The Stone Child

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To my wife, Liz, who has always been my best editor

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"The Stone Child"—*Black Warrior Review* 29.1 (fall/winter 2002)
"The Wrath of God"—*Flyway*
"You Asked for It" (in a much different form, "The Canals of Mars")
—*Shenandoah* (reprinted in *The Pushcart Prize, XXV*)
"Morons. Imbeciles. Idiots."—*South Dakota Review*
"Clean Shaven," "Blockhead," and "Don't Breathe . . . Breathe"
—*Beloit Fiction Journal*
"Zombies"—*The Journal*
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"Dynamic Tension"—*Talking River Review*

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"They're going to induce it," Syl said. She poured a bowl of whipped eggs into the skillet, covering the chopped jalapeños and chorizo. She nodded at the juice and coffee on the table. "To be safe."

"Okay." I checked the clock over the stove. Ten thirty-five, and already so hot I thought about taking breakfast into the basement.

"I wanted it to just happen," Syl said.

"Of course." I watched her slide a spatula under the omelet. She was so big her elbow was hardly bent as she reached toward the burner.

"Maybe it will," Syl said. "There's a chance. There's forty-five hours yet. I'd like that. He should get to choose something."

"Christ, it's hot. You must be roasting."

Syl fiddled with the eggs and smiled. "You know what I'd like?" she said. "Sitting in the movies. It will feel good inside."

"There's something that's over by three?"

"It's summer, Bobby. They have matinees. That war movie starts at noon. You'll be able to get to work on time."

"Whatever you want," I said.

"I love history," Syl said, and then she glanced down at her swollen belly. "And it will take my mind off things. You know."

"I know."

"Maybe it will make him feel better, too."

"Maybe," I said, but it was like pretending shrimp cocktail and a steak makes a death-row prisoner feel better the night before the needle goes in.

Less than twenty minutes into the movie, Syl asked for my shirt. "You cold?" I said.

"No," she said, but I peeled it off and handed it to her, sitting back in my sleeveless undershirt.

I watched her open her blouse and slide off her bra. The light from the screen flashed across her swollen breasts. Her stomach seemed enormous. How can somebody get that big? For a moment I thought about whether or not she'd look like she had last summer after this was over.

"I can't get comfortable," she said, and she pulled the shirt over herself and rested her head on my shoulder. By the time the Japanese showed up, she was asleep. The explosions were the only parts of the movie worth a damn, but she didn't wake up. I had to shake her when everything got sorted out and Doolittle bombed Japan and the credits rolled. "That was so boring," she said. "I bet I know everything that happened."

"You'd be right," I said.

"Why do they write stories where you can see what's coming?"

"That's the way things are," I said.

"That's not history, Bobby."

"Okay," I said, and nodded like I thought she'd won an argument.

"You don't mean that," she said, tugging at my shirt as if it made her as uncomfortable as the bra. I thought for a moment she was going to give it back to me, but she settled, finally, and said, "So what's next?"

We stepped outside into rain so fine it felt good on my bare shoulders. The gutters were flooded, though, and the traffic splashed up waves from standing water. Off to the east, where our weather usually disappeared, it was so black and green I expected to see a funnel cloud set down. "We get through this," I said. "And then we start to take care of ourselves."

"Just like that?"

"As close as we can."

She kept the shirt pulled against her as we walked outside. I thought of what she looked like underneath. What people in the crowd would think if she handed it back to me and didn't bother to cover herself.

That was one more impossible thing, I thought. And then I started looking at the couples we were walking among, their expressions, their gestures, the way they moved toward or apart from each other.

Something made me so sad about the future of all of them that I put my arm around Syl and pulled her against me so tight we both stumbled. "Whoa," she said, and I turned her toward me so I could feel her belly. She lifted one hand to touch my face, the one that was holding her bra, and I kept looking at her and hoping that some smart-ass in the crowd was enjoying us.

I made it to work with five minutes to spare. Though with the foreman, Sal Tamarelli, hovering like it was my first day, that time clock looked like it might be in a mirror, saying five minutes past the hour. "Go down to Hemmerline Hall," Sal said. "They got water."

The clock settled back to three minutes before the hour while I nodded. I'd been in that basement after a gully washer before. I loaded fans and the vacuum. I looked around to see if I had a partner on this one, but Sal shook his head. "It's all yours, Bobby," he said. "We're still working while you're mopping up."

In Hemmerline, I unlocked the corner office first, using it to judge how many doors I'd be propping open. The carpet sparkled, the water that had soaked in nearly to the door reflecting the late afternoon sun. Three offices, I guessed, maybe the fourth. By the time I saw that the fourth office down was dry, the professor from office 1, Jack Spicer, was standing in his doorway. I noticed his blue flip-flops, the Jane's Addiction T-shirt. I wondered if Spicer wore that outfit when summer ended, whether he walked around campus as if he could leave the scent of hipness for some coed to sniff. "I'll stay out of your way," he said. "You got work to do here."

I shrugged and plugged in the wet-vac, dragging it to the corner where there was still standing water. When the door across the hall opened, I had two professors standing guard. "Has it been raining?" the second one said, and I smiled, turning on the machine.

Jack Spicer stepped into his office, bringing up water from the soaked carpet. "This place," he said. "I was watching it pour from my kitchen window and called in an office flood before I even drove over." He squished three more steps my way, acting as if this was a demonstration rather than a chance to inspect what I was doing about the water.

"Go for it, Noah," the professor from across the hall said.

"Is that the only way to take care of this?" Spicer asked.

"It's one way."

"So there's another?"

"We could open the windows and wait for nature." Spicer looked at the sopping leaves of the school's rhododendrons that leaned against his two windows and snorted to show he got the joke, but I wasn't through. "Or we could set fire to it, dry things out quick."

The second professor tiptoed across the soaked carpet and stopped. "Or have a faculty meeting in here and trust all the hot air to dry it out."

He looked my way as if he was inviting more sarcasm. I wondered if Jack Spicer was the kind of man who would call his boss and complain about "the janitor's attitude." If there was a hearing, I decided, that second professor would size up his choices and agree I'd been a smart-ass, and I'd be out of work. I shrugged and set the vacuum as far under the stilted bookshelf as it would reach.

There was enough water and furniture moving to take me right through till break. By the time I pushed the vacuum out the back door, I had fans running in three offices and both sets of outside doors propped for cross-ventilation. Spicer stepped out of the department library as if he'd just thought of something he needed by the back door. "This place will be wide open when you leave," Spicer said.

"That's how it works," I said.

"What about security? I'm the only one around, and I'm ready to walk home for dinner."

"It's summer," I said, lifting the vacuum into my cart as if that explained everything. I drove off before I told him he could call security from his house when he knew his office was being robbed.

After break, Sal saw me pull into the maintenance shack and gestured toward the spilled stack of pipe I'd just passed coming in. "I need you and Ron Steinbach to get that mess the hell out of here and up to the ball field where it's worth a shit to somebody."

I looked back and saw Ron parking a truck beside the scattered pipe. "Who dumped it?" I said.

Sal spit into the dust and shook his head. "Don't matter how it got there," he said. "Nobody doing drainage up there gives a shit about anything but having that pipe up there with some daylight still in the sky."

"Okay," I said. I waved to Ron to let him know he had a partner in this sorry project, but Sal took a step closer to me.

"You have a problem in those offices?"

"They're healing," I said. "There's no miracles for soaked carpets."

"A people problem."

I kept my expression steady. "No," I said.

Sal shrugged. "I have to ask when I get a call. I have to say I talked to you and there's an understanding."

"Okay," I said. "I understand."

"You got the baby just around the corner. I'll file this one under Jackass."

"Okay," I said again.

"A file like that can't get too thick though."

I nodded and walked over to where Ron was deciding which length of metal pipe to tackle first. I let him take his time deciding. Tumbled like they were, the gray pieces looked like the beginning of that old jackstraw game. It was clear to me we needed to hoist them in the right order or we'd jiggle the whole mess into an ankle-breaker.

Halfway through the load, Ron leaned against the truck bed and took off his hat. "You get one of them brain-boys riled over to the dorm?" he said. I bent down to relace a shoe, taking my time with the knot. "I took the call," he said. "He started in afore I could pass it on to Sal."

"It's over with," I said.

Ron stuck his cap back on, tugging and twisting it like he was fixing a bow tie on a tuxedo. "Your wife teaches here, don't she?" he said.

"Ex-wife. She's remarried."

Ron whistled. "That's a shit pile, then, ain't it?"

"We don't hate each other."

"No, I mean her getting it from some other guy and you seeing her day to day. I couldn't truck with such." Ron moved back to the

remaining pipe sections, and I bent to take an end. They were so heavy I was thinking forklift, and why it wasn't doing this work instead of our arms and backs.

"I've met him half a dozen times. That's not my life anymore."

Ron grunted as we lifted the pipe together. "Sure it is," he said. "I'd want to kill the lousy fuck if I was in your shoes."

I guided the pipe onto the truck while Ron shoved. I wasn't about to tell Ron what I felt about Sarah and Lou. "Let's just take care of this pipe," I said.

Ron nodded and tugged his hat. "Sure, I get you, but let me ask you one more question—is her new husband a professor here?"

I bent to the next section, and Ron, to my surprise, backed up a step as if he thought I might find the strength to lay him out with it. "No," I said, feeling it was true. Lou was a fund-raiser, an associate vice president in the development office.

"You're still awake," I said, when Syl was sitting up in bed reading at 11:30.

"You ever hear of the Stone Child?" she said, holding up a book with a picture of Siamese twins on the cover.

"No."

"There was a woman, once, who was pregnant for twenty-eight years."

"Really."

"You know. She was pregnant and had labor pains and then didn't deliver. All of a sudden people thought maybe she'd ballooned up for some other reason. All those years," she said. "People thinking she was a fat, hysterical idiot." She looked at me. "You should never have told Sarah."

"You told your father."

"I thought he needed to know. So it wasn't a shock. Sarah wasn't going to be shocked; she was going to preach."

"So Sarah called?"

Syl waved the book as if she meant to fling it at me. "She said she just wanted to wish me well now that it was close. That's not what she was saying five months ago."

"You don't think she meant it?"

"Back then she did. When she was going on and on about anencephalic babies. When she talked to me like I never heard about what I was dealing with."

"She assumed it was religion."

Syl waved the book again. "She assumed I was an idiot. 'It's incompatible with life,' she said. She talked like I was somebody whose case was in a book."

"The people in that book you're waving at me are once-a-century cases," I said.

"And I'm one in a thousand. I told her to wish you well if she wanted to. You're the one she knows."

Because my days off are Sunday and Monday, I always make breakfast on Sunday to start the weekend off right. Syl sleeps in and wakes to me carrying in a tray that starts with juice and ends with coffee. This Sunday, though, she walked into the kitchen before I could even open the refrigerator. "Don't bother yourself," she said. "Cereal will do."

"Okay," I said, but when I opened the cabinet, there were only two boxes, and neither one had enough left in it for two bowls. I held them up and shook them to let her know how low they were. "Pick one," I said. "Whichever you choose decides which one I eat."

"You look like my father that day he made breakfast for us the week before we were married. Remember that? He gave you the choice between the two meats he was cooking."

"I remember."

"You chose the kidneys. 'Well then,' he said, 'my daughter gets herself a mess of brains.'"

"I picked the kidneys because I could tell what they were. I didn't want something that looked like nothing I'd ever seen on a plate."

Syl lifted the box of shredded wheat from my left hand. "Those brains tasted like surgery," she said.

"You finished them."

"We should accept what the world gives us," she said.

"That's your father talking. We weren't kids, Syl. He acted like we were sixteen and ready to elope."

"You don't like being tested."

"There's enough trial in this world without being asked to breakfast jury duty."

"That's resolve," she said. "That's what you've lost."

"It's been replaced by realism."

Syl dumped the shredded wheat into a bowl. "It's resignation, Bobby. They're not synonyms." Half of her bowl was filled scraps and broken pieces. They looked like straw, something that should be dumped in a trough. "I want to be out today," she said.

"Where?"

"The park. Just a short walk. We can sit most of the time."

Ten minutes into our walk, Syl started looking for a bench to rest on. The park was crowded. We'd passed two benches already full when I spotted an empty one just past where a couple walking a dog were coming at us from the opposite direction. The dog, I decided when they got closer, was a black lab, and then the woman flung her arms up in a sort of mock horror and said, "Syl, what are you doing on your feet?"

Immediately the dog bared its teeth and snarled, tugging at the leash the man tightened. "It's Julie," Syl whispered to me. "I work with her." And then she walked right up to that dog, reached down and patted the black lab's upturned head.

"Wow," the man said, "you must have grown up around dogs."

"No, we didn't have any pets."

I saw the man hesitate, uncertain where to go next without Syl leading him. "You're so big," Julie said. "It's only been three weeks since I last saw you. Ready to pop?"

"Any day now."

To my horror, the woman stepped closer and laid her hand on Syl's belly. I saw that Syl didn't step back, that she smiled as if a curtain had gone up. The woman pulled her hand back. "So quiet, that one."

"Saving his energy."

"He'll be wearing you out soon enough," the man said, and I wondered what he'd say if I told him there wasn't enough of a nervous system in Syl's baby to get legs kicking.

"Syl's getting herself a baby-sitter," Julie said to the man. "Thinks we can't live without her at work."

Julie tugged Syl's arm enough to move her a few steps. She leaned in close and whispered to her. I kept my eye on the black lab, taking a step back to make sure that leash didn't reach.

When Syl broke away from Julie she walked to the empty bench thirty feet down the path and sat. I dropped beside her as the black lab, spotting a squirrel, dragged the couple away. "They think I'm coming back to work in a month for the money," Syl said. "They think I'm terrible to even think about coming back and asking for an eight-week leave. 'Your job will always be there,' Julie said. 'You don't have to make it official like teachers and such.' They act like I'm not going to care for my baby."

"They'll know soon enough."

"I couldn't tell them, least of all Julie," Syl said. "I didn't want them being sorry and talking among themselves about me every day I wasn't there."

"They do anyway, right? Just a different topic and a different attitude."

Syl shook her head. "You know what Julie said to me the last week I was on the job? She said, 'You're getting like the teachers at the college. Your husband bring that day-care shit home from work?' "

"It's called maternity leave. It's been common for a generation."

"They know you were married to a professor."

"And now I keep house for her," I said, and I looked away, but the black lab and the couple had disappeared, and there was nothing along the path that gave me an excuse to stare at it. "I'm so tired, Bobby," Syl said. "If I go home and rest now, maybe we can go out later."

Syl laid down on the couch and fell asleep so quickly I felt apprehension swirl up inside me. As soon as I walked outside, I knew I had to see Sarah to work things out while there was still a day left. I didn't want to be warning her away from Syl after the fact. I thought if she called next week to offer sympathy I'd walk into her office and slap her face.

Sarah invited me in, but I hesitated on the doorstep when Lou stepped into the room behind her. "It's okay, Bobby. We're adults. Lou and I are just recuperating from this wedding we went to yesterday."

"You should have been at the wedding, Bobby," Lou said, his voice pitched up a notch as if he were hearing background noise. "There was a karaoke singer."

I looked around the room, stopping at a picture of Sarah and Lou standing on a beach that looked like somebody had cleaned it before they posed. Sarah was wearing a two-piece, and I was surprised how flat her stomach had become, as if Lou had ordered her to work out for six weeks before the vacation.

