pillowcase. He comes across the room and puts the pillowcase down. He rubs his eyes and sits on the bed beside Wayne. He opens a book of matches and lights a cigarette. Holds the filtered end to Wayne's lips, but the boy doesn't inhale. Frank David puts the cigarette in his own lips, the embers glow. Then he drops it on the floor, crushes it out with his boot. Picks up the butt and slips it into his shirt pocket. He puts his hand over the boy's watery eyes, the skin of his palm dry and hard. Cool. Faint smell of blood. He moves his fingers over Wayne's nose, lips, chin. Stops at his throat and holds the boy tightly but not painfully. In a strange way Wayne can't understand, he finds it reassuring. His thudding heart slows. Something is struggling beside his shoulder and Frank David takes the thing from the bag. Now the smell in the room changes. Wayne begins to thrash and whip his head from side to side.

"Goddamn, son," Frank David whispers. "I hate to civilize you."

Goodloe began going to the veterans' hospital in Mobile once a week. He brought Kirxy cigarettes from his store. There weren't any private rooms available, and the beds around the storekeeper were filled with dying ex-soldiers who never talked, but Kirxy was beside a window and Goodloe would raise the glass and prop it open with a novel. They smoked together and drank whiskey from paper cups, listening for nurses.

It was the tall mean one.

"One more time, goddamn it," she said, coming out of nowhere and plucking the cigarettes from their lips so quickly they were still puckered.

Sometimes Goodloe would wheel Kirxy down the hall in his chair, the IV rack attached by a stainless steel contraption with a black handle the shape of a

flower. They would go to the elevator and ride down three floors to a covered area where people smoked and talked about the weather. There were nurses and black cafeteria workers in white uniforms and hairnets and people visiting other people and a few patients. Occasionally in the halls they'd see some mean old fart Kirxy knew and they'd talk about hospital food or chicken fighting. Or the fact that Frank David had surprised everyone and decided to retire after only a month of quiet duty, that the new game warden was from Texas. And a nigger to boot.

Then Goodloe would wheel Kirxy back along a long window, out of which you could see the tops of oak trees.

On one visit, Goodloe told Kirxy they'd taken Wayne out of intensive care. Three weeks later he said the boy'd been discharged.

"I give him a ride to the store," Goodloe said. This was in late May and Kirxy was a yellow skeleton with hands that shook.

"I'll stop by and check on him every evening," Goodloe went on. "He'll be OK, the doctor says. Just needs to keep them bandages changed. I can do that, I reckon."

They were quiet then, for a time, just the coughs of the dying men and the soft swishing of nurses' thighs and the hum of IV machines.

"Goodloe," Kirxy whispered, "I'd like you to help me with something."

Goodloe leaned in to hear, an unlit cigarette behind his ear like a pencil.

Kirxy's tongue was white and cracked, his breath awful. "I'd like to change my will," he said, "make the boy beneficiary."

"All right," Goodloe said.

"I'm obliged," whispered Kirxy. He closed his eyes.

Near the end he was delirious. He said he saw a little black creature at the foot of his bed. Said it had him by the toe. In surprising fits of strength, he would throw his water pitcher at it, or his box of tissues, or the *TV Guide*. Restraints were called for. His coma was a relief to everyone, and he died quietly in the night.

In Kirxy's chair in the store, Wayne didn't seem to hear Goodloe's questions. The sheriff had done some looking in the Grove Hill library—"research" was the modern word—and discovered that one species of cobra spat venom at its victim's eyes, but there weren't such snakes in southern Alabama. Anyway, the hospital lab had confirmed that it was the venom of a cottonmouth that had blinded Wayne. The question, of course, was who had put the venom in his eyes. Goodloe shuddered to think of it, how they'd found Wayne staggering about, howling in pain, bleeding from his tear ducts, the skin around his eye sockets

dissolving, exposing the white ridges of his skull.

In the investigation, several local blacks including Euphrates Morrisette stated to Goodloe that the youngest Gates boy and his two dead brothers had molested Euphrates' stepdaughter in her own house. There was a rumor that several black men dressed in white sheets with pillowcases for hoods had caught and punished Wayne as he lurked along the river, peeping in folks' windows and doing unwholesome things to himself. Others suggested that the conjure woman had cast a spell on the Gateses, that she'd summoned a swamp demon to chase them to hell. And still others attributed the happenings to Frank David. There were a few occurrences of violence between some of the local whites and the blacks—some fires, a broken jaw—but soon it died down and Goodloe filed the deaths of Kent and Scott Gates as accidental.

But he listed Wayne's blinding as unsolved. The snake venom had bleached his pupils white, and the skin around his eye sockets had required grafts. The doctors had had to use skin from his buttocks, and because his buttocks were hairy, the skin around his eyes grew hair, too.

In the years to come, the loggers who clear-cut the land along the river would occasionally stop in the store, less from a need to buy something than from a curiosity to see the hermit with the milky, hairy eyes. The store smelled horrible, like the inside of a bear's mouth, and dust lay thick and soft on the shelves. Because they'd come in, the loggers would feel obligated to buy something, but every item was moldy or stale beyond belief, except for the things in cans, which were all unlabeled so they never knew what they'd get. Nothing was marked as to price either, and the blind man wouldn't talk. He just sat by the stove. So the loggers paid more than what they thought a can was worth, leaving the money on the counter by the telephone, which hadn't been connected in years. When plumper, grayer Goodloe came by on the occasional evening, he'd take the bills and coins and put them in Kirxy's cash drawer. He was no longer sheriff, having lost several elections back to one of his deputies, Roy or Dave. Now he drove a Lance truck, his routes including the hospitals in the county.

"Dern, boy," he cracked once. "This store's doing a better business now than it ever has. You sure you don't want a cracker rack?"

When Goodloe left, Wayne listened to the sound of the truck as it faded. "Sugarbaby," he whispered.

And many a night for years after, until his own death in his sleep, Wayne would rise from the chair and move across the floor, taking Kirxy's cane from where it stood by the coat rack. He would go outside, down the stairs like a man who could see, his beard nearly to his chest, and he would walk soundlessly the length of the building, knowing the woods even better now as he crept down the

rain-rutted gullyside toward the river whose smell never left the caves of his nostrils and the roof of his mouth. At the riverbank, he would stop and sit with his back against a small pine, and lifting his white eyes to the sky, he would listen to the clicks and hum and thrattle of the woods, seeking out each noise at its source and imagining it: an acorn nodding, detaching, falling, its thin ricochet and the way it settles into the leaves. A bullfrog's bubbling throat and the things it says. The soft movement of the river over rocks and around the bases of cattails and cypress knees and through the wet hanging roots of trees. And then another sound, familiar. The soft, precise footsteps of Frank David. Downwind. Not coming closer, not going away. Circling. The striking of a match and the sizzle of ember and the fall of ash. The ascent of smoke. A strange and terrifying comfort for the rest of Wayne Gates's life.

DENNIS LEHANE

Running Out of Dog

FROM *Murder and Obsession*

THE PROBLEM WITH DOGS in Eden, South Carolina, was that the owners who bred them bred a lot of them. Or they allowed them to run free where they met up with other dogs of opposite gender and achieved the same result. This wouldn't have been so bad if Eden weren't so close to 1-95, and if the dogs weren't in the habit of bolting into traffic and fucking up the bumpers of potential tourists.

The mayor, Big Bobby Vargas, went to a mayoral conference up in Beaufort, where the governor made a surprise appearance to tell everyone how pissed off he was about this dog thing. Lot of money being poured into Eden these days, the governor said, lot of steps being taken to change her image, and he for one would be god-damned if a bunch of misbehaving canines was going to mess all that up.

"Boys," he'd said, looking Big Bobby Vargas dead in the eye, "they're starting to call this state the Devil's Kennel 'cause of all them pooch corpses along the interstate. And I don't know about you all, but I don't think that's a real pretty name."

Big Bobby told Elgin and Blue he'd never heard anyone call it the Devil's Kennel in his life. Heard a lot worse, sure, but never that. Big Bobby said the governor was full of shit. But, being the governor and all, he was sort of entitled.

The dogs in Eden had been a problem going back to the twenties and a part-time breeder named J. Mallon Ellenburg who, if his arms weren't up to their elbows in the guts of the tractors and combines he repaired for a living, was usually lashing out at something—his family when they weren't quick enough, his dogs when the family was. J. Mallon Ellenburg's dogs were mixed breeds and mongrels and they ran in packs, as did their offspring, and several generations later, those packs still moved through the Eden night like wolves, their bodies stripped to muscle and gristle, tense and angry, growling in the dark at J. Mallon Ellenburg's ghost.

Big Bobby went to the trouble of measuring exactly how much of 95 crossed through Eden, and he came up with 2.8 miles. Not much really, but still an average of .74 dog a day or 4.9 dogs a week. Big Bobby wanted the rest of the state funds the governor was going to be doling out at year's end, and if that meant getting rid of five dogs a week, give or take, then that's what was going to

get done.

“On the QT,” he said to Elgin and Blue, “on the QT, what we going to do, boys, is set up in some trees and shoot every canine who gets within barking distance of that interstate.”

Elgin didn’t much like this “we” stuff. First place, Big Bobby’d said “we” that time in Double O’s four years ago. This was before he’d become mayor, when he was nothing more than a county tax assessor who shot pool at Double O’s every other night, same as Elgin and Blue. But one night, after Harlan and Chub Uke had roughed him up over a matter of some pocket change, and knowing that neither Elgin nor Blue was too fond of the Uke family either, Big Bobby’d said, “We going to settle those boys’ asses tonight,” and started running his mouth the minute the brothers entered the bar.

Time the smoke cleared, Blue had a broken hand, Harlan and Chub were curled up on the floor, and Elgin’s lip was busted. Big Bobby, meanwhile, was hiding under the pool table, and Cal Sears was asking who was going to pay for the pool stick Elgin had snapped across the back of Chub’s head.

So Elgin heard Mayor Big Bobby saying “we” and remembered the ten dollars it had cost him for that pool stick, and he said, “No, sir, you can count me out this particular enterprise.”

Big Bobby looked disappointed. Elgin was a veteran of a foreign war, former Marine, a marksman. “Shit,” Big Bobby said, “what good are you, you don’t use the skills Uncle Sam spent good money teaching you?”

Elgin shrugged. “Damn, Bobby. I guess not much.”

But Blue kept his hand in, as both Big Bobby and Elgin knew he would. All the job required was a guy didn’t mind sitting in a tree who liked to shoot things. Hell, Blue was home.

Elgin didn’t have the time to be sitting up in a tree anyway. The past few months, he’d been working like crazy after they’d broke ground at Eden Falls—mixing cement, digging postholes, draining swamp water to shore up the foundation—with the real work still to come. There’d be several more months of drilling and bilging, spreading cement like cake icing, and erecting scaffolding to erect walls to erect facades. There’d be the hump-and-grind of rolling along in the dump trucks and drill trucks, the forklifts and cranes and industrial diggers, until the constant heave and jerk of them drove up his spine or into his kidneys like a corkscrew.

Time to sit up in a tree shooting dogs? Shit. Elgin didn’t have time to take a piss some days.

And then on top of all the work, he’d been seeing Drew Briggs’s ex-wife,

Shelley, lately. Shelley was the receptionist at Perkin Lut's Auto Emporium, and one day Elgin had brought his Impala in for a tire rotation and they'd got to talking. She'd been divorced from Drew over a year, and they waited a couple of months to show respect, but after a while they began showing up at Double O's and down at the IHOP together.

Once they drove clear to Myrtle Beach together for the weekend. People asked them what it was like, and they said, "Just like the postcards." Since the postcards never mentioned the price of a room at the Hilton, Elgin and Shelley didn't mention that all they'd done was drive up and down the beach twice before settling in a motel a bit west in Conway. Nice, though; had a color TV and one of those switches turned the bathroom into a sauna if you let the shower run. They'd started making love in the sauna, finished up on the bed with the steam coiling out from the bathroom and brushing their heels. Afterward, he pushed her hair back off her forehead and looked in her eyes and told her he could get used to this.

She said, "But wouldn't it cost a lot to install a sauna in your trailer?" then waited a full thirty seconds before she smiled.

Elgin liked that about her, the way she let him know he was still just a man after all, always would take himself too seriously, part of his nature. Letting him know she might be around to keep him apprised of that fact every time he did. Keep him from pushing a bullet into the breech of a thirty-aught-six, slamming the bolt home, firing into the flank of some wild dog.

Sometimes, when they'd shut down the site early for the day—if it had rained real heavy and the soil loosened near a foundation, or if supplies were running late—he'd drop by Lut's to see her. She'd smile as if he'd brought her flowers, say, "Caught boozing on the job again?" or some other smartass thing, but it made him feel good, as if something in his chest suddenly realized it was free to breathe.

Before Shelley, Elgin had spent a long time without a woman he could publicly acknowledge as his. He'd gone with Mae Shiller from fifteen to nineteen, but she'd gotten lonely while he was overseas, and he'd returned to find her gone from Eden, married to a boy up in South of the Border, the two of them working a corn-dog concession stand, making a tidy profit, folks said. Elgin dated some, but it took him a while to get over Mae, to get over the loss of something he'd always expected to have, the sound of her laugh and an image of her stepping naked from Cooper's Lake, her pale flesh beaded with water, having been the things that got Elgin through the jungle, through the heat, through the ticking of his own death he'd heard in his ears every night he'd been over there.

About a year after he'd come home, Jewel Lut had come to visit her mother, who still lived in the trailer park where Jewel had grown up with Elgin and Blue, where Elgin still lived. On her way out, she'd dropped by Elgin's and they'd sat out front of his trailer in some folding chairs, had a few drinks, talked about old times. He told her a bit about Vietnam, and she told him a bit about marriage. How it wasn't what you expected, how Perkin Lut might know a lot of things but he didn't know a damn sight about having fun.

There was something about Jewel Lut that sank into men's flesh the way heat did. It wasn't just that she was pretty, had a beautiful body, moved in a loose, languid way that made you picture her naked no matter what she was wearing. No, there was more to it. Jewel, never the brightest girl in town and not even the most charming, had something in her eyes that none of the women Elgin had ever met had; it was a capacity for living, for taking moments—no matter how small or inconsequential—and squeezing every last thing you could out of them. Jewel gobbled up life, dove into it like it was a cool pond cut in the shade of a mountain on the hottest day of the year.

That look in her eyes—the one that never left—said, Let's have fun, goddammit. Let's eat. Now.

She and Elgin hadn't been stupid enough to do anything that night, not even after Elgin caught that look in her eyes, saw it was directed at him, saw she wanted to eat.

Elgin knew how small Eden was, how its people loved to insinuate and pry and talk. So he and Jewel worked it out, a once-a-week thing mostly that happened down in Carlyle, at a small cabin that had been in Elgin's family since before the War Between the States. There, Elgin and Jewel were free to partake of each other, squeeze and bite and swallow and inhale each other, to make love in the lake, on the porch, in the tiny kitchen.

They hardly ever talked, and when they did it was about nothing at all, really—the decline in quality of the meat at Billy's Butcher Shop, rumors that parking meters were going to be installed in front of the courthouse, if McGarrett and the rest of Five-0 would ever put the cuffs on Wo Fat.

There was an unspoken understanding that he was free to date any woman he chose and that she'd never leave Perkin Lut. And that was just fine. This wasn't about love; it was about appetite.

Sometimes, Elgin would see her in town or hear Blue speak about her in that puppy-dog-love way he'd been speaking about her since high school, and he'd find himself surprised by the realization that he slept with this woman. That no one knew. That it could go on forever, if both of them remained careful, vigilant against the wrong look, the wrong tone in their voices when they spoke in

public.

He couldn't entirely put his finger on what need she satisfied, only that he needed her in that lakefront cabin once a week, that it had something to do with walking out of the jungle alive, with the ticking of his own death he'd heard for a full year. Jewel was somehow reward for that, a fringe benefit. To be naked and spent with her lying atop him and seeing that look in her eyes that said she was ready to go again, ready to gobble him up like oxygen. He'd earned that by shooting at shapes in the night, pressed against those damp foxhole walls that never stayed shored up for long, only to come home to a woman who couldn't wait, who'd discarded him as easily as she would a once-favored doll she'd grown beyond, looked back upon with a wistful mix of nostalgia and disdain.

He'd always told himself that when he found the right woman, his passion for Jewel, his need for those nights at the lake, would disappear. And, truth was, since he'd been with Shelley Briggs, he and Jewel had cooled it. Shelley wasn't Perkin, he told Jewel; she'd figure it out soon enough if he left town once a week, came back with bite marks on his abdomen.

Jewel said, "Fine. We'll get back to it whenever you're ready."

Knowing there'd be a next time, even if Elgin wouldn't admit it to himself.

So Elgin, who'd been so lonely in the year after his discharge, now had two women. Sometimes, he didn't know what to think of that. When you were alone, the happiness of others boiled your insides. Beauty seemed ugly. Laughter seemed evil. The casual grazing of one lover's hand into another was enough to make you want to cut them off at the wrist. *I will never be loved*, you said. *I will never know joy*.

He wondered sometimes how Blue made it through. Blue, who'd never had a girlfriend he hadn't rented by the half hour. Who was too ugly and small and just plain weird to evoke anything in women but fear or pity. Blue, who'd been carrying a torch for Jewel Lut since long before she married Perkin and kept carrying it with a quiet fever Elgin could only occasionally identify with. Blue, he knew, saw Jewel Lut as a queen, as the only woman who existed for him in Eden, South Carolina. All because she'd been nice to him, pals with him and Elgin, back about a thousand years ago, before sex, before breasts, before Elgin or Blue had even the smallest clue what that thing between their legs was for, before Perkin Lut had come along with his daddy's money and his nice smile and his bullshit stories about how many men he'd have killed in the war if only the draft board had seen fit to let him go.

Blue figured if he was nice enough, kind enough, waited long enough—then one day Jewel would see his decency, need to cling to it.

Elgin never bothered telling Blue that some women didn't want decency.

Some women didn't want a nice guy. Some women, and some men too, wanted to get into a bed, turn out the lights, and feast on each other like animals until it hurt to move.

Blue would never guess that Jewel was that kind of woman, because she was always so sweet to him, treated him like a child really, and with every friendly hello she gave him, every pat on the shoulder, every "What you been up to, old bud?" Blue pushed her further and further up the pedestal he'd built in his mind.

"I seen him at the Emporium one time," Shelley told Elgin. "He just come in for no reason anyone understood and sat reading magazines until Jewel came in to see Perkin about something. And Blue, he just stared at her. Just stared at her talking to Perkin in the showroom. When she finally looked back, he stood up and left."

Elgin hated hearing about, talking about, or thinking about Jewel when he was with Shelley. It made him feel unclean and unworthy.

"Crazy love," he said to end the subject.

"Crazy something, babe."

Nights sometimes, Elgin would sit with Shelley in front of his trailer, listen to the cicadas hum through the scrawny pine, smell the night and the rock salt mixed with gravel; the piña colada shampoo Shelley used made him think of Hawaii though he'd never been, and he'd think how their love wasn't crazy love, wasn't burning so fast and furious it'd burn itself out they weren't careful. And that was fine with him. If he could just get his head around this Jewel Lut thing, stop seeing her naked and waiting and looking back over her shoulder at him in the cabin, then he could make something with Shelley. She was worth it. She might not be able to fuck like Jewel, and, truth be told, he didn't laugh as much with her, but Shelley was what you aspired to. A good woman, who'd be a good mother, who'd stick by you when times got tough. Sometimes he'd take her hand in his and hold it for no other reason but the doing of it. She caught him one night, some look in his eyes, maybe the way he tilted his head to look at her small white hand in his big brown one.

She said, "Damn, Elgin, if you ain't simple sometimes." Then she came out of her chair in a rush and straddled him, kissed him as if she were trying to take a piece of him back with her. She said, "Baby, we ain't getting any younger. You know?"

And he knew, somehow, at that moment why some men build families and others shoot dogs. He just wasn't sure where he fit in the equation.

He said, "We ain't, are we?"

Blue had been Elgin's best buddy since either of them could remember, but Elgin

had been wondering about it lately. Blue'd always been a little different, something Elgin liked, sure, but there was more to it now. Blue was the kind of guy you never knew if he was quiet because he didn't have anything to say or, because what he had to say was so horrible, he knew enough not to send it out into the atmosphere.

When they'd been kids, growing up in the trailer park, Blue used to be out at all hours because his mother was either entertaining a man or had gone out and forgotten to leave him the key. Back then, Blue had this thing for cockroaches. He'd collect them in a jar, then drop bricks on them to test their resiliency. He told Elgin once, "That's what they are—resilient. Every generation, we have to come up with new ways to kill 'em because they get immune to the poisons we had before." After a while, Blue took to dousing them in gasoline, lighting them up, seeing how resilient they were then.

Elgin's folks told him to stay away from the strange, dirty kid with the white-trash mother, but Elgin felt sorry for Blue. He was half Elgin's size even though they were the same age; you could place your thumb and forefinger around Blue's biceps and meet them on the other side. Elgin hated how Blue seemed to have only two pairs of clothes, both usually dirty, and how sometimes they'd pass his trailer together and hear the animal sounds coming from inside, the grunts and moans, the slapping of flesh. Half the time you couldn't tell if Blue's old lady was in there fucking or fighting. And always the sound of country music mingled in with all that animal noise, Blue's mother and her man of the moment listening to it on the transistor radio she'd given Blue one Christmas.

"My fucking radio," Blue said once and shook his small head, the only time Elgin ever saw him react to what went on in that trailer.

Blue was a reader—knew more about science and ecology, about anatomy and blue whales and conversion tables than anyone Elgin knew. Most everyone figured the kid for a mute—hell, he'd been held back twice in fourth grade—but with Elgin he'd sometimes chat up a storm while they puffed smokes together down at the drainage ditch behind the park. He'd talk about whales, how they bore only one child, who they were fiercely protective of, but how if another child was orphaned, a mother whale would take it as her own, protect it as fiercely as she did the one she gave birth to. He told Elgin how sharks never slept, how electrical currents worked, what a depth charge was. Elgin, never much of a talker, just sat and listened, ate it up and waited for more.

The older they got, the more Elgin became Blue's protector, till finally, the year Blue's face exploded with acne, Elgin got in about two fights a day until there was no one left to fight. Everyone knew—they were brothers. And if Elgin didn't get you from the front, Blue was sure to take care of you from behind, like

that time a can of acid fell on Roy Hubrist's arm in shop, or the time someone hit Carnell Lewis from behind with a brick, then cut his Achilles tendon with a razor while he lay out cold. Everyone knew it was Blue, even if no one actually saw him do it.

Elgin figured with Roy and Carnell, they'd had it coming. No great loss. It was since Elgin'd come back from Vietnam, though, that he'd noticed some things and kept them to himself, wondered what he was going to do the day he'd know he had to do something.

There was the owl someone had set afire and hung upside down from a telephone wire, the cats who turned up missing in the blocks that surrounded Blue's shack off Route 11. There were the small pink panties Elgin had seen sticking out from under Blue's bed one morning when he'd come to get him for some cleanup work at a site. He'd checked the missing-persons reports for days, but it hadn't come to anything, so he'd just decided Blue had picked them up himself, fed a fantasy or two. He didn't forget, though, couldn't shake the way those panties had curled upward out of the brown dust under Blue's bed, seemed to be pleading for something.

He'd never bothered asking Blue about any of this. That never worked. Blue just shut down at times like that, stared off somewhere as if something you couldn't hear was drowning out your words, something you couldn't see was taking up his line of vision. Blue, floating away on you, until you stopped cluttering up his mind with useless talk.

One Saturday, Elgin went into town with Shelley so she could get her hair done at Martha's Unisex on Main. In Martha's, as Dottie Leeds gave Shelley a shampoo and rinse, Elgin felt like he'd stumbled into a chapel of womanhood. There was Jim Hayder's teenage daughter, Sonny, getting one of those feathered cuts was growing popular these days and several older women who still wore beehives, getting them reset or plastered or whatever they did to keep them up like that. There was Joylene Covens and Lila Sims having their nails done while their husbands golfed and the black maids watched their kids, and Martha and Dottie and Esther and Gertrude and Hayley dancing and flitting, laughing and chattering among the chairs, calling everyone "Honey," and all of them—the young, the old, the rich, and Shelley—kicking back like they did this every day, knew each other more intimately than they did their husbands or children or boyfriends.

When Dottie Leeds looked up from Shelley's head and said, "Elgin, honey, can we get you a sports page or something?" the whole place burst out laughing, Shelley included. Elgin smiled though he didn't feel like it and gave them all a

sheepish wave that got a bigger laugh, and he told Shelley he'd be back in a bit and left.

He headed up Main toward the town square, wondering what it was those women seemed to know so effortlessly that completely escaped him, and saw Perkin Lut walking in a circle outside Dexter Isley's Five & Dime. It was one of those days when the wet, white heat was so overpowering that unless you were in Martha's, the one place in town with central air-conditioning, most people stayed inside with their shades down and tried not to move much.

And there was Perkin Lut walking the soles of his shoes into the ground, turning in circles like a little kid trying to make himself dizzy.

Perkin and Elgin had known each other since kindergarten, but Elgin could never remember liking the man much. Perkin's old man, Mance Lut, had pretty much built Eden, and he'd spent a lot of money keeping Perkin out of the war, hid his son up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, for so many semesters even Perkin couldn't remember what he'd majored in. A lot of men who'd gone overseas and come back hated Perkin for that, as did the families of most of the men who hadn't come back, but that wasn't Elgin's problem with Perkin. Hell, if Elgin'd had the money, he'd have stayed out of that shitty war too.

What Elgin couldn't abide was that there was something in Perkin that protected him from consequence. Something that made him look down on people who paid for their sins, who fell without a safety net to catch them.

It had happened more than once that Elgin had found himself thrusting in and out of Perkin's wife and thinking, Take that, Perkin. Take that.

But this afternoon, Perkin didn't have his salesman's smile or aloof glance. When Elgin stopped by him and said, "Hey, Perkin, how you?" Perkin looked up at him with eyes so wild they seemed about to jump out of their sockets.

"I'm not good, Elgin. Not good."

"What's the matter?"

Perkin nodded to himself several times, looked over Elgin's shoulder. "I'm fixing to do something about that."

"About what?"

"About that." Perkin's jaw gestured over Elgin's shoulder.

Elgin turned around, looked across Main and through the windows of Miller's Laundromat, saw Jewel Lut pulling her clothes from the dryer, saw Blue standing beside her, taking a pair of jeans from the pile and starting to fold. If either of them had looked up and over, they'd have seen Elgin and Perkin Lut easily enough, but Elgin knew they wouldn't. There was an air to the two of them that seemed to block out the rest of the world in that bright Laundromat as easily as it would in a dark bedroom. Blue's lips moved and Jewel laughed,

flipped a T-shirt on his head.

“I’m fixing to do something right now,” Perkin said.

Elgin looked at him, could see that was a lie, something Perkin was repeating to himself in hopes it would come true. Perkin was successful in business, and for more reasons than just his daddy’s money, but he wasn’t the kind of man who did things; he was the kind of man who had things done.

Elgin looked across the street again. Blue still had the T-shirt sitting atop his head. He said something else and Jewel covered her mouth with her hand when she laughed.

“Don’t you have a washer and dryer at your house, Perkin?”

Perkin rocked back on his heels. “Washer broke. Jewel decides to come in town.” He looked at Elgin. “We ain’t getting along so well these days. She keeps reading those magazines, Elgin. You know the ones? Talking about liberation, leaving your bra at home, shit like that.” He pointed across the street. “Your friend’s a problem.”

Your friend.

Elgin looked at Perkin, felt a sudden anger he couldn’t completely understand, and with it a desire to say, That’s my friend and he’s talking to my fuck-buddy. Get it, Perkin?

Instead, he just shook his head and left Perkin there, walked across the street to the Laundromat.

Blue took the T-shirt off his head when he saw Elgin enter. A smile, half frozen on his pitted face, died as he blinked into the sunlight blaring through the windows.

Jewel said, “Hey, we got another helper!” She tossed a pair of men’s briefs over Blue’s head, hit Elgin in the chest with them.

“Hey, Jewel.”

“Hey, Elgin. Long time.” Her eyes dropped from his, settled on a towel.

Didn’t seem like it at the moment to Elgin. Seemed almost as if he’d been out at the lake with her as recently as last night. He could taste her in his mouth, smell her skin damp with a light sweat.

And standing there with Blue, it also seemed like they were all three back in that trailer park, and Jewel hadn’t aged a bit. Still wore her red hair long and messy, still dressed in clothes seemed to have been picked up, wrinkled, off her closet floor and nothing fancy about them in the first place, but draped over her body, they were sexier than clothes other rich women bought in New York once a year.

This afternoon, she wore a crinkly, paisley dress that might have been on the pink side once but had faded to a pasty newspaper color after years of washing.

Nothing special about it, not too high up her thigh or down her chest, and loose—but something about her body made it appear like she might just ripen right out of it any second.

Elgin handed the briefs to Blue as he joined them at the folding table. For a while, none of them said anything. They picked clothes from the large pile and folded, and the only sound was Jewel whistling.

Then Jewel laughed.

“What?” Blue said.

“Aw, nothing.” She shook her head. “Seems like we’re just one happy family here, though, don’t it?”

Blue looked stunned. He looked at Elgin. He looked at Jewel. He looked at the pair of small, light-blue socks he held in his hands, the monogram *JL* stitched in the cotton. He looked at Jewel again.

“Yeah,” he said eventually, and Elgin heard a tremor in his voice he’d never heard before. “Yeah, it does.”

Elgin looked up at one of the upper dryer doors. It had been swung out at eye level when the dryer had been emptied. The center of the door was a circle of glass, and Elgin could see Main Street reflected in it, the white posts that supported the wood awning over the Five & Dime, Perkin Lut walking in circles, his head down, heat shimmering in waves up and down Main.

The dog was green.

Blue had used some of the money Big Bobby’d paid him over the past few weeks to upgrade his target scope. The new scope was huge, twice the width of the rifle barrel, and because the days were getting shorter, it was outfitted with a light-amplification device. Elgin had used similar scopes in the jungle, and he’d never liked them, even when they’d saved his life and those of his platoon, picked up Charlie coming through the dense flora like icy gray ghosts. Night scopes—or LADs as they’d called them over there—were just plain unnatural, and Elgin always felt like he was looking through a telescope from the bottom of a lake. He had no idea where Blue would have gotten one, but hunters in Eden had been showing up with all sorts of weird Marine or army surplus shit these last few years; Elgin had even heard of a hunting party using grenades to scare up fish—blowing ’em up into the boat already half cooked, all you had to do was scale ’em.

The dog was green, the highway was beige, the top of the tree line was yellow, and the trunks were the color of army fatigues.

Blue said, “What you think?”

They were up in the tree house Blue’d built. Nice wood, two lawn chairs, a

tarp hanging from the branch overhead, a cooler filled with Coors. Blue'd built a railing across the front, perfect for resting your elbows when you took aim. Along the tree trunk, he'd mounted a huge klieg light plugged to a portable generator, because while it was illegal to "shine" deer, nobody'd ever said anything about shining wild dogs. Blue was definitely home.

Elgin shrugged. Just like in the jungle, he wasn't sure he was meant to see the world this way—faded to the shades and textures of old photographs. The dog, too, seemed to sense that it had stepped out of time somehow, into this seaweed circle punched through the landscape. It sniffed the air with a misshapen snout, but the rest of its body was tensed into one tight muscle, leaning forward as if it smelled prey.

Blue said, "You wanna do it?"

The stock felt hard against Elgin's shoulder. The trigger, curled under his index finger, was cold and thick, something about it that itched his finger and the back of his head simultaneously, a voice back there with the itch in his head saying, "Fire."

What you could never talk about down at the bar to people who hadn't been there, to people who wanted to know, was what it had been like firing on human beings, on those icy gray ghosts in the dark jungle. Elgin had been in fourteen battles over the course of his twelve-month tour, and he couldn't say with certainty that he'd ever killed anyone. He'd shot some of those shapes, seen them go down, but never the blood, never their eyes when the bullets hit. It had all been a cluster-fuck of swift and sudden noise and color, an explosion of white lights and tracers, green bush, red fire, screams in the night. And afterward, if it was clear, you walked into the jungle and saw the corpses, wondered if you'd hit this body or that one or any at all.

And the only thing you were sure of was that you were too fucking hot and still—this was the terrible thing, but oddly exhilarating too—deeply afraid.

Elgin lowered Blue's rifle, stared across the interstate, now the color of seashell, at the dark mint tree line. The dog was barely noticeable, a soft dark shape amid other soft dark shapes.

He said, "No, Blue, thanks," and handed him the rifle.

Blue said, "Suit yourself, buddy." He reached behind them and pulled the beaded string on the klieg light. As the white light erupted across the highway and the dog froze, blinking in the brightness, Elgin found himself wondering what the fucking point of a LAD scope was when you were just going to shine the animal anyway.

Blue swung the rifle around, leaned into the railing, and put a round in the center of the animal, right by its rib cage. The dog jerked inward, as if someone

had whacked it with a bat, and as it teetered on wobbly legs, Blue pulled back on the bolt, drove it home again, and shot the dog in the head. The dog flipped over on its side, most of its skull gone, back leg kicking at the road like it was trying to ride a bicycle.

“You think Jewel Lut might, I dunno, like me?” Blue said.

Elgin cleared his throat. “Sure. She’s always liked you.”

“But I mean . . .” Blue shrugged, seemed embarrassed suddenly, “How about this: You think a girl like that could take to Australia?”

“Australia?”

Blue smiled at Elgin. “Australia.”

“Australia?” he said again.

Blue reached back and shut off the light. “Australia. They got some wild dingoes there, buddy. Could make some real money. Jewel told me the other day how they got real nice beaches. But dingoes, too. Big Bobby said people’re starting to bitch about what’s happening here, asking where Rover is and such, and anyway, ain’t too many dogs left dumb enough to come this way anymore. Australia,” he said, “they never run out of dog. Sooner or later, here, I’m gonna run out of dog.”

Elgin nodded. Sooner or later, Blue would run out of dog. He wondered if Big Bobby’d thought that one through, if he had a contingency plan, if he had access to the National Guard.

“The boy’s just, what you call it, zealous,” Big Bobby told Elgin.

They were sitting in Phil’s Barbershop on Main. Phil had gone to lunch, and Big Bobby’d drawn the shades so people’d think he was making some important decision of state.

Elgin said, “He ain’t zealous, Big Bobby. He’s losing it. Thinks he’s in love with Jewel Lut.”

“He’s always thought that.”

“Yeah, but now maybe he’s thinking she might like him a bit, too.”

Big Bobby said, “How come you never call me Mayor?”

Elgin sighed.

“All right, all right. Look,” Big Bobby said, picking up one of the hair-tonic bottles on Phil’s counter and sniffing it, “so Blue likes his job a little bit.”

Elgin said, “There’s more to it and you know it.”

Playing with combs now. “I do?”

“Bobby, he’s got a taste for shooting things now.”

“Wait.” He held up a pair of fat, stubby hands. “Blue always liked to shoot things. Everyone knows that. Shit, if he wasn’t so short and didn’t have six or

seven million little health problems, he'd a been the first guy in this town to go to The 'Nam. 'Stead, he had to sit back here while you boys had all the fun."

Calling it The 'Nam. Like Big Bobby had any idea. Calling it fun. Shit.

"Dingoes," Elgin said.

"Dingoes?"

"Dingoes. He's saying he's going to Australia to shoot dingoes."

"Do him a world of good, too." Big Bobby sat back down in the barber's chair beside Elgin. "He can see the sights, that sort of thing."

"Bobby, he ain't going to Australia and you know it. Hell, Blue ain't never stepped over the county line in his life."

Big Bobby polished his belt buckle with the cuff of his sleeve. "Well, what you want me to do about it?"

"I don't know. I'm just telling you. Next time you see him, Bobby, you look in his fucking eyes."

"Yeah, What'll I see?"

Elgin turned his head, looked at him. "Nothing."

Bobby said, "He's your buddy."

Elgin thought of the small panties curling out of the dust under Blue's bed.

"Yeah, but he's your problem."

Big Bobby put his hands behind his head, stretched in the chair. "Well, people getting suspicious about all the dogs disappearing, so I'm going to have to shut this operation down immediately anyway."

He wasn't getting it. "Bobby, you shut this operation down, someone's gonna get a world's worth of that nothing in Blue's eyes."

Big Bobby shrugged, a man who'd made a career out of knowing what was beyond him.

The first time Perkin Lut struck Jewel in public was at Chuck's Diner.

Elgin and Shelley were sitting just three booths away when they heard a racket of falling glasses and plates, and by the time they came out of their booth, Jewel was lying on the tile floor with shattered glass and chunks of bone china by her elbows and Perkin standing over her, his arms shaking, a look in his eyes that said he'd surprised himself as much as anyone else.

Elgin looked at Jewel, on her knees, the hem of her dress getting stained by the spilled food, and he looked away before she caught his eye, because if that happened he just might do something stupid, fuck Perkin up a couple-three ways.

"Aw, Perkin," Chuck Blade said, coming from behind the counter to help Jewel up, wiping gravy off his hands against his apron.

“We don’t respect that kind of behavior ’round here, Mr. Lut,” Clara Blade said. “Won’t have it neither.”

Chuck Blade helped Jewel to her feet, his eyes cast down at his broken plates, the half a steak lying in a soup of beans by his shoe. Jewel had a welt growing on her right cheek, turning a bright red as she placed her hand on the table for support.

“I didn’t mean it,” Perkin said.

Clara Blade snorted and pulled the pen from behind her ear, began itemizing the damage on a cocktail napkin.

“I didn’t.” Perkin noticed Elgin and Shelley. He locked eyes with Elgin, held out his hands. “I swear.”

Elgin turned away and that’s when he saw Blue coming through the door. He had no idea where he’d come from, though it ran through his head that Blue could have just been standing outside looking in, could have been standing there for an hour.

Like a lot of small guys, Blue had speed, and he never seemed to walk in a straight line. He moved as if he were constantly sidestepping tackles or land mines—with sudden, unpredictable pivots that left you watching the space where he’d been, instead of the place he’d ended up.

Blue didn’t say anything, but Elgin could see the determination for homicide in his eyes and Perkin saw it too, backed up, and slipped on the mess on the floor and stumbled back, trying to regain his balance as Blue came past Shelley and tried to lunge past Elgin.

Elgin caught him at the waist, lifted him off the ground, and held on tight because he knew how slippery Blue could be in these situations. You’d think you had him and he’d just squirm away from you, hit somebody with a glass.

Elgin tucked his head down and headed for the door, Blue flopped over his shoulder like a bag of cement mix, Blue screaming, “You see me, Perkin? You see me? I’m a last face you see, Perkin! Real soon.”

Elgin hit the open doorway, felt the night heat on his face as Blue screamed, “Jewel! You all right? Jewel?”

Blue didn’t say much back at Elgin’s trailer.

He tried to explain to Shelley how pure Jewel was, how hitting something that innocent was like spitting on the Bible.

Shelley didn’t say anything, and after a while Blue shut up, too.

Elgin just kept plying him with Beam, knowing Blue’s lack of tolerance for it, and pretty soon Blue passed out on the couch, his pitted face still red with rage.

“He’s never been exactly right in the head, has he?” Shelley said.

Elgin ran his hand down her bare arm, pulled her shoulder in tighter against his chest, heard Blue snoring from the front of the trailer. “No, ma’am.”

She rose above him, her dark hair falling to his face, tickling the corners of his eyes. “But you’ve been his friend.”

Elgin nodded.

She touched his cheek with her hand. “Why?”

Elgin thought about it a bit, started talking to her about the little, dirty kid and his cockroach flambés, of the animal sounds that came from his mother’s trailer. The way Blue used to sit by the drainage ditch, all pulled into himself, his body tight. Elgin thought of all those roaches and cats and rabbits and dogs, and he told Shelley that he’d always thought Blue was dying, ever since he’d met him, leaking away in front of his eyes.

“Everyone dies,” she said.

“Yeah.” He rose up on his elbow, rested his free hand on her warm hip. “Yeah, but with most of us it’s like we’re growing toward something and then we die. But with Blue, it’s like he ain’t never grown toward nothing. He’s just been dying real slowly since he was born.”

She shook her head. “I’m not getting you.”

He thought of the mildew that used to soak the walls in Blue’s mother’s trailer, of the mold and dust in Blue’s shack off Route 11, of the rotting smell that had grown out of the drainage ditch when they were kids. The way Blue looked at it all—seemed to be at one with it—as if he felt a bond.

Shelley said, “Babe, what do you think about getting out of here?”

“Where?”

“I dunno. Florida. Georgia. Someplace else.”

“I got a job. You too.”

“You can always get construction jobs other places. Receptionist jobs too.”

“We grew up here.”

She nodded. “But maybe it’s time to start our life somewhere else.”

He said, “Let me think about it.”

She tilted his chin so she was looking in his eyes. “You’ve *been* thinking about it.”

He nodded. “Maybe I want to think about it some more.”

In the morning, when they woke up, Blue was gone.

Shelley looked at the rumpled couch, over at Elgin. For a good minute they just stood there, looking from the couch to each other, the couch to each other.

An hour later, Shelley called from work, told Elgin that Perkin Lut was in his

office as always, no signs of physical damage.

Elgin said, "If you see Blue . . ."

"Yeah?"

Elgin thought about it. "I dunno. Call the cops. Tell Perkin to bail out a back door. That sound right?"

"Sure."

Big Bobby came to the site later that morning, said, "I go over to Blue's place to tell him we got to end this dog thing and—"

"Did you tell him it was over?" Elgin asked.

"Let me finish. Let me explain."

"Did you tell him?"

"Let me finish," Bobby wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I was gonna tell him, but—"

"You didn't tell him."

"But Jewel Lut was there."

"What?"

Big Bobby put his hand on Elgin's elbow, led him away from the other workers. "I said Jewel was there. The two of them sitting at the kitchen table, having breakfast."

"In Blue's place?"

Big Bobby nodded. "Biggest dump I ever seen. Smells like something I-don't-know-what. But bad. And there's Jewel, pretty as can be in her summer dress and soft skin and make-up, eating Eggos and grits with Blue, big brown shiner under here eye. She smiles at me, says, 'Hey, Big Bobby,' and goes back to eating."

"And that was it?"

"How come no one ever calls me Mayor?"

"And that was it?" Elgin repeated.

"Yeah. Blue asks me to take a seat, I say I got business. He says him, too."

"What's that mean?" Elgin heard his own voice, hard and sharp.

Big Bobby took a step back from it. "Hell do I know? Could mean he's going out to shoot more dog."

"So you never told him you were shutting down the operation."

Big Bobby's eyes were wide and confused. "You hear what I told you? He was in there with Jewel. Her all doll-pretty and him looking, well, ugly as usual. Whole situation was too weird. I got out."

"Blue said he had business, too."

"He said he had business, too," Bobby said, and walked away.

The next week, they showed up in town together a couple of times, buying some groceries, toiletries for Jewel, boxes of shells for Blue.

They never held hands or kissed or did anything romantic, but they were together, and people talked. Said, Well, of all things. And I never thought I'd see the day. How do you like that? I guess this is the day the cows actually come home.

Blue called and invited Shelley and Elgin to join them one Sunday afternoon for a late breakfast at the IHOP. Shelley begged off, said something about coming down with the flu, but Elgin went. He was curious to see where this was going, what Jewel was thinking, how she thought her hanging around Blue was going to come to anything but bad.

He could feel the eyes of the whole place on them as they ate.

"See where he hit me?" Jewel tilted her head, tucked her beautiful red hair back behind her ear. The mark on her cheekbone, in the shape of a small rain puddle, was faded yellow now, its edges roped by a sallow beige.

Elgin nodded.

"Still can't believe the son of a bitch hit me," she said, but there was no rage in her voice anymore, just a mild sense of drama, as if she'd pushed the words out of her mouth the way she believed she should say them. But the emotion she must have felt when Perkin's hand hit her face, when she fell to the floor in front of people she'd known all her life—that seemed to have faded with the mark on her cheekbone.

"Perkin Lut," she said with a snort, then laughed.

Elgin looked at Blue. He'd never seemed so . . . fluid in all the time Elgin had known him. The way he cut into his pancakes, swept them off his plate with a smooth dip of the fork tines; the swift dab of the napkin against his lips after every bite; the attentive swivel of his head whenever Jewel spoke, usually in tandem with the lifting of his coffee mug to his mouth.

This was not a Blue Elgin recognized. Except when he was handling weapons, Blue moved in jerks and spasms. Tremors rippled through his limbs and caused his fingers to drop things, his elbows and knees to move too fast, crack against solid objects. Blue's blood seemed to move too quickly through his veins, made his muscles obey his brain after a quarter-second delay and then too rapidly, as if to catch up on lost time.

But now he moved in concert, like an athlete or a jungle cat.

That's what you do to men, Jewel: You give them a confidence so total it finds their limbs.

"Perkin," Blue said, and rolled his eyes at Jewel and they both laughed.

She not as hard as he did, though.

Elgin could see the root of doubt in her eyes, could feel her loneliness in the way she fiddled with the menu, touched her cheekbone, spoke too loudly, as if she wasn't just telling Elgin and Blue how Perkin had mistreated her, but the whole IHOP as well, so people could get it straight that she wasn't the villain, and if after she returned to Perkin she had to leave him again, they'd know why.

Of course she was going back to Perkin.

Elgin could tell by the glances she gave Blue—unsure, slightly embarrassed, maybe a bit repulsed. What had begun as a nighttime ride into the unknown had turned cold and stale during the hard yellow lurch into morning.

Blue wiped his mouth, said, “Be right back,” and walked to the bathroom with surer strides than Elgin had ever seen on the man.

Elgin looked at Jewel.

She gripped the handle of her coffee cup between the tips of her thumb and index finger and turned the cup in slow revolutions around the saucer, made a soft scraping noise that climbed up Elgin's spine like a termite trapped under the skin.

“You ain't sleeping with him, are you?” Elgin said quietly. Jewel's head jerked up and she looked over her shoulder, then back at Elgin. “What? God, no. We're just . . . He's my pal. That's all. Like when we were kids.”

“We ain't kids.”

“I know. Don't you know I know?” She fingered the coffee cup again. “I miss you,” she said softly. “I miss you. When you coming back?”

Elgin kept his voice low. “Me and Shelley, we're getting pretty serious.”

She gave him a small smile that he instantly hated. It seemed to know him; it seemed like everything he was and everything he wasn't was caught in the curl of her lips. “You miss the lake, Elgin. Don't lie.”

He shrugged.

“You ain't ever going to marry Shelley Briggs, have babies, be an upstanding citizen.”

“Yeah? Why's that?”

“Because you got too many demons in you, boy. And they need me. They need the lake. They need to cry out every now and then.”

Elgin looked down at his own coffee cup. “You going back to Perkin?”

She shook her head hard. “No way. Uh-uh. No way.”

Elgin nodded, even though he knew she was lying. If Elgin's demons needed the lake, needed to be unbridled, Jewel's needed Perkin. They needed security. They needed to know the money'd never run out, that she'd never go two full days without a solid meal, like she had so many times as a child in the trailer

park.

Perkin was what she saw when she looked down at her empty coffee cup, when she touched her cheek. Perkin was at their nice home with his feet up, watching a game, petting the dog, and she was in the IHOP in the middle of a Sunday when the food was at its oldest and coldest, with one guy who loved her and one who fucked her, wondering how she got there.

Blue came back to the table, moving with that new sure stride, a broad smile in the wide swing of his arms.

“How we doing?” Blue said. “Huh? How we doing?” And his lips burst into a grin so huge Elgin expected it to keep going right off the sides of his face.

Jewel left Blue’s place two days later, walked into Perkin Lut’s Auto Emporium and into Perkin’s office, and by the time anyone went to check, they’d left through the back door, gone home for the day.

Elgin tried to get a hold of Blue for three days—called constantly, went by his shack and knocked on the door, even staked out the tree house along I-95 where he fired on the dogs.

He’d decided to break into Blue’s place, was fixing to do just that, when he tried one last call from his trailer that third night and Blue answered with a strangled “Hello.”

“It’s me. How you doing?”

“Can’t talk now.”

“Come on, Blue. It’s me. You okay?”

“All alone,” Blue said.

“I know. I’ll come by.”

“You do, I’ll leave.”

“Blue.”

“Leave me alone for a spell, Elgin. Okay?”

That night Elgin sat alone in his trailer, smoking cigarettes, staring at the walls.

Blue’d never had much of anything his whole life—not a job he enjoyed, not a woman he could consider his—and then between the dogs and Jewel Lut he’d probably thought he’d got it all at once. Hit pay dirt.

Elgin remembered the dirty little kid sitting down by the drainage ditch, hugging himself. Six, maybe seven years old, waiting to die.

You had to wonder sometimes why some people were even born. You had to wonder what kind of creature threw bodies into the world, expected them to get along when they’d been given no tools, no capacity to get any either.

In Vietnam, this fat boy, name of Woodson from South Dakota, had been the

least popular guy in the platoon. He wasn't smart, he wasn't athletic, he wasn't funny, he wasn't even personable. He just was. Elgin had been running beside him one day through a sea of rice paddies, their boots making sucking sounds every step they took, and someone fired a hell of a round from the other side of the paddies, ripped Woodson's head in half so completely all Elgin saw running beside him for a few seconds was the lower half of Woodson's face. No hair, no forehead, no eyes. Just half the nose, a mouth, a chin.

Thing was, Woodson kept running, kept plunging his feet in and out of the water, making those sucking sounds, M-15 hugged to his chest, for a good eight or ten steps. Kid was dead, he's still running. Kid had no reason to hold on, but he don't know it, he keeps running.

What spark of memory, hope, or dream had kept him going?

You had to wonder.

In Elgin's dream that night, a platoon of ice-gray Vietcong rose in a straight line from the center of Cooper's Lake while Elgin was inside the cabin with Shelley and Jewel. He penetrated them both somehow, their separate torsos branching out from the same pair of hips, their four legs clamping at the small of his back, this Shelley-Jewel creature crying out for more, more, more.

And Elgin could see the VC platoon drifting in formation toward the shore, their guns pointed, their faces hidden behind thin wisps of green fog.

The Shelley-Jewel creature arched her backs on the bed below him, and Woodson and Blue stood in the corner of the room watching as their dogs padded across the floor, letting out low growls and drooling.

Shelley dissolved into Jewel as the VC platoon reached the porch steps and released their safeties all at once, the sound like the ratcheting of a thousand shotguns. Sweat exploded in Elgin's hair, poured down his body like warm rain, and the VC fired in concert, the bullets shearing the walls of the cabin, lifting the roof off into the night. Elgin looked above him at the naked night sky, the stars zipping by like tracers, the yellow moon full and mean, the shivering branches of birch trees. Jewel rose and straddled him, bit his lip, and dug her nails into his back, and the bullets dance through his hair, and then Jewel was gone, her writhing flesh having dissolved into his own.

Elgin sat naked on the bed, his arms stretched wide, waiting for the bullets to find his back, to shear his head from his body the way they'd sheared the roof from the cabin, and the yellow moon burned above him as the dogs howled and Blue and Woodson held each other in the corner of the room and wept like children as the bullets drilled holes in their faces.

Big Bobby came by the trailer late the next morning, a Sunday, and said, “Blue’s a bit put out about losing his job.”

“What?” Elgin sat on the edge of his bed, pulled on his socks. “You picked now—now, Bobby—to fire him?”

“It’s in his eyes,” Big Bobby said. “Like you said. You can see it.”

Elgin had seen Big Bobby scared before, plenty of times, but now the man was trembling.

Elgin said, “Where is he?”

Blue’s front door was open, hanging half down the steps from a busted hinge. Elgin said, “Blue.”

“Kitchen.”

He sat in his Jockeys at the table, cleaning his rifle, each shiny black piece spread in front of him on the table. Elgin’s eyes watered a bit because there was a stench coming from the back of the house that he felt might strip his nostrils bare. He realized then that he’d never asked Big Bobby or Blue what they’d done with all those dead dogs.

Blue said, “Have a seat, bud. Beer in the fridge if you’re thirsty.”

Elgin wasn’t looking in that fridge. “Lost your job, huh?”

Blue wiped the bolt with a shammy cloth. “Happens.” He looked at Elgin. “Where you been lately?”

“I called you last night.”

“I mean in general.”

“Working.”

“No, I mean at night.”

“Blue, you been”—he almost said “playing house with Jewel Lut” but caught himself—“up in a fucking tree, how do you know where I been at night?”

“I don’t,” Blue said. “Why I’m asking.”

Elgin said, “I’ve been at my trailer or down at Doubles, same as usual.”

“With Shelley Briggs, right?”

Slowly, Elgin said, “Yeah.”

“I’m just asking, buddy. I mean, when we all going to go out? You, me, your new girl.”

The pits that covered Blue’s face like a layer of bad meat had faded some from all those nights in the tree.

Elgin said, “Anytime you want.”

Blue put down the bolt. “How ’bout right now?” He stood and walked into the bedroom just off the kitchen. “Let me just throw on some duds.”

“She’s working now, Blue.”

“At Perkin Lut’s? Hell, it’s almost noon. I’ll talk to Perkin about that Dodge he sold me last year, and when she’s ready we’ll take her out someplace nice.” He came back into the kitchen wearing a soiled brown T-shirt and jeans.

“Hell,” Elgin said, “I don’t want the girl thinking I’ve got some serious love for her or something. We come by for lunch, next thing she’ll expect me to drop her off in the mornings, pick her up at night.”

Blue was reassembling the rifle, snapping all those shiny pieces together so fast, Elgin figured he could do it blind. He said, “Elgin, you got to show them some affection sometimes. I mean, Jesus.” He pulled a thin brass bullet from his T-shirt pocket and slipped it in the breech, followed it with four more, then slid the bolt home.

“Yeah, but you know what I’m saying, bud?” Elgin watched Blue nestle the stock in the space between his left hip and ribs, let the barrel point out into the kitchen.

“I know what you’re saying,” Blue said. “I know. But I got to talk to Perkin about my Dodge.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“What’s wrong with it?” Blue turned to look at him, and the barrel swung level with Elgin’s belt buckle. “What’s wrong with it, it’s a piece of shit, what’s wrong with it, Elgin. Hell, you know that. Perkin sold me a lemon. This is the situation.” He blinked. “Beer for the ride?”

Elgin had a pistol in his glove compartment. A .32. He considered it.

“Elgin?”

“Yeah?”

“Why you looking at me funny?”

“You got a rifle pointed at me, Blue. You realize that?”

Blue looked at the rifle, and its presence seemed to surprise him. He dipped it toward the floor. “Shit, man, I’m sorry. I wasn’t even thinking. It feels like my arm sometimes. I forget. Man, I am sorry.” He held his arms out wide, the rifle rising with them.

“Lotta things deserve to die, don’t they?”

Blue smiled. “Well, I wasn’t quite thinking along those lines, but now you bring it up . . .”

Elgin said, “Who deserves to die, buddy?”

Blue laughed. “You got something on your mind, don’t you?” He hoisted himself up on the table, cradled the rifle in his lap. “Hell, boy, who you got? Let’s start with people who take two parking spaces.”

“Okay.” Elgin moved the chair by the table to a position slightly behind Blue, sat in it. “Let’s.”

“Then there’s DJs talk through the first minute of a song. Fucking Guatos coming down here these days to pick tobacco, showing no respect. Women wearing all those tight clothes, look at you like you’re a pervert when you stare at what they’re advertising.” He wiped his forehead with his arm. “Shit.”

“Who else?” Elgin said quietly.

“Okay. Okay. You got people like the ones let their dogs run wild into the highway, get themselves killed. And you got dishonest people, people who lie and sell insurance and cars and bad food. You got a lot of things. Jane Fonda.”

“Sure.” Elgin nodded.

Blue’s face was drawn, gray. He crossed his legs over each other like he used to down at the drainage ditch. “It’s all out there.” He nodded and his eyelids drooped.

“Perkin Lut?” Elgin said. “He deserve to die?”

“Not just Perkin,” Blue said. “Not just. Lots of people. I mean, how many you kill over in the war?”

Elgin shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“But some. Some. Right? Had to. I mean, that’s war—someone gets on your bad side, you kill them and all their friends till they stop bothering you.” His eyelids drooped again, and he yawned so deeply he shuddered when he finished.

“Maybe you should get some sleep.”

Blue looked over his shoulder at him. “You think? It’s been a while.”

A breeze rattled the thin walls at the back of the house, pushed that thick dank smell into the kitchen again, a rotting stench that found the back of Elgin’s throat and stuck there. He said, “When’s the last time?”

“I slept? Hell, a while. Days maybe.” Blue twisted his body so he was facing Elgin. “You ever feel like you spend your whole life waiting for it to get going?”

Elgin nodded, not positive what Blue was saying, but knowing he should agree with him. “Sure.”

“It’s hard,” Blue said. “Hard.” He leaned back on the table, stared at the brown water marks in his ceiling.

Elgin took in a long stream of that stench through his nostrils. He kept his eyes open, felt that air entering his nostrils creep past into his corneas, tear at them. The urge to close his eyes and wish it all away was as strong an urge as he’d ever felt, but he knew now was that time he’d always known was coming.

He leaned in toward Blue, reached across him, and pulled the rifle off his lap.

Blue turned his head, looked at him.

“Go to sleep,” Elgin said. “I’ll take care of this a while. We’ll go see Shelley tomorrow. Perkin Lut, too.”

Blue blinked. “What if I can’t sleep? Huh? I’ve been having that problem, you

know. I put my head on the pillow and I try to sleep and it won't come and soon I'm just bawling like a fucking child till I got to get up and do something."

Elgin looked at the tears that had just then sprung into Blue's eyes, the red veins split across the whites, the desperate, savage need in his face that had always been there if anyone had looked close enough, and would never, Elgin knew, be satisfied.

"I'll stick right here, buddy. I'll sit here in the kitchen and you go in and sleep."

Blue turned his head and stared up at the ceiling again. Then he slid off the table, peeled off his T-shirt, and tossed it on top of the fridge. "All right. All right. I'm gonna try." He stopped at the bedroom doorway. "'Member—there's beer in the fridge. You be here when I wake up?"

Elgin looked at him. He was still so small, probably so thin you could still wrap your hand around his biceps, meet the fingers on the other side. He was still ugly and stupid-looking, still dying right in front of Elgin's eyes.

"I'll be here, Blue. Don't you worry."

"Good enough. Yes, sir."

Blue shut the door and Elgin heard the bedsprings grind, the rustle of pillows being arranged. He sat in the chair, with the smell of whatever decayed in the back of the house swirling around his head. The sun had hit the cheap tin roof now, heating the small house, and after a while he realized the buzzing he'd thought was in his head came from somewhere back in the house too.

He wondered if he had the strength to open the fridge. He wondered if he should call Perkin Lut's and tell Perkin to get the hell out of Eden for a bit. Maybe he'd just ask for Shelley, tell her to meet him tonight with her suitcases. They'd drive down 95 where the dogs wouldn't disturb them, drive clear to Jacksonville, Florida, before the sun came up again. See if they could outrun Blue and his tiny, dangerous wants, his dog corpses, and his smell; outrun people who took two parking spaces and telephone solicitors and Jane Fonda.

Jewel flashed through his mind then, an image of her sitting atop him, arching her back and shaking that long red hair, a look in her green eyes that said this was it, this was why we live.

He could stand up right now with this rifle in his hands, scratch the itch in the back of his head, and fire straight through the door, end what should never have been started.

He sat there staring at the door for quite a while, until he knew the exact number of places the paint had peeled in teardrop spots, and eventually he stood, went to the phone on the wall by the fridge, and dialed Perkin Lut's.

"Auto Emporium," Shelley said, and Elgin thanked God that in his present

mood he hadn't gotten Glynnis Verdon, who snapped her gum and always placed him on hold, left him listening to Muzak versions of The Shirelles.

"Shelley?"

"People gonna talk, you keep calling me at work, boy."

He smiled, cradled the rifle like a baby, leaned against the wall. "How you doing?"

"Just fine, handsome. How 'bout yourself?"

Elgin turned his head, looked at the bedroom door. "I'm okay."

"Still like me?"

Elgin heard the springs creak in the bedroom, heard weight drop on the old floorboards. "Still like you."

"Well, then, it's all fine then, isn't it?"

Blue's footfalls crossed toward the bedroom door, and Elgin used his hip to push himself off the wall.

"It's all fine," he said. "I gotta go. I'll talk to you soon."

He hung up and stepped away from the wall.

"Elgin," Blue said from the other side of the door.

"Yeah, Blue?"

"I can't sleep. I just can't."

Elgin saw Woodson sloshing through the paddy, the top of his head gone. He saw the pink panties curling up from underneath Blue's bed and a shaft of sunlight hitting Shelley's face as she looked up from behind her desk at Perkin Lut's and smiled. He saw Jewel Lut dancing in the night rain by the lake and that dog lying dead on the shoulder of the interstate, kicking its leg like it was trying to ride a bicycle.

"Elgin," Blue said. "I just can't sleep. I got to do something."

"Try," Elgin said and cleared his throat.

"I just can't. I got to . . . do something. I got to go . . ." His voice cracked, and he cleared his throat. "I can't sleep."

The doorknob turned and Elgin raised the rifle, stared down the barrel.

"Sure, you can, Blue." He curled his finger around the trigger as the door opened. "Sure you can," he repeated and took a breath, held it in.

The skeleton of Eden Falls still sits on twenty-two acres of land just east of Brimmer's Point, covered in rust thick as flesh. Some say it was the levels of iodine an environmental inspector found in the groundwater that scared off the original investors. Others said it was the downswing of the state economy or the governor's failed reelection bid. Some say Eden Falls was just plain a dumb name, too Biblical. And then, of course, there were plenty who claimed it was

Jewel Lut's ghost scared off all the workers.

They found her body hanging from the scaffolding they'd erected by the shell of the roller coaster. She was naked and hung upside down from a rope tied around her ankles. Her throat had been cut so deep the coroner said it was a miracle her head was still attached when they found her. The coroner's assistant, man by the name of Chris Gleason, would claim when he was in his cups that the head had fallen off in the hearse as they drove down Main toward the morgue. Said he heard it cry out.

This was the same day Elgin Bern called the sheriff's office, told them he'd shot his buddy Blue, fired two rounds into him at close range, the little guy dead before he hit his kitchen floor. Elgin told the deputy he was still sitting in the kitchen, right where he'd done it a few hours before. Said to send the hearse.

Due to the fact that Perkin Lut had no real alibi for his whereabouts when Jewel passed on and owing even more to the fact there'd been some very recent and very public discord in their marriage, Perkin was arrested and brought before a grand jury, but that jury decided not to indict. Perkin and Jewel had been patching things up, after all; he'd bought her a car (at cost, but still . . .).

Besides, we all knew it was Blue had killed Jewel. Hell, the Simmons boy, a retard ate paint and tree bark, could have told you that. Once all that stuff came out about what Blue and Big Bobby'd been doing with the dogs around here, well, that just sealed it. And everyone remembered how that week she'd been separated from Perkin, you could see the dream come alive in Blue's eyes, see him allow hope into his heart for the first time in his sorry life.

And when hope comes late to a man, it's quite a dangerous thing. Hope is for the young, the children. Hope in a full-grown man—particularly one with as little acquaintanceship with it or prospect for it as Blue—well, that kind of hope burns as it dies, boils blood white, and leaves something mean behind when it's done.

Blue killed Jewel Lut.

And Elgin Bern killed Blue. And ended up doing time. Not much, due to his war record and the circumstances of who Blue was, but time just the same. Everyone knew Blue probably had it coming, was probably on his way back into town to do to Perkin or some other poor soul what he'd done to Jewel. Once a man gets that look in his eyes—that boiled look, like a dog searching out a bone who's not going to stop until he finds it—well, sometimes he has to be put down like a dog. Don't he?

And it was sad how Elgin came out of prison to find Shelley Briggs gone, moved up North with Perkin Lut of all people, who'd lost his heart for the car business after Jewel died, took to selling home electronics imported from Japan

and Germany, made himself a fortune. Not long after he got out of prison, Elgin left too, no one knows where, just gone, drifting.

See, the thing is—no one wanted to convict Elgin. We all understood. We did. Blue had to go. But he'd had no weapon in his hand when Elgin, standing just nine feet away, pulled that trigger. Twice. Once we might have been able to overlook, but twice, that's something else again. Elgin offered no defense, even refused a fancy lawyer's attempt to get him to claim he'd suffered something called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which we're hearing a lot more about these days.

"I don't have that," Elgin said. "I shot a defenseless man. That's the long and the short of it, and that's a sin."

And he was right:

In the world, 'case you haven't noticed, you usually pay for your sins.

And in the South, always.

RUSSELL BANKS

Lobster Night

FROM *Esquire*

STACY DIDN'T MEAN to tell Noonan that when she was seventeen she was struck by lightning. She rarely told anyone, and never a man she was attracted to or hoped soon to be sleeping with. Always, at the last second, an alarm in the center of her brain went off, and she changed the subject, asked a question like, "How's your wife?" or "You ready for another?" She was a summertime bartender at Noonan's, a sprawling log building with the main entrance and kitchen door facing the road and three large plate-glass dining room windows in back and a wide redwood deck cantilevered above the yard for taking in the great sunset views of the Adirondack Mountains. The sign said, NOONAN'S FAMILY RESTAURANT, but in fact it was a roadhouse, a bar that—except in ski season and on summer weekends when drive-by tourists with kids mistakenly pulled in for lunch or supper—catered mostly to heavy drinkers from the several nearby hamlets.

The night that Stacy told Noonan about the lightning was also the night she shot and killed him. She had rented an A-frame at off-season rates in one of the hamlets and was working for Noonan only till the winter snows blew in from Quebec and Ontario. From May to November, she usually waited tables or tended bar in one or another of the area restaurants, and the rest of the year she taught alpine skiing at Whiteface Mountain. That was her real job, her profession. Stacy had the healthy, ash-blond good looks of a poster girl for women's Nordic sports: tall, broad shouldered, flat muscled, with a square jaw and high cheekbones. But despite appearances, she viewed herself as a plain-faced twenty-eight-year-old ex-athlete, with the emphasis on *ex*. Eight years ago, she was captain of the nationally ranked St. Regis University downhill ski team, only a sophomore and already a star. Then in the eastern regionals she pushed her luck, took a spectacular, cartwheeling spill in the giant slalom, and shattered her left thigh. The video of her fall was still being shown at the front of the sports segment on the evening news from Plattsburgh.

A year of physical therapy and she returned to college and the slopes, but she'd lost her fearlessness and, with it, her interest in college, and dropped out before fall break. Her parents had long since swapped their house for an RV and retired to a semipermanent campground outside Phoenix; her three older brothers

had drifted downstate to Albany for work in construction; but Stacy came back to where she'd grown up. She had friends from high school there, mostly women, who still thought of her as a star: "Stace was headed for the Olympics, y'know," they told strangers. Over time, she lived briefly and serially with three local men in their early thirties, men she called losers even when she was living with them—slow-talking guys with beards and ponytails, rusted-out pickup trucks, and large dogs with bandannas tied around their necks. Otherwise and most of the time, she lived alone.

Stacy had never tended bar for Noonan before this, and the place was a little rougher than she was used to. But she was experienced and had cultivated a set of open-faced, wiseguy ways and a laid-back manner that protected her from her male customers' presumptions. Which, in spite of her ways and manner, she needed: She was a shy, north-country girl who, when it came to personal matters, volunteered very little about herself, not because she had secrets but because there was so much about herself that she did not yet understand. She did understand, however, that the last thing she wanted or needed was a love affair with a man like Noonan—married, twenty years older than she, and her boss. She was seriously attracted to him, though. And not just sexually. Which was why she got caught off guard.

It was late August, a Thursday, the afternoon of Lobster Night. The place was empty, and she and Noonan were standing hip to hip behind the bar, studying the lobster tank. Back in June, Noonan, who did all the cooking himself, had decided that he could attract a better class of clientele and simplify the menu at the same time if, during the week, he offered nightly specials, which he advertised on a chalkboard hung from the FAMILY RESTAURANT sign outside. Monday became Mexican Night, with dollar margaritas and all the rice and refried beans you could eat. Tuesday was Liver 'n' Onions Night. Wednesday was Fresh Local Corn Night, although until mid-August, the corn came not from Adirondack gardens but from southern New Jersey and Pennsylvania by way of the Grand Union supermarket in Lake Placid. And Thursday—when local folks rarely ate out and therefore needed something more than merely special—was designated Lobster Night. Weekends, he figured, took care of themselves.

Noonan had set his teenage son's unused tropical fish tank at the end of the bar, filled it with tap water, and arranged with the Albany wholesaler to stock the tank on his Monday runs to Lake Placid with a dozen live lobsters. All week, the lobsters rose and sank in the cloudy tank like dark thoughts. Usually, by Tuesday afternoon, the regulars at the bar had given the lobsters names like Marsh and Redeye and Honest Abe, after local drinking, hunting, and bar-brawling legends,

and had handicapped the order of their execution. In the villages around, Thursday quickly became everyone's favorite night for eating out, and soon Noonan was doubling his weekly order, jamming the fish tank and making Lobster Night an almost merciful event for the poor crowded creatures.

"You ought to either get a bigger tank or else just don't buy so many of them," Stacy said.

Noonan laughed. "Stace," he said. "Compared to the cardboard boxes these guys've been in, the fish tank is lobster heaven. Four days of swimmin' in this, they're free-range, practically." He draped a heavy hand across her shoulder and drummed her collarbone with a fingertip. "They don't know the difference, anyhow. They're dumber than fish, y'know."

"You don't know what they feel or don't feel. Maybe they spend the last few days before they die flipping out from being so confined. I sure would."

"Yeah, well, I don't go there, Stace. Trying to figure what lobsters feel, that's the road to vegetarianism. The road to vegansville."

She smiled at that. Like most of the Adirondack men she knew, Noonan was a dedicated, lifelong hunter—mainly of deer, but also of game birds and rabbits, which he fed to his family and sometimes put on the restaurant menu as well. He also shot and trapped animals he didn't eat—foxes, coyotes, lynxes, even bears—and sold their pelts. Normally, this would disgust Stacy or at least seriously test her acceptance of Noonan's character. She wasn't noticeably softhearted or sentimental when it came to animals, but shooting and trapping creatures you didn't intend to eat made no sense to her. She was sure it was cruel and was almost ready to say it was sadistic.

In Noonan, though, it oddly attracted her, this cruelty. He was a tall, good-looking man in an awkward, rough-hewn way, large in the shoulders and arms, with a clean-shaven face and a buzz-cut head one or two sizes too small for his body. It made him look boyish to her, and whenever he showed signs of cruelty—his relentless, not quite good-natured teasing of Gail, his regular waitress, and the LaPierre brothers, two high school kids he hired in summers to wash dishes and bus tables—to her, he seemed even more boyish than usual. It was all somehow innocent, she thought. It had the same strange, otherworldly innocence of the animals that he liked to kill. A man that manly, that different from a woman, can actually make you feel more womanly—as if you were of a different species. It freed you from having to compare yourself to him.

"You ever try that? Vegetarianism?" Noonan asked. He tapped the glass of the tank with a knuckle, as if signaling one of the lobsters to come on over.

"Once. When I was seventeen. I kept it up for a while—two years, as a matter of fact. Till I busted up my leg and had to quit college." He knew the story of her

accident; everyone knew it. She'd been a local hero before the break and had become a celebrity afterward. "It's hard to keep being a vegetarian in the hospital, though. That's what got me off it."

"No shit. What got you on it?"

That's when she told him. "I was struck by lightning."

He looked at her. "Lightning! Jesus! Are you kidding me? How the hell did *that* happen?"

"The way it always happens, I guess. I was doing something else at the time. Going up the stairs to bed, actually, in my parents' house. It was in a thunderstorm, and I reached for the light switch on the wall and *bam!* Just like they say, a bolt out of the blue."

"But it didn't kill you," Noonan tenderly observed.

"No. But it sure could've. You could say it *almost* killed me, though."

"But it didn't."

"Right. But it *almost* killed me. That's not the same as 'It didn't kill me.' If you know what I mean."

"Yeah, but you're OK now, right? No lingering aftereffects, I mean. Except, of course, for your brief flirtation with the veg world." He squeezed the meat of her shoulder and smiled warmly.

She sighed. Then smiled back—she liked his touch—and tried again: "No, it really changed me. It did. A bolt of lightning went through my body and my brain, and I almost died from it, even though it lasted only a fraction of a second and then was over. It changes you, Noonan. That's all."

"But you're OK now, right?"

"Sure."

"So what was it like, getting hit by lightning?"

She hesitated a moment before answering. "Well, I thought I was shot. With a gun. Seriously. There was this loud noise, like an explosion, and when I woke up, I was lying at the bottom of the stairs, and Daddy and Mom were standing over me like I was dead, and I said, 'Who shot me, Daddy?' It really messed with my mind for a long time. I tried to find out if anybody else I knew had been struck by lightning, but nobody had. Although a few people said they knew someone or heard of someone who'd been hit and survived it. But nobody I ever met myself had been through it. I was the only person I knew who'd had this particular experience. Still am. It's strange, but when you're the only person you know who's gone through something that's changed you into a completely different person, for a while it's like you're on your own planet, like if you're a Vietnam vet and don't know anyone else who was in Vietnam, too."

"I can dig it," Noonan said somberly, although he himself had not been in

Vietnam.

“You get used to it, though. And then it turns out to be like life. I mean, there’s you, and there’s everybody else. Only, unlike the way it is for everybody else, this happened to me in a flash, not over years and so slow you don’t even realize how true it is. Know what I mean?”

“How true what is?”

“Well, just that there’s you, and there’s everybody else. And that’s life.”

“Sure, I can understand that.” He turned away from the tank and looked into Stacy’s blue eyes. “It’s the same for me. Only with me it was on account of this goddamned bear. Did I ever tell you about the bear that tore my camp down?”

She said, “No, Noonan. You didn’t.”

“It’s the same thing, like getting struck by lightning and afterward feeling like you’re a changed man.” It was years ago, he explained, when he was between marriages and drinking way too much and living in his hunting camp up on Baxter Mountain because his first wife had got the house in the divorce. He got drunk every night in town at the Spread Eagle or the Elm Tree or the old Dew Drop Inn, and afterward, when he drove back to Baxter Mountain, he’d park his truck at the side of the road, because the trail was too rough even for a four-by-four, and walk the two miles through the woods to his camp. It was a windblown, one-room cabin with a sleeping loft and a woodstove, and one night, after stumbling back from the village, he found the place had been trashed by a bear. “An adolescent male, I figured, it being springtime, who’d been kicked out of his own house and home. Not unlike myself. I had a certain sympathy for him, therefore. But he’d wrecked my cabin looking for food and had busted a window getting in, and I knew he’d come back, so I had to take him down.”

The next evening, Noonan blew out his kerosene lantern, climbed into the sleeping loft with a bottle of Jim Beam, his Winchester .30-06, and his flashlight, and waited. Around midnight, as if brushing away a cobweb, the bear tore off the sheet of polyurethane that Noonan had tacked over the broken window, crawled into the cabin, and made for the same cupboard he’d emptied the night before. Noonan, half drunk by now, clicked on his flashlight, caught the startled bear in its beam, and fired, but only wounded him. Maddened with pain, the bear roared and stood on his hind legs, flinging his forelegs in the air right and left, and before Noonan could fire again, the animal had grabbed on to a timber that held up the loft and ripped it from its place, tearing out several other supporting timbers with it, until the entire cabin was collapsing around Noonan and the wounded bear. The structure was feeble anyhow, made of old, cast-off boards tacked together in a hurry twenty years before, never rebuilt, never renovated, and it came down upon Noonan’s head with ease. The bear escaped into the

night, but Noonan lay trapped under the fallen roof of the cabin, unable to move, his right arm broken, he assumed, and possibly several ribs. “That’s when it happened,” he said.

“What?” Stacy dipped a dozen beer mugs two at a time into cold water, pulled them out, and stuck them into the freezer to frost for later on.

“That’s when I knew there was me, and there was everybody else. Just like you said. It changed my life.”

“No kidding. How?” She refilled the salt shakers on the bar.

“Well. I stopped drinking for one thing. That was a few years later, though. But I lay there all that night and most of the next day. Until this beautiful young woman out looking for her lost dog came wandering by. And, Stace,” he said, his voice suddenly lowered, “I married her.”

She put her fists on her hips and checked him out. “Seriously?”

He smiled. “Well, yeah, sort of. I’d actually known her a long time beforehand, and she’d visited me a few times at my camp, let us say. But, yeah, I did marry her . . . eventually. And we were very happy. For a while.”

“Uh-huh. For a while.”

Noonan nodded, smiled, winked. Then he bumped her hip with his and said, “I gotta get the kitchen set up. We can pursue this later, Stace. If you want.”

She didn’t answer. She started slinging bottles of beer into the darkness of the cooler, and when she next looked up, he was gone and a pair of road workers were coming through the door, hot and sunburned and thirsty.

The day had been clear, with wispy fantails of clouds in the east, promising a soft, late-summer sunset over the mountains for the folks dining out at Noonan’s Family Restaurant. It was unusually busy that evening, even for Lobster Night. Depressed by an earlier quarrel with her pregnant daughter over money, Gail fell quickly behind in her orders and, after being yelled at, first by her hungry customers in the dining room and then by Noonan in the kitchen, where seven or eight bright-red lobsters on their platters awaited pickup, she broke down and ran sobbing into the ladies’ room. She came out, but only after Stacy went after her and promised to help in the dining room, where fifteen kids from three unrelated French-Canadian families were banging their silverware rhythmically against their glasses. Back in the kitchen, halfway into the supper hour, Donny LaPierre threw down his dish towel and told Noonan to take his job and shove it—he didn’t graduate high school to get treated like an idiot for minimum wage. His younger brother, Timmy, who would graduate the following year, high-fived Donny and said, “Whoa! Way cool, D.L.,” and the two walked out together.

Noonan stood at the door and bellowed, “Don’t even think about gettin’ paid

for this week!” and the boys gave him the finger from the parking lot and laughed and started hitching to Lake Placid.

Eventually, Gail and Stacy, between them, got everyone satisfactorily served, the diners and their children quieted down, and order was restored—even in the kitchen, where Noonan, almost grateful for the chance to do it right, took over the dishwasher’s job himself. At the bar, four bored, lonely regulars, men of habit, were drinking and smoking cigarettes and watching Montreal lose to the Mets on television. Stacy gave them a round on the house for their patience, and all four smiled and thanked her and resumed watching the game.

In the fish tank, the one last lobster bumped lazily against the glass. Stacy wiped down the bar and came to a slow stop by the tank. She leaned down and gazed into what she believed was one of the lobster’s eyes—more of a greenish knob than an eyeball, anatomically absurd to her—and tried to imagine what the world of Noonan’s Family Restaurant looked like through that knob and the thirty-gallon cell of cloudy water surrounding it and, beyond that, the lens of the algae-stained glass wall. It probably looks like an alien planet out here, she thought. Or incomprehensibly foreign, like some old-time Chinese movie, so you don’t even know what the story’s about, who’s the good guy and who’s the bad guy. Or maybe, instead of an actual place or thing, to a lobster it looks like only an idea out here. That scared her.

There must be some kind of tradeoff among the senses, she reasoned, like with blind and deaf people. If one sense is weak, another must be strong, and vice versa. Lobsters, she figured, probably can’t see very well, living as they do way at the dark bottom of the sea. To distinguish food from friend and friend from foe, they would need powerful senses of smell and hearing. She brought her face up close to the glass and almost touched it with her nose. The lobster bobbled and jiggled just beyond, as if struggling to use its weak eyes and tank-impaired hearing and olfactory senses to determine if Stacy was a thing that could eat it or breed with it or be eaten by it. So much in the life of any creature depends upon being able to identify the other creatures accurately, Stacy thought. In the tank and out of it, too. And this poor beast, with only its ridiculous eyes to depend upon, was lost, was wholly, utterly lost. She reached toward the lobster, as if to pat it, to comfort and reassure.

Noonan’s large hand dropped unseen from above, as if through dark water, and came to rest upon hers. She turned, startled, and there was his face a bare few inches away, his large, bloodshot brown eyes and his porous peach-colored skin with black whiskers popping through like lopped-off stalks, soft caves of nostrils, red lips, tobacco-stained teeth, wet tongue. She yanked her hand away and stepped back, bringing him into a more appropriate and safe focus, with the

bar between them like a fence, keeping him out or her in, she wasn't sure, but it didn't matter, as long as they were on opposite sides of it.

"You scared me!" she said.

He leaned across the bar and smiled indulgently. Behind her, the men drank beer and watched baseball. She heard the crowd at the ballpark chitter in anticipation of the pitch. From the dining room came the low rumble of families distributing food among themselves and their hushed commentaries as they evaluated its quality and the size of their portions, praise and disappointment voiced equally low, as if both were gossip, and the clink of their forks and knives, gulps, chomps, an old man's sudden laugh, the snap of lobster claws and legs breaking.

"Stace, soon's you get the chance, c'mon out to the kitchen. There's something I want to tell you." He turned and abruptly strode to the dining room, spoke a moment to Gail, sympathetically offering to let her go home early, Stacy guessed, getting rid of witnesses, and gathered up a tub of dirty dishes left behind by Donny LaPierre. As Noonan disappeared into the kitchen, he glanced over at Stacy, and though a stranger would have thought him expressionless, she saw him practically speaking with his face, saw him using it to say in a low, cold voice, "Stace, as soon as we're alone here tonight, I'm going to take you down."

She decided to force the issue, to go back to the kitchen right now, before Gail left, while there was still a fairly large number of people in the dining room and the four guys at the bar, and if Noonan said what she expected him to say and did what she expected him to do, then she would walk out the door just like the LaPierre boys had, take off in her car, the doors locked and windows up, the wheels spinning, kicking gravel and squealing rubber as she left the parking lot and hit the road to Lake Placid.

Who the hell did he think he was anyhow, coming on to her like that, him a married man, middle-aged, practically? Sure, she had been attracted to him from the first time she saw him, when he interviewed her for the job and made her turn and turn again, while he sat there on the barstool and looked her over with genuine interest, almost with innocence, as if she were a bouquet of wildflowers he'd ordered for his wife. "Turn around, Stace. Let me see the other side." She had actually liked his suddenness, his fearless, impersonal way of telling her exactly what he wanted from her, instructing her to wear a tight white T-shirt and black jeans or shorts to work in and to be friendly with the customers, especially the males, because he wanted return business, not one-night stands, and men will come back and stay late again and again if they think the pretty girl behind the bar likes them personally. She had smiled like a coconspirator when he told her that and said, "No *problema*, Mr. Noonan."

“Hey, you can call me Charlie, or you can call me Noonan. Just don’t call me at home, and never call me Mister. You’re hired, Stace. Go change the dress and be back here by six.” But all that was before she told him about having been struck by lightning. Until then, she had thought it was safe to flirt with him; he was married, after all, and he was so unlike the losers she usually hooked up with that she had decided it was harmless as well as interesting to be attracted to him, and nothing could come of it anyhow; and wasn’t it intelligent, after all, for a young woman to want a successful older man’s attention and approval? Wasn’t that how you learned about life and who you were?

But somehow, this afternoon everything had changed. She couldn’t have said how it had changed or why, but everything was different now, especially between her and Noonan. It wasn’t what he had done or not done or even anything he had said. It was what she had said.

A woman who has been struck by lightning is not like other people. Most of the time Stacy could forget that fact, could even forget what that horrible night had felt like, when she was only seventeen and thought that she had been shot in the head. But all she had to do was say the words, reestablish the fact, and the whole thing came back in full force—her astonishment, the physical and mental pain, and the long-lasting fear, even today, that it would happen to her again. The only people who say lightning never strikes twice in the same place have never been struck once. Which was why she was so reluctant to speak of it.

But Noonan had charmed her into speaking of it, and all at once, there it was again, as if a glass wall had appeared between her and other people, Noonan especially. The man had no idea who she was. But that wasn’t his fault. It was hers. She had misled him. She had misled herself. She checked the drinks of the customers at the bar. Then, to show Gail where she was headed, she pointedly flipped a wave across the dining room and walked back to the kitchen.

When she entered, Noonan was leaning against the edge of the sink, his large, bare arms folded across his chest, his head lowered: a man absorbing a sobering thought.

Stacy said, “What’d you want to tell me?” She stayed by the door, propping it open with her foot.

He shook his head as if waking from a nap. “What? Oh, Stace! Sorry, I was thinking. Actually, Stace, I was thinking about you.”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Close the door. Come on in.” He peered around her into the dining room. “Is Gail OK? She’s not crying or anything anymore, is she?”

“No.” Stacy let the door slide shut behind her. The exhaust fan chugged above the stove, and the dishwasher sloshed quietly next to the sink, tinkling the

glasses and silverware inside and jiggling the plates. On a shelf by the rear door, a portable radio played country and western music at low volume—sweetly melancholic background music. There was a calming order and peacefulness to the kitchen, a low-key domesticity about it that, even though the room was as familiar to her as the kitchen of her rented A-frame, surprised Stacy. For a moment, she felt guilty for having been so suspicious of Noonan and so quick to judge and condemn him. She liked his boyish good looks, didn't she? She enjoyed his smoky baritone voice and unapologetic north-country accent, and she was pleased and flattered by his sudden flashes of intimacy. "What did you want to tell me, Noonan?" she repeated, softly this time.

He leaned forward, eyes twinkling, mischief on his mind, and looked right and left, as if not wishing to be overheard. "What do you say we cook that last lobster and split it between ourselves?" He gave her a broad smile and rubbed his hands together. "Don't tell Gail. I'll boil and chill the sucker and break out the meat and squeeze a little lime juice over it, and we'll eat it later, after we close up, just the two of us. Maybe open a bottle of wine. Whaddya say?" He came up to her and put his arm around her shoulder and steered her toward the door. "You go liberate the animal from its tank, and I'll bring the kettle to a roiling boil, as they say."

"No." She shrugged out from under his arm.

"Huh? What d'you mean, 'No'?"

"Just that. No. I don't want a quiet little tête-à-tête out here with you after we close. I don't want to make it with you, Noonan. You're married, and I resent the way you act like it doesn't matter to you. Or worse, me! You act like your being married doesn't matter to me."

Noonan was confused. "What the fuck? Who said anything about *making* it? Jesus!"

She exhaled heavily. "I'm sorry," she said. "You're right. I don't know what you've got in mind, Noonan. Really. I don't know why I said all that. I'm just . . . I'm scared, I guess."

"You? Scared? Hah!" She was young and beautiful and healthy; she was an athlete, a woman who could pick and choose among men much younger, more available, better-looking, and richer than he. What did she have to be scared of? Not him, that's for sure. "Man, you are one screwed-up broad, let me tell you." He shook his head slowly in frustration and disgust. "Look, I don't give a shit if you don't want to join me in a whaddyacallit, a tête-à-tête. Suit yourself. But I'm gonna eat me some lobster anyhow. Alone!" he said, and he sailed through the door into the dining room.

Stacy slowly crossed the kitchen to the back door, last used by the LaPierre

brothers on their way to the parking lot and road beyond. It was a screen door, and moths and mosquitoes batted against it and swarmed around the yellow bulb on the wall outside. On this side of the restaurant, it was already dark. Out back, where the building faced west to the mountains, the sky was pale orange, with long, silver-gray clouds tinged with purple floating up high and blood-red strips of cloud near the horizon. She decided she'd better return to the bar. There would be a few diners, she knew, who would want to take an after-dinner drink onto the deck and watch the sunset.

Before she could get out the door, Noonan, his face dark with confused anger, strode back into the kitchen, carrying the last lobster in his dripping-wet hand. The lobster feebly waved its claws in the air, and its thick, armored tail curled in on itself and snapped back in a weak, hopeless attempt to push Noonan away. "Here, you do the honors!" Noonan said to Stacy, holding the lobster up to her face. With his free hand, he flipped the gas jet below the slow-boiling lobster pot to high. "Have you ever boiled a live lobster, Stacy? Oh, it's a real turn-on." He leered, but it was an angry leer. "You're gonna love it, Stacy, especially the way it turns bright-red as soon as you drop it into the boiling water. It won't sink right away, of course, because it's still alive and will struggle to climb out of the pot, just like you would. But even while it's trying to get out of the boiling water, it'll be turning red, and you'll see it give up, and when that happens, it's cooked and ready to be eaten. *Yummm!*"

He pushed the lobster at her, and it flailed its claws in her face, as if it were her hand clamped onto its back, not Noonan's. She didn't flinch or back away. She held her ground and looked into what passed for the animal's face, searching for an expression, some indicator of feeling or thought that would guide her own feelings and thoughts. But there was none, and when she realized there could be none, this pleased her and she smiled.

"It's getting to you, right?" Noonan said. "I can tell, it's a turn-on for you, right?" He smiled back, almost forgiving her for having judged him so unfairly, and held the lobster over the pot of boiling water. Steam billowed around the creature's twisting body, and Stacy stared, transfixed, when from the dining room she heard the rising voices of the diners, their loud exclamations and calls to one another to come and see, hurry up, come and see the bear!

Stacy and Noonan looked at each other, she in puzzlement, he with irritated resignation. "Shit," he said. "This has got to be the worst goddamn night of my life." He dropped the lobster into the empty sink and disappeared into the pantry, returning to the kitchen a few seconds later with a rifle cradled in his arm. "Sonofabitch, this is the last time that bastard gets into my trash!" he declared, and made for the dining room, with Stacy following close behind.

She had never seen a black bear close-up, although it was not uncommon to come upon one in the neighborhood, especially in midsummer, when the mountain streams ran dry and sent the normally shy creatures to the lower slopes and valleys, where the humans lived. Once, when driving back to college after summer vacation, she thought she spotted a large bear crossing the road a hundred yards ahead of her and at first had assumed it couldn't be a bear, it must be a huge dog, a Newfoundland, maybe, moving slowly, until it heard her car coming and broke into a swift, forward-tilted lope and disappeared into the brush as she passed. She stopped the car and backed up to where the animal had entered the brush, but there was no sign of its ever having been there, no broken weeds or freshly fallen leaves, even.

This time, however, she intended to see the bear up close, if possible, and to know for sure that she had not imagined it. When she got to the dining room, everyone, Gail and the regulars from the bar included, was standing at the windows, gazing down at the yard in back where the land sloped away from the building, pointing and murmuring small noises of appreciation—except for the children, who were stilled by the sight, not so much frightened by the bear as in awe of it. The adults seemed to be mainly pleased by their good luck, for now they would have something novel to report to their friends and family when they returned home. This would become the night they saw the bear at Noonan's.

Then Stacy saw Noonan and several other diners, all of them men, out on the deck. They, too, stared down into the yard below the dining room and in the direction of the basement door, where Noonan stashed his garbage and trash barrels in a locked wooden latticework cage. The men were somber and intent, taut and almost trembling, like hunting dogs on point.

Stacy edged up to the window. Behind the distant mountains, the sun was gloriously setting. Its last golden rays splashed across the neatly mowed yard behind the restaurant and shone like a soft spotlight upon the thick, black-pelted body of the bear. It was a large adult male, over six feet tall on his hind legs, methodically, calmly ripping away the sides and top of the lattice cage, sending torn boards into the air like kindling sticks, working efficiently but at his own placid pace, as if he were utterly alone and there were no audience of men, women, and children staring down at him from the dining room windows overhead, no small gang of men out on the deck watching him like a hunting party gathered on a cliff above a watering hole, and as if Noonan were not lifting his rifle to his shoulder, aiming it, and firing.

He shot once, and he missed the bear altogether. He fired a second time.

The bear was struck high in the back and a tuft of black hair flew away from

his chest where the bullet emerged. The crowd in the dining room groaned and cried out, "He's shooting it! Oh, God, he's shooting it!" A woman screeched, "Tell him to stop!" and children began to bawl. A man yelled, "For God's sake, is he nuts?" Gail looked beseechingly at Stacy, who simply shook her head slowly from side to side, for she could do nothing to stop him now. No one could. People shouted and cried, a few sobbed, and children wailed, and Noonan fired a third time. He hit the bear in the shoulder and the animal spun around, still standing, searching for the source of this terrible pain, not understanding that he should look up, that the man with the rifle, barely fifty yards away, was positioned out of sight above him and, because of his extreme anger, because of his refusal to be impersonal in this grisly business, was unable to kill him, and so he wounded the poor creature again and again, in the chest, in a paw, and shot him through the muzzle, until finally the bear dropped to all fours and, unsure in which direction to flee, tumbled first away from the restaurant downhill toward the woods, and then, hit in the back, turned and came lumbering, bleeding and in pain, straight toward the deck, where Noonan fired one last shot, hitting the bear this time in the center of his forehead, and the bear rolled forward, as if he had accidentally tripped, and died.

Rifle in hand, Noonan stomped in silence past the departing crowd, his gaze fixed rigidly on something inside, a target in his mind of a silhouetted bear. No one spoke to him or caught his eye as he passed; no one looked at his back, even, when he strode into the kitchen and the door swung shut behind him. The men who had stood with him on the deck outside were ashamed now to have been there. Making as little of it as possible, they joined their wives and friends, all of whom were lined up at the cash register paying Gail, leaving cash on the table, or paying Stacy at the bar, and quickly headed for the parking lot and their cars. There were a few stunned, silent exceptions, older kids too shocked to cry or too proud, but most of the children were weeping, and some wailed, while the parents tried vainly to comfort them, to assure them that bears don't feel pain the same way humans do, that the man who shot the bear had to shoot it because it was damaging his property, and not to worry, we will never come to this restaurant again, no matter what.

When everyone had left, Gail walked slowly from the dining room to the bar, where she took off her apron, folded it carefully, and set it on a barstool. "That's it for me," she said to Stacy. With trembling hands, she knocked a cigarette loose from the pack, lit it, and inhaled deeply. "Tell him he can mail me my pay," she said. "The fucker." She started for the door and then abruptly stopped. Without turning around, she said, "Stacy? Why the hell are you staying?"

“I’m not.”

In a voice so low she seemed to be talking to herself, Gail said, “Yes, girl, you are.” Then she was gone.

Stacy flipped off the lights in the bar and dining room one by one, unplugged the roadside sign, and locked the front entrance. When she pushed open the door to the kitchen, Noonan, standing at the far end of the long stainless-steel counter, looked up and scowled at her. He had cooked the last lobster and was eating it, eating it off the counter with his hands; broken shells and the remains of its shattered carcass lay scattered in front of him. He poked a forefinger into the thick, muscular tail and shoved a chunk of white meat out the other end, snatched it up, and popped it into his mouth. “Eight fucking shots it took me!” he said, chewing. “That’s what I get for stashing that goddamn pissant .22 here instead of laying in a real gun.” He waved contemptuously with the back of his hand at the rifle propped against the counter, and with his other hand he pushed more lobster meat into his mouth. His face was red, and he was breathing rapidly and heavily. “I missed the first shot, y’know, only because I was so pissed off I didn’t concentrate. But if I’d had a real gun, that second shot would’ve done the job fine. By God, tomorrow I’m bringing in my .30-06!” he declared.

Stacy picked up the .22 rifle and looked it over. She slid it into shooting position against her right shoulder and aimed along the barrel through the screen door and the fluttering cluster of moths to the outside lamp.

“Is it still loaded?” she asked.

“There’s four rounds left, so don’t fuck with it.” He yanked the spindly legs off the underbelly of the lobster and sucked the meat from each and dropped the emptied tubes, one by one, onto the counter in front of him.

Slowly, Stacy brought the rifle around and aimed it at Noonan’s skull.

“Noonan,” she said, and he turned.

“Yeah, sure.”

She closed her eyes and pulled the trigger and heard the explosion, and when she opened her eyes, she saw in the middle of Noonan’s broad, white forehead a dark hole the size of a dime, which instantly expanded to a quarter, and his large body jerked once as if electrocuted and flipped backward, his astonished face gone from her sight altogether now, and she saw instead the back of his head, and a hole in it the size of a silver dollar. His body, like a large, rubberized sack of water, fell to the floor, spinning away from her as it descended, ending flat on its back, with Noonan’s wide-open eyes staring at the pot rack above the counter. Blood pumped from the hole in the rear of his skull onto the pale-green linoleum and spread in a thickening, dark-red puddle slowly toward her feet.

She laid the rifle on the counter beside the broken remains of the lobster, crossed to the stove, where the pot of water was still boiling, and shut off the gas flame. Slowly, as if unsure of where she was, she looked around the room, then seemed to make a decision, and perched herself on a stool next to the walk-in refrigerator. She leaned her head back against the cool stainless-steel door and closed her eyes. Never in her life, never, had Stacy known the relief she felt at that moment. And not since the moment before she was struck by lightning had she known the freedom.

A rattling Ford pickup truck stopped beside the darkened roadside sign, and the LaPierre brothers, Donny and Timmy, leaped from the truck bed to the side of the road. "Hey, good luck with ol' Noonan, you little assholes!" the driver said, and he and a male passenger in the cab cackled with laughter. Two beery, expansive carpenters, they were cousins of the LaPierres, heading home to their wives and kids late from the bars of Lake Placid. They waved cheerfully to the boys and pulled away.

Donny and Timmy crunched across the gravel parking lot. The kitchen light and the lamp outside were still on, and when the boys were halfway across the lot, they saw Stacy through the screen door, seated on the stool by the big walk-in fridge. She was asleep, it looked like, or maybe just bored out of her mind listening to one of Noonan's dumb hunting stories.

"You think he's screwing Stacy?" Timmy asked.

"C'mon, man. Stacy's a babe. And he's ancient, man," Donny said. "It's cool she's still here, though," he added. "She likes us, and he'll hire us back just to look good."

"I wouldn't mind a little of that myself."

"A little of what?"

"Stacy, man!"

Donny punched his younger brother on the shoulder. "Yeah, well, you'll hafta wait your turn, little fella!" he laughed. He waved away the swarming cloud of moths and pulled the screen door open. Timmy entered first, and Donny, hiding his fading grin behind his hand, followed.

WILLIAM GAY

The Paperhanger

FROM *Harper's Magazine*

THE VANISHING of the doctor's wife's child in broad daylight was an event so cataclysmic that it forever divided time into the then and the now, the before and the after. In later years, fortified with a pitcher of silica-dry vodka martinis, she had cause to replay the events preceding the disappearance. They were tawdry and banal but in retrospect freighted with menace, a foreshadowing of what was to come, like a footman or a fool preceding a king into a room.

She had been quarreling with the paperhanger. Her four-year-old daughter, Zeineb, was standing directly behind the paperhanger where he knelt smoothing air bubbles out with a wide plastic trowel. Zeineb had her fingers in the paperhanger's hair. The paperhanger's hair was shoulder length and the color of flax and the child was delighted with it. The paperhanger was accustomed to her doing this and he did not even turn around. He just went on with his work. His arms were smooth and brown and corded with muscle and in the light that fell upon the paperhanger through stained-glass panels the doctor's wife could see that they were lightly downed with fine golden hair. She studied these arms bemusedly while she formulated her thoughts.

You tell me so much a roll, she said. The doctor's wife was from Pakistan and her speech was still heavily accented. I do not know single-bolt rolls and double-bolt rolls. You tell me double-bolt price but you are installing single-bolt rolls. My friend has told me. It is cost me perhaps twice as much.

The paperhanger, still on his knees, turned. He smiled up at her. He had pale blue eyes. I did tell you so much a roll, he said. You bought the rolls. The child, not yet vanished, was watching the paperhanger's eyes. She was a scaled-down clone of the mother, the mother viewed through the wrong end of a telescope, and the paperhanger suspected that as she grew neither her features nor her expression would alter, she would just grow larger, like something being aired up with a hand pump.

And you are leave lumps, the doctor's wife said, gesturing at the wall. I do not leave lumps, the paperhanger said. You've seen my work before. These are not lumps. The paper is wet. The paste is wet. Everything will shrink down and flatten out. He smiled again. He had clean even teeth. And besides, he said, I gave you my special cockteaser rate. I don't know what you're complaining

about.

Her mouth worked convulsively. She looked for a moment as if he'd slapped her. When words did come they came in a fine spray of spit. You are trash, she said. You are scum.

Hands on knees, he was pushing erect, the girl's dark fingers trailing out of his hair. Don't call me trash, he said, as if it were perfectly all right to call him scum, but he was already talking to her back. She had whirled on her heels and went twisting her hips through an arched doorway into the cathedraled living room. The paperhanger looked down at the child. Her face glowed with a strange constrained glee, as if she and the paperhanger shared some secret the rest of the world hadn't caught on to yet.

In the living room the builder was supervising the installation of a chandelier that depended from the vaulted ceiling by a long golden chain. The builder was a short bearded man dancing about, showing her the features of the chandelier, smiling obsequiously. She gave him a flat angry look. She waved a dismissive hand toward the ceiling. Whatever, she said.

She went out the front door onto the porch and down a makeshift walkway of two-by-tens into the front yard where her car was parked. The car was a silver-gray Mercedes her husband had given her for their anniversary. When she cranked the engine its idle was scarcely perceptible.

She powered down the window. Zeineb, she called. Across the razed earth of the unlandscaped yard a man in a grease-stained T-shirt was booming down the chains securing a backhoe to a lowboy hooked to a gravel truck. The sun was low in the west and blood-red behind this tableau and man and tractor looked flat and dimensionless as something decorative stamped from tin. She blew the horn. The man turned, raised an arm as if she'd signaled him.

Zeineb, she called again.

She got out of the car and started impatiently up the walkway. Behind her the gravel truck started, and truck and backhoe pulled out of the drive and down toward the road.

The paperhanger was stowing away his T-square and trowels in his wooden toolbox. Where is Zeineb? the doctor's wife asked. She followed you out, the paperhanger told her. He glanced about, as if the girl might be hiding somewhere. There was nowhere to hide.

Where is my child? she asked the builder. The electrician climbed down from the ladder. The paperhanger came out of the bathroom with his tools. The builder was looking all around. His elfin features were touched with chagrin, as if this missing child were just something else he was going to be held accountable for.

Likely she's hiding in a closet, the paperhanger said. Playing a trick on you.

Zeineb does not play tricks, the doctor's wife said. Her eyes kept darting about the huge room, the shadows that lurked in corners. There was already an undercurrent of panic in her voice and all her poise and self-confidence seemed to have vanished with the child.

The paperhanger set down his toolbox and went through the house, opening and closing doors. It was a huge house and there were a lot of closets. There was no child in any of them.

The electrician was searching upstairs. The builder had gone through the French doors that opened onto the unfinished veranda and was peering into the backyard. The backyard was a maze of convoluted ditch excavated for the septic tank field line and beyond that there was just woods. She's playing in that ditch, the builder said, going down the flagstone steps.

She wasn't, though. She wasn't anywhere. They searched the house and grounds. They moved with jerky haste. They kept glancing toward the woods where the day was waning first. The builder kept shaking his head. She's got to be *somewhere*, he said.

Call someone, the doctor's wife said. Call the police.

It's a little early for the police, the builder said. She's got to be here.

You call them anyway. I have a phone in my car. I will call my husband.

While she called, the paperhanger and the electrician continued to search. They had looked everywhere and were forced to search places they'd already looked. If this ain't the goddamnedest thing I ever saw, the electrician said.

The doctor's wife got out of the Mercedes and slammed the door. Suddenly she stopped and clasped a hand to her forehead. She screamed. The man with the tractor, she cried. Somehow my child is gone with the tractor man.

Oh Jesus, the builder said. What have we got ourselves into here?

The high sheriff that year was a ruminative man named Bellwether. He stood beside the county cruiser talking to the paperhanger while deputies ranged the grounds. Other men were inside looking in places that had already been searched numberless times. Bellwether had been in the woods and he was picking cockleburs off his khakis and out of his socks. He was watching the woods, where dark was gathering and seeping across the field like a stain.

I've got to get men out here, Bellwether said. A lot of men and a lot of lights. We're going to have to search every inch of these woods.

You'll play hell doing it, the paperhanger said. These woods stretch all the way to Lawrence County. This is the edge of the Harrikan. Down in there's where all those old mines used to be. Allens Creek.

I don't give a shit if they stretch all the way to Fairbanks, Alaska, Bellwether

said. They've got to be searched. It'll just take a lot of men.

The raw earth yard was full of cars. Doctor Jamahl had come in a sleek black Lexus. He berated his wife. Why weren't you watching her? he asked, Unlike his wife's, the doctor's speech was impeccable. She covered her face with her palms and wept. The doctor still wore his green surgeon's smock and it was flecked with bright dots of blood as a butcher's smock might be.

I need to feed a few cows, the paperhanger said. I'll feed my stock pretty quick and come back and help hunt.

You don't mind if I look in your truck, do you?

Do what?

I've got to cover my ass. If that little girl don't turn up damn quick this is going to be over my head. TBI, FBI, network news. I've got to eliminate everything.

Eliminate away, the paperhanger said.

The sheriff searched the floorboard of the paperhanger's pickup truck. He shined his huge flashlight under the seat and felt behind it with his hands.

I had to look, he said apologetically.

Of course you did, the paperhanger said.

Full dark had fallen before he returned. He had fed his cattle and stowed away his tools and picked up a six-pack of San Miguel beer and he sat in the back of the pickup truck drinking it. The paperhanger had been in the navy and stationed in the Philippines and San Miguel was the only beer he could drink. He had to go out of town to buy it, but he figured it was worth it. He liked the exotic labels, the dark bitter taste on the back of his tongue, the way the chilled bottles felt held against his forehead.

A modey crowd of curiosity seekers and searchers thronged the yard. There was a vaguely festive air. He watched all this with a dispassionate eye, as if he were charged with grading the participants, comparing this with other spectacles he'd seen. Coffee urns had been brought in and set up on tables, sandwiches prepared and handed out to the weary searchers. A crane had been hauled in and the septic tank reclaimed from the ground. It swayed from a taut cable while men with lights searched the impacted earth beneath it for a child, for the very trace of a child. Through the far dark woods lights crossed and recrossed, darted to and fro like fireflies. The doctor and the doctor's wife sat in folding camp chairs looking drained, stunned, waiting for their child to be delivered into their arms.

The doctor was a short portly man with a benevolent expression. He had a moon-shaped face, with light and dark areas of skin that looked swirled, as if the

pigment coloring him had not been properly mixed. He had been educated at Princeton. When he had established his practice he had returned to Pakistan to find a wife befitting his station. The woman he had selected had been chosen on the basis of her beauty. In retrospect, perhaps more consideration should have been given to other qualities. She was still beautiful but he was thinking that certain faults might outweigh this. She seemed to have trouble keeping up with her children. She could lose a four-year-old child in a room no larger than six hundred square feet and she could not find it again.

The paperhanger drained his bottle and set it by his foot in the bed of the truck. He studied the doctor's wife's ravaged face through the deep blue light. The first time he had seen her she had hired him to paint a bedroom in the house they were living in while the doctor's mansion was being built. There was an arrogance about her that cried out to be taken down a notch or two. She flirted with him, backed away, flirted again. She would treat him as if he were a stain on the bathroom rug and then stand close by him while he worked until he was dizzy with the smell of her, with the heat that seemed to radiate off her body. She stood by him while he knelt painting baseboards and after an infinite moment leaned carefully the weight of a thigh against his shoulder. You'd better move it, he thought. She didn't. He laughed and turned his face into her groin. She gave a strangled cry and slapped him hard. The paintbrush flew away and speckled the dark rose walls with antique white. You filthy beast, she said. You are some kind of monster. She stormed out of the room and he could hear her slamming doors behind her.

Well, I was looking for a job when I found this one. He smiled philosophically to himself.

But he had not been fired. In fact now he had been hired again. Perhaps there was something here to ponder.

At midnight he gave up his vigil. Some souls more hardy than his kept up the watch. The earth here was worn smooth by the useless traffic of the searchers. Driving out, he met a line of pickup trucks with civil-defense tags. Grimfaced men sat aligned in their beds. Some clutched rifles loosely by their barrels, as if they would lay waste whatever monster, man or beast, would snatch up a child in its slaverous jaws and vanish, prey and predator, in the space between two heartbeats.

Even more dubious reminders of civilization as these fell away. He drove into the Harrikan, where he lived. A world so dark and forlorn light itself seemed at a premium. Whippoorwills swept red-eyed up from the roadside. Old abandoned foundries and furnaces rolled past, grim and dark as forsaken prisons. Down a ridge here was an abandoned graveyard, if you knew where to look. The

paperhanger did. He had dug up a few of the graves, examined with curiosity what remained, buttons, belt buckles, a cameo brooch. The bones he laid out like a child with a Tinkertoy, arranging them the way they went in jury-rigged resurrection.

He braked hard on a curve, the truck slewing in the gravel. A bobcat had crossed the road, graceful as a wraith, fierce and lantern-eyed in the headlights, gone so swiftly it might have been a stage prop swung across the road on wires.

Bellwether and a deputy drove to the backhoe operator's house. He lived up a gravel road that wound through a great stand of cedars. He lived in a board-and-batten house with a tin roof rusted to a warm umber. They parked before it and got out, adjusting their gunbelts.

Bellwether had a search warrant with the ink scarcely dry. The operator was outraged.

Look at it this way, Bellwether explained patiently. I've got to cover my ass. Everything has got to be considered. You know how kids are. Never thinking. What if she run under the wheels of your truck when you was backing out? What if quicklike you put the body in your truck to get rid of somewhere?

What if quicklike you get the hell off my property, the operator said.

Everything has to be considered, the sheriff said again. Nobody's accusing anybody of anything just yet.

The operator's wife stood glowering at them. To have something to do with his hands, the operator began to construct a cigarette. He had huge red hands thickly sown with brown freckles. They trembled. I ain't got a thing in this round world to hide, he said.

Bellwether and his men searched everywhere they could think of to look. Finally they stood uncertainly in the operator's yard, out of place in their neat khakis, their polished leather.

Now get the hell off my land, the operator said. If all you think of me is that I could run over a little kid and then throw it off in the bushes like a dead cat or something then I don't even want to see your goddamn face. I want you gone and I want you by God gone now.

Everything had to be considered, the sheriff said.

Then maybe you need to consider that paperhanger.

What about him?

That paperhanger is one sick puppy.

He was still there when I got there, the sheriff said. Three witnesses swore nobody ever left, not even for a minute, and one of them was the child's mother. I searched his truck myself.

Then he's a sick puppy with a damn good alibi, the operator said.

That was all. There was no ransom note, no child that turned up two counties over with amnesia. She was a page turned, a door closed, a lost ball in the high weeds. She was a child no larger than a doll, but the void she left behind her was unreckonable. Yet there was no end to it. No finality. There was no moment when someone could say, turning from a mounded grave, Well, this has been unbearable, but you've got to go on with your life. Life did not go on.

At the doctor's wife's insistence an intensive investigation was focused on the backhoe operator. Forensic experts from the FBI examined every millimeter of the gravel truck, paying special attention to its wheels. They were examined with every modern crime-fighting device the government possessed, and there was not a microscopic particle of tissue or blood, no telltale chip of fingernail, no hair ribbon.

Work ceased on the mansion. Some subcontractors were discharged outright, while others simply drifted away. There was no one to care if the work was done, no one to pay them. The half-finished veranda's raw wood grayed in the fall, then winter, rains. The ditches were left fallow and uncovered and half-filled with water. Kudzu crept from the woods. The hollyhocks and oleanders the doctor's wife had planted grew entangled and rampant. The imported windows were stoned by double-dared boys who whirled and fled. Already this house where a child had vanished was acquiring an unhealthy, diseased reputation.

The doctor and his wife sat entombed in separate prisons replaying real and imagined grievances. The doctor felt that his wife's neglect had sent his child into the abstract. The doctor's wife drank vodka martinis and watched talk shows where passed an endless procession of vengeful people who had not had children vanish, and felt, perhaps rightly, that the fates had dealt her from the bottom of the deck, and she prayed with intensity for a miracle.

Then one day she was just gone. The Mercedes and part of her clothing and personal possessions were gone too. He idly wondered where she was, but he did not search for her.

Sitting in his armchair cradling a great marmalade cat and a bottle of J&B and observing with bemused detachment the gradations of light at the window, the doctor remembered studying literature at Princeton. He had particular cause to reconsider the poetry of William Butler Yeats. For how surely things fell apart, how surely the center did not hold.

His practice fell into a ruin. His colleagues made sympathetic allowances for him at first, but there are limits to these things. He made erroneous diagnoses, prescribed the wrong medicines not once or twice but as a matter of course.

Just as there is a deepening progression to misfortune, so too there is a point beyond which things can only get worse. They did. A middle-aged woman he was operating on died.

He had made an incision to remove a ruptured appendix and the incised flesh was clamped aside while he made ready to slice it out. It was not there. He stared in drunken disbelief. He began to search under things, organs, intestines, a rising tide of blood. The appendix was not there. It had gone into the abstract, atrophied, been removed twenty-five years before, he had sliced through the selfsame scar. He was rummaging through her abdominal cavity like an irritated man fumbling through a drawer for a clean pair of socks, finally bellowing in rage and wringing his hands in bloody vexation while nurses began to cry out, another surgeon was brought on the run as a closer, and he was carried from the operating room.

Came then days of sitting in the armchair while he was besieged by contingency lawyers, action news teams, a long line of process servers. There was nothing he could do. It was out of his hands and into the hands of the people who are paid to do these things. He sat cradling the bottle of J&B with the marmalade cat snuggled against his portly midriff. He would study the window, where the light drained away in a process he no longer had an understanding of, and sip the scotch and every now and then stroke the cat's head gently. The cat purred against his breast as reassuringly as the hum of an air conditioner.

He left in the middle of the night. He began to load his possessions into the Lexus. At first he chose items with a great degree of consideration. The first thing he loaded was a set of custom-made monogrammed golf clubs. Then his stereo receiver, Denon AC3, \$1,750. A copy of *This Side of Paradise* autographed by Fitzgerald that he had bought as an investment. By the time the Lexus was half full he was just grabbing things at random and stuffing them into the back seat, a half-eaten pizza, half a case of cat food, a single brocade house shoe.

He drove west past the hospital, the country club, the city limit sign. He was thinking no thoughts at all, and all the destination he had was the amount of highway the headlights showed him.

In the slow rains of late fall the doctor's wife returned to the unfinished mansion. She used to sit in a camp chair on the ruined veranda and drink chilled martinis she poured from the pitcher she carried in a foam ice chest. Dark fell early these November days. Raincrows husbanding some far cornfield called through the smoky autumn air. The sound was fiercely evocative, reminding her of something but she could not have said what.

She went into the room where she had lost the child. The light was failing. The high corners of the room were in deepening shadow but she could see the nests of dirt daubers clustered on the rich flocked wallpaper, a spider swing from a chandelier on a strand of spun glass. Some animal's dried blackened stool curled like a slug against the baseboards. The silence in the room was enormous.

One day she arrived and was surprised to find the paperhanger there. He was sitting on a yellow four-wheeler drinking a bottle of beer. He made to go when he saw her but she waved him back. Stay and talk with me, she said.

The paperhanger was much changed. His pale locks had been shorn away in a makeshift haircut as if scissored in the dark or by a blind barber and his cheeks were covered with a soft curly beard.

You have grow a beard.

Yes.

You are strange with it.

The paperhanger sipped from his San Miguel. He smiled. I was strange without it, he said. He arose from the four-wheeler and came over and sat on the flagstone steps. He stared across the mutilated yard toward the treeline. The yard was like a funhouse maze seen from above, its twistings and turnings bereft of mystery.

You are working somewhere now?

No. I don't take so many jobs anymore. There's only me, and I don't need much. What has become of the doctor?

She shrugged. Many things have change, she said. He has gone. The banks have foreclose. What is that you ride?

An ATV. A four-wheeler.

It goes well in the woods?

It was made for that.

You could take me in the woods. How much would you charge me?

For what?

To go in the woods. You could drive me. I will pay you.

Why?

To search for my child's body.

I wouldn't charge anybody anything to search for a child's body, the paperhanger said. But she's not in these woods. Nothing could have stayed hidden, the way these woods were searched.

Sometimes I think she just kept walking. Perhaps just walking away from the men looking. Far into the woods.

Into the woods, the paperhanger thought. If she had just kept walking in a straight line with no time out for eating or sleeping, where would she be?

Kentucky, Algiers, who knew.

I'll take you when the rains stop, he said. But we won't find a child.

The doctor's wife shook her head. It is a mystery, she said. She drank from her cocktail glass. Where could she have gone? How could she have gone?

There was a man named David Lang, the paperhanger said. Up in Galletin, back in the late 1800s. He was crossing a barn lot in full view of his wife and two children and he just vanished. Went into thin air. There was a judge in a wagon turning into the yard and he saw it too. It was just like he took a step in this world and his foot came down in another one. He was never seen again.

She gave him a sad smile, bitter and one-cornered. You make fun with me.

No. It's true. I have it in a book. I'll show you.

I have a book with dragons, fairies. A book where hobbits live in the middle earth. They are lies. I think most books are lies. Perhaps all books. I have prayed for a miracle but I am not worthy of one. I have prayed for her to come from the dead, then just to find her body. That would be a miracle to me. There are no miracles.

She rose unsteadily, swayed slightly, leaning to take up the cooler. The paperhanger watched her. I have to go now, she said. When the rains stop we will search.

Can you drive?

Of course I can drive. I have drive out here.

I mean are you capable of driving now. You seem a little drunk.

I drink to forget but it is not enough, she said. I can drive.

After a while he heard her leave in the Mercedes, the tires spinning in the gravel drive. He lit a cigarette. He sat smoking it, watching the rain string off the roof. He seemed to be waiting for something. Dusk was falling like a shroud, the world going dark and formless the way it had begun. He drank the last of the beer, sat holding the bottle, the foam bitter in the back of his mouth. A chill touched him. He felt something watching him. He turned. From the corner of the ruined veranda a child was watching him. He stood up. He heard the beer bottle break on the flagstones. The child went sprinting past the hollyhocks toward the brush at the edge of the yard, tiny sepia child with an intent sloe-eyed face, real as she had ever been, translucent as winter light through dirty glass.

The doctor's wife's hands were laced loosely about his waist as they came down through a thin stand of sassafras, edging over the ridge where the ghost of a road was, a road more sensed than seen that faced into a half acre of tilting stones and fading granite tablets. Other graves marked only by their declivities in the earth, folk so far beyond the pale even the legibility of their identities had been leached

away by the weathers.

Leaves drifted, huge poplar leaves veined with amber so golden they might have been coin of the realm for a finer world than this one. He cut the ignition of the four-wheeler and got off. Past the lowering trees the sky was a blue of an improbable intensity, a fierce cobalt blue shot through with dense golden light.

She slid off the rear and steadied herself a moment with a hand on his arm. Where are we? she asked. Why are we here?

The paperhanger had disengaged his arm and was strolling among the gravestones reading such inscriptions as were legible, as if he might find forebear or antecedent in this moldering earth. The doctor's wife was retrieving her martinis from the luggage carrier of the ATV. She stood looking about uncertainly. A graven angel with broken wings crouched on a truncated marble column like a gargoyle. Its stone eyes regarded her with a blind benignity. Some of these graves have been rob, she said.

You can't rob the dead, he said. They have nothing left to steal.

It is a sacrilege, she said. It is forbidden to disturb the dead. You have done this.

The paperhanger took a cigarette pack from his pocket and felt it, but it was empty, and he balled it up and threw it away. The line between grave robbing and archaeology has always looked a little blurry to me, he said. I was studying their culture, trying to get a fix on what their lives were like.

She was watching him with a kind of benumbed horror. Standing hip-slung and lost like a parody of her former self. Strange and anomalous in her fashionable but mismatched clothing, as if she'd put on the first garment that fell to hand. Someday, he thought, she might rise and wander out into the daylight world wearing nothing at all, the way she had come into it. With her diamond watch and the cocktail glass she carried like a used-up talisman.

You have break the law, she told him.

I got a government grant, the paperhanger said contemptuously.

Why are we here? We are supposed to be searching for my child.

If you're looking for a body the first place to look is the graveyard, he said. If you want a book don't you go to the library?

I am paying you, she said. You are in my employ. I do not want to be here. I want you to do as I say or carry me to my car if you will not.

Actually, the paperhanger said, I had a story to tell you. About my wife.

He paused, as if leaving a space for her comment, but when she made none he went on. I had a wife. My childhood sweetheart. She became a nurse, went to work in one of these drug rehab places. After she was there a while she got a faraway look in her eyes. Look at me without seeing me. She got in tight with

her supervisor. They started having meetings to go to. Conferences. Sometimes just the two of them would confer, generally in a motel. The night I watched them walk into the Holiday Inn in Franklin I decided to kill her. No impetuous spur-of-the-moment thing. I thought it all out and it would be the perfect crime.

The doctor's wife didn't say anything. She just watched him.

A grave is the best place to dispose of a body, the paperhanger said. The grave is its normal destination anyway. I could dig up a grave and then just keep on digging. Save everything carefully. Put my body there and fill in part of the earth, and then restore everything the way it was. The coffin, if any of it was left. The bones and such. A good settling rain and the fall leaves and you're home free. Now that's eternity for you.

Did you kill someone, she breathed. Her voice was barely audible.

Did I or did I not, he said. You decide. You have the powers of a god. You can make me a murderer or just a heartbroke guy whose wife quit him. What do you think? Anyway, I don't have a wife. I expect she just walked off into the abstract like that Lang guy I told you about.

I want to go, she said. I want to go where my car is.

He was sitting on a gravestone watching her out of his pale eyes. He might not have heard.

I will walk.

Just whatever suits you, the paperhanger said. Abruptly, he was standing in front of her. She had not seen him arise from the headstone or stride across the graves, but like a jerky splice in a film he was before her, a hand cupping each of her breasts, staring down into her face.

Under the merciless weight of the sun her face was stunned and vacuous. He studied it intently, missing no detail. Fine wrinkles crept from the corners of her eyes and mouth like hairline cracks in porcelain. Grime was impacted in her pores, in the crepe flesh of her throat. How surely everything had fallen from her: beauty, wealth, social position, arrogance. Humanity itself, for by now she seemed scarcely human, beleaguered so by the fates that she suffered his hands on her breasts as just one more cross to bear, one more indignity to endure.

How far you've come, the paperhanger said in wonder. I believe you're about down to my level now, don't you?

It does not matter, the doctor's wife said. There is no longer one thing that matters.

Slowly and with enormous lassitude her body slumped toward him, and in his exultance it seemed not a motion in itself but simply the completion of one begun long ago with the fateful weight of a thigh, a motion that began in one world and completed itself in another one.

From what seemed a great distance he watched her fall toward him like an angel descending, wings spread, from an infinite height, striking the earth gently, tilting, then righting itself.

The weight of moonlight tracking across the paperhanger's face awoke him from where he took his rest. Filigrees of light through the gauzy curtains swept across him in stately silence like the translucent ghosts of insects. He stirred, lay still then for a moment getting his bearings, a fix on where he was.

He was in his bed, lying on his back. He could see a huge orange moon poised beyond the bedroom window, ink-sketch tree branches that raked its face like claws. He could see his feet book-ending the San Miguel bottle that his hands clasped erect on his abdomen, the amber bottle hard edged and defined against the pale window, dark atavistic monolith reared against a harvest moon.

He could smell her. A musk compounded of stale sweat and alcohol, the rank smell of her sex. Dissolution, ruin, loss. He turned to study her where she lay asleep, her open mouth a dark cavity in her face. She was naked, legs outflung, pale breasts pooled like cooling wax. She stirred restively, groaned in her sleep. He could hear the rasp of her breathing. Her breath was fetid on his face, corrupt, a graveyard smell. He watched her in disgust, in a dull self-loathing.

He drank from the bottle, lowered it. Sometimes, he told her sleeping face, you do things you can't undo. You break things you just can't fix. Before you mean to, before you know you've done it. And you were right, there are things only a miracle can set to rights.

He sat clasping the bottle. He touched his miscut hair, the soft down of his beard. He had forgotten what he looked like, he hadn't seen his reflection in a mirror for so long. Unbidden, Zeineb's face swam into his memory. He remembered the look on the child's face when the doctor's wife had spun on her heel: spite had crossed it like a flicker of heat lightning. She stuck her tongue out at him. His hand snaked out like a serpent and closed on her throat and snapped her neck before he could call it back, sloe eyes wild and wide, pink tongue caught between tiny seed-pearl teeth like a bitten-off rosebud. Her hair swung sidewise, her head lolled onto his clasped hand. The tray of the toolbox was out before he knew it, he was stuffing her into the toolbox like a ragdoll. So small, so small, hardly there at all.

He arose. Silhouetted naked against the moon-drenched window, he drained the bottle. He looked about for a place to set it, leaned and wedged it between the heavy flesh of her upper thighs. He stood in silence, watching her. He seemed philosophical, possessed of some hard-won wisdom. The paperhanger knew so well that while few are deserving of a miracle, fewer still can make one

come to pass.

He went out of the room. Doors opened, doors closed. Footsteps softly climbing a staircase, descending. She dreamed on. When he came back into the room he was cradling a plastic-wrapped bundle stiffly in his arms. He placed it gently beside the drunk woman. He folded the plastic sheeting back like a caul.

What had been a child. What the graveyard earth had spared the freezer had preserved. Ice crystals snared in the hair like windy snowflakes whirled there, in the lashes. A doll from a madhouse assembly line.

He took her arm, laid it across the child. She pulled away from the cold. He firmly brought the arm back, arranging them like mannequins, madonna and child. He studied this tableau, then went out of his house for the last time. The door closed gently behind him on its keeper spring.

The paperhanger left in the Mercedes, heading west into the open country, tracking into wide-open territories he could infect like a malignant spore. Without knowing it, he followed the selfsame route the doctor had taken some eight months earlier, and in a world of infinite possibilities where all journeys share a common end, perhaps they are together, taking the evening air on a ruined veranda among the hollyhocks and oleanders, the doctor sipping his Scotch and the paperhanger his San Miguel, gentlemen of leisure discussing the vagaries of life and pondering deep into the night not just the possibility but the inevitability of miracles.

JOHN BIGUENET

It Is Raining in Bejucal

FROM *Zoetrope*

1

IT IS RAINING when the letter arrives. But when is it not raining in Bejucal? When do the tin roofs of the settlement not clatter under the endlessly falling pebbles of water? When do the few windows not waver with the slithering trails of raindrops beading down glass? When is the brown face of the river not pocked like old Doña Ananá's, who contracted smallpox when she was twelve during the one visit to her cousin in the capital?

Yes, the letter arrives in the rain. A barefoot man, his sandals slung around his neck, slogs across the road from the ballast-board cabin of the Southern Crescent Trading Company with the damp blue envelope already curling in his hand. He pauses on the veranda of the cantina to slip on his shoes and remove his straw hat. Even though he is the company foreman, he has no choice; the implacable Doña Ananá would chase him back into the rain just like any other man who dared enter her café with a hat on his head or without shoes on his feet. "It is a respectable establishment, no?" he has heard her bellow at prostrate peones cowering beneath her raised machete. So, still dripping from every fold of his poncho, the foreman slicks back his hair.

The men of the town are all there, hunched over tables, sipping maté, waiting for the rain to break. They are in no hurry: what doesn't get done today will get done tomorrow, or the next day maybe. At some tables, men sit saying nothing. They have grown up together, nearly all of them. They know everything about one another. And they have quit talking about the weather, years ago. So what is there to say?

The foreman, called Tavi by everyone who knows him, nods at Doña Ananá. She smirks. Even as a boy, he sensed the old woman didn't care for him. He strides up to José Antonio López, who straddles a stool at the bar, grasping an empty beer mug in both hands. The foreman sits down beside the man and, without speaking, slides the blue envelope blotched with raindrops in front of his old friend, to whom it is addressed. Tavi has passed the letter with the surreptitious gesture of a man paying for a crime another will commit for him. He has always had a taste for the dramatic. In another place, he might have been

a notary or a salesman, but in Bejucal he is simply the guy who organizes the work crews for the company, the guy who gets his orders from the circuit manager every fifth week, the guy who delivers a letter that has floated three hundred miles up the river from the capital to this outpost in the jungle.