"Some people like that stuff."

"Not at the reception. At the wedding."

My eyes dropped to her waist, imagining that taut midriff. "You can't have karaoke at a wedding."

"Before the ceremony. A woman sang to karaoke tapes. Every time she had to switch tapes, the organist played a minute of classical."

"Change the tapes?"

"She had the four songs on four different tapes. Don't ask me why."

"Celine Dion?"

"Yes."

"Faith Hill?"

"You sound like you were there," Lou said. "What a church full of rednecks." He sidestepped from the room, and for the first time I noticed he'd been holding a glass against his hip.

I smiled, thinking of the woman lifting a tape from her boom box, inserting the next while Wagner thundered from the church organ. "I came over to get something straight with you," I said to Sarah.

"Bobby," Sarah said, "you made this call long ago. You know where all this is going."

I heard Lou dropping ice cubes into a glass. "All this?" I said.

She sighed. "Bringing a child like this to term."

"It was Syl's call," I said, wishing for the words back as soon as I heard them trickle out like drool.

"But you're stuck, too," Lou said, walking back in. He lifted his fresh drink to his lips and swallowed. "You have time for one?" he said.

I shook my head. "I remember when you said you were against this," Sarah said. "Ultrasound doesn't lie. There's no repairing a brain that isn't there."

"A fucking tar baby," Lou said.

"A what?" I blurted. Sarah looked stricken. If she'd been drinking, I didn't see another glass in the room.

Lou took another swallow. "You know, fucking Uncle Remus—Zip-a-dee-doo-dah."

"I'm lost here, Lou."

"I hear that."

"Lou," Sarah said, but he wasn't finished.

"The little organ recipients will buy her Mother's Day cards in a few years. They'll send her fucking flowers and a cake."

"Let me talk to Bobby alone," Sarah said.

"The good old days," Lou muttered, but he went back to the kitchen, busied himself with the refrigerator.

"What the fuck?" I said to Sarah.

"Lou has his ways sometimes. He thinks you're going to have the baby harvested."

"He *thinks*?"

"What's this always been about, Bobby? Religion?"

"Syl's no more religious than you are," I said. "That's one reason why I enjoy living with her. She's carrying that doomed child because she thinks it's right, not because she fears God. It's no different than caring for a defective child once it's born. You wouldn't throw a retarded baby in the river, would you?"

"It's not for religion and it's not for science," Sarah said. "There's no other reason."

"She set her mind to it long ago," I said. "Those are side issues."

"Call it what you want, Bobby. It's religion. Nobody would blame her for aborting but a handful of fanatics."

I wanted to tell Sarah she was so religious in her science it made me sick, but instead of comparing statistics to anecdotes, I said, "It's about knowing. It's about choice."

"No, Bobby. You know that baby could just be DOA, not viable at all."

"You're the educated one," I said. "You're the expert."

"Yes," she said, her tone making me think of every spitball I'd ever thrown in high school, every homework assignment left undone. And then her expression softened, and she rested her hand on my forearm. "Bobby . . ."

"Forget it," I said. "You teach at a college; I work in physical plant at a college—fix it when it's broken."

"You paint. You do cleanup."

"I could fix a drunk for you."

"Still the child," she said.

"If I wasn't, I'd set Lou on fire and make you watch."

She pressed her lips together, and I waited for her to tell me to never come back. When she spoke, she said, "This whole business is hard on everybody."

I opened the door and stepped out. "Just keep telling yourself it's only a movie." And when I was halfway to the car, I wondered whether she could name the films that line had advertised. Any of them, including, years ago, two we'd seen together.

"You said you had something to get straight," I heard her say from behind me, but I didn't even raise a hand to show I was ignoring her.

Syl was still lying on the couch when I got back, but she was awake and reading. "You still stuck in that book?" I asked.

"You went to Sarah's, didn't you?"

"I thought I could explain if I was looking at her."

"I'm okay, Bobby. There's so many things that can go wrong. Mine's already happened. I don't have to worry." I lifted the book from her hand and thumbed through the chapters: Pig-headed women. Wolfmen. Egg-laying mothers.

"I always read out loud to him, Bobby."

"He's not going to learn anything."

"So he can hear my voice, Bobby. It's what I can do for him. Everything that's alive can listen. I haven't watched television in two months."

"The TV has voices," I said, but she closed the book and let it rest on her belly.

"The husband of the stone child's mother had his wife dissected after she died," Syl said. She looked out the window as if she expected to see visitors. "Like a frog in biology class. He said he wanted to know for sure."

"Autopsies aren't immoral."

"You remember cutting up a frog when you were in biology?"

"And a worm and a cat."

"A cat?"

"I took advanced biology."

"And then you didn't go to college."

"I thought I'd learn something in Vietnam, and then we gave up before I got there."

"People go to college when they're older."

"I didn't."

Syl looked out the window again, and I realized she was examining her reflection, that standing where she was, in the light, she could look at her profile. "You know what those doctors found?" Syl said, without turning toward me.

"Tell me."

"A fetus, Bobby. She really had been carrying a baby all those years. But first they found something like a big coconut. A goddamn giant shell they could hardly crack open and inside was a baby made of stone."

I wanted her to stop looking at herself. When I spoke, my voice was a croak: "Doctors said this?"

"Yes, Bobby, a real baby, all right. One that had been alive and had grown—it calcified." Finally, she turned back to me. "Let's go out to dinner, Bobby. Tomorrow's a big day."

I watched her getting dressed. After the first few weeks of our marriage I'd never watched. I'd discovered my impatience with her care, that I grew angry watching her apply makeup and brush her hair because it seemed she took too much time readying herself, that her preparations expressed a lack of confidence I found disgusting.

But now I watched without counting the brushstrokes, without

checking my watch to measure the minutes for the beginning of an argument. I looked at myself in the mirror. She could see me looking, but she didn't shut her eyes or pause until I saw her take a breath and hold it, getting ready to push off the dresser, getting ready to stand and walk to the car.

When I turned down the alley that ran behind the five blocks of businesses in town, two dogs were busy tearing at a garbage bag. They turned and barked at the car, and then they ran alongside, growling and yapping as if we were there to steal that bag. Syl glanced at me as I slowed for the lot behind the restaurant, the dogs still busy with chasing us. "They'll run off when we open the doors," she said. "You don't show fear and they understand who's boss."

"Maybe."

"I saw you cringe today," she said. "Where does it come from? You're so afraid of dogs, and yet you were never bitten."

She'd been attacked once when she was twelve. The police had driven her back to the neighborhood, and she'd pointed at the dog. "I didn't know that meant it was going to be destroyed," she'd told me. "They killed it to find out if it was rabid."

"I keep my distance. You keep the law according to your father."

Syl patted my thigh. "Look them in the eye."

"And you have the scars," I finished for her.

"Yes."

"More great advice."

"There's nothing wrong with Dad's advice, you've just been lucky."

"He might as well have been preaching the gospel of Hair of the Dog. You should have seen Lou today—he was living that gospel like a disciple." Syl lifted her hand and opened the door. "Just remember," I said, "it's only a movie."

The dogs turned and trotted off as if they'd been paid. *"The Last House on the Left,"* Syl said, looking back into the car. "I snuck into that movie when I was fourteen, and it scared me for weeks."

* * *

I was invisible in the restaurant. There were so many smiles and heads turning back into conversation that I felt like a celebrity's husband.

You read about those guys sometimes—a carpenter or a plumber married to a movie star. You wonder how it's all going to work out for him, what he does at parties.

When we were married, I'd stood beside Sarah and listened to professors talk about books as if that made it okay to be suggestive. They knew I worked physical plant. Everything in books, according to their innuendos, was politics or sex. Either way, the characters were getting fucked or being the fuckers. The more those professors talked, the more it seemed like literature was pornography for the educated. I wondered if Syl would go back to television again after the baby was born or whether she'd become a reader.

"You know what I'd like to be," she said.

"What?"

"A grandmother."

"There's no sense wishing the years away."

If she'd heard, she didn't acknowledge. "Then I'd know my child had grown up safely."

"There, now," I said, and got stuck.

When Syl shook my shoulders at 4 A.M., I thought, for a moment, that it was happening, and I was surprised at how pleased I was. "I've been trying to will it," she said, "but there's nothing."

I propped myself on one elbow and looked at her. "You've done more than your share," I said. "There's no shame."

I sensed her shrink back in the darkness. "Shame?" she said. "You think I've ever felt ashamed?"

"I meant about the willpower."

"No, you didn't."

"Let's not quibble," I said.

"Quibbling is for the lucky," Syl said. "It's like jogging on a treadmill and thinking you can run a marathon."

"Let's not argue, then." When I sensed her relaxing, I smiled though she couldn't see it.

"Right," she said, rolling over and pushing herself up. "It's his day. Let's not spoil it." She sat on the edge of the bed while I waited for her to decide what came next. "That stone baby had hair," she finally said, and I tensed, staring toward where the ceiling had to be. "It had one tooth."

The Wrath of God

Sid Morrow wanted a story that would splash with booking agents, so I worked one up full of dreams and visions and a good dose of automatic artistry. Sid read it over and nodded. "It doesn't matter if this is all lies, Ray," he said, "so long as I'm honest about what I can do." I fixed up the tall tales where Sid pointed out exaggerations in the blurbs he'd received from the hierarchies of established churches, and before the weekend was over, I had it ready in copies for press release all over Pennsylvania, which, the agents willing, was about to discover the wonders of enterology.

Sid Morrow, according to the release, had woken up in a trance three weeks ago and begun to draw. All night he sketched—still lifes, portraits, and a landscape of Pittsburgh from the top of Mount Washington. Twenty detailed drawings, all of them available for inspection, and each of them created in less than fifteen minutes by a man who, at age forty-five, had never done more than doodle while he talked on the telephone.

He'd sent copies of the drawings to all of the church leaders in the country, telling his story, and already he had a papal blessing via the cardinal from New York, thank-yous from the Lutherans and Presbyterians and Methodists, and a hallelujah from the Baptists.

The release didn't say anything about the silence of the Mormons or the indifference of the Jews, but the blessings and prayers had helped, I pointed out, because just this week, in a dream, Sid Morrow had had a vision that showed him how to get into and out of a locked box without ever opening it.

He'd gotten to work as soon as he woke up. He'd borrowed a wooden crate and locked it twice, tied rope around the outside and sealed it with wax. To resist temptation, he'd tied his own hands together and sat on the box. And then, with no way else to do it, he'd willed himself inside. Lucky for him he'd been able to will himself

out again, and he was prepared, for a reasonable fee, to demonstrate his skill at enterology to an audience of paying customers.

"It's enough to bring back vaudeville," Sid said. "I'm the human ship-in-a-bottle," and he was right, at least close enough for starters, because I landed him bookings in Erie, Uniontown, Dubois, and Punxatawney, home of the groundhog festival.

The first night, Sid wore a deep blue cape, looking a little like a shy Dracula. As far as I could tell, he had the stage presence of forgotten presidential candidates, which was why, I thought, he'd signed me on as emcee, telling me to work up a little patter to keep things going with the audience while he rematerialized himself inside his homemade trunk, trusting that whatever stupid things I was about to say couldn't hurt him one bit.

He was flawless, though. He did a routine that would have received tens from even the Communist bloc, and then, for the finale, he had himself tied to a chair with a sealed bag hung over his shoulders, and a minute later there he was, chair and all, still tied, inside that sack inside the trunk. The halls weren't large, but pretty soon I had Sunbury lined up, then Shamokin, Ashland, and Hazleton, working out a tour of coal-country towns where Bosnia and Croatia and Serbia had specific identities long before Yugoslavia fell apart.

We were headquartered in Pittsburgh, where I lived with a woman who had given up twelve years of training teachers to become one herself. When Cheryl Sloan said she loved her work, that it gave her more joy to see the optimism of student teachers from the point of view of the classroom, I believed her, but I couldn't share the hope she claimed.

On nights when I was anxious about my own long-shot chances with journalism, I pointed out to her she had seen, for twelve years, the best of the experienced teachers, those willing and able to take on apprentices, and that she saw the novices, then and now, at their most industrious and imaginative.

She let me say those things, but when I suggested she spend her in-service days traveling to schools to observe her old students in their current jobs, she told me to shut up, and I did, watching her German shepherd forcing itself under the television stand as if it needed to be surrounded while we argued. I followed its shrugs

and wiggles, and by the time it finally settled, I thought if I raised a hand toward Cheryl, that dog would rear up and heave the television into an irreparable heap. Instead, I told her, "You'd feel better if you knew how things turned out."

To which she said, putting closure on my input, "It would be like knowing the itinerary for the rest of your life."

Because, when the show started clicking, I was on the road fifteen days a month with Sid Morrow, I thought she and her dog were taking things personally, both of them growling at everything I did. On the road, though, my biggest problem was spare time, and after a while, I started spending my afternoons on the road inside local libraries, where I studied the history of magic, discovering enterologists from the past, beginning with Del Monte, who was featured in *Life* in 1950 because he'd worked his way into a plastic cube with sides less than twenty inches long.

I put a question to Sid while we were holed up in Mansfield after the act one night. "You ever hear of Cazeneuve?"

"No," Sid said.

"He got himself inside a bag inside a trunk locked inside a trunk a hundred years ago."

Sid relaxed. "I can do that," he said, "but I think you're making this fellow up."

"Somebody tested him, surrounded the trunk with wrapping paper, sealed and signed it so it couldn't be messed with, and then they took the second trunk away to give him less chance to cheat."

"That's more interesting," Sid said. "That's worth trying."

"It took a little longer, but he got inside a bag inside the trunk and nobody found a clue."

"And neither will you," Sid said. "I'll put it in the act for Saturday night."

So he did, wowing the eighty-two paid ticket holders in Pottsville, but then he went back to his standard three "enterings" per night.

"King Brawn," I said to him a few days later in Reading. "Back in the thirties, he worked his way through the face of a tennis racket with no strings."

"They didn't have oversize then, did they?" Sid said.

"No, they didn't."

He seemed pleased, but the only story Sid wanted to hear again was about Major Zamora, the dwarf who, in 1894, entered a specially made bottle of Bass Ale. It was oversized, and Zamora was undersized, but the crowd loved it anyway.

"What did you do before you worked for me?" Sid finally asked, after we drew only forty-three in Allentown. "It's not as if you applied for the job."

"I worked at a health club."

"A health club?"

"In a hotel."

"Like a recreation area?"

"A weight room."

"I can't think of anything you could do there but work a cash register."

"There was more to it than that," I said, but Sid didn't ask any other questions, even when I didn't offer any additions to my job description or started in on how journalism was overcrowded.

"Before that I worked for an Italian restaurant," I said.

"I understand," he said, as if he knew I'd been a delivery boy. "Myself, I was unemployed altogether."

I worked up a new line of patter, starting with "Sid Morrow, the king of enterology," and I added lights and music and interspersed my saying things like "Never accomplished by another human" and "Witnessed by world leaders" with anecdotes about King Brawn and Major Zamora and Del Monte, so people would appreciate the art of entering.

But the big problem was that Sid had a thirty-minute act: three enterings, and it was over. We needed opening acts that would tour or at least ones that had a local following, but all we found were local rock bands and stand-up comics. There were dozens in every town, even places as small as Evans City, where we toured the places where *The Night of the Living Dead* had been filmed the year I was born. I even toyed with hiring magicians, but everybody we auditioned had bought their act at the magic store at the mall.