Doña Ananá is scowling at two Indians playing dominoes on the bench against the wall. Tavi catches the eye of the old woman. “Señora, a beer, and one for this man, too.”

When the foreman lays down a ten-peso note for the two warm drinks, she makes change from the pocket of her apron. “Big shot,” he hears her grumble. José Antonio’s left thumb conceals the return address on the blue envelope while the old woman snaps the coins, one by one, onto the bar in front of Tavi.

“So you going to open it?” Tavi almost whispers after she disappears through the stained curtain into the little kitchen.

“In a minute.” Now José Antonio is holding the letter in both hands, running his thumb back and forth across the embossed address of the Office of the National Lottery. Both men already know what it must say, the letter. The Office of the National Lottery does not waste a sheet of its official stationery, folded into one of its pale blue envelopes, to inform a citizen that after the annual drawing in the capital, his ticket still remained at the bottom of the great iron cage among the thousands of others unplucked by the archbishop.

They know this because for the past thirty-two years, ever since the two classmates were fifteen and each old enough to enter the lottery, they have failed to receive such a letter informing them with profound regret that they have lost yet again. They have come to understand, without saying so or even acknowledging it to themselves, that this is the lesson of the lottery: the inevitability of loss. Why waste paper on the confirmation of the obvious?

Nonetheless, the agent of the lottery arrives each autumn under the protection of the Southern Crescent circuit manager and his payroll guards. The little man sets up on a table in this very cantina the framed placard announcing the unimaginable prizes to be awarded the following spring. Then he unlocks the cash box and, like the last year and the year before and the year before that, once again enrolls each of the villagers in his ledger. Each name is inscribed beside an ornate number printed in the margin, a number matching the one stamped on the blue ticket the bespectacled gentleman offers as a receipt of the wager.

So José Antonio need not draw his knife from its sheath between his shoulder blades and splay open the seam of the envelope to know he has been invited to present his ticket at the Office of the National Lottery in Puerto Túbido, where he may claim his prize.

“Come on, amigo, let’s see it,” pleads Tavi.

But slipping the envelope into a pocket, his friend is firm. "Later." José Antonio nods toward the tarnished mirror behind the bar, which flickers with the reflections of dark figures crowding the room as they wait out the downpour.

Tavi sighs. "I'll bring a bottle, yes?"

"Yeah, later . . ." The voice trails off into that trackless waste of memories and dreams where Tavi has often lost his friend.

The foreman finishes his drink and pats the other man on the shoulder. "God smiles on you," he whispers. But he knows José Antonio doesn't hear him.

2

The house, his since childhood, has fallen into disrepair these last few years. The roof leaks, of course. In the bedroom upstairs, scattered pots cluck with dripping water. It sounds as if something is beginning to boil, as if José Antonio is making tea for the whole village.

At least, that is what he is thinking as he takes his siesta, half asleep in the bed he has dragged to the center of the floor, the one dry spot left in the room. The Virgin watches him from her framed portrait on the wall, her hands cupping a heart in flames, tears weeping from her eyes.

He has only to glance at the picture of Our Lady, he knows, and he will be back in the doorway, once again the five-year-old answering his mother's screams in the middle of the night as his father, still cursing the woman, pushes past him and flees down the stairs. The Virgin was the last thing she saw, his mother, as the sheet dampened beneath her in this very bed. He remembers the blood oozing, just in front of his face, between the long fingers she pressed against the gash in her belly and how it pooled red, and then darker than red, in the hollow of her curled body.

Even after his great-aunt had scrubbed the blood from the coarse linen with lye on the bank of the river, working the sheet against the washing stone worn smooth by generations of Indian women, the stain's brown shadow lingered as though scorched there by a hot iron. But the old woman, too frugal to discard a possession with use still left in it, slept on that soiled sheet in her niece's deathbed for the next twelve years until the afternoon she herself died, delirious and cursing the priest.

In his memory, José Antonio cannot distinguish his mother's face from the face framed on the wall. There was no photograph of her, Elena. As a boy he convinced himself that maybe she did look like the Virgin, with pursed lips and blue eyes saddened for her son. When he told his great-aunt about it, though, she cackled. "Blue eyes?" the old woman scoffed. "One of us?" But then she

softened. “The Mother of God is the only mother you have, niño, so yes, your mother has the face of the Virgin.”

From then on, the old woman had the child say his prayers each night on his knees before the portrait. Every year at Eastertide, she replaced the small palm branch wedged above the frame with a new frond blessed by the priest. The spine of green needles protected the houses of faithful Christians and all those who dwelled there, she believed, just as she believed every other superstition countenanced by the Church. In fact, the fury she unleashed upon the itinerant priest who administered her last rites had sprung from the failure of his holy water to shrink the tumor in her gut. At first she had dipped two fingers in the carved font just inside the door of the crude chapel before Mass each month and slipped them under her skirt to rub the swelling. But then near the end, when the pain had clawed her into a whimpering madwoman, José Antonio found his great-aunt lapping the water from the font like a scrawny monkey drinking rainwater cupped in the crook of a tree.

He had the old woman wound in the stained sheet on which she had died with knees clutched to her shriveled bosom against the agony of her last hour. The young man had thought to bury his mother’s ghost in his great-aunt’s grave, but when he came home after the funeral, he found it still there, the shadow of Elena’s death, blurred on the ticking of the mattress. He sees it still every time he strips the bed and stuffs the mattress with fresh husks, smoothing the clumps of sheaths with arms sunk all the way to the shoulders through the slits of the bedding. And there have been times when, kneeling beside the bed with his cheek on the brown stain of his mother’s blood, his fingers deep inside the mattress to find the hard core of withered chaff that disturbs his sleep night after night, José Antonio could have let himself weep like a child.

Thinking of his mother, he lowers himself to his knees before the image of the Virgin and repeats the prayer he has offered for more than thirty years, professing a vow that now—thanks to the lottery—can finally be honored, a vow to find and kill his father.

Then, making the sign of the cross, he pulls himself up along the wall and slides his hand behind the frame of the holy picture. Just beneath the barbs of the palm frond he has continued to replace each year since his great-aunt’s death, slipped into the groove of the frame that locks the mat against the picture, a delicate strip of paper rustles under his fingertips. Reassured, he smiles to himself as he riffles the slip of blue paper, stamped, he knows, with a string of maroon numerals and emblazoned with the ornate crest of the Office of the National Lottery.

The steamer that has delivered José Antonio's letter will leave at first light tomorrow morning on the return voyage to Puerto Túbido; Southern Crescent trades at no villages farther upriver. Already Tavi has gathered a crew to load the crates of rare orchids and the baskets of iridescent butterfly wings gathered by Indians along the slopes of an unnamed valley six hard days' trek from Bejucal. Because it is the rainy season, the company warehouses are nearly empty. The lumber, black with water, is too heavy to cart back through the rutted mud of the logging roads, and the jungle crops can't begin to be harvested until the rain breaks in another month or two. So this time of the year, the company sends the little boat, and it does not bother to stop for long at the small settlements on its way back to the capital.

José Antonio finds his friend on the landing, checking a bill of lading, and the two men walk together to Tavi's office. Rain licks their faces with its hundred small tongues.

Inside the company cabin, Tavi bends before the safe that Southern Crescent has provided each of its outposts. The one at Bejucal is an antique; his father taught Tavi its sequence of numbers twenty-two years ago. Now without even repeating the code to himself as he spins the brass knob to first one number and then another, twirling it back and forth between his thumb and finger, the foreman opens the safe and counts out the wages owed since the last payday nearly three months ago. As José Antonio signs the ledger to document the transaction, Tavi realizes he will never see his old friend again. Why would a man return to this godforsaken place?

"Bring a case of whiskey when you come home," he says as he locks the red ledger back in the safe.

"For a fiesta," the voice behind him promises.

There is much to be done, and José Antonio is not used to being rushed. With his pay and if he sells his father's gold watch still locked in the strongbox that is squirreled between two joists of the floorboards of his bedroom, the man will have enough for his journey to the capital—even with the debts he has to settle before he leaves the village. He owes Doña Ananá for a month of drinks at her cantina. There is the money for the ax he borrowed from Xavier and lost in a hole of the river when his canoe capsized last spring. And then he has to do something about Maciza.

He needs a mat to sleep on and a new hat, one with a band on the inside that keeps the straw from scratching the forehead. He has to wash his clothes and pack them in the woven bag an Indian traded him for a pocket mirror on the

mudflats below San Ignacio Falls. He has to sharpen his knife, he reminds himself.

The day drizzles away. José Antonio dislikes being pursued by obligations yammering after him like pups snapping at his ankles. It is already dark before, finally finished with everything else, he sends a boy for Maciza.

A bottle forgotten beside his rocker from last night or the night before glistens in the lamplight with a finger or two of rum. José Antonio pours the dregs into two glasses and carries them upstairs to the woman who, already undressed, waits for him in his bed.

Maciza sniffs the drink when he hands it to her.

“Go on, it’s rum.”

“Why do we drink tonight?” She senses his unease.

“Tomorrow, I’m taking a trip.” He feels her eyes on him. “A long trip.”

“How long?”

He shrugs and swallows the black liquid. Then he loosens his clothes.

She lays her cheek against the mattress, her knees beneath her. Maciza will let herself be rolled onto her back, but it embarrasses her to be taken like a white woman, and her shame stifles the whimpers of pleasure he likes to hear her make. So he kneels behind her on the sagging bed, rolling his hands along the curve of her back until he seizes her shoulders and holds her fast.

Afterward, he tells her to live in the house until he comes back.

“Come back?” she laughs. “Why would anyone come back?”

“You never know,” he whispers in the dark. “Maybe I’ll miss you.”

“Oh, hombre,” she purrs, pleased.

“And if I don’t come back, you keep the house.”

The woman, her back still to the man, is both touched and hurt by the promise of his gift to her.

4

After an hour or so, José Antonio no longer notices the pistons huffing below the deck. Sitting upon a bale of blouses embroidered at the cuffs and the bibs with tribal talismans, he observes the roiling water the stern leaves in its wake. But lifting his eyes, he sees the churning ease, then calm just twenty yards back, as if the boat had never passed.

He has never felt the need of a watch, not in his entire life. But now, gliding over the brown river that thickens behind him before he’s even taken its next bend out of sight, the man asks a crewman what time it is.

“Ten minutes,” the sailor assures him impatiently, “since the last time you

asked.”

“Ah, sorry. It goes slow on the water.”

“Not if you have work to do,” the man snaps as he lashes a tarp over the three bales of blouses and aprons and festival skirts carted from Xinutlan to Bejucal for shipment to the capital. They store textiles on deck; the dampness in the holds would mildew and stain the cloth long before they reached Puerto Túrvido.

José Antonio waits for the man to move on to other duties, then stretches out on top of the tarp and the three stacks of clothing it covers. Drowsing on the makeshift pallet, he learns his first lesson of what it means to have money: the rich often endure boredom.

He is confused by his feelings. Already today he has done more, seen more, said more than he has often managed in a whole week in Bejucal. Even as he considers what is happening, the surging of the boat rocks him to sleep.

The crack of a parrot’s caw tumbles him awake. He slips to his feet from the bales on which he has slept. The parrot, perched on a rail of the gunnel, squawks off to a tree overhanging the bank of the river. The branch bobs under its weight.

José Antonio is hungry. He doesn’t know how long he has been asleep, but it is still morning. A dream nags at him until it fades like something big just beneath the surface of water, a *pirarucu* maybe, going deeper. He peels a banana.

It goes on like this, the sleeping, the eating, the jungle and its river closing behind them, until José Antonio would believe they have been traveling a week, a month, whatever he was told.

Over the next days, the boat fills its holds, and the deck grows impassable with bales of textiles, cages of croaking macaws, tin vats of tortoises clambering over one another, tubs of something that looks like human fingers floating in vinegar. The nooks where one might doze away the afternoon under a canvas awning are filled with loose cargo. But José Antonio hardly notices. He paces the bow, cramped as it is, like the caged ocelot or the little peccary leashed to a cleat.

He grows impatient to arrive and fulfill the vow he has repeated as a prayer for nearly as long as he can remember. But always nagging him through the ten thousand nights—no, more—he knelt before the Virgin was how to carry out his promise to avenge his mother, how with his father fled and no means to follow? How, without help, could he track the murderer across that wilderness of years? How could he hunt a beast that had hidden itself in a thicket of time, whose black hair had turned to ash, whose handsome face sagged under a mask of wrinkled age, whose fierce eyes had dulled to tarnished coins? But it is all unfolding now, the path he could not see, like the brown river snaking silently through the impenetrable jungle all the way to Puerto Túrvido.

José Antonio will not be lulled again, not by the thrum of engines beneath his feet, not by the lassitude of a damp breeze, not by the sway of a loose-rigged boom. The lethargy of the jungle—the plodding gait of the *ai* slung along the underside of a dripping branch, the tapir's shamble through giant cane grass, the slumber of the anaconda—yields to the wariness of prey, the watchfulness of predator. He is alert, straining to see beyond the next bend.

Eventually, the next bend reveals a stand of huts, tottering on stilts sunk in the muddy wastes of the lapping river. Then, farther on, children peer from tin sheds in a clearing.

The jungle thins. Trees shrink to bush. Bush droops to brush. Brush crumbles to burned plains. Fires smolder across the horizon.

People emerge from the smoke. At first, one or two straggle out of shadow. Then the shadow thickens into a knot of human figures. Suddenly the whole plain is writhing with creatures, moving in aimless circles and dark with soot.

On both sides of the river, the mud banks are stamped with footprints, littered with refuse. The boat glides on.

Mud hardens into rude walls, rises into raw houses. Incinerators, like huge tree trunks, spire beneath the dense foliage of their yellow smoke. Foam bubbles halfway across the river wherever a factory squats on the bank. Rusted warehouses, barges lining their wharves, fill the spaces between.

The captain slows his vessel as it approaches a complex of whitewashed buildings and docks. Signaling with one long shrill of his whistle followed by one short blast, he waits for an echo from the harbormaster, then comes about and eases his boat against the wharf of a two-story shed.

Longshoremen are already on board, hefting cargo on their shoulders, before José Antonio can bid the captain farewell and make his way down the gangplank.

He follows the wharf along the river past warehouse after warehouse until it swings into the harbor itself. Jutting from the murky orange sunset behind them, the cathedral's three steeples, flanked by the cupola of the old colonial garrison and the little dome of the city hall, tower over the masts and the smokestacks of ships at anchor.

For the first time since his journey began back in Bejucal days and days ago, he is afraid. The welter of people, the clanging of sounds, the labyrinth of buildings—he stands confused in the church's vast plaza and doubts himself. Seeking refuge through the small wooden entrance set into one of the enormous carved doors of the cathedral, the man kneels before the statue of the Blessed Mother crushing the serpent Satan under her heel. Banks of candles flicker at her feet. José Antonio prays for guidance and, lifting his eyes, recognizes the snake:

it is a bushmaster. The knowledge calms him; he realizes, whatever Puerto Túrvido may look like, he is still in the jungle.

5

The other great square of the city, the Plaza of the Peace of December the Third, is only a short walk from the widow's house in which José Antonio has taken a room.

Awaking at dawn, the man sits upon his bed until eight, when Señora Machado serves breakfast to her boarders. She is young to have lost a husband, he thinks, peeling a mango the woman has offered him from a blue bowl.

As she has instructed, he follows the Boulevard of the Revolution the few blocks to the plaza, about which all the government offices assemble like ornate stools around a flowered carpet, or so it looks to him as he regards the squat buildings bordering the square.

The Office of the National Lottery is on the second floor of the National Bank. Though the façade of the bank is gilded, the man is disappointed to discover at the top of a rear staircase that a simple door with a milky pane is the threshold to his future. Entering, José Antonio is surprised to join others, Indians and country folk like himself, milling about a vestibule fenced off from the main office by a gated mahogany railing.

Two clerks, each at his own desk, argue quietly with the people who sit across from them. One man, his back to the crowd in the vestibule, pounds the desk. The clerk speaking to him lifts both hands as if offended and closes the ledger lying between them. The angry man hunches his shoulders; even at a distance, it is obvious he is apologizing and cajoling the clerk to reopen the book. The young clerk, with a disdainful snort, relents. José Antonio notices that, against the far wall beneath a large window, the chief clerk drinks from a delicate cup and watches his two subordinates.

The waiting area grows more crowded. An hour passes before José Antonio finally swings open the mahogany gate and stands before a desk. The clerk gestures for him to sit and asks for his ticket. When he reaches behind his neck and lowers his knife in its sheath onto the desk, he sees fear blanching the young man's face. He doesn't like the clerk, the way the fellow made another man beg just an hour ago. So he holds the sheath in one hand and slowly draws the blade with the other. The clerk's frightened chatter is silenced abruptly when José Antonio pounds the lip of the sheath in his fist against the desktop. Raising the sheath, he reveals a crumpled blue ticket.

The nervous laugh as the pale hands of the clerk smooth the paper pleases

José Antonio. He is getting his bearings in this stone jungle.

The clerk, comparing the ticket to his ledger, suddenly bends closer to the page. Excusing himself, he retreats to the desk of the chief clerk, where he waves the blue paper and whispers excitedly. He returns and tells José Antonio his superior will handle the case.

“Señor,” he exclaims as the man stands and begins to walk toward the back of the room, “you are forgetting your knife.”

José Antonio smiles and in one motion the knife disappears into its sheath and the sheath disappears over his head and down his back beneath his shirt.

The clerk scurries behind him, holding the ledger open to a particular page.

The old man shakes hands gravely. “Señor López, God smiles on you.”

“And on you, señor.”

“Perhaps, my friend. You see, we have an unusual circumstance here. The ticket you presented to my assistant, it bears a winning number.”

José Antonio nods. “Your letter said so.”

“Ah, we send many such letters. But from the secondary drawing.”

“What secondary drawing?”

The old man smiles at his assistant. “It’s true, no one ever reads the regulations.”

“Regulations?” José Antonio repeats.

“On the back of the placards. They all have it. It’s required. But never mind that. We’re not talking about you, Señor López. The secondary drawing, that’s for all those poor devils.” The chief clerk waves vaguely toward the crowded vestibule. “A hundred pesos, two hundred pesos, perhaps five hundred for the lucky ones. They come all this way, and for what? Enough to get back home—maybe.”

“That’s their fortune?”

“No, my friend, that’s their fate.”

José Antonio sighs. “And me, what’s my fate?”

“Why, a fortune.” The old man grins. Then glancing at the ledger, he corrects himself. “A small fortune.”

“How much?”

“We’ll have to calculate that. It’s a percentage of the third level. Minus the fees, of course.”

“Fees?”

“Administrative fees. It’s all spelled out in the regulations.”

The assistant clerk computes the figures and presents his tally to the chief clerk, who examines the calculations before initialing them. Drawing a sheet of blue letterhead from a drawer, the old man copies the number, folds the page in

half, and slides it across the desk to José Antonio.

Opening the blue sheet, he is surprised. Yes, it is more than he has ever had before, but he would not call it a fortune. He could buy a house with it, he guesses, a nice house, even here in the capital. If nothing changed, he could live a long time on it, for the rest of his life probably, in Bejucal. But the unimaginable riches promised on the placard in Doña Ananá's cantina, they must have gone to someone else. Still, his prize is enough to do what he has come to do.

José Antonio nods and starts to slide the paper back across the desk, but the old man stops him. "You must sign it as a receipt. Diaz will take you downstairs to the bank for the money and the other paperwork." The chief clerk stands and extends his hand. "I congratulate you, Señor López."

José Antonio nods again.

"Just one more thing," the chief clerk confides as if to save the man from an embarrassment. "It is the custom for a lottery winner like you to tip poor civil servants like us for this good fortune."

"Is that in the regulations, too?"

"Regulations?" The old man laughs. "Ah, very good, señor. I see we understand each other." He motions to his assistant. "Don't worry. Diaz will advise you when you get downstairs."

Despite Diaz's advice to leave the money in an account at the bank, José Antonio insists on taking his winnings with him in the woven bag from San Ignacio Falls, which he emptied of his clothing last night for this very purpose. He also ignores the young man's outraged remonstrations when the lottery winner declines to share a single peso of his wealth with the clerks of the Office of the National Lottery.

6

The young widow, cleaning beans for dinner at the kitchen table, listens sympathetically to José Antonio's story. He does not mention the lottery winnings he has hidden in his room upstairs behind the cornice of the heavy armoire, nor does he describe Elena's murder. But the woman learns he was orphaned of his mother and abandoned by his father at the age of five, raised by a great-aunt, and left to fend for himself after her death. He tells Señora Machado that he has come to Puerto Túbido to track down his father and make peace with the old man.

The widow's melancholy sigh, José Antonio understands, is not for him but for her own young son, Enrique, whom she pets each time the child tugs at her

skirt from under the table where he plays with a wooden rabbit.

“But how am I to find him?” her boarder asks as she dotes on the boy.

The child has distracted her from their conversation. “Who?”

“My father.”

“You need a detective, Señor López. A professional. You must ask Dr. Hidalgo. He will know where to go. Tonight at dinner, ask him where.”

“It sounds as if you need a detective to find a detective.”

The woman’s laugh is soothing as water over stones.

Dr. Hidalgo, unfortunately, does not know any detectives, but one of his patients is a lawyer. The next morning, the lawyer recommends one of his clients, a former policeman recently released from prison. “A temper, yes, it’s true. But a more honest man you’ll never meet. In court, no excuses, no alibis. He stands up and tells the judge, ‘Sure I killed him. He was a pain in the ass.’ How do you like that? Right there in the courtroom. Luis Menéndez, that’s the man for you. Honest as the day is long.”

By the time José Antonio returns to the widow’s house at sunset, Menéndez has agreed to find Juan López. He is touched that a grown son would seek a father who abandoned the family. Between his old friends on the force and his new friends from prison, he is confident that he can track down the old man. It may cost a bit—“Everybody has one hand out,” the former police officer complains, shaking his head—but he has no doubt he’ll turn up the missing father.

His landlady greets José Antonio at the door. “What’s this?” she wonders, pointing to the stuffed blue crocodile in his hand.

“For your little fellow,” he explains shyly.

“Come.” She smiles, taking his arm. “Dinner is ready.”

As he lies in his bed after supper and Dr. Hidalgo’s stories about patients’ afflictions, he realizes it is finally in motion, the vengeance he has sworn. He throws off the covers, kneels on the worn rug, and repeats the vow he hasn’t uttered since his last night in Bejucal, praying before the picture of the Virgin while Maciza watched him from the bed.

Falling asleep, José Antonio rehearses the scene he has imagined night after night as far back as he can remember.

He knocks at the door. His father answers. He drives his knife into the man’s belly.

The one thing that changes, the one thing of which he remains uncertain, is what he should say as the blood pools beneath the figure dying at his feet. Should he declare, “I am the son of the woman you murdered”? Perhaps he should simply curse his father. Or should he say nothing, letting the old man die

without explanation, without a word?

As always, he falls asleep without deciding.

When he next meets Menéndez, the detective has no firm leads but remains optimistic. “It’s only a matter of enough time,” the former policeman assures José Antonio, “and enough money.” Menéndez himself has scoured the last three years of records in the notarial archives but has found no reference to a Juan López of the right age and with the correct birthplace. When his client prompts him, he admits it would go faster if he could hire assistants to examine the bills of sale, the tax assessments, the census records.

“By all means,” José Antonio agrees. “Hire whoever you need. The money doesn’t matter. The only thing I care about is finding my father.”

“I wish I had a son like you,” the detective sighs.

Each time Menéndez consults with Juan López’s son, the operation to find the old man grows. Now there are retired policemen in Guadajirno, in Santa Maria, even on the western islands who are working on the case. The lawyer was right; Menéndez is an honest man, always ready with a receipt for each expense José Antonio reimburses. Once, the detective comments on the ready cash his client provides. “My inheritance,” the man explains. “My mother’s money.” Satisfied, Menéndez does not bring up the subject again.

Señora Machado mentions the money, too, but indirectly, when she protests the many gifts her boarder has showered on young Enrique. She knows José Antonio does not work, and yet he does not seem a rich man.

“The money came too late in life to change me,” he stammers, looking down at his shuffling feet.

The widow thinks she has embarrassed him. “No, Señor López, don’t apologize. The poor would not hate the rich if they were all like you.”

José Antonio takes long walks but never exhausts the stones of the city, which stretch, it sometimes seems, all the way to the horizon. Aware of the looks his rough clothes draw, he begins to dress like a townsman. One afternoon, alone in the house with Señora Machado—“Alma,” she insists—he asks the woman how to knot the tie he has bought to go with his new collared shirt and linen jacket. The woman has very small shoulders, he notices, as she fiddles with the cloth around his throat. He thinks of the brown, muscled back of Maciza, of her broad shoulders. The man touches the young widow’s pale face, and she presses her cheek against his hand.

From then on, they make love by daylight in his room after the other boarders have left for work and while the boy naps. Their discretion is useless, though. Neither can hide the tenderness for the other. Soon, the whole household accepts the arrangement. The Indian girl who helps with the cleaning never interrupts

them when the door is closed. And as for the others, Dr. Hidalgo advises the aging roomers that it is physically unhealthy for a young woman, especially a young mother, to be—he chooses his word carefully here—alone. He approves of José Antonio not only for having taken his advice in the matter of the detective but also for listening attentively in the evenings to the stories about his practice.

One afternoon, Enrique runs into the parlor, where José Antonio reads the newspaper while Alma sips her tea. The child asks the name of a bird singing in the tree outside the window. When the man explains it is a canary, Enrique wonders, “But what is it singing about, Papá?” José Antonio glances at the child’s mother, who offers him a sad smile and nods her resignation to what she cannot change.

Now it has been six months since José Antonio first saw the steeples of the cathedral over the harbor. The reports have filtered in from all over the country, nearly fifty of them. A pickpocket in Aldorá reports a Juan López, a tobacconist, to Menéndez, but this López turns out to be an immigrant from Spain and ten years too young. Another Juan López is located on the coast in a fishing village; the age is right, but his right hand has been twisted into a deformed claw since his birth in, it is eventually confirmed, the same village where he still works in the icehouse. The detective counsels further patience.

But Menéndez mistakes his client for a man of the city. José Antonio has not been patient; he has been hunting his father as one hunts in the jungle. The man has seemed to the detective deferential, almost passive, perhaps even indifferent. Offered files to peruse, José Antonio thumbs through a few sheets, sighs, hands the folders back with a shrug. What the ex-policeman takes for boredom, though, is the stillness of a serpent as its cloven tongue tastes the scent in the breeze. Each morning José Antonio has sharpened his knife against the little whetstone he carries in his pocket. In the afternoon, with Alma still dozing amid the tangled sheets, he has eased the leather thong and sheath from the mahogany bedpost, slipped it over his head, and returned to the streets. Prowling until evening, he has sought his elusive quarry in strange neighborhoods, following unfamiliar streets to the slums on the outskirts of the city and beyond to the outlying shanties, tireless and keen as a jaguar trailing prey. And he has ended each day on his knees, promising the Virgin he will not fail.

By the end of the first year, Menéndez has reported to José Antonio on two hundred leads. None pans out. So the detective casts a wider net. Now his agents (as he begins to call them when he seeks payment for their services from his client) send dossiers on a Joaquim López in Plato Negro, a Juan Lopata in some mountain village ten kilometers from Titalpa, even an Englishman named John

Loping, an engineer who is building a bridge in the Apulco Valley.

José Antonio still offers the same vow each night beside the bed in which he sleeps alone for the sake of propriety, but he begins to consider the possibility that his father never will be found. He himself has crisscrossed the city, pressing pesos into the palm of anyone who will listen to his story about the abandoned son seeking a lost parent. He has been blessed to God by hundreds of simple folk for his devotion to the old man. “If only my son . . .” one after another has complained to him, almost never finishing the sentence. But even in a great city like Puerto Túrvido, the stone streets eventually powder into muddy lanes, and the muddy lanes finally dissipate into fields that fringe the jungle. After a year of his long prowls through the capital, people begin to recognize him. There is no one left to whom he can tell his story. Maybe, he allows himself to think, the old man is dead.

Though he will admit to no relief at the idea of laying his vengeance to rest, it does please him to think of opening a store with the money that remains, perhaps an ice cream parlor—a year ago, he didn’t even know frozen custard existed, but now he grows cranky if he misses his scoop of chocolate after his siesta. And it pleases him to think of Alma as his wife, Enrique as his son, himself as the master of the house.

He makes up his mind to propose to his landlady, to adopt her child. He even begins to plan the wedding. The man has discharged his duty to his mother, he insists to himself. What more could he have done? He tells Menéndez he has had enough, to cancel the search. But before he can offer the woman the ring he has purchased with his dwindling winnings, the detective visits one Sunday morning after Mass with the news that Juan López, the father of José Antonio, has been located.

7

“All this time and he was right here under our nose.” The detective shrugs. “And you know, we had him in our files since the beginning and didn’t even realize it. Can you imagine? Report number eight. But the birthdate was entered in reverse. Not 1854 but 1845. That’s how we missed him.”

José Antonio remembers the file from the very first group. He even asked Menéndez to take another look; it seemed a close match, number eight. But no, the detective had assured him at their next meeting, number eight could not be his father. And then there were so many others to look at, the ex-convict had explained. He had a lead on a fellow in the south who met the description almost perfectly. It would cost a bit more to check it out, he had admitted, but he felt

certain this was the Juan López they were seeking. When the fellow in the south turned out to be left-handed, Menéndez had seemed even more disappointed than José Antonio.

“So how did you find your mistake?”

“Fate, Señor López, divine intervention. I was boxing up the files after you told me to shut down the search, and the contents of number eight somehow slipped from my hand to the floor. There, next to each other on the tiles, were the copy of the subject’s birth certificate and the page of my notebook where I had recopied the date. Somehow, my eyes fell upon the discrepancy.”

José Antonio studies Menéndez. “You’ve checked it all out?”

“You won’t believe this. Your father is in an apartment, not ten blocks from here. He goes by another name—Juan Sánchez he calls himself—but that’s just his mother’s name he uses. It’s there on the birth certificate, the maiden name.”

“The whole time he was right here? In this neighborhood?”

“I tell you, señor, the world is a handkerchief.” The detective sighs. “He was clever, though. It was simple to go from Juan López y Sánchez to just Juan Sánchez. Nothing fancy, just a small thing, but now no one in this whole city knows who he really is. No one but you and me.” The detective smiles, permitting himself a professional’s pride in the job he has done. “I guess he must have been ashamed of abandoning his wife and child.”

As Menéndez passes his client the file, he lays a final reckoning on top of the manila folder. “The last reimbursements,” he explains. Then he clears his throat. “And, of course, I’ve added the bonus you promised in the beginning for actually finding your father.”

José Antonio suddenly understands the detective’s scheme with the disgust of a man who, emerging from the waist-deep muck of a swamp, discovers a swollen leech battenning on his thigh. Menéndez has bled him dry. And he is absolutely certain the former policeman has known all along where the old man could be found.

“You’ll get what I owe you,” José Antonio promises, examining the bill, “when you take me to my father.”

The detective hesitates.

“Tonight at nine. Where shall we meet? The fountain at the great plaza?”

Menéndez, unhappy but anxious not to jeopardize the last of the money, repeats, “Tonight at nine, at the fountain.”

“Yes, my friend, tonight,” José Antonio assures him, ushering the man out of the house.

When Alma and her boarders sit down to their Sunday dinner an hour later, José Antonio watches the woman laughing at a joke. He regrets that today is the

Sabbath. Though the household will retire to their rooms for a siesta after the big meal, Alma will not slip into his bed while the others sleep this afternoon. She is ashamed to lie with him on a Sunday.

Alone in his room, having burned his father's file in the little fireplace, José Antonio slowly draws his knife across the small whetstone, over and over again, as he loses himself in memories, some more recent than others.

Just before nine o'clock, the sheath of the knife invisible beneath his old shirt from Bejucal, Juan López's son follows a flowered path to the great fountain at the center of the Plaza of the Peace of December the Third. As he approaches, rain that has threatened all day begins to fall, chasing the young couples, followed by stern old aunts, from the stone benches of the plaza to the cafés beneath the porticoes of the buildings surrounding the square. The drops, clapping like tiny hands against the water in the vast stone pool, remind José Antonio of home. He puts on the straw hat that hangs from a cord round his neck.

Menéndez is not late. "I almost didn't recognize you, dressed like this. You look like one of those peones from the country."

"It's for my father. This is how he remembers me."

The detective shrugs and leads his client down a quiet side street away from the plaza. The houses they pass have walls burnished with the brown clay of the earliest architecture of the capital. It is a kind of slum, this neighborhood people call the "old city." The rain picks up.

Menéndez turns his collar against the shower. "Tell me, señor, why was it so important, finding the old man?"

"I promised my mother," José Antonio explains, "never to forget my father."

"A good woman," the detective nods. Then he points. "There, across the street."

The two men hurry into the hallway of the shabby building. The front door is jammed open with a wooden shim.

"These people," Menéndez complains, shaking his head. "Too stupid to close a door even in the rain." Then he realizes whom they are visiting. "I didn't mean your father. I meant the old bitch, the one who lives down here." He points to the door beside the mailboxes to their right.

José Antonio notes to himself that Menéndez has been here before.

They climb the stairs to the second landing. The detective knocks roughly at a scarred door.

"Who's there?" The voice is reedy. Even through the wood, José Antonio can hear the wheeze between each word.

"The police, Señor Sánchez." Menéndez winks at his client. "We've found

something that belongs to you.”

“It’s unlocked,” the voice manages between wracking coughs.

“You’re about to meet your father,” the detective whispers, turning the knob.

The door swings open on the room, its walls shuddering with candlelight.

Juan López lies in his bed. He is a small man, nothing like his son. The voice rattles before it speaks. “What have you got of mine?”

The body in the bed is wasted; the face, sunken. Consumption, José Antonio realizes, remembering the wretched death of a consumptive Dr. Hidalgo described one evening.

The old man wheezes, waiting for Menéndez’s answer.

The detective puts a hand on his client’s shoulder. “Your son, Señor López.”

Menéndez pauses, like a boxer who has just landed an unexpected punch, but the old man does not flinch. “I don’t have a son,” López growls between breaths.

“Papá? It’s me, Papá, José Antonio.”

“You?”

José Antonio nods. “My mother sent me.”

“That whore—” But the word turns into a cough he can’t stop.

“Choke on your insult, you murderer.”

López recovers his breath, little by little. “Water,” he begs. “For the love of Christ, a glass of water.”

Ignoring the trembling hand stretched out to him, José Antonio walks around to the other side of the bed, so Menéndez fills a glass from the pitcher on the nightstand.

As his father laps it up, rattling breaths between sips, José Antonio leans over and barely utters, “You are going to die, Papá.”

A cough—no, a laugh—bursts from López’s lips, spewing water over his covers. The old man peels the damp sheet from his chest. Stains of yellow sputum blotch the undershirt he wears. “Of course I’m going to die,” he manages between breaths. “And stop calling me ‘Papá.’ I’m not your father.”

“You are Juan López, no? The husband of Elena Altiérrez?”

“Oh, yes, all that. But not the father of José Antonio López. He is a bastard, that boy.”

José Antonio wavers. “Then who is my father?”

The old man tries to shrug but starts coughing again. “Some Indian,” he chokes out, then calms himself with deep breaths. “Why do you think a man kills his wife? He looks at his boy and sees nothing of himself. And his woman, the bitch, she mocks him with it.” He laughs to himself. “Of course he takes a knife to her.”

“Gentlemen, please,” Menéndez interrupts, “I can see you have things to

discuss. I should go.” But the ex-convict stands there, waiting. José Antonio looks up from the bedridden old man. “There’s just the matter, señor, of the final reckoning . . .”

“Oh, yes, forgive me. I still owe you something, don’t I?”

The detective nods as his client comes around the bed.

José Antonio knows how things kill only in the jungle. No slow toxin drips from the fangs of a jungle snake; already the mouse is being digested before it is even swallowed. And the monkey, pricked by a dart, plummets dead from its branch to the damp leaves matted about the trunk of the tree. So when he draws the knife from behind his back and drives it, all in one motion, into the heart of the man who has cheated him of nearly all his lottery winnings, the fat body slumps across the bed without a moan of protest.

José Antonio turns back to his father.

“I can’t move,” López coughs. The heavy corpse has pinned his withered legs to the mattress. Then, grasping the situation, he sneers, “Go ahead. Kill me, you son of a whore.”

But José Antonio takes his father’s skeletal hand and wraps it around the hilt of the knife still buried in Menéndez’s chest. The old man struggles to extricate his bloody hand from beneath the body pressing against his own.

“They’ll come in the morning, won’t they, someone, the old lady downstairs, with your breakfast?” José Antonio explains as he wipes his hand on the blanket. “And what will you tell them, Señor Sánchez, about this former police officer murdered in your room with your own knife? It is yours, you know. It’s the knife I pulled from my mother’s belly.”

The old man is defiant. “I’ll tell them about you, you bastard.”

“You’ll tell them you are Juan López, the murderer of Elena Altíérrez? Killing a young mother—that’s even worse than this. Would you rather be executed for her murder? Either way, it’s justice, isn’t it?” José Antonio leans over and blows out the candle on the nightstand. “You think about it, Papá. You think about it all night until they come for you in the morning.”

“You can’t leave me like this,” the voice wheezes pitifully in the dark.

“Isn’t this how you left me?” the dark answers.

8

Sometimes in the jungle, surrounded by vegetation higher than the eyes, one nonetheless senses the path home. It requires no compass, no landmarks, only an ear to listen to what one already knows.

Monday at two o’clock, Alma climbs the stairs to José Antonio’s room, taps

twice, and softly opens the door, expecting to find her lover awaiting her afternoon visit. Though he has missed breakfast before, out early on one of his walks, he has always come home for their siesta.

But on the bed, his city clothes are laid out like a corpse on its bier. Above the linen pants, within the linen coat, the collared shirt is drawn closed with the tie she once taught the man to knot. As she bends to touch the cloth, Alma sees the tie has been threaded through a diamond wedding ring and the shirt pocket is stuffed with hundred-peso notes bound by a letter she will stain with her tears.

Already the steamer on which José Antonio has booked passage inland is leaving behind the smoking plains on the outskirts of Puerto Túbido. As he sits in the bow on the case of whiskey he has bought for the fiesta with the last of his winnings, it salves his heart to see the brown brush unwither into green jungle.

F. X. TOOLE

Midnight Emissions

FROM *Murder on the Ropes*

“BUTCHERIN’ was done while the deceased was still alive,” Junior said.

See, we was at the gym and I’d been answering a few things. Old Junior’s a cop, and his South Texas twang was wide and flat like mine. ’Course he was dipping, and he let a stream go into the Coke bottle he was carrying in the hand that wasn’t his gun hand. His blue eyes was paler than a washed-out work shirt.

“Hail,” he said, “one side of the mouth’d been slit all the way to the earring.”

See, when the police find a corpse in Texas, their first question ain’t who done it, it’s what did the dead do to deserve it?

Billy Clancy’d been off the police force a long time before Kenny Coyle come along, but he had worked for the San Antonio Police Department a spell there after boxing. He made some good money for himself on the side—down in dark town, if you know what I’m saying? That’s after I trained him as a heavyweight in the old *El Gallo*, or Fighting Cock gym off Blanco Road downtown. We worked together maybe six years all told, starting off when he was a amateur. Billy Clancy had all the Irish heart in the world. At six-three and two-twenty-five, he had a fine frame on him, most of his weight upstairs. He had a nice clean style, too, and was quick as a sprinter. But after he was once knocked out for the first time? He had no chin after that. He’d be kicking ass and taking names, but even in a rigged fight with a bum, if he got caught, down he’d go like a longneck at a ice house.

He was a big winner in the amateurs, Billy was, but after twelve pro fights, he had a record of eight and four, with his nose broke once—that’s eight wins by KO, but he lost four times by KO, so that’s when he hung ’em up. For a long time, he went his way and I went mine. But then Billy Clancy opened Clancy’s Pub with his cop money. That was his big break. There was Irish night with Mick music, corned beef and cabbage, and Caffery’s Ale on tap and Harp Lager from Dundalk. And he had Messkin night with *mariachis* and folks was dancin’ *corridos* and the band was whooping out *rancheras* and they’d get to playing some of that *norteña* polka music that’d have you laughing and crying at the same time. For shrimp night, all you can eat, Billy trucked in fresh Gulf shrimp sweeter than plum jelly straight up from Matamoros on the border. There was

kicker, and hillbilly night, and on weekends there was just about the best jazz and blues you ever did hear. B. B. King did a whole week there one time. It got to be a hell of a deal for Billy, and then he opened up a couple of more joints till he had six in three towns, and soon Billy Clancy was somebody all the way from San Antonio up to Dallas, and down to Houston. Paid all his taxes, obeyed all the laws, treated folks like they was ladies and gentlemen, no matter how dusty the boots, how faded the dress, or if a suit was orange and purple and green.

By then he had him a home in the historic old Monte Vista section of San Antonio. His wife had one of them home decorating businesses on her own, and she had that old place looking so shiny that it was like going back a hundred years. His kids was all in private school, all of them geared to go to UT up Austin, even though the dumb young one saw himself as a Aggie.

So one day Billy called me for some “Q” down near the river, knew I was a whore for baby back ribs. Halfway through, he just up and said, “Red, I want back in.”

See, he got to missing the smell of leather and sweat, and the laughter of men—he missed the action, is what, and got himself back into the game the only way he could, managing fighters. He was good at it, too. By then he was better’n forty, and myself I was getting on—old’s when you sit on the crapper and you have to hold your nuts up so they don’t get wet. But what with my rocking chair money every month, and the money I made off Billy’s fighters, it got to where I was doing pretty good. Even got me some ostrich boots and a El Patron 30X beaver Stetson, *yip!*

What Billy really wanted was a heavyweight. With most managers, it’s only the money, ’cause heavies is what brings in them stacks of green fun-tickets. Billy wanted fun-tickets, too, but with Billy it was more like he wanted to get back something what he had lost. ’Course, finding the right heavyweight’s like finding a cherry at the high school prom.

Figure it, with only twenty, twenty-five good wins, ’specially if he can crack, a heavy can fight for a title’s worth millions. There’s exceptions, but most little guys’ll fight forever and never crack maybe two hundred grand. One of the reason’s ’cause there’s so many of them. Other reason’s ’cause they’s small. Fans like seeing heavyweights hit the canvas.

But most of today’s big guys go into the other sports where you don’t get hit the way you do in the fights. It ain’t held against you in boxing if you’re black nowadays, but if you’re a white heavy it makes it easier to pump paydays, and I could tell that it wouldn’t make Billy sad if I could get him a white boy—Irish or Italian would be desired. But working with the big guys takes training to a level that can break your back and your heart, and I wasn’t all that sure a heavy was

what I wanted, what with me being the one what's getting broke up.

See, training's a hard row to hoe. It ain't only the physical and mental parts for the fighter what's hard, but it's hard for the trainer, too. Fighters can drive you crazy, like maybe right in the middle of a fight they're *winning*, when they forget everything what you taught them? And all of a sudden they can't follow instructions from the corner? Pressure, pain, and being out of gas will make fighters go flat brain-dead on you. Your fighter's maybe sweated off six or eight pounds in there, his body's breaking down, and the jungle in him is yelling quick to get him some gone. Trainers come to know how that works, so you got to hang with your boy when he's all alone out there in the canvas part of the world. He takes heart again, 'cause he knows with you there he's still got a fighting chance to go for the titties of the win. 'Course, that means cutting grommets, Red Ryder.

Everyone working corners knows you'll more'n likely lose more'n you'll ever win, that boxing for most is refried beans and burnt tortillas. But winning is what makes your birdie chirp, so you got to always put in your mind that losing ain't nothing but a hitch in the git-along.

Working with the big guys snarls your task. How do you tell a heavyweight full-up on his maleness to use his mind instead of his sixty-pound dick? How do you teach someone big as a garage that it ain't the fighter with the biggest brawn what wins, but it's the one what gets there first with deadly force? How do you make him see that hitting hard ain't the problem, but that hitting *right* is? How do you get through to him that you don't have to be mad at someone to knock him out, same as you don't have to be in a frenzy to kill with a gun? Heavyweights got that upper-body strength what's scary, it's what they'd always use to win fights at school and such, so it's their way to work from the waist up. That means they throw arm punches, but arm punches ain't good enough. George Foreman does it, but he's so strong, and don't hardly miss, so he most times gets away with punching wrong. 'Course he didn't get away with it in Zaire with Mr. Ali.

So the big deal with heavies is getting them to work from the waist down as well as from the waist up. And they got to learn that the last thing that happens is when the punch lands. A thousand things got to happen before that can happen. Those things begin on the floor with balance. But how do you get across that he's got to work hard, but not so hard that he harms himself? How do you do that in a way what don't threaten what he already knows and has come to depend on? How do you do it so's it don't jar how he has come to see himself and his fighting style? And most of all, how do you do it so when the pressure's on he don't go back to his old ways?

After they win a few fights by early knockout, some heavies get to where they try to control workouts, will balk at new stuff what they 'll need as they step up in class. When they pick up a few purses and start driving that new car, lots get lazy and spend their time chasing poon, of which there is a large supply when there is evidence of a quantity of hundred-dollar bills. Some's hop heads, but maybe they fool you and you don't find that out till it's too late. Now you got to squeeze as many paydays out of your dooper that you can. Most times, you love your fighter like he's kin, but with a goddamn dooper you get to where you couldn't give a bent nail.

Why shouldn't I run things? the heavy's eyes will glare. His nose is flared, his socks is soggy with sweat, his heart's banging at his rib cage like it's trying to bust out of jail. It's 'cause he don't understand that he can't be the horse and the jockey. *How could anyone as big and handsome and powerful and smart as me be wrong about anything?* he will press. Under his breath he's saying, *And who's big enough to tell me I'm wrong?*

When that happens, your boy's attitude is moving him to the streets, and you may have to let him go.

Not many fight fans ever see the inside of fight gyms, so they get to wondering what's the deal with these big dummies who get all sweaty and grunty and beat on each other. Well, sir, they ain't big dummies when you think big money. Most big guys in team sports figure there's more gain and less pain than in fights, even if they have to play a hundred fifty games a year or more, and even if they have to get those leg and back operations that go with them. Some starting-out heavies get to thinking they ought to get the same big payday as major-league pitchers from the day they walk into the gym. Some see themselves as first-round draft picks in the NBA before they ever been hit. What they got to learn is that you got to be a hungry fighter before you can become a championship fighter, a fighter who has learned and survived all the layers of work and hurt the fight game will put on you. Good heavyweights're about as scarce as black cotton.

There're less white heavies than black, and the whites can be even goofier than blacks about quick money. Some whites spout off that 'cause they're white, as in White Hope, that they should be getting easy fights up to and including the one for the title. If you're that kind—and there's black ones same as white—you learn right quick that he don't have the tit or the brains to be a winner under them bright lights.

Though heavies may have the same look, they're as different from each other as zebras when it comes to mental desire, chin, heart, and *huevos*—*huevos* is eggs, but in Messkin it means “balls.” Getting heavies into shape is another

problem, keeping them in shape is a even bigger one, 'cause they got these bottomless pits for stomachs. So you work to keep them in at least decent shape all the time—but not in punishing *top shape*, the kind that peaks just before a fight. Fighter'd go wild-pig crazy if he had to live at top shape longer than a few days, his nerves all crawly and hunger eating him alive. And then there's that blood-clotting wait to the first bell. See, the job of molding flesh and bone into a fighting machine that meets danger instead of high-tailing from it is as tricky as the needlework what goes into one of them black, lacy deals what Spanish ladies wear on their heads. Fighting's easy, cowboy, it's training what's hard.

But once a trainer takes a heavy on, there's all that thump. First of all, when the heavy moves, you got to move with him—up in the ring, on the hardwood, around the big bag. You're there to guide him like a mama bear, and to stay on his ass so's he don't dog it. All fighters'll dog it after they been in the game a while, but the heavies can be the worst. They got all that weight to transport, and being human, they'll look for a place to hide. A good piece of change'll usually goad them. But always there is more training than fighting, and the faith and the fever it takes to be a champ will drop below ninety-eight-point-six real quick unless your boy eats and sleeps fight. 'Course, no fighter can do that one hundred percent. Besides, there's the pussy factor. Which is part of where the punch mitts come in. They'll make him sharp with his punches, but they're also there to help tire him into submission come bedtime.

The big bag they can fake if you don't stay on them, but a trainer with mitts, calling for combination after combination, see that's for the fighter like he's wearing a wire jock. But for the trainer, the mitts mean you're catching punches thrown by a six-foot-five longhorn, and the punches carry force enough to drop a horse. And the trainer takes this punishment round after round, day after day, the *thump* pounding through him like batting practice and he's the ball. I can't much work the mitts like I once did, only when I'm working on moves, or getting ready for a set date. But even bantamweights can make your eyes pop.

Part of the payoff for all this is sweeter'n whipped cream on top of strawberry pie. It's when your fighter comes to see himself from the outside instead of just from the in. It's when all of a sudden he can see how to use his feet to control that other guy in the short pants. It's how a fighter'll smile like a shy little boy when he understands that all his moves're now offense *and* defense, and that he suddenly has the know-how to beat the other guy with his mind, that he no longer has to be just some bull at the watering hole looking to gore. And that's when, Lordy, that you just maybe got yourself a piece of somebody what can change sweat and hurt into gold and glory.

Getting a boy ready for a fight is the toughest time of all for trainers. After a

session with the mitts, your fingers'll curl into the palms of your hands for a hour or so, and driving home in your Jimmy pickup means your hands'll be claws on the steering wheel. The muscles in the middle of your back squeeze your shoulders up around your ears. Where your chest hooks into your shoulders, you go home feeling there's something tore down in there. Elbows get sprung, and groin pulls hobble you. In my case, I've got piano wire holding my chest and ribs together, so when I leave the gym shock keeps on twanging through me. By the time I'm heading home, I'm thinking hard on a longneck bottle of Lone Star. The only other thing I'm thinking on is time in the prone position underneath Granny's quilt.

See, what we're talking about here is signing on to be a cripple, 'cause when you get down to it, trainers in their way get hit more than fighters, only we do it for nickels and dimes, compared. So what's the rest of the deal for the trainer? Well, sir, after getting through all the training and hurting, you live with the threat that you could work years with a heavy only to have him quit on you for somebody who's dangling money at him now that you've done the job that changed a lump of fear and doubt into a fighter. But like I say, a good heavy these days only has to win a few fights for a shot at the title. If he wins that, he's suddenly drinking from solid gold teacups. As the champ, he will defend his title as little as once. But the payoff can be *mucho* if he can defend a few times. So when the champ gets a ten-million-dollar payday, the trainer gets ten percent off the top—that's a one-million-dollar bill. That can make you forget crippled backs and hands.

'Course the downside can be there, too. That's when your heart goes out to your fighter as you watch helpless sometimes as he takes punches to the head that can hack into his memory forever. And your gut will turn against you when one day you see your boy's eyes wander all glassy when he tries to find a word that he don't have in his mouth no more. You feel rotten deep down, but you also love your fighter for having the heart to roll the dice of his life on a dream. And above all, you see clear that no matter how rotten you feel, that your boy never had nothing else but his life to roll, and that you was the lone one who ever cared enough to give him the only shot he would ever have.

Yet the real lure, when you love the fights with everything that's left of your patched-up old heart, is to be part of the great game—a game where the dues are so high that once paid they take you to the Mount Everest of the Squared Circle, to that highest of places, where fire and ice are one and where only the biggest and best can play, *yip!*

Trainers know going in that the odds against you are a ton to one. So why do I risk the years, why do I take shots that stun my heart? Why am I part of the spilt

blood? Why do I take trips to Leipzig or Johannesburg that take me two weeks to recover from? B. B. King sings my answer for me, backs it up with that big old guitar. “*I got a bad case of love.*”

Anyway, all I was able to get Billy was what was out there, mostly Messkins, little guys wringing wet at a hundred twenty-four and three quarters, what with us being in San Antonio. But there was some black fighters, too, a welter or a middleweight, now and then. Billy treated all his fighters like they was champs, no matter that they was prelim boys hanging between hope and fear, and praying hard the tornado don’t touch down. If they was to show promise, he’d outright sponsor them good, give them a deuce a week minimum, no paybacks, a free room someplace decent, and eats in one of his pubs, whatever they wanted as long as they kept their weight right. If a boy wasn’t so good, Billy’d give ’em work, that way if the kid didn’t catch in boxing, leastways he always had a job. People loved Billy Clancy.

See, he’d start boys as a dishwasher, but then he’d move ’em up, make waiters and bartenders of them. He had Messkin managers what started as busboys. He was godfather to close to two dozen Messkin babies, and he never forgot a birthday or Christmas. His help would invite him to their weddings, sometimes deep into Mexico, and damned if he wouldn’t go. Eyes down there would bug out when this big *gringo*’d come driving through a dusty *pueblo* in one of his big old silver Lincoln Town Cars what he ordered made special. Billy’d join right in, *yip!*, got to where he could talk the lingo passable—good enough to where he could tell jokes and make folks laugh in their own tongue.

Billy Clancy’d be in the middle of it, but he never crossed the line, never messed with any of the gals, though he could have had any or all of ’em. The priests would always take a shine to him, too, want to talk baseball. He never turned one down who come to him about somebody’s grandma what needed a decent burial, instead of being dropped down a hole in a bag.

One time I asked Billy why he didn’t try on one of them Indian-eyed honeys down there. Respect, is what he said, for the older folks, and ’specially for the young men, you don’t want to take a man’s pride.

“When you’re invited to a party,” said Billy, “act like you care to be invited back.”

That was Billy Clancy; you don’t shit where you eat.

My deal with Billy was working in the gym with his fighters for ten percent of the purse off the top. No fights, no money. I didn’t see him for days unless it was getting up around fight time. But he’d stop by, not to check up on me, but just to

let his boys know he cared about them. Most times he was smoother than gravy on a biscuit, but I could always tell when something was pestering him. 'Course he wouldn't talk about it much. Billy didn't feel the need to talk, or he saw fit not to.

I know there was this one time when the head manager of all Billy's joints in San Antonia took off with Billy's cash. Billy come into his private office one Monday expecting to see deposit slips for the money what come in over a big weekend. Well, sir, there was no money, and no keys, and no manager, but that same manager had held a gun on Billy's little Messkin office gal so's she'd open the safe. The manager had whipped on the little gal, taped her to a chair with duct tape to where she'd peed herself, and she was near hysteric.

Billy had some of his help make a few phone calls, and damned if the boy what did Billy didn't head for his hometown on the island of Isla Mujeres way down at the tip of Mexico, where he thought he'd be safe. Billy waited a week, then took a plane to Mérida in the Yucatan. He rented him a big car with a good AC and drove on over to the dried-out, palmy little town of Puerto Juárez on the coast that's just lick across the water from what's called Women's Island.

He hung out a day or so in Puerto Juárez, until he got a feel for the place, and so the local police could get a good look at him. Then he just pulled up in front of their peach-colored shack, half its palm-leaf roof hanging loose. He took his time getting out of his rental car, and walked slow inside. Stood a foot taller than most. He talked Spanish and told the captain of the local *federales* his deal, made it simple. All he wanted was his keys back, *and* he wanted both the manager's balls. The captain was to keep what was left of the money.

That night late, the captain brought forty-six keys on three key rings to Billy's blistered motel. He showed Polaroids of the manager's corpse what was dumped to cook in the hot water off the island, and he also brought in the manager's two *huevos*—his two eggs, each wrapped in a corn tortilla. Billy Clancy fed them to the wild dogs on the other side of the adobe back fence.

Billy checked out some of the Mayan ruins down around those parts, giving local folks time to call the news back to San Antonia. Billy got back, nobody said nothing. Didn't have no more problems with the help stealing now he'd made clear what was his was his.

There was only one other deal about Billy I ever knew about, this time with one of his ex-fighters, a failed middleweight, a colored boy Billy'd made a cook in one of his places. Nice boy, worked hard, short hair, all the good stuff. First off, he worked as a bar-back. But then the bartenders found out the kid was sneaking their tips. They cornered him in a storeroom. They had him turned upside down,

was ready to break his hands for him, but then he started squealing they was only doing it 'cause he's black. Billy heard it from upstairs and called off his bartenders, piecing them off with a couple of c-notes each. He listened to the boy's story, and 'cause he couldn't prove the boy was dirty, he moved him to a different joint, and that's where he made a fry cook out of him. The kid was good at cooking, worked overtime anytime the head cook wanted. But then word come down the kid was dealing drugs outta the kitchen. Billy knew dead bang this time and he had one of his cop friends make a buy on the sly.

See, Billy always tried to take care of his own business, unless when it was something like down in Mexico. Billy said when he took care of things himself, there was nobody could tell a story different from the one he told. So he waited for the boy outside the boy's mama's house one night late, slashed two of his tires. Boy comes out and goes shitting mad when he sees his tires cut, starts waving his arms like a crawdad.

Billy comes up with a baseball bat alongside his leg, said, "Boy, I come to buy some of that shit you sell."

Boy pissed the boy off something awful, but he knew better than to challenge Billy on it. So the boy tried to run. He showed up dead, is what happened, his legs broke, his balls in his mouth. No cop ever knocked on Billy Clancy's door, but drugs didn't happen in any of Billy's places after that neither.

It was a couple years after that when Dee-Cee Swans collared me about this heavyweight he'd been working with over at the Brown Bomber Gym in Houston. I said I wasn't going to no Houston—even if it was to look at the real Brown Bomber himself. Dee-Cee said there wasn't no need.

Henrilee "Dark Chocolate" Swans was from Louisiana, his family going back to Spanish slave times, the original name was Cisneros. Family'd brought him as a boy to Houston during World War Two, where they'd come to better themselves. Henrilee's fighting days started on the streets of the Fifth Ward. He said things was so tough in his part of town that when a wino died, his dog ate him. Dee-Cee was a pretty good lightweight in his time, now a'course he weighs more. Fight guys got to calling him Dee-Cee instead of Dark Chocolate, to make things short. Dee-Cee said call him anything you want, long as you called him to dinner.

He wore a cap 'cause he was bald-headed except for the white fringe around his ears and neck. He wore glasses, but one lens had a crack in it. He had a bad back and a slight limp, so he walked with a polished, homemade old mesquite walking stick. It was thick as your wrist and was more like a knobby club than a cane. But old Dee-Cee still had the moves. The time, between now and back

when he was still Dark Chocolate, disappeared when Dee-Cee had need to move. Said he never had no trouble on no bus in no part of town, not with that stick between his legs. Dee-Cee had them greeny-blue eyes what some coloreds gets, and when he looked at you square, you was looked at.

Way me and him hooked up was chancy, like everything else in fights. 'Course we knew each other going way back. Both of us liked stand-up style of fighters, so we always had a lot to talk about, things like moves, slips, and counters. Like me, he knew that a fighter's feet are his brains—that they're what tell you what punches to throw and when to do it. Since there was more colored fighters in Dallas and Houston, that's where Dee-Cee operated out of most. But he had folks in San Antonio, too. He showed up again, him and a white heavyweight, big kid, a Irish boy from L.A. calling himself "KO" Kenny Coyle. What wasn't chancy was that Dee-Cee knew I was connected with Billy Clancy.

Dee-Cee got together with Coyle, trained him a while in Houston after working the boy's corner twice as a pickup cutman in a Alabama casino. The way the boy was matched, he was supposed to lose. See, he hadn't fought in a while. But he won both fights by early KOs, and his record got to be seventeen and one, with fifteen knockouts. Coyle could punch with both hands at six-foot-five, two hundred forty-five pounds, size sixteen shoe. His only loss came a few years back from a bad cut to his left eyelid up Vancouver, Canada.

The boy'd also worked as sparring partner for big-time heavyweights, going to camp sometimes for weeks at a time. That's a lot of high-level experience, but it's a lot of punishment, even when you're bone strong, and sometimes you could tell that Coyle'd lose a word. Except for the bad scar on his eyelid, and his nose being a little flat, he didn't look much busted up, so that made you think he maybe had some smarts. He was in shape, too. That made you like him right off.

Dee-Cee was slick. He always put one hand up to his mouth when he talked, said he didn't want spies to read his lips, said some had telescopes. He was known to be a bad man, Dee-Cee, but that didn't mean he didn't have a sense of right and wrong. Back before he had to use a cane, we got to drinking over Houston after a afternoon fight—it was at a fair where we both lost. Half drunk, we went to a fish shack in dark town for some catfish. Place was jam-packed. The lard-ass owner had one of them muslim-style gold teeth—the slip-on kind with a star cutout that shows white from the white enamel underneath? Wouldn't you know it, he took one look at my color and flat said they didn't serve no food. Dee-Cee was fit to be tied—talked nigga, talked common, said Allah was going to send his black ass to the pit along with his four handkerchief-head ho's. Old muslim slid off the tooth quick as a quail when Dee-Cee tapped his pocket and said he

was going to cut that tooth out or break it off.

We headed for a liquor store, bought some jerky, and ended up out at one of them baseball-pitching park deals drinking rock and rye and falling down in the dirt from swinging and missing pitches. People got to laughing like we was Richard Pryor. Special loud was the hustler running a three-card monte game next to the stands, a little round dude with fuzzy-wuzzy hair. He worked off a old lettuce crate and cheated people for nickels and dimes. Not one of them ever broke the code, but old Dee-Cee had broke it from the git. He watched sly from the fence as the monte-guy took even pennies from the raggedy kids what made a few cents chasing down balls in the outfield.

Dee-Cee put on his Louisiana country-boy act, bet a dollar, and pointed to one of the cards after the monte-guy moved the three cards all around. 'Course Dee-Cee didn't choose right, *couldn't* choose right, so he went head-on and lost another twenty, thirty dollars. Then he bet fifty, like he was trying to get his money back. The dealer did more slick business with his cards, and Dee-Cee chose the one in the middle—only this time, instead of just pointing to it and waiting for the dealer to turn it face-up like before, Dee-Cee held it down hard with two fingers and told monte-man to flip the other two cards over first. Dee-Cee said he'd turn his card over *last*, said he wanted to eyeball *all* the cards. See, there was no way for nobody to win. The dealer knew he'd been caught cheating, and tried to slide. Dee-Cee cracked him in the shins a few times with a piece of pipe he carried those days, and pretty soon—wouldn't you know it?—the monte-man got to begging Dee-Cee to take *all* his money. Dee-Cee took it all, too. 'Course he kept his own money, what was natural, but he gave the rest to the ragamuffins in the field—at which juncture the little guys all took the rest of the night off.

Dee-Cee got me off to the side one day, his hand over his mouth, said did I want to work with him and Coyle? He told me Coyle maybe had a ten-round fight coming up at one of the Mississippi casinos, and I figured Dee-Cee wanted me as cutman for the fight, him being the trainer and chief second. I say why not?, some extra cash to go along with my rocking chair, right?

But Dee-Cee said, "Naw, Red, not just cutman, I want you wit' me full-time training Coyle."

I say to myself, *A heavyiveight what can crack, a big old white Irish one!*

Dee-Cee says he needs he'p 'cause as chief second he can't hardly get up the ring steps and through the ropes quick enough no more. 'Course with me working inside the ring, that makes me chief second *and* cutman. I'd done that before, hell.

Dee-Cee says he chose me 'cause he don't trust none of what he called the niggas and the beaners in the gym. Said he don't think much of the rednecks neither. See, that's the way Dee-Cee *talked*, not the way he *acted* toward folks. Dee-Cee always had respect.

He said, "See, you'n me knows that a fighter's feet is his brains. My white boy's feet ain't right, and you good wit' feet. We split the trainer's ten percent, even."

Five percent of a heavyweight can mount.

Dee-Cee said, "Yeah, and maybe you could bring in Billy Clancy."

Like I said, Dee-Cee's slick. So I ask myself if this is something I want bad enough to kiss a spider for? See, when a fan sees the pros and the amateurs', he sees them as a sport. But the pros is a business, too. It's maybe more a business than a sport. I liked the business part like everybody else, but heavyweights can hurt you like nobody else. So I'm thinking, do I want to chance sliding down that dark hole a heavyweight can dig? Besides, do I want to risk my good name on KO Kenny Coyle with Billy Clancy? I told Dee-Cee I'd wait a spell before I'd do that.