Worse, he was just "Sid Morrow, Enterologist." I wanted him to become "The Great Enterer" or some such thing, but he refused. "My name is Sid Morrow. What I have is will power. I'm not the

great anything. I get into these things better than anyone else is all."

"Exactly."

"I haven't studied up on this like you have."

"You know what you're doing, though."

Sid shook his head. "I'm better off not knowing how I do these things," he said. "Imagination is a wonderful gift. If I could see myself entering the trunk it would be as disappointing as success."

"So you're as mystified as the press release says?"

"There you are."

When we played Homestead, Sid got a review in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. "Sid Morrow could disappear from the earth, and I wouldn't be surprised," the reviewer said.

"What a great review," I told Sid, but he didn't see it that way.

"Ninety-eight customers," he said, supporting his gloom.

I brought up the Bottle Conjurer, the great ad campaign from 1749, when the publicist promised a man would enter a quart bottle in full view of the audience.

Sid perked up like he hadn't since our last two hundred–plus crowd. "Now there's something," he said.

"It was a hoax," I said. "Nobody could do that. The hoaxer just wanted to find out how gullible people could be."

"But the people believed it could happen."

"And then they rioted and tore up the theater," I said, but Sid didn't want to hear about the aftermath.

On stage and off, Sid Morrow moved like the immortal: slow, methodical, and spending so much time with small things that needed to be finished quickly I wondered how many years he'd studied enterology to get it right.

He went through his phone bills line by line, comparing each call by number and duration to the ones he logged each time he hung up. He never made a second call until he had the first one logged. "You never know when a mistake will pop up," he said.

For all I knew, I'd been paying double on my phone bills, but it wasn't likely with only two or three long distance calls a month, conversations I could remember weeks later because they were necessary to hold. Except now I was promoting Sid's act, making fifty calls a month on Cheryl's phone because I refused to keep a

log for the one in Sid's apartment, and when she had them totaled, I'd give her the money without asking and then listen to Sid remind me of the dangers of being unaccountable.

Cheryl agreed. "I could cheat you," she said. "I could be having you pay my whole bill without you knowing it."

"Why would you do that?" I said, and she shrugged. The German shepherd rustled out from behind a row of dresses in her closet, all of them falling back into place as if the dog had never been scrunched down among her shoes. "That dog spends half its time hiding," Cheryl said. "It's getting as crazy as the people who pay to see that phony you promote."

What was wrong with Sid moving the way he did was the way it affected his act. He was being careful, but he looked uncomfortable. He was precise, but he looked uncertain, like he was there to recite a poem he hadn't memorized. The audience wanted nonchalance and flair; they wanted mannered arrogance and professional cool. It didn't matter if Sid Morrow was the best enterologist in the United States unless people were willing to buy enough tickets to keep his bookings.

"There's only the three tricks," the agents started saying, "and those opening acts aren't bringing anybody in. All you have is thirty minutes—nobody's going to pay for that."

"A boxing match is thirty minutes," Sid said.

"There's an undercard."

"A roller coaster ride is three minutes," he said, but I was thinking about the undercard—all magic, all night, I said to myself, escaping and entering, and when I told Sid, he jingled his keys in his pocket. I didn't flinch. "Who do you have in mind?" he finally said.

"I'll start working on it. Two weeks maybe—I'll start dropping it into my pitch to agents, seeing what happens to their attitude."

"Straitjackets," Sid said. "Handcuffs. You're going to hire a woman."

I shrugged as if he were right, but I'd been watching how Cheryl's dog got itself out of small, complicated spaces without ever disturbing anything, and I'd started working on an act of my own, getting out of trunks, including one where, if I could talk her into it, Cheryl would saw me in half if I didn't escape in time.

Summer vacation was coming up in less than two weeks, just the

right timing to take Cheryl on the road with us, but she wasn't interested in traveling. "It's fun for kids," she said, "but it's just magic."

"For the summer," I started, picking up two books, listening to her Shepherd reposition itself beneath me as I flopped onto the bed.

"You going to put me in a push-up bra? You going to buy me spangles and cleavage?"

I swung the books down, positioning them upright about eighteen inches apart beside the bed. "Houdini's wife worked with him," I said.

"A million years ago."

"She could disappear."

"I bet." I started rocking the bed, banging the headboard against the wall. "What?" Cheryl said

"So where does that leave me?" I said, but just then the dog wormed out, slithering between the books without knocking either of them over. It stretched and started nosing at the closet door.

Cheryl rolled her eyes. "There are plenty of newspapers hiring," she said. "There are businesses that need PR people."

"The lady or the tiger," I said.

"The conjunction is a promise," Cheryl said, and then she opened up her grade book to columns of cramped percentages, each row running across the page to tiny, lettered judgments she was computing on a calculator.

"What's the point?" Sid said, when I brought up my idea.

"Coming and going," I said. "Arriving and leaving."

"We already dumped the bought magic."

"If we get the bigger halls, the people will think everything's bought anyway. It's only the rubes who believe. It's my job to get us a gimmick; I'm the one who's been studying. What do you know? The Bottle Conjurer, for instance, he's not even trivia he's so well known. It's like knowing *Plan Nine from Outer Space* and thinking you're an expert on bad movies. Everybody knows about that one now. Ed Wood's not fun anymore. There's even a movie about him."

"It's hard to keep secrets," Sid said. "You pull the curtain. You don't ever go behind it."

"I know that."

He stayed quiet for a few seconds. "I'm sorry I said that," he said. "It's like telling your wife she doesn't get laid by anyone else."

"I understand."

"The world would be a better place with more silence."

"You want I should cut the patter?"

"That's just another kind of silence. There's no harm in that."

So I constructed new releases, splicing in reviews I made up as I watched him finish the chair and sack and trunk routine, my mouth shut for the last thirty seconds to bring the audience up in their seats. And I spent the hour I had with him after every show trying to convince him to take me and my accompanying rock records on. "Television," I said, scratching for examples, "wants pizzazz and handsome. They don't care about talent."

He nodded. "That's their loss then."

"Most likely."

"Copperfield rotated the audience when he made the Statue of Liberty vanish. He hid it behind a tower of that silly proscenium arch. That's why he talked so long about freedom, so the stage could move. Who wouldn't notice that, seeing the arch there for no reason at all?"

"I thought you didn't follow magic."

"I don't read about it. I watch it, though."

"The more talk the worse magic," I quoted Sid.

"Mirrors and lights," Sid said. "It's engineering, not magic."

"You use a curtain."

"So I can concentrate. If there wasn't an audience, I could do it in plain sight."

A week later, we opened with a lip-synch contest, the six fraternities and sororities from a tiny college in the middle of the state mouthing the lyrics to "I'm Too Sexy for My Shirt" and "Stayin' Alive" while they performed skits that were hilarious as far as the rest of their brothers and sisters, jammed into a 240 seat theater after an afternoon of beer drinking, were concerned.

The girls who did "I'm Too Sexy for My Shirt" were presented with a trophy, and then Sid started his routine, working up to the chair and mailbag and trunk, which, when I began to describe it,

brought six guys from the jock fraternity up the stairs to the stage, an enormous length of heavy rope in their hands. "Use this rope," the biggest of them said. "Let *us* tie it." The crowd roared as if Right Said Fred themselves had just appeared to perform their song live.

The social coordinator, as thin as the poster girl for anorexia, skittered toward them, but Sid held up both hands. "Do your worst," he said, and the crowd hooted again while the jocks wrapped him up, pulled the rope tight and looped enormous, complicated knots, which they yanked and patted before they stepped back to a theater of cheers.

I pulled the curtain and started my spiel about enterology. One minute to enter both trunk and bag, I said, the fraternity brothers breathing beer beside me, smirking and slapping each other's upturned palms while I got a few cheers for the Bass Ale part of the Zamora story. I started a countdown at ten, and when I reached zero, I pulled the curtain back, opened the trunk, and Sid sat there tied to the chair, inside the bag, just like always.

Sid was a hit, but he showed me his bruises later, and the set of brush burns across his chest and arms. "Fraternities," he said, "the night of the laughing dead. You put out a new release. Tell everybody I'm going to enter a three-gallon bottle that's floating in a tank of water that's inside a tank of burning gasoline. Call it 'The Wrath of God.' Tell them I can survive the end of the world by doing the impossible."

Cheryl's class had won eight free pizzas from the local franchise for reading the most books in the county. "Do one thing for me," Cheryl said, "while you have a couple of days off."

"Sure," I said, the dog looking mournfully up at me from the bathtub as I pulled open the shower curtain. "You can do one thing for me, too."

I picked the pizzas up, drove to the school, and carried them into her room like the expert I was after six months of doing deliveries for Captain's Pizza.

"Mr. Shelley is the magic pizza man," Cheryl announced while the class settled down for two slices each. "You know how you always say to each other you can't fight your way out of a paper bag? Well,

the magic pizza man can do it without opening it or tearing it to show you nobody has to fight, after all, to get things done."

The students looked puzzled, as if they'd never heard the expression before or the pizza was drugged, but as soon as I pulled out my huge paper sack, they perked up and watched while I tested the curtain Cheryl kept strung in the corner of the room for when the class put on plays.

"So you don't think I'm going to switch bags," I said, "I want all of you to come up and sign your names on this bag, just don't write near the top because that's where it will be sealed and you won't be able to see your name when it's closed."

They filed up, one by one, nine-year-olds as disciplined as ants, and each of them signed in the big, awkward script of fourth-graders. I stepped into the bag, and the biggest boys sealed the gummed flap across the top, laughing as they left me in the dark, trusting Cheryl to pull the curtain shut and turn on "I Put a Spell on You," telling them I'd be out before the song was over.

I pulled out my razor blade and sliced around the edge of the seal, climbed out, resealed the bag with my duplicate gummed flap, stuffed the cut part in my pants and waited while I listened to Screamin' Jay Hawkins for a few seconds, hearing him laugh and snort and howl his silly song nearly to its end before I pulled the curtain back and stepped forward to a roomful of cheers.

A second later they all rushed up to look for their names on the bag. "Here's mine," I heard. "Here's mine."

A fat boy wearing a Batman Forever T-shirt slid up beside me. "You ought to have that bag set on fire after you get in," he said. "That would be so cool."

"Do one more thing for me," Cheryl said as I left. "Take the dog for a walk."

I wanted to add something to my list of things she could do, but nothing struck me, so I nodded and smiled, waving back at the students. I wasn't any more interested in walking her dog than being in the apartment when she returned from school in three hours.

I propped the door with the morning paper that was still lying in the hall and started carrying my books and CDs and pictures out to the back seat of my car. I packed two suitcases and slung a few

hangers full of clothes over my shoulder, lugging them outside and dropping them into the trunk.

When I'd finished, with an hour left before Cheryl would find me gone, I said "What the hell" to myself and called the dog.

Not a sound. "Jesus Christ," I muttered, but I looked under the bed, in the bathtub, and inside the closet. I was trying to imagine it stuffed under the television when Cheryl walked in. "It's gone," I said. "It must have run off while I was going in and out."

"What do you mean 'in and out'?" She started cataloging the items missing from shelves. "Oh, I get it," she said. "And you didn't give a rat's ass about anything but your own self."

She started crying, which surprised me. "I'm sorry," I said.

"This isn't for you," she said. "Don't kid yourself. If we don't find that dog, you'll wish you were Houdini."

"There's only three rooms here. It has to be outside."

She looked under the bed, in the bathtub, and inside the closet. "Well," she said. "We get to start walking."

Then the cupboard below the sink opened slowly from the inside, the dog stepping out, turning to nudge it shut, and padding off toward the closet, where it stopped in front of the space I'd emptied, looked back at me, and then sprawled as if there was no chance that space would be filled with anything but its body anytime soon.

I pried open the cupboard and stared at a space just large enough for a bag of dog food, a couple of jars, and two boxes of soap powder. The dog would have had to have folded itself in two to fit. It would have had to have pulled the door shut behind it, knocked nothing over in the dark, and listened to silence, then me, then Cheryl and me, without making a sound. "You worked this out with the dog," Cheryl said. "You're not fooling me like you did those kids."

A few days after the "Wrath of God" promotion went out, I got Sid booked into an arena that held three thousand. "We get our best crowds for professional wrestling," the manager said, "and outdoor films. You know the kind—'Grizzlies with a Crossbow' and 'Hand to Hand with Wild Wolves.'"

"This isn't faked," I said. "He could burn up or drown."

"Good. You have something to go with him?"

"An escape artist."

The manager looked anguished. "That don't make sense. What good does that do? Out and in, out and in—sounds like you're doing it backwards, you know?"

"It's the first time for the escape artist."

"You don't have to tell me that," he said. "Why don't you let him keep his cherry for one more night? Let me take care of filling seats. You're giving me hellfire and flood; I'll give you something to go with it, trust me."

"The Natural Disaster Extravaganza," the ads were saying when we arrived in town. "Fire and rain—Sid Morrow's 'Wrath of God' and Jack Claney's incredible live footage of tornadoes, hurricanes, and earthquakes." The manager had booked a film full of home video footage of leveled houses, fleeing homeowners, and roiling funnel clouds. Sure enough, there were eighteen hundred tickets presold.

"Not great," the manager said, "but not bad. You ought to talk rental with this film company—Jack Claney Pictures, guaranteed not released to video stores until September."

"You can keep your magic a surprise until next Wednesday," Sid said. "I'll have four days of pins and needles before we do Scranton."

"It's six hundred seats there. We don't need twisters to fill them."

"Not ever again," Sid said. "Not after tonight. Not after the 'Wrath of God.'"

I could hear the audience buzzing during Sid's routine with the old trunk and the mailbag. After the killer cyclones and the 7.5 Richter-scale earthquake, they were wound up for the brimstone and floods of the "Wrath of God," and I tried to keep them in their seats with promises slipped into the patter, finally saying, "And now, just before the fire and rain of heaven's justice," getting them settled for the chair and trunk, which pulled applause that sounded more like car horns blaring at twilight at a drive-in.

A couple of attendants pushed Sid's rig onto the stage. Where had Sid put this together? It looked to me as if he'd bought all of it pre-assembled in one place, including the three-gallon bottle with the wide throat. It looked too professional, like silicone breasts.

And so what? I thought at once. Sid should be careful with insulation and watertight seals, though as soon as I said this to myself I was worried because Sid's magic seemed diluted near such manufactured work.

After Sid went behind the curtain, the fire throwing its light, the water sloshing as if there were tremors running through the earth beneath us, the audience stood as if they might see better the molecules of Sid's body dancing through asbestos and fire and steel and water and glass. Or, to the unbelievers, the wrath of God frying or drowning or smothering Sid Morrow exactly the way he deserved unless he was truly the personification of the great oneness of being, being protected like Tarzan of the elements.

I realized I'd been counting the seconds when I reached one hundred, and I took a few steps toward the curtain because the fire was still roaring. I could hear a wash of audience doubt lapping at the stage, two minutes, then two and a half, and I pulled that curtain, ready or not, shielding my eyes, though the fire had settled down by now, and Sid wasn't writhing in flames or floating in the water, everybody could see that, so I waited another half minute, and when the fire was out and the water drained into the opened base, I climbed in, tipped and unlocked that trunk, lifted the lid, and showed the audience there was nothing at all inside—not the bottle, and certainly not Sid.