Dee-Cee said, "No, no, you right, hail yeah!"

See, I'm slick, too.

What it was is, Coyle was quirky. He'd gone into the navy young and started fighting as a service fighter, started knocking everybody out. He won all of the fleet and other service titles, and most of the civilian amateur tournaments, and people was talking Olympics. But the Olympics was maybe three years away, and he wanted to make some money right now. Couldn't make no big money or train full-time in the navy, so one day Coyle up and walks straight into the ship's captain's face. Damned if Coyle don't claim he's queer as a three-dollar bill. See, the service folks these days ain't supposed to ask, and you ain't supposed to tell, but here was Coyle telling what he really wanted was to be a woman and dance the ballet. Captain hit the overhead, was ready to toss him in the brig, but Coyle threatened to suck off all the marine guards, and to contact the president himself about sexual harassment. Didn't take more'n a lick, and the captain made Coyle a ex-navy queer. Coyle laughed his snorty laugh when he told the story, said wasn't he equal smart as he was big? Guys said he sure was, but all knew Coyle wasn't smart as Coyle thought he was—'specially when he got to bragging about how he stung some shyster lawyers what had contacted him while he was still a amateur. See, they started funneling him money, and got him to agree to sign with them when he turned pro. He knew up front that nobody was supposed to be buzzing amateurs, and he got them for better'n twenty big ones before he

pulled his sissy stunt on the navy. When they come to him with a pro contract, he told them to stick it, told them no contract with a amateur was valid, verbal or written, and that he had bigger plans. He had them shysters by the ying-yang, he said, and them shysters knew it. Coyle laughed about that one, too.

Too bad I didn't hear about the lawyer deal until we was already into the far turn with Coyle. By the time I did, I already knew Kenny was too big for his britches, and that he was a liar no different from my cousin Royal. If it was four o'clock, old Royal'd say it was four-thirty. Couldn't help himself.

Coyle's problem as a fighter was he'd not been trained right, but he was smart enough to know it. His other trainers depended on his reach and power, and that he could take a shot. The problem with that is that you end up fighting with your face. What I worked on with him was the angles of the game, distance, and how to get in and out of range with the least amount of work. The big fellows got to be careful not to waste gas. But where I started Coyle first was with the *bitch*. See, the bitch is what I call the jab, that's the one'll get a crowd up and cheering, you do it pretty. *Bing! Bing!* Man, there ain't nothing like the bitch. And Coyle took to it good, him being fed up with getting hit. With the bitch, you automatic got angles. You got the angle, you got the opening. *Bang!* Everything comes off the bitch. I got him to moving on the balls of his feet, and soon he was coming off that right toe behind the bitch like he was a great white going for a seal pup. *Whooom!*

See, when you got the bitch working for you is when you got the other guy blinking, and on his heels going backward, and you can knock a man down with the bitch, even knock him out if you can throw a one-two-one combination right. Coyle picking up the bitch like he did is what got me to think serious on him, 'specially when I saw how hard he worked day in, day out. On time every day, nary a balk. Dee-Cee and me both started counting fun-tickets in our sleep but both of us agreed to pass on the ten-round Mississippi fight until I could get Coyle's feet right.

Moving with Coyle, like with the other heavies, is easy for me even now. 'Cause of their weight, they get their feet tangled when they ain't trained right, and I know how to back them to the ropes or into a corner. I don't kid myself, they could knock me out with the bitch alone if we was fighting, but what we're up to ain't fighting. What we're up to is what makes fighting boxing.

Billy Clancy got wind of Coyle and called me in, wanted to know why I was keeping my white boy secret. I told him Coyle wasn't no secret, said it was too soon.

"Who's feedin' him?"

“Me and Dee-Cee.”

Billy peeled off some hundreds. I’d later split the six hundred with Dee-Cee.

Billy said, “Tell him to start eatin’ at one of my joints, as much as he wants. But no drinks and no partyin’ in the place. When’ll Coyle be ready?”

“Gimme six weeks. If he can stand up to what I put on him, then we’ll see.”

“Will he fight?”

“He better.”

Once I got Coyle’s feet slick, damn if he didn’t come along as if he was champion already. When I told Billy, he put a eight-round fight together at one of the Indian reservations on the Mississippi. We went for eight so’s not to put too much pressure on Coyle, what with me being a new trainer to him. We fought for only seventy-five hundred—took the fight just to get Coyle on the card. When I told Coyle about it, he said book it, didn’t even ask who’s the opponent. See, Coyle was broke and living in dark town with Dee-Cee, and hoping to impress Billy ’cause Dee-Cee’d told him about Billy Clancy having money.

Well, sir, halfway through the fifth round with Marcellus Ellis, Coyle got himself head-butted in the same eye where he’d been cut up in Vancouver. Ellis was a six-foot-seven colored boy weighing two-seventy, but he couldn’t do nothing with Coyle, ’cause of the bitch. So Ellis hoped to save his big ass with a head-butt. Referee didn’t see the butt, and wouldn’t take our word it was intentional, so the butt wasn’t counted. Cut was so bad I skipped adrenaline and went direct to Thrombin, the ten-thousand-unit bovine coagulant deal. Thrombin stopped the blood quicker’n morphine’ll stop the runs, but the cut was in the eyelid, and the fight shoulda been stopped in truth. But we was in Mississippi and the casino wanted happy gamblers, so the ref let it go on with a warning that he’d stop the fight in the next round if the cut got worse.

Dee-Cee got gray-looking, said he was ready to go over and whip on Ellis’s nappy head with his cane.

I told Coyle the only thing I could tell him. “They’ll stop this fight on us and we could lose, so you got to get into Ellis’s ass with the bitch and then drop your right hand on him and get *respect!*”

All Coyle did was to nod. He went out there serious as a diamondback. Six hard jabs busted up Ellis so bad that he couldn’t think nothing but the bitch. That’s when Coyle got the angle and, *Bang!* he hit Ellis with a straight right that was like the right hand of God. Lordy, Ellis was out for five minutes. He went down stiff like a tree and bounced on his face, and then one leg went all jerk and twitchy. We went to whooping and hugging. That right hand was lightning in human form. But what it was that did it for me wasn’t Coyle’s big right hand, it

was the way he stuck the *bitch*, and the way Coyle *listened* to me in the corner.

Billy wanted to sign him right then, but I said wait, even though I knew Coyle was antsy to get him a place of his own. Besides, we had to wait a month and more to see if the eye'd heal complete. It took longer than we thought, so Billy started paying the boy three hundred a week walking-around money. Folks at the casino was so wild about that right hand coming outta a white boy that Billy was able to get twenty-five thousand for Coyle's next fight soon's a doctor'd clear his eye. And sure enough, Coyle was right back in the gym when the doctor gave him the okay. But he had some kind of funny look to him, so I told him to go home and rest. But no, Coyle kept showing up saying he wanted to get back to that casino. How do you reach the brain of a pure-strain male hormone when he's eighteen and one, with sixteen KOs? But one morning when me and Dee-Cee was out with him doing his road work, we got a surprise. Coyle started pressing his chest and had to stop running. Damn if he didn't look half-blue and ready to go down. Me and Dee-Cee walked him back to the car, both holding him by a arm. I thought maybe it was a heart attack. We hauled ass over to Emergency. They checked him all over, hooked him up to all the machines, checked his blood for enzymes. Said it wasn't no heart attack, said it was maybe some kind of quick virus going around that could knock folks down. Coyle wanted to know when he'd be able to fight again in Mississippi, and I told him to forget Mississippi till he was well. On our way out, the doctor got me to the side to tell me he wasn't positive Coyle was sick.

I said, "What does that mean?"

Doc said, "I'm not sure. Just thought you might want to know."

After a couple of days' rest Coyle was back in the gym, but then he had to stop his road work outta weakness again. He looked like a whipped pup, so I figured he had to have something wrong. He said, "But I can't fight if I don't run, you said it yourself."

I said, "You can't fight if you ain't got gas in your tank, that's what that means. Right now, you got a hole in your tank."

"I need dough, Red."

He was a hungry fighter; it's what you dream about. And there he'd be the next day, even if he coughed till he gagged. You never saw anybody push himself like him. But by then, the fool could hardly punch, much less run. But he still wanted to train, said he didn't want us to think he didn't have no heart.

I said, "Hail, boy, I'm worried about your brain, not heart. You got money from the last fight. Rest."

He said, "I sent all but a thousand to my brother for an operation. He's a cripple."

Well, later on I learned he'd pissed all the money away on pussy and pool, and there wasn't no cripple. But at that time I was so positive Coyle had the heart it takes that I just grabbed the bull by the horns and told Billy it was time. Billy could see the weak state Coyle was in, but on my good word it was a virus, Billy signed Coyle up to a four-year contract. On top of that, he gave Coyle a one-bedroom poolside apartment in one of his units for free. Said he'd give Coyle twenty-five hundred a month, that he'd put it in the contract, no payback, until Coyle started clearing thirty thousand a year. Said he'd give Coyle sixty thousand dollars under the table as a signing bonus soon's he was well enough to get back in the gym. Coyle wanted a hundred thousand, but settled for sixty.

Billy said, "That's cash, Kenny. So you don't have to pay no taxes on it."

"I'll get you the title, Mr. Clancy."

"Billy."

I looked at Dee-Cee, knew the head of his dick was glowing same as mine. Damned if Coyle wasn't back in the gym working hard and doing road work in only three days. Billy's word was good, and I was there when he paid Coyle off in stacks of hundreds. Money smells bad when you get a gang of it all together.

Wouldn't you know it? Old stinky-head went right out and spent the whole shiterree on one of them new BMW four-wheel-drive deals what goes for better than fifty thousand. Coyle got to bragging about the sports package, the killer sound system, how much horsepower it had. Who gives a rap when you can't afford tires and battery? Buying them boogers is easy, keeping them up what's hard.

Besides, it was about that time that Coyle's knees went to flap like butterfly wings. See, the ladies took one look at Coyle and thought they had the real deal, what with him having that big car and flashing hundreds in the clubs.

Dee-Cee said, "How many times you get you nut this week?"

Coyle said, "That's personal."

Dee-Cee said, "So you been gettin' you nut every night."

Coyle said, "No, I ain't."

Dee-Cee said, "You is, too. If it was one or none, or even two times, you'da said so."

Coyle looked at me like he'd never heard such talk.

I said, "He's sayin' when your legs get to wobblin', you been doin' it too much. He's saying that when your legs're weak that your brain gets to wonderin' why's it so hard to keep itself from failin' down. That's when your brain is so busy keeping you on your feet that it don't pay attention to fightin'. Son, you got to have your legs right so your mind can work quicker than light, or you end up

as a opponent talkin' through your nose, and the do-gooders wants to blame us trainers. No good, it's you and your dick what's doin' wrong."

Coyle said, "I'm a fighter livin' like a fighter."

Dee-Cee said, "Way you goin', you won't be for long."

I said, "Dee-Cee ain't wrong, Kenny."

Dee-Cee said, "Boy, you can fuck you white ass black, but that ain't never gonna make you champ of nothin'."

Coyle snorted, said, "I'll be champ of the bitches."

Dee-Cee said, "You go out, screw a thousand bitches, you think you somethin'? Sheeuh, you don't screw no thousand bitches, a thousand bitches screw you—and there go you title shot, fool."

Coyle said, "Fighters need release."

Dee-Cee said, "Say *what*? All you got to do is wait some. You midnight emissions'll natural take care of you goddamn release!"

I said, "Look, we're tryin' to get you around the track and across the finish line first, but you're headin' into the rail on us."

"Yeah," said Dee-Cee, "workin' wit' you be like holdin' water in one hand."

Coyle thought about that and seemed to nod, but next day when he come in his knees were flapping same as before.

Come to find out, Coyle wasn't worth the powder to blow him to hell. Billy found out Coyle had been with three gals in the stall of the men's toilet at one of his hot spots—that they'd been smoking weed hunched around the stool, *yip*! Billy didn't jump Coyle. But instead of seeing him as a long-lost White Hope in shining armor, he saw him same as me and Dee-Cee'd come to—like a peach what had gone part bad. So, do you cut out the bad part and keep the good? Or do you shit-can the whole deal? Billy decided to save what he could as long as he could.

Billy told Coyle to flat take his partying somewhere else, like he was first told. If I know Billy, there was more he wanted to say, but didn't. 'Course big old Coyle didn't take it too good, and wanted to dispute with Billy. So Billy said not to mistake kindness for weakness. Coyle got the message looked like, and was back in the gym working hard again—he wanted that twenty-five hundred a month. We figured the bullshit was over, leastways the in-public bullshit. But who could tell about weed? And who knew what else Coyle was messing with? By then, I got to feeling like I was a cat trapped in a sock drawer.

I told Coyle that what he'd pulled on Billy wasn't the right way to do business.

Coyle said, "He's makin' money off me."

I said, “Not yet he ain’t.”

That’s when things got so squirrely you’d think Coyle had a tail.

First thing what come up was that stink with the plain-Jane cop’s daughter who said Coyle knocked her up—said Coyle’d gave her some of this GHB stuff that’s floating around that’ll make a gal pass out so deep she’s a corpse. Cop’s daughter said the last thing she remembered was that she was in Coyle’s pool playing kissy face. Next thing she knew she was bare-ass on the floor and Coyle was fixing to do her. She said she jumped up and fled.

Coyle claimed that he’d already done her twice, said she was crying for more.

See, it wasn’t until it come out she was pregnant that she told her daddy, who was a detective sergeant of the San Antonio P.D. She was a only child, and Daddy had them squinty blue eyes set in a face wide in the cheekbones what the Polacks brought into Texas. That good old boy got to rampaging like a rodeo bull, and right about then his neighbors got to thinking about calling Tom Bodette and checking into a Motel 6.

Once Daddy’d killed a half bottle of Jim Beam, he loaded up a old .44 six-gun, put on his boots and hat, and went on over to shoot Coyle dead.

Coyle told Daddy he loved plain-Jane more than his life itself, said that he wanted to marry her.

Cop was one of them fundamentals and figured marrying was better’n killing, so he let Coyle off.

Arrangements was made quick so the girl could wear white to the altar and not show. But then Coyle ups and says he’d have to wait till after the kid was born, that he wanted a blood test to prove he was the real daddy. The cop went to rampaging again and was fixing to hunt Coyle down, but he was took off the scent when his daughter stuck something up herself. Killed the baby, and liked to killed herself. The family was in such grief that Daddy started to drink full-time. The girl was sent off to live with a aunt up Nacogdoches. The cop had to go into one of them anger management deals or get fired from the force. ’Course Coyle slapped his thigh.

Second deal was about sparring, and was way worse for me’n Dee-Cee than the cop-daughter deal. All of a sudden Coyle started sparring like he never done it before. Everybody was hitting him—middleweights we had in with him to work speed, high school linemen in the gym on a dare, grunts for God’s sake. The eye puffed up again, and we had to take off more time. All of a sudden Coyle’s moving on his heels instead of his toes, and now he can’t jump rope without stumbling into a wall. A amateur light heavy knocked him down hard enough to

make him go pie-eyed, and Dee-Cee called the session off. Most times like that, a fighter's pride will make him want to keep on working, but not Coyle. He was happy to get his ass outta there. Billy heard about it and quick got Coyle that second Mississippi fight for seventy-five thousand. Got Coyle ten rounds with a dead man just to see what was what.

The opponent was six foot tall, three hundred twenty-eight pounds, a big old black country boy from Lake Charles, Louisiana, who couldn't hardly scrawl his own name. But in the first round, with his damn eyes closed, he hit Coyle high on the head with an overhand right and knocked him on his ass. Me and Dee-Cee couldn't figure how he didn't see the punch coming, it was so high and wide. Coyle jumped up, and to his credit, he went right to work.

Bang! Three bitches to the eyes, right hand to the chin, left hook to the body, all the punches quick and pretty. The black boy settled like a dead whale to the bottom, and white folks was dancing in the aisles and waving the Stars and Bars. It was pitiful, but Coyle strutted like he just knocked out Jack Johnson. Me and Dee-Cee was pissed, and our peters had lost their glow. Dressing room afterward was quiet as a gray dawn.

Coyle took time off, not that he needed the rest. He came back for a few days, then it got so he wasn't coming in at all. If he did, he'd lie around and bullshit instead of work. You could smell weed on him, and his hair got greasy. Now all our fighters started going flaky. Sweat got scarcer and scarcer. There was other times Coyle'd come in so fluffy from screwing you wished he didn't come in at all. Gym got to be a goddamned social club what looked full of boy whores and Social Security socialites. What with Coyle lying around like a pet poodle, Billy's other fighters started doing the same. Some begged off fights that were sure wins for them. You never want a fighter to fight if he's not ready, but when they're being paid to be in shape, they're supposed to be in shape, not Butterball goddamn turkeys.

I tried to get Coyle to get serious, but he kept saying, "I'm cool, I'm cool."

I said, "Tits on a polar bear's what's cool."

That went on for three months, but I wasn't big enough to choke sense into him. Besides, no trainer worth a damn would want to. Fighters come in on their own, or they don't come in. Billy wanted a answer, but I didn't have one. How do you figure it when a ten-round fighter hungry for money pulls out of fights 'cause of a sore knuckle, or a sprung thumb, or a bad elbow? Course old Coyle didn't volunteer for no cut in pay.

One day he was lounging in his velour sweatsuit looking at tittie magazines. He said to turn up the lights. I said they was turned up. He said to turn them up again, and I said they was up again. Coyle yelled at me the first and last time.

“Turn ‘em all the goddamn fuck up!”

“Boy,” I said, and then I said it again real quiet. “Boy, lights is all the goddamn fuck up.”

He looked up. “Oh, uh-huh, yeah, Red, thanks.”

About then I figure Kenny don’t know shit from Shinola.

Vegas called Billy for a two-hundred-thousand-dollar fight with some African fighting outta France. He had big German money behind him, and he was a tough sumbitch, but he didn’t have no punch like Kenny Coyle. Coyle said he’d go for the two-hundred-thousand fight in a heartbeat.

I knew there had to be some fun in all this pain. We whip the Afro-Frenchie and win the next couple of fights, and we’re talking three, maybe five hundred thousand a fight. Even if he loses, Billy’s got all his money back and more, and me and Dee-Cee’s doing right good, too. If we win big, we’ll be talking title fight, ‘cause word’ll be out that there’s some big white boy who could be the one to win boxing back from the coloreds. The only coloreds me and Dee-Cee gave a rap about was them colored twenties, and fifties, and hundreds that’d make us proud standing in the bank line instead of meek. Like I say, the amateurs and the pros ain’t alike, and Billy’s figuring to get his money out of Coyle while he can. Me and Dee-Cee’s for that, ‘specially me, since it gets me off the hook.

But neither one of us could figure what had happened with Coyle, so we got Billy to bring in some tough sparring partners for the Frenchie fight to test what Coyle had. Same-oh same-oh, with Coyle getting hit. But when he hit them, *damn!*, they’d go *down!* A gang of them took off when Coyle threw what that writer guy James Ellroy calls *body rockets* that tore up short ribs and squashed livers. But it was almost like Coyle was swinging blind. Usual-like, you don’t care about the sparring partners, they’re paid to get hit. But the problem was that Coyle was getting hit, and going *down*, too. He’d take a shot and his knees would do the old butterfly. We figured he’d been smoking weed, or worse—being up all night in toilets with hoochies.

Dee-Cee said, “Can’t say I didn’t tell him ‘bout midnight emissions, but no, he won’t listen a me.”

But Coyle wasn’t short on wind, and he looked strong. Me’n Dee-Cee’d never seen nothing like it, a top guy gets to be a shot fighter so quick like that, ‘specially with him doing his road work every dawn? Hell, come to find out he wasn’t even smoking weed, just having a beer after a workout so’s he could relax and sleep.

Seeing all our work fall apart, I figured we was Cinderella at midnight. Me

and Dee-Cee both knew it, but we still couldn't make out why. Then Dee-Cee come to me, his hand over his mouth.

Dee-Cee said, "Coyle's blind in that bad eye."

I said, "What? Bullshit, the commission doctors passed him."

"He's blind, Red, in that hurt eye, I'm tellin' you. I been wavin' a white towel next to it two days now, and he don't blink on the bad-eye side. Watch."

Between rounds sparring next day, with me greasing and watering Coyle, Dee-Cee kind of waved the tip of the towel next to Coyle's good eye and Coyle blinked automatic. Between the next round, Dee-Cee was on the other side. He did the same waving deal with the towel. But Coyle's bad eye didn't blink 'cause he never saw the towel. That's when I understood why he was taking all them shots, that's when I knew he was moving on his heels 'cause he couldn't see the floor clear. And that's why he was getting rocked like it was the first time he was ever hit, 'cause shots was surprising him that he couldn't tell was coming. And it's when I come to know why he was pulling out of fights—he knew he'd lose 'cause he couldn't see. He went for the two-hundred-thousand fight knowing he'd lose, but he took it for the big money. I wanted to shoot the bastard, what with him taking Billy's money and not saying the eye'd gone bad and making a chump outta me.

The rule is if you can't see, then you can't fight. I told Dee-Cee we got to tell Billy. See, Billy's close to being my own kin, and it's like I stuck a knife in his back if I don't come clean.

Dee-Cee said to wait, that it was the commission doctor's fault, not ours, let them take the heat. He said maybe Vegas won't find out, and maybe the fight will fuck Coyle up so bad he'll have to retire anyhow. Billy'll still get most of his money back, Dee-Cee said, so Billy won't have cause to be mad with us. That made sense.

But what happened to mess up our deal permanent was that the Vegas Boxing Commission faxed in its forms for the AIDS blood test, said they wanted a current neuro exam, and they sent forms for a eye exam that had to be done by a ophthalmologist, not some regular doctor with a eye chart. Damned if Coyle wasn't sudden all happy. He couldn't wait once he heard about the eye test. Me and Dee-Cee was wondering how can he want a eye test, what with what we know about that eye?

Sure enough, when the eye test comes in, it says that Coyle's close to stone blind in the bad eye, the one what got cut in Canada. The nuero showed Coyle's balance was off from being hit too much in training camps, which is why he couldn't jump rope, and why he 'd shudder when he got popped. The eye exam

proved what me and Dee-Cee already knew, which is why Coyle was taking shots what never shoulda landed. What it come down to was the two-hundred-thousand-dollar fight was off, and Coyle's fighting days for big money was over. It also come down to Billy taking it in the ass for sixty grand in signing money that was all my fault. And that ain't saying nothing about all the big purses Coyle coulda won if he had been fit.

Turns out that the fight in Vancouver where Coyle got cut caused his eye to first go bad. The reason why word didn't get loose on him is 'cause Coyle didn't tell the Canadian doctors he was a fighter, and 'cause it was done on that Canadian free health deal they got up there. The eye doc said the operation was seventy percent successful, but told Coyle to be careful, 'cause trauma to the eye could mess it up permanent. What with him dropping out of boxing for a couple of years the way fighters'll do when they lose, people wasn't thinking on him. And the way Coyle passed the eye test in Alabama and Mississippi was to piece off with a hundred-dollar bill the crooked casino croakers what's checking his eyes. When later on he told me how he did it, he laughed the same snorty way as when he told how he played his game on the navy.

That's when I worked out what was Coyle's plan. See, he knew right after the Marcellus Ellis fight that the eye had gone bad on him again, but he kept that to himself instead of telling anyone about it, thinking his eye operation in Canada won't come out. That way, he could steal Billy's signing money, and pick up the twenty-five hundred a month chasing-pussy money, too. I wondered how long he'd be laughing.

Only now what am I supposed to say to Billy? After all, it was my name on Coyle what clinched the deal. It got to be where my shiny, big old white boy was tarnished as a copper washtub. I talked with Dee-Cee about it.

Dee-Cee said, "You right. That why the schemin' muhfuh come down South from the front!"

See, we surprised Coyle. He didn't know the tests had come back, so me and Dee-Cee just sat him down on the ring apron. Starting out, he was all fluffy.

Dee-Cee said, "Why didn't you tell us about the eye?"

Coyle lied, said, "What eye?"

Dee-Cee said, "Kenny, the first rule's don't shit a shitter. The eye what's fucked up."

Coyle said, "Ain't no eye fucked up."

"You got a fucked-up eye, don't bullshit," said Dee-Cee.

"It ain't bad, it's just blurry."

"Just *blurry* means you ain't fightin' Vegas, that's what's muthuh-fuckin'

blurry,” Dee-Cee said, muscles jumping along his jaw. “I’m quittin’ you right now, hyuh? Don’t want no truck with no punk playin’ me.”

Coyle’s eyes started to bulge and his neck got all swole up and red. “You’re the punk, old man!”

Coyle shoved Dee-Cee hard in the chest. Dee-Cee went down, but he took the fall rolling on his shoulder, and was up like a bounced ball.

Dee-Cee said, “Boy, second rule’s don’t hit a hitter.”

Coyle moved as if to kick Dee-Cee. I reached for my Buck, but before it cleared my back pocket, Dee-Cee quick as a dart used his cane *bap! bap! bap!* to crack Coyle across one knee and both shins. Coyle hit the floor like a sack full of cats.

“I’ll kill you, old man. I’ll beat your brains out with that stick.”

Dee-Cee said, “Muhfuh, you best don’t be talking no *kill* shit wit’ Dark Chocolate.”

Coyle yelled, “Watch your back, old man!”

Dee-Cee said, “Boy, you diggin’ you a hole.”

Dee-Cee hobbled off, leaning heavy on his cane. Coyle made to go after Dee-Cee again, but by then I’d long had my one-ten out and open.

I said, “Y’all ever see someone skin a live dog?”

I had to get Coyle outta there, thought to quick get him to the Texas Ice House over on Blanco, where we could have some longnecks like good buds and maybe calm down. Texas Ice House’s open three hundred sixty-five days a year, sign out front says GO COWBOYS.

Coyle said, “Got my own Texas shit beer at home.”

Texas and *shit* in the same breath ain’t something us Texans cotton to, but I went on over to Coyle’s place later on ’cause I had to. I knocked, and through the door I heard a shotgun shell being jacked into the chamber.

I said, “It’s me, Red.”

Coyle opened up, then limped out on the porch looking for Dee-Cee.

Coyle said, “I’m gonna kill him, you tell him.”

Inside, there was beer cans all over the floor, and the smell of weed and screwing. Coyle and a half-sleepy tittie-club blond gal was lying around half bare-ass. She never said a word throughout. I got names backing me like Geraghty and O’Kelly, but when I got to know what a sidewinder Coyle was, it made me ashamed of belonging to the same race.

I said, “When did the eye go bad?”

Coyle was still babying his legs. “It was perfect before that Marcellus Ellis butted me at the casino. But with you training me, hey baby, I can still fight

down around here.”

“You go back to chump change you fight down around here.”

“My eye is okay, it’s just blurry, that’s all, don’t you start on me, fuck!”

“It’s you’s what’s startin’.”

“This happened time before last in Mississippi, okay? And it was gettin’ better all by itself, okay?”

I stayed quiet, so did he. Then I said, “Don’t you get it? You fail the eye test, no fights in Vegas, or no place where there’s money. Only trainer you’ll get now’s a blood sucker.”

Coyle shrugged, even laughed a little. That’s when I asked him the one question he didn’t never want to hear, the one that would mean he’d have to give back Billy’s money if he told the truth.

I said, “Why didn’t you tell us about the eye before you signed Billy’s contract?”

Coyle got old. He looked off in a thousand-yard stare for close to a minute. He stuttered twice, and then said, “Everybody knew about my eye.”

I said, “Not many in Vancouver, and for sure none in San Antonio.”

Coyle said, “Vegas coulda checked.”

I said, “We ain’t Vegas.”

Coyle stood up. He thought he wanted to hit me, but he really wanted to hide. Instead, he moved the shotgun so’s it was pointing at my gut.

He said, “I don’t want you to train me no more.”

I said, “Next time you want to fuck somebody, fuck your mama in her casket. She can’t fuck you back.”

That stood him straight up, and I knew it was time to git. As the door closed behind me, I could hear Coyle and the tittie-club blonde start to laugh.

I said to myself, “Keep laughin’, punk cocksucker—point a gun at me and don’t shoot.”

I drove my pickup over to Billy’s office next day, told him the whole thing. It wasn’t far from my place but it was the longest ride I ever took. I was expecting to be told to get my redneck ass out of Texas. He just listened, then lit up a Montecristo contraband Havana robusto with a gold Dunhill. He took his time, poured us both some Hennessy XO.

He could see I felt lowdown and thought I’d killed his friendship.

I said, “I’m sorry, Billy, you know I’d never wrong you on purpose.”

Billy said, “You couldn’t see the future, Red. Only women can, and that’s ’cause they know when they’re gonna get fucked.”

Billy put the joke in there to save me from myself, damned if he didn’t. I was

ready to track Coyle and gut him right then. But Billy said to calm down, said he'd go over to Coyle's place later on. I wanted to go, said I'd bring along Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson.

"Naw," said Billy, "there won't be no shootin'."

When Billy got to Coyle's, Kenny was smoking weed again, had hold of a big-assed, stainless steel .357 MAG Ruger with a six-inch barrel. Billy didn't blink, said could he have some iced tea like Coyle was drinking. Coyle said it was Snapple Peach, not diet, but Billy said go on'n hook one up. Things got friendly, but Coyle kept ahold of the Ruger.

Billy said, "Way I see it, you didn't set out to do it."

Coyle said, "That's right. Ellis did it."

Billy said, "But you still got me for sixty large."

Coyle said, "Depends on how you look at it." He laughed at his joke.

"Besides, nobody asked about my eye, so I told no lie. Hey, I can rhyme like Ali, that's me, hoo-ee."

Billy said, "Coyle, there's sins of commission and there's sins of omission. This one's a sixty-thousand-dollar omission."

Coyle said, "You got no proof. It was all cash like you wanted, no taxes."

Billy said, "I want my sixty back. You can forget the free rent and the twenty-five hundred you got off me every month, but I want the bonus money."

Coyle said, "Ain't got it to give back."

Billy said, "You got the BMW free and clear. Sign it over and we're square."

Coyle said, "You ain't gettin' my Beamer. Bought that with my signing money."

Billy said, "You takin' it knowin' your eye was shot, that was humbug."

Coyle said, "I'm stickin' with the contract and my lawyer says you still owe me twenty-five hundred for this month, and maybe for three years to come. He says you're the one that caused it all when you put me in with the wrong opponent."

Billy'd put weight on around the belly, and Coyle was saying he wasn't dick afraid of him.

Billy didn't press for the pink, and didn't argue about the twenty-five hundred a month, didn't say nothing about the lost projected income.

"Then tell me this," Billy said, "when do you plan on gettin' out of my building and givin' back my keys?"

Coyle laughed his laugh. "When you evict me, that's when, and you can't do that for a while 'cause my eye means I'm disabled, I checked."

Billy laughed with Coyle, and Billy shook Coyle's left hand with his right

before taking off, 'cause Coyle kept the Ruger in his right hand.

Billy said, "Well, let me know if you change your mind."

"Not hardly," said Coyle. "I'm thinkin' on marrying that cop's daughter. This here's our love nest."

Me and Dee-Cee was cussing Coyle twenty-four hours a day, but Billy never let on he cared. About a week later, he said his wife and kids was heading down to Orlando Disney World for a few days. On Thursday he gave me and Dee-Cee the invite to come on down to Nuevo Laredo with him Friday night for the weekend.

Billy said, "We'll have a few thousand drinks at the Cadillac Bar to wash the taste of Coyle out of our mouths."

He sweetened the pot, said how about spending some quality time in the cat houses of Boys Town, all on him? I said my old root'll still do the job with the right inspiration, so did Dee-Cee. But he said his back was painin' him bad since the deal with Coyle, and that he had to go on over Houston where he had this Cuban *Santería* woman. She had some kind of mystic rubjuice made with rooster blood he said was the only thing what'd cure him.

Dee-Cee said, "I hate to miss the trip with y'all, but I got to see my Cuban."

I told Billy he might as well ride with me in my Jimmy down to Nuevo Laredo. See, it's on the border some three hours south of San Antonio. I had a transmission I been wanting to deliver to my cousin Royal in Dilley, which is some seventy-eighty miles down from San Antonio on Highway 35 right on out way. Billy said he had stuff to do in the morning, but that he'd meet me at the Cadillac Bar at six o'clock next day. That left just me heading south alone and feeling busted up inside for doing the right thing by a skunk.

I left early so's I could listen to Royal lie, and level out with some of his Jack Daniel's. When I pulled up in front of the Cadillac Bar at ten of six, I saw Billy's bugged-up Town Car parked out front. He was inside, a big smile on him. With my new hat and boots, I felt fifty again, and screw Kenny Coyle and the BMW he rode in on. We was laughing like Coyle didn't matter to us, but underneath, we knew he did.

Billy got us nice rooms in a brand-new motel once we had quail and Dos Equis for dinner, and finished off with fried ice cream in the Messkin style. Best I can recollect, we left our wheels at the motel and took a cab to Boys Town. We hit places like the Honeymoon Hotel, the Dallas Cowboys, and the New York Yankey. Hell, I buried myself in brown titties, even ended up with a little Chink gal I wanted to smuggle home in my hat. Spent two nights with her and didn't never want to go home.

I ain't sure, but seems to me I went back to the motel once on Saturday just to

check on Billy. His car was gone, and there was a message for me blinking on the phone in my room, and five one-hundred-dollar bills on my pillow. Billy's message said he had to go on over to Matamoros 'cause the truck for his shrimps had busted down, and he had to rent another one for shrimp night. So I had me a mess of Messkin scrambled eggs and rice and beans and a few thousand bottles of Negra Modelo. I headed on back for my China doll still shaky, but I hadn't lost my boots or my *El Patrón* so I'm thinking I was a tall dog in short grass.

There seems like there were times when I must a blanked out there. But somewhere along the line, I remember wandering the streets over around Boys Town when I come up on a little park that made me stop and watch. It happens in parks all over Mexico. The street lights ain't nothing but hanging bare bulbs with swarms of bugs and darting bats. Boys and girls of fourteen to eighteen'n more'd make the nightly *paseo*—that's like a stroll on the main drag, 'cause there ain't no TV or nothing, and the *paseo*'s what they do to get out from the house to flirt. In some parts, the young folks form circles in the park. The boys' circle'd form outside the girls' circle and each circle moves slow in opposite directions so's the boys and the girls can be facing each other as they pass. The girls try to squirt cheap perfume on a boy they fancy. The boys try to pitch a pinch of confetti into a special girl's month. Everybody gets to laughing and spitting and holding their noses but inside their knickers they're fixing to explode. It's how folks get married down there.

'Course, getting married wasn't on my mind. Something else was, and I did my best to satisfy my mind with some more of that authentic Chineese sweet and sour.

Billy was asleep the next day, Sunday, when I come stumbling back, so I crapped out, too. I remember right, we headed home separate on Sunday night late. Both of us crippled and green but back in Laredo Billy's car was washed and spanky clean except for a cracked rear window. Billy said some Matamoros drunk had made a failed try to break in. He showed me his raw knuckles to prove it.

Billy said, "I can still punch like you taught me, Reddy."

Driving myself home alone, I was all bowlegged, and my heart was leaping sideways. But when it's my time to go to sleep for the last time, I want to die in Boys Town teasing the girls and learning Chineese.

I was still hung over on Monday, and had to lay around all pale and shaky until I could load up on biscuits and gravy, fresh salsa, fried grits, a near pound of bacon, three or four tomatoes, and a few thousand longnecks. I guess I slept most of the time 'cause I don't remember no TV.

It wasn't until when I got to the gym on Tuesday that I found out about Kenny Coyle. Hunters found him dead in the dirt. He was beside his torched BMW in the mesquite on the outside of town. They found him Sunday noon, and word was he'd been dead some twelve hours, which meant he'd been killed near midnight Saturday night. Someone at the gym said the cops had been by to see me. Hell, me'n Billy was in Mexico, and Dee-Cee was in Houston.

The inside skinny was that Coyle'd been hog-tied with them plastic cable-tie deals that cops'll sometimes use instead of handcuffs. One leg'd been knee-capped with his own Ruger someplace else, and later his head was busted in by blunt force with a unknown object. His brains was said to hang free, and looked like a bunch of grapes. His balls was in his mouth, and his mouth had been slit to the ear so's both balls'd fit. The story I got was that the cops who found him got to laughing, said it was funny seeing a man eating his own mountain oysters. See, police right away knew it was business.

When the cops stopped by the gym Tuesday morning, I was still having coffee and looking out the storefront window. I didn't have nothing to hide, so I stayed sipping my joe right where I was. I told them the same story I been telling you, starting off with stopping by to see old Royal in Dilley. See, the head cop was old Junior, and old Junior was daddy to that plain-Jane gal.

I told him me and Billy had been down Nuevo Laredo when the tragedy occurred. Told him about the Cadillac Bar, and about drinking tequila and teasing the girls in Boys Town. 'Course, I left out a few thousand details I didn't think was any of his business. Old Junior's eyes got paler still, and his jaw was clenched up to where his lips didn't hardly move when he talked. He didn't ask but two or three questions, and looked satisfied with what I answered.

Fixing to leave, Junior said, "Seems like some's got to learn good sense the hard way."

Once Junior'd gone, talk started up in the gym again and ropes got jumped. Fight gyms from northern Mexico all up through Texas knew what happened to Coyle. Far as I know, the cops never knocked on Billy Clancy's door, but I can tell you that none of Billy's fighters never had trouble working up a sweat no more, or getting up for a fight neither.

I was into my third cup of coffee when I saw old Dee-Cee get off the bus. He was same as always, except this time he had him a knobby new walking stick. It was made of mesquite like the last one. But as he come closer, I could see that the wood on this new one was still green from the tree.

I said, "You hear about Coyle?"

"I jus' got back," said Dee-Cee, "what about him?" One of the colored boys working out started to snicker. Dee-Cee gave that boy a look with those greeny-

blue eyes. And that was the end of that.

HANNAH TINTI

Home Sweet Home

FROM *Epoch*

PAT AND CLYDE were murdered on pot roast night. The doorbell rang just as Pat was setting the butter and margarine (Clyde was watching his cholesterol) on the table. She was thinking about James Dean. She had loved him desperately as a teenager, seen his movies dozens of times, written his name across her notebooks, carefully taped pictures of him to the inside of her locker so that she would have the pleasure of seeing his tortured, sullen face from *East of Eden* as she exchanged her French and English textbooks for science and math. When she graduated from high school she took down the photos and pasted them to the inside cover of her yearbook, which she perused longingly several times over the summer and brought with her to the University of Massachusetts, where it sat, unopened, alongside her thesaurus and abridged collegiate dictionary until she met Clyde, received her M.R.S. degree, and packed her things to move into their two-bedroom ranch house on Bridge Street.

Before she put the meat in the oven that afternoon, Pat had made herself a cup of tea and turned on the television. Channel 38 was showing *Rebel Without a Cause*, and as the light slowly began to rise through the screen of their old Zenith she saw James Dean on the steps of the planetarium, clutching at the mismatched socks of a dead Sal Mineo and crying. She put down her tea, slid her warm fingertips inside the V-neck of her dress, and held her left breast. Her heart was suddenly pounding, her nipple hard and erect against the palm of her hand. It was like seeing an old lover, like remembering a piece of herself that no longer existed. She watched the credits roll and glanced outside to see her husband mowing the lawn. He had a worried expression on his face and his socks pulled up to his knees.

That evening before dinner, as she arranged the butter and margarine side by side on the table—one yellow airy and light, the other yellow hard and dark like the yolk of an egg—she wondered how she could have forgotten the way James Dean's eyebrows curved. *Isn't memory a strange thing*, she thought. *I could forget all of this, how everything feels, what all of these things mean to me.* She was suddenly seized with the desire to grab the sticks of butter and margarine in her hands and squeeze them until her fingers went right through, to somehow imprint their textures and colors on her brain like a stamp, to make them

something that she would never lose. And then she heard the bell.

When she opened the door Pat noticed that it was still daylight. The sky was blue and bright and clear and she had a fleeting, guilty thought that she should not have spent so much time indoors. After that she crumpled backwards into the hall as the bullet from a .38-caliber Saturday Night Special pierced her chest, exited below her shoulder blade, and jammed into the wood of the stairs, where it would later be dug out with a penknife by Lieutenant Sales and dropped gingerly into a transparent plastic Baggie.

Pat's husband Clyde was found in the kitchen by the back door, a knife in his hand (first considered a defense against his attacker and later determined as the carver of the roast). He had been shot twice—once in the stomach and once in the head—and then covered with cereal, the boxes lined up on the counter beside him and the crispy golden contents of Captain Crunch, Corn Flakes, and Special K emptied out over what remained of his face.

Nothing had been stolen.

It was a warm spring evening, full of summer promises. Pat and Clyde's bodies lay silent and still while the orange sunset crossed the floors of their house and the streetlights clicked on. As darkness came, and the skunks waddled through the backyard and the raccoons crawled down from the trees, they were still there, holding their places, suspended in a moment of quiet blue before the sun came up and a new day started and life went on without them.

It was Clyde's mother who called the police. She dialed her son's number every Sunday morning from Rhode Island. These phone calls always somehow perfectly coincided with whenever Pat and Clyde had just settled down to breakfast, or whenever they were on the verge of making love.

Thar she blows, Clyde would say, and take his hot coffee with him over to where the phone hung on the wall, or slide out of bed with an apologetic glance at his wife. The coffee and Pat would inevitably cool, and in this way his mother would ruin every Sunday. It had been years now since they frolicked in the morning, but once, when they were first married and Pat was preparing breakfast, she had heard the phone, walked over to where her husband was reading the paper, dropped to her knees, pulled open his robe, and taken him in her mouth. *Let it ring*, she thought, and he had let it ring. Fifteen minutes later the police were on their front porch with smiles as Clyde, red-faced, bathrobe bulging, answered their questions at the door.

In most areas of her life Clyde's mother was a very nice person. She behaved in such a kind and decorous manner that people would often remark, having met her, *What a lovely woman*. But with Clyde she lost her head. She was suspicious, accusing, and tyrannical. Her husband had died suddenly a few years back, and

once she got through her grief her son became her man. She pushed this sense of responsibility through him like fishhooks, plucking on the line, reeling him back in when she felt her hold slipping, so that the points became embedded in his flesh so deep that it would kill him to take them out.

She dialed the police after trying her son thirty-two times, and because the lieutenant on duty was a soft touch, his own mother having recently passed, a cruiser was dispatched to Pat and Clyde's on Bridge Street, and because one of the policemen was looking to buy in the neighborhood, the officers decided to check out the back of the house after they got no answer, and because there was cereal blowing around in the yard the men got suspicious, and because it was a windy day and because the hinges had recently been oiled and because the door had been left unlocked and swung open and because one of them had seen a dead body before, a suicide up in Hanover, and knew blood and brain and bits of skull when he saw them, he made the call back to the station, because his partner was quietly vomiting in the rosebushes, and said, *We've got trouble*.

Earlier that morning, as Little Mike Findleman delivered Pat and Clyde's *Sunday Globe*, the comics straining around the sections like wrapping on an inappropriate gift, he noticed that the welcome mat was gone. It had been ordered out of an expensive catalog and said, *Home Sweet Home*. Every day when Little Mike rode up on his bicycle and delivered the paper, he looked at the mat and thought of his own home. It was not sweet.

Little Mike's father had recently returned from a minimum-security prison, where he had spent the past three years doing time for embezzlement. With her husband back in the house, Little Mike's mother, a charismatic redhead, was now on antidepressants, and had cooked spaghetti for dinner twenty-eight days in a row. To top it off, Little Mike had not made the cut to junior league baseball, as his friends Norman and Greg Kessler had, and the shame he felt when he checked the list posted outside the gym and later as he told the twins, who squinted into the sun and shrugged their shoulders together as if they were brushing him off their lives like a bug, struck him deeply and confirmed his suspicions of his own lack of greatness. Little Mike enjoyed getting off of his bicycle and kicking Pat and Clyde's welcome mat as he dropped off their paper just after dawn, leaving it askew and glancing back at it as he walked down the front porch steps. It made him feel less alone.

Each morning he would return and find the welcome mat back in place. He wondered sometimes if they complained about their delivery, but Pat and Clyde never said anything, and when the money was due for the paper they left a check in an envelope taped above the doorbell, usually with a few extra bucks for a tip.

So when he walked up the porch steps and found the door shut tight and no *Home Sweet Home*, Little Mike paused. Later, when he was interviewed by Lieutenant Sales, he would say that he had sensed that something was wrong. But in that moment, standing on the porch in the smoky light of early morning, he felt angry and cheated, as if this small pleasure of kicking the mat had been plugging up a large and gaping hole inside of him, and now that it was gone he saw through it to all the other empty places in his life. Little Mike threw the *Sunday Globe* off the porch into the bushes with a vengeance, where it would later be found by Buster, the Mitchells' Labrador retriever, and buried in another part of the yard along with some abandoned Kentucky Fried Chicken rummaged from the local barrels. Little Mike did not tell the police that he had done this. He claimed that he had left the paper on the front porch as always. He did not want anyone to think he was a bad delivery boy.

Buster was the kind of dog who knew how to feel at home. He treated all the yards on Bridge Street as if they were his own, making his way leisurely through flower beds, pausing for a drink from a sprinkler, tearing into garbage bags and relieving himself among patches of newly planted rutabagas. When he discovered Pat and Clyde's *Sunday Globe* caught in the low branches of a rhododendron it was after eight. Mrs. Mitchell had let him out that morning with an affectionate pat on his behind. *Don't get into too much trouble*, she said. He had left her with his nose to the ground.

The Kentucky Fried Chicken was a gift. Half a bucket of wings and drumsticks left in an open trash can by a teenager on his way home after a night of near misses. The dog fell upon it like a drunk on whiskey, without remorse or pause or reason, with no more than the sense of *get this in me now*. But he also caught a whiff of melancholy left on the bucket from the teenager's hands, and the smell told the dog to save some bones for a time when he was not so lucky.

Buster was already digging a hole in Pat and Clyde's yard when he noticed a small golden flake on the grass. It was food, and he followed the promise of more across the lawn, through the back door, and over to Clyde, stiff and covered with flies, the remaining cereal a soggy wet pile of pink plaster across his shoulders. The rug underneath the kitchen table was soaked in blood. Buster left red paw prints as he walked around the body and sniffed at the slippers on the dead man's feet.

The dog smelled fear in the sweat of Clyde's last moment. It had curled in the arch of his foot as he listened to his wife answer their front door. The bell rang just as he pierced the roast with the carving fork, releasing two streams of juice, which ran down the sides of the meat until they were captured by the raised edge

of the serving plate. He paused then, as he lifted the knife, waiting to hear and recognize the voices of his wife and whoever had come to their house. When he heard nothing, an uneasiness tightened at the base of his stomach. Their home contained his life, and he realized, suddenly, that he could not imagine something that could not be greeted by name, could not easily become a part of everything they had inside: their potholders in the shape of barnyard animals; the creak in the third stair; the way their bedroom door stuck in the summer heat. When the shot exploded, he felt it all at once and everywhere—in the walls, in his eyes, in his chest, in his arms, in the utensils he was holding, in the piece of meat he was carving, in the slippers that placed him on the floor, in the kitchen, before their evening meal.

Buster pulled off one of the slippers and sank his teeth into it. It was rank, worn, and sour-tasting, cutting the sweetness of the Captain Crunch. He worked on removing the stuffing of the inner sole and kept his eye on the dead man who used to shoo-shoo him away from garbage bags, from munching the daffodils that lined the walk, from humping strays behind the garage. Once, after catching the dog relieving himself in the middle of the driveway, Clyde had dragged him by the collar all the way down Bridge Street. *Listen to me, pooch*, Mr. Mitchell had said after Clyde had left, one hand smoothing where the collar had choked and the other hand vigorously scratching the dog's behind. *You shit wherever you feel like shitting*.

On his way out of the yard Buster found the *Sunday Globe* that Little Mike Findleman had tossed. It held the same scent he'd picked up over the body—anger, fear, and disconnectedness—things that cried out to be buried. He dragged the paper over to the hole he'd already started and threw it in with the slipper and the leftover chicken. The earth had a way of settling things. The dog walked back and forth over the spot once it was filled, then lifted his leg to mark it. He shook some dirt out of his ear and used four paws to take himself home.

The Mitchells had moved into the neighborhood five years before. They brought their dog with them. Three years later, a son arrived—not a newborn baby decked out in bonnets but a thin, dark boy of indiscriminate age. His name was Miguel, and it was unclear to the people living on Bridge Street whether he was adopted or a child from a previous marriage. He called the Mitchells his mother and father, enrolled in the public school for the district, and quietly became a part of their everyday lives.

In fact, Miguel was the true son of Mr. Mitchell, sired unknowingly on a business trip with a Venezuelan prostitute some seven years before. The mother had been killed in a bus accident along with fifty-three other travelers on a road

outside Caracas, and the local police had contacted Mr. Mitchell from a faded company card she had left pressed in her Bible. After a paternity test, the boy arrived at Logan airport with a worn-out blanket and duffel bag full of chickens (his pets), which were quickly confiscated by customs officials. Mr. Mitchell drove down Route 128 in his station wagon, amazed and panicked at his sudden parenthood, trying to comfort the sobbing boy and wondering how Miguel had managed to keep the birds quiet on the plane.

When they pulled into the driveway, Mrs. Mitchell was waiting with a glass of warm milk sweetened with sugar. She was wearing dungarees. She took the boy in her arms and carried him immediately into the bathroom, where she sat him on the counter and washed his face, his hands, his knees, and his feet. Miguel sipped the milk while Mrs. Mitchell gently ran the washcloth between his toes. When she was finished, she tucked him into their guest bed and read him a stack of *Curious George* books in Spanish, which she had ordered from their local bookstore. She showed Miguel a picture of the little monkey in the hospital getting a shot from a nurse and the boy fell asleep, a finger hooked around the belt loop of her jeans. Mrs. Mitchell sat on the bed beside him quietly until he rolled over and let it go.

Mr. Mitchell had met his wife in Northern California. They pulled up beside each other at a gas station. He had just completed his business degree, and was driving a rented car up the coast to see the Olympic rain forest. She was in a pickup truck with Oregon plates. They both got out and started pumping. Mr. Mitchell finished first, and on his way back to his car after paying, he watched the muscles in her thick arm flexing as she replaced the hose. She glanced up, caught him looking, and smiled. She was not beautiful, but one of her teeth stuck out charmingly sideways. He started the car, turned out of the station, and glanced into his rearview mirror. He watched the pickup take the opposite road, and as it drove away he felt such a pulling that he turned around and followed it for 150 miles.

At the rest stop, he pretended that he was surprised to see her. Later he discovered that many people followed his wife, and that she was used to this, and that it did not seem strange to her. People she had never met came up and began to speak to her in supermarkets, in elevators, in the waiting rooms of doctors, at traffic lights, at concerts, at coffee shops and bistros. Even their dog, a stray she fed while camping in Tennessee, came scratching outside their door six weeks later. Mr. Mitchell was jealous and frightened by these strangers, and often used himself as a shield between them and his wife. *What do they want from her?* he often found himself thinking. But he also felt, *What will they take from me?*

His wife was a quiet woman, in the way that large rocks just beyond the shore are quiet; the waves rush against them and the seaweed hangs on and the birds gather round on top. Mr. Mitchell was amazed that she had married him. He spent the first few years doing what he could to please her and watched for signs that she was leaving.

Sometimes she got depressed and locked herself in the bathroom. It made him furious and desperate. When she came out, tender and pink from washing, she would put her arms around him and tell him that he was a good man. Mr. Mitchell was not sure of this, because sometimes he found himself hating her. The door was in front of him but the knob wouldn't turn. He wanted her to know what it felt like to be powerless. He found himself taking risks.

When he got the call from Venezuela telling him about Miguel, he was terrified that he might lose his wife and also secretly happy to have wounded her. But all of the control he felt as they prepared for his son's arrival slipped away as he watched her take the strange dark boy into her arms and tenderly wash his feet. He realized then that she was capable of taking everything from him.

The three of them formed an awkward family. Mr. Mitchell tried to place the boy in a home but his wife would not let him. She did this to punish him. He had now been an accidental father for two years. He took the boy to baseball games and bought him comic books and drove him to school in the mornings. Sometimes Mr. Mitchell enjoyed these things, other times they made him angry. One day he walked in on Miguel talking to his wife in Spanish and the boy immediately stopped. He realized then that his son was afraid of him. He was sure his wife had done this too. Mr. Mitchell began to resent what had initially drawn him to her, and to offset these feelings he began an affair with their neighbor, Pat.

It did not begin innocently. Mr. Mitchell walked over to Pat one afternoon as she was planting bulbs in her garden and slid his hand into the elastic waistband of her Bermuda shorts. He leaned her up against the fence, underneath a birch tree, right there in the middle of a bright, spring day where everyone could see. He didn't say anything, but he could tell by her breath and the way she rocked on his hand that she wasn't afraid.

He hadn't known that it was in him to do anything like this. He had never been attracted to Pat; he had never had any conversation with her that went beyond the weather or the scheduling of trash. He had been on his way to the library to return some books. Look, there they were, thrown aside on the grass, wrapped in plastic smeared with age and the fingers of readers who were unknown to him. And here was another person he did not know, panting in his ear, streaking his arms with dirt. Someone he had seen bent over in the sunlight,

a slight glistening of sweat reflecting in the backs of her knees, and for which he had suddenly felt a hard sense of lonesomeness and longing. A new kind of warmth spread in the palm of his hand and he tried not to think about his wife.

They had hard, raw sex in public places—movie theaters and parks, elevators and playgrounds. After dark, underneath the jungle gym, his knees pressing into the dirt, Mr. Mitchell began to wonder why they hadn't been caught. Once, sitting on a bench near the reservoir, Pat straddling him in a skirt with no underwear, they had actually waved to an elderly couple passing by. The couple continued on as if they hadn't seen them. Who knows, maybe they were half-blind, but the experience left the impression that his meetings with Pat were occurring in some kind of alternative reality, a bubble in time that he knew would eventually pop.

Pat told him that Clyde had been impotent for years—a reaction, it seemed, from witnessing his father's death. The man had been a mechanic, and was working underneath a bulldozer when the lift slipped, crushing him from the chest down. The father and the son had held hands, and the coldness that came as life left seemed to spread through Clyde's fingers and into his arms, and he stopped using them to reach for his wife. Since the funeral she'd had two lovers. Mr. Mitchell was number three.

There were rumors, later on, that the lift had been tampered with—that Clyde's father had owed someone money. Pat denied it, but Mr. Mitchell remembered driving by the garage and sensing he'd rather buy his gas somewhere else.

Mr. Mitchell's desire increased with the risk of discovery, and he'd started arranging meetings with Pat that were closer to home. In his house he fantasized about the dining room table, the dryer in the laundry room, the space on the kitchen counter beside the mixer. He touched these places with his fingertips and trembled, thinking of how he would feel later, watching his wife sip her soup, fold sheets, mix batter for cookies in the same places.

On the day Pat was murdered, before she put the roast in the oven or reminisced about James Dean or thought about the difference between butter and margarine, she was having sex in the vestibule. The coiled rope of Home Sweet Home scratched her behind and dug into Mr. Mitchell's knees. He had seen Clyde leave for a bowling lesson, and as he waited on the front porch for Pat to open the door, something had made him pick up the welcome mat. When she answered he'd thrown it down in the hall, then her, then himself, the soles of his shoes knocking over the entry table.

Mrs. Mitchell would soon be home with Miguel. Mr. Mitchell brought Pat's knees to his shoulders and listened for the choking hum of his wife's Reliant.

The following day when Lieutenant Sales climbed the stairs of Pat and Clyde's porch he did not notice that there was nothing to wipe his feet on. He was an average-looking man: six feet two inches, 190 pounds, brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin. He had once been a champion deep-sea diver, until a shark attack (which left him with a hole in his side crossed with the pink, puckered scars of new skin) pulled him from the waters with a sense of righteous authority and induced him to join the force. He lived thirty-five minutes away in a basement apartment with a Siamese cat named Frank.

When Sales was a boy, he'd had a teacher who smelled like roses. Her name was Mrs. Bosco. She showed him how to blow eggs. Forcing the yolk out of the tiny hole always felt a little disgusting, like blowing a heavy wad of snot from his nose, but when he looked up at Mrs. Bosco's cheeks, flushed red with effort, he knew it would be worth it, and it was—the empty shell in his hand like a held breath, like the moment before something important happens. Whenever he began an investigation he'd get the same sensation, and as he stepped into the doorway of Pat and Clyde's house he felt it rise in his chest and stay.

He interviewed the police who found the bodies first. They were sheepish about their reasons for going into the backyard, but before long they began loudly discussing drywall and sheetrock and the pros and cons of lanceted windows (all of the men, including Lieutenant Sales, carried weekend and part-time jobs in construction). The policeman who had thrown up in the roses had gone home early. When Sales spoke to him later, he apologized for contaminating the scene.

Lieutenant Sales found the roast on the counter. He found green beans still on the stove. He found a sour cherry pie in the oven. He found the butter and the margarine, softened tubes of yellow, half melted on the dining room table. He found that Pat and Clyde used cloth napkins and tiny separate plates for their dinner rolls. The silverware was polished. The edges of the steak knives turned in.

He found their unpaid bills in a basket by the telephone. He found clean laundry inside the dryer in the basement—towels, sheets, T-shirts, socks, three sets of Fruit of the Loom, and one pair of soft pink satin panties, the elastic starting to give, the bottom frayed and thin. He found an unfinished letter Pat had started writing to a friend who had recently moved to Arizona: *What is it like there? How can you stand the heat?* He found Clyde's stamp albums from when he was a boy—tiny spots of brilliant color, etchings of flowers and portraits of kings, painstakingly pasted over the names of countries Lieutenant Sales had never heard of.

He found the bullet that had passed through Pat's body embedded in the stairs. He found a run in her stocking, starting at the heel and inching its way up the back of her leg. He thought about how Pat had been walking around the day she was going to die, not realizing that there was a hole in her pantyhose. He found a stain, dark and blooming beneath her shoulders, spreading across the oriental rug in the foyer and into the hardwood floors, which he noticed, as he got down on his knees for a closer look, still held the scent of Murphy's Oil. He found a hairpin caught in the fringe. He found a cluster of dandelion seeds, the tiny white filaments coming apart in his fingers. He found a look on Pat's face like a child trying to be brave, lips tightened and thin, forehead just beginning to crease, eyes glazed, dark, and unconvinced. Her body was stiff when they moved her.

There were dog tracks on the back porch. They were the prints of a midsized animal, red and clearly defined as they circled the body in the kitchen, then crisscrossing over themselves and heading out the door, fading down the steps and onto the driveway before disappearing into the yard. Lieutenant Sales sent a man to knock on doors in the neighborhood and find out who let their dogs off the leash. He interviewed the paperboy and Clyde's mother. He went back to the station and checked Pat and Clyde's records—both clean. When he finally went to sleep that night, the small warmth of his cat tucked up behind his knees, Lieutenant Sales thought about the feel of satin panties, missing slippers, stolen welcome mats, dandelion seeds from a yard with no dandelions, and the kind of killer who shuts off the oven.

A month before Pat and Clyde were murdered, Mrs. Mitchell was fixing the toilet. Her husband passed by on his way to the kitchen, paused in the doorway, shook his head, and told her that she was too good for him. The heavy porcelain top was off; her arms elbow deep in rusty water. The man she had married was standing at the entrance to the bathroom and he was speaking to her, but she was not thinking about him, and so she did not respond. She was concentrating on the particular tone in the pipes she was trying to clear. It was this same ability to turn her attention into focus, like a lighthouse whose spinning had unexpectedly stopped, that made people follow her.

Mr. Mitchell went into the kitchen and began popping popcorn. The kernels cracked against the insides of the kettle as his words settled into her, and when, with a twist of the coat hanger in her hand beneath the water, she stopped the ringing of the pipes, Mrs. Mitchell sensed in the quiet that came next that her husband had done something wrong. She had known in this same way before he told her about Miguel. A breeze came through the window and made the hair on her wet arms rise. She pulled her hands from the toilet and thought to herself, *I*

fixed it.

When Miguel came into their home, she had taken all the sorrow she felt at his existence and turned it into a fierce motherly love. Mrs. Mitchell thought her husband would be grateful; instead he seemed to hold it against her. He became dodgy and spiteful. Her mind was full of failings, but all she understood was that her husband was having difficulty loving her, because it seemed as if she didn't make mistakes. It was the closest she ever came to leaving; but she hadn't expected the boy.

Miguel spent the first three months of his life in America asking to go home. When the fourth month came he began to sleepwalk. In the dark he wandered downstairs to the kitchen, emptied the garbage can onto the floor, and curled up inside. The next morning Mrs. Mitchell would find him asleep, shoulders in the barrel, feet in the coffee grounds and leftovers. He told her he was looking for his mother's head. She had been decapitated in the bus accident, and now she stepped from the corners of Miguel's dreams at night and beckoned him with her arms, tiny chicks resting on her shoulders, pecking at the empty neck.

Mrs. Mitchell suggested that they make her a new one. She brought materials for papier-maché. The strips of newspaper felt like bandages as she helped Miguel dip them in glue and smooth them over the surface of the inflated balloon. They fashioned a nose and lips out of cardboard. Once it was dry, Miguel described his mother's face and they painted the skin brown, added yarn for hair, cut eyelashes out of construction paper. Mrs. Mitchell took a pair of gold earrings, poked them through where they'd drawn the ears, and said, heart sinking, *She's beautiful*. Miguel nodded. He smiled. He put his mother's head on top of the bookcase in his room and stopped sleeping in the garbage.

Sometimes when Mrs. Mitchell checked on the boy at night she'd feel the head looking at her. It was unnerving. She imagined her husband making love to the papier-maché face and discovered a hate so strong and hard it made her afraid of herself. She considered swiping the head and destroying it, but she remembered how skinny and pitiful the boy's legs had looked against her kitchen floor. Then Miguel began to love her. She suddenly felt capable of anything. She thumbed her nose at the face in the corner. She held her heart open.

Mrs. Mitchell was raised by two of her aunts in a house near the Columbia River. Her mother had her when she was sixteen, then died a few years later of a botched abortion. Mrs. Mitchell kept a picture of her mother next to the mirror in her room, and whenever she checked her reflection, her eyes would naturally turn from her own face to that of the woman who gave birth to her. The photo was black and white and creased near the edges; she was fifteen, her hair in braids, the end of one strand stuck between her lips. It made Mrs. Mitchell think

of stories she'd heard of women who spent their lives spinning—years of passing flax through their mouths to make thread would leave them disfigured, lower lips drooping off their faces; a permanent look of being beaten.

The aunts who raised her were expert marksmen. They built a shooting range on an area of property behind the house. As a child, it was Mrs. Mitchell's job to set up the targets and fetch them iced tea and ammo. She kept a glass jar full of shells in the back of her closet, shiny gold casings from her aunts' collection of .22-calibers and .45s. They made a shooting station out of an old shed, two tables set up with sandbags to hold the guns, nestling the shape of heavy metal as the pieces were placed down.

When she was twelve years old the aunts gave her a rifle. She already knew the shooting stances, and she practiced them with her new gun every day after school. She could hit a target while kneeling, crouching, lying down, and standing tall, hips parallel to the barrel and her waist turned, the same way the aunts taught her to pose when a picture was being taken to look thin. She picked off tin cans and old metal signs and polka-dotted the paper outlines of men.

Mrs. Mitchell remembered this when she pulled into her driveway, glanced over the fence, and saw her husband having sex in the doorway of their neighbor's house. She turned to Miguel in the passenger seat and told him to close his eyes. The boy covered his face with his hands and sat quietly while she got out of the car. Mrs. Mitchell watched her husband moving back and forth and felt her feet give way from the ground. She had the sensation of being caught in a river, the current pulling her body outwards, tugging at her ankles, and she wondered why she wasn't being swept away until she realized that she was holding on to the fence. The wood felt smooth and worn, like the handle of her first gun, and she used it to pull herself back down.