There was a brief hush, that crowd hesitating, making up its mind, and then it roared a unison *Boo* to show solidarity with the camera work of Jack Claney. The main curtain started swirling shut like the return of the Red Sea, but not before a dozen half-pint bottles bounced and skittered across the stage. "Shove yourself in this," I heard, and then I started looking for Sid Morrow, something I was still doing the following day when I sent out a new press release, saying Sid Morrow had entered that bottle and then he'd been stolen away by the churches of the United States to exhibit as a living example of the accomplishment of faith and will.

And before too long the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* received a hundred letters to the editor that retold the story of the original Bottle Conjurer, half of them including a reference to how the hoaxer had said he'd done a private showing before the scheduled performance and had been taken prisoner while he was in the bottle. "It's

so weak," one of the six letters the paper printed said. "The story is so well known it even appears in *Moby Dick*."

After that, I waited for an explanation from Sid, how he wanted to handle his comeback. "Out and In. Out and In," I kept trying to send to him by concentrating, and before you laugh, I've already willed myself into the wooden trunks he left behind. After all, a dog can do it. We learn by watching, and surely astonishment can shape the darkness of the world as well as wind and water, and surely it must always stay.

You Asked for It

"Where are we?" my mother said, slowing down and looking back and forth as if she were searching for house numbers.

"We missed the turn," I said.

"What turn?"

"To Route 8."

"Don't be silly," she said, but we were almost stopped by now, and when my mother pulled into a driveway and turned around, my sister leaned forward, blinking, from the back seat.

"There's three lanes to cross there. We'd get killed if we didn't stop," she announced like a kindergarten teacher, the first thing she'd said since she'd fallen asleep five minutes after we'd picked her up from her weekend at church camp.

What did she know with her eyes shut? As soon as we crested the first small hill going the other way, she could see Route 8 as proof enough she'd slept right through a miracle. On Sunday afternoon, in April, the traffic was steady, nearly every car and truck going faster than the posted limit of fifty.

"You really didn't stop," my sister said.

"You didn't even slow down," I added.

"How come we're not dead?" my mother said.

I kept quiet about that. It looked to me like we'd been lucky, but I knew she was already working toward something about God's will and a meaningful future for one or two or all three of us. You survive something stupid, and it means you have to buckle down and work because God's decided you're worth something.

Sure enough, I was right. She brought up the Route 8 story a dozen times between May and August, that and her headaches and the other stuff she insisted she forgot or didn't notice, and as soon as school started again, she mentioned it in the weekly way my

father brought up the church sermon. And when my sister and I went to the doctor's for our last polio shot, she told us to read a magazine because she'd made an appointment for herself to save time. "Don't you dare throw away your second chance," she said on the way home. "Don't you even think about it." She drove so slowly I was afraid we'd be hit from behind.

When Mrs. Sowers, during the first week of sixth grade, showed us the canals of Mars, she traced the straight lines of them with the rubber tip of a wooden pointer. "Think of the Erie Canal," she said, holding the stick against the poster-sized map of Mars. "Better yet, think of the Panama and the Suez," she added, starting a list we were to memorize for one week's worth of geography.

"It's very likely," she said, "there were countries on Mars that fought over their technological marvels," and then she listed, for our current events lesson, the nations threatening war for the Suez Canal, hissing out the names *Nasser* and *the U.S.S.R.,* explaining the possible domino effect to the A-bomb.

The map, Mrs. Sowers went on to explain, had been drawn by Percival Lowell, a respected astronomer who had pointed out the locations of Martian infrastructure. I believed her, because up to that point I'd been relying for my information about Mars on a handful of science fiction movies I'd seen and comic books Dave Tolliver had smuggled into school since fourth grade.

During September, while she kept us up to date on the Suez crisis, Mrs. Sowers ran a series of experiments for science. She demonstrated the water cycle; she wowed us with magnets and with electric current that stood our hair on end.

Nature lessons were another matter. We fidgeted through two weeks on Pennsylvania plants. None of us liked the taste of the sassafras tea she brewed from a small tree on the hillside behind our school. It was like drinking the chewing gum our parents preferred to the sweet pleasures of Double Bubble and Bazooka.

What my friends and I wanted to know about were killer plants. Venus's-flytraps, for instance, or pitcher plants, or most of all, the whereabouts of those wonderfully gigantic man-eaters from the double features we watched on weekends at the Etna Theater.

All those enormous leaves. The suffocating, hair-trigger, relentless

vines. Those plants were as dangerous as the giant squids created by atomic tests that left excess radiation in the ocean. If even one of their million fine-threaded leaves were brushed by careless explorers or women who wandered off from jungle camps against the advice of the guide, the horrible gulping would begin.

After one of those movies, a new Tarzan with Lex Barker, Dan Trout, the smallest boy in our class, was tossed into brambles behind the Etna Theater by boys we didn't know because our parents had saved enough money to make down payments on houses rather than stay in Etna, where the steel mills and railroad yards were showing signs of shutting down for good. "See?" my father would say, running his finger over his newly painted bakery. "See what Etna does to white?" And I nodded, thinking I could write my name and the names of all my friends with my finger through the soot.

Dan Trout laughed it off. None of us lived in Etna. Nobody but me had a father who worked there. We never saw those boys on the streets where we lived. And no matter—we couldn't get enough of those movies. We looked for plants in the neighborhood that might thrive on blood, dropped ants by the hundreds into any flower that grew wild, but never once did one close on the insects. It was as hard to find a carnivorous plant as it was to find quicksand. Apparently, we thought, you had to live in some steamy, forbidding place to watch anything being eaten by flowers.

Mrs. Sowers told us plants couldn't possibly get that large. She said we didn't study the Venus's-flytrap because there weren't any in Pennsylvania. We were right, though, about one thing—they lived in bogs where other flowers seldom live. Worse, she insisted there weren't any within hundreds of miles of us.

That weekend Dave Tolliver and I hiked to every marshy place we could find. It was late September; the weather, we thought, was still warm enough for those traps to be working. Now that we had an important clue, we wanted to prove Mrs. Sowers wrong.

"You'll ruin those shoes," my mother said while she fiddled with a rainbow-colored scarf she'd taken to wearing around the house. My Aunt Peg, when she visited, said she looked like Aunt Jemima, but nobody else acted like they saw it. "You and all that mud," she went

on. "You'll have to wear your church shoes to school and pretty soon they'll be worn out."

Dave Tolliver looked down at the old sneakers I was sure he wore on Sundays. He never said anything about church. He knew not to come around until after dinner on Sundays, but I wished my mother would shut up about saving money while he was standing there and just make her judgments the way she did when she set out Sunday clothes for my father.

Those were the early days of pastel shirts for men. Suddenly, it seemed, there were blue shirts, tan shirts, and gray shirts; and though he was just forty years old, my father seemed too old for making choices about clothes. He would hold out his shirts and ties like a small boy carrying rings on a velvet cushion, waiting for her to pick and match. Seconds later, he'd hold out pants, then socks, then lift his three sport coats on their hangers from his closet.

"Color matters," my mother reminded him. She'd started wearing nothing but blue blouses and skirts of various shades of blue. "It's what's in," she said, and my father shrugged as if she'd switched to a second language. He walked away, leaving me to hear her explanation, how the correct choice of color was the doctor's orders for socializing because the confidence it brought helped to cure shyness, uncertainty, and fear.

We didn't have a radio in the car because it cost extra. "We make our own music in this family," my father said, but he didn't seem to know any popular songs except "Ghost Riders in the Sky." The part he sang with gusto was "those red-eyed cows, he saw," belting it out as if he expected the ghost-steers to materialize above the next hillside.

But on Sundays he sang nothing but hymns, and the last Sunday in September, when we went for a ride, my mother said, "That's enough, Rex. We don't want to hear 'In the Garden' again. We can't stand 'The Old Rugged Cross' when we hear it a hundred times."

He settled down for a minute or two, but then my sister started up with "Jesus Loves Me," something really sappy for a thirteen-year-old girl to sing, and my mother looked out the window while the

two of them sang in harmony, my mother putting up with it, pressing one hand against her head just above her ear until my father, as if he couldn't help himself, started in on "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" when we were still twenty miles from home.

"Save it for the Reformation, Rex," my mother said. "I won't be sitting here to stop you by then."

My father paused. "That's no way to talk," he said, and we pulled onto Route 8 just below Butler and started south. As soon as he shifted into third gear, he started "A Mighty Fortress" again.

"Jesus Christ, Rex," my mother blurted, and my father's foot touched the brake while he swerved to the right and we skidded to a stop along the shoulder.

"I'll walk from here," he said.

"It's over fifteen miles, Rex."

"Don't you worry about how far it is."

"And don't you worry about my worrying." Maybe my mother thought about apologizing for breaking a Commandment. Maybe she wanted to see what would happen next.

My father stared into the rearview mirror. "Your mother thinks faith is something you buy at a gift shop," he said, and then he opened the door, got out, and started walking. My mother hunched down to watch, and when she could see him just fine sitting up, she slid across the seat, shifted into first, pressed the gas pedal, and let out the clutch.

My father didn't look at us as we passed, and I started counting, guessing ten for the number my mother would stop on, pulling over and waiting. When I got to thirty, I gave up. When I got to fifty, we passed the intersection my mother had crossed five months before, but I didn't notice her keeping an eye out for somebody running a stop sign.

That fall Dave Tolliver and I—one week at his house, one week at mine—were glued to *You Asked for It,* where every Sunday on television we could see the impossible come true. "Your father apologizing," my mother said every time the announcer invited requests for the hard-to-believe. My father never sat in the living room with

us on Sunday. He stayed in the basement until ten o'clock, when he knew my mother turned the television off "because it was a school night."

Sooner or later, we thought, somebody would write in and ask to see a man-eating plant, but finally we settled for a man who could catch a bullet in his teeth. While Dave Tolliver and I watched, a bullet was marked by a witness from the audience so the rest of us would know it had really been fired. The camera, while the bullet was loaded, showed us the audience, all of the studio guests sitting up straight. They looked as if they were holding their breath. Every man was wearing a coat and tie; every woman a dress, and all of them were as old as our parents or older.

Even the man who could catch a bullet in his teeth was wearing a coat and tie, as if he were going to church to pray for perfect timing. He furrowed his brow. He squinted. He concentrated. The marksman aimed carefully and fired. Across the studio stage the man was still standing. The camera panned in to show us it was the marked bullet he pulled from between his teeth, and we immediately set out to attempt a sort of beginners' lesson for bullet catching.

In Dave Tolliver's refrigerator were bunches of green, seedless grapes. His parents played Canasta on Sundays; they wouldn't be home for hours, and we threw those grapes across the living room at each other, never once catching even a lob toss between our teeth.

There were over a hundred grapes on the carpet. "Either he's a fake," Dave Tolliver said, "or we're spastic." I shrugged. We had to pick all those grapes up and wash them, eating enough to make it look as if we were helping his parents rather than using their grapes as ammunition. Twenty grapes into that bowl, we decided to try one more time, and when Dave Tolliver, a few minutes later, caught one of my tosses between his teeth, we shut up about impossible and decided that if somebody practiced longer than the ten minutes we'd just spent, maybe it could be done.

After all, Richard Turner, another boy in our class, could already juggle three balls. He'd learned to do it in one afternoon from his father. We thought of four balls, then five; we thought of swords

and flaming sticks; we thought of increasing the speed of grapes until we could take on a bullet, how we could perform a feat so incredible nobody would believe it.

Mrs. Sowers, of course, was no help. On Monday morning, when we told her, she said it was a silly thing to try. "Oh, that's just impossible," she said, even though we described the careful ways the program had made sure the whole thing was genuine. She shook her head and started current events, beginning with the Soviets invading Hungary. "For a few days there, the Hungarians thought they were free. Nothing's the way it looks," she said, "when it comes to Communism."

She went on and on about misuse of power, how France and England had invaded Egypt. They equated power with authority, she explained, and everybody in our class wrote it down.

Dave Tolliver and I had some authority. We were patrol boys. We directed traffic for a few minutes in the morning and the afternoon. I loved wearing that belt and the crossed white strap that sported the patrol badge. It showed Mrs. Sowers approved, that I was responsible and trustworthy, that even the low-readers from the Locust Grove trailer court had to wait for my signal to cross. The badges we wore were like magic that warded off danger. None of those thuggish boys had ever threatened us.

When I got home that day, my mother was sitting in the living room with the drapes pulled shut. My sister, who rode the early bus from the junior high, was sitting beside her. My mother patted the couch, and before I even got settled she said, "I'm starting something called chemotherapy. They're going to make me so sick it'll make me better." My sister looked like she wanted to sing a hymn, but she kept as quiet as I did. I knew chemotherapy was what happened to people just before they died.

The Invasion of the Body Snatchers arrived at the Etna Theater. We'd been waiting so long, every boy in our sixth grade class but Ron Mason, who was thirteen and lived in the trailer court, watched it on Saturday afternoon. The body snatchers, it seemed, were plants. None of us could figure out how they'd changed the first human victims, but after that, people carried the big seedpods

for them, placing the pods near the sleeping, who woke up transformed into aliens. Sure enough, all the people in the movie who changed acted like plants. They didn't have emotions. They did anything they were told.

Just like in the Tarzan movies, it seemed scarier to be threatened by plants. You could recognize which animals were threatening. You stayed away from them. But plants? Except for poison ivy and the thorns on berry bushes and roses, there wasn't anything to be afraid of. Trees, bushes, flowers, weeds—if some of them could attack, we'd be out of luck, because we were surrounded.

Dave Tolliver and I went by ourselves on a Friday night. Report cards had come out. We were the only two in our group who weren't being punished, and my mother dropped us off, telling us to walk to the bakery afterwards because she had work to do.

As soon as we started walking, we picked our guesses for the number of steps it would take. "One thousand, one hundred and twelve," Dave Tolliver said, and it sounded so close, I said, "One thousand, one hundred and thirty-seven."

My mother, I knew, was slicing apples for coffee cakes while we counted. We were at two hundred steps when a man got in stride with us. Ahead of us, a teenage couple entered the one car in the bank's parking lot. Its headlights swept the father and sons of us, crossed the front of the mill, and faced away like both of us did when the man asked us how we liked looking at Jayne Mansfield in the previews, whether we wished we could see her nipples.

The car lot we were passing was full of dark alleys among its Fords. "Makes you want to reach down and touch yourself, doesn't it?" he said. When the cars disappeared, there was a field with no lights at all, and I heard him say, "Look at what I have here, boys," and I didn't, pushing against Dave Tolliver so he'd know to cross the street and start running. Behind us, I heard the man breathe in so loud I thought he might have fallen. When we saw the bakery, we slowed down. "I stopped counting," Dave Tolliver said, but I was waiting to catch my breath before we walked inside where my mother, a minute later, stuffed sliced apples into our mouths, peeled and sweet, running her knife through the sink's warm water before she wiped it clean and drove us home. "This is my last time for this,"

she said. "You'll have to eat those god-awful canned fruit pies for a while."

At the end of October, Mrs. Sowers took Dave Tolliver and me aside. "Listen, boys," she said, "I've come across a story you might enjoy. In England, a man came across a large meadow completely covered by sundews."

She looked at us for a moment. "Sundews are carnivorous plants," she said, and both of us started paying attention.