Later she thought of the look on Pat's face. It reminded Mrs. Mitchell of the Tin Woodman from *The Wizard of Oz*—disarmingly lovely and greasy with expectation. In the book she bought for Miguel she'd read that the Woodman had once been real, but his ax kept slipping and he'd dismembered himself, slowly exchanging his flesh piece by piece for hollow metal. Mrs. Mitchell thought Pat's body would rattle with the same kind of emptiness, but it didn't; it fell with the heavy tone of meat. As she waited for the echo Mrs. Mitchell heard a small cough from the kitchen, the kind a person does in polite society to remind someone else that they are there. She followed it and found Clyde in his slippers, the knife in the roast.

Hello, she said. I just shot your wife. The beans were boiling; the water frothing over the sides of the pan and sizzling into the low flame beneath. Mrs. Mitchell would not let the dinner be ruined. She turned off the oven and spun all

the burners to zero.

The aunts never married. They still lived in the house where they raised their niece. Occasionally they sent her photographs, recipes, information on the NRA, or obituaries of people she had known clipped from the local newspaper. When a reporter called Mrs. Mitchell asking questions about Pat and Clyde, she thought back to all the notices her aunts had sent over the years, and said: *They were good neighbors and wonderful people. I don't know who would have done something like this. They will be greatly missed.* The truth was that she felt very little at their loss. It was hard to forgive herself for this, so she didn't try.

She waited patiently through the following day and night for someone to come for her. On Monday morning she woke up and let the dog out. She made a sandwich for Miguel and fit it in his lunchbox beside a thermos of milk. She poured juice into a glass and cereal into a bowl. Then she locked herself in the bathroom and watched her hands shake. She remembered that she had wanted to cover Clyde with something. Falling out of the box, the cereal had sounded crisp and new like water on rocks, but it quickly turned into a soggy mess that stayed with her as she left him, stepped over Pat, and picked up the welcome mat with her gloves. She could still see her husband moving back and forth on top of it. She wanted to make Home Sweet Home disappear, but the longest she could bring herself to touch it was the end of the driveway, and she left it in a garbage can on the street.

She found that she could not say good-bye. Not when her husband pounded on the door to take a shower and not when Miguel asked if he could brush his teeth. She sat on the toilet and listened to them move about the house and leave. Later, she watched a policeman wrap her neighbor's house in yellow tape. To double it around a tree in the yard he circled the trunk with his arms. It was a brief embrace and she thought, *That tree felt nothing.*

In the afternoon, when the sun began to slant through the western windows, Lieutenant Sales crossed the Mitchells' front yard. He was carrying a chewed-up slipper in a bag, jostling the dandelions and sending seeds of white fluff adrift. Mrs. Mitchell saw him coming. She turned the key in the lock, and once she was beyond the bathroom she ran her fingers through her hair, smoothing down the rough spots. The bell rang. The dog barked. She opened the door, and offered him coffee.

Miguel turned nine years old that summer. In the past two years he'd spent with the Mitchells the boy had grown no more than an inch, but with the warm weather that June he'd suddenly sprouted—his legs stretching like brown sugar taffy tight over his new knobby bones, as if the genes of his American father had

been lying dormant, biding their time until the right combination of spring breezes and processed food kissed them awake. He began to trip over himself. On his way home from baseball practice that Monday, he caught one of his newly distended feet on a trash can, just outside the line of yellow police tape that closed in Pat and Clyde's yard. Miguel fell to the sidewalk, smacking his hands against the concrete. The barrel toppled over beside him and out came a welcome mat. Home Sweet Home.

Miguel was not the best student, but he had made friends easily once he hit several home runs in gym class. Norman and Greg Kessler, the most popular kids in school, chose him for their team and for their friend, replacing Little Mike Findleman, who had never been that good in the first place. Norman and Greg helped him with English, defended him against would-be attackers, and told him they had seen his father naked.

The boys claimed they had looked down from the window of their mother's minivan and seen Mr. Mitchell drive past, stripped bare from the waist down. There was a woman in the car with him and she was leaning over the gearshift. *It's true*, said the twins. Miguel made them swear on the Bible, on a stack of Red Sox cards, and finally on their grandfather's grave, which they did, bikes thrown aside in the grass and sweaty hands pressed on the polished marble of his years. At dinner that night the boy watched his father eating. The angle of his jaw clenched and turned.

Miguel felt a memory push past hot dogs, past English, past Hostess cupcakes and his collection of Spiderman comic books. He was five years old and asked his mother where his father was. She was making coffee—squeezing the grounds through a sieve made out of cloth and wire. He'd collected eggs from their chickens for breakfast. He was holding them in his hands and they were still warm. His mother took one from him. *This is the world and we are here*, she said, and pointed to the bottom half of the egg. *Your father is there*. She ran her finger up along the edge and tapped the point with a dark red nail. Then she cracked the yolk in a pan and threw the rest of the egg in the garbage. He retrieved it later and pushed his fingertips back and forth across the slippery inner membrane until the shell came apart into pieces.

Miguel picked up the doormat and shook it to get the dust off. It seemed like something Mrs. Mitchell might be fond of. That morning he had kept watch through the bathroom keyhole. She was out of sight, but he caught the scent of her worry. He knew she needed something.

In Caracas he had gone through the trash regularly, looking for things to play with and at times for something to eat. Ever since he heard about his father being naked on the highway, he had been remembering more about his life there, and

even reverting to some of his old habits; as if the non sequitur of his father's nudity had tenderly shaken him awake. He lay in bed at night and looked into the eyes of the papier-maché head for guidance. He had two lives now, two countries, and two mothers. Soon he would find another life without his father, and another, when he went away to college, and another life, and another, and another, and another; each of them thin, fragile casings echoing the hum of what had gone before.

The boy walked into the kitchen and found his American mother sitting with a strange man. They both held steaming mugs of coffee. Buster was under the table, waking from his afternoon nap. He saw Miguel and thumped his tail halfheartedly against the floor. The adults turned. *Now what have you got there?*

Lieutenant Sales took Home Sweet Home in his hands. He felt it was what he had been looking for. The twisted pink skin where the shark had bitten him began to itch. It had been tingling all afternoon. He hadn't had sensation there for years—the buildup of scar tissue had left him numb—but there was something in the look of the boy and the feel of the rope that held possibility, and excitement rose like fear within him, alongside the memory of closing teeth. Later, in the lab, the welcome mat would reveal tiny spots of Pat's blood, dog saliva, gunpowder, dead ants, mud, fertilizer, and footprints—but not the impression of Mr. Mitchell's knees, or the hesitation of his lonely wife on the doorstep, or the hunger of his son in the garbage. All of this had been shaken off.

Lieutenant Sales would leave the Mitchells' house that afternoon with the same thrill he'd had when the shark passed and he realized his leg was still there. He was exhilarated and then exhausted, as though his life had been drained, and he knew then that he had gone as far as he could go. Home Sweet Home would lead him back to the beginning of a murder he could not solve. There would be no scar, just the sense that he missed something, and the familiar taste of things not done. For now, he reached out with a kind of hope and accepted the welcome mat as a gift.

Mrs. Mitchell put her arm around Miguel's shoulders and waited for Lieutenant Sales to arrest her. She would continue to wait in the weeks ahead, as suspects were raised and then dismissed and headlines changed and funerals were planned. The possibilities of these moments passed over her like shadows. When they were gone she was left standing chilled.

Clyde's mother arranged for closed caskets. In the pew Mrs. Mitchell sat quietly. Her husband cracked knuckles beside her. He was thinking about the way Clyde's father died—his chest pressed hard into the nothing of concrete. Mr. Mitchell was sure whoever rigged the lift had killed Pat and her husband. He worried that he could be next. He thought, *Who would hold my hand?* He

reached for his wife and her fingers were cold.

When Mr. Mitchell first learned what had happened to his lover he had opened his closet and started to pack. His family listened to suitcases being dragged down from the attic, the swing of hangers, zipper teeth, the straps of leather buckles. Things from their home began to go missing. They reappeared when Lieutenant Sales came by. They disappeared again after the funerals. Then Mr. Mitchell said he was leaving, and his wife felt her throat clutch. She wanted to ask him where he would go; she wanted to ask him what she had done this for; she wanted to ask him why he no longer loved her but instead she asked for his son.

She had watched Miguel hand the welcome mat to the detective, and as it passed by her she felt an ache in the back of her mouth, as though she hadn't eaten for days. Lieutenant Sales turned Home Sweet Home over in his hands. He placed it carefully on the kitchen table and Mrs. Mitchell saw the word *Sweet*. She remembered the milk she had made for the boy when he arrived, and sensed that this would not be the end of her. She could hear the steady breathing of her sleeping dog. She could smell the coffee. She felt the small frame of Miguel steady beneath her hand. These bones, she thought, were everything. *Hey sport*, Mrs. Mitchell asked. *Is that for me?* The boy nodded, and she held him close.

CHRISTOPHER COAKE

All Through the House

FROM *The Gettysburg Review*

Now

Here is an empty meadow, circled by bare autumn woods.

The trees of the wood—oak, maple, locust—grow through a mat of tangled scrub, rusty leaves, piles of brittle deadfall. Overhead is a rich blue sky, a few high, translucent clouds, moving quickly, but the trees are dense enough to shelter everything below, and the meadow too. And here, leading into the trees from the meadow's edge, is a gravel track, twin ruts now grown over, switching back and forth through the woods and away.

The meadow floor is overrun by tall yellow grass, thorny vines, the occasional sapling—save for at the meadow's center. Here is a wide rectangular depression. The broken remains of a concrete foundation shore up its sides. The bottom is crumbled concrete and cinder, barely visible beneath the thin netting of weeds. A blackened wooden beam angles down from the rim, its underside soft and fibrous. Two oaks lean over the foundation, charred on the sides that face it.

Sometimes deer browse in the meadow. Raccoons and rabbits are always present; they have made their own curving trails across the meadow floor. A fox, rusty and quick, lives in the nearby trees. His den, twisting among tree roots, is pressed flat and smooth by his belly.

Sometimes automobiles crawl slowly along the gravel track and park at the edge of the meadow. The people inside sometimes get out and walk into the grass. They take photographs or draw pictures or read from books. Sometimes they climb down into the old foundation. A few camp overnight, huddling close to fires.

Whenever these people come, a policeman arrives soon after, fat and gray-haired. Sometimes the people speak with him—and sometimes they shout—but always they depart, loading their cars while the policeman watches. When they depart he follows them down the track in his slow, rumbling cruiser. When he comes at night, the spinning of his red and blue lights causes the trees to jump and dance.

Sometimes the policeman arrives alone:

He stops the cruiser and climbs out. He walks slowly into the meadow. He sits

on the broken concrete at the rim of the crater, looking into it, looking at the sky, closing his eyes.

When he makes noise the woods grow quiet. All the animals crouch low, flicking their ears at the man's barks and howls.

He does not stay long.

After his cruiser has rolled away down the track, the woods and the meadow remain, for a time, silent. But before long what lives there sniffs the air and, in fits and starts, emerges. Noses press to the ground and into the burrows of mice. Things eat and are eaten.

Here memories are held in muscles and bellies, not in minds. The policeman and the house and all the people who have come and gone here are not forgotten.

They are, simply, never remembered.

1987

Sheriff Larry Thompkins tucked his chin against the cold and, his back to his idling cruiser, unlocked the cattle gate that blocked access to the Sullivan woods. The gate swung inward, squealing, and the cruiser's headlights shone a little ways down the gravel track before it curled off into the trees. Larry straightened, then glanced right and left, down the paved county road behind him. He saw no other cars—not even on the distant interstate. The sky was clouded over—snow was a possibility—and the fields behind him were almost invisible in the dark.

Larry sank back behind the wheel, grateful for the warmth and the spits of static from his radio. He nosed the cruiser through the gate and onto the track, then switched to his parking lights. The trunks of trees ahead faintly glowed, turning orange as he passed. Even though the nearest living soul, old Ned Baker, lived a half mile off, he was an insomniac and often sat in front of his bedroom window watching the Sullivan woods. If Larry used his headlights, Ned would see. Ever since Patricia Pike's book had come out—three months ago now—Ned had watched the gated entrance to the woods like it was a military duty.

Larry had been chasing off trespassers from the Sullivan place ever since the murders, twelve years ago in December. He hated coming out here, but he couldn't very well refuse to do his job—no one else would do it. Almost always the trespassers were kids from the high school, out at the murder house getting drunk or high, and though Larry was always firm with them and made trouble for the bad ones, he knew most kids did stupid things and couldn't blame them that much. Larry had fallen off the roof of a barn, drunk, when he was sixteen. He'd broken his arm in two places, all because he was trying to impress a girl who, in the end, never went out with him.

But activity in the woods had picked up since the Pike woman's book came out. Larry had been out here three times in the last week alone. There were kids, still, more of them than ever—but also people from out of town, some of whom he suspected were mentally ill. Just last weekend Larry had chased off a couple in their twenties, lying on a blanket with horrible screaming music playing on their boom box. They'd told him—calmly, as though he might understand—that they practiced magic and wanted to conceive a child out there. The house, they said, was a place of energy. When they were gone Larry looked up at its empty windows, its stupid, dead house-face, and couldn't imagine anything further from the truth.

The cruiser bounced and shimmied as Larry negotiated the turns through the woods. All his extra visits had deepened the ruts in the track—he'd been cutting through mud and ice all autumn. Now and then the tires spun, and he tried not to think about having to call for a tow, the stories he'd have to make up to explain it. But each time, the cruiser roared and lurched free.

He remembered coming out here with Patricia Pike. He hadn't wanted to, but the mayor told him Pike did a good job with this kind of book, and that—while the mayor was concerned, just like Larry was, about exploiting what had happened—he didn't want the town to get any more of a bad name on account of being uncooperative. So Larry had gone to the library to read one of Pike's other books. *The Beauties and the Beast* was what the book was called, with the close-up of a cat's eye on the front cover. It was about a serial killer in Idaho in the sixties who murdered five women and fed them to his pet cougar. In one chapter Pike wrote that the police had hidden details of the crime from her. Larry could understand why: The killings were brutal, and he was sure the police had a hard time explaining the details to the families of the victims, let alone to ghouls all across the country looking for a thrill.

We're going to get exploited, Larry had told the mayor, waving that book at him.

Look, the mayor said. I know this is difficult for you. But would you rather she wrote it without your help? You knew Wayne better than anybody. Who knows? Maybe we'll finally get to the bottom of things.

What if there's no bottom to get to? Larry asked, but the mayor had looked at him strangely and never answered, just told him to put up with it, that it would be over before he knew it.

Larry wrestled the cruiser around the last bend and then stopped. His parking lights shone dully across what was left of the old driveway turnaround and onto the Sullivan house.

The house squatted, dim and orange. It had never been much to look at, even

when new; it was small, unremarkable, square—barely more than a prefab. The garage, jutting off the back, was far too big and made the whole structure look deformed, unbalanced. Wayne had designed the house himself, not long after he and Jenny got married. Most of the paint had chipped off the siding, and the undersized windows were boarded over—the high school kids had broken out all the glass years ago.

Jenny had hated the house even when it was new. She'd told Larry so at her and Wayne's housewarming dinner.

It's bad enough I have to live out here in the middle of nowhere, she'd said under her breath while Wayne chattered to Larry's wife, Emily, in the living room. But at least he could have built us a house you can look at.

He did it because he loves you, Larry whispered. He tried.

Don't remind me, Jenny said, swallowing wine. Why did I ever agree to this? The house?

The house, the marriage. God, Larry, you name it.

When she'd said it she hadn't sounded bitter. She looked at Larry as though he might have an answer, but he didn't—he'd never been able to see Jenny and Wayne together, from the moment they started dating in college. He remembered telling her, *It'll get better*, and feeling right away as though he'd lied, and Jenny making a face that showed she knew he had, before both of them turned to watch Wayne demonstrate the dimmer switch in the living room for Emily.

The front door, Larry saw now, was swinging open. Some folks he'd chased out two weeks ago had jimmied it, and the lock hadn't worked right afterward. The open door and the black gap behind it made the house look even meaner than it was—like a baby crying. Patricia Pike had said that, at one point. Larry wondered if she'd put it into her book.

She had sent him a copy back in July just before its release. The book was called *All Through the House*; the cover showed a Christmas tree with little skulls as ornaments. Pike had signed it for him: *To Larry, even though I know you prefer fiction. Cheers, Patricia*. He flipped to the index and saw his name with a lot of numbers by it, and then he looked at the glossy plates at the book's center. One was a map of Prescott County, showing the county road and an X in the Sullivan woods where the house stood. The next page showed a floor plan of the house, with bodies drawn in outline and dotted lines following Wayne's path from room to room. One plate showed a Sears portrait of the entire family smiling together, plus graduation photos of Wayne and Jenny. Pike had included a picture of Larry, too—taken on the day of the murders—that showed him pointing off to the edge of the picture while EMTs brought one of the boys out the front door, wrapped in a blanket. Larry looked like he was running—his arms

were blurry—which was odd. They’d brought no one out of the house alive. He’d have had no need to rush.

The last chapter was titled “Why?” Larry had read that part all the way through. Every rumor and half-baked theory Patricia Pike had heard while in town, she’d included, worded to make it sound like she’d done thinking no one else ever had.

Wayne was in debt. Wayne was jealous because maybe Jenny was sleeping around. Wayne had been seeing a doctor about migraines. Wayne was a man who had never matured past childhood. Wayne lived in a fantasy world inhabited by the perfect family he could never have. *Once again the reluctance of the sheriff’s department and the townspeople to discuss their nightmares freely hinders us from understanding a man like Wayne Sullivan, from preventing others from killing as he has killed, from beginning the healing and closure this community so badly needs.*

Larry had tossed his copy in a drawer and hoped everyone else would do the same.

But then the book was a success—all Patricia Pike’s books were. And not long after that, the lunatics had started to come out to the house. And then, today, Larry had gotten a call from the mayor.

You’re not going to like this, the mayor said.

Larry hadn’t. The mayor told him a cable channel wanted to film a documentary based on the book. They were sending out a camera crew at the end of the month, near Christmastime—for authenticity’s sake. They wanted to film in the house, and of course they wanted to talk to everybody all over again, Larry first and foremost.

Larry took a bottle of whiskey from underneath the front seat of the cruiser, and watching the Sullivan house through the windshield, he unscrewed the cap and drank a swallow. His eyes watered, but he got it down and drank another. The booze spread in his throat and belly, made him want to sit very still behind the wheel, to keep drinking. Most nights he would. But instead he opened the door and climbed out of the cruiser.

The meadow and the house were mostly blocked from the wind, but the air had a bite to it all the same. He hunched his shoulders, then opened up the trunk and took out one of the gas cans he’d filled up at the station and a few rolls of newspaper. He walked up to the open doorway of the house, his head ducked, careful with his feet in the shadows and the grass.

He smelled the house’s insides even before he stepped onto the porch—a smell like the underside of a wet log. He clicked on his flashlight and shone it into the doorway, across the splotched and crumbling walls. He stepped inside.

Something living scuttled immediately out of the way: a raccoon or a possum. Maybe even a fox. Wayne had once told him the woods were full of them, but in all the times Larry had been out here, he'd never seen any.

He glanced over the walls. Some new graffiti had appeared: KILL 'EM ALL was spray-painted on the wall where, once, the Christmas tree had leaned. The older messages were still in place. One read, HEY WAYNE, DO MY HOUSE NEXT. Beside a ragged, spackled-over depression in the same wall, someone had painted an arrow and the word BRAINS. Smaller messages were written in marker—the sorts of things high school kids write: initials, graduation years, witless sex puns, pictures of genitalia. And—sitting right there in the corner—was a copy of *All Through the House*, its pages swollen with moisture.

Larry rubbed his temple. The book was as good a place to start as any.

He kicked the book to the center of the living room floor and then splashed it with gas. Nearby was a crevice where the carpet had torn and separated. He rolled the newspapers up and wedged them underneath the carpet, then doused them too. Then he drizzled gasoline in a line from both the book and the papers to the front door. From the edge of the stoop, he tossed arcs of gas onto the door and the jamb until the can was empty.

He stood on the porch, smelling the gas and gasping—he was horribly out of shape. His head was throbbing. He squeezed the lighter in his hand until the pain subsided.

Larry was not much for religion, but he tried a prayer anyway: *Lord, keep them. I know you have been. And please let this work.* But the prayer sounded pitiful in his head, so he stopped it.

He flicked the lighter under a clump of newspaper and, once that had bloomed, touched it to the base of the door.

The fire took the door right away and flickered in a curling line across the carpet to the book and the papers. He could see them burning through the doorway, before thick gray smoke obscured his view. After a few minutes the flames began to gutter. He wasn't much of an arsonist—it was wet in there. He retrieved the other gas can from the trunk and shoved a rolled-up cone of newspaper into the nozzle. He made sure he had a clear throw and then lit the paper and heaved the can inside the house. It exploded right away, with a thump, and orange light bloomed up one of the inside walls. Outside, the flames from the door flared, steadied, then began to climb upward to the siding.

Larry went back to the cruiser and pulled the bottle of whiskey from beneath his seat. He drank from it and thought about Jenny, and then about camping in the meadow as a boy, with Wayne.

Larry had seen this house being built; he'd seen it lived in and died in. He had

guessed he might feel a certain joy watching it destroyed, but instead his throat caught. Somewhere down the line, this had gotten to be his house. He'd thought that for a while now: The township owned the Sullivan house, but really, Wayne had passed it on to *him*.

An image of himself drifted into his head—it had come a few times tonight. He saw himself walking into the burning house, climbing up the stairs. In his head he did this without pain, even while fire found his clothing, the bullets in his gun. He would sit upstairs in Jenny's sewing room and close his eyes, and it wouldn't take long.

He sniffled and pinched his nose. That was horseshit. He'd seen people who'd been burnt to death. He'd die, all right, but he'd go screaming and flailing. At the thought of it, his arms and legs grew heavy; his skin prickled.

Larry put the cruiser in reverse and backed it slowly away from the house, out of the drive, and onto the track. He watched for ten minutes as the fire grew and tried not to think about anything, to see only the flames. Then he got the call from dispatch.

Sheriff?

Copy, he said.

Ned called in. He says it looks like there's a fire out at the Sullivan place.

A fire?

That's what he said. He sees a fire in the woods.

My my my, Larry said. I'm on old 52 just past Mackey. I'll get out there quick as I can and take a look.

He waited another ten minutes. Flames shot out around the boards on the windows. The downstairs ceiling caught. Long shadows shifted through the trees; the woods came alive, swaying and dancing. Something alive and aflame shot out the front door—a rabbit? It zigged and zagged across the turnaround and then headed toward him. For a moment Larry thought it had shot under his car, and he put his hand on the door handle—but whatever it was cut away for the woods to his right. He saw it come to rest in a patch of scrub; smoke rose from the bush in wisps.

Dispatch? Larry said.

Copy.

I'm at the Sullivan house. It's on fire, all right. Better get the trucks out here.

Twenty minutes later two fire trucks arrived, advancing carefully down the track. The men got out and stood beside Larry, looking over the house, now brightly ablaze from top to bottom. They rolled the trucks past Larry's cruiser and sprayed the grass around the house and the trees nearby. Then all of them watched the house burn and crumble into its foundation, and no one said much

of anything.

Larry left them to the rubble just before dawn. He went home and tried to wash the smell of smoke out of his hair and then lay down next to Emily, who didn't stir. He lay awake for a while, trying to convince himself he'd actually done it, and then trying to convince himself he hadn't.

When he finally slept he saw the house on fire, except that in his dream there were people still in it: Jenny Sullivan in the upstairs window, holding her youngest boy to her and shouting Larry's name, screaming it, while Larry sat in his car, tugging at the handle, unable even to shout back to her, to tell her it was locked.

1985

Patricia Pike had known from the start that Sheriff Thompkins was reluctant to work with her. Now, riding in his cruiser with him down empty back roads to the Sullivan house, she wondered if what she'd thought was reticence was actual anger. Thompkins had been civil enough when she spoke with him on the phone a month before, but since meeting him this morning in his small, cluttered office—she'd seen janitors with better quarters—he'd been scowling, sullen, rarely bothering to look her in the eye.

She was used to this treatment from policemen. A lot of them had read her books, two of which had uncovered information the police hadn't found themselves. Her second book—*On a Darkling Plain*—had overturned a conviction. Policemen hated being shown up, even the best of them, and she suspected from the look of Thompkins's office that he didn't operate on the cutting edge of law enforcement.

Thompkins was tall and hunched, perhaps muscular once but going now to fat, with a gray cop's mustache and a single thick fold under his chin. He was only forty—two years younger than she was—but he looked much older. He kept a wedding photo on his desk; in it he had the broad-shouldered, thick-necked look of an offensive lineman. Unsurprising, this; a lot of country cops she spoke to had played football. His wife was a little ghost of a woman, dark-eyed, smiling what Patricia suspected was one of her last big smiles.

Patricia had asked Thompkins a few questions in his office, chatty ones designed to put him at ease. She'd also flirted a little; she was good-looking, and sometimes that worked. But even then Thompkins answered in clipped sentences, in the sort of language police fell back on in their reports. He looked often at his watch, but she wasn't fooled. Kinslow, Indiana, had only six hundred residents, and Thompkins wasn't about to convince her he was a busy man.

Thompkins drove along the interminable gravel roads to the Sullivan woods with one hand on the wheel and the other brushing the corners of his mustache. Finally she couldn't stand it.

Do I make you uncomfortable, Sheriff?

He widened his eyes, and he shifted his shoulders then coughed. He said, Well, I'll be honest. I guess I'd rather not do this.

I can't imagine you would, she said. Best to give him the sympathy he so desperately wanted.

If the mayor wasn't such a fan of yours, I wouldn't be out here.

She smiled at him, just a little. She said, I've talked to Wayne's parents; I know you were close to Wayne and Jenny. It can't be easy to do this.

No, ma'am. That it is not.

Thompkins turned the cruiser onto a smaller paved road. On either side of them was nothing but fields, empty and stubbled with old broken cornstalks and blocky stands of woods so monochrome they could be pencil drawings.

Patricia asked, You all went to high school together, didn't you?

Abington, Glass of '64. Jenny was a year behind me and Wayne.

Did you become friends in high school?

That's when I got to know Jenny. Wayne and I knew each other since we were little. Our mothers taught together at the middle school.

Thompkins glanced at Patricia. You know all this already. You drawing out the witness?

She smiled, genuinely grateful. So he had a brain in there after all. It seems I have to, she said.

He sighed—a big man's sigh, long and weary—and said, I have nothing against you personally, Ms. Pike. But I don't like the kind of books you write, and I don't like coming out here.

I do appreciate your help. I know it's hard.

Why this case? he asked her. Why us?

She tried to think of the right words, nothing that would offend him.

Well, I suppose I was just *drawn* to it. My agent sends me clippings about cases, things she thinks I might want to write about. The murders were so . . . brutal, and they happened on Christmas Eve. And since it happened in the country, it never made the news much; people don't know about it—not in the big cities, anyway. There's also kind of a—a fairy tale quality to it, the house out in the middle of the forest—you know?

Uh-huh, Thompkins said.

And then there's the mystery of *why*. There's a certain type of case I specialize in—crimes with a component of unsolved mystery. I'm intrigued that Wayne

didn't leave any notes. You're the only person he gave any information to, and even then—

—He didn't say much.

No. I know, I've read the transcript already. But that's my answer, I suppose: There's a lot to write about.

Thompkins stroked his mustache and turned at a stop sign.

They were to the right of an enormous tract of woods, much larger than the other stands nearby. Patricia had seen it growing on the horizon, almost like a rain cloud, and now, close up, she saw it was at least a mile square. The sheriff slowed and turned off the road, stopping in front of a low metal gate blocking a gravel track that dipped away from the road and into the bare trees. A No Trespassing sign hung from the gate's center. It had been fired upon a number of times; some of the bullet holes had yet to rust. Thompkins said, Excuse me, and got out. He bent over a giant padlock and then swung the gate inward. He got back behind the wheel, drove the cruiser through without shutting his door, then clambered out again and locked the gate behind them.

Keeps the kids out, he told her, shifting the cruiser into gear. Means the only way in is on foot. A lot of them won't walk it, least when it's cold like this.

This is a big woods.

Probably the biggest between Indy and Lafayette. Course no one's ever measured, but that's—that's what Wayne always told me.

Patricia watched his mouth droop when he said this, caught his drop in volume.

The car curved right, then left. The world they were in was almost a sepia-toned old film: bare winter branches, patches of old snow on the ground, pools of black muck. Patricia had grown up in Chicago, had relatives on a farm downstate. She knew what a tangle those woods would be. What a curious place for a house. She opened her notebook and wrote in shorthand.

This land belongs to Wayne's family? she asked.

It used to. Township owns it now. Wayne had put the land up as collateral for the house, and then when he died, his folks didn't pay on the loan. I don't blame them for that. The town might sell it someday, but no one really wants farmland anymore. None of the farmers around here can afford to develop it. An ag company would have to buy it. In the meantime I keep an eye on the place.

Thompkins slowed and the car jounced into and out of a deep rut. He said, Me, I'd like to see the whole thing plowed under. But I don't make those choices.

She wrote his words down.

They rounded a last bend in the track, and there in front of them was a

meadow, and in the center of it the Sullivan house. Patricia had seen pictures of it, but here in person it was much smaller than she'd imagined. She pulled her camera out of her bag.

It's ugly, she said.

That's the truth, Thompkins said, and put the car into park.

The house was a two-story of some indeterminate style—closer to a Cape Cod than anything else. The roof was pitched but seemed . . . too small, too flat for the rest of the house. The face suggested by its windows and front door—flanked by faux half-columns—was that of a mongoloid: all chin and mouth, and no forehead. Or like a baby crying. It had been painted an olive color, and now the paint was flaking. The windows had been boarded over with sheets of plywood. The track continued around behind the house, where a two-car garage jutted off at right angles, too big in proportion to the house proper.

Wayne drew up the plans, Thompkins said. He wanted to do it himself.

What did Jenny think of it? Do you know?

She joked about it. Not so Wayne could hear.

Would he have been angry?

No. Sad. He'd wanted a house out here since we were kids. He loved these woods.

Thompkins undid his seat belt. Then he said, I guess he knew the house was a mess, but he . . . it's hard to say. We all pretended it was fine.

Why?

Some folks, you just want to protect their feelings. He wanted us all to be as excited as he was. It just wouldn't have occurred to us to be . . . blunt with him. You know that type of person? Kind of like a puppy?

Yes.

Well, Thompkins said, that was Wayne. You want to go in?

The interior of the house was dark. Thompkins had brought two electric lanterns; he set one just inside the door and held the other in his hand. He walked inside and then motioned for Patricia to follow.

The inside of the house stank—an old, abandoned smell of mildew and rot. The carpeting—what was left of it, anyway—seemed to be on the verge of becoming mud, or a kind of algae, and held the stink. Patricia had been in morgues and, for one of her books, had accompanied a homicide detective in Detroit to murder sites. She knew what death—dead human beings—smelled like. That smell might have been in the Sullivan house, underneath everything else, but she couldn't be sure. It *ought* to have been.

Patricia could see no furniture. Ragged holes gaped in the ceilings where light fixtures might have been. Behind the sheriff was a staircase, rising up into

darkness, and to the right of it an entrance into what seemed to be the kitchen.

Shit, Thompkins said.

What?

He held the lantern close to a wall in the room to the right of the foyer. There was a spot on the wall, a ragged, spackled patch. Someone had spray-painted an arrow pointing at it, and the word BRAINS.

Thompkins turned a circle with the lantern held out. He was looking down, and she followed his gaze. She saw cigarette butts, beer cans.

Kids come in here from Abington, Thompkins said. I run them off every now and then. Sometimes it's adults, even. Have to come out and see for themselves, I guess. Already the kids say it's haunted.

That happens in a lot of places, Patricia said.

Huh, Thompkins said.

She took photos of the rooms, the flashbulb's light dazzling in the dark.

I guess you want the tour; Thompkins said.

I do. She put a hand on his arm, and his eyes widened. She said, as cheerfully as she could. Do you mind if I tape our conversation?

Do you have to? Thompkins asked, looking up from her hand.

It will help me quote you better.

Well. I suppose.

Patricia put a tape into her hand-held recorder, then nodded at him.

Thompkins held the lantern up. The light gleamed off his dark eyes. His mouth hung open, just a little, and when he breathed out it made a thin line of steam in front of the lantern. He looked different—not sad, not anymore. Maybe, Patricia thought, she saw in him what she was feeling, which was a thrill, what a teenaged girl feels in front of a campfire, knowing a scary story is coming. She reminded herself that actual people had died here, that she was in a place of tremendous sadness, but all the same she couldn't help herself. Her books sold well because she wrote them well, with fervency, and she wrote that way because she loved to be in forbidden places like this, she loved learning the secrets no one wanted to say. Just as, she suspected, Sheriff Thompkins wanted deep in his heart to tell them to her. Secrets were too big for people to hold—that was what she found in her research, time after time. Secrets had their own agendas.

Patricia looked at Thompkins, turning a smile into a quick nod.

All right then, the sheriff said. This way.

Here's the kitchen.

Wayne shot Jenny first, in here. But that first shot didn't kill her. You can't tell

because of the boards, but the kitchen window looks out over the driveway, just outside the garage. Wayne shot her through the window. Jenny was looking out at Wayne, we know that, because the bullet went in through the front of her right shoulder and out the back, and we know he was outside because the glass was broken and because his footprints were still in the snow when we got there—there was no wind that night. The car was outside the garage. What he did was, he got out of the driver's side door and went around to the trunk and opened it—best guess is the gun was in there; he'd purchased it that night, up at a shop in Muncie. Then he went around to the passenger door and stood there for a while; the snow was all tramped down. We think he was loading the gun. Or maybe he was talking himself into doing it. I don't know.

We figure he braced on the top of the car and shot her from where he stood. The security light over the garage was burnt out when we got here, so from, inside looking out, with the kitchen lights on, Jenny wouldn't have been able to see what he was doing—not very clearly, if at all. I don't know why she was turned around looking out the window at him. Maybe he honked the horn. I also don't know if he aimed to kill her or wound her, but my feeling is he went for a wounding shot. It's about twenty feet from where he stood to where she stood, so it wasn't that hard a shot for him to make, and he made most of his others that night. Now down here—

*[The sheriff's pointing to a spot on the linoleum, slightly stained, see photos.]
Excuse me?*

[Don't mind me, Sheriff. Just keep talking.]

Oh. All right then.

Well, Jenny—once she was shot, she fell and struggled. There was a lot of blood; we think she probably bled out for seven or eight minutes while Wayne . . . while Wayne killed the others. She tried to pull herself to the living room; there were . . . ah, smears on the floor consistent with her doing that.

[We're back in the living room; we're facing the front door.]

After he'd shot Jenny, he imlked around the east side of the house to the front door here. He could have come in the garage into the kitchen, but he didn't. I'm not sure what happened from there exactly. But here's what I think: The grandmother—Mrs. Murray—and Danny, the four-year-old, were in the living room—in here—next to the tree. She was reading to him; he liked to be read to, and a book of nursery rhymes was open face down on the couch. The grandmother was infirm—she had diabetes and couldn't walk so well. She was sitting on the couch still when we found her. He shot her once through the head, probably from the doorway.

[We're looking at the graffiti wall, see photos.]

But by this time Jenny would have been . . . she would have been screaming, so we know Wayne didn't catch the rest of them unawares. Jenny might have called out that Daddy was home before Wayne shot her; hell, this place is in the middle of nowhere, and it was nighttime, so they all knew a car had pulled up. What I'm saying is, I'm guessing there was a lot of confusion at this juncture, a lot of shouting. There's a bullet hole at waist height on the wall opposite the front door. My best guess is that Danny ran to the door and was in front of it when Wayne opened it. He could have been looking into the kitchen at his, at his mother, or at the door. I think Wayne took a shot at him from the doorway and missed. Danny ran into the living room, and since Mrs. Murray hadn't tried to straggle to her feet, Wayne shot her next. He took one shot and hit her. Then he shot Danny. Danny was behind the Christmas tree; he probably ran there to hide. Wayne took three shots into the tree, and one of them, or I guess Danny's struggles, knocked it sideways off its base, But he got Danny, shot his own boy in the head just over his left ear.

[We're looking through a door off the dining room; inside is a small room maybe ten by nine, see photos.]

This was a playroom. Mr. Murray and Alex, the two-year-old, were in it. Mr. Murray reacted pretty quick to the shots, for a guy his age, but he was a vet, and he hunted, so he probably would have been moving at the sound of the first gunshot. He opened that window—

[A boarded window on the rear of the house, see photos.]

—which, ah, used, to look out behind the garage, and he dropped Alex through it into the snowdrift beneath. Then he got himself through. Though not without some trouble. The autopsy showed he had a broken wrist, which we figure he broke getting out. But it's still a remarkable thing. I hope you write that. Sam Murray tried his best to save Alex.

[I'll certainly note it. Wayne's parents also mentioned him.]

Well, good. Good.

Sam and Alex got about fifty yards away, toward the woods. Wayne probably went to the doorway of the playroom and saw the window open. He ran back outside, around the west corner of the house, and shot Sam in the back right about where the garden was. There wasn't a lot of light, but the house lights were all on, and if I remember right, the bodies were just about at the limit of what, you could see from that corner. So Sam almost made it out of range. But I don't know if he could have got very far once he was in the trees. He was strong for a guy his age, but it was snowy and neither he nor the boy had coats, and it was about ten degrees out that night. Plus Wayne meant to kill everybody, and I think he would have tracked them.

Sam died instantly. Wayne got him in the heart. He fell, and the boy didn't go any farther. Wayne walked about fifty feet out and fired a few shots, and one of them got Alex through the neck. Wayne never went any closer. Either he knew he'd killed them both, or he figured the cold would finish the job for him if he hadn't. Maybe he couldn't look. I don't know.

[We're in the living room again, at the foot of the stairs.]

He went back inside and shut the door behind him. I think he was confronted by the dog, Kodiak, on the stairs, there on the landing. He shot the dog, probably from where you're standing. Then—

[We're looking into the kitchen again.]

Wayne went to the kitchen and shot—he shot Jenny a second time. The killing shot. We found her facedown. Wayne stood over her and fired from a distance of less than an inch. The bullet went in the back of her head just above the neck. He held her down with his boot on her shoulder. We know because she was wearing a white sweater, and he left a bloodstain on it that held the imprint of his boot sole.

He called my house at nine-sixteen. You've seen the transcript.

[How did he sound? On the phone?]

Oh, Jesus. I'd say upset but not hysterical. Like he was out of breath, I guess.

[Will you tell me again what he said?]

Hell. Do you really need me to repeat it?

[If you can.]

. . . Well, he said, Larry, it's Wayne. I said, Hey Wayne, Merry Christmas, or something like that. And then he said, No time, Larry, this is a business call. And I said, What's wrong? And he said, Larry, I killed Jenny and the kids and my in-laws, and as soon as I hang up, I'm going to kill myself. And I said something like, Are you joking? And then he hung up. That's it. I got in the cruiser and drove up here as fast as I could.

[You were first on the scene?]

Yeah. Yeah, I was. I called it in on the way; it took me a while to—to remember. I saw blood through the front windows, and I called for backup as soon as I did. I went inside. I looked, around . . . and saw . . . everyone but Sam and Alex. It took me . . .

[Sheriff?]

No, it's all right. I wasn't . . . I wasn't in great shape, which I guess you can imagine, but after a couple of minutes, I found the window open in the playroom. I was out with—with Sam and Alex when the deputies arrived.

[But you found Wayne first?]

Yes. I looked for him right off. For all I knew he was still alive.

[Where was he?]

Down in here.

[We're looking into a door opening off the kitchen; it looks like—the basement?]

Yeah. Wayne killed himself in his workroom. That was his favorite place, where he went for privacy. We used to drink down there, play darts. He sat in a corner and shot himself with a small handgun, which he also purchased that night. It was the only shot he fired from it. He'd shut the basement door behind him.

. . . You want to see down there?

They sat for a while in the cruiser afterward. Thompkins had brought a thermos of coffee, which touched her; the coffee was terrible, but at least it was warm. She held the cup in her hands in front of the dashboard heaters. Thompkins chewed his thumbnail and looked at the house.

Why did he do it? she asked him.

Hm?

Why did Wayne do it?

I don't know.

You don't have any theories?

No.

He said it quickly, an obvious lie. Patricia watched his face and said, I called around after talking with his parents. Wayne was twenty grand behind on his loan payments. If he hadn't worked at the bank already, this place would have been repossessed.

Maybe, Thompkins said and sipped his coffee. But half the farms you see out here are twenty grand in the hole, and no one's slaughtered their entire family over it.

Patricia watched him while he said this. Thompkins kept his big face neutral, but he didn't look at her. His ears were pink with cold.

Wayne's mother, she said, told me she thought that Jenny might have had affairs.

Yeah. I heard that too.

Any truth to it?

Adultery's not against the law. So I don't concern myself with it.

But surely you've heard something.

Well, Ms. Pike, I have the same answer as before. People have been sleeping around on each other out here for a lot longer than I've had this job, and no one ever killed their family over it.

Thompkins put on his seat belt.

Besides, he said, if you were a man who'd slept with Jenny Sullivan, would you say anything about it? You wouldn't, not now. So no, I don't know for sure. And frankly, I wouldn't tell you if I did.

Why?

Because I knew Jenny, and she was a good woman. She was my prom date, for Christ's sake. I stood up at her and Wayne's wedding. Jenny was always straight, and she was smart. If she had an affair, that was her business. But it's not mine, now, and it's not yours.

It would be motive, Patricia said softly.

I took the bodies out of that house, Thompkins said, putting the cruiser into reverse. I took my friends out. I felt their necks to see if they were alive. I saw what Wayne did. There's no reason good enough. No one could have wronged him enough to make him do what he did. I don't care what it was.

He turned the cruiser around; the trees rushed by, and Patricia put both hands around her coffee to keep it from spilling. She'd heard speeches like this before. Someone's brains get opened up, and there's always some backcountry cop who puts his hand to his heart and pretends the poor soul still has any privacy.

There's always a reason, she said.

Thompkins smirked without humor; the cruiser bounced up and down.

Then I'm sure you'll come up with something, he said.

December 25, 1975

In the evening, just past sundown, Larry went out again to the Sullivan house. He and the staties had finished with the scene earlier in the day. There hadn't been much to investigate, really; Wayne had confessed in his phone call, yet Larry had told his deputies to take pictures anyway, to collect what evidence they could. And then all day reporters had come out for pictures, and some of the townspeople had stopped by to gawk or to ask if anything needed to be done, so Larry decided to keep the house under guard. Truth be told, he and the men needed something to do; watching the house was better than fielding questions in town.

When Larry pulled up in front of the house, his deputy, Troy Bowen, was sitting in his cruiser by the garage, reading a paperback behind the wheel. Larry flashed his lights, and Bowen got out and ambled over to Larry's car, hands in his armpits.

Hey Larry, he said. What're you doing out here?

Slow night, Larry said, which was true enough. He said, I'll take over. Go get

dinner. I'll cover until Albie gets here.

That's not till midnight, Bowen said, but his face was open and grateful.

I might as well be out here. It's all I'm thinking about anyway.

Yeah, that's what I thought. But I don't mind saying it gives me the willies. You're welcome to it.

When Bowen's cruiser was gone, Larry stood for a moment on the front stoop, hands in his pockets. Crime scene tape was strung over the doorway in a big haphazard X; Bowen had done it after the bodies were removed, still sniffing and red-eyed. It had been his first murder scene. The electricity was still on; the little fake lantern hanging over the door was shining. Larry took a couple of breaths and then fumbled out a copy of the house key. He unlocked the door, ducked under the caution tape, and went inside.

He turned on the living room light, and there everything was, as he'd left it this afternoon. His heart thumped. What else had he expected? That it would all be gone? That it hadn't really happened? It had. Here were the outlines. The bloodstains on the living room carpet and on the landing. The light from the living room just shone into the kitchen; he could see the dark swirls on the linoleum, too. Already a smell was in the air. The furnace was still on, and the blood and the smaller pieces of remains were starting to turn. The place would go bad if Wayne's folks didn't have the house cleaned up soon. Larry didn't want to have that talk with them, but he'd call them tomorrow. He knew a service in Indianapolis that took care of things like this. All the same he turned off the thermostat.

He asked himself why he cared. Surely no one would ever live in this place again. What did it matter?

But it did, somehow.

He walked into the family room. The tree was still canted sideways, knocked partway out of its base. He went to the wall behind it, stepping over stains, careful not to disturb anything. The lights on the tree were still plugged into the wall outlet. He squatted, straddling a collapsing pile of presents, then leaned forward and pulled the cord. The tree might go up, especially with the trunk out of its water.

Larry looked up at the wall and put his hand over his mouth; he'd been trying to avoid looking right at anything, but he'd done it now. Just a few inches in front of him, on the wall, was the spot where Danny had been shot. The bullet had gone right through his head. He'd given Danny a couple of rides in the cruiser, and now here the boy was: matted blood, strands of hair—

He breathed through his fingers and looked down at the presents. He'd seen blood before; he'd seen all kinds of deaths, mostly on the sides of highways, but

twice because of bullets to the head. He told himself, *Pretend it's no different*. He tried to focus and made himself pick out words on the presents' tags.

No help there. Wayne had bought them all presents. *To Danny, From Daddy. To Mommy, From Daddy*. All written in Wayne's blocky letters. Jesus H.

Larry knew he should go, just go out and sit in his cruiser until midnight, but he couldn't help it. He took one of Jenny's presents, a small one that had slid almost completely under the couch, and sat down in the dining room with the box on his lap. He shouldn't do this, it was wrong, but really—who was left to know that a present was gone? Larry wasn't family, but he was close enough—he had some rights here. Who, besides him, would ever unwrap them? The presents belonged to Wayne's parents now. Would they? Would they want to see what their son had bought for the family he'd butchered? Not if they had any sense at all.

Larry went into the kitchen, looking down only to step where the rusty smears weren't. Under the sink he found garbage bags; he took one.

He sat back down in the dining room. The gift was only a few inches square, wrapped in gold foil paper. Larry slid a finger under a taped seam. He carefully tore the paper away. Inside was a small, light cardboard box, also taped. He could see Wayne's fingerprint caught in the tape glue before he cut it with a thumbnail. He held the lid lightly between his palms and shook out the container onto his lap.

Wayne had bought Jenny lingerie. A silk camisole and matching panty, in red, folded small.

Jenny liked red. Her skin took to it somehow; she was always a little pink. The bust of the camisole was transparent, lacy. She would look impossible in it. That was Jenny, though. She could slip on a T-shirt and look like your best pal. Or she could put on a little lipstick and do her hair and wear a dress, and she'd look like she ought to be up on a movie screen someplace. Larry ran his fingers over the silk. He wondered if Wayne had touched the lingerie this way, too, and what he might have been thinking when he did. Did he know, when he bought it? When had he found out?

Don't be coy with me, Wayne had said on the phone. He'd called Larry at his house; Emily would have picked up if her hands weren't soapy with dishwater. Larry watched his wife while he listened. I know, Wayne said. I followed you to the motel. I just shot her, Larry. I shot her in the head.

Larry dumped the lingerie and the wrappings into the garbage bag.

He took the bag upstairs with him, turning off the living room light behind him and turning on the one in the stairwell. He had to cling tight to the banister to get past the spot where Wayne had shot the dog, a big husky named Kodiak,

rheumy-eyed and arthritic. Kodiak didn't care much for the children, who tried to uncurl his tail, so most of the time he slept in a giant basket in the sewing room upstairs. He must have jumped awake at the sound of gunshots. He would have smelled what was wrong right away. Jenny had gotten him as a puppy during high school. Larry had been dating her then; he remembered sitting on the kitchen floor with her at her parents' house, the dog skidding happily back and forth between them. Kodiak had grown old loving her. He must have stood on the landing and growled and barked at Wayne, and Wayne shot him from the foot of the stairs. Through the head, just like everyone else. Larry had seen dogs driven vicious by bloodshed; it turned on switches in their heads. He hoped Kodiak had at least made a lunge for Wayne before getting shot.

Larry walked into Wayne and Jenny's bedroom. He'd been in it before. Just once. Wayne had gone up to Chicago on business, and the kids were at school, and Jenny called Larry—at the station; she told dispatch she thought she saw someone in the woods, maybe a hunter, and would the sheriff swing by and run him off? That was smart of her. Larry could go in broad daylight and smoke in the living room and drink a cup of coffee, and no one would say boo.

And, as it turned out, Jenny could set his coffee down on the dining room table and then waggle her fingers at him from the foot of the stairs. And he could get hard just at the sight of her doing it, Jenny Sullivan smiling at him in sweatpants and an old T-shirt.

And upstairs she could say, Not the bed.

They'd stood together in front of the mirror over the low bureau, Jenny bent forward, both of them with their pants pulled down mid-thigh, and Larry gritting his teeth just to last a few minutes. Halfway through he took his hat from the bureau top—he'd brought it upstairs with them and couldn't remember why—and set it on her head, and she'd looked up and met his eyes in the mirror, and both of them were laughing when they came. Jenny's laugh turned into something like a shriek. He said, I never heard you sound like that before, and Jenny said, I've never sounded like that before. Not in this room. She said, This house has never heard anything like it. And when she said it, it was like the house was Wayne, like somehow he'd walked in. They both turned serious and sheepish—Jenny's mouth got small and grim—and they'd separated, pulled their clothes up, pulled themselves together.

Now he went through the drawers of the bureau, trying to remember what Jenny wore that day. The blue sweatpants. The Butler Bulldogs shirt. Bright pink socks—he remembered her stumbling around, trying to pull one off. He found a pair that seemed right, rolled tight together. Silk panties, robin's egg blue. He found a fluffy red thing that she used to keep her ponytail together. Little fake

ruby earrings in a ceramic seashell. He smelled through the perfumes next to her vanity, found one he liked and remembered, and sprayed it on the clothes, heavily . . . it would fade over time, and if it was too strong now, in ten years it wouldn't be.

He packed all of it into the plastic bag from the kitchen.

Then he sat at the foot of the bed, eyes closed, for a long few minutes. He could hear his own breath. His eyes stung. He looked at the backs of his hands and concentrated on keeping steady. He thought about the sound of Wayne's voice when he called. *I left her sexy for you, Larry.*

That made him feel like doing something other than weeping.

When he was composed he looked through the desks in the bedroom and the drawers of all the bed tables. He glanced at his watch. It was only eight.

He walked down the hall into the sewing room and sat at Jenny's sewing table. The room smelled like Kodiak: an old dog smell, a mixture of the animal and the drops he had to have in his ears. Pictures of the children and Jenny's parents dotted the walls. Wayne's bespectacled head peeped out of a few, too—but not very many, when you looked hard. Larry opened a drawer under the table and rooted through. Then he opened Jenny's sewing box.

He hadn't known what he was looking for, but in the sewing box he found it. He opened a little pillowed silk box full of spare buttons, and inside, pinned to the lid, was a slip of paper. He knew it right away from the green embossment—it was from a stationery pad he'd found at the hotel he and Jenny had sometimes used in Lebanon. He unfolded it. His hands shook, and he was crying now—she'd kept it, she'd kept something.

This was from a year ago, on a Thursday afternoon; Wayne had taken the boys up to see his folks. Larry met Jenny at the hotel after she was done at the school. Jenny wanted to sleep for an hour or two after they made love, but Larry was due home, and it was better for them to come and go separately anyway, so he dressed quietly while she dozed. He'd looked at her asleep for a long time, and then he'd written a note. He remembered thinking at the time: *evidence*. But he couldn't help it. Some things needed to be put down in writing; some things you had to put your name to, if they were going to mean anything at all.

So Larry found the stationery pad and wrote, *My sweet Jenny*, and got teary when he did. He sat on the bed next to her and leaned over and kissed her warm ear. She stirred and murmured without opening her eyes. He finished the note and left it by her hand.

A week later he asked her, Did you get my note?

She said, No. But then she kissed him and smiled and put her warm, small hands on his cheeks. Of course I did, you dummy.

He'd been able to remember the words on the note—he'd run them over and over in his head—but now he opened the folded paper and read them again: *My sweet Jenny, I have trouble with these things but I wouldn't do this if I didn't love you.*

And then he read on. He dropped the note onto the tabletop and stared at it, his hand clamped over his mouth.

He'd signed it *Yours, Larry*—but his name had been crossed out. And over it had been written, in shaky block letters: *Wayne*.

December 24, 1975

If Jenny ever had to tell someone—a stranger, the sympathetic man she imagined coming to the door sometimes, kind of a traveling psychologist and granter of divorces all wrapped up in one—about what it was like to be married to Wayne Sullivan, she would have told him about tonight. She'd say, *Wayne called me at six, after my parents got here for dinner, after I'd gotten the boys into their good clothes for the Christmas picture, to tell me he wouldn't be home for another couple of hours. He had some last-minute shopping, he said.*

Jenny was washing dishes. The leftovers from the turkey had already been sealed in Tupperware and put into the refrigerator. From the living room she could hear Danny with her mother; her father was playing with Alex in the playroom. She could hear Alex squealing every few minutes or shouting nonsense in his two-year-old singsong. It was 8:40. *Almost three hours later, she told the man in her head, and no sign of him. And that's Wayne. There's a living room full of presents. All anyone wants of him now is his presence at the table. And he thinks he hasn't done enough, and so our dinner is ruined. It couldn't be more typical.*

Her mother was reading to Danny; she was a schoolteacher too, and Jenny could hear the careful cadences, the little emphasis that meant she was acting out the story with her voice. Her mother had been heroic tonight. She was a master of keeping up appearances, and here, by God, was a time when her gifts were needed. Jenny's father had started to bluster when Jenny announced Wayne was going to be late—Jennifer, I swear to you I think that man does this on purpose—but her mother had gotten up on her cane and gone to her father, put a hand on his shoulder, and said, He's being sweet, dear, he's buying presents. He's doing the best he knows.

Danny of course had asked after his father, and she told him, Daddy will be a little late, and he whined, and Alex picked up on it, and then her mother called both of them over to the couch and let them pick the channel on the television,

and for the most part they forgot. Just before dinner was served, her mother hobbled into the kitchen, and Jenny kissed her on the forehead. Thank you, she said.

He's an odd man, her mother said.

You're not telling me anything new.

But loving. He is loving.

Her mother stirred the gravy, a firm smile on her face.

They ate slowly, eyes on the clock—Jenny waited a long time to announce dessert—and at eight o'clock she gave up and cleared the dishes. She put a plate of turkey and potatoes—Wayne wouldn't eat anything else—into the oven.

Jenny scrubbed at the dishes, the same china they'd had since their wedding, even the plates they'd glued together after their first anniversary dinner. She thought, for the hundredth time, what her life would be like if she were in Larry's kitchen now instead of Wayne's.

Larry and Emily had bought a new house the previous spring, on the other side of the county, to celebrate Larry's election as sheriff. Of course Jenny had gone to see it with Wayne and the boys, but she'd been by on her own a couple of times, too. Emily spent two weekends a month visiting her grandmother at a nursing home in Michigan. Jenny had made her visits in summer, when she didn't teach, while Wayne was at work. She dropped the boys at her folks' and parked her car out of sight from the road. It was a nice house, big and bright, with beautiful bay windows that let in the evening sun, filtering it through the leaves of two big maples in the front yard. Larry wouldn't use his and Emily's bed—God, it wouldn't be right, even if I don't love her—so they made love on the guest bed, narrow and squeaky, the same bed Larry had slept on in high school, which gave things a nice nostalgic feel; this was the bed where Larry had first touched her breasts, way back in the mists of time, when she was sixteen. Now she and Larry lay in the guest room all afternoon. They laughed and chattered; when Larry came—with a bellow she would have found funny if it hadn't turned her on so much—it was like a cork popped out from his throat, and he'd talk for hours about the misadventures of the citizens of Kinslow. All the while he'd touch her with his big hands.

I should have slept with you in high school, she told him during one of those afternoons. I would never have gone on to anyone else.

Well, I told you so.

She laughed. But sometimes this was because she tried very hard not to cry in front of Larry. He worried after her constantly, and she wanted him to think as many good thoughts about her as he could.

I married the wrong guy was what she wanted to tell him, but she couldn't.

They had just, in a shy way, admitted they were in love, but neither one had been brave enough to bring up what they were going to do about it. Larry had just been elected; even though he was doing what his father had done, he was the youngest sheriff anyone had ever heard of, and a scandal and a divorce would probably torpedo another term. And being sheriff was a job Larry wanted—the only job he’d wanted, why he’d gone into the police force instead of going off to college like her and Wayne. If only he had! She and Wayne had never been friends in high school, but in college they got to know each other because they had Larry in common, because she pined for Larry, and Wayne was good at making her laugh, at making her seem not so lonely.

And then Larry met Emily at church. He called Jenny one night during her sophomore year to tell her he was in love, that he was happy, and that he hoped Jenny would be happy for him, too.

I’m seeing Wayne, she said, blurting it out, relieved she could finally say it.

Really? Larry had paused. *Our* Wayne?

But as much as Jenny now daydreamed about being Larry’s wife (which, these days, was often) she knew such a thing was unlikely at best. She could only stand here waiting for the husband she did have—who might as well be a third son—to figure out it was family time, and think of Larry sitting in his living room with Emily. They probably weren’t talking, either. Emily would be watching television, Larry sitting in his den, his nose buried in a Civil War book. Or thinking of her. Jenny’s stomach thrilled.

But what was she thinking? It was Christmastime at the Thompkins’s house, too, and Larry’s parents were over; her mother was good friends with Mrs. Thompkins and had said something about it earlier. Larry’s house would be a lot like hers, except maybe even happier. Larry and his father and brother would be knocking back a special eggnog recipe, and Emily and Mrs. Thompkins, who got along better than Emily and Larry did, would be gossiping over cookie dough in the kitchen. The thought of all that activity and noise made her sad. It was better to think of Larry’s house as unhappy; better to think of it as an empty place, too big for Larry, needing her and the children—

She was drying her hands when she heard the car grumbling in the trees. Wayne had been putting off a new muffler. She sighed, then called out: Daddy’s home!

Daddy! Danny called. Gramma, finally!

She wished Wayne could hear that.

She looked out the kitchen window and saw Wayne’s car pull up in front of the garage, the wide white circles of his headlights getting smaller and more specific on the garage door. He pulled up too close. Jenny had asked him time

and time again to give her room to pull the Vega out of the garage if she needed to. She could see Wayne behind the wheel, his Impala's orange dash lights shining onto his face. He had his glasses on; she could see the reflections, little match lights.

She imagined Larry coming home, outside a different kitchen window, climbing out of his cruiser. She imagined her sons calling him Daddy, and the thought made her blush. The fantasy was almost blasphemous, but it made her tingle at the same time. Larry loved the boys, and they loved him; she sometimes stopped at the station house, and Larry would take them for a ride in his cruiser. His marriage to Emily might be different if they could have children of their own. Jenny wasn't supposed to know—no one did—but Emily was infertile. They'd found out just before moving into the new house.

Wayne shut off the engine. The light was out over the garage, and Jenny couldn't see him any longer; the image of the car was replaced by a curved piece of her own reflection in the window. She turned again to putting away the dishes. I think he's bringing presents, she heard her mother say. Danny answered this with shouts, and Alex answered him with a yodel.

Jenny thought about Wayne coming in the front door, forgetting to stamp the snow from his boots. She was going to have to go up and kiss him, pretend she didn't taste the cigarettes on his breath. He would sulk if she didn't. This was what infuriated her most; she could explain and explain (later, when they put the kids to bed), but he wouldn't understand what he'd done wrong. He'd brought the kids presents—he'd probably bought her a present. He'd been moody lately (working long hours was what he'd told her), and—she knew—this was his apology for it. In his head he'd worked it all out; he would make a gesture that far outshone any grumpiness, any silence at the dinner table. He'd come through the door like Santa Claus. She could tell him, *The only gift I wanted was a normal family dinner*, and he'd look hurt, he'd look like she slapped him. *But*, he'd say, and the corners of his mouth would turn down, *I was just trying to—* and then he'd launch into the same story he'd be telling himself right now—

They had done this before, a number of times. Too many times. This was how the rest of the night was going to go. And the thought of it all playing out so predictably—

Jenny set a plate down on the counter. She blinked; her throat stung. The thought of him made her feel ill. Her husband was coming into his house on Christmas Eve, and she couldn't bear it.

About a month ago she'd called in a trespasser while Wayne had the kids at a movie in Indy. This was risky, she knew, but she had gotten weepy like this, and she and Larry wouldn't be able to see each other for weeks yet. She'd asked if

the sheriff could come out to the house, and the sheriff came. He looked so happy when she opened the door to him, when he realized Wayne was gone. She took him upstairs, and they did it, and then afterward she said, Now you surprise me, and so he took her out in the cruiser, to a nearby stretch of road, empty for a mile ahead and behind, and he said, Hang on, and floored it. The cruiser seemed almost happy to oblige him. She had her hands on the dashboard, and the road—slightly hilly—lifted her up off the seat, dropped her down again, made her feel like a girl. You're doing one-twenty, Larry said, calm as ever, in between her shrieks. Unfortunately, we're out of road.

At the house she hugged him, kissed his chin. He'd already told her, in a way, but now she told him: I love you. He'd blushed to his ears.

She was going to leave Wayne.

Of course she'd thought about it; she'd been over the possibilities, idly, on and off for the last four years, and certainly since taking up with Larry. But now she knew; she'd crossed some point of balance. She'd been waiting for something to happen with Larry, but she would have to act even sooner. The planning would take a few months at most. She'd have to have a place lined up somewhere else. A job—maybe in Indy, but certainly out of Kinslow. And then she would tell Larry—she'd have to break it to him gently, but she would tell him, once and for all, that she was his for the taking, if he could manage it.

This was it: She didn't love her husband—in fact she didn't much like him—and was never going to feel anything for him again. It had to be done. Larry or no Larry, it had to be done.

Something out the window caught her eye. Wayne had the passenger door of the Impala open and was bent inside; she could see his back under the dome lamp. What was he doing? Maybe he'd spilled his ashtray. She went to the window and put her face close to the glass.

He backed out of the car and stood straight. He stood looking at her for a moment in front of the open car door. He wiped his nose with his gloved hand. Was he crying? She felt a flicker of guilt, as though somehow he'd heard her thoughts. But then he smiled and lifted a finger: *Just a second.*

She did a quick beckon with her hand—*Get your ass in here*—and made a face, eyeballs rolled toward the rest of the house. *Now.*

He shook his head, held the finger up again.

Jenny crossed her arms. She'd see Larry next week; Emily was going to Michigan. She could begin to tell him then.

Wayne bent into the car, then straightened up again. He grinned.

She held her hands out at her sides, palms up: *What? I'm waiting.*

1970

When Wayne had first told her he wanted to blindfold her, Jenny's fear was that he was trying out some kind of sex game, some spice-up-your-love-life idea he'd gotten out of the advice column in *Playboy*. But he promised her otherwise and led her to the car. After fifteen minutes there, arms folded across her chest, and then the discovery that he was serious about guiding her, still blindfolded, through waist-high weeds and clinging spiderwebs, she began to wish sex was on his mind after all.

Wayne, she said, either tell me where we're going or I'm taking this thing off.

It's not far, honey, he said; she could tell from his voice he was grinning. Just bear with me. I'm watching your feet for you.

They were in a woods; that was easy enough to guess. She heard the leaves overhead, and birdcalls; she smelled the thick and cloying smells of the undergrowth. Twice she stumbled, and her hands scraped across tree trunks, furred vines, before Wayne tightened his grip on her arm. They were probably on a path; even blind she knew the going was too easy for them to be headed directly through the bushes. So they were in Wayne's woods, the one his parents owned. Simple enough to figure out; he talked about this place constantly. He'd driven her past it a number of times, but to her it looked like any other stand of trees out in this part of the country: solid green in summertime and dull gray-brown in winter, so thick you couldn't see light shining through from the other side.

I know where we are, she told him.

He gripped her hand and laughed. Maybe, he said, but you don't know *why*.