"There were a million plants," Mrs. Sowers said, "and all of them, as far as the man could see, had just swallowed butterflies. An enormous flock of them had decided to settle on those flowers, and they had paid for their mistake, millions of them simultaneously eaten in minutes."

Dave Tolliver and I nodded like carnival dolls. "Imagine," she said, "a whole field of insect-eating plants." We did, but like everything we wanted to see, the butterfly eaters seemed as far away as Mars.

"And as for *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers,*" she said, "and all that big seedpod business, that's the Communists. Did either of you see *The Thing* a few years back? The alien in that movie was a vegetable that drank blood—it was a Communist, too. Korea and Red China—that's what all the to-do was about then. This thing in Egypt might be over for now, and all the Communists have to show for it is a canal nobody can use because it's full of sunken ships and broken bridges."

My mother kept that rainbow scarf on all the time now. She was practicing for when her hair fell out, my sister said, but my mother kept it on when she was sleeping because, she explained, one afternoon, it was a healing scarf. "It's like taking every vitamin there is at once," she said. "It's like getting every vaccination—from smallpox to diphtheria to tetanus to polio."

The scarf covered her scalp. "There's no harm in trying," she said, and when, the next day, I told her I had a headache, she told me to wear blue. "So that's the worst you have," she said. That week she dressed my sister in yellow when she threw up. I let her have her way. They were the only health problems I'd ever had, so small the

other colors seemed more important. My father wore green pants and a white t-shirt every night at the bakery. He kept wearing them, not saying a word, I guessed, to my mother about any way he felt sick.

My mother showed me the pamphlet that came with the healing scarf. "Designed to bring all the healing colors to your consciousness," it said on the first page.

"It's silly, I know," she said. "But who's to say?"

Two days later my father walked into my room and handed me a book opened to an article on a man named Dinshah. "Read this," he said, and left me to learn about the theory of balancing the colors within us to promote health. Dinshah sold something called a Spectro-Chrome: red was for sexual power, green was a germicide, yellow was for diabetes, and there, in a paragraph about the trial at which Dinshah had been acquitted, was a testimonial from a doctor about how bathing a cancer patient in blue light had cured her.

It was horrible. I felt like my mother had put her trust in the divine intervention of Zeus. I glanced at my red shirt, the one I thought was cool because Elvis wore one with the black chinos I was sporting, and considered my chances with Sharon Daniels, who sat across from me in Mrs. Sowers's room. When I gave the book back to my father, he said, "Not a word about this," and I nodded. I watched him carry it down the hall and knew he was replacing it exactly where he had discovered it in the spare room my mother used for sewing and ironing. For a moment I imagined it among a stack of unironed shirts, hidden like the magazines Dan Trout got from his older brother for washing his car, but then I decided she would have kept it in the stack of books beside her needles and thread and scissors. Why would she think my father would enter that room? Why would she think he would examine anything meant to be read? He was someone who scolded her for having a newspaper delivered, restricting her to Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday because that was enough to keep up with everything. And then I wondered whether my father had shared that book with my sister, trusting her with that secret.

The Sunday after Thanksgiving, my mother opened the closet and showed my father an arrangement of new clothes. "Everything

matches," she said. The shirts were a variety of colors, the sport coats had patterns, nothing like the solid gray and blue my father had always worn. There were socks in colors other than black and brown, ties with stripes and swirls of color. "You keep these together," she said, "and you'll make out just fine."

My father touched the shirts as if the color might rub off on his fingers. "Just to be sure," my mother said, "I sewed in small monograms on each set." She showed him the small *r* on the blue shirt tail, the *r* inside the cuff of the charcoal pants, the *r* at the bottom of the skinny end of the dark, red-spotted tie. There was a small *rr* on the light green shirt, a *rrr* on the pale yellow one beside it. "If the wrong end of the tie shows, you need to unknot it and start again."

"This isn't Christmas," my father said.

"I'm starting you off on the right foot, Rex," she said. "There's bound to be stripes and checks and such for men's shirts now that color has come in for men."

"We don't need to talk like this."

She sat down on the bed, and then she lay back as if she'd suddenly grown as tired as the man who'd stayed awake for a month on *You Asked for It.* "Your father thinks I'm crazy," she said, "since he found that book about color therapy." I didn't say anything, let her explain as if every word were new. "Of course it won't work," she said, closing her eyes. "That's not why we try these things."

The last day before Christmas vacation, beginning at lunch, was our party—the gift exchange, games with candy bars as prizes, mothers bringing cookies and potato chips and Coke—but first, Mrs. Sowers said, she had a surprise, flinging her arm toward a man in a dark suit who had materialized in the doorway.

"Who can remember their canals?" Mrs. Sowers said. The stranger smiled while we chorused Panama and Suez, and then pieced together the canals of Pennsylvania, pleasing Mrs. Sowers by conjuring Main Line, Schuykill, Delaware, Lehigh, and Morris.

The man in the suit, Mrs. Sowers said, had helped build the Pennsylvania Turnpike. That road had been completed, a wonderful success, nothing like that old dream we had studied in September, the

Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, which was supposed to come right from the Bay to Pittsburgh and the beginning of the river seven miles from where we were sitting.

It turned out, after we had passed her retest, showing we remembered the long-closed canals of Pennsylvania and the still-open canals of the world, Mrs. Sowers was having that engineer show us a film on the first turnpike in America because part of that road ran through our county. And when Dan Trout, looking at the map of the turnpike, with everything else in Pennsylvania blacked out, said it reminded him of the canals of Mars, the engineer smoothed his solid gray tie down over his white shirt and told our class those lines on Mars weren't canals at all. Nobody said anything. Nobody looked at Mrs. Sowers. The engineer kept going, telling us those lines were just Martian forests that flourished on either side of the canals, how irrigation would show itself to approaching spacecraft, how growth along our own lengthening turnpike system would tell the monsters coming our way we could think.

So that settled that, we thought. Mrs. Sowers wasn't wrong, but she wasn't infallible. If we knew who to ask, he'd lead us to carnivorous plants; if we talked to an expert, we'd learn to face a one-man firing squad and live to hear the applause. But when she told us, just before the gift exchange, that the troops were withdrawing in the Middle East, all of us applauded to let her know we thought it was important that the inevitable atomic war had been postponed a while longer.

I gave her a gift-wrapped box my mother said contained a pair of stockings. "Thank you," Mrs. Sowers said, and I nodded, embarrassed, because I hadn't even seen the stockings before my mother wrapped them while she lay on the couch, propped up for television. The Sunday before, when she'd wrapped those stockings, a man had lain on a bed of nails during *You Asked for It,* and then, with another board placed on top of him, ten men had stood on him while he smiled for the camera. At the end of the show, my mother, her eyes closed, had handed me the gift-wrapped present. "That's nothing," my mother had said, nodding at the television, and she had me cross the living room and turn it off.

I heard my father moving around in the basement below us, pacing up and back on the cement floor. She opened her eyes for a

moment and then closed them. "Your father thinks you can walk off doubt as if it was fat," she said. Anything could have been in that box, as long as it lay flat, was light, and was less than ten inches long and six inches wide. "Turn it back on," she said. "I can't read anymore, but when I can't stand to watch, I close my eyes and listen to the voices."

After school I got off the bus two miles from my house where a path between the Atlantic station and a car dealership made a shortcut to the Locust Grove trailer court. Since November, I'd been walking, on Fridays, from the Atlantic station to my father's bakery in Etna, where I sat with my sister for two hours waiting for my father to drive my mother back from her chemo session. It was a mile, maybe, from that bus stop to the bakery, all of it along the part of Route 8 that was so crowded nobody would daydream through a stop sign. But there was a sidewalk most of the way, or parking lots to cut across, and during those seven weeks I'd talked to nobody who got off the bus there except Ron Mason, because he'd flunked sixth grade and ended up in my class instead of the junior high school.

On that first official day of winter it was cold and gloomy and already nearly dark at 4 P.M. Instead of going up the path like he always did, Ron Mason fell in beside two older boys I'd never seen. All three of them caught up to me as soon as I crossed the Route 8 bridge where Pine Creek ran under the highway.

Ron Mason said the three of them had a job selling Christmas trees in Etna. He cut in front of me and walked backwards, slowing us down. If I had any money, he said, I should buy a tree from them, or better yet, just give the money to them, and they wouldn't bother me any more.

"I don't have any money," I said, telling the truth.

"Not on you," Ron Mason said, but the other two boys bumped against me from either side.

"What's that badge for?" the biggest said. "You play cops and robbers at your school?"

"Safety patrol," I said. He turned and put his forearm against my chest, resting it across the badge. I noticed he had a mustache.

"You keep the babies safe?"

I didn't say anything. I already wished I hadn't said a word or had the stupidity to wear that patrol gear outside my winter coat. "Patrol boy," he said. "I want to cross here. Why don't you step out and stop those trucks?"

I cut to the inside, afraid he'd push me into the highway. I kept walking, down to the last section, a quarter mile of crushed cinders sidewalk, Pine Creek ten feet below us on one side, a hundred-foot cliff running down to the highway on the other.

All three lanes were patch-iced, the traffic one step from where he waved his arms. I could see the stoplight where businesses, including my father's, began. Right this minute, I thought, my mother was taking her medicine while my father hummed hymns to himself in the waiting room at Allegheny General Hospital. In a few minutes she'd begin to gag and vomit.

"You're worthless," he said. He snapped the white straps crossed over my red jacket. "Safety patrol," he said. "Pussy." The badge blinked from the early sets of headlights. He pulled on a pair of black leather gloves. "Give me that badge," the boy said, "or I'll beat the shit out of you, patrol boy."

He shoved me toward the guardrail, and I looked down the hillside at the creek moving beneath the thin ice. "Don't move," he said, sticking a blue pen in my face. "Patrol boy, you write this down: 'I died here, December 21,'" and then he shoved my arm toward the guardrail; the pen skipped along the metal's white and rust until I stopped where a string of *fuck you*s began.

"More darker," he said, and I went over and over the letters as if the darkest possible blue might save me. "So the police," he said, "can read it when your body's found—now walk."

All four of us skidded down a path through the trees that lined the creek bank. Anybody driving a car along Route 8 couldn't see us anymore, and from where I was standing, I couldn't see them. Nobody would lean out of a car far enough to see over the edge unless he was drunk or crazy or wanted to dare God.

On the other side of the creek, an identical thick set of scrub trees covered a bank that sloped up and stopped where the leveled slag of the parking lot for National Valve began. Anybody in that factory, even if he was taking the time to stare out a window instead of

shaping and cutting pipe, couldn't see us. Only someone overhead in a helicopter or a hot-air balloon could have watched what was happening.

"You ever seen it hard, patrol boy?" he said. "You can fight back right now, or else you can kneel and suck it." I checked the bank on the other side of Pine Creek for an opening among the trees. For all I knew, nobody worked at National Valve after four o'clock. When he cocked his fist, I stepped into water that ran over my shoes. "Cold?" he asked. "Wet?"

I watched his hands as I backpedaled to knee-high, the ice collapsing under me, and then I turned and slogged to the other side, eleven years old and dying at 4:15, December 21, in Pine Creek, all three of those boys screaming "Safety Patrol" across that ditch of factory runoff as I scrabbled to the almost-empty lot where two cars were parked so near the edge, so close together, I thought, before I began to run toward the bakery, one driver was kneeling for another, or both of them were waiting to kill me.

I watched as the boys picked up stones and heaved them my way, the closest one landing ten feet away. Nobody, I thought, would slog through that creek unless he had to. And then, as they turned and scrambled back up the bank, disappearing down Route 8, I asked for it, that something so silly as being cured by colors could be true. It had to have a better chance than catching bullets in your teeth, and even if I couldn't possibly manage to do it, somebody else had.

Color mattered. Already it had kept peace in the house when my father had followed my mother's directions and dressed properly for church. Anybody could tell he looked better, that he was more at ease.

When my mother died in March, her rainbow of clothes was packed and donated. My father, for a few months, wore the same three outfits on Sundays, rotating them, *r* to *rr* to *rrr*. He washed and ironed those shirts himself. He dressed himself three ways for God and one for work until he began, in May, to put on old shirts from the back of the closet, leaving the laundry to my sister, slipping on the first tie he found, becoming, by the time I said goodbye to Mrs. Sowers, all silence, unbalanced, and dark.

Morons. Imbeciles. Idiots.

"You'll see a shopping center after you turn onto the Boardman-Canfield Road," Laurie said over the phone. "I live beside the Al-Mart."

I tried to remember what stores you might come to after you exited an Al-Mart. Chess King. Spencer Gifts. Orange Julius. If I picked the right one, I'd figure out Laurie's joke and look smart, surprising her while she kept her laughter under control on the other end of the line.

Al-Marts were always down near the end of shopping centers, so I thought it might be a grocery store or a lawn and garden center where men in overalls examined seed spreaders and rototillers as if it were possible to predict the durability of machinery by eye contact and heft.

I needed to say something, so I opted for honesty. "I give up," I said. "What's beside the Al-Mart?"

"My house."

She didn't elaborate, wanting, I thought, to keep that joke going for a few more hours, so all I could say was "Okay, seven o'clock."

"The earlier the better," she said. "Get me out of here."

I didn't need encouragement. "You can stay at my house," she'd said earlier in the week, and I'd been concentrating on the future ever since. She had a job at Al-Mart for the summer. "Selling material for drapes and curtains," she'd said, and I'd kept quiet about whether or not there was a difference between them. What puzzled me more was, when I arrived to pick her up from work, the Al-Mart was set off by itself, so the only things beside it were an enormous parking lot and, on the other side, a creek with a footbridge that led to a tumbledown house that looked as if it would sway in the wind.

I walked to the back of the Al-Mart, knowing I was in the right

area when I saw stacks of rolled up material, most of it in flower patterns—blooms of roses and orchids and black-eyed Susans. It was a regular greenhouse, I thought, but nearer the wall there was a pattern of spinning wheels and butter churns and looms, as if those drapes, pulled shut, could resurrect the nineteenth century. At the end of the next aisle, where Laurie was standing with her back to me, was a window draped on either side by material covered with an assortment of balls—basketballs, footballs, baseballs, volleyballs, golf balls, tennis balls, soccer balls. The window next to it had its drapes pulled shut, and they were covered with varieties of candy, dolls, rainbows, and unicorns. Those last steps I took, coming up as quietly as I could behind Laurie, were like walking through "introduction to drape design," if it had been a year for special-interest groups. The whole way down the aisle I looked for one pattern I'd want in my room, and the best I could do was something that suggested cirrus clouds, though I knew it was the accidental way the weave hit me in the weak light.

As soon as Laurie turned, seeing me, and walked my way, a man wearing an assistant manager's tag on his gold blazer materialized in the adjacent aisle. "Don't worry about him," Laurie said, but she took one step back when I got close. Her tag said *Laurie* and nothing else. I figured there wasn't a title for summer staff. "Seventeen more minutes," she said. "He's only drapes and carpets. Just browse in bedroom furniture. It's down at the end of the aisle."

I looped around so I could pass the assistant manager on the way to furniture. The man in charge of drapes and carpets was named Franklin, but his name was in smaller letters than *Assistant Manager.* His tag was different from Laurie's. It looked like a deluxe model, like Franklin had had it embossed because he planned on being around Al-Mart for a long time.

He was one of those men in their twenties who know they're going to be slick bald and are trying to milk a few more years out of their thinning hair by combing it forward. I moved from bed to bed, and then through a display of dining-room tables, and noticed, keeping an eye on him, that Franklin had a habit of fluffing and patting that comb-forward when he thought nobody was looking.

He had a habit, too, of following Laurie with his eyes, restack-

ing samples to give himself time to stare. When she sized a pair of window shades for a woman surrounded by four small boys, he watched her lift the cutter bar and push it through the material as if she were slicing those shades while balanced on a high wire. I imagined him, when he went into the employee rest room, jerking off to her image.

Before those seventeen minutes were up, I'd decided Al-Mart should have Laurie working in auto parts or home repairs, where her body would maybe bring men back to buy something they had no need for or to stock up on things as if there were a civil defense alert. Back here you needed somebody fit and muscular with a good head of hair to impress the housewives. What would Franklin do with his fantasies if he knew Laurie was a technical virgin who ended every petting session by bringing me off with her hand or her mouth?

When the minute hand clicked into place on the twelve, I followed Laurie to the time clock that hung on the wall beside a door that read Employees Only. She started to turn the knob, and I said, "I'm parked way back out front where you first walk in."

"Okay," Laurie said, getting in step beside me, but I didn't say anything else, and neither did she, until I was in second gear, my Chevy crawling toward the exit. "Turn left at the stop sign and then take the very first left," she said then. "I told you I lived right next door, but maybe you forgot."

"I remember," I said, but when I saw that sorrowful house from the front, it looked even worse than it had from across the creek. There was an enormous blue Buick parked on an angle that filled both spaces where the driveway widened.

Laurie sighed. "You'll have to park back here," she said. "It's Dad's problem if he wants to get out."

I stared at that Buick, my expectations shriveling. A minute later, after Laurie hollered, her father, dressed in the overalls favored by farmers, came downstairs, stopping two steps from the bottom, wiping his hands on an old T-shirt he was carrying. "You're too late for dinner," he said, "but my other girl fixed the spare room up neat as she could before she left for her friend's shindig."

"That's okay," I said. "I'll manage."

"Mind, it's torn up some being next in line for a fixing, but Laurie's managed in there since July." He wiped his hands again and looked at me. "No sense you wasting money on a motel room. Laurie don't mind bunking with her sister for the weekend."

"We'll just hang out in the living room for a while, Dad," Laurie said. "You can go back to what you were doing."

Mr. Rae came down the last two steps and followed us. "It's okay," he said. "I can sit a spell." On this side of the house, facing east, it seemed almost dark, but neither Mr. Rae nor Laurie turned on a light.

Maybe five minutes we sat in the half-light, working our way through my summer job (factory work), my major (journalism), and how I liked my Chevy (not much). Right after I said I was saving to trade up, Mr. Rae leaned forward from the shadows. "You a flag burner?" he said.

"No," I said, happy to answer with certainty.

"Draft card burner?"

"No."

This was easy, I thought, and then he asked, "Are you one of those fellows who thinks God is dead?"

"No," I said at once. It had been years since I thought God had ever been alive.

Laurie's father looked at me closely, estimating, I thought, how likely I was to be lying. "Good. Laurie said you were raised Lutheran, but that doesn't mean you took it up for yourself. And mind, it's likely you don't know a thing about the ways of Catholics."

He seemed disappointed, as if he wanted to throw me out, disqualified by something unforgivable. Suddenly I wasn't a bad guy, just a disappointing one, somebody to keep an eye on until he disappeared from his daughter's life.

"I have to go back to the store again," Laurie said. Mr. Rae looked at me as if I were making her talk without moving my lips, and Laurie sighed. "I have to get my paycheck, Dad. They don't release them until closing time on Friday."

"They've got morons in charge over there," Mr. Rae said.

"I know, Dad. But Danny's here to walk with me."

"You keep an eye out," he said to me. "There's worse than morons on the loose."

"Danny's a big boy, Dad."

Laurie took my arm and guided me through the door, across the side yard, and then, instead of crossing the footbridge, she followed the creek down to the highway. "Dad honest-to-God waited for me at the Al-Mart door the first two weeks," she said. "He's watching us now and working himself into a lather, you can bet on it." We walked along the shoulder, staying as far to the right as we could yet still feeling that shudder trucks make when they thunder by, trying to beat the stoplight that always takes forever in front of shopping centers.

We walked to the second light, then turned and came back through the parking lot. Laurie ignored Al-Mart's front door, and I had to fall in behind her on the narrow curb that ran alongside the building. Halfway back, she put her key in the lock of a door and opened it. "Stay here," she said. "These morons don't want anybody seeing their secrets." She laughed, but I let her close the door and gave myself up to evaluating the small parking lot and one-lane drive that made me think there could be a drive-through window around the corner.

By the time she reappeared, I'd turned the Al-Mart into the mom-and-pop general store that had probably sat here ten years before, this employee lot the entire parking space. All I had to do was erase the Employees Only painted between each pair of lines and imagine myself a little kid again, something impossible as soon as Laurie stretched her arms over her head, tightening her tucked-in blouse. "Nobody but us slaves would ever park around here unless everything in the store was marked down 100 percent," Laurie said. The lot ended in darkness and that creek where Mr. Rae's property began. Laurie saw me looking around. "I cross under the light," she said. "The footbridge is right there."

There were two cars, both of them white, in the lot. Nobody had gone in or out in the two minutes I'd been standing there, but suddenly somebody in one of those cars started the engine and switched on the lights. A man, I decided at once. Some guy who

could have been sitting there three minutes or an hour. I kept my eyes on the side window, expecting Franklin, but there was no making the driver out.

"What the hell?" I said, but Laurie grabbed my arm.

"Come on," she said. "It was probably kids parking back here to drink and make out. One of them's crouched down, you can bet on it." She was right about the light and the footbridge, and it took maybe thirty seconds altogether to pass from the danger of the parking lot through the danger of the brief, shadowed field to the parking area behind the house. When we stepped out of the shadows, Laurie hurried me to her father's car. "What?" I said, but she opened the door and whispered, "Get in." The Buick had a bench seat, and Laurie slouched down at once, giving me just enough room to lean on one elbow and put my other hand along her throat, running my fingers up to her ear, then down into the V of her blouse. "You notice how he parked this so your car would be in the light from the porch?" she said. "He's upstairs working, but he'll go to the window every few minutes. Watch."

I opened Laurie's blouse and lifted her bra. It was hard to look up at the window. I settled for fondling her breasts and taking a couple of quick glances, seeing if I could count to fifty slowly before I gave up giving a damn about whether or not her father came to the window.

At twenty-seven, a shadow passed behind the thin curtains. A moment later, it passed again. "See?" she said. "He's watching your car and that path. He thinks this car is locked, that he's a regular CIA kind of guy."

For just a moment I thought about how, despite watching for us, Mr. Rae had missed our crossing the lot and walking through the field. The light stayed steady while I counted till ten and felt Laurie's hand slide under my shirt, moving down, and then I didn't care whether Mr. Rae had seen us all along and had left the window to look for his shotgun.

We slept in until nearly noon, Cindy, Laurie's sister, walking in on me and shaking my shoulder, then slipping away after saying "Hi." Laurie had a one-to-nine Saturday shift. The night before, after

I came in Laurie's hand, we'd settled back and waited for Mr. Rae's next shift in the window to end and then slipped into my car. As soon as I turned the engine over, I saw him reappear in the window. He had the next four hours to worry about Laurie and work on guessing where she'd been during that half hour between getting her check and us driving off.

By 12:15, Cindy had lunch on the table, club sandwiches, the toast cut diagonally. I felt as if I was eating in a restaurant, as if Mr. Rae, sitting down late at the table, had taken a minute to use the men's room. "So how are our boys doing in the war today?" he said to me, waiting for Cindy to pour iced tea.

"I don't know," I said. "I didn't see the paper yet." I had another year before graduating. The war, I figured, had maybe one chance in five of shutting down by next summer, down from the one chance in two I'd given it last summer when I was rooting like hell for McCarthy and then Kennedy and then saying stupid things like "Two years is a long time" and "You never know" whenever Vietnam oozed into conversations.

"You think those flyboys were really on the moon?" Mr. Rae said, picking up his glass.

I hesitated a second, swallowing, before I said "Sure."

Mr. Rae beamed. "But I had you thinking there?"

"I'd never heard anybody suggest that."

"Where do you live, son? I know a hundred people in walking distance who hold that moon walk was all a big show for the Commies."

"I don't think you could keep that a secret."

"That's the point. People know. The word's getting around." Cindy opened a jar of pickles and forked one onto his plate.

"That's a mystery to me then."

"Yes," Mr. Rae said. "It's a mystery all right," and then, as if that pickle were a green light, he concentrated on eating.

Mr. Rae finished in five minutes. He nodded, pushed his plate away, and left the table to go back outside as if he'd been holding his breath and needed to resurface.

"Almost a record," Cindy said, and then, turning my way, she said, "You and Laurie going to get married?"

I lifted my second club sandwich triangle. "You're not supposed to ask questions like that," Laurie said.

"Like what?"

I put the sandwich down. "Not this year," I said.

Laurie looked at me as if I'd wiped my nose on a fabric sample, but Cindy grinned. "Okay," she said. "I get it."

"Then you know more than I do," Laurie said.

Cindy held that grin like a pageant hopeful. "You're such a bad liar," she said, but Laurie was already on her feet, promising to be down in ten minutes to walk across that bridge to work.

Cindy ran upstairs, and I was alone, nothing to do but thumb through the notebook Laurie had left on the table. I paged through a list of dates and expenses for January 1969: candy bar—20 cents; grape soda—25 cents; aspirin, Kleenex, tampons. And then I put it down.

Laurie saw me look at it as soon as she came back downstairs dressed for work. "Sorry," I said. "I was bored. I thought it was just a bunch of names and addresses."

"It's okay. I have to keep a record of everything I earn and spend for my father."

"And you actually write everything down to the penny?"

"I can't lie," she said, "What would he think, that I borrow from somebody every month?"

"What would happen if you stopped?"

"He'd stop paying for college."

"Then just put down anything. You could fill this up in two minutes right before you came home for vacations."

"He'd know."

"There's nothing in here an eighth grader wouldn't spend money on."

"It works, you know. I don't waste money. I don't waste time buying things nobody needs."

"You drink beer."

"Only when you buy it."

"I've seen you smoke."

"I borrow every one."

"Nobody can do that with cigarettes."

"That's why I stopped. It was too hard."

When we walked outside, Laurie saw me watching Cindy crossing the yard in a two-piece. "Dad let me wear a two-piece until I was fourteen," Laurie said, "and then he told me I needed to cover myself."

"Were you as skinny as Cindy?"

"Skinnier. You can bet this is her last summer in that bathing suit."

"Don't you think your dad's a little nuts?"

"He could be worse. If he didn't have this house and yard to fix, he'd really go crazy. He goes upstairs after dinner every night. He does two shifts on weekends. During the day, he works outside; at night he works upstairs."

"He needs to get out more."

Cindy laid the blanket she was carrying on the best-looking patch of grass in the backyard. She waved as we headed toward the footbridge, and Laurie, walking backwards, threw both hands in the air like she'd stepped off a cliff.

At the footbridge, she turned and put one hand in mine. "You remember how I told you my mom died when Cindy was born?"

"Sure."

"I didn't tell you that there was a chance to save her."

"I'm lost," I said, the two of us facing each other now that we'd reached the other side of the creek.

"Catholics always save the baby rather than the mother if there's a choice. It's hospital policy."

"If you were having a baby," I said, "I'd save you first."

"Then don't take me to a Catholic hospital. It's full of morons who'd let me die."

We trudged across the narrow lot toward the side door. "This summer living at home is giving you side effects," I said. "You're starting to sound like your father."

"Morons, imbeciles, idiots," Laurie said. "Don't you remember learning those categories in health class?"

"Categories of what?"

"IQs."

"I don't get it."

"You know. Below 70 and you're a moron. Below 55 and you're an imbecile. Below 40 and you're an idiot."

"Those are real words?"

"Sure they are. We learned them for Miss Hutchings in eighth grade. I got an A on that test because my father taught me those categories long before I had to learn them for Miss Hutchings." Laurie laughed. "Unofficially, of course. To him, the majority of the world are morons." She stepped up on the curb, the door behind her.

"I don't think anybody uses those terms anymore."

"It's only been seven years since we were in eighth grade, Danny. Didn't you study IQs in health?"

"I don't remember memorizing what an imbecile is."

"Ask my dad. It's what morons turn into when they're out of work."

"Ok. I get it."

"So then," Laurie said, turning to shove her key in the lock, "who's an idiot?"

I thought about how retarded somebody with an IQ of 35 would be, but that didn't help. "I guess I don't know."

"Imbeciles who don't have morals."

"What?"

"It's terrible to not be working," Laurie said, "but it's even worse if you don't take care of yourself." She sounded like she was quoting somebody. "And it all begins and ends in knowing right from wrong and living up to it."

"Damn," I said.

"Jesus Christ, Danny," she said then. "Try not to rile him. Nine o'clock will get here."

"And so will September."

She smiled. "And we can get back to living among the morons."

When I got back to the house, I walked through every room looking for a magazine or a book. Nothing at all upstairs. Nothing downstairs except an almanac on a table beside the couch. I read the census figures for Ohio. Temperature ranges. Crop planting cycles. After a while I just stared at the cover.

Mr. Rae seemed to be waiting for me by the back door when

I stepped outside. He gestured toward a huge mound of dirt and stones that lay between the parking lot and the creek, fifty feet back from the footbridge. "You might as well be useful while you're waiting for her shift to end," Mr. Rae said.

I didn't get it, so I waited for Mr. Rae to help.

"There's television of course," he said. "And there's sitting over there watching old ladies pick out fabric."

"Those aren't my vices," I said, but he didn't smile.

"You familiar with the world of tools?"

"Just a little," I tried.

"Meaning you've seen tools in the hands of others?"

"Something like that," I said, smiling.

Mr. Rae lifted his hands and showed them to me front and back. "A little it is, then," he said. "For this job, all you need is what God gave you. You best put on that shirt you wore last night. You're going to sweat some."

A few minutes later, on the other side of the dirt pile, he showed me a stack of railroad ties arranged like the beginning of a giant's game of pick-up-sticks. From the look of the tracks through the weeds, somebody had backed a truck down from the end of the parking lot and dumped a full load. "I have in mind walling this mess," Mr. Rae said. "Keep it from settling toward the creek. And then I can take my time raking it out and planting something worth a damn behind it." I nodded like I thought this insane project made perfect sense, and Mr. Rae spit up the tire tracks toward the lot. "Morons just pushed everything the hell over the hill when they got to the end of building that store-for-the-poor last year. Half of this isn't on my land, but half the job won't accomplish anything. This here bank will come down and then what'll we have."

I pitched in to give him my show of strength. I was ready to lift railroad ties enough for the Great Wall of Youngstown. We sweated, and I was pleased to see Mr. Rae pouring gullies down his neck and back, spraying drops when he lifted his end of the tie. I knew it was lift every tie or get in my car and drive away. The only relief possible was Mr. Rae having a heart attack, somehow misjudging his capacity, at fifty, for such work. He had thirty more years than

I did on his heart and lungs. By the time I got so tired I'd faint, I figured he'd be dead.