He had her there. She snagged her skirt on a bush and was tugged briefly between its thorns and Wayne's hand. The skirt ripped and gave. She cursed.

Sorry! Wayne said. Sorry, sorry—not much longer now.

Sunlight flickered over the top of the blindfold, and the sounds around her opened up. She was willing to bet they were in a clearing. A breeze blew past them, smelling of springtime: budding leaves and manure.

Okay, Wayne said. Are you ready?

I'm not sure, she said.

Do you love me?

Of course I love you, she said. She reached a hand out in front of her and found he was suddenly absent. Okay, she said, enough. Give me your hand or the blindfold's off.

She heard odd sounds—was that metal? Glass?

All right, almost there, he said. Sit down.

On the ground?

No. Just sit.

She sat, his hands on her shoulders, and found, shockingly, a chair underneath her behind. A smooth metal folding chair.

Wayne then unknotted the blindfold. He whipped it away. Happy anniversary! he said.

Jenny squinted in the revealed light, but only for a moment. She opened her eyes wide and saw she was sitting, as she'd thought, in a meadow, maybe fifty yards across, surrounded on all sides by tall green trees, all of them rippling in the wind. In front of her was a card table covered with a red-and-white checked tablecloth. The table was set with dishes—their good china, the plates at least—and two wine glasses, all wedding presents they'd only used once, on her birthday. Wayne sat in a chair opposite her, grinning, eyebrows arched. The wind blew his hair straight up off his head.

A picnic, she said. Wayne, that's lovely, thank you.

She reached her hand across the table and grasped his. He was exasperating sometimes, but no other man she'd met could reach this level of sweetness. He'd lugged all this stuff out into the middle of nowhere for her—*that's* where he must have been all afternoon.

You're welcome, he said. The red spots on his cheeks spread and deepened. He lifted her hand and kissed her knuckles, then her wedding ring. He rubbed the places where he'd kissed with his thumb.

He said, I'm sorry that dinner won't be as fancy as the plates, but I really couldn't get anything but sandwiches out here.

That's fine. She laughed. I've eaten your cooking, and we're better off with sandwiches.

Ouch, he said. He faked a European accent: This kitten, she has the claws. But I have the milk that will tame her.

He bent and rummaged through a paper bag near his chair and produced a bottle of red with a flourish and a cocked eyebrow. She couldn't help but laugh.

Not entirely chilled, he said, but good enough. He uncorked it and poured her a glass.

A toast.

To what?

To the first part of the surprise.

There's more?

He smiled slyly, lifted his glass, then said, After dinner.

He'd won her over; she didn't question it. Jenny lifted her glass, clinked rims with her husband's, and sat back with her legs crossed at the knee. Wayne bent

and dug in the bag again, and then came up with sliced wheat bread and cheese and a package of carved roast beef in deli paper. He made her a sandwich, even slicing up a fresh tomato. They ate in the pleasant breeze.

After dinner he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his stomach. When they'd first started dating, she thought he did it to be funny; but really, he did it after eating anything larger than a candy bar. She was willing to bet he'd been doing it since he was a toddler. It meant all was well in the land of Wayne. The gesture made her smile, and she looked away. Since they'd married he'd developed a small wedge of belly; she wondered—not unhappily, not here—if in twenty years he'd have a giant stomach to rub, like his father's.

So I was right? she asked. This is your parents' woods?

Nope, he said, smiling.

It's not?

It was. They don't own it anymore.

They sold it? When? To who?

Yesterday. He was grinning broadly, now. To me. To us.

She sat forward, then back. He glanced around at the trees, his hair tufting in a sudden gust of the wind.

You're serious, she said. Her stomach tightened. This was a feeling she'd had a few times since their wedding—she was learning that the more complicated Wayne's ideas were, the less likely they were to be good ones. A picnic in the woods? Fine. But this?

I'm serious, Wayne said. This is my favorite place in the world—second favorite, I mean. He winked at her, then went on: But either way. Both my favorite places are mine, now. Ours.

She touched a napkin to her lips. So, she said. How much did—did we pay for our woods?

A dollar. He laughed and said, Can you believe it? Dad wanted to give it to us, but I told him, No Pop, I want to buy it. We ended up compromising.

She could only stare at him. He squeezed her hand and said, We're landowners now, honey. One square mile.

That's—

Dad wanted to sell it off, and I couldn't bear the thought of it going to somebody who was going to plow it all under.

We need to pay your parents more than a dollar, Wayne. That's absurd.

That's what *I* told them. But Dad said no, we needed the money more. But honey—there's something else. That's only part of the surprise.

Jenny twined her fingers together in front of her mouth. A suspicion had formed, and she hoped he wasn't about to do what she guessed. Wayne was

digging beside his chair again. He came up with a long roll of paper, blueprint paper, held with a rubber band. He put it on the table between them.

Our paper anniversary, he said.

What is this?

Go ahead. Look at it.

Jenny knew what the plans would show. She rolled the rubber band off the blueprints, her mouth dry. Wayne stood, his hands quick and eager, and spread the prints flat on the tabletop. They were upside down; she went around the table and stood next to him. He put a hand on the small of her back.

The blueprints were for a house. A simple two-story house—the ugliest thing she had ever seen.

I didn't want to tell you too soon, he said, but I got a raise at the bank. Plus, now that I've been there three years, I get a terrific deal on home loans. I got approval three days ago.

A house, she said.

They were living in an apartment in Kinslow, nice enough but bland, sharing a wall with an old woman who complained if they spoke above a whisper or if they played rock 'n' roll records. Jenny put a hand to her hair. Wayne, she said, where is this house going to be?

Here, he said and grinned again. He held his arms out. Right here. The table is on the exact spot. The contractors start digging on Monday. The timing's perfect. It'll be done by the end of summer.

Here . . . in the woods.

Yep.

He laughed, watching her face, and said, We're only three miles from town. The interstate's just on the other side of the field to the south. The county road is paved. All we have to do is have them expand the path in and we'll have a driveway. It'll be our hideaway. Honey?

She sat down in the chair he'd been sitting in. She could barely speak. They had talked about buying a house soon—but one in town. They'd also talked about moving to Indianapolis, about leaving Kinslow—maybe not right away, but within five years.

Wayne, she said. Doesn't this all feel kind of . . . permanent?

Well, he said, it's a house. It's supposed to.

We just talked last month. You wanted to get a job in the city. I want to live in the city. A five-year plan, remember?

Yeah. I do.

He knelt next to her chair and put his arm across her shoulders.

But I've been thinking, he said. The bank is nice, really nice, and the money

just got better, and then Dad was talking about getting rid of the land, and I couldn't bear to hear it, and—

And so you went ahead and did it without asking me.

Um, Wayne said, it seemed like such a great deal that—

Okay, she told him. Okay. It *is* a great deal. If it was just buying the woods, that would be wonderful. But the house is different. What it means is that you're building your dream house right in the spot I want to move away from. I hate to break it to you, but that means it's not quite my dream house.

Wayne removed his hand from her shoulders and clasped his fingers in front of his mouth. She knew that gesture, too.

Wayne—

I really thought this would make you happy, he said.

A house *does* make me happy. But one in Kinslow. One we can sell later and not feel bad about when we move—

She wasn't sure what happened next. Wayne told her it was an accident, that he stood up too fast and hit his shoulder on the table. And it looked that way, sometimes, when she thought back on it. But when it happened she was sure he flung his arm out, that he knocked the table aside, that he did it on purpose. The wineglasses and china plates flew out and disappeared into the clumps of yellow grass; she heard a crash. The blueprints caught in a tangle with the tablecloth and the other folding chair.

Goddammit! Wayne shouted. He walked a quick circle, holding his hand close to his chest.

Jenny was too stunned to move, but after a minute she said Wayne's name.

He shook his head and kept walking the circle. Jenny saw he was crying, and when he saw her looking, he turned his face away. She sat still in her chair, not certain what to say or do. Finally she knelt and tried to assemble the pieces of the broken dishes.

After a minute he said, I think I'm bleeding.

She stood and walked to him and saw that he was. He'd torn a gash in his hand on the meaty outside of his palm. A big one—it would need stitches. His shirt was soaked with blood where he'd cradled his hand.

Come on, she said. We need to get you to the hospital.

No, he said. His voice was low and miserable.

Wayne, don't be silly. This isn't a time to sulk. You're hurt.

No. Hear me out. Okay? You always say what you want, and you make me sound stupid for saying what I want. This time I just want to *say* it.

She grabbed some napkins and pressed them against his hand. Jesus, Wayne, she said, seeing blood well up from the cut, across her fingers. Okay, okay, say

what you need to.

This is my favorite place, he said. I've loved it since I was a kid. I used to come out here with Larry. He and I used to imagine we had a house out here. A hideaway.

Well—

Be quiet. I'm not done yet. His lip quivered, and he said, I know we talked, I know you want to go to Indy. Well, we can. But it looks like we're going to be successful. It looks like I'm going to do well, and you can get a job teaching anywhere. I'll just work hard, and in five years maybe we can have two houses

—

Oh, Wayne—

Listen! We can have a house in Indy and then this—this can be our getaway. He sniffled and said, But I want to keep it. Besides you, this is the only thing I want. This house, right out here.

We can talk about it later. You're going to bleed to death if we don't get you to the emergency room.

I wanted you to love it, he said. I wanted you to love it because *I* love it. Is that too much to ask from your wife? I wanted to give you something *special*. I

—

It was awful watching him try to talk about this. The spots of red in his cheeks were burning now, and the rims of his eyes were almost the same color. The corners of his mouth turned down in little curls.

Don't worry, she said. We'll talk about it. Okay? Wayne? We'll talk. We'll take the blueprints with us to the emergency room. But you need stitches. Let's go.

I love you, he said.

She stopped fussing around his hand. He was looking down at her, tilting his head.

Jenny, just tell me you love me and none of it will matter.

She laughed in spite of herself, shaking her head. Of course, she said. Of course I do.

Say it. I need to hear it.

She kissed his cheek. Wayne, I love you with all my heart. You're my husband. Now move your behind, okay?

He kissed her, dipping his head. Jenny was bending away to pick up the blueprints, and his lips, wet, just grazed her cheek. She smiled at him and gathered their things; Wayne stood and watched her, moist eyed.

She finally took his good hand, and they walked back toward the car, and his kiss, dried slowly by the breeze, felt cool on her cheek. It lingered for a while,

and despite everything, she was glad for it.

Then

The boys were first audible only as distant shrieks between the trees.

They were young enough that any time they raised their voices they sounded as though they were in terror. They were chasing each other, their only sounds loud calls, denials, laughter. When they appeared in the meadow—one charging out from a break in a dense thicket of thorned shrubs, the other close behind—they were almost indistinguishable from one another in their squeals, in their red jackets and caps. Late afternoon was shifting into dusky evening. Earlier they had hunted squirrels, unaware of how the sounds of their voices and the pops of their BB guns had traveled ahead of them, sending hundreds of beasts into their dens.

In the center of the meadow, the trailing boy caught up with the fleeing first; he pounced and they wrestled. Caps came off. One boy was blond, the other was mousy brown. The brown-haired boy was smaller. Stop it, he called from the bottom of the pile. Larry! Stop it! I mean it!

Larry laughed and said with a shudder: Wayne, you pussy.

Don't call me that!

Don't be one, pussy!

They flailed and punched until they lay squirming and helpless with laughter.

Later they pitched a tent in the center of the meadow. They had done this before. Near their tent was an old circle of charred stones, ringing a pile of damp ashes and cinders. Wayne wandered out of the meadow and gathered armfuls of deadwood while Larry secured the tent into the soft and unstable earth. They squatted down around the gathered wood and worked at setting it alight. Darkness was coming; beneath the gray overcast sky, light was diffuse anyway, and now it seemed as though the shadows came not from above but from below, shadows pooling and deepening as though they welled up from underground springs. Larry was the first to look nervously into the shadowed trees while Wayne threw matches into the wood. Wayne worked at the fire with his face twisted, mouth pursed. When the fire caught at last, the boys grinned at each other.

I wouldn't want to be out here when it's dark, Larry said, experimentally.

It's dark now.

No, I mean with no fire. Pitch dark.

I have, Wayne said.

No you haven't.

Sure I have. Sometimes I forget what time it is and get back to my bike late. Once it got totally dark. If I wasn't on the path, I would have got lost.

Wayne poked at the fire with a long stick. His parents owned the woods, but their house was two miles away. Larry looked around him, impressed.

Were you scared?

Shit, yeah. Wayne giggled. It was dark. I'm not *dumb*.

Larry looked at him for a while, then said, Sorry I called you a pussy.

Wayne shrugged and said, I should have shot that squirrel.

They'd seen one in a tree, somehow oblivious to them. Wayne was the better shot, and they'd crouched together behind a nearby log, Wayne's BB gun steadied in the crotch of a dead branch. He'd looked at the squirrel for a long time before finally lifting his cheek from the gun. I can't, he'd said.

What do you mean, you can't?

I can't. That's all.

He handed the gun to Larry, and Larry took aim, too fast, and missed.

It's all right, Larry said now, at the fire. Squirrel tastes like shit.

So does baloney, Wayne said, grim.

They pulled sandwiches from their packs. Both took the meat from between the bread, speared it with sticks, and held it over the fire until it charred and sizzled. Then they put it back into the sandwiches. Wayne took a bite first, then squealed and held a hand to his mouth. He spit a hot chunk of meat into his hand, then fumbled it into the fire.

It's *hot*, he said.

Larry looked at him for a long time. Pussy, he said and couldn't hold in his laughter. Wayne ducked his eyes and felt inside his mouth with his fingers.

Later, the fire dimmed. They sat sleepily beside it, talking in low voices. Wayne rubbed his stomach. Things unseen moved in the trees—mostly small animals, from the sound of it, but once or twice larger things.

Deer, probably, Wayne said.

What about wildcats?

No wildcats live around here. I've seen foxes, though.

Foxes aren't that big.

They spread out their sleeping bags inside the tent and opened the flap a bit so they could see the fire.

This is my favorite place, Wayne said, when they zipped into the bags.

The tent?

No. The meadow. I've been thinking about it. I want to have a house here someday.

A house?

Yeah.

What kind of house?

I don't know. Like mine, I guess, but out here. I could come out onto the porch at night, and it would be just like this. But you wouldn't have to pitch a tent. You know what? We could both have it. We'd each get half of the house to do whatever we want in. We wouldn't have to go home before it gets dark, because we'd already be there.

Larry smiled but said, That's dumb. We'll both be married by then. You won't want me in your house all the time.

That's not true.

You won't get married?

No—I mean, yeah, I will. Sure. But you can always come over.

It's not like that, Larry said, laughing.

How do you know?

Because it isn't. Jesus Christ, Wayne. Sometimes I wonder what planet you live on.

You always make my ideas sound dumb.

So don't have dumb ideas.

It isn't a dumb idea to have my friends in my house.

Larry sighed and said, No, it isn't. But marriage is different. You get married, and then the girl you marry is your best friend. That's what being in love is.

My dad has best friends.

Mine too. But who does your dad spend more time with—they or your mom?

Wayne thought for a minute. Oh.

They looked out the tent flap at the fire.

Wayne said, You'll come over when you can, though, right?

Sure, Larry said. You bet.

They lay on their stomachs, and Wayne talked about the house he wanted to build. It would have a tower. It would have a secret hallway built into the walls. It would have a pool table in the basement, better than the one at Vic's Pizza King in town. It would have a garage big enough for three cars.

Four, Larry said. We'll each have two. A sports car and a truck.

Four, Wayne said, A four-car garage. And a pinball machine. I'll have one in the living room, rigged so you don't have to put money in it.

After a while, Wayne heard Larry's breathing soften. He looked out the tent flap at the orange coals of the fire. He was sleepy, but he didn't want to sleep, not yet. He thought about his house and watched the fire fade.

He wished for the house to be here in the meadow now. Larry could have half, Wayne the other. He imagined empty rooms, then rooms full of toys. But that

wasn't the way it would be. They'd be grown-ups. He imagined a long mirror in the bedroom and tried to see himself in it: older, as a man. He'd have rifles, not BB guns. He tried to imagine the rooms full of the things a man would have and a boy wouldn't: bookshelves, closets full of suits and ties.

Then he saw a woman at the kitchen table, wearing a blue dress. Her face kept changing—he couldn't quite see it. But he knew she was pretty. He saw himself open the kitchen door, swinging a briefcase that he put down at his feet. He held out his arms, and the woman stood to welcome him, making a happy girlish sound, and held out her arms too. Then she was close. He smelled her perfume, and she said—in a woman's voice, warm and honeyed—*Wayne*, and he felt a leaping excitement, like he'd just been scared—but better, much better—and he laughed and squeezed her and said into her soft neck and hair, his voice deep: *I'm home.*

LOUISE ERDRICH

Disaster Stamps of Pluto

FROM *The New Yorker*

THE DEAD OF PLUTO now outnumber the living, and the cemetery stretches up the low hill east of town in a jagged display of white stone. There is no bar, no theater, no hardware store, no creamery or car repair, just a gas pump. Even the priest comes to the church only once a month. The grass is barely mowed in time for his visit, and of course there are no flowers planted. But when the priest does come, there is at least one more person for the town café to feed.

That there is a town café is something of a surprise, and it is no rundown questionable edifice. When the bank pulled out, the family whose drive-in was destroyed by heavy winds bought the building with their insurance money. The granite façade, arched windows, and twenty-foot ceilings make the café seem solid and even luxurious. There is a blackboard for specials and a cigar box by the cash register for the extra change that people might donate to the hospital care of a local boy who was piteously hurt in a farming accident. I spend a good part of my day, as do most of the people left here, in a booth at the café. For now that there is no point in keeping up our municipal buildings, the café serves as office space for town-council and hobby-club members, church-society and card-playing groups. It is an informal staging area for shopping trips to the nearest mall—sixty-eight miles south—and a place for the town's few young mothers to meet and talk, pushing their car-seat-convertible strollers back and forth with one foot while hooting and swearing as intensely as their husbands, down at the other end of the row of booths. Those left spouseless or childless, owing to war or distance or attrition, eat here. Also divorced or single persons like myself who, for one reason or another, have ended up with a house in Pluto, North Dakota, their only major possession.

We are still here because to sell our houses for a fraction of their original price would leave us renters for life in the world outside. Yet, however tenaciously we cling to yards and living rooms and garages, the grip of one or two of us is broken every year. We are growing fewer. Our town is dying. And I am in charge of more than I bargained for when, in 1991, in the year of my retirement from medicine, I was elected president of Pluto's historical society.

At the time, it looked as though we might survive, if not flourish, well into the next millennium. But then came the flood of 1997, followed by the cost of

rebuilding. Smalls's bearing works and the farm-implement dealership moved east. We were left with flaxseed and sunflowers, but cheap transport via the interstate had pretty much knocked us out of the game already. So we have begun to steadily diminish, and, as we do, I am becoming the repository of many untold stories such as people will finally tell when they know that there is no use in keeping secrets, or when they realize that all that's left of a place will one day reside in documents, and they want those papers to reflect the truth.

My old high school friend Neve Harp, salutatorian of the class of 1942 and fellow historical-society member, is one of the last of the original founding families. She is the granddaughter of the speculator and surveyor Frank Harp, who came with members of the Dakota and Great Northern Townsite Company to establish a chain of towns along the Great Northern tracks. They hoped to profit, of course. These townsites were meticulously drawn up into maps for risktakers who would purchase lots for their businesses or homes. Farmers in every direction would buy their supplies in town and patronize the entertainment spots when they came to ship their harvests via rail.

The platting crew moved by wagon and camped where they all agreed some natural feature of the landscape or general distance from other towns made a new town desirable. When the men reached the site of what is now our town, they'd already been platting and mapping for several years and in naming their sites had used up the few words they knew of Sioux or Chippewa, presidents and foreign capitals, important minerals, great statesmen, and the names of their girlfriends and wives. The Greek and Roman gods intrigued them. To the east lay the neatly marked-out townsites of Zeus, Neptune, Apollo, and Athena. They rejected Venus as conducive, perhaps, to future debauchery. Frank Harp suggested Pluto, and it was accepted before anyone realized they'd named a town for the god of the underworld. This occurred in the boom year of 1906, twenty-four years before the planet Pluto was discovered. It is not without irony now that the planet is the coldest, the loneliest, and perhaps the least hospitable in our solar system—but that was never, of course, intended to reflect upon our little municipality.

Dramas of great note have occurred in Pluto. In 1924, five members of a family—the parents, a teenage girl, an eight- and a four-year-old boy—were murdered. A neighbor boy, apparently deranged with love over the daughter, vanished, and so remained the only suspect. Of that family, but one survived—a seven-month-old baby, who slept through the violence in a crib wedged unobtrusively behind a bed.

In 1934, the National Bank of Pluto was robbed of seventeen thousand dollars. In 1936, the president of the bank tried to flee the country with most of the town's money. He intended to travel to Brazil. His brother followed him as far as New York and persuaded him to return, and most of the money was restored. By visiting each customer personally, the brother convinced them all that their accounts were now safe, and the bank survived. The president, however, killed himself. The brother took over the job.

At the very apex of the town cemetery hill, there is a war memorial. In 1951, seventeen names were carved into a chunk of granite that was dedicated to the heroes of both world wars. One of the names was that of the boy who is generally believed to have murdered the family, the one who vanished from Pluto shortly after the bodies were discovered. He enlisted in Canada, and when notice of his death reached his aunt—who was married to a town-council member and had not wanted to move away, as the mother and father of the suspect did—the aunt insisted that his name be added to the list of the honorable dead. But unknown community members chipped it out of the stone, so that now a rough spot is all that marks his death, and on Veterans Day only sixteen flags are set into the ground around that rock.

There were droughts and freak accidents and other crimes of passion, and there were good things that happened, too. The seven-month-old baby who survived the murders was adopted by the aunt of the killer, who raised her in pampered love and, at great expense, sent her away to an Eastern college, never expecting that she would return. When she did, nine years later, she was a doctor—the first female doctor in the region. She set up her practice in town and restored the house she had inherited, where the murders had taken place—a small, charming clapboard farmhouse that sits on the eastern edge of town. Six hundred and forty acres of farmland stretch east from the house and barn. With the lease money from those acres, she was able to maintain a clinic and a nurse, and to keep her practice going even when her patients could not always pay for her services. She never married, but for a time she had a lover, a college professor and swim coach whose job did not permit him to leave the university. She had always understood that he would move to Pluto once he retired. But instead he married a girl much younger than himself and moved to Southern California, where he could have a year-round outdoor swimming pool.

Murdo Harp was the name of the brother of the suicide banker. He was the son of the town's surveyor and the father of my friend. Neve is now an octogenarian like me; she and I take daily walks to keep our joints oiled. Neve Harp was married three times, but has returned to her maiden name and the house she

inherited from her father. She is a tall woman, somewhat stooped for lack of calcium in her diet, although on my advice she now ingests plenty. Every day, no matter what the weather (up to blizzard conditions), we take our two- or three-mile walk around the perimeter of Pluto.

“We orbit like an ancient couple of moons,” she said to me one day.

“If there were people in Pluto, they could set their clocks by us,” I answered. “Or worship us.”

We laughed to think of ourselves as moon goddesses.

Most of the yards and lots are empty. For years, there has been no money in the town coffers for the streets, and the majority have been unimproved or left to gravel. Only the main street is paved with asphalt now, but the rough surfaces are fine with us. They give more purchase. Breaking a hip is our gravest dread—once you are immobile at our age, that is the end.

Our conversations slide through time, and we dwell often on setting straight the town record. I think we’ve sifted through every town occurrence by now, but perhaps when it comes to our own stories there is something left to know. Neve surprised me one day.

“I’ve been meaning to tell you why Murdo’s brother, my uncle Octave, tried to run away to Brazil,” she told me, as though the scandal had just occurred. “We should write the whole thing up for the historical newsletter.”

I asked Neve to wait until we had finished our walk and sat down at the café, so that I could take notes, but she was so excited by the story beating its wings inside her—for some reason so alive and insistent that morning—that she had to talk as we made our way along. Her white hair swirled in wisps from its clip. Her features seemed to have sharpened. Neve has always been angular and imposing. I’ve been her foil. Her best audience. The one who absorbs the overflow of her excitements and pains.

“As you remember,” Neve said, “Octave drowned himself when the river was at its lowest, in only two feet of water. He basically had to throw himself upon a puddle and breathe it in. It was thought that only a woman could have caused a man to inflict such a gruesome death upon himself, but it was not love. He did not die for love.” Neve jabbed a finger at me, as though I’d been the one who kept the myth of Octave’s passion alive. We walked meditatively on for about a hundred yards. Then she began again. “Do you remember stamp collections? How important those were? The rage?”

I said that I did remember. People still collect stamps, I told her.

“But not like they did then, not like Octave,” she said. “My uncle had a stamp collection that he kept in the bank’s main vault. One of this town’s best-kept secrets is exactly how much money that collection was worth. When the bank

was robbed in '34, the robbers forced their way into the vault. They grabbed what cash there was and completely ignored the fifty-nine albums and twenty-two specially constructed display boxes framed in ebony. That stamp collection was worth many times what the robbers got. It was worth almost as much money as was in the entire bank, in fact."

"What happened to it?" I was intrigued, as I hadn't known any of this.

Neve gave me a sly sideways look.

"I kept it when the bank changed hands. I like looking at the stamps, you see—they're better than television. I've decided to sell the whole thing, and that's why I'm telling the story now. The collection is in my front room. Stacked on a table. You've seen the albums, but you've never commented. You've never looked inside them. If you had, you would have been enchanted, like me, with the delicacy, the detail, and the endless variety. You would have wanted to know more about the stamps themselves, and the need to know and understand their histories would have taken hold of you, as it did my uncle and as it has me, though thankfully to a much lesser degree. Of course, you have your own interests."

"Yes," I said. "Thank God for those."

I would be typing out and editing Neve's story for the next month.

As we passed the church, we saw the priest there on his monthly visit. The poor man waved at us when we called out a greeting. No one had remembered, so he was cutting the grass. His parish was four or six combined now.

"They treat the good ones like simple beasts," Neve said. Then she shrugged and we pressed on. "My uncle's specialty, for all stamp collectors begin at some point to lean in a certain direction, was what you might call the dark side of stamp collecting."

I looked at Neve, whose excitements tend to take a shady turn, and thought that she had inherited her uncle's twist of mind along with his collection.

"After he had acquired the Holy Grails of philately—British Guiana's one-cent magenta, and the one-cent Z Grill—as well as the merely intriguing—for instance, Sweden's 1855 three-cent issue, which is orange instead of blue-green, and many stamps of the Thurn und Taxis postal system and superb specimens of the highly prized Mulready cover—my uncle's melancholia drew him specifically to what are called 'errors.' I think Sweden's three-cent began it all."

"Of course," I said, "even I know about the upside-down airplane stamp."

"The twenty-four-cent carmine-rose-and-blue invert. The Jenny. Yes!" She seemed delighted. "He began to collect errors in color, like the Swedish stamp, very tricky, then overprints, imperforate errors, value missings, omitted vignettes, and freaks. He has one entire album devoted to the seventeen-year-old

boy Frank Baptist, who ran off stamps on an old handpress for the Confederate government.”

Neve charged across a gravelly patch of road, and I hastened to stay within earshot. Stopping to catch her breath, she leaned on a tree and told me that, about six years before he absconded with the bank’s money, Octave Harp had gone into disasters—that is, stamps and covers, or envelopes, that had survived the dreadful occurrences that test or destroy us. These pieces of mail, water-stained, tattered, even bloodied, marked by experience, took their value from the gravity of their condition. Such damage was part of their allure.

By then, we had arrived at the café, and I was glad to sit down and take a few notes on Neve’s revelations. I borrowed some paper and a pen from the owner, and we ordered our coffee and sandwiches. I always have a Denver sandwich and Neve orders a BLT without the bacon. She is a strict vegetarian, the only one in Pluto. We sipped our coffee.

“I have a book,” Neve said, “on philately, in which it says that stamp collecting offers refuge to the confused and gives new vigor to fallen spirits. I think Octave was hoping he would find something of the sort. But my father told me that the more he dwelt on the disasters the worse he felt. He would brighten whenever he obtained something valuable for his collection, though. He was in touch with people all over the globe—it was quite remarkable. I’ve got files and files of his correspondence with stamp dealers. He would spend years tracking down a surviving stamp or cover that had been through a particular disaster. Wars, of course, from the American Revolution to the Crimean War and the First World War. Soldiers frequently carry letters on their person, and one doesn’t like to think how those letters ended up in the hands of collectors. But Octave preferred natural disasters and, to a lesser extent, man-made accidents.” Neve tapped the side of her cup. “He would have been fascinated by the *Hindenburg*, and certainly there would have been a stamp or two involved, somewhere. And our modern disasters, too, of course.”

I knew what she was thinking of, suddenly—those countless fluttering, strangely cheerful papers drifting through the sky in New York. . . . I went cold with dismay at the thought that many of those bits of paper were perhaps now in the hands of dealers who were selling them all over the world to people like Octave. Neve and I think very much alike, and I saw that she was about to sugar her coffee—a sign of distress. She has a bit of a blood-sugar problem.

“Don’t,” I said. “You’ll be awake all night.”

“I know.” She did it anyway, then set the glass cannister back on the table. “Isn’t it strange, though, how time mutes the horror of events, how they cease to affect us in the same way? But I began to tell you all of this in order to explain

why Octave left for Brazil.”

“With so much money. Now I’m starting to imagine he was on the trail of a stamp.”

“You’re exactly right,” Neve said. “My father told me what Octave was looking for. As I said, he was fascinated with natural disasters, and in his collection he had a letter that had survived the explosion of Krakatoa in 1883, a Dutch postmark placed upon a letter written just before and carried off on a steamer. He had a letter from the sack of mail frozen onto the back of a New Hampshire mail carrier who died in the East Coast blizzard of 1888. An authenticated letter from the *Titanic*’s seagoing post office, too, but then there must have been quite a lot of mail recovered for some reason, as he refers to other pieces. But he was not as interested in sea disasters. No, the prize he was after was a letter from the year 79 AD.”

I hadn’t known there was mail service then, but Neve assured me that mail was extremely old, and that it was Herodotus whose words appeared in the motto “Neither snow, nor rain, nor gloom of night,” etc., more than three hundred years before the date she’d just referred to—the year Mt. Vesuvius blew up and buried Pompeii in volcanic ash. “As you may know,” she went on, “the site was looted and picked through by curiosity seekers for a century and a half after its rediscovery before anything was done about preservation. By then, quite a number of recovered objects had found their way into the hands of collectors. A letter that may have been meant for Pliny the Younger, from the Elder, apparently surfaced for a tantalizing moment in Paris, but by the time Octave could contact the dealer the prize had been stolen. The dealer tracked it, however, through a shadowy resale into the hands of a Portuguese rubber baron’s wife, who was living in Brazil, a woman with obsessions similar to Octave’s—though she was not a stamp collector. She was interested in all things Pompeian—had her walls painted in exact replicas of Pompeii frescoes, and so on.”

“Imagine that. In Brazil.”

“No stranger than a small-town North Dakota banker amassing a world-class collection of stamps. Octave was, of course, a bachelor. And he lived very modestly too. Still, he didn’t have enough money to come near to purchasing the Pliny letter. He tried to leave the country with the bank’s money and his stamp collection, but the stamps held him back. I think the customs officials became involved in questions regarding the collection—whether it should be allowed to leave the country, and so on. The Frank Baptist stamps were an interesting side note to American history, for instance. Murdo caught up with him a few days later, and Octave had had a breakdown and was paralyzed in some hotel room. He was terrified that his collection would be confiscated. When he returned to

Pluto, he began drinking heavily, and from then on he was a wreck.”

“And the Pompeii letter—what became of it?”

“There was a letter from the Brazilian lady, who still hoped to sell the piece to Octave, a wild letter full of cross-outs and stained with tears.”

“A disaster letter?”

“Yes, I suppose you could say so. Her three-year-old son had somehow got hold of the Pompeii missive and reduced it to dust. So in a way it was a letter from a woman that broke Octave’s heart.”

There was nothing more to say, and we were both in a thoughtful mood by then. Our sandwiches were before us and we ate them.

Neve and I spend our evenings quietly, indoors, reading or watching television, listening to music, eating our meager suppers alone. As I have been long accustomed to my own company, I find my time from dusk to midnight wonderful. I am not lonely. I know I haven’t long to enjoy the luxuries of privacy and silence, and I cherish my familiar surroundings. Neve, however, misses her two children and her grandchildren. She spends many evenings on the telephone, although they live in Fargo and she sees them often. Both Neve and I find it strange that we are old, and we are amazed at how quickly our lives passed—Neve with her marriages and I with my medical practice. We are even surprised when we catch sight of ourselves sometimes. I am fortunate in old age to have a good companion like Neve, though I have lately suspected that if she had the chance to leave Pluto she would do it.

That night, she had an episode of black moodiness, brought on by the sugar in her coffee, though I did not say so. She was still caught up in the telling of Octave’s story, and she had also made an odd discovery.

Flanked by two bright reading lamps, I was quietly absorbing a rather too sweet novel sent by a book club that I belong to when the telephone rang. Speaking breathlessly, Neve told me that she had been looking through albums all evening with a magnifying glass. She had also been sifting through Octave’s papers and letters. She had found something that distressed her: In a file that she had never before opened was a set of eight or nine letters, all addressed to the same person, with canceled stamps, the paper distorted as though it had got wet, the writing smudged, each stamp differing from the others by some slight degree—a minor flaw in the cancellation mark, a slight rip. She had examined them in some puzzlement and noticed that one bore a fifty-cent violet Benjamin Franklin issued two years after the cancellation mark, which was dated just before the sinking of the *Titanic*.

“I am finding it very hard to admit the obvious,” she said, “because I had

formed such a sympathetic opinion of my uncle. But I believe he must have been experimenting with forged disaster mail, and that what I found was no less than evidence. He was offering his fake letter to a dealer in London. There were attempts and rejections of certification letters, too.” She sounded furious, as though he had tried to sell her the item himself.

I tried to talk Neve down, but when she gets into a mood like this all of her rages and sorrows come back to her and it seems she must berate the world or mourn each one. From what she could tell, all the other articles in Octave’s collection were authentic, so after a while she calmed herself. She even laughed a bit, wondering if Octave’s forgery would hold up if included in the context of an otherwise brilliant collection.

“It could improve the price,” she said.

As soon as possible, I put the phone down, and my insipid novel as well. Neve’s moods are catching. I have a notion I will soon be alone in Pluto. I try to shake off a sudden miasma of turbulent dread, but before I know it I have walked into my bedroom and am opening the chest at the foot of my bed and I am looking through my family’s clothes—all else was destroyed or taken away, but the undertaker washed and kept these (kindly, I think) and he gave them to me when I moved into this house. I find the somber envelope marked “Jorghansen’s Funeral Parlor” and slip from it the valentine, within its own envelope, that must have been hidden in a pocket. It may or may not be stained with blood, or rust, but it is most certainly a hideous thing, all schmaltz and paper lace. I note for the first time that the envelope bears a five-cent commemorative stamp of the Huguenot monument in Florida.

Sometimes I wonder if the sounds of fear and anguish, the thunder of the shotgun, is hidden from me somewhere in the most obscure corner of my brain. I might have died of dehydration, as I wasn’t found for three days, but I don’t remember that either, not at all, and have never been abnormally afraid of thirst or obsessed with food or water. No, my childhood was very happy and I had everything—a swing, a puppy, doting parents. Only good things happened to me. I was chosen Queen of the Prom. I never underwent a shock at the sudden revelation of my origins, for I was told the story early on and came to accept who I was. We even suspected that the actual killer might still be living somewhere in our area, invisible, remorseful. For we’d find small, carefully folded bills of cash hidden outdoors in places where my aunt or I would be certain to find them—beneath a flowerpot, in my tree house, in the hollow handles of my bicycle—and we’d always hold the wadded squares up and say, “He’s been here again.” But, truly, I am hard pressed to name more than the predictable sadnesses that pass through one’s life. It is as though the freak of my

survival charged my disposition with gratitude. Or as if my family absorbed all the misfortune that might have come my way. I have lived an ordinary and a satisfying life, and I have been privileged to be of service to people. There is no one I mourn to the point of madness and nothing I would really do over again.

So why, when I stroke my sister's valentine against the side of my face, and why, when I touch the folded linen of her vest, and when I reach for my brothers' overalls and the apron my mother died in that day, and bundle these things to my stomach together with my father's ancient, laundered, hay-smelling clothes, why, when I gather my family into my arms, do I catch my breath at the wild upsurge, as if a wind had lifted me, a black wing of air? And why, when that happens, do I fly toward some blurred and ineradicable set of features that seems to rush away from me as stars do? At blinding speeds, never stopping?

When Pluto is empty at last and this house is reclaimed by earth, when the war memorial is toppled and the bank/café stripped for its brass and granite, when all that remains of our town is a collection of historical newsletters bound in volumes donated to the regional collections at the University of North Dakota, what then? What shall I have said? How shall I have depicted the truth?

The valentine tells me that the boy's name should not have been scratched from the war memorial, that he was not the killer after all. For my sister loved him in return, or she would not have carried his message upon her person. And if he had had her love he probably fled out of grief and despair, not remorse or fear of prosecution. But if it was not the boy, who was it? My father? But no, he was felled from behind. There is no one to accuse. Somewhere in this town or out in the world, then, the being has existed who stalked the boys hiding in the barn and destroyed them in the hay, who saw the beauty of my sister and my mother and shot them dead. And to what profit? For nothing was taken. Nothing gained. To what end the mysterious waste?

An extremely touchy case came my way about twenty years ago, and I have submerged the knowledge of its truth. I have never wanted to think of it. But now, as with Neve, my story knocks with insistence, and I remember my patient. He was a hired man who'd lived his life on a stock farm that abutted the farthest edges of our land. Warren Wolde was a taciturn crank, who nevertheless had a way with animals. He held a number of peculiar beliefs, I am told, regarding the United States government. On these topics, his opinion was avoided. Certain things were never mentioned around him—Congress being one, and particular amendments to the Constitution. Even if one stuck to safe subjects, he looked at people in a penetrating way that they found disquieting. But Warren Wolde was in no condition to disquiet me when I came onto the farm to treat him. Two

weeks before, the farm's expensive blooded bull had hooked and then trampled him, concentrating most of the damage on one leg. He'd refused to see a doctor, and now a feverish infection had set in and the wound was necrotic. He was very strong, and fought being moved to a hospital so violently that his employers had decided to call me instead to see if I could save his leg.

I could, and did, though the means were painful and awful and it meant twice-daily visits, which my schedule could ill afford. At each change of the dressing and debridement, I tried to dose Wolde with morphine, but he resisted. He did not trust me yet and feared that if he lost consciousness he'd wake without his leg. Gradually, I managed to heal the wound and also to quiet him. When I first came to treat him, he'd reacted to the sight of me with a horror unprecedented in my medical experience. It was a fear mixed with panic that had only gradually dulled to a silent wariness. As his leg healed, he opened to my visits, and by the time he was hobbling on crutches he seemed to anticipate my presence with an eager pleasure so tender and pathetic that it startled everyone around him. He'd shuck off his forbidding and strange persona just for me, they said, and sink back into an immobilizing fury once I'd left. He never healed quite enough to take on all of his old tasks, but he lasted pretty well at his job for another three years. He died naturally, in his sleep one night, of a thrown blood clot. To my surprise, I was contacted several weeks later by a lawyer.

The man said that his client Warren Wolde had left a package for me, which I asked him to send in the mail. When the package arrived, addressed in an awkward script that certainly could have been Wolde's, I opened the box immediately. Inside were hundreds upon hundreds of wadded bills of assorted denominations, and of course I recognized their folded pattern as identical to the bills that had turned up for me all through my childhood. I could perhaps believe that the money gifts and the legacy were only marks of sympathy for the tragic star of my past and, later, gratitude for what I'd done. I might be inclined to think that, were it not for the first few times I had come to treat Wolde, when he reared from me in a horror that seemed so personal. There had been something of a recalled nightmare in his face, I'd thought it even then, and I was not touched later on by the remarkable change in his character. On the contrary, it chilled me to sickness.

Those of you who have faithfully subscribed to this newsletter know that our dwindling subscription list has made it necessary to reduce the length of our articles. So I must end here. But it appears, anyway, that since only the society's treasurer, Neve Harp, and I have convened to make any decisions at all regarding the preservation and upkeep of our little collection, and as only the two of us are

left to contribute more material to this record, and as we have nothing left to say, our membership is now closed. We declare our society defunct. I shall, at least, keep walking the perimeter of Pluto until my footsteps wear my orbit into the earth. My last act as the president of Pluto's historical society is this: I would like to declare a town holiday to commemorate the year I saved the life of my family's murderer. The wind will blow. The devils rise. All who celebrate it shall be ghosts. And there will be nothing but eternal dancing, dust on dust, everywhere you look.

Oh my, too apocalyptic, I think as I leave my house to walk over to Neve's to help her cope with her sleepless night. She will soon move to Fargo. She'll have the money to do it. Dust on dust! There are very few towns where old women can go out at night and enjoy the breeze, so there is that about Pluto. I take my cane to feel the way, for the air is so black I think already I am invisible.

TIM MCLOUGHLIN

When All This Was Bay Ridge

FROM *Brooklyn Noir*

STANDING IN CHURCH at my father's funeral, I thought about being arrested on the night of my seventeenth birthday. It had occurred in the train yard at Avenue X, in Coney Island. Me and Pancho and a kid named Freddie were working a three-car piece, the most ambitious I'd tried to that point, and more time-consuming than was judicious to spend trespassing on city property. Two Transit cops with German shepherds caught us in the middle of the second car. I dropped my aerosol can and took off, and was perhaps two hundred feet along the beginning of the trench that becomes the IRT line to the Bronx, when I saw the hand. It was human, adult, and severed neatly, seemingly surgically, at the wrist. My first thought was that it looked bare without a watch. Then I made a whooping sound, trying to take in air, and turned and ran back toward the cops and their dogs.

At the 60th Precinct, we three were ushered into a small cell. We sat for several hours, then the door opened and I was led out. My father was waiting in the main room, in front of the counter.

The desk sergeant, middle-aged, black, and noticeably bored, looked up briefly. "Him?"

"Him," my father echoed, sounding defeated.

"Goodnight," the sergeant said.

My father took my arm and led me out of the precinct. As we cleared the door and stepped into the humid night he turned to me and said, "This was it. Your one free ride. It doesn't happen again."

"What did it cost?" I asked. My father had retired from the police department years earlier, and I knew this had been expensive.

He shook his head. "This once, that's all."

I followed him to his car. "I have two friends in there."

"Fuck 'em. Spics. That's half your problem."

"What's the other half?"

"You have no common sense," he said, his voice rising in scale as it did in volume. By the time he reached a scream he sounded like a boy going through puberty. "What do you think you're doing out here? Crawling 'round in the dark with the niggers and the spics. Writing on trains like a hoodlum. Is this all you'll do?"

“It’s not writing. It’s drawing. Pictures.”

“Same shit, defacing property, behaving like a punk. Where do you suppose it will lead?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t thought about it. You had your aimless time, when you got out of the service. You told me so. You bummed around for two years.”

“I always worked.”

“Part-time. Beer money. You were a roofer.”

“Beer money was all I needed.”

“Maybe it’s all I need.”

He shook his head slowly, and squinted, as though peering through the dirty windshield for an answer. “It was different. That was a long time ago. Back when all this was Bay Ridge. You could live like that then.”

When all this was Bay Ridge. He was masterful, my father. He didn’t say *when it was white*, or *when it was Irish*, or even the relatively tame *when it was safer*. No. When all this was Bay Ridge. As though it were an issue of geography. As though, somehow, the tectonic plate beneath Sunset Park had shifted, moving it physically to some other place.

I told him about seeing the hand.

“Did you tell the officers?”

“No.”

“The people you were with?”

“No.”

“Then don’t worry about it. There’s body parts all over this town. Saw enough in my day to put together a baseball team.” He drove in silence for a few minutes, then nodded his head a couple of times, as though agreeing with a point made by some voice I could not hear. “You’re going to college, you know,” he said.

That was what I remembered at the funeral. Returning from the altar rail after receiving Communion, Pancho walked past me. He’d lost a great deal of weight since I’d last seen him, and I couldn’t tell if he was sick or if it was just the drugs. His black suit hung on him in a way that emphasized his gaunt frame. He winked at me as he came around the casket in front of my pew, and flashed the mischievous smile that—when we were sixteen—got all the girls in his bed and all the guys agreeing to the stupidest and most dangerous stunts.

In my shirt pocket was a photograph of my father with a woman who was not my mother. The date on the back was five years ago. Their arms were around each other’s waists and they smiled for the photographer. When we arrived at the cemetery I took the picture out of my pocket, and looked at it for perhaps the

fiftieth time since I'd first discovered it. There were no clues. The woman was young to be with my father, but not a girl. Forty, give or take a few years. I looked for any evidence in his expression that I was misreading their embrace, but even I couldn't summon the required naiveté. My father's countenance was not what would commonly be regarded as a poker face. He wasn't holding her as a friend, a friend's girl, or the prize at some retirement or bachelor party; he held her like a possession. Like he held his tools. Like he held my mother. The photo had been taken before my mother's death. I put it back.

I'd always found his plodding predictability and meticulous planning of insignificant events maddening. For the first time that I could recall, I was experiencing curiosity about some part of my father's life.

I walked from Greenwood Cemetery directly to Olsen's bar, my father's watering hole, feeling that I needed to talk to the men that nearly lived there, but not looking forward to it. Aside from my father's wake the previous night, I hadn't seen them in years. They were all Irish. The Irish among them were perhaps the most Irish, but the Norwegians and the Danes were Irish, too, as were the older Puerto Ricans. They had developed, over time, the stereotypical hooded gaze, the squared jaws set in grim defiance of whatever waited in the sobering daylight. To a man they had that odd trait of the Gaelic heavy-hitter, that—as they attained middle age—their faces increasingly began to resemble a woman's nipple.

The door to the bar was propped open, and the cool damp odor of stale beer washed over me before I entered. That smell has always reminded me of the Boy Scouts. Meetings were Thursday nights in the basement of Bethany Lutheran Church. When they were over, I would have to pass Olsen's on my way home, and I usually stopped in to see my father. He would buy me a couple of glasses of beer—about all I could handle at thirteen—and leave with me after about an hour so we could walk home together.

From the inside looking out: Picture an embassy in a foreign country. A truly foreign country. Not a Western European ally, but a fundamentalist state perennially on the precipice of war. A fill-the-sandbags-and-wait-for-the-airstrike enclave. That was Olsen's, home to the last of the donkeys, the white dinosaurs of Sunset Park. A jukebox filled with Kirsty MacColl and the Clancy Brothers, and fliers tacked to the flaking walls advertising step-dancing classes, Gaelic lessons, and the memorial run to raise money for a scholarship in the name of a recently slain cop. Within three blocks of the front door you could attend a cockfight, buy crack, or pick up a streetwalker, but in Olsen's, it was always 1965.

Upon entering the bar for the first time in several years, I found its pinched

dimensions and dim lighting more oppressive, and less mysterious, than I had remembered. The row of ascetic faces, and the way all conversation trailed off at my entrance, put me in mind of the legendary blue wall of silence in the police department. It is no coincidence that the force has historically been predominantly Irish. The men in Olsen's would be pained to reveal their zip code to a stranger, and I wasn't sure if even they knew why.

The bar surface itself was more warped than I'd recalled. The mirrors had oxidized and the white tile floor had been torn up in spots and replaced with odd-shaped pieces of green linoleum. It was a neighborhood bar in a neighborhood where such establishments are not yet celebrated. If it had been located in my part of the East Village, it would have long since achieved cultural-landmark status. I'd been living in Manhattan for five years and still had not adjusted to the large number of people who moved here from other parts of the country, and overlooked the spectacle of the city only to revere the mundane. One of my coworkers, herself a transplant, remarked that the coffee shop on my corner was *authentic*. In that they served coffee, I suppose she was correct.

I sat on an empty stool in the middle of the wavy bar and ordered a beer. I felt strangely nervous there without my father, like a child about to be caught doing something bad. Everyone knew me. Marty, the round-shouldered bartender, approached first, breaking the ice. He spoke around an enormous, soggy stub of a cigar, as he always did. And, as always, he seemed constantly annoyed by its presence in his mouth; as though he'd never smoked one before, and was surprised to discover himself chewing on it.

"Daniel. It's good to see you. I'm sorry for your loss."

He extended one hand, and when I did the same, he grasped mine in both of his and held it for a moment. It had to have been some sort of signal, because the rest of the relics in the place lurched toward me then, like some nursing-home theater guild performing *Night of the Living Dead*. They shook hands, engaged in awkward stiff hugs, and offered unintelligible condolences. Frank Sanchez, one of my father's closest friends, squeezed the back of my neck absently until I winced. I thanked them as best I could, and accepted the offers of free drinks.

Someone—I don't know who—thought it would be a good idea for me to have Jameson's Irish whiskey, that having been my father's drink. I'd never considered myself much of a drinker. I liked a couple of beers on a Friday night, and perhaps twice a year I would get drunk. I almost never drank hard liquor, but this crew was insistent, they were matching me shot for shot, and they were paying. It was the sort of thing my father would have been adamant about.

I began to reach for the photograph in my pocket several times and stopped. Finally I fished it out and showed it to the bartender. "Who is she, Marty?" I

asked. "Any idea?"

The manner in which he pretended to scrutinize it told me that he recognized the woman immediately. He looked at the picture with a studied perplexity, as though he would have had trouble identifying my father.

"Wherever did you get such a thing?" he asked.

"I found it in the basement, by my father's shop."

"Ah. Just come across it by accident then."

The contempt in his voice seared through my whiskey glow, and left me as sober as when I'd entered. He knew, and if he knew they all knew. And a decision had been reached to tell me nothing.

"Not by accident," I lied. "My father told me where it was and asked me to get it."

Our eyes met for a moment. "And did he say anything about it?" Marty asked. "Were there no instructions or suggestions?"

"He asked me to take care of it," I said evenly. "To make everything all right."

He nodded. "Makes good sense," he said. "That would be best served by letting the dead sleep, don't you think? Forget it, son, let it lie." He poured me another drink, sloppily, like the others, and resumed moving his towel over the bar, as though he could obliterate the mildewed stench of a thousand spilled drinks with a few swipes of the rag.

I drank the shot down quickly and my buzz returned in a rush. I hadn't been keeping track, but I realized that I'd had much more than what I was used to, and I was starting to feel dizzy. The rest of the men in the room looked the same as when I walked in, the same as when I was twelve. In the smoke-stained bar mirror I saw Frank Sanchez staring at me from a few stools away. He caught me looking and gestured for me to come down.

"Sit, Danny," he said when I got there. He was drinking boilermakers. Without asking, he ordered each of us another round. "What were you talking to Marty about?"

I handed Frank the picture. "I was asking who the woman is."

He looked at it and placed it on the bar. "Yeah? What'd he say?"

"He said to let it lie."

Frank snorted. "Typical donkey," he said. "Won't answer a straight question, but has all kinds of advice on what you should do."

From a distance in the dark bar I would have said that Frank Sanchez hadn't changed much over the years, but I was close to him now, and I'd seen him only last night in the unforgiving fluorescent lighting of the funeral home. He'd been thin and handsome when I was a kid, with blue-black hair combed straight back, and the features and complexion of a Hollywood Indian in a John Wayne picture.

He'd thickened in the middle over the years, though he still wasn't fat. His reddish brown cheeks were illuminated by the roadmap of broken capillaries that seemed an entrance requirement for "regular" status at Olsen's. His hair was still shockingly dark, but now with a fake Jerry Lewis sheen and plenty of scalp showing through in the back. He was a retired homicide detective. His had been one of the first Hispanic families in this neighborhood. I knew he'd moved to Fort Lee, New Jersey, long ago, though my father said that he was still in Olsen's every day.

Frank picked up the picture and looked at it again, then looked over it at the two sloppy rows of bottles along the back bar. The gaps for the speed rack looked like missing teeth.

"We're the same," he said. "Me and you."

"The same, how?"

"We're on the outside, and we're always looking to be let in."

"I never gave a damn about being on the inside here, Frank."

He handed me the photo. "You do now."

He stood then, and walked stiffly back to the men's room. A couple of minutes later Marty appeared at my elbow, topped off my shot, and replaced Frank's.

"It's a funny thing about Francis," Marty said. "He's a spic who's always hated the spics. So he moves from a spic neighborhood to an all-white one, then has to watch as it turns spic. So now he's got to get in his car every day and drive back to his old all-spic neighborhood, just so he can drink with white men. It's made the man bitter. And," he nodded toward the glasses, "he's in his cups tonight. Don't take the man too seriously."

Marty stopped talking and moved down the bar when Frank returned.

"What'd Darby O'Gill say to you?" he asked.

"He told me you were drunk," I said, "and that you didn't like spics."

Frank widened his eyes, "Coming out with revelations like that, is he? Hey, Martin," he yelled, "next time I piss tell him JFK's been shot!" He drained his whiskey, took a sip of beer, and turned his attention back to me. "Listen. Early on, when I first started on the job—years back, I'm talking—there was almost no spades in the department; even less spics. I was the only spic in my precinct, only one I knew of in Brooklyn. I worked in the seven-one, Crown Heights. Did five years there, but this must've been my first year or so.

"I was sitting upstairs in the squad room typing attendance reports. Manual typewriters back then. I was good too, fifty or sixty words a minute—don't forget, English ain't my first language. See, I learned the forms. The key is knowin' the forms, where to plug in the fucking numbers. You could type two hundred words a minute, but you don't know the forms, all them goddamn

boxes, you're sitting there all day.

"So I'm typing these reports—only uniform in a room full of bulls, only spic in a room full of harps—when they bring in the drunk."

Frank paused to order another shot, and Marty brought one for me too. I was hungry and really needed to step outside for some air, but I wanted to hear Frank's story. I did want to know how he thought we were similar, and I hoped he would talk about the photo. He turned his face to the ceiling and opened his mouth like a child catching rain, and he poured the booze smoothly down his throat.

"You gotta remember," he continued, "Crown Heights was still mostly white back then, white civilians, white skulls. The drunk is just another mick with a skinful. But what an obnoxious cocksucker. And loud.

"Man who brought him in is another uniform, almost new as me. He throws him in the cage and takes the desk next to mine to type his report. Only this guy can't type, you can see he's gonna be there all day. Takes him ten minutes to get the paper straight in the damn machine. And all this time the goddamn drunk is yelling at the top of his lungs down the length of the squad room. You can see the bulls are gettin' annoyed. Everybody tells him to shut up, but he keeps on, mostly just abusing the poor fuck that brought him in, who's still struggling with the report, his fingers all smudged with ink from the ribbons.

"On and on he goes: 'Your mother blows sailors . . . Your wife fucks dogs . . . You're all queers, every one of you.' Like that. But I mean, really, it don't end, it's like he never gets tired.

"So the guy who locked him up gets him outa the cage and walks him across the room. Over in the corner they got one of these steam pipes, just a vertical pipe, no radiator or nothing. Hot as a motherfucker. So he cuffs the drunk's hands around the pipe, so now the drunk's gotta stand like this"—Frank formed a huge circle with his arms, as if he were hugging an invisible fat woman—"or else he gets burned. And just bein' that close to the heat, I mean, it's fuckin' awful. So the uniform walks away, figuring that'll shut the scumbag up, but it gets worse.

"Now, the bulls are all pissed at the uniform for not beatin' the drunk senseless before he brought him in, like any guy with a year on the street would know to do. The poor fuck is still typing the paperwork at about a word an hour, and the asshole is still at it, 'Your daughter fucks niggers. When I get out I'll look your wife up—again.' Then he looks straight at the uniform, and the uniform looks up. Their eyes lock for a minute. And the drunk says this: 'What's it feel like to know that every man in this room thinks you're an asshole?' Then the drunk is quiet and he smiles."

Marty returned then, and though I felt I was barely hanging on, I didn't dare speak to refuse the drink. Frank sat silently while Marty poured, and when he was done Frank stared at him until he walked away.

"After that," he continued in a low voice, "it was like slow motion. Like everything was happening underwater. The uniform stands up, takes his gun out, and points it at the drunk. The drunk never stops smiling. And then the uniform pulls the trigger, shoots him right in the face. The drunk's head like explodes, and he spins around the steam pipe—all the way—once, before he drops.

"For a second everything stops. It's just the echo and the smoke and blood on the wall and back window. Then, time speeds up again. The sergeant of detectives, a little leprechaun from the other side—must've bribed his way past the height requirement—jumps over his desk and grabs up a billy club. He lands next to the uniform, who's still holding the gun straight out, and he clubs him five or six times on the forearm, hard and fast, *whap-whap-whap*. The gun drops with the first hit but the leprechaun don't stop till the bone breaks. We all hear it snap.

"The uniform pulls his arm in and howls, and the sergeant throws the billy club down and screams at him: 'The next time . . . the next time, it'll be your head that he breaks before you were able to shoot him. Now get him off the pipe before there's burns on his body.' And he storms out of the room."

Frank drank the shot in front of him and finished his beer. I didn't move. He looked at me and smiled. "The whole squad room," he said, "jumped into action. Some guys uncuffed the drunk; I helped the uniform out. Got him to a hospital. Coupla guys got rags and a pail and started cleaning up.

"Now, think about that," Frank said, leaning in toward me and lowering his voice yet again. "I'm the only spic there. The only other uniform. There had to be ten bulls. But the sergeant, he didn't have to tell anybody what the plan was, or to keep their mouth shut, or any fucking thing. And there was no moment where anybody worried about me seeing it, being a spic. We all knew that coulda been any one of us. That's the most on-the-inside I ever felt. Department now, it's a fucking joke. Affirmative action, cultural-diversity training. And what've you got? Nobody trusts anybody. Guys afraid to trust their own partners." He was whispering, and starting to slur his words.

I began to feel nauseated. It's a joke, I thought. A cop's made-up war story. "Frank, did the guy die?"

"Who?"

"The drunk. The man that got shot."

Frank looked confused, and a bit annoyed. "Of course he died."

"Did he die right away?"

“How the fuck should I know? They dragged him outa the room in like a minute.”

“To a hospital?”

“Was a better world’s all I’m saying. A better world. And you always gotta stay on the inside, don’t drift, Danny. If you drift, nobody’ll stick up for you.”

Jesus, did he have a brogue? He certainly had picked up that lilt to his voice that my father’s generation possessed. That half-accent that the children of immigrants acquire in a ghetto. I had to get out of there. A few more minutes and I feared I’d start sounding like one of these tura-lura-lura motherfuckers myself.

I stood, probably too quickly, and took hold of the bar to steady myself. “What about the picture, Frank?”

He handed it to me. “Martin is right,” he said slowly, “let it lie. Why do you care who she was?”

“Who she *was*? I asked who she *is*. Is she dead, Frank? Is that what Marty meant by letting the dead rest?”

“Martin . . . Marty meant . . .”

“I’m right here, Francis,” Marty said, “and I can speak for myself.” He turned to me. “Francis has overindulged in a few jars,” he said. “He’ll nap in the back booth for a while and be right as rain for the ride home.”

“Is that the way it happened, Frank? Exactly that way?”

Frank was smiling at his drink, looking dreamily at his better world. “Who owns memory?” he said.

“Goodnight, Daniel,” Marty said. “It was good of you to stop in.”

I didn’t respond, just turned and slowly walked out. One or two guys gestured at me as I left, the rest seemed not to notice or care.

I removed the picture from my pocket again when I was outside, an action that had taken on a ritualistic feel, like making the sign of the cross. I did not look at it this time, but began tearing it in strips, lengthwise. Then I walked, and bent down at street comers, depositing each strip in a separate sewer along Fourth Avenue.

He’d told me that he’d broken his arm in a car accident, pursuing two black kids who had robbed a jewelry store.

As I released the strips of paper through the sewer gratings, I thought of the hand in the subway tunnel, and my father’s assertion that there were many body parts undoubtedly littering the less frequently traveled parts of the city. Arms, legs, heads, torsos; and perhaps all these bits of photo would find their way into disembodied hands. A dozen or more hands, each gripping a strip of photograph down in the wet slime under the street. Regaining a history, a past, that they lost

when they were dismembered, making a connection that I never would.

LOU MANFREDO

Case Closed

FROM *Brooklyn Noir*

The fear enveloped her, and yet despite it, or perhaps because of it, she found herself oddly detached, being from body, as she ran frantically from the stifling grip of the subway station out into the rainy, darkened street.

Her physiology now took full control, independent of her conscious thought, and her pupils dilated and gathered in the dim light to scan the streets, the storefronts, the randomly parked automobiles. Like a laser, her vision locked onto him, indiscernible in the distance. Her brain computed: one hundred yards away. Her legs received the computation and turned her body toward him, propelling her faster. How odd, she thought through the terror, as she watched herself from above. It was almost the flight of an inanimate object. So unlike that of a terrified young woman.

When her scream came at last, it struck her deeply and primordially, and she ran even faster with the sound of it. A microsecond later the scream reached his ears and she saw his head snap around toward her. The silver object at the crest of his hat glistened in the misty streetlight, and she felt her heart leap wildly in her chest.

Oh my God, she thought, a police officer. Thank you, dear God, a police officer!

As he stepped from the curb and started toward her, she swooned, and her being suddenly came slamming back into her body from above. Her knees weakened and she faltered, stumbled, and as consciousness left her, she fell heavily down and slid into the grit and slime of the wet, cracked asphalt.

Mike McQueen sat behind the wheel of the dark gray Chevrolet Impala and listened to the hum of the motor idling. The intermittent *slap-slap* of the wipers and the soft sound of the rain falling on the sheet-metal body were the only other sounds. The Motorola two-way on the seat beside him was silent. The smell of stale cigarettes permeated the car's interior. It was a slow September night, and he shivered against the dampness.

The green digital on the dash told him it was almost 1:00 AM. He glanced across the seat and through the passenger window. He saw his partner, Joe Rizzo, pocketing his change and about to leave the all-night grocer. He held a brown

bag in his left hand. McQueen was a six-year veteran of the New York City Police Department, but on this night he felt like a first-day rookie. Six years as a uniformed officer first assigned to Manhattan's Greenwich Village, then, most recently, its Upper East Side. Sitting in the car, in the heart of the Italian-American ghetto that was Brooklyn's Bensonhurst neighborhood, he felt like an out-of-towner in a very alien environment.

He had been a detective, third grade, for all of three days, and this night was to be his first field exposure, a midnight-to-eight tour with a fourteen-year detective first grade, the coffee-buying Rizzo.

Six long years of a fine, solid career, active in felony arrests, not even one civilian complaint, medals, commendations, and a file full of glowing letters from grateful citizens, and it had gotten for him only a choice assignment to the East Side Precinct. And then one night, he swings his radio car to the curb to pee in an all-night diner, hears a commotion, takes a look down an alleyway, and just like that, third grade detective, the gold shield handed to him personally by the mayor himself just three weeks later.

If you've got to fall ass-backwards into an arrest, fall into the one where the lovely young college roommate of the lovely young daughter of the mayor of New York City is about to get raped by a nocturnal predator. Careerwise, it doesn't get any better than that.

McQueen was smiling at the memory when Rizzo dropped heavily into the passenger seat and slammed the door.

"Damn it," Rizzo said, shifting his large body in the seat. "Can they put some fucking springs in these seats, already?"

He fished a container of coffee from the bag and passed it to McQueen. They sat in silence as the B train roared by on the overhead elevated tracks running above this length of Eighty-sixth Street. McQueen watched the sparks fly from the third rail contacts and then sparkle and twirl in the rainy night air before flickering and dying away. Through the parallel slots of the overhead tracks, he watched the twin red taillights of the last car vanish into the distance. The noise of the steel-on-steel wheels and a thousand rattling steel parts and I-beams reverberated in the train's wake. It made the deserted, rain-washed streets seem even more dismal. McQueen found himself missing Manhattan.

The grocery had been the scene of a robbery the week before, and Rizzo wanted to ask the night man a few questions. McQueen wasn't quite sure if it was the coffee or the questions that had come as an afterthought. Although he had only known Rizzo for two days, he suspected the older man to be a somewhat less than enthusiastic investigator.