"Joseph, Mary, and Jesus," Mr. Rae said softly when we caught a tie against a shoulder-high one already in place. We wavered a moment, and then he caught himself and threw that tie upward like he was auditioning for Paul Bunyan's crew. He exhaled and stood back. "Young people seem so confused these days," he said. "Do you feel confused?"

"Sometimes."

Mr. Rae hitched the tie an inch to the left. He nudged it with the heel of his hand. "Is this one of those times?" he said.

"No," I said at once, relying on whatever answer popped up first.

"Let's all of us hope not," he said.

When we ran out of railroad ties, and the wall was head high the length of that dirt, the rubble looked like it would stay in place through the end of time, the day the Soviet bombs fell, or the moment another bulldozer swept it away to begin a mall, bigger and better because all the customers could stay inside for a whole afternoon without even knowing what the weather was doing.

Mr. Rae seemed satisfied. "That's a start," he said. He looked at the sun. "Cindy will have dinner on the table before too long. Time goes fast when you're working."

"You have your hands full, that's for sure," I said. "Laurie said the house you just sold wasn't such a project."

Mr. Rae snorted. "That house wasn't mine," he said. "It belonged to whoever built it."

"Somebody built this one, too."

"But I'm rebuilding it from top to bottom. That other house didn't need my help."

As far as I could tell from my book and magazine search, he had two rooms nearly finished—wiring, paneling, wooden floors. I thought of this house redone, how, in five years maybe, it would be perfect. From where we were standing, I could see that the farm on the other side had a "For Sale, Commercial" sign. "Nobody will buy that," Mr. Rae said like a mind reader. "There's no call for another mall out this way."

Cindy stepped outside as we started back toward the house. "She keeps house as good as a full-grown woman," Mr. Rae said, but I kept walking, concentrating on the ground as if it were pocked with holes. "There's no complaining there," he went on. "She knows her mother sacrificed herself for her."

"Dinner's ready," Cindy said as we crossed the yard. "Yikes," she added, pulling her bare feet back off the cement driveway. "I thought this would be cooled off by now."

"Hot?" I said. She was so skinny in her two-piece suit she could have passed for ten or eleven.

"I think cement gets hotter than asphalt," I said. "Like sand at the beach."

"Gee whiz," she said, turning back toward the door to the kitchen. For all I knew, asphalt was hotter than cement. Weren't you supposed to wear white in the summer?

"Laurie tell you all about her mother?" Mr. Rae said.

"A little."

Mr. Rae snorted. "A little of this, a little of that," he said.

Cindy had TV dinners, the kind with the dessert built in, waiting for us. Before she sat down to her Salisbury steak, she put on a man's white shirt over her bathing suit. It hung down to her knees, looked like a dress when she sat down beside me. Mr. Rae bent low over his food, saying nothing until he pushed the tray away, nodded, and trudged upstairs.

When both of us were finished, Cindy wiped crumbs from the table with a damp cloth. "I wish I was older," she said.

"That's one thing you shouldn't wish for."

She folded the cloth and hung it over the faucet. "Yes, it is," she said, and I pushed my chair back, ready to get in the shower, change out of clothes my mother wouldn't let me sit down to dinner in.

Cindy tore off one sheet of paper towel and wiped the table again. "Old enough for somebody to marry," she said. "After that I'd take as long as I wanted to grow up."

"You don't want to hurry that either."

The table looked like it should have a price fixed in one corner. Cindy lifted one hand to the top button of her shirt and undid it as her father's footsteps crossed and then recrossed the floor above

us. "Listen to him," she said. "He's fixing that room for Laurie. Isn't that awful?" Her hand undid a second button, and I swallowed and looked up at the ceiling, trying to count. "The closet in the first room he finished is full of my mother's clothes," Cindy said. "Did you know that?"

I could have told her that I did, seeing them as I searched the rooms, but I stood, still looking up, and I nearly tumbled backward. Cindy laughed. "You look like you're trying to balance something on your nose," she said. I steadied myself, putting one hand on the back of the chair, and when I let myself look at her, the shirt was exactly the same, two buttons open, that hand resting on the light switch. "If I turn the light on now, do you know what will happen?"

"No," I croaked.

"My father would charge me. He'd see the light and write down the time and tell me how many minutes it was before it was dark out." I glanced at the window. The sun had nearly set. "A penny a minute," she said. "It doesn't sound like much until he tells me I owe him $5.62 at the end of the month, and I only get a $10 allowance for all that time if I keep the house perfect."

I nodded and stared at the window, and she tapped her finger against the switch. "You try it," she said. "Only wait until I'm in the shower, so he knows it's you wasting electricity."

I heard her climb the stairs, and then I heard Mr. Rae's voice, then hers. A minute later, I heard water running. If she stayed in the bathroom for longer than twenty minutes, I was going to be too late to shower and change and meet Laurie before her shift ended.

I walked into the living room and slumped on the couch. I picked up the almanac, paging through it as if I expected dialogue and description. Before I settled down to anything but the pictures, I heard the water quit running upstairs, and I started listening for the door to open. Ten minutes went by, then five more. I stopped flipping through the book where somebody had folded down the corners of two consecutive pages. There were lists, in columns by region, of the times for every sunset of the year. I heard the bathroom door click open. Each day was crossed out through Friday, August 15.

"Only morons waste electricity," Cindy said, coming downstairs.

She was wearing red shorts and a white t-shirt, and I felt like a pervert following, from the near dark, the outline of her bra around her tiny breasts. "It's past 8:30," she said, "there's no charge," and she flipped the light switch, both of us squinting.

"I'm going to be late," I said, getting up.

"Dad will let you know when she steps outside," Cindy said as I passed her and started up the stairs. "And there's a five-minute limit on running the shower. He'll be timing you."

In the shower, I thought of Mr. Rae looking out the window, checking, every ten minutes, for Laurie. I tried to see her body, but I couldn't get it clear. I could call up pictures of naked women from magazines and movies. I could remember details about their bodies so well I thought I could pick each one out of a lineup just by seeing their breasts or their hips or the soft surfaces of their thighs. Laurie, when I thought about her, was always wearing clothes. I told myself that made her special, but I wasn't convinced.

As I stepped from the shower, starting to towel off, I thought of Mr. Rae glancing up at the moon from time to time, disbelieving. I wondered if he believed in the structure of atoms, viruses, all of the kinds of light invisible to the eye. And then I started to hurry because I knew it was nearly nine o'clock.

In five minutes I was downstairs, looking myself over in the hall mirror, when Mr. Rae came crashing down the stairs, slamming his shoulder against the wall as he turned the corner, ran through the kitchen, and out the door, pushing it open with one hand while he gripped a claw hammer in the other.

"Jesus Christ," I thought, and then I was running after him. By the time I hit the footbridge, Mr. Rae was bringing that hammer down on the skull of a man who was half in and half out of a cherry-red Mustang in the Al-Mart lot. By the time I reached the lot, he'd cracked that man's skull twice more and Laurie was pulling herself up from the asphalt.

"Did he put his hands on you?" Mr. Rae said to her as I steadied her. The man was down and moaning, and Mr. Rae laid one more swipe into his ribs.

"Sure he did, Dad. He was trying to pull me into his car."

"You know what I mean, on your body." He raised the hammer again.

"God, Dad, don't kill him. I don't know. Maybe. I was trying to get loose, not be a witness."

Mr. Rae looked my way. "I need a moment with my daughter."

"Dad."

I backed away, keeping my eye on the face-down man. There were pink bubbles frothing from his lips, and his moaning had stopped.

I heard Laurie say "No, Dad" a few times, but the last line was him saying "My mind's made up," and I knew, as soon as Mr. Rae put his hands under the man's shoulders and looked my way, what he intended to do.

"Laurie's right, Mr. Rae," I said. "You've done enough here."

"I'm not asking for your vote, son. This is making sure I'm not going to regret what happens next. I have another daughter. What could I tell her if I didn't take care of this? If this fellow even gets another evil thought into his head, I'd never be able to forgive myself."

"She wasn't hurt."

"You don't wait for the bomb to drop, son. You make sure it's never launched." He lifted the body into the passenger seat. I wasn't sure whether I was happy or unhappy to hear the man suddenly groan. "There's enough for God to do in this world without me bothering him," Mr. Rae said, getting behind the wheel. The man was slumped so low, nobody would guess Mr. Rae had someone in that Mustang with him. "You can follow me if you have a mind to," he said. "You walk my daughter home and lock the door. I'll wait across from the driveway for exactly two minutes."

You can't police the world, I thought, but I didn't say anything. Mr. Rae must have looked back from where he pulled over to see me still standing in the parking lot with Laurie, but he didn't turn around or wind down his window to gesture at me from across the highway.

"Where's he going to go?" Laurie said to me as he pulled away. She was steady now, unhurt as far as I could tell, except her blouse

had torn, her name tag snagging and tearing a flap of material away from her flowered bra.

"I don't know."

"He can't go far if he has to walk back."

I looked at her, but she had her eyes fixed on the receding car. "Come on," I said, "let's go to the house."

Laurie walked into my room and lay on the bed. Cindy stepped into the hall and looked at me, but I closed the door and slid in beside Laurie. "Jesus Christ, Danny," she said, and I put my arm around her, waiting for Laurie to say what she wanted me to do. After ten minutes, I lifted my arm, working it back and forth in the air to get the circulation going, but she didn't move, not then or when I laid my arm across her just below her breasts. We were still lying like that, Laurie asleep finally, when I heard Mr. Rae come in at 1 A.M. Over three hours. He could have walked ten miles; he could have driven twenty miles, turned back, and left the car seven miles from home; he could have tried any combination of miles and violence that would keep that car five miles or more from where I lay in the dark beside Laurie.

"I thought I'd go to church with all of you," I said at breakfast.

"Suit yourself."

Cindy cleared the cereal bowls from the table. "We need to talk, Dad," Laurie said.

"Everything is just hindsight now," he said. "That's the way the weak see."

"It's just knowing what happened."

"You think you'll know something by hearing about it?" He stood up. "You and Laurie go on ahead in your car," he said. "Cindy can finish up here, and I have something to attend to. We'll be along in the Buick before you know it."

"Could I borrow a coat and tie?" I said, and Mr. Rae looked at me like I was bringing in month-late homework the day before report cards came out.

"We're not going to the country club," he said.

The four of us sat halfway back. Laurie and her sister produced strings of beads they fingered absently. They followed Mr. Rae up

for Communion. I noticed the priest didn't serve them wine, which made no sense, given all the "body and blood of Christ" sharing the ceremony claimed to be. But there was incense galore. Some Latin. And the priest's message was short, and we didn't have to hold hymnals open three times and pretend to sing like in my parents' church.

Mr. Rae walked ahead of us to his Buick. He reached into the back seat, and when he turned, he had my small suitcase in his hand. "You best get an early start," he said. "You girls get in that front seat."

"Dad," Laurie said, and he dropped the suitcase at my feet, pivoted, and put an arm around her shoulders, leaning in close to hiss something in her ear. She started crying, huge, audible sobs, but she didn't turn her head as he guided her, after Cindy, into the car, hissing something else before he closed the door.

"I've made my peace with God," Mr. Rae said, turning back to me. I looked over his shoulder at Laurie in the car with her sister. She opened the door and Mr. Rae pivoted and stared until she closed it again.

"Let me show you something," he said, and he led me back into the church.

I was okay with that. I expected a tour of holy water and crucifixes and even the grandiose statue of Mary that filled the left front corner of the church. Instead, he sat down in the shadowed end of a pew furthest from the stained glass windows. "Here," he said, and he took my hand and turned it palm up, placing a social security card on it.

I could hardly breathe. "Read the name," he said.

I shook my head, but he was staring straight down at the maroon carpet. I counted slowly to five, but he didn't look up. "Richard Allen Farrar," I said.

He slid the card off my palm and into the pocket of my shirt, and then he sat back and watched to see what I would do next.

I fixed on the statue of Mary, the shades of blue in her robe. I started seeing myself as the worst sort of cowardly asshole. "What would Joseph have done?" Mr. Rae said, and when I didn't do anything, he added, "You know."

Outside, Laurie and Cindy were still in the car. Laurie had the windows rolled down, but she didn't say anything, and I didn't call out. Mr. Rae walked to the Buick and got in while I stuck to the asphalt as if the temperature had soared past a hundred degrees. When he turned the engine over, I reached into my pocket and pulled out the card, flinging it toward him.

It caught in the breeze and fluttered, landing one step from where I was standing. By the time I picked it up, ready to pitch it through the open window at Mr. Rae, he'd rolled past me, only Laurie's sister looking back at me, her mouth open as if she'd been jabbed in the ribs for disobedience.

I wanted to follow Mr. Rae then and explain how there was more than one way to live a life, that everything was subject to interpretation and complication. Right away, though, I felt like a moron wanting to spout all those things I thought I knew because somebody had read them to me out of a book.

And then I knew I was wrong, that I was an idiot because I knew better and didn't do anything about it. What could be dumber than that? Having no excuse for my behavior, not even fear, because I'd had an easier time with those railroad ties the day before. And if we were just even to start with, Mr. Rae had those thirty years on me, didn't he?

Clean Shaven

As Reynolds concentrated on his emerging upper lip, he stifled each incident and image that welled up from stories he'd read or films he'd seen. His shaving, he thought, was not a metaphor for anything.

"How's this?" he said, standing behind his wife so she could see him in the mirror. Lauren's expression flickered over surprise and sadness before settling on fright.

"You're not you," she said.

"It was only a mustache. It's not like when the beard went."

"This is different," she insisted. "That was still you. This isn't."

He looked at Lauren in the mirror, evaluating her reserves for common sense. "Great," he said at last. "Let me know when you can speak English again." He went back to the bathroom and stared at his clean-shaven face. Twenty-one years. He saw himself as a groom, as a first-time father. And then he thought if he stared much longer he would turn to stone.

Certainly, this was the last family vacation of his life. His son, now twenty-one, never accompanied them for any trip farther than a few miles unless it ended at a shopping mall where Reynolds was buying. It was having no job and the accident of Dylan losing his driver's license for three underage drinking arrests the previous year that accounted for his lack of choices over this holiday. Lauren had taken Dylan's keys. Reynolds's daughter, Brigit, who'd been driving for seven years, had sulked in the back of the van because he refused to let her take a stretch of the clogged, holiday interstate.

He'd driven the whole eight hundred miles from Pennsylvania, sitting at the wheel since before dawn except for breakfast, lunch, and dinner stops, where he walked in circles around fast-food restaurants, trying to stride the ache from his leg while his family ate. The calf of his right leg, now that they'd arrived, throbbed terribly, a new extension of his varicose vein etched to his sock line.

He thought of blood clots and embolism. He couldn't sit without putting his leg up; he couldn't stand still.

"You can make me an appointment with Dr. Ditzler when we get back," Reynolds told his wife.

Lauren held her eyes on him for an extra beat without speaking, and Reynolds considered whether or not she was alarmed by his asking or disgusted by the way she'd been ordered.

"Secretary, right?" she said, declaring annoyance.

"You know why," Reynolds tried, but when she said "No," he didn't elaborate, though he could have told her, "You go to the doctor, you get sick; you go to the hospital, you die"; that's what his mother had said a thousand times, dying at home from heart disease, refusing the doctor even after her kidneys had failed. "We'll see how things are in the morning," she'd told his father the last night of her life, expecting, Reynolds was certain, that a good night's sleep would somehow heal her internal organs.