"Let's head on back to the house," Rizzo said, referring to the 62nd Precinct

station house, as he sipped his coffee and fished in his outer coat pocket for the Chesterfields he seemed to live on. "I'll write up this here interview I just did and show you where to file it."

McQueen eased the car out from the curb. Rizzo had insisted he drive, to get the lay of the neighborhood, and McQueen knew it made sense. But he felt disoriented and foolish: He wasn't even sure which way the precinct was.

Rizzo seemed to sense McQueen's discomfort. "Make a U-turn," he said, lighting the Chesterfield. "Head back up Eighty-sixth and make a left on Seventeenth Avenue." He drew on the cigarette and looked sideways at McQueen. He smiled before he spoke again. "What's the matter, kid? Missing the bright lights across the river already?"

McQueen shrugged. "I guess. I just need time, that's all."

He drove slowly through the light rain. Once off Eighty-sixth Street's commercial strip, they entered a residential area comprised of detached and semidetached older, brick homes. Mostly two stories, the occasional three-story. Some had small, neat gardens or lawns in front. Many had ornate, well-kept statues, some illuminated by flood lamps, of the Virgin Mary or Saint Anthony or Joseph. McQueen scanned the home fronts as he drove. The occasional window shone dimly with night lights glowing from within. They looked peaceful and warm, and he imagined the families inside, tucked into their beds, alarm clocks set and ready for the coming workday. Everyone safe, everything secure, everyone happy and well.

And that's how it always seemed. But six years had taught him what was more likely going on in some of those houses. The drunken husbands coming home and beating their wives; the junkie sons and daughters, the sickly, lonely old, the forsaken parent found dead in an apartment after the stench of decomposition had reached a neighbor and someone had dialed 911.

The memories of an ex-patrol officer. As the radio crackled to life on the seat beside him and he listened with half an ear, he wondered what the memories of an ex-detective would someday be.

He heard Rizzo sigh. "All right, Mike. That call is ours. Straight up this way, turn left on Bay Eighth Street. Straight down to the Belt Parkway. Take the parkway east a few exits and get off at Ocean Parkway. Coney Island Hospital is a block up from the Belt. Looks like it might be a long night."

When they entered the hospital, it took them some minutes to sort through the half-dozen patrol officers milling around the emergency room. McQueen found the right cop, a tall, skinny kid of about twenty-three. He glanced down at the man's nametag. "How you doing, Marino? I'm McQueen, Mike McQueen. Me and Rizzo are catching tonight. What d'ya got?"

The man pulled a thick leather note binder from his rear pocket. He flipped through it and found his entry, turned it to face McQueen, and held out a Bic pen.

“Can you scratch it for me, detective? No sergeant here yet.”

McQueen took the book and pen and scribbled the date, time, and CIHOSP E/R across the bottom of the page, then put his initials and shield number. He handed the book back to Marino.

“What d’ya got?” he asked again.

Marino cleared his throat. “I’m not the guy from the scene. That was Willis. He was off at midnight, so he turned it to us and went home. I just got some notes here. Female Caucasian, Amy Taylor, twenty-six, single, lives at 1860 Sixty-first Street. Coming off the subway at Sixty-second Street about eleven o’clock, twenty-three hundred, the station’s got no clerk on duty after nine. She goes into one of them—what d’ya call it?—one-way exit-door turnstile things, the ones that’ll only let you out, not in. Some guy jumps out of nowhere and grabs her.”

At that point, Rizzo walked up. “Hey, Mike, you OK with this for a while? My niece is a nurse here, I’m gonna go say hello, OK?”

Mike glanced at his partner. “Yeah, sure, OK, Joe, go ahead.”

McQueen turned back to Marino. “Go on.”

Marino dropped his eyes back to his notes, “So this guy pins her in the revolving door and shoves a knife in her face. Tells her he’s gonna cut her bad if she don’t help him.”

“Help him with what?”

Marino shrugged, “Who the fuck knows? Guy’s got the knife in one hand and his johnson in the other. He’s trying to whack off on her. Never says another word to her, just presses the knife against her throat. Anyway, somehow he drops the weapon and she gets loose, starts to run away. The guy goes after her. She comes out of the station screaming, Willis is on a foot post doing a four-to-midnight, sees her running and screaming, and goes over her way. She takes a fall, faints or something, bangs up her head and swells up her knee and breaks two fingers. They got her upstairs in a room, for observation on account of the head wound.”

McQueen thought for a moment. “Did Willis see the guy?”

“No, never saw him.”

“Any description from the girl?”

“I don’t know, I never even seen her. When I got here she was upstairs.”

“OK, stick around till your sergeant shows up and cuts you loose.”

“Can’t you, Detective?”

“Can’t I what?”

“Cut me loose?”

McQueen frowned and pushed a hand through his hair. “I don’t know. I think I can. Do me a favor, though, wait for the sarge, OK?”

Marino shook his head and turned his lips downward. “Yeah, sure, a favor. I’ll go sniff some ether or something.” He walked away, his head still shaking.

McQueen looked around the brightly lit emergency room. He saw Rizzo down a hall, leaning against a wall, talking to a bleached-blond nurse who looked to be about Rizzo’s age: fifty. McQueen walked over.

“Hey, Joe, you going to introduce me to your niece?”

Joe turned and looked at McQueen with a puzzled look, then smiled.

“Oh, no, no, turns out she’s not working tonight. I’m just making a new friend here, is all.”

“Well, we need to go talk to the victim, this Amy Taylor.”

Rizzo frowned. “She a ditsoon?”

“A what?” McQueen asked.

Rizzo shook his head. “Is she black?”

“No, cop told me Caucasian. Why?”

“Kid, I know you’re new here to Bensonhurst, so I’m gonna be patient. Anybody in this neighborhood named Amy Taylor is either a ditsoon or a yuppie pain-in-the-ass moved here from Boston to be an artist or a dancer or a Broadway star, and she can’t afford to live in Park Slope or Brooklyn Heights or across the river. This here neighborhood is all Italian, kid, everybody—cops, crooks, butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers. Except for you, of course. You’re the exception. By the way, did I introduce you two? This here is the morning-shift head nurse, Rosalie Mazzarino. Rosalie, say hello to my boy wonder partner, Mike Mick-fucking-Queen.”

The woman smiled and held out a hand. “Nice to meet you, Mike. And don’t believe a thing this guy tells you. Making new friends! I’ve known him since he was your age and chasing every nurse in the place.” She squinted at McQueen then and slipped a pair of glasses out of her hair and over her eyes. “How old are you—twelve?”

Mike laughed. “I’m twenty-eight.”

She twisted her mouth up and nodded her head in an approving manner. “And a third-grade detective already? I’m impressed.”

Rizzo laughed. “Yeah, so was the mayor. This boy’s a genuine hero with the alma mater gals.”

“Okay, Joe, very good. Now, can we go see the victim?”

“You know, kid, I got a problem with that. I can tell you her whole story from

right here. She's from Boston, wants to be a star, and as soon as you lock up the guy raped her, she's gonna bring a complaint against you 'cause you showed no respect for the poor shit, a victim of society and all. Why don't you talk to her, I'll go see the doctor and get the rape kit and the panties, and we'll get out of here."

McQueen shook his head. "Wrong crime, partner. No rape, some kind of sexual assault or abuse or whatever."

"Go ahead, kid, talk to her. It'll be good experience for you. Me and Rosalie'll be in one of these linen closets when you get back. I did tell you she was the *head* nurse, right?"

McQueen walked away with her laughter in his ear. It was going to be a long night. Just like Joe had figured.

He checked the room number twice before entering. It was a small room with barely enough space for the two hospital beds it held. They were separated by a seriously despondent-looking curtain. The one nearest the door was empty, the mattress exposed. In the dim lighting, McQueen could see the foot of the second bed. The outline of someone's feet showed through the bedding. A faint and sterile yet vaguely unpleasant odor touched his nostrils. He waited a moment longer for his eyes to adjust to the low light, so soft after the harsh fluorescent glare of the hall. He glanced around for something to knock on to announce his presence. He settled on the footboard of the near bed and rapped gently on the cold metal.

"Hello?" he said softly. "Hello, Ms. Taylor?"

The covered feet stirred. He heard the low rustle of linens. He raised his voice a bit when he spoke again.

"Ms. Taylor? I'm Detective McQueen, police. May I see you for a moment?"

A light switched on, hidden by the curtain but near the head of the bed. McQueen stood and waited.

"Ms. Taylor? Hello?"

The voice was sleepy, possibly sedated. It was a gentle and clear voice, yet it held a tension, an edginess. McQueen imagined he had awoken her and now the memories were flooding through her, the reality of it: yes, it had actually happened, no, it hadn't been a dream. He had seen it a thousand times: the burglarized, the beaten, the raped, robbed, shot, stabbed, pissed on whole lot of them. He had seen it.

"Detective? Did you say 'detective'? Hello? I can't see you."

He stepped further into the room, slowly venturing past the curtain. Slow and steady, don't move fast and remember to speak softly. Get her to relax, don't

freak her out.

Her beauty struck him immediately. She was sitting, propped on two pillows, the sheet raised and folded over her breasts. Her arms lay beside her on the bed, palms down, straight out. She appeared to be clinging to the bed, steadying herself against some unseen, not possible force. Her skin was almost translucent, a soft glow emanating from it. Her wide-set eyes were like liquid sapphire, and they met and held his own. Her lips were full and rounded and sat perfectly under her straight, narrow nose, her face framed with shoulder-length black hair. She wore no makeup, and an ugly purple-yellow bruise marked her left temple and part of her cheekbone. Yet she was the most beautiful woman McQueen had ever seen.

After almost three years working the richest, most sophisticated square mile in the world, here, now, in this godforsaken corner of Brooklyn, he sees this woman. For a moment, he forgot why he had come.

“Yes? Can I help you?” she asked as he stood in her sight.

He blinked himself back and cleared his throat. He glanced down to the blank page of the notepad in his hand, just to steal an instant more before he had to speak.

“Yes, yes, Ms. Taylor. I’m Detective McQueen, six-two detective squad. I need to see you for a few minutes. If you don’t mind.”

She frowned, and he saw pain in her eyes. For an instant he thought his heart would break. He shook his head slightly. What the hell? What the hell was this?

“I’ve already spoken to two or three police officers. I’ve already told them what happened.” Her eyes closed. “I’m very tired. My head hurts.” She opened her eyes and they were welled with tears. McQueen used all his willpower not to move to her, to cradle her head, to tell her it was OK, it was all over, he was here now.

“Yeah, yeah, I know that,” he said instead. “But my partner and I caught the case. We’ll be handling it. I need some information. Just a few minutes. The sooner we get started, the better chance we have of catching this guy.”

She seemed to think it over as she held his gaze. When she tried to blink the tears away, they spilled down onto her cheeks. She made no effort to brush them away. “All right,” was all she said.

McQueen felt his body relax, and he realized he had been holding himself so tightly that his back and shoulders ached. “May I sit down?” he asked softly.

“Yes, of course.”

He slid the too-large-for-the-room chair to the far side of the bed and sat with his back to the windows. He heard rain rattle against the panes and the sound chilled him and made him shiver. He found himself hoping she hadn’t noticed.

"I already know pretty much what happened. There's no need to go over it all, really. I just have a few questions. Most of them are formalities, please don't read anything into it. I just need to know certain things. For the reports. And to help us find this guy. OK?"

She squeezed her eyes closed again and more tears escaped. She nodded yes to him and reopened her eyes. He couldn't look away from them.

"This happened about eleven, eleven-ten?"

"Yes, about."

"You had gotten off the train at the Sixty-second Street subway station?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"What train is that?"

"The N."

"Where were you going?"

"Home."

"Where were you coming from?"

"My art class in Manhattan."

McQueen looked up from his notes. Art class? Rizzo's inane preamble resounded in his mind. He squinted at her and said, "You're not originally from Boston, are you?"

For the first time she smiled slightly, and McQueen found it disproportionately endearing. "No, Connecticut. Do you think I sound like a Bostonian?"

He laughed. "No, no, not at all. Just something somebody said to me. Long story, pay no attention."

She smiled again, and he could see it in her eyes that the facial movement had caused her some pain. "A lot of you Brooklynites think anyone from out of town sounds like they come from Boston."

McQueen sat back in his chair and raised his eyebrows in mock indignation. "'Brooklynite?' You think I sound like a Brooklynite?"

"Sure do."

"Well, Ms. Taylor, just so you know, I live in the city. Not Brooklyn." He kept his voice light, singsong.

"Isn't Brooklyn in the city?"

"Well, yeah, geographically. But the city is Manhattan. I was born on Long Island but I've lived in the city for fifteen years."

"All right, then," she said, with a pitched nod of her head.

McQueen tapped his pen on his notepad and looked at the ugly bruise on her

temple. He dropped his gaze to the splinted, bandaged broken fingers of her right hand.

“How are you doing? I know you took a bad fall and had a real bad scare. But how are you doing?”

She seemed to tremble briefly, and he regretted having asked. But she met his gaze with her answer.

“I’ll be fine. Everything is superficial, except for the fingers, and they’ll heal. I’ll be fine.”

He nodded to show he believed her and that yes, of course, she was right, she would be fine. He wondered, though, if she really would be.

“Can you describe the man to me?”

“It happened very fast. I mean, it seemed to last for hours, but . . . but . . .”

McQueen leaned forward and spoke more softly so she would have to focus on the sound of his voice in order to hear, focus on hearing the words and not the memory at hand.

“Was he taller than you?”

“Yes.”

“How tall are you?”

“Five-eight.”

“And him?”

She thought for a moment. “Five-nine or -ten.”

“His hair?”

“Black. Long. Very dirty.” She looked down at the sheet and nervously picked at a loose thread. “It . . . It . . .”

McQueen leaned in closer, his knees against the side of the bed. He imagined what it would be like to touch her. “It what?” he asked gently.

“It smelled.” She looked up sharply with the near panic of a frightened deer in her eyes. She whispered, “His hair was so dirty, I could smell it.”

She started to sob. McQueen sat back in his chair.

He needed to find this man. Badly.

“I want to keep this one.”

McQueen started the engine and glanced down at his wristwatch as he spoke to Rizzo. It was two in the morning, and his eyes stung with the grit of someone who had been too long awake.

Rizzo shifted in the seat and adjusted his jacket. He settled in and turned to the younger detective.

“You what?” he asked absently.

“I want this one. I want to keep it. We can handle this case, Joe, and I want it.”

Rizzo shook his head and frowned. "Doesn't work that way, kid. The morning shift catches and pokes around a little, does a rah-rah for the victim, and then turns the case to the day tour. You know that, that's the way it is. Let's get us back to the house and do the reports and grab a few Z's. We'll pick up enough of our own work next day-tour we pull. We don't need to grab something ain't our problem. OK?"

McQueen stared out of the window into the falling rain on the dark street. He didn't turn his head when he spoke.

"Joe, I'm telling you, I want this case. If you're in, fine. If not, I go to the squad boss tomorrow and ask for the case and a partner to go with it." Now he turned to face the older man and met his eyes. "Up to you, Joe. You tell me."

Rizzo turned away and spoke into the windshield before him. He let his eyes watch McQueen's watery reflection. "Pretty rough for a fuckin' guy with three days under his belt." He sighed and turned slowly before he spoke again.

"One of the cops in the ER told me this broad was a looker. So now I get extra work 'cause you got a hard-on?"

McQueen shook his head. "Joe, it's not like that."

Rizzo smiled. "Mike, you're how old? Twenty-seven, twenty-eight? It's like that, all right, it's always like that."

"Not this time. And not me. It's wrong for you to say that, Joe."

At that, Rizzo laughed aloud. "Mike," he said through a lingering chuckle, "there ain't no wrong. And there ain't no right. There just *is*, that's all."

Now it was McQueen who laughed. "Who told you that, a guru?"

Rizzo fumbled through his jacket pockets and produced a battered and bent Chesterfield. "Sort of," he said as he lit it. "My grandfather told me that. Do you know where I was born?"

McQueen, puzzled by the question, shook his head. "How would I know? Brooklyn?"

"Omaha-fuckin'-Nebraska, that's where. My old man was a lifer in the Air Force stationed out there. Well, when I was nine years old he dropped dead. Me and my mother and big sister came back to Brooklyn to live with my grandparents. My grandfather was a first-grade detective working Chinatown back then. The first night we was home, I broke down, crying to him about how wrong it was, my old man dying and all, how it wasn't right and all like that. He got down on his knees and leaned right into my face. I still remember the smell of beer and garlic sauce on his breath. He leaned right in and said, 'Kid, nothing is wrong. And nothing is right. It just is.' I never forgot that. He was dead-on correct about that, I'll tell you."

McQueen drummed his fingers lightly on the wheel and scanned the mirrors.

The street was empty. He pulled the Impala away from the curb and drove back toward the Belt Parkway. After they had entered the westbound lanes, Rizzo spoke again.

“Besides, Mike, this case won’t even stay with the squad. Rapes go to sex crimes and they get handled by the broads and the guys with the master’s degrees in fundamental and advanced bullshit. Can you imagine the bitch that Betty Friedan and Bella Abzug would pitch if they knew an insensitive prick like me was handling a rape?”

“Joe, Bella Abzug died about twenty years ago.”

Rizzo nodded. “Whatever. You get my point.”

“And I told you already, this isn’t a rape. A guy grabbed her, threatened her with a blade, and was yanking on his own chain while he held her there. No rape. Abuse and assault, tops.”

For the first time since they had worked together, McQueen heard a shadow of interest in Rizzo’s voice when the older man next spoke.

“Blade? Whackin’ off? Did the guy come?”

McQueen glanced over at his partner. “What?” he asked.

“Did the guy bust a nut, or not?”

McQueen squinted through the windshield: Had he thought to ask her that? No. No, he hadn’t. It simply hadn’t occurred to him.

“Is that real important to this, Joe, or are you just making a case for your insensitive-prick status?”

Rizzo laughed out loud and expelled a gray cloud of cigarette smoke in the process. McQueen reached for the power button and cracked his window.

“No, no, kid, really, official request. Did this asshole come?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t ask her. Why?”

Rizzo laughed again. “Didn’t want to embarrass her on the first date, eh, Mike? Understandable, but totally unacceptable detective work.”

“Is this going somewhere, Joe?”

Rizzo nodded and smiled. “Yeah, it’s going toward granting your rude request that we keep this one. If I can catch a case I can clear up quick, I’ll always keep it. See, about four, five years ago we had some schmuck running around the precinct grabbing girls and forcing them into doorways and alleyways. Used a knife. He’d hold them there and beat off till the thing started to look like a stick of chop meat. One victim said she stared at a bank clock across the street the whole time to sort of distract herself from the intimacy of the situation, and she said the guy was hammering himself for twenty-five minutes. But he could never get the job done. Psychological, probably. Sort of a major failure at his crime of choice. Never hurt no one, physically, but one of his victims was only thirteen.

She must be popping Prozac by the handful now somewhere. We caught the guy. Not me, but some guys from the squad. Turned out to be a strung-out junkie shitbag we all knew. Thing is, junkies don't usually cross over into the sex stuff. No cash or H in it. I bet this is the same guy. He'd be long out by now. And except for the subway, it's his footprint. We can clear this one, Mike. You and me. I'm gonna make you look like a star, first case. The mayor will be so proud of himself for grabbing that gold shield for you, he'll probably make you the fuckin' commissioner!"

Two days later, McQueen sat at his desk in the cramped detective squad room, gazing once again into the eyes of Amy Taylor. He cleared his voice before he spoke, and noticed the bruise at her temple had subsided a bit and that no attempt to cover it with makeup had been made.

"What I'd like to do is show you some photographs. I'd like you to take a look at some suspects and tell me if one of them is the perpetrator."

Her eyes smiled at him as she spoke. "I've talked to about five police officers in the last few days, and you're the first one to say 'perpetrator.'"

He felt himself flush a little. "Well," he said with a forced laugh, "it's a fairly appropriate word for what we're doing here."

"Yes, it is. It's just unsettling to hear it actually said. Does that make sense?"

He nodded. "I think I know what you mean."

"Good," she said with the pitched nod of her head that he suddenly realized he had been looking forward to seeing again. "I didn't mean it as an insult or anything. Do I look at the mug books now?"

This time McQueen's laugh was genuine. "No, no, that's your words now. We call it a photo array. I'll show you eight photos of men roughly matching the description you gave me. You tell me if one of them is the right one."

"All right, then." She straightened herself in her chair and folded her hands in her lap. She cradled the broken right fingers in the long slender ones of her left hand. The gentleness made McQueen's head swim with—what?—grief?—pity? He didn't know.

When he came around to her side of the desk and spread out the color photos before her, he knew immediately. She looked up at him—and the sapphires swam in tears yet again. She turned back to the photos and lightly touched one.

"Him," was all she said.

"You know," Rizzo said, chewing on a hamburger as he spoke, "you can never overestimate the stupidity of these assholes."

It was just after nine on a Thursday night, and the two detectives sat in the

Chevrolet and ate their meals. The car stood backed into a slot at the rear of the Burger King's parking lot, nestled in the darkness between circles of glare from two lampposts. Three weeks had passed since the assault on Amy Taylor.

McQueen turned to his partner. "Which assholes we talking about here, Joe?" In the short time he had been working with Rizzo, McQueen had developed a grudging respect for the older man. What Rizzo appeared to lack in enthusiasm, he more than made up for in experience and with an ironic, grizzled sort of street smarts. McQueen had learned much from him and knew he was about to learn more.

"Criminals," Rizzo continued. "Skells in general. This burglary call we just took reminded me of something. Old case I handled seven, eight years ago. Jewelry store got robbed, over on Thirteenth Avenue. Me and my partner, guy named Giacalone, go over there and see the victim. Old Sicilian lived in the neighborhood forever, salt-of-the-earth type. So me and Giacalone, we go all out for this guy. We even called for the fingerprint team, we were right on it. So we look around, talk to the guy, get the description of the perp and the gun used, and we tell the old guy to sit tight and wait for the fingerprint team to show up and we'll be in touch in a couple of days. Well, the old man is so grateful, he walks us out to the car. Just as we're about to pull away, the guy says, 'You know, the guy that robbed me cased the joint first.' Imagine that?—'cased the joint'—Musta watched a lot of TV, this old guy. So I say to him, 'What d'ya mean, cased the joint?' And he says, 'Yeah, two days ago the same guy came in to get his watch fixed. Left it with me and everything. Even filled out a receipt card with his name and address and phone number. Must have been just casing the place. Well, he sure fooled me.'"

Rizzo chuckled and bit into his burger. "So," he continued through a full mouth, "old Giacalone puts the car back into park and he leans across me and says, 'You still got that receipt slip?' The old guy goes, 'Yeah, but it must be all phony. He was just trying to get a look around.' Well, me and Giacalone go back in and we get the slip. We cancel the print guys and drive out to Canarsie. Guess what? The asshole is home. We grab him and go get a warrant for the apartment. Gun, jewelry, and cash, bing-bang-boom. The guy cops to rob-three and does four-to-seven."

Rizzo smiled broadly at McQueen. "His girlfriend lived in the precinct, and while he was visiting her, he figured he'd get his watch fixed. Then when he sees what a mark the old guy is, he has an inspiration! See? Assholes."

"Yeah, well, it's a good thing," McQueen said. "I haven't run across too many geniuses working this job."

Rizzo laughed and crumpled up the wrappings spread across his lap. "Amen,"

he said.

They sat in silence, Rizzo smoking, McQueen watching the people and cars moving around the parking lot.

“Hey, Joe,” McQueen said after a while. “Your theory about this neighborhood is a little bit off base. For a place supposed to be all Italian, I notice a lot of Asians around. Not to mention the Russians.”

Rizzo waved a hand through his cigarette smoke. “Yeah, somebody’s got to wait the tables in the Chinese restaurants and drive car service, You still can’t throw a rock without hitting a fucking guinea.”

The Motorola crackled to life at McQueen’s side. It was dispatch directing them to call the precinct via telephone. McQueen took his cell from his jacket pocket as Rizzo keyed the radio and gave a curt “Ten-four.”

McQueen placed the call and the desk put him through to the squad. A detective named Borrelli came on the line. McQueen listened. His eyes narrowed and, taking a pen from his shirt, he scribbled on the back of a newspaper. He hung up the phone and turned to Rizzo.

“We’ve got him,” he said softly.

Rizzo belched loudly. “Got who?”

McQueen leaned forward and started the engine. He switched on the headlights and pulled away. After three weeks in Bensonhurst, he no longer needed directions. He knew where he was going.

“Flain,” he said. “Peter Flain.”

Rizzo reached back, pulled on his shoulder belt, and buckled up. “Imagine that,” he said with a faint grin. “And here we was, just a minute ago, talking about assholes. Imagine that.”

McQueen drove hard and quickly toward Eighteenth Avenue. Traffic was light, and he carefully jumped a red signal at Bay Parkway and turned left onto Seventy-fifth Street. He accelerated to Eighteenth Avenue and turned right.

As he drove, he reflected on the investigation that was now about to unfold.

It had been Rizzo who had gotten it started when he recalled the prior crimes with the same pattern. He had asked around the precinct and someone remembered the name of the perp. Flain. Peter Flain.

The precinct computer had spit out his last known address in the Bronx and the parole officer assigned to the junkie ex-con. A call to the officer told them that Flain had been living in the Bronx for some years, serving out his parole without incident. He had been placed in a methadone program and was clean. Then, about three months ago, he disappeared. His parole officer checked around in the Bronx, but Flain had simply vanished. The officer put a violation on

Flain's parole and notified the state police, the New York Supreme Court, and NYPD headquarters. And that's where it had ended, as far as he was concerned.

McQueen had printed a color print from the computer and assembled the photo array. Amy Taylor picked Flain's face from it. Flain had returned to the Six-two Precinct.

Then Rizzo had really gone to work. He spent the better part of a four-to-midnight hitting every known junkie haunt in the precinct. He had made it known he wanted Flain. He had made it known that he would not be happy with any bar, poolroom, candy store, or after-hours joint that would harbor Flain and fail to give him up with a phone call to the squad.

And tonight, that call had been made.

McQueen swung the Chevy into the curb, killing the lights as the car rolled to a slow stop. Three storefronts down, just off the corner of Sixty-ninth Street, the faded fluorescent of the Keyboard Bar shone in the night. He twisted the key to shut off the engine. As he reached for the door handle and was about to pull it open, he felt the firm, tight grasp of Rizzo's large hand on his right shoulder. He turned to face him.

Rizzo's face held no sign of emotion. When he spoke, it was in a low, conversational tone. McQueen had never heard the older man enunciate more clearly. "Kid," Rizzo began, "I know you like this girl. And I know you took her out to dinner last week. Now, we both know you shouldn't even be working this collar since you been seeing the victim socially. I been working with you for three weeks now, and you're a good cop. But this here is the first bit of real shit we had to do. Let me handle it. Don't be stupid. We pinch him and read him the rights and off he goes." Rizzo paused and let his dark brown eyes run over McQueen's face. When they returned to the cold blue of McQueen's own eyes, they bored in.

"Right?" Rizzo asked.

McQueen nodded. "Just one thing, Joe."

Rizzo let his hand slide gently off McQueen's shoulder.

"What?" he asked.

"I'll process it. I'll walk him through central booking. I'll do the paperwork. Just do me one favor."

"What?" Rizzo repeated.

"I don't know any Brooklyn ADAs. I need you to talk to the ADA writing tonight. I want this to go hard. Two top counts, D felonies. Assault two and sexual abuse one. I don't want this prick copping to an A misdemeanor assault or some bullshit E felony. OK?"

Rizzo smiled, and McQueen became aware of the tension that had been

hidden in the older man's face only as he saw it melt away. "Sure, kid," he nodded. "I'll go down there myself and cash in a favor. No problem." He pushed his face in the direction of the bar and said, "Now, let's go get him."

Rizzo walked in first and went directly to the bar. McQueen hung back near the door, his back angled to the bare barroom wall. His eyes adjusted to the dimness of the large room and he scanned the half-dozen drinkers scattered along its length. He noticed two empty barstools with drinks and money and cigarettes spread before them on the worn Formica surface. At least two people were in the place somewhere, but not visible. He glanced over at Joe Rizzo.

Rizzo stood silently, his forearms resting on the bar. The bartender, a man of about sixty, was slowly walking toward him.

"Hello, Andrew," McQueen heard Rizzo say. "How the hell you been?" McQueen watched as the two men, out of earshot of the others, whispered briefly to one another. McQueen noticed the start of nervous stirrings as the drinkers came to realize that something was suddenly different here. He saw a small envelope drop to the floor at the feet of one man.

Rizzo stepped away from the bar and came back to McQueen.

He smiled. "This joint is so crooked, old Andrew over there would give up Jesus Christ Himself to keep me away from here." With a flick of his index finger, Rizzo indicated the men's room at the very rear in the left corner.

"Our boy's in there. Ain't feeling too chipper this evening, according to Andrew. Flain's back on the junk, hard. He's been sucking down Cokes all night. Andrew says he's been in there for twenty minutes."

McQueen looked at the distant door. "Must have nodded off."

Rizzo twisted his lips. "Or he read Andrew like a book and climbed out the fucking window. Lets us go see."

Rizzo started toward the men's room, unbuttoning his coat with his left hand as he walked. McQueen suddenly became aware of the weight of the 9mm Glock automatic belted to his own right hip. His groin broke into a sudden sweat as he realized he couldn't remember having chambered a round before leaving his apartment for work. He unbuttoned his coat and followed his partner.

The men's room was small. A urinal hung on the wall to their left, brimming with dark urine and blackened cigarette butts. A cracked mirror hung above a blue-green stained sink. The metallic rattle of a worn, useless ventilation fan clamored. The stench of disinfectant surrendered to—what?—vomit? Yes, vomit.

The single stall stood against the wall before them. The door was closed. Feet showed beneath it.

McQueen reached for his Glock and watched as Rizzo slipped an ancient-

looking Colt revolver from under his coat.

Then Rizzo leaned his weight back, his shoulder brushing against McQueen's chest, and heaved a heavy foot at the stress point of the stall door. He threw his weight behind it, and as the door flew inward, he stepped deftly aside, at the same time gently shoving McQueen the other way. The door crashed against the stall occupant and Rizzo rushed forward, holding the bouncing door back with one hand, pointing the Colt with the other.

Peter Flain sat motionless on the toilet. His pants and underwear lay crumpled around his ankles. His legs were spread wide, pale and varicosed, and capped by bony knees. His head hung forward onto his chest, still. McQueen's eyes fell on the man's greasy black hair. Flain's dirty gray shirt was covered with a brown, foamy, blood-streaked vomit. More blood, dark and thick, ran from his nostrils and pooled in the crook of his chin. His fists were clenched.

Rizzo leaned forward and, carefully avoiding the fluids, lay two fingers across the jugular.

He stood erect and holstered his gun. He turned to McQueen.

"*Morte*," he said. "The prick died on us!"

McQueen looked away from Rizzo and back to Flain. He tried to feel what he felt, but couldn't. "Well," he said, just to hear his own voice.

Rizzo let the door swing closed on the sight of Flain. He turned to McQueen with sudden anger on his face. "You know what this means?" he said.

McQueen watched as the door swung slowly back open. He looked at Flain, but spoke to Rizzo.

"It means he's dead. It's over."

Rizzo shook his head angrily. "No, no, that's not what it fucking means. It means no conviction. No guilty plea. It means, 'Investigation abated by death'! That's what it means."

McQueen shook his head. "So?" he asked. "So what?"

Rizzo frowned and leaned back against the tiled wall. Some of the anger left him. "So what?" he said, now more sad than angry. "I'll tell you 'so what.' Without a conviction or a plea, we don't clear this case. We don't clear this case, we don't get credit for it. We don't clear this case, we did all this shit for nothing. Fucker would have died tonight anyway, with or without us bustin' our asses to find him."

They stood in silence for a moment. Then, suddenly, Rizzo brightened. He turned to McQueen with a sly grin, and when he spoke, he did so in a softer tone.

"Unless," he said, "unless we start to get smart."

In six years on the job, McQueen had been present in other places, at other times, with other cops, when one of them had said, "Unless . . ." with just such a

grin. He felt his facial muscles begin to tighten.

“What, Joe? Unless what?”

“Un-less when we got here, came in the john, this guy was still alive. In acute respiratory distress. Pukin’ on himself. Scared, real scared ’cause he knew this was the final overdose. And we, well, we tried to help, but we ain’t doctors, right? So he knows he’s gonna die and he says to us, ‘I’m sorry.’ And we say, ‘What, Pete, sorry about what?’ And he says, ‘I’m sorry about that girl, that last pretty girl, in the subway. I shouldn’ta done that.’ And I say to him, ‘Done what, Pete, what’d you do?’ And he says, ‘I did like I did before, with the others, with the knife.’ And then, just like that, he drops dead!”

McQueen wrinkled his forehead. “I’m not following this, Joe. How does that change anything?”

Rizzo leaned closer to McQueen. “It changes everything,” he whispered, holding his thumb to his fingers and shaking his hand, palm up, at McQueen’s face. “Don’t you get it? It’s a deathbed confession, rock-solid evidence, even admissible in court. Bang—case closed! And we’re the ones who closed it. Don’t you see? It’s fucking beautiful.”

McQueen looked back at the grotesque body of the dead junkie. He felt bile rising in his throat, and he swallowed it down.

He shook his head slowly, his eyes still on the corpse.

“Jesus, Joe,” he said, the bile searing at his throat. “Jesus Christ, Joe, that’s not right. We can’t do that. That’s just fucking wrong!”

Rizzo reddened, the anger suddenly coming back to him.

“Kid,” he said, “don’t make me say you owe me. Don’t make me say it. I took this case on for you, remember?”

But it was not the way McQueen remembered it. He looked into the older man’s eyes.

“Jesus, Joe,” he said.

Rizzo shook his head, “Jesus got nothin’ to do with it.”

“It’s wrong, Joe,” McQueen said, even as his ears flushed red with the realization of what they were about to do. “It’s just wrong.”

Rizzo leaned in close, speaking more softly, directly into McQueen’s ear. The sound of people approaching the men’s room forced an urgency into his voice. McQueen felt the warmth of Rizzo’s breath touching him.

“I tole you this, kid. I already tole you this. There is no right. There is no wrong.” He turned and looked down at the hideous corpse. “There just *is*.”

SCOTT TUROW

Loyalty

FROM *Playboy*

THIS HAPPENED, the first part, four or five years before everything else. In those days I was still sweeping a lot of stuff under the rug with Clarissa, and we didn't see the Elstners often, because my wife, given the history, was never really at ease around Paul and Ann. Instead, every few months, Paul Elstner and I would take in a game on our own—basketball in the winter, baseball in the summer—meeting first for an early dinner usually at Gil's, near the University Field House, formerly Gil's Men's Bar and still a bastion of a lost world, with its walls wainscoted in sleek oak.

And so we were there, feeling timeless, telling tales about our cases and our kids, when this character came to a halt near our table. I could feel Elstner start at the sight of him. The man had a generation on us, putting him near seventy at this point. He was in a longhair cashmere topcoat, with a heavy cuff link winking on his sleeve and his sparse hair puffed up in a fifty-dollar do. But he was the kind you couldn't really dress up. He was working a toothpick in his mouth, and on his meaty face there was a harsh look of ingrained self-importance. He was a tough mug, you could see it, the kind whose father had come over on the boat and who had grown up hard himself.

"Christ," Elstner whispered. He'd raised his menu to surround his face. "Christ, don't look at him. Oh, Christ." Elstner has always run a little over the margins. Never mind the dumb stuff twenty years before when we were law school roommates. But even now, a married grownup with two daughters, Paul would ride around in the dead of winter with his car windows open so he wouldn't kill himself with his own cigar smoke, a pair of yellow headphones mounted over his earmuffs so he could rock with the Rolling Stones despite the onrushing wind. Looking at him with the two sides of the menu pushed against his ears, even though he was twice the size of the guy he was hiding from, I figured, It's Elstner.

"Maurie Moleva," Paul said when the old guy at last had moved on. "I just didn't want him remembering I'm still alive." Elstner swallowed hard on the hunk of schnitzel he'd stopped chewing when Moleva appeared.

I asked what it was Paul had done to Maurie.

"Me? Nothin'. Nada. This isn't about what anybody did to Maurie. It's about

what Maurie did to somebody else.” Elstner looked into his Diet Coke while the racket of the restaurant swelled around us. “This is obviously a story I shouldn’t be telling anybody,” he said.

“OK,” I answered, meaning I was not asking for more. Elstner rattled the cubes in his drink, chasing a necklace of tiny brown bubbles to the sides of the glass, plainly reconsidering it all, the secret and its consequences.

“This was a long time ago,” he finally said. “Before the earth had cooled. No more than a year after you and I finished law school. I was still working for Jack Barrish. You remember Jack. Wacky stuff was always going on around that office. He’s defending hookers and taking it out in trade, or trying to give me something hot—a camera, a suit—instead of half my salary. You remember.”

“I remember,” I said.

“Anyway, Jack, you know, his business clients are all Kehwahnee hustlers just like him, and this guy Maurie Moleva is one of them. Dr. Moleva. PhD. Research chemist who went into business. A few years back now, he sold off his company to some New York Stock Exchange outfit, Tinker and Something, one of those conglomerates. I read about it in the *Journal*, forty million bucks, fifty million, you know, pocket money to them but a piece of change. Back then, the time I’m talking about, the company was still Maurie’s.

“Moleva started out making household products, bleach and spot remover, off-brand stuff that they’d sell at the independent grocers, but by then he’s really ringing the gong selling to the military. One of his biggest contracts is for windshield washer fluid. For jeeps. Airplanes. Tanks. Helicopters. And of course, the kind of guy he is, whatever he’s got, he wants more, so the government is like, We need some chemical, HD-12 or whatever, in the washer fluid, in case we’re in the desert, the sand won’t stick. And Maurie, he’s a smart guy, we’ve got several hundred thousand troops in the jungles of Nam, no sand there, and the HD-12, I don’t know, it adds two bucks a gallon, so he tells them on the assembly line, ‘Leave it out.’

“Now the guys on the line, they’re all to a man Maurie’s people from the old country. Including Maurie’s cousin Dragon. When Cousin Dragon was about nine years old, he started in writing to Maurie, ‘America’s my dream, I need to come to America, I hate these commies over here, they’re godless tyrants, they crush the spirit of every man,’ and Maurie read these letters for about a decade. He’d never set eyes on Dragon, but like every tough SOB I ever met, he’s sort of a softie on his own time, very sentimental. So Maurie pays Dragon’s way, meets his plane, kisses Dragon’s cheeks, gives him a diamond medallion with the American flag surrounded by some vines that are a big symbol in the homeland, and puts Dragon to work on the line. Then Maurie goes off to tell everybody at

the church men's club what a hero he is for rescuing his young cousin.

"Anyway, Dragon's here for a while and he begins to get the low-down. Mamie's sons are driving shiny cars, they got lovely wives and big houses, and Cousin Dragon is bustin' his hump on the line, starting at six AM every day because Maurie doesn't like his employees stuck in traffic. And long story short, Dragon begins to remember what's so great about communism. He starts in asking, Where's a little more for the workin' stiff? He even, God save the poor son of a bitch, talks on the assembly line about a union. Not smart. Maurie gets his two sons and they throw Dragon's butt out. Literally. They toss him through the door in the middle of winter without his hat and gloves. 'I bought your fuckin' hat, I bought your gloves, I brought your ungrateful pink heinie here from the old country. Go.'

"Bad news for Dragon. And worse news it turns out for Maurie. Because within a few months, an Army helicopter gets caught in a desert storm and goes kerplunk in the Mojave. One survivor. Who says they went down because they couldn't get the sand off their frigging windshield.

"So we have a big federal grand jury investigation started up. Which is where my boss Jack comes in. The G, of course, has figured out that their windshield wiper fluid doesn't have any HD-12 in it and Maurie's answer is, 'Darn it, can you believe what knuckleballs I got on my line? I need better help.' That's not so bad, right? As a defense? That could sell?"

It sounded OK to me, but I'd never practiced criminal law.

"It didn't," Elstner said. "Nope. The AUSA says, 'Nope, we're gonna put Maurie in the pokey, let the big boys call him Sweetie. We're gonna forfeit Maurie's great business 'cause he's a racketeer.' 'How you gonna do that?' Jack says. 'This is a terrible accident.' 'Nope,' says the AUSA. 'Nope, I got a witness.'"

"Dragon."

"You can move on to the Jeopardy round."

"So Maurie did some time?"

"Hardly. Negative on that one, flight commander. Maurie strolled. Here's where I come into the picture," Elstner said.

I made a sound to show I was getting interested.

"There was this night," Paul said. "I get a call. Past midnight. It's Maurie. Says he's been phoning Boss Jack everywhere and can't find him. When I tell Maurie that Jack went to take an emergency dep in Boston, you'd think from the sound that old Maurie was passing a stone. Finally he tells me to meet up with him instead. Now, I don't even own a car. I have to go wake up my sister across town. And I'm following Maurie's directions, which take me to East

Bumblefuck. There are moons of Jupiter that are closer. I'm in cornfields. And here near one of these roadside telephone booths, here at two-thirty in the goddamn morning, here is Maurie Moleva. It's springtime. The earth is soft. Stuff is growing. The air smells of loam. There's a bright moon. He's in a rumpled seersucker suit. With mud up to his knees. He's got on a straw fedora and he's carrying a briefcase. He gets in the car and tells me to drive him home. That's all he says. Not hello. Not thanks. Just, 'Drive.' The Great Communicator. At his feet he's got the briefcase, which won't quite close because the wooden handle of something is sticking out of it. He's got a ring of grime under his polished fingernails, and every so often he's jiggling a chain in one palm. In time I see the medallion—diamond, flag, vines. I didn't have a clue right then whose it was, but still and all, this is bad voodoo. I'm definitely scared, especially a few days later when it turns out that good old Cousin Dragon is AWOL."

"Isn't that big trouble for Maurie?" I asked. "Prosecutors aren't going to have to summon the oracle to figure out who'd want to disappear Dragon."

"Yeah, well, Maurie's not stupid. Nobody will ever hang that on him. In about a week, Dragon's beater car turns up at the airport. So the FBI searches all the flight manifests and, can you imagine, one of them shows Dragon boarded a plane home the same night Maurie was taking mud baths in the boonies. Had a reservation and all, paid his ticket in cash. Bureau questions the guys on Maurie's line and some are saying Dragon was talking about making some bigtime money. Couple of them are even hearing from Aunt Tatiana who heard from Cousin Lugo how Dragon's back in the old country and acting real flush.

"Now the G, of course, they're up Maurie's hind end with a miner's light, because they just know he paid off dear old Dragon to boogie. Feebies tear up every bank account, they stick Maurie's bookkeeper in the grand jury, hoping to trace the money, but no luck. So they call Interpol to find Dragon, but he left no trail once he stepped off the plane.

"And of course, I'm young and dumb, and this is really killing me. Attorney-client, I can't talk about what I know, and I'm too petrified to do it anyway, but one Sunday I mosey back to where I picked Maurie up, just hoping to figure all this out for my own sake. Which I pretty much do. Maurie's in the chemical business, right? Ever hear of hazardous waste?"

"That's how Clarissa describes our marriage."

Elstner stopped to laugh. "Yeah, right. Well, this place, these days you'd call it a brownfield, a disposal site. My guess, it was owned by the outfit that hauled Maurie's stuff. Today, with the EPA, you probably have to have the Marines posted at the perimeter, but back then there's just a chainlink fence, and you can see somebody did a number on the padlock. Inside there are all these trenches,

each longer than a football field, set about twenty yards apart and filled with rock and soil. The last one's open, maybe three, four feet deep with Styrofoam liner, and a couple dozen fifty-five-gallon drums of shit in there waiting to be buried."

"And 'RIP Dragon' written on one of the drums. Is that how it adds?"

"That's my arithmetic. I figure Dr. Maurie told Dragon he'd send him home rich, then took the guy down instead. Fella like Maurie, he'd kill you sooner than let you put the squeeze on him."

"And who got on the airplane with Dragon's passport?"

"My bet? One of the sons. Cousins, there's probably some resemblance. Besides, something like this stays at home."

"That's why you quit on Jack?"

"Hey, after this one, a nice real estate deal, that sounded just right. And even so, I've been scared all these years Maurie was gonna come for me with his meat ax or his latrine shovel or whatever it was he had in that briefcase. That's why this tale never got told. I mean," Elstner said, looking across the table, "how can you tell anyone a story like this?"

So that was what my pal Paul Elstner had told me several years before. By now I was seeing a good deal of Paul, because I had left Clarissa. I barely got out at first, but one of Paul's partners had deserted Elstner on their season tickets for the Hands basketball games over at the university, and I was happy to buy in.

Like most people who split up, I had told myself that I was starting a new life, a better life, a life in which I'd finally become my true self, but turmoil consumed most of my private moments, confining me within walls of pain. It is such a mystery, really, that you can stop loving someone. You grow up believing love is one of the epic forces of nature, like tidal patterns and the creeping of the earth's crust, an indomitable element. So how can it just go away? I would turn this question over in my head for hours at a time, sitting in my bare high-rise apartment and watching the city twinkle desolately at night.

I didn't know if I had married Clarissa for the wrong reasons or if she had changed, with the babies, the years at home, the death of her older sister and her mother. I could not explain why a somewhat wry, laconic woman, whom I'd found thrillingly bright when I first met her, became so obsessed with her children's health that barely a week passed without a visit to the pediatrician, or why at the age of forty a person who had been a defiant atheist returned to the Catholic Church and insisted, with the same ferocity with which she had once spurned religion, that the boys be baptized in a faith I did not share. I could not explain any of it, the passions or the quirks that had grown unbearably grating

over time, but we had ended up like most couples who don't make it—embittered rivals who saw each other as emblems of life's shortcomings.

My sons had remained with their mother. At all moments, I seemed to feel them behind me, like passengers left on some pier. They were both in high school, a sophomore and a senior. I felt awful for them. But I felt worse for myself.

I moved into an apartment building in Center City, not far from work. The building's population was mostly young, late-twenties just-getting-starteds. I was weirdly aware of the number who moved out each week. Common sense suggested that they had fallen in love and were relocating to begin a life with someone else. The sight of furniture on dollies, of bags and boxes piled in the service elevator, seemed to seize all of my attention, like somebody calling my name.

I turned into one of those people who arrive home for a night alone, carrying as much as possible—the cleaning, something I'd had repaired, and a few groceries for dinner. Twice a week I saw my sons. The other nights I tried not to drink too much, certain that this cataclysm would finally make me the gentle alcoholic my father was in his later years, always waiting for sunset and the first Manhattan. I had been told that women would find a successful single man in his late forties magnetic, but I felt too sad even to start in that direction. Eventually, I began attending the kind of tony intellectual events around the city at which I'd envisioned myself when I first came here for law school and which Clarissa for years had derided as a complete bore—art openings, symphonies, lectures. There were few singles at these events, and I often felt out of place, but I was desperate to make some effort at self-improvement.

One of these evenings, involving a fundraising dinner and a reading by a poet celebrated in circles too narrow to mean much to me, was held in the West Bank condo of old acquaintances, Leo Levitz, a shrink, and his wife, Ruth, whose industrial-design firm has been an off-and-on client of mine for years. In their late sixties, the Levitzes had achieved an enviable settled grace. Vivid paintings and objects of primitive art they'd gathered from around the world crowded the track-lit corridors of their apartment. Alone, I studied each piece, deeply struck that a congenial married life could be reflected by such tangible beauty.

By ten, the gathering had thinned and I prepared to shirk the pretense I had made of being cheerful, humorous, of feeling I was of interest to other people. Shortly, I would again be on my own. I bade the Levitzes goodbye. Waiting in the small corridor outside their door for the elevator, I heard a vague thudding. I swore out loud when I realized it was the skylight overhead.

"I'm sorry?" A tall woman with straight black hair was working the key into

the lock of her apartment across the hall. I'd noticed her once or twice during the evening, especially as she'd departed immediately before me. She smiled sociably, revealing a front tooth lapped over its neighbor. She had a long face and dark eyes, a woman close to my age who knew she still retained much of the appeal of youth.

"Is it raining out there?" I asked. It was fall, late November, and the prediction had been snow rather than rain. Without an umbrella, my topcoat would become sodden and emit a repellent scent that would taint the close air of my apartment.

"Take a look." Across the threshold, she gestured to her living room window. Staring down, I could make out both rain and snow, leaving a lethal glister on the streets. The smarter taxi drivers, who valued their lives and property, would already have called it a night.

She introduced herself as Karen Kolmar. Her apartment had soft yellow walls and deep Chinese rugs. A book about Coco Chanel was open on a cocktail table. We talked about the poet who'd read.

"His work seemed cold to me," she said. "But I suppose a lot of it was just over my head." She shrugged, not much concerned.

I would have said the same thing, I told her, but lacked the strength of character to admit it.

"I'm at peace as a middlebrow," she answered. I liked her. Self-awareness seemed a particularly appealing trait at the moment.

She asked whether it was the Levitzes or poetry that had brought me around, and in no time I had explained my situation in life, saying far too much about Clarissa. Karen Kolmar smiled philosophically. She was not wearing a wedding ring and no doubt had encountered her share of guys like me.

In fact, I soon picked out a photo of a fellow I figured for her beau, given the prominence with which the picture was displayed on the closed ebony lid of a baby grand in the corner. A healthy-looking older guy, he seemed mildly familiar, if only for his buoyant smile that appeared all too obviously manufactured for the sake of the camera. Looking at the photograph, I sized up my hostess's situation. A divorce. Some money. This guy who was at least ten years too old for her but who probably paid a lot of attention. That, I was slowly coming to realize, was one more sadness in divorce, not merely getting to the middle of your life and confessing that the most basic things had not worked out but finding that you're one of life's bench players waiting to get on the court again with the rest of the second string.

"That's my father," she told me when she caught my eye. "I just put up his picture a couple of days ago. We're having a rapprochement. My mother died and so we're being nice to one another. It might not last. We didn't speak for two

years before this.”

She asked if my parents were living. Neither was. Like her, I’d lost my mother recently. I wondered all the time if I would have left Clarissa but for that, if I’d hung on to my marriage for years for my mother’s sake. I thought I might have. I told her that—I seemed willing to say anything, and she to listen to it appreciatively.

“I’m trying to figure out if my father is why I have trouble with men,” she said.

She didn’t seem to me to have much problem with men. She knew what she was doing.

“Three-time loser,” she added and waggled the fourth finger of her left hand.

“God, three times,” I said, before I could catch myself. “I’d throw myself under a train.”

That could have gone badly, but her look was sadly sympathetic.

“It gets easier,” she said. “Unfortunately.” She didn’t have kids, though. That was different. She asked if I was thinking of going back. I wasn’t, although Clarissa, after weeks in which she’d been shrill and recklessly accusing—no one person could ever love me as much as I wanted to be loved; I was trying to change her because I could not change myself—had recently turned plaintive. After all this time, she asked me. After all this time? It was the only thing that ever had any resonance.

When I got ready to leave, Karen emerged from another room with an umbrella.

“I won’t melt,” I said.

“You can bring it back.” She smiled, enjoying the fact that she was so far ahead of me. Walking me to the door, she took my arm.

I was quite happy until, halfway downstairs in the elevator, it came to me that she looked a good deal like Clarissa.

I brought the umbrella back, naturally. I called ahead, and then it started to rain as soon as I got there, which led to a pretty good laugh. We just dashed around the corner and sat on the stools in a little coffee bar, talking about ourselves.

She ran the sales division of a chemical company her father had founded and sold several years ago to a big conglomerate. I figured she was one of those sleek women I noticed in airports, always looking resourceful and self-possessed in their dark tailored suits, able to climb onto the plane at the last instant and still somehow get their luggage into the overhead.

“You don’t really seem like a salesman,” I told her. “Too sincere.”

“That’s why I’m good. I don’t lie,” she said. “I never lie,” Her dark eyes rose

over her paper cup in a measured warning. "I didn't believe I could handle sales. But I needed a job after my first divorce. And when I was a kid, I was always jealous that my brothers went to the office with my father." Her father, pushing seventy-five now, still ran the company under the terms of his buyout.

"How'd that work when you weren't talking to him?"

"E-mail." She laughed.

I was impressed with her rugged sense of humor about the way life had turned out. Her last name, for example, was her second husband's.

"You really wouldn't really call that a marriage. He was a country-club buddy of my father's, older and very polished, but it just never took. We were together six weeks, and kind of split up at a party one night and never were under the same roof again. I thought, Oh god, I'm not going to change all my credit cards again. I just did that. They were still coming in the mail, a different one each day. At some point, you have to start moving forward."

As we walked back to her place, a huge clap of thunder rattled the street, and the rain suddenly fell as if poured from a bucket. The small umbrella offered little protection, and I pushed her into a street-corner bus shelter, where I kissed her. I was afraid it might seem like a moment from a movie, but I guess everybody wants some of that in her life.

"That was very stylish," she said, and rubbed one finger under her lip to deal with the lipstick smudge. "You're a stylish guy."

The next time I saw her, we ended up walking down to the river. It was drizzling again, but there'd been plenty of winter weather, and the River Kindle was covered by a solid frozen sheet. Standing on the ice, you could still feel the lurking movement beneath, the vibration of the Cory Falls a hundred feet away, the telltale swirls of the water and its many enigmas.

Rain glossed the surface, refracting the lights of Center City and making it possible to skate along. Karen had trained as a girl and did wonderful, graceful movements, skidding ahead on a pair of Keds, encouraging me to follow her. She's an adventure, I thought. This woman's an adventure. My skin went electric, not just about her but for myself.

"You're not going to say anything to her. Tell me you're not," Elstner and I had stopped for a beer after the basketball game, mostly so Paul could have a final cigar before he got home, where Ann did not permit them. "Maurie will dissolve my bones in a vat of acid."

I had figured it out a while ago, probably by the second time I saw Karen. The details were a while coming back to me. But by then, as I told Elstner, I was involved.

“For crying out loud,” I said. “I won’t say anything. I thought you’d think it was funny.”

“Sure. Funny. I’ll laugh as soon as I change my diaper.” Elstner blustered his lips. “Have you met Dr. Moleva yet?”

I had, in fact, only a few days before, when I’d picked Karen up at their Center City office. His smile was disturbing. He had bad teeth, like a farm animal whose poor bloodlines couldn’t be concealed. To his daughter, he was a source of never-ending vexation. At work he was imperious, then blamed his subordinates when his orders turned out to be wrong. As a father, he attacked her often and made a habit of overlooking what was important to her. He hadn’t been able to remember my name, although she gave it to him three times in the few minutes we were together.

“Kind of your run-of-the-mill jerk,” I said.

“And murderer,” added Paul.

“She hates him, I think. You know. Underneath.”

Elstner shivered again. “Christ,” he said. “Why don’t you go out with twenty-five-year-old women like other guys your age?”

“Hey, cut me some slack. It won’t make any difference.”

Elstner groaned. “You think you can just know something like that about somebody and it won’t matter?”

“Paul—”

“Listen. Did I ever give you advice about women?”

In our third year of law school, Elstner went out with a tall dark girl, an undergraduate who had the lean elegant moves of a whippet. Very moody. Very attractive. She smiled with notable reluctance. She seemed exotic because she knew a lot about motorcycles and introduced us to mescal—the saltshaker, the lime, the worm in the bottle. After their third date, I told Elstner I didn’t think she was really right for him. To this day he seemed to agree, but two or three months later, on a whim, I called her myself. That was Clarissa. Elstner for one reason or another never said much, not even the kind of jokes you might expect, not when I married her or lived with her for twenty-two years, not even when I told him that our life together had become a barren misery and that I’d asked for a divorce. Maybe he thought I’d saved him. Or used him. He never said. I never asked.

“No,” I told him, “you never gave me advice about women.”

“Well,” he said, “that’s the only reason I’m not gonna start.”

When you’re having great sex, it seems to be the center of the world. Everything else—work, the news, people on the street—has a remote, second-tier quality, as

if none of it will ever fully reach you. The rest of life seems a pretext, a recovery period before the shuddering starts again.

Over the holidays, Clarissa and I divided time with the boys. For Christmas she took them on the annual journey to Pennsylvania and her parents' home. Knowing their absence would be hard on me, I accepted when one of my partners offered his cabin up in Skageon. Clarissa hated the cold, and it had been years since I had passed any part of winter in the woods. On a chance, I invited Karen and she accepted, eager to avoid the annual holiday collisions with her father.

We left late on the twenty-fifth and made an elaborate Christmas dinner while it stormed outside. What followed were three of those crystalline days that occasionally bless the Midwest, when the snows magnify the available light and the lack of clouds leaves the air thin and exciting. We snowshoed for hours, then, exhausted by our treks, passed the long dark nights in bed, an intermittent languor of sleeping and reading, lovemaking and laughter. Driving back to the Tri-Cities, to the year-end deadlines of my law practice and the turmoil of my broken marriage, I felt the exhilaration of having finally, briefly, lived the life I'd longed for.

I spent the next couple of nights at Karen's apartment. I had second thoughts about the Levitzes, who also knew Clarissa, but they were away. Even in her own bed, Karen slept poorly. Initially I was afraid it was my presence, but she said she never got more than three or four hours in a row, which seemed somehow at odds with her resigned exterior. She would buck awake, thrashing with the demons of a savage nightmare.

"What was the dream?" I asked the second night.

She shook her head, unwilling or unable to answer. She was naked and had her arms wrapped about herself. When I laid my hand on her narrow back, I could feel her heart hammering.

"Go back to sleep," she said. "I'll get up until I calm down."

I asked what she would do.

"I have my things. I like cognac. I like Edith Piaf, in some moods. Or big symphonies. It's a good time to reflect."

Clarissa also did not sleep well. She read. In the middle of the night I'd find her propped on her pillow, a minute lamp clipped onto her book. The only pleasure I ever took in business travel was in not having to sleep with a pillow over my head.

Without warning Karen said, "I was dreaming about a fire." She was looking at the ceiling and a plaster rosette sculpted where a gas lamp had hung decades before. "I was in a fire with my father. I was watching the fire come toward him

and there wasn't anything I could do."

"Frightening," I said.

"It's not what I dream that doesn't make sense to me. It's the way I react. All I had to do was shout, 'Watch out.' But the person I was in that dream—she didn't even know that shouting was possible. Why do you think you're yourself in a dream when you don't know the most basic things?"

Perhaps that was how life really was, I said, full of blind spots and the inability to do what seems obvious. She didn't take much to the suggestion.

"Do you dream about your father often?" I asked.

She wrinkled her mouth. "Why would you ask that?"

I didn't have an answer, not one I could speak. She went for her robe and told me again to go back to sleep.

"You know, my father likes you," she said in the morning, as I was driving her to work. "He says you're solid."

I wasn't sure what basis Maurie had to comment, although it was a remark that, a year before, I might have made about myself.

"He has a lot of good qualities," she added. "He's not all one way. Did you know he was a war hero?"

"Really? What kind of hero?"

"Are there kinds? A hero. He has medals. From Korea."

"Did he kill anyone?"

"God," she said. "What a question. Like I'm going to say, 'Daddy, who'd you shoot?' It was a war. He saved some people, He killed some people. Why else do they give you medals?" She kissed me before leaving the car, but bent to eye me from the curb. "What's your thing with my father?" she asked.

Karen and I spent New Year's Eve with the Elstners, enjoying dinner at their home, then, as midnight approached, a few minutes of revelry in the local hangout where Paul made an appearance most nights to smoke a cigar. I thought it had gone well—Elstner and I had engaged in our usual good-spirited mocking of one another, amusing the women—and when Paul and I went to a game later that week, he made it a point to say how much Ann and he had liked Karen.

"The only thing is," Elstner said, as he drove to the University Field House after dinner, "I nearly soaked my socks every time she mentioned her father. She always talk about him that much?"

"She works with him, Paul. He's her boss."

He gave an equivocal nod, clearly not inclined to question my hasty defense.

"Truth is," I added, "I always wonder how she'd be about her father if that story you told me had the right ending—you know, if Maurie got nabbed for

offing his relative, and Karen knew it. Probably make a big difference, don't you think?"

"How's that?"

"She has no perspective on him. I mean, he's her dad. So whenever he clobbers her, she's inclined to think maybe it's her fault, that he's really a good guy underneath. But if she knew what a cruel character he is, an actual killer, that would have an impact." I was moving full throttle with the idea that had propelled me for months now, the belief that new perspectives and new information could make life a happier enterprise.

"Well, that didn't happen," he said. "Maurie's roaming free. And nobody's going to be diming him out now. Right?"

"Right," I said. "But it's strange knowing."

Paul had been keeping a close eye on the traffic. We were caught in the pregame rush, staggering a few feet and then stopping again as the cars funneled into the lot, but Elstner turned to me fully now. He might as well have said I told you so.

"Maybe strange is what you want, champ," he said.

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you could have walked away as soon as you figured out who she was."

"Hey, I like this woman. More than 'like.'"

Paul had worked his mouth into a funny shape as he reflected. "Here," said Elstner, "mind if I tell you a weird story?"

"Another one?"

He paused to give me a sick smile, then asked, "Remember Rhonda Carling?"

"Rhonda Carling? The woman you went out with before Ann?"

"Her. Did I ever tell you about our sex life?"

"Christ, I don't think so."

"This was the bad old days, right? Virginity mattered." He grimaced. "Listen to me. 'Bad old days.' A man with two daughters."

"Don't act like a Cro-Magnon. Rhonda Carling and her virtue. I have the context."

"Well," he said, "she liked to play halvsies."

"Halvsies?"

"You know. To go just partway. So she remained, you know, intact."

"No," I said.

"Oh yeah," he said. "Now, I really dug Rhonda. And this halfway stuff, it had its moments. Kind of like surgery, very exact, and very exciting, with all the fuss and bother and holding back. And all the danger. I mean, I'm always trying to

figure out what happens if we go one angstrom too far. Am I engaged or dead on the side of the road?"

Only Elstner, I thought to myself.

"But it was also pretty frigging strange. The whole thing really bugged me. What was wrong with her? Or me? It was bizarre, but it went on the whole time I was seeing her. Finally, I met Ann at her brother's at Thanksgiving, which is just about when Rhonda got interested in a guy she was working with, and we sort of faded away.

"One night, say six months later, I bumped into Rhonda at the A&P and we went out for coffee, just to sort of officially throw the dirt on the grave, and she tells me this other fellow has popped the question and something else. 'Are you hurt?' she says. 'My pride,' I say. She smiles, nicely, we liked each other, she says, 'Halfway's all you wanted, Paul.' And soon as she said it, I knew she had that just right. "

Paul lowered the window to pay the parking attendant, then surged forward into the lot. As ever with Elstner, I was having a hard time following his logic.

"Meaning what? I should think about marrying Karen?" Even saying it seemed preposterous. I was still at the stage where I couldn't imagine being married to anyone but Clarissa.

Safely in a space, Paul threw the car into park and studied me.

"Forget it," he said finally. "It's just a story."

My law firm followed the quaint custom of holding a formal dinner at the conclusion of the firm's fiscal year in January. It was intended to celebrate our successes, but was frequently an occasion for teeth gritting among those who were upset about the annual division of spoils. I looked forward to having Karen with me, both to buffer me from the simmering quarrels and to show her off to my colleagues, before whom I'd suffered the shame of not holding together my home. Already in my tux, I swept by her office to collect her. She walked to the car mincingly, trying not to dirty her silk shoes on the icy street. She was in a long gown, its revealing crepe neckline visible in the parting of her coat. I whistled. She smiled as she peeked down through the car door, but made no move to get in.

"I can't go," she said. "There's a presentation tomorrow. My whole staff is upstairs. Somehow my father forgot to mention he had rescheduled with the customer, until he saw me dressed. I must have told him ten times how excited I was to be going with you tonight." She leaned inside. "Will you kill me?"

"Not you. Better not ask about Maurie. I thought you said he liked me."

"He does. You're not the issue. Believe me." She shook her head in sad

wonder. "Why don't you come back when you're done?" She gave a salacious little waggle to her brow. "I'll letcha take me home."

When I returned near midnight, I found her unsettled. She'd had words with her father, the usual stuff about his indifference to her. I was angry enough with him to relinquish my customary restraint.

"Have you ever kept track of how much time you spend being upset about Maurie?" I asked her.

"Who knows? Sometimes it seems as if I've lost years that way. What's the point?"

"I guess I wonder now and then why you put yourself in harm's way."

"You mean cut myself off?"

"Keep a distance. Nobody forces you to work with the guy."

"It's a family business. I'm in the family. And I refuse to just hand it all over to my brothers. You don't like my father, do you?"

I weighed my options. "I don't like the way he treats you."

"Neither do I, sometimes. But he's my father. And my problem," She did not speak for the rest of the ride.

I suspect we were each ready to call it a night. But we hadn't had many disagreements, and experience had taught us both the perils of parting angry. I came up. We had a drink and talked, then got around to doing what we did best.

As we groped, she slid from my arms, already naked below, and with a naughty grin pulled the belt from my trousers. I thought she was going for my fly, but instead she pushed me to a seated position on the bed, then threw herself across my lap. She bent one leg from the knee and touched her lip impishly. She put the folded belt in my hand.

"Spank me," she said.

I looked down at her behind as if it were a face. This was a new note between us. All I could think of to say was, "Why?"

"Why not? I feel like it."

"I don't think I can do that," I finally said.

"I'll enjoy it. I'm asking you to do it. This isn't whips and chains. Use your hand, if you'd rather. I'll enjoy it."

I tried one swat.

"Hard," she said. "Harder. Keep doing it. I'll say when I want you to stop. I'll enjoy it."

But I didn't.

"No," I said suddenly, and pushed her off my lap. I went for my clothing.

"What?"

"I don't want to be this to you," I said.

“Be what? The man who pleases me?”

“Not like that.”

“It’s what I want,” she said.

“No,” I said again and left.

“I think I have to tell her,” I said to Elstner the next night. “About her father.”

Paul took his time now. I’d been late and we’d skipped Gil’s, settling instead for dogs we were gobbling down as we stood at a little linoleum table fixed to one of the elderly pillars in the Field House.

“You can’t tell her,” Pavil said then. “That’s all. You can’t. You can’t for my sake. And her sake. And your sake. You can’t. This isn’t comedy. This is real life. This guy is a murderer. And smart enough to realize there’s no statute of limitations. He killed a man to keep from getting caught. You think he wouldn’t do it again?”

“Paul, she wouldn’t say anything to Maurie. I’d make her promise.”

“Like you promised me?”

“I’ll keep you out of it.”

“He’ll figure it out. She knows we’re friends.” Paul seldom took advantage of his size, but he’d drawn himself up to his full height. I wanted to explain what it was like to be alone, to feel you have a chance to regain the purpose love alone imparts.

“Paul, it might make a difference. It might open her eyes. To this whole thing with her old man. I really think it might.”

“You think people open their eyes just because you tell them to look? There’s no happily-ever-after on this. You’re dreaming.”

I kept shaking my head. “This is your fault, Elstner.”

“My fault? Because I told you a story years ago about the father of some girl you didn’t even know existed?”

“No,” I said. “No. Because of what you said last time. About stopping at halfway? I’ll say it to myself now, if I don’t do this. I want to go for it all with this woman. To see if she can really be what I need. So don’t tell me it’s her or you.”

Elstner stalked away to drop his little paper basket, now bearing only a few specks of relish, into the trash. When he came back, he said, “I’m not telling you it’s her or me. I’m telling you that you don’t have that choice. You gave me your word. And I have a God-given right to sleep at night. So you can’t tell her.” He stared at me, giving no ground. Instead he was calling in the cards guys like to think they have with one another, especially honor and loyalty.

Inside the arena, the horn blared, indicating the end of the shootaround. It was

game time. Paul's eyes had never left mine.

"I can't tell her," I said at last.

I told her anyway.

I didn't see Karen or call her for several days after that encounter in her bedroom. Four or five nights along, I returned from work to find two items at my apartment door, a little bud vase with two sweetheart roses in fresh water, and a narrow box. Inside was a pair of suspenders with a note. "Forget about your belt. . . . Sorry to messup. . . . Call me. Please."

I met her for lunch the next day.

"I offended you," she said, as soon as the waiter had left us in peace.

"No."

"I know I did. I didn't think. We've been so compatible that way, I just got caught up in my own stuff. I was stupid."

"It's not that." I felt she was taking me as puritanical or blinkered. "There are just some things I have in my head."

"What things?"

"I can't explain."

"Try," she said. "Please. This doesn't have to be an impasse."

I avoided several questions and she grew more imploring.

"What is it?" She leaned across the table to touch my hands. "What's the problem? What aren't you saying?" In her long face, I saw an urgency no different than my own, a will to connect and to escape the complexities of what had left us alone, to be a better person with a better life. In the end, it was exactly as I had told Elstner. I could not stop halfway, without taking the chance.

"There's something I've been told," I answered. I was surprised at the smoothness with which the tale emerged. I'd heard a story. From a reliable source. Someone I knew. A former prosecutor. I was so intent on the telling that I did not at first notice her draw away on the other side of the table, but when I finished, she was watching me with a bitter smile.

"That?" she asked. "That ridiculous, moldy rumor? Do you know how long people have been saying that? It's absurd."

It was one of those moments. In the crowded dining room, I thought I could somehow hear my watch tick. After a confused instant, I decided she had simply not understood. I repeated myself, more slowly, but her look soon hardened with suspicion. That glass wall I had smashed against so often with Clarissa had descended. Karen stared through it with appalling remoteness.

"And why are you telling me this?" she asked then. "Is that how you see me? Is this something genetic?"

“Of course not.”

“So what is the point? I’m neurotic? Because my father is supposedly some hoodlum?” With vehemence, she shifted in her chair. “You know, every divorced man I meet either has had no therapy or way too much. Go shrink somebody else’s head.” I reached for her as she marched from the table. “No!” she said and swung her arm away violently. “It’s me anyway. You don’t want me. My father is just an excuse.”

She disappeared around a pillar. In her wake, I was miserable, but I knew two things for certain. It was over. And I was never going to tell Paul.

In late March, the Hands ended a dismal season with one more agonizing loss. They took the game to overtime, then, while they were trailing by a single point with only a few seconds left, Pokey Corr, the Hands’ only star, broke free on the baseline and ascended toward the basket. He wound up and slammed his intended dunk shot against the back iron of the rim. Along with everyone else in the stadium, Pokey watched as the ball floated along an arc that brought it down almost at center court as time expired.

Like a losing bettor at the track, Elstner threw the season’s last ticket into the air. Then we started up toward the exit, inching ahead as the crowd merged into the walkways. From one stair above, I felt the weight of someone staring. It was Maurie Moleva.

“Oh, Christ!” he said. “Look at this. The heartbreaker.” His tone wasn’t completely malicious. His crooked brown teeth even appeared briefly as he smiled.

“It was mutual,” I said.

“Not how I hear it. How you keeping?”

I said I was OK.

“Gone back to your wife yet?”

I absorbed Dr. Moleva’s estimate of my situation, which he must have shared with his daughter long ago. With Maurie, anything that came at Karen’s expense was never waylaid by circumspection.

“Not so far as I know,” I told him. Clarissa had lately taken to mentioning counseling, an option she’d adamantly refused during the years I’d suggested it. Now I had no idea how to regard her surrender. I was fairly sure I no longer had the strength or interest. Oddly, though, there were moments when I felt sorry for her, sorry to see that loneliness had broken her will. Clarissa liked to portray herself as a person beyond regrets.

Maurie introduced me to his companion, a woman not quite his age. Reliably himself, Elstner had stood, face averted, as if studying something on the empty

basketball court behind us.

“Doctor, did you ever meet Paul Elstner?” Elstner went rigid as I placed my hand on his shoulder, but he turned and greeted Moleva.

“Not so as I recall,” Moleva answered. “But I don’t remember my own name these days. Bad eyes, bad back, bad memory. I’m beginning to think I’m not getting younger.”

We all laughed as if this were original, then, when the crowd began moving, parted with a genial wave.

Elstner was still agitated when we settled in my car. “Thanks,” he said. “Thanks a lot. I really needed to renew acquaintances.”

“I didn’t have any choice. And besides—he doesn’t remember you. I really don’t think he does. Not tonight anyway.”

“Probably not most nights,” said Elstner. “That’s how he sleeps.”

I edged my car out of the lot.

“So you never told her?” Elstner asked me. “I’d have bet a whole lot you told her.”

“I told her.”

He swore at me. “I knew you’d tell her.”

“I thought it would make a difference, Paul.”

“Screw you. You’re too old to believe people change because you want them to. They change because they get tired of themselves.”

“She didn’t believe it anyway,” I said. “And I knew you’d be fine, because she’d never tell her old man about it.”

“And how’s that?”

“Because she’d never take the chance on seeing it might be true.”

The remark cast him down into silence as we swept into the lights and rush of the highway. After a few minutes his indignation rose up again.

“I can’t believe you told her,” he said. “Jesus Christ. Why do I put up with you?”

“Why do you?” I asked with sudden earnestness. The question seemed to exasperate him more than anything I’d said yet.

“Because you’re part of my life,” said Elstner. “How many people do we get in a lifetime? And I’m loyal. I’m a loyal person. Loyalty is an undervalued virtue these days. Besides, I have too much respect for myself to think I wasted twenty-five years on you. Or that I just figured you out. You’ve always been trying to find the Holy Grail with women. You haven’t changed either.”

“Well, apparently then, I expected better from her.”

“Don’t laugh, pal.” My sarcasm had provoked Elstner to point a finger. “The older I get, the more I’m just watching the same movie. He’s and she’s, the

attraction is that they're different, right? Everybody's looking for the other piece. And then nothing makes them crazier. She's upset because he's not like she is, or vice versa, and then there are nimrods like you who actually think different oughta mean better, all the time hoping that will make you better, too. Grow up."

With that blow delivered, he did not speak until we reached his house. I was furious, but also aware that I was due a lashing of some kind. A client, a trader from the exchange, had given me a couple of Cubans. I'd left them on the dashboard for Paul and remembered them now, fortuitous timing. Elstner studied the label with appreciation.

"Smoke one with me," he said.

Hanging around with Paul, I'd puffed on a short cigar now and then and saw the wisdom of a peace pipe. I rolled down all the windows. It was a fairly mild night for mid-March, and we lit up the Cubans and reclined the front seats and talked in a dreamy reconciled way, reviewing the season. The Hands, who'd been a Final Four team within the last decade, were not even going to the Big Dance this season. We tried at great length to discern the ephemeral difference between winning and losing, how coaching and spirit contribute to talent. We talked about great teams we'd seen and, by contrast, recollected our own failed careers as high school athletes.

Finally, Elstner decided it was time for him to get inside. I watched as Paul, with his sloppy loping stride, made his way to the house he'd lived in for decades. From the door, he gave an elaborate wave, like a campaigning politician. I thought he was marking the end of the season or the peace reestablished between us, but over time the image of him there on his stoop, grandly flagging his hand, has returned to me often, and with it the suspicion that he meant to acknowledge more. An intuitive creature like Elstner probably knew before I did that I was headed back to Clarissa, that she and I would find a new mercy with each other and make better of it, and that, as a result, I would see him less. Paul never required any explanation. In fact, I had no doubt that reviving my marriage was what he would have counseled, if I'd ever allowed him to lift his embargo on advice.

I remember all this because we lost Paul Elstner last week. He developed cancer of the liver and slipped off in a matter of months. I saw him often during his illness. One day he cataloged all the other ways he'd worried he might die—an extensive list with Maurie Moleva still on it—but he spoke the name without rancor. It turns out that there are far too many ironies as one's life draws to a close to linger much with a small one like that.

It was Paul's wish, another of his harmless eccentricities, to be buried in cigar ash. On a bitterly cold day, with the graveyard mounded with snow, the casket

was lowered and the entire burial procession was presented with lighted Coronas. Paul had many friends, of course, and we formed a long, moving circle around the open grave, each person approaching to tamp whatever ash had developed since the last time she or he had gone past. The proceedings had all the comic elements Elstner would have savored, with designated puffers to keep the cigars going for the nonsmokers and many mourners making smart comments about the smell, which they figured would linger in their clothing forever, Paul's unwelcome ghost. This rite continued for more than half an hour, with the group dwindling in the cold. I was among the last. The ember by now was near the fingertips of my gloves. Before surrendering the last bit to the earth, I stood above the casket, desperate to speak, but able to summon only a few fragments to mind. All our longings, I thought. All our futility. The comfort we can be to each other. Then Clarissa and I went home.

ANDREW KLAVAN

Her Lord and Master

FROM *Dangerous Women*

IT WAS OBVIOUS she'd killed him, but only I knew why. I'd been Jim's friend, and he'd told me everything. It was a shocking story in its way. I found it shocking, at any rate. More than once, when he confided in me, I'd felt the sweat gathering under my collar, on my chest. Goose bumps, and what in a more decorous age we would have called a "stirring in the loins." Nowadays, of course, we're supposed to be able to talk about these things, about anything, in fact. There are so many books and movies and television shows claiming to shatter "the last taboo" that you'd think we were in danger of running out of them.

Well, let's see. Let's just see.

Jim and Susan knew each other at work, and began a relationship after an office party, standard stuff. Jim was Vice President in charge of Entertainment at one of the larger radio networks. "I don't know what my job is," he used to say "but by gum I must be doing it." Susan was an Assistant Manager in Personnel, which meant she was the secretary in charge of scheduling.

Jim was a tallish, elegant Harvard grad, thirty-five. On the job, he had a slow, thoughtful manner, a way of appearing to consider every word he spoke. Plus a way of boring into your eyes when you spoke, as if every neuron he had was engaged in whatever tedious matter you'd brought before him. After hours, thankfully, he became more satirical, more sardonic. To be honest, I think he considered most people little better than idiots. Which makes him a cockeyed optimist, if you ask me.

Susan was sharp, dark, energetic, in her twenties. A little thin and beaky in the face for my taste, but pretty enough with long, straight, black, black hair. Plus she had a fine figure, small and compact and gracefully meltingly round at breast and hip. Her attitude was aggressive, funny, challenging: You gonna take me as I am, pal, or what? Which I think disguised a certain defensiveness about her Queens background, her education, maybe even her intelligence. In any case, she could put a charge in your morning, striding by in a short skirt, or drawing her hair from her mouth with one long nail. A Watercooler Fuck, was the general male consensus. In those sociological debates in which gentlemen are prone to discuss how their various female colleagues and acquaintances should be

coupled with, Susan was usually voted the girl you'd like to shove against the watercooler and take standing up with the overnight cleaning crew vacuuming down the hall.

So at a party one February at which we celebrated the launch and certain failure of some new moronic management scheme or other, we watched with glee and envy as Jim and Susan stood together, talked together, and eventually left together. And eventually slept together. We didn't watch that part, but I heard all about it later.

I'm a news editor, thirty-eight, once divorced, seven years, two months, and sixteen days ago. Sexually, I think I've pretty much been around the block. But we've all pretty much been around the block these days. They probably ought to widen the lanes around the block to ease the traffic. So, at first, what Jim was telling me brought no more than a mild glaze of lust to my eyes, not to mention the thin line of drool running unattended from the corner of my mouth.

She liked it rough. That's the story. Now it can be told. Our Susan enjoyed the occasional smack with her rumpty-tumpty. Jim, God love him, seemed somewhat disconcerted by this at first. He'd been around the block too, of course, but it was a block in a more sedate neighborhood. And I guess maybe he'd missed that particular address.

Apparently, when they went back to his apartment, Susan had presented Jim with the belt to his terrycloth bathrobe and said, "Tie me." Jim managed to follow these simple instructions and also the ones about grabbing her black, black hair in his fist and forcing her mouth down on what I will politely assume to be his throbbing tumescence. The smacking part came later, after he'd hurled her bellyward onto his bed and was ramming into her from behind. This, too, at her specific request.

"It was kind of kinky," Jim told me.

"Hey, I sympathize," I said. "What does this make you, only the second or third luckiest man on the face of the earth?"

Well, it was a turn-on, Jim admitted that. And it wasn't that he'd never done anything like it before. It was just that, in Jim's experience, you had to get to know a girl a little before you started clobbering her. It was intimate, fantasy stuff, not the sort of thing you did on a first date.

Plus, Jim genuinely liked Susan. He liked the tough, working-stiff jazz of her and the chip-on-the-shoulder wisecracks with the vulnerability underneath. He wanted to get to know her, be with her a while, maybe a long while. And if this was where they started, he wondered, where exactly were they going to go?

But any awkwardness, it turned out, was all on Jim's side. Susan seemed

perfectly comfortable when she woke in his arms the next morning. “It was nice last night,” she whispered, stretching up to kiss his stubble. And she held his hand as they hailed a cab to take her home for a change of clothes. And she wowed and charmed him with her office etiquette, giving not a clue to the world of their altered state, giving even him only a single token of it when they passed each other, nodding, in the hall, and she murmured, “God, we are so professional.”

And they had dinner together up on Columbus at the Moroccan and she went on, hilarious, about the management types in her department. And Jim, who usually expressed amusement by narrowing his eyes and smiling thinly, fell back in his chair and laughed with his teeth showing, and had to wipe tears out of his crow’s feet with the four fingers of one hand.

That night, she wanted him to thrash her with his leather belt. Jim demurred. “Don’t we ever get to do it just the regular way?” he asked.

But she leaned in close and smoldered at him. “Do it. I want you to.”

“You know, I’m a little concerned about the noise. The neighbors and everything.”

Well, he had a point there. Susan went into the kitchen and returned with a wooden spoon. They don’t make quite the crack, apparently. Jim, always the gentleman, proceeded to tie her to the bedposts.

“The woman’s killing me, I’m exhausted,” he told me a couple of weeks later.

I put my hand under my shirt and moved it up and down so he could see my heart beating for him.

“I mean it,” he said. “I mean, I’m up for this stuff sometimes. It’s sexy, it’s fun. But Jesus. I’d like to see her face from time to time.”

“She’ll calm down. You’re just getting started,” I said. “So she digs this stuff. Later, you can gently instruct her in the joys of the missionary position.”

We had this conversation at a table in McCord’s, the last unspoiled Irish bar on the gentrified West Side. The news team does tend to drift down here of an evening, so we were already speaking in undertones. Now, Jim leaned in toward me even closer. Our foreheads were almost touching and he glanced side to side before he went on.

“The thing is,” he said, “I think she’s serious.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’m all for fantasy stuff and all that. But I don’t think she’s kidding around.”

“What do you mean?” I said again, more hoarsely and with a bead of sweat forming behind my ear.

It turned out their relationship had now progressed to the point where they

were divvying up the household chores. Susan had doled out the assignments and it fell to her to clean Jim's apartment, cook his dinner, and wash the dishes. Naked. Jim's job was to force her to do these things and whip, spank, or rape her if she showed reluctance or made, or pretended to make, some kind of mistake.

Now there's always an element of braggadocio when men complain about their sex lives, but Jim really did seem troubled by this. "I'm not saying it doesn't turn me on. I admit, it's a turn-on. It's just getting kind of . . . ugly at this point. Isn't it?" he said.

I wiped my lips dry and dropped back in my seat. When I could finally stop panting and move my mouth, I said, "I don't know. To each his own. I mean, look, if you don't like it, eject. You know? If it doesn't work for you, hit the button."

Obviously, this thought had occurred to him before. He nodded slowly, as if considering it.

But he didn't eject. In fact, another week or so, and for all intents and purposes Susan was living with him.

At this point, my information becomes less detailed. Obviously, a guy's living with someone, he doesn't go on too much about their sex life. Everyone at the net knew the affair was a happening thing by now, but Susan and Jim remained entirely professional and detached on the job. They'd walk to work together holding hands. They'd kiss once outside the building. And after that, it was business as usual. No low tones in the hallway, no closed office doors. The few times we all went out drinking together after work, they didn't even sit next to each other. Through the bar window, when they left, we'd see Jim put his arm around her. That was all.

The last time Jim and I talked about it before he died was in McCord's again. I came in there one night and there he was sitting at a corner table alone. I knew by the way he was sitting—bolt upright with his eyes half open, staring, glazed—that he was drunk as God on Sunday. I sat down across from him and he made a sloppy gesture with his hand and said, "Drinks are on me." I ordered a Scotch.

If I'd been smart, I would've stuck to sports. The Knicks were getting murdered, the Yanks, after a championship season, were struggling to keep pace with Baltimore as the new season got under way. I could've talked about all of that. I should've. But I was curious. If curious is the word I want. "Prurient," maybe, is the *mot juste*.

And I said, "So how are things going with Susan?"

And he said, as you will when you're serious about someone, "Fine. Things with Susan are fine." But then he added, "I'm her Lord and Master." Sitting bolt

upright. Waving slightly like a lamppost in a gale.

Susan had scripted their routines, but he knew them by heart now and ran through them without prompting. This was apparently more efficient because it left her free to beg him to stop. He would tie her and she would beg him and he would beat her while she begged. He would sodomize her and grab her hair, force her head around so she had to watch him while he did it. “Who’s your Lord and Master?” he would say. And she would answer, “You’re my Lord and Master. You are.” Later she would do the chores, naked or in this lace-and-suspender outfit she’d bought. Usually she’d fumble something or spill something, and he would beat her, which got him ready to take her again.

After he told me this, his eyes sank closed, his lips parted. He seemed to sleep for a few minutes, then woke up with a slight start. But bolt upright always, always straight up and down. Even when he got up to leave, his posture was stiff and perfect. He wafted to the door as if he were one of those old deportment instructors. He was a funny kind of a drunk that way, even more dignified than when he was sober, a sort of exaggerated, comic version of his reserved, dignified sober self.

I watched him leave with a half-smile on my face. I miss him.

Susan stabbed him with a kitchen knife, one of those big ones. Just a single convulsive jab but it went straight in, severed the vena cava. He bled out lying on the kitchen floor, staring up at the ceiling while she screamed into the phone for an ambulance.

Jim being a bit of a muck-a-muck, it made the news. Then the feminists got ahold of it, the real bully girls who consider murdering your boyfriend a form of self-expression. They wanted the case dismissed out of hand. And a lot of people agreed they had a point this time. Susan, it was found, had bruises all over her torso, was bleeding from various orifices. And Jim had pretty clearly been wielding a nasty-looking sex store paddle when she went for the knife. According to the political dicta of the day, it was an obvious case of long-term abuse and long-delayed self-defense.

But the cops, for some reason, were not immediately convinced. In general, cops spend enough time in the depths of human depravity to keep a spare suit in the closet there. They know that even the most obvious political axioms don’t always cut it when you’re dealing with true romance.

So the Manhattan DA’s office was caught between the devil and the deep blue sea. Susan had gotten a good lawyer fast and had said nothing to anyone. The police suspected they’d find evidence of consensual rough sex in Susan’s life but so far hadn’t produced the goods. The press, meanwhile, was starting to link

Susan's name with the word "ordeal" a lot, and were running her story next to sidebars on sexual abuse, which was their way of being "objective" while taking Susan's side entirely. Anyway, the last thing the DA wanted was to jail the woman and then release her. So he waffled. Withheld charges for a day or two, pending further investigation. And, in the meantime, the prime suspect was set free.

As for me, all was depression and confusion. Jim wasn't my brother or anything, but he was a good buddy. And I knew I was probably the best friend he had at the network, maybe even in the city, maybe in the world. Still there were moments, watching the feminists on TV, watching Susan's lawyer, when I thought: How do I know? The guy says one thing, the girl says something else. How do I know everything Jim told me wasn't some kind of crazy lie, some sort of justification for the bad stuff he was doing to her?

Of course, all that aside, I called the police the day after the murder, Friday, the first I heard. I phoned a contact of mine in Homicide and told him I had solid information on the case. I think I half-expected to hear the whining sirens of the squad coming for me even as I hung up the phone. Instead, I was given a Monday morning appointment and asked to wander on by the station house to talk to the detectives in charge.

Which gave me the weekend free. I spent it anchored to the sofa by a leaden nausea. Gazing at the ceiling, arm flung across my brow. Trying to force tears, trying to blame myself, trying not to. The phone rang and rang, but I never answered it. It was just friends—I could hear them on the answering machine—wanting to get in on it: the sympathy, the grief, the gossip. Everybody craving a piece of a murder. I didn't have the energy to play.

Sunday evening, finally, there was a knock at my door. I'm on the top floor of a brownstone so you expect the street buzzer, but this was a knock. I figured it must be one of my neighbors who'd seen the story on TV. I called out as I put my shoes on. Tucked in my shirt as I went to the door. Pulled it open without even looking through the peephole.

And there was Susan.

A lot of things went through my mind in the second I saw her. As she stood there, combative and uncomfortable at once. Chin raised, belligerent; glance sidelong, shy. I thought: Who am I supposed to be here? What am I supposed to be like? Angry? Vengeful? Chilly? Just? Lofty? Compassionate? Christ, it was paralyzing. In the end, I just stood back and let her enter. She walked into the middle of the room and faced me as I closed the door.

Then she shrugged at me. One bare shoulder lifted, one lifted corner of her

mouth, a wise-guy smile. She was wearing a pale spring dress, the thin strings tied round her neck in a bow. It showed a lot of her dark flesh. I noticed a crescent of discolor on her thigh beneath the hem.

"I'm not too sure about the etiquette here," I said.

"Yeah. Maybe you could look under 'Entertaining the Girl Who Killed Your Best Friend.'"

I gave her back her wise-guy smile. "Don't say too much, Susan, okay? I gotta go in to see the cops on Monday."

She stopped smiling, nodded, turned away. "So—what? Like, Jim told you everything? About us?" She toyed with the pad on my phone table.

I watched her. My reactions were subtle but intense. It was the way she turned, it was that thing she said. It made me think about what Jim had told me. It made me look, long and slow, down the line of her back. It made my skin feel hot, my stomach cold. An interesting combination.

I moistened my lips and tried to think about my dead friend. "Yeah, that's right," I said gruffly. "He told me pretty much everything."

Susan laughed over her shoulder at me. "Well, that's embarrassing, anyway."

"Hey, don't flirt with me, okay? Don't kill my friend and come over here and flirt with me."

She turned round again, hands primly folded in front of her. I looked so steadily at her face she must've known I was thinking about her breasts. "I'm not flirting with you," she said. "I just want to tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"What he did, that he beat me, that he humiliated me. He was twice my size. Think how you'd like it, think what you would've done if someone was doing that to you."

"Susan!" I spread my hands at her. "You asked him to!"

"Oh, yeah, like, 'She was asking for it,' right? Like you automatically believe that. Your buddy says it so it must be true."

I snorted. I thought about it. I looked at her. I thought about Jim. "Yeah," I said finally. "I do believe it. It was true."

She didn't argue the point. She went right on. "Yeah, well, if it is true, it doesn't make it any better. You know? I mean, you should've seen the way it turned him on. I mean, he could've stopped it. I'd've stopped. He could've changed everything any time, if he wanted to. But he liked it so much . . . And then there he is, hurting me like that, and all turned on by it. How do you think that makes a person feel?"

I am not too proud to admit that I actually scratched my head, dumb as a monkey.

Susan ran one long nail over the phone table pad. She looked down at it. So did I. "Are you really going to the cops?"

"Yeah. Hell, yeah," I said. Then, as if I needed an excuse, "It's not like they won't find someone else. Some other guy you did this stuff with. He'll tell them the same thing."

She shook her head once. "No. There's only you. You're the only one who knows." Which left nothing to say. We stood there silent. She thinking, me just watching her, just watching the lines and colors of her.

Then, finally, she raised her eyes to me, tilted her head. She didn't slink toward me, or tiptoe her fingers up my chest. She didn't nestle under me so I could feel the heat of her breath or smell her perfume. She left that for the movies, for the femme fatales. All she did was stand there like that and give me that Susan look, chin out, dukes up, her soul in the offing, almost trembling in your hand.

"It gives you a lot of power over me, doesn't it?" she said.

"So what?" I said back.

She shrugged again. "You know what I like."

"Get out," I said. I didn't give myself time to start sweating. "Christ. Get the fuck out of here, Susan."

She walked to the door. I watched her go. Yeah, right, I thought. I have power over her. As if. I have power over her until they decide not to charge her, until the headlines disappear. Then where am I? Then I'm her Lord and Master. Just like Jim was.

She passed close to me. Close enough to hear my thoughts. She glanced up, surprised. She laughed at me. "What. You think I'd kill you too?"

"I'd always have to wonder, wouldn't I?" I said.

Still smiling, she jogged her eyebrows comically. "Whatever turns you on," she said.

It was the comedy that did it. I couldn't resist the impulse to wipe that smile off her murdering face. I reached out and grabbed her hair in my fist. Her black, black hair.

It was even softer than I thought it would be.

ED MCBAIN

Improvisation

FROM *Dangerous Women*

“WHY DON’T WE kill somebody?” she suggested.

She was a blond, of course, tall and willowy and wearing a sleek black cocktail dress cut high on the leg and low at the neckline.

“Been there,” Will told her. “Done that.”

Her eyes opened wide, a sharp blue in startling contrast to the black of the dress.

“The Gulf War,” he explained.

“Not the same thing at all,” she said, and plucked the olive from her martini and popped it into her mouth. “I’m talking about murder.”

“Murder, uh-huh,” Will said. “Who’d you have in mind?”

“How about the girl sitting across the bar there?”

“Ah, a random victim,” he said. “But how’s that any different from combat?”

“A *specific* random victim,” she said. “Shall we kill her or not?”

“Why?” he asked.

“Why not?” she said.

Will had known the woman for perhaps twenty minutes at most. In fact, he didn’t even know her name. Her suggestion that they kill someone had come in response to a standard pickup line he’d used to good effect many times before, to wit: “So what do we do for a little excitement tonight?”

To which the blond had replied, “Why don’t we kill somebody?”

Hadn’t whispered the words, hadn’t even lowered her voice. Just smiled over the rim of her martini glass and said in her normal speaking voice, “Why don’t we kill somebody?”

The *specific* random victim she had in mind was a plain-looking woman wearing a plain brown jacket over a brown silk blouse and a darker brown skirt. There was about her the look of a harried file clerk or lower-level secretary, the mousy brown hair, the unblinking eyes behind what one had to call spectacles rather than eyeglasses, the thin-lipped mouth and slight overbite. A totally unremarkable woman. Small wonder she was sitting alone nursing a glass of white wine.

“Let’s say we *do* actually kill her,” Will said. “What’ll we do for a little excitement afterward?”

The blond smiled.
And crossed her legs.
“My name is Jessica,” she said.
She extended her hand.
He took it.
“I’m Will,” he said.
He assumed her palm was cold from the iced drink she’d been holding.

On this chilly December evening three days before Christmas, Will had no intention whatever of killing the mousy little file clerk at the end of the bar, or anyone else for that matter. He had killed his fair share of people a long time ago, thank you, all of them *specific* random victims in that they had been wearing the uniform of the Iraqi Army, which made them the enemy. That was as specific as you could get in wartime, he supposed. That was what made it okay to bulldoze them in their trenches. That was what made it okay to *murder them*, whatever fine distinction Jessica was now making between murder and combat.

Anyway, Will knew this was merely a game, a variation on the mating ritual that took place in every singles bar in Manhattan on any given night of the year. You came up with a clever approach, you got a response that indicated interest, and you took it from there. In fact, he wondered how many times, in how many bars before tonight, Jessica had used her “Why don’t we kill somebody?” line. The approach was admittedly an adventurous one, possibly even a dangerous one—suppose she flashed those splendid legs at someone who turned out to be Jack the Ripper? Suppose she picked up a guy who really *believed* it might be fun to kill that girl sitting alone at the other end of the bar? Hey, great idea, Jess, let’s do it! Which, in effect, was what he’d tacitly indicated, but of course she knew they were just playing a game here, didn’t she? She certainly had to realize they weren’t planning an actual murder here.

“Who’ll make the approach?” she asked.

“I suppose I should,” Will said.

“Please don’t use your ‘What’ll we do for a little excitement tonight?’ line.”

“Gee, I thought you liked that.”

“Yes, the first time I heard it. Five or six years ago.”

“I thought I was being entirely original.”

“Try to be more original with little Alice there, okay?”

“Is that what you think her name is?”

“What do you think it is?”

“Patricia.”

“Okay, I’ll be Patricia,” she said. “Let me hear it.”

“Excuse me, Miss,” Will said.

“Great start,” Jessica said.

“My friend and I happened to notice you sitting all alone here, and we thought you might care to join us.”

Jessica looked around as if trying to locate the friend he was telling Patricia about.

“Who do you mean?” she asked, all wide-eyed and wondering.

“The beautiful blond sitting right there,” Will said. “Her name is Jessica.”

Jessica smiled.

“Beautiful blond, huh?” she said.

“*Gorgeous* blond,” he said.

“Sweet talker,” she said, and covered his hand with her own on the bar top.

“So let’s say little Patty Cake decides to join us. Then what?”

“We ply her with compliments and alcohol.”

“And then what?”

“We take her to some dark alley and bludgeon her to death.”

“I have a small bottle of poison in my handbag,” Jessica said. “Wouldn’t that be better?”

Will narrowed his eyes like a gangster.

“Perfect,” he said. “We’ll take her to some dark alley and poison her to death.”

“Wouldn’t an apartment someplace be a better venue?” Jessica asked.

And it suddenly occurred to him that perhaps they weren’t discussing murder at all, jokingly or otherwise. Was it possible that what Jessica had in mind was a three-way?

“Go talk to the lady,” she said. “After that, we’ll improvise.”

Will wasn’t very good at picking up girls in bars.

In fact, aside from his “What’ll we do for a little excitement tonight?” line, he didn’t have many other approaches in his repertoire. He was emboldened somewhat by Jessica’s encouraging nod from where she sat at the opposite end of the bar, but he still felt somewhat timid about taking the empty stool alongside Alice or Patricia or whatever her name was.

It had been his experience that plain girls were less responsive to flattery than were truly knockout beauties. He guessed that was because they were expecting to be lied to, and were wary of being duped and disappointed yet another time, Alice or Patricia or Whoever proved to be no exception to this general Plain-Jane observation. Will took the stool next to hers, turned to her, and said, “Excuse me, Miss,” exactly as he’d rehearsed it with Jessica, but before he could

utter another word, she recoiled as if he'd slapped her. Eyes wide, seemingly surprised, she said, "What? What is it?"

"I'm sorry if I startled you . . ."

"No, that's all right," she said. "What is it?"

Her voice was high and whiny, with an accent he couldn't quite place. Her eyes behind their thick round lenses were a very dark brown, still wide now with either fright or suspicion, or both. Staring at him unblinkingly, she waited.

"I don't want to bother you," he said, "but. . . ."

"That's all right, really," she said. "What is it?"

"My friend and I couldn't help noticing . . ."

"Your friend?"

"The lady sitting just opposite us. The blond lady at the other end of the bar?" Will said, and pointed to Jessica, who obligingly raised her hand in greeting.

"Oh. Yes," she said. "I see."

"We couldn't help notice that you were sitting here, drinking alone," he said. "We thought you might care to join us."

"Oh," she said.

"Do you think you might care to? Join us?"

There was a moment's hesitation. The brown eyes blinked, softened. The slightest smile formed on her thin-lipped mouth.

"I think I would like to, yes," she said. "I'd like to."

They sat at a small table some distance from the bar, in a dimly lighted corner of the room. Susan—and not Patricia or Alice, as it turned out—ordered another Chardonnay. Jessica stuck to her martinis. Will ordered another bourbon on the rocks.

"No one should sit drinking alone three days before Christmas," Jessica said.

"Oh, I agree, I agree," Susan said.

She had an annoying habit of saying everything twice. Made it sound as if there were an echo in the place.

"But this bar is on my way home," she said, "and I thought I'd stop in for a quick glass of wine."

"Take the chill off," Jessica agreed, nodding.

"Yes, exactly. Take the chill off."

She also repeated *other* people's words, Will noticed.

"Do you live near here?" Jessica asked.

"Yes. Just around the corner."

"Where are you from originally?"

"Oh dear, can you still tell?"

"Tell what?" Will asked.

"The accent. Oh dear, does it still show? After all those lessons? Oh my."

"What accent would that be?" Jessica asked.

"Alabama. Montgomery, Alabama," she said, making it sound like
"Mun'gummy, Alabama."

"I don't hear any accent at all," Jessica said. "Do you detect an accent, Will?"

"Well, it's a regional dialect, actually," Susan said.

"You sound like you were born right here in New York," Will said, lying in his teeth.

"That's so kind of you, really," she said. "Really, it's so very kind."

"How long have you been up here?" Jessica asked.

"Six months now. I came up at the end of June. I'm an actress."

An actress, Will thought.

"I'm a nurse," Jessica said.

An actress and a nurse, Will thought.

"No kidding?" Susan said. "Do you work at some hospital?"

"Beth Israel," Jessica said.

"I thought that was a synagogue," Will said.

"A hospital, too," Jessica said, nodding, and turned back to Susan again.

"Would we have seen you in anything?" she asked.

"Well, not unless you've been to Montgomery," Susan said, and smiled. "*The Glass Menagerie*? Do you know *The Glass Menagerie*? Tennessee Williams? The play by Tennessee Williams? I played Laura Wingate in the Paper Players' production down there. I haven't been in anything up here yet. I've been waitressing, in fact."

A waitress, Will thought.

The nurse and I are about to kill the plainest waitress in the city of New York. Or worse, we're going to take her to bed.

Afterward, he thought it might have been Jessica who suggested that they buy a bottle of Moët Chandon and take it up to Susan's apartment for a nightcap, the apartment being so close and all, just around the corner, in fact, as Susan herself had earlier pointed out. Or perhaps it was Will himself who'd made the suggestion, having consumed by then four hefty shots of Jack Daniels, and being somewhat bolder than he might ordinarily have been. Or perhaps it was Susan who invited them up to her place, which was in the heart of the theatrical district, right around the corner from Flanagan's, where she herself had consumed three or four glasses of Chardonnay and had begun performing for them the entire scene in which the Gentleman Caller breaks the little glass unicorn and Laura

pretends it's no great tragedy, acting both parts for them, which Will felt certain caused the bartender to announce last call a full ten minutes earlier than he should have.

She was some terrible actress.

But oh so inspired!

The minute they hit the street outside, she raised her arms to the heavens above, her fingers widespread, and shouted in her dreadful Southern accent, "Just look at it! Broadway! The Great White Way!" and then did a little sort of pirouette, twirling and dancing up the street, her arms still high over her head.

"My God, let's kill her *quick!*" Jessica whispered to Will.

They both burst out laughing.

Susan must have thought they were sharing her exuberance.

Will guessed she didn't know what lay just ahead.

Or maybe she did.

At this hour of the night, the hookers had already begun their stroll up Eighth Avenue, but none of them so much as lifted an eyebrow to Will, probably figuring he was a John already occupied twice over, one on each arm. In an open liquor store, he bought a bottle of not Moët Chandon but Veuve Clicquot, and they went walking up the avenue together again, arm in arm.

Susan's apartment was a studio flat on the third floor of a walkup on Forty-ninth and Ninth. They climbed the steps behind her, and she stopped outside apartment 3A, fiddled for her keys in her handbag, found them at last, and unlocked the door. The place was furnished in what Will called Struggling Young Actress Thrift. A tiny kitchen to the left of the entrance. A double bed against the far wall, a door alongside it leading to what Will supposed was a bathroom. A sofa and two easy chairs and a dresser with a mirror over it. There was a door on the entrance wall, and it opened onto a closet. Susan took their coats and hung them up.

"Mind if I make myself comfortable?" she asked, and went into the bathroom.

Jessica waggled her eyebrows.

Will went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and emptied two of the ice cube trays into a bowl he found in the overhead cabinets. He also found three juice glasses he supposed would have to serve. Jessica sat on the sofa watching him while he started opening the champagne. A loud pop exploded just as another blond stepped out of the bathroom.

It took him a moment to realize this was Susan.

"Makeup and costume go a long way toward realizing a character," she said.

She was now a slender young woman with short straight blond hair, a nice set

of jugs showing in the swooping neckline of a red blouse, a short tight black skirt, good legs in very high-heeled black pumps. She held dangling from her right hand the mousy brown wig she'd been wearing in the bar, and when she opened her left hand and held it out to him, palm flat, he saw the dental prosthesis that had given her the overbite. Through the open bathroom door, he could see her frowzy brown suit hanging on the shower rod. Her spectacles were resting on the bathroom sink.

"Little padding around the waist thickened me out," she said. "We have all these useful props in class."

No Southern accent anymore, he noticed. No brown eyes, either.

"But your eyes . . ." he said.

"Contact lenses," Susan said.

Her *real* eyes were as blue as . . . well, Jessica's.

In fact, they could pass for sisters.

He said this out loud.

"You could pass for sisters," he said.

"Maybe 'cause we are," Jessica said. "Sure had you going, though, didn't we?"

"I'll be damned," he said.

"Let's try that champagne," Susan said, and swiveled into the kitchen where the bottle was now resting in the bowl of ice. She lifted it, poured into the juice glasses, and carried back into the other room the three glasses in a cradle of fingers and thumbs. Jessica plucked one of the glasses free. Susan handed one to Will.

"Here's to the three of us," Jessica toasted.

"And improvisation," Susan added.

They all drank.

Will figured this was going to turn into one hell of a night.

"We're in the same acting class," Jessica told him.

She was still sitting on the sofa, legs crossed. Splendid legs. Will was in one of the easy chairs. Susan was in the easy chair opposite him, her legs also crossed, also splendid.

"We both want to be actors," Jessica explained.

"I thought you were a nurse," Will said.

"Oh, sure. Same way Sue is a waitress. But our ambition is to act."

"We're gonna be stars one day."

"Our names up in lights on Broadway."

"The Carter Sisters," Jessica said.

“Susan and Jessica!” her sister said.

“I’ll drink to that,” Will said.

They all drank again.

“We’re not really from Montgomery, you know,” Jessica said.

“Well, I realize that now. But that certainly was a good accent, Susan.”

“Regional dialect,” she corrected.

“We’re from Seattle.”

“Where it rains all the time,” Will said.

“Oh, that’s not true at all,” Susan said. “Actually it rains less in Seattle than it does in New York, that’s a fact.”

“A statistically proven fact,” Jessica said, nodding in agreement and draining her glass. “Is there any more bubbly out there?”

“Oh, lots,” Susan said, and shoved herself out of the easy chair, exposing a fair amount of thigh as she got to her feet. Will handed her his empty glass, too. He sure hoped the ladies wouldn’t be drinking too much here. There was some serious business to take care of here tonight, some serious improvisation to do.

“So how long have you been living here in New York?” he asked. “Was it true what you said in the bar? Is it really only six months?”

“That’s right,” Jessica said. “Since the end of June.”

“We’ve been taking acting classes since then.”

“Were you really in *The Glass Menagerie*? The Paper Players? Is there such a thing as the Paper Players?”

“Oh yes,” Susan said, coming back with their replenished glasses. “But in Seattle.”

“We’ve never been to Montgomery.”

“That was part of my character,” Susan said. “The character I was assuming in the bar. Little Suzie Sad Ass.”

Both girls laughed.

Will laughed along with them.

“I played *Amanda Wingate*,” Jessica said.

“In *The Glass Menagerie*,” Susan explained. “When we did it in Seattle. Laura’s mother. Amanda Wingate.”

“Actually I am the older one,” Jessica said. “In real life.”

“She’s thirty,” Susan said. “I’m twenty-eight.”

“Here all alone in the big bad city,” Will said.

“Yep, here all alone,” Jessica said.

“Is that where you girls sleep?” Will asked. “The bed across the room there? The two of you all alone in that big bad bed?”

“Uh-oh,” Jessica said. “He wants to know where we sleep, Sue.”

“Better be careful,” Susan said.

Will figured he ought to back off a little, play it a bit more slowly here.

“So where’s this acting school you go to?” he asked.

“Right on Eighth Avenue.”

“Near the Biltmore,” Susan said. “Do you know the Biltmore Theater?”

“No, I don’t,” Will said. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, near there,” Jessica said. “Madame D’Arbousse, do you know her work?”

“No, I’m sorry, I don’t.”

“Well, she’s only famous,” Susan said.

“I’m sorry, I’m just not familiar with . . .”

“The D’Arbousse School? You’ve never heard of the D’Arbousse School of Acting?”

“I’m sorry, no.”

“It’s only world-famous,” Susan said.

She seemed to be pouting now, almost petulant. Will figured he was losing ground here. Fast.

“So . . . uh . . . what was the idea of putting on the costume tonight?” he asked. “Going to that bar as a . . . well . . . I hope you’ll forgive me . . . a frumpy little file clerk, was what I thought you were.”

“It was that good, huh?” Susan said, smiling. Her smile, without the fake overbite, was actually quite lovely. Her mouth didn’t look as thin-lipped anymore, either. Amazing what a little lipstick could do to plump up a girl’s lips. He imagined those lips on his own lips, in the bed across the room there. He imagined her sister’s lips on his, too. Imagine all their lips entangled, intertwined . . .

“That was part of the exercise,” Susan said.

“The exercise?”

“Finding the place,” Jessica said.

“The *character*’s place,” Susan said.

“For a private moment,” Jessica explained.

“Finding the place for a character’s private moment.”

“We thought it might be the bar.”

“But now we think it might be here.”

“Well, it *will* be here,” Jessica said. “Once we create it.”

They were losing Will. More important, he felt he was losing them. That bed, maybe fifteen feet away across the room, seemed to be receding into an unreachable distance. He had to get this thing back on track. But he didn’t know how quite yet. Not while they were rattling on about . . . what were they saying,

anyway?

"I'm sorry," he said, "but *what* exactly is it you're trying to create?"

"A character's private moment," Jessica said.

"Is this the place we're going to use?" Susan asked.

"I think so, yes. Don't you think so? Our own apartment. A real place. It feels very real to me. Doesn't it feel real to you, Sue?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, it does. It feels *very* real. But I don't feel private yet. Do you feel private?"

"No, not yet."

"Excuse me, ladies . . ." Will said.

"Ladies, ooo hoo," Susan said, and rolled her eyes.

". . . but we can get a lot *more* private here, if that's what you ladies are looking for here."

"We're talking about a private *moment*," Jessica explained. "The way we behave when no one's watching."

"No one's watching us right now," Will said encouragingly. "We can do whatever we wish to do here, and no one will ever . . ."

"I don't think you understand," Susan said. "A *character's* private feelings and emotions are what we're trying to create here tonight."

"So let's *start* creating all these feelings and emotions," Will suggested.

"These feelings have to be *real*," Jessica said.

"They have to be *absolutely* real," Susan said.

"So that we can apply them to the scene we're doing."

"Ah-ha!" Will said.

"I think he's got it," Jessica said.

"By George, he's got it."

"You're rehearsing a scene together."

"Bravo!"

"What scene?" Will asked.

"A scene in Macbeth," Susan said.

"Where she tells him to screw his courage to the sticking point," Jessica said.

"Lady Macbeth."

"Tells Macbeth. When he's beginning to waver about killing Duncan."

"Screw your courage to the sticking point," Jessica said again, with conviction this time. "And we shall not fail."

She looked at her sister.

"That was very good," Susan said.

Will figured maybe they were back on track again.

"Screw your courage, huh?" he said, and smiled knowingly, and took another

sip of champagne.

"She's telling him not to be such a wuss," Susan said.

"The thing is they're plotting to kill the king, you see," Jessica said.

"This is a private moment for both of them."

"Where they're both examining what they're about to do."

"They're planning a *murder*, you see."

"What does that *feel* like?" Susan asked.

"What is that like inside your *head*?" Jessica said.

"That private moment inside your *head*."

"When you're actually contemplating someone's death."

The room went silent for an instant.

The sisters looked at each other.

"Would anyone like some more champagne?" Susan asked.

"I'd love some," Jessica said.

"I'll get it," Will said, and started to rise.

"No, no, let me," Susan said, and took his glass and carried all three empty glasses into the kitchen. Jessica crossed her legs. Behind him, in the kitchen, Will could hear Susan refilling their glasses. He watched Jessica's jiggling foot, her pump half-on, half-off, held only by her toes.

"So that stuff in the bar was all part of the exercise, right?" Will said. "Your suggesting we kill somebody? And then choosing your sister as the victim?"

"Well, sort of," Jessica said.

Her pump fell off. She bent over to retrieve it, spreading her legs, the black dress high on her thighs. She crossed one leg over the other, put the pump back on, smiled at Will. Susan was back with the full glasses.

"Still some more out there," she said, and passed the glasses around. Jessica held hers up in a toast.

"From this time such," she said, "I account thy love."

"Cheers," Susan said, and drank.

"Meaning?" Will said, but he drank, too.

"That's in the scene," Jessica said. "Actually, it's at the start of the scene. Where he's beginning to waver. By the end of the scene, she's convinced him the king must die."

"False face must hide what the false heart doth show," Susan said, and nodded.

"That's Macbeth's exit line. At the end of the scene."

"Is that why you were dressed as a file clerk? False face must hide . . . whatever it was you just said?"

"What the false heart doth show," Susan repeated. "But no, that's not why I

was in costume.”

“Then why?”

“It was my way of trying to create a character.”

“Maybe he hasn’t got it, after all,” Jessica said.

“A character who could kill,” Susan said.

“You had to become a *frump*?”

“Well, I had to become someone *else*, yes. Someone not like myself at all. But it turned out that wasn’t enough. I had to find the right place, too.”

“The place is *here*,” Jessica said.

“And *now*,” Will said. “So, ladies, if no one minds . . .”

“Ooo hoo, ladies again,” Susan said, and again rolled her eyes.

“. . . can we get off all this acting stuff for a moment. . . ?”

“How about *your* private moment?” Susan said.

“I don’t have any private moments.”

“Don’t you ever fart alone in the dark?” Jessica asked.

“Don’t you ever jack off alone in the dark?” Susan asked.

Will’s mouth fell open.

“Those are private moments,” Jessica said.

For some reason, he could not close his mouth again.

“I think it’s beginning to work,” Susan said.

“Take the glass from his hand before he drops it,” Jessica said.

Will watched them with his eyes and his mouth wide open.

“I’ll bet he thinks it’s curare,” Jessica said.

“Where on earth would we get curare?”

“The jungles of Brazil?”

“Venezuela?”

Both girls laughed.

Will didn’t know if it was curare or not. All he knew was he couldn’t speak and he couldn’t move.

“Well, he *knows* we didn’t go all the way down to the Amazon for any poison,” Jessica said.

“That’s right, he knows you’re a nurse,” Susan said.

“Beth Israel, you bet,” Jessica said.

“Access to lots of drugs there.”

“Even *synthetic* curare drugs.”

“Plenty of those around.”

“List them for him, Jess.”

“Don’t want to bore him, Sue.”

“You have to *inject* curare, Will, did you know that?”

“The natives dip their darts in it.”

“Shoot the darts from blowpipes.”

“The victims are paralyzed.”

“Helpless.”

“Death comes from asphyxia.”

“That means you can’t breathe.”

“Because the respiratory nerve muscles get paralyzed.”

“Are you having trouble breathing yet, Will?”

He did not think he was having trouble breathing. But what were they saying? Were they saying they’d poisoned him?

“The synthetics come in tablet form,” Susan told him.

“Easy to pulverize.”

“Easy to dissolve.”

“Lots of legitimate uses for synthetic curare drugs,” Jessica said. “Provided you’re careful with the dosage.”

“We weren’t particularly careful with the dosage, Will.”

“Did your champagne taste a little bitter?”

He wanted to shake his head no. His champagne had tasted just fine. Or had he been too drunk to know just *how* it had tasted? But he couldn’t shake his head, and he couldn’t talk.

“Let’s watch him,” Susan said. “Study his reactions.”

“Why?” Jessica asked.

“Well, it could be helpful.”

“Not for the scene we’re doing.”

“Killing someone.”

“Killing someone, yes. Duh, Susan.”

Killing *me*, Will thought.

They are actually killing me here.

But, no . . .

Girls, he thought, you’re making a mistake here. This is not the way to go about this. Let’s go back to the original plan, girls. The original plan was to pop a bottle of bubbly and hop into the sack together. The original plan was to share this lovely night three days before . . . actually only two days now, it was already well past midnight . . . *two* days before Christmas, share this sweet uncomplicated night together, a sister act with a willing third partner is all this was supposed to be here. So how’d it get so serious all of a sudden? There was no reason for you girls to get all serious about acting lessons and private moments, really, this was just supposed to be fun and games here tonight. So

why'd you have to go drop poison in my champagne? I mean, *Jesus*, girls, why'd you have to go do that when we were getting along so fine here?

"Are you feeling anything?" Susan asked.

"No," Jessica said. "Are you?"

"I thought I'd feel . . ."

"Me, too."

"I don't know . . . sinister or something."

"Me, too."

"I mean, *killing* somebody! I thought it would be something special. Instead . . ."

"I know what you mean. It's just like watching somebody, I don't know, getting a *haircut* or something."

"Maybe we should have tried something else."

"Not poison, you mean?"

"Something more dramatic."

"Something scarier, I know what you mean."

"Get some kind of reaction out of him."

"Instead of him just *sitting* there."

"Sitting there like a dope and dying."

The girls leaned over Will and peered into his face. Their faces looked distorted, so close to his face and all. Their blue eyes looked as if they were popping out of their heads.

"Do something," Jessica told him.

"Do something, asshole," Susan said.

They kept watching him.

"It's not too late to stab him, I suppose," Jessica said.

"You think?" Susan said.

Please don't stab me, Will thought. I'm afraid of knives. Please don't stab me.

"Let's see what's in the kitchen," Jessica said.

He was suddenly alone.

The girls were suddenly gone.

Behind him . . .

He could not turn his head to see them.

. . . behind him he could hear them rummaging through what he guessed was one of the kitchen drawers, could hear the rattle of utensils . . .

Please don't stab me, he thought.

"How about this one?" Jessica asked.

"Looks awfully big for the job," Susan said.

"Slit his fuckin' throat good," Jessica said, and laughed.

"See if he sits there like a dope then," Susan said.

"Get some kind of *reaction* out of him."

"Help us to *feel* something."

"Now you've got it, Sue. That's the whole point."

Will's chest was beginning to feel tight. He was beginning to have difficulty breathing.

In the kitchen, the girls laughed again.

Why were they laughing?

Had they just said something he couldn't hear? Were they going to do something else? with that knife, other than slit his throat? He wished he could take a deep breath. He knew he would feel so much better if he could just take a deep breath. But he . . . he . . . he didn't seem to be . . . to be able to . . .

"Hey!" Jessica said. "You! Don't poop out on us!"

Susan looked at her.

"I think he's gone," she said.

"Shit!" Jessica said.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking his pulse."

Susan waited.

"Nothing," Jessica said, and dropped his wrist.

The sisters kept looking at Will where he sat slumped in the easy chair, his mouth still hanging open, his eyes wide.

"He sure as hell *looks* dead," Jessica said.

"We'd better get him out of here."

"Be a good exercise," Jessica said. "Getting rid of the body."

"I'll say. I'll bet he weighs at least a hun' ninety."

"I didn't say good *exercise*, Sue. I said *a* good exercise. A good *acting* exercise."

"Oh. Right. What it feels like to get rid of a dead body. Right."

"So let's do it," Jessica said.

They started lifting him out of the chair. He was, in fact, very heavy. They half-carried him, half-dragged him to the front door.

"Tell me something," Susan said. "Do you . . . you know . . . *feel* anything yet?"

"Nothing," Jessica said.

Contributors' Notes

Russell Banks, a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, has written fourteen novels and five short story collections. Two of his novels were nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, *Continental Drift* and *Cloudsplitter*. Two others have inspired motion pictures: *The Sweet Hereafter*, starring Ian Holm and directed by Atom Egoyan, who also wrote the screenplay, and *Affliction*, starring Nick Nolte, Sissy Spacek, and James Coburn and written and directed by Paul Schrader.

John Biguenet has written short stories that appeared in such publications as *Esquire*, *Granta*, *Playboy*, *Story*, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, and *Zoetrope* and have been selected for an O. Henry Award, a Pushcart Prize, and for *The Best American Short Stories* for 1997, 1998, 1999, and 2002. He lives in New Orleans and teaches at Loyola University. His debut collection of stories, *The Torturer's Apprentice*, was published in 2001. *Oyster*, his first novel, was published the following year.

Christopher Coake received an M.A. at Miami University in Ohio and an M.F.A. at Ohio State. His short stories have appeared in such publications as *Epoch* and the *Gettysburg Review*. His first book was a collection of stories, *We're in Trouble*, after which he was named one of *Granta's* Best of Young American Novelists in 2007; he published *You Came Back*, his first novel, in 2012. He now teaches creative writing at the University of Nevada–Reno.

James Crumley was born and raised in Texas, received an M.F.A. at the University of Iowa, and taught at several universities. He was the author of a novel about the Vietnam War, *One to Count Cadence*, and seven highly acclaimed crime novels, including *The Wrong Case*; *Dancing Bear*; *The Mexican Tree Duck*; and *The Last Good Kiss*, often described as the best and most influential private eye novel of the second half of the twentieth century. He died in 2008.

Jeffery Deaver is a former journalist, folksinger, and attorney. He was born in Chicago and received a journalism degree from the University of Missouri. As

the author of more than thirty suspense novels, he has become an international bestseller, published in twenty-five languages in 150 countries, and received countless awards, including seven Edgar nominations. His most successful series features Lincoln Rhyme, a quadriplegic former policeman who first appeared in *The Bone Collector*, filmed by Universal and starring Denzel Washington and Angelina Jolie.

Brendan DuBois is a former newspaperman who was born and raised in New Hampshire, where he still lives. He has been writing mystery and science fiction for a quarter of a century, producing sixteen novels and about two hundred short stories, two of which won Shamus Awards and three of which were nominated for Edgar Allan Poe Awards. His alternate history novel *Resurrection Day* won the Sideways Award for Alternate History and was optioned for motion pictures. He was a one-day champion on *Jeopardy*.

Louise Erdrich is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibwe, whose language she has been studying since the late 1990s. She is the author of fourteen novels and numerous other works, including volumes of poetry, short fiction, children's literature, and nonfiction. Her work has received numerous awards, including the 1984 National Book Critics Circle Award for *Love Medicine* and the National Book Award in 2012 for *The Round House*; *The Plague of Doves* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2009.

Tom Franklin grew up in Alabama and now teaches at the University of Mississippi; he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 2001. His first book was the short story collection *Poachers: Stories*, which was followed by the novels *Hell at the Breech*, *Smonk*, and *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*, which won the Gold Dagger Award as best novel of the year from the British Crime Writers' Association. His most recent novel is *The Tilted World*, which he cowrote with his wife, the poet Beth Ann Fennelly.

William Gay was the author of only three novels and two short story collections, but they received so much critical acclaim that he was soon compared to Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Cormac McCarthy, who was an early admirer. In addition to the novels *The Long Home*, *Provinces of Night*, and *Twilight*, Gay wrote stories for such publications as *Harper's* and the *Atlantic Monthly* and had work selected for *O. Henry Prize Stories*. He died in February 2012.

Andrew Klavan has been nominated for four Edgar Allan Poe Awards and won twice, for *Mrs. White* (under the pseudonym Margaret Tracy) and *The Rain* (as Keith Peterson). He also was nominated under his own name in the Best Novel category for *Don't Say a Word*, which was filmed with Michael Douglas starring. His novel *True Crime* was filmed with Clint Eastwood as the star and director. He wrote the screenplay for Simon Brett's novel *A Shock to the System*.

Dennis Lehane was born and raised in the Boston area and has set most of his novels there, notably the series of six private eye novels featuring Angela Gennaro and Patrick Kenzie, beginning with *A Drink Before the War*. The third book in the series, *Gone, Baby, Gone*, was filmed (Ben Affleck directed), as were others of his novels, notably the award-winning *Mystic River*, directed by Clint Eastwood, and *Shutter Island*, directed by Martin Scorsese. He also won several awards as one of the writers of the successful television series *The Wire*.

Elmore Leonard may have been the most highly regarded crime writer of the past half century. Among his numerous awards were the Grand Master from the Mystery Writers of America and the National Book Foundation 2012 Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. He wrote nearly fifty books, many of which were the inspiration for motion pictures—some very good, such as *Hombre*, *Get Shorty*, and *Jackie Brown* (based on *Rum Punch*)—and some not so good. He claimed that *The Big Bounce*, filmed twice, inspired the two worst movies ever made, and he despised the Burt Reynolds vehicle *Stick*. Leonard died in August 2013.

Michael Malone has taught at numerous universities, currently at Duke. He is the author of several novels, including *Dingley Falls* and *Handling Sin*, which are frequently among the assigned reading in classes on modern literature and the American novel. His mystery novels feature the North Carolina policemen Justin Savile and Cuddy Mangum, introduced in *Uncivil Seasons* and continued in *Time's Witness* and *First Lady*. Malone has won an Edgar, a Peabody, and an Emmy as the writer of the daytime drama series *One Life to Live*.

Lou Manfredo, a former New York City schoolteacher and legal investigator, served in the Brooklyn criminal court system for twenty-five years. He has written three highly praised books about Joe Rizzo, a long-time veteran of the New York Police Department working in Brooklyn: *Rizzo's War*, *Rizzo's Fire*, and *Rizzo's Daughter*, which have been compared frequently to Ed McBain's novels. He is a regular contributor to *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*.

Ed McBain was the pseudonym of Evan Hunter, who wrote such mainstream novels as *The Blackboard Jungle* and *Strangers When We Meet*, both successful films. As McBain, he was best known for his series of novels about the 87th Precinct, which have sold more than a hundred million copies worldwide as the most famous and most loved police procedurals ever written. He was given the Grand Master Award by the Mystery Writers of America for lifetime achievement in 1986. He died in 2005.

Tim McLoughlin was born and raised in Brooklyn, where he still resides and sets his works of fiction. His novel *Heart of the Old Country* was a selection of the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers series, was favorably compared to Richard Price's work, won him Italy's Premio Penne award, and was the basis for the motion picture *The Narrows*. He also was the editor of *Brooklyn Noir*, *Brooklyn Noir 2: The Classics*, and *Brooklyn Noir 3: Nothing but the Truth*.

Joyce Carol Oates was born in upstate New York and now teaches at Princeton University. As one of the most honored authors in the world, she has been nominated for five National Book Awards, winning one for the novel *them*; given the PEN/Malamud Award; and won and been nominated for countless other awards. She is the author of more than fifty novels, several hundred short stories, and numerous other works, including such best-selling novels as *Blonde*, *The Falls*, *The Gravedigger's Daughter*, and *We Were the Mulvaney's*, one of several of her works to be filmed.

Hannah Tinti earned her M.A. from New York University's Graduate Creative Writing Program. Her work has been published in such journals as *Story*, *Epoch*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Story Quarterly*, and *Sonora Review*. Her short story collection *Animal Crackers* was a runner-up for the Pen/Hemingway Award. Her 2008 novel, *The Good Thief*, received the American Library Association's Alex Award and the John Sargent Sr. First Novel Prize.

F.X. Toole was the pseudonym of Jerry Boyd. After a brief matador career, he became a boxing trainer and ringside "cut man." He also began writing and, after forty years, published a short story, "The Monkey Look," in *Zyzzyva*. His first book, a collection of stories about professional boxing, *Rope Burns: Stories from the Corner*, drew critical praise, and movie rights were sold. Two stories were adapted for Clint Eastwood's 2004 film *Million Dollar Baby*, which won the Best Picture Oscar. Boyd died in 2002.

Scott Turow's first crime novel, *Presumed Innocent*, became an international bestseller when it was published in 1987 and inspired a film of the same title starring Harrison Ford. All nine of his novels have made the best-seller list, and in 1999 *Time* named *Personal Injuries* the year's best work of fiction. His work has been translated into forty languages. His long career as a lawyer has served as the background for his fiction. His most recent work is *Identical*, published in 2013.

About the Editor

OTTO PENZLER is a renowned mystery editor, publisher, columnist, and owner of New York's The Mysterious Bookshop, the oldest and largest bookstore solely dedicated to mystery fiction. He has edited more than fifty crime-fiction anthologies.