"Who would believe that?" Lauren said as they drove home from the funeral. "You might as well rely on prayer."

Reynolds didn't answer. He knew how anxious he was during routine examinations. He knew how many times he'd fainted during blood tests, incoherent with imagined terminal illnesses: If only he hadn't come, he thought before blacking out, using the logic of the religious fanatic.

Away from his work, Reynolds kept a close tally of nonsense. His weakness was for trips that changed the climate. Florida in December, the Gaspe Peninsula in July. Here, in South Carolina, at Christmas, it was merely late October in Pennsylvania, not enough of a shift to compensate for leisure. Every day there was less time to accommodate the waste of vacations. In twenty-four hours he was reduced to the life of a domestic animal—watered and fed and dozing until the shuffling of bodies alerted him to the possibility of going outside.

He was puzzled by people who accepted work the same way they accepted using the bathroom, something to be done with from time to time, expected and routine. Worse yet was leisure, which tolled the single note of disappearing time. His busyness was an antidote for panic, he knew. And he recognized, as well,

this as not unique, working at keeping his terror hidden from his children the way some fathers steel themselves against flinching at close lightning or nearby barking dogs.

Lauren slept in every day until nearly noon. He took to making himself lunch and sitting down with sandwiches and potato chips while she drank coffee and nibbled brown, cinnamon-filled diet breakfast rolls.

After the first day's argument about the week being wasted in bed, he ate in silence, cracking open a beer, reading one of the volumes of the *News of the Weird* series he'd bought for himself for the hours he had to wait for his family to stir. He loved to read about people like the man who kept a list of every person he ever met, beginning as a child. Now he was eighty-three years old, and he had 679 pages with 3,487 names, the entries annotated with comments like "fond of chicken gravy," which is how he remembered a man named Leonard McKnight.

Reynolds wanted a fight full of hateful language, threats, and disaster. Or he wanted Lauren up at 6:30, walking into the dawn with him. Which was the idea of vacations, after all. To gain focus. To regrind the lens of attitude. He'd become so foolish with his needs that he felt ancient with impatience, as if he were visiting his family as an old man terminally ill.

He read the guest book. His wife's uncle, who had used the condo for a week in early October, had written a thank-you note. "Great golf," it said, "especially at the Moss Creek Plantation." The uncle, they'd been told at Thanksgiving, had discovered he had liver cancer. Two days before they left for South Carolina, they learned he'd gone into cardiac arrest during treatment. Reynolds considered the price, even in the off season, of sixty-five dollars for eighteen holes. His wife's uncle, he calculated from the prices in the tour guide, had paid $450 to play the four rounds of in-season "great golf" he'd listed in the guest book before tossing his clubs in the back of his Mercedes to drive them back to northern Ohio for the winter.

"Mom says you're not you," his daughter said the second day.

"Again and again."

"I think she meant it," Brigit said.

"Christ."

"You ought to grow it back."

"And reenter my body?"

"No. You look better with it."

Reynolds thought this was the voice of reason. He stored it away like prophecy, but for the time being, he was busy staying angry at the prices people willingly paid on this island. He was angry he was unwilling to pay them. And then he was angry at himself for wishing, year after year, to regroup in some wild, self-reliance place where golf and tennis and the means to play them in style would be as ludicrous as the seriousness of Nintendo games.

Already Dylan was embarrassed to be using the public courts instead of the ones inside the fence of the Rod Laver Center. "You're turning into an asshole, Dad," he said, the first time they walked onto the windswept courts at the high school.

An hour and a half later, after playing two sets between a foursome of teenagers who played classic rock from a car radio and two grade school girls who brought only one tennis ball, Reynolds decided to drive to the shore front. "We can walk the beach," he said, but when Dylan rolled his eyes, he looked around for options. Sea Pines, he read on a decorative road sign—he remembered the name from watching a golf tournament on television. He had Dylan look it up in the brochure on the dashboard. It said $135 for 18 holes: $7.50 a hole, Reynolds calculated; $1.50 per swing, most likely. He swung right, leaving the traffic circle to take a look at what sort of course could convince people, however wealthy, to pay $135 for four hours of entertainment.

A uniformed man stepped out of the booth Reynolds was about to drive by. "Good afternoon," the man said. "There is a three-dollar charge for entering the plantation."

The price of each hole skipped upward by nearly another seventeen cents. "How do I turn around?" Reynolds said, seeing Dylan twist his head and stare out the side window.

"You don't want to enter?"

"No."

"There's a space a hundred yards down. I'll watch you from here."

Reynolds looped, paused for a car, and drove into traffic heading

out of Sea Pines. "Three dollars," Dylan said. "I'd give you the three dollars."

"We have a pass to Sea Pines," Lauren announced at dinner. "The woman in the next condo has a cousin who lives there year round, and she came over to give us his pass. 'You have to go there,' she said. 'You have to see Harbor Town.' "

Reynolds waited for Dylan to hoot, but he was busy pulling another slice of pizza out of the take-out box. Joan Wreggett, the woman next door, had stopped in the first day. "Wait until you see the miniature deer," she said. "It's a sight you'll never forget."

The next morning his upper lip seemed too thin. The flesh beneath his nose seemed Cro-Magnon. He shaved it clean and saw his wife search for stubble as he ate lunch; she said nothing except "Do you want to come along to Harbor Town?"

For Christmas Eve, Reynolds walked along an unfamiliar road eight hundred miles from home. The three mornings he'd been on Hilton Head, he'd walked for miles, eventually circling toward the highway and the convenience store where he bought *USA Today.* He wasn't interested in the lives of South Carolinians, but he read every item in the national news except those in the business section, and after four miles of walking, after the newspaper, he went back inside, and no one was up.

And on all of those walks, with one exception, he never saw another person who wasn't in a car. The last quarter mile of his walk always had to pass over the same trail, and each morning, on the corner near the store, he passed a man holding a cup of coffee and smoking. He walked by him in silence, the man looking down the highway, and then, when he approached him from behind to head back to Palmetto Dunes, the man would turn and ask, "You know the time?" Three days in a row, and the time hadn't varied by more than five minutes. He thought the man failed to recognize him each morning, or else the man figured Reynolds didn't recognize him and wanted to spare him embarrassment. Now, a hundred yards from where he would sound the hour, a police cruiser pulled alongside him. "Can I help you?" the policeman said.

"What?"

"Can I help you?"

Reynolds ran through answers that might get things unstuck. "No, I don't think so."

"Could you use a ride?"

"No."

"Would you be staying near here?"

"Yes."

While he waited for the next question, the one that would commit him to sarcasm and the subsequent nasty scene, Reynolds evaluated how fat and effeminate the policeman was. As if he'd never gotten out of the car for ten years. As if his voice, untried, had taken on a tone like a child's, more frightening, somehow, than the voice of an ordinary cop. He'd seen the car pass him earlier, and he understood the cop had pulled off into the maintenance road and waited for him to walk by, turning on the flashing blue light to ask if he wanted a lift.

"Have a good evening," the policeman said at last. But he didn't pull away from the roadside until Reynolds walked another fifty steps and turned into the driveway to the cluster of condominiums.

"Fucking cops," Dylan said as Reynolds told the story during their late dinner. "They're the same everywhere."

Brigit smiled and Reynolds saw that his wife wanted him to reprimand Dylan for his language or his attitude or both, but he let it go.

"I thought you were past that," he said. It had been over a year since Dylan's college days, at least at the school where he'd spent two and a half years, had ended on Snowball Night. December third, last year, the first significant snowfall near Amish Country, and the men's dorms, according to tradition, faced off to break each other's windows.

The college's new dean had called in the town police. He wasn't having any more of this sanctioned vandalism, not on his watch, and Dylan, already on probation for alienating three resident assistants on three separate occasions, had run outside under the influence of the keg in his room to toss snowballs at the police.

"One student was arrested, and it was you?" Reynolds had asked.

"Yeah."

"You couldn't run as fast as the other guys? You couldn't stay with the pack?"

"I didn't sprint or anything. I didn't want to look like some jerk."

"So you jogged?"

"Something like that."

"Another year without a license?"

"If I'm convicted."

"Well, that's new at least," Reynolds had said. "Where do you get the money for a lawyer?"

"Call it a Christmas loan. I'm willing to deal. You'll save money having me live in the basement again. I'll be going to school for free at your playground."

So Dylan had transferred, Reynolds and his wife relieved, but not so happy they forgot to force Dylan to look for a job. He'd been going to school tuition-free at the out-of-town "playground" as well.

"Is this a sound investment?" Reynolds had wanted to know.

"They botched the arrest. I have witnesses. There's a lawyer in town who specializes in underage cases."

Dylan, two days after he took his final exams and cleaned out his dorm room, discovered he had a reputation. The job he'd applied for and been hired to do had folded when the girl who had quit had changed her mind. Dylan, still reading the want ads, saw it readvertised. He was puzzled and then excited. "That girl must have quit after all," he said, asking for a ride to the pool hall.

Reynolds was less certain, but nothing he thought of made any more sense, so he picked up his keys. The owner, only two weeks before, had called Dylan an hour before he was to report for work to explain the job hadn't materialized. Now, miraculously, his son might retrieve one chance to be happier, helping to manage the entertainment center, working five nights instead of going out with whoever called after dinner.

"This is a family place," he was told. "We've learned things about you."

"I should give them a few windows to repair. I should torch the place," Dylan said on the way home.

Reynolds was appalled when he agreed with this foolishness. He said nothing, counting on his silence to stand for hands-off parenting. He saw himself thin through the shoulders and chest, puny despite his height. All of the strength he had ever had was based

in leverage and quickness, and now he was so flat-footed and sluggish he'd become someone no man would bother evaluating before turning brutish.

Which true-to-life stories or false rumors had reached the family man at the smoke-free pool hall? His wife brought them home from the high school where she worked; Brigit confirmed them if he asked her, but she refused to volunteer any new ones she'd learned since he'd graduated. All of them had something to do with alcohol and drugs, and Reynolds thought they were absurd. No one could get up and be lucid with those habits. His son, if he was dealing, was a terrible businessman who had to borrow money for pizza.

Reynolds sensed the vague apprehensions of the middle-aged whose children, for better or worse, have formed. The imminence of their leaving was teaching him to subtract his birthdays from his life span, and lately the remainder looked like an age that would still be eligible for the draft in case of national crisis.

Recently, he'd developed the habit of urinating in the shower. One morning, in a hurry, he'd let himself go to save a minute, and then he'd begun on purpose, smelling himself rising through the steam and then dissipating. He wondered briefly if he could harm his feet by standing daily in diluted urine, but that concern passed without even an examination of the soles of his feet.

He remembered pissing in the bathtub when he was small, when his mother would leave him to "soak for a while" before scrubbing his face and back. He would watch the water discolor and then return to clarity. And his mother never noticed, or at least she said nothing, although, one day, after a few months of this, he saw her scrubbing a narrow, V-shaped stain from the bathtub, scouring with cleanser, and he knew exactly its source and what his mother understood about the damage urine can do, and he never let loose again for nearly forty-five years until now, at forty-nine, he found himself examining the floor of the shower, searching for signs that his wife might use to decipher his penchant for pissing down the drain. Nothing, so far, and certainly, in four days, nothing showing in Hilton Head, but when he stepped up to the mirror on Christmas morning, he rubbed off the lather from beneath his nose. "Merry Christmas," he said at lunch.

His wife brightened. "You're not teasing?" she said, reaching over to touch the stubble, her fingers lingering like those of the sightless. "You're you?"

Suddenly, he wanted to do something as basic as repeating a swing and watching the flight of a ball, its arc the result of acceleration, force, and angle.

He dropped a six-pack behind the passenger seat of the van and drove off the island to search out the "executive length" golf course because it was cheaper, less than half the price of the other courses. His score, allied to the shorter length, would be better, remarkable maybe, if he gave it without qualification. He could break 40; he could tell someone in the snow of Pennsylvania he'd managed 38, including a birdie on a par four hole whose yardage would remain unspoken.

He passed the point on the map where the course was located, but there was no sign of it, everything marshland or new developments. When he saw, finally, a course open up on his right, he put on the turn signal and pulled into a private club not listed among the numbered "places-to-tee-off" in his tourist guide.

For half an hour he drove back and forth, turning down side roads that ended in swamp and decrepit houses. Finally, he pulled up beside a fairway of the new private club. He imagined it the lengthened and beautified child of the executive length course. He could play one hole, at least, because no one appeared to be on the tee or the green, and the clubhouse was out of sight. He took two irons, two balls, and a putter, pushed his way through twenty yards of undergrowth to where the tee was. Number 13, the sign said—172 yards, par three. He'd brought a 7 iron and a 9 iron. He dropped the 9 and his putter, set the two balls a yard apart on the grass.

He hit the first ball straight and true. It landed on the front of the green and rolled to within twenty feet of the hole. For a moment, reason was replaced by the wish for a foursome waiting behind him, and when he stepped over to the second ball, one dream came true because he saw two carts approaching.

Reynolds turned, addressed the ball, and swung so quickly he pulled his shot short and left, walking toward it without looking back, turning into the woods where it had soared and leaving the

ball back on the green for that foursome to pocket, wondering who had sliced a ball so badly from the adjacent fairway to land it there. And then, when no one stepped up to claim it, who the poor bastard had been who'd gotten sick and unable to finish the hole? Or, finally, what asshole had clawed his way through underbrush and bog to steal a few holes of golf, giving himself away by walking on a course that required everyone to ride in a cart?

It was raining by the time he returned to the condo. He had time to shower, finish three beers, and volume two of *News of the Weird* before his family showed up. "We waited for you, but nobody knew where you'd gone," Lauren said at once. "Joan drove us to Harbor Town to shop."

"No problem," Reynolds said, meaning each word. He could see Dylan and Brigit clutching their throats behind her.

"What about dinner," Lauren said. "Are we doing more Christmas?"

"How about wings?" Reynolds tried. "How about a couple of pitchers of beer?" Dylan brightened. Brigit turned toward the kitchen to start rooting through the refrigerator.

"Are you serious?"

"Sure, there's a place called Wild Wings by the traffic circle."

"No thanks. The principal ingredient of chicken wings is fat; the principal component of beer is calories."

"So, a two-man mission," Dylan said fifteen minutes later, evaluating the four levels of wing heat on the menu. They asked for "Death Wings," a triple order, and a pitcher of beer. The waitress didn't check Dylan for ID.

The wings were bright and crisp. Whatever had been slathered on had been fried into the wings with authority. Forty-eight wings, Reynolds figured. He had to do twenty of them in order not to be embarrassed, and after five, his mouth was on fire, his lips buzzing, most of the celery already gone. They ordered a second pitcher, extra celery, and settled down to finish the wings. After he got into double figures, Reynolds stopped counting and let his mouth go numb with grease and chilis and stories from *News of the Weird.*

"Here's one you'll like," he said. "A man in Tulsa held a woman at knifepoint, and the police, by mistake, surrounded the house next door. The knife wielder had a change of heart and walked outside

to surrender, but the police told him to get back inside and get out of the way."

"How long did that go on?" Dylan said.

"An hour. A neighbor finally told the police what the story was."

Reynolds heard voices rising out of the background clatter. A man and a woman were arguing. The man said, "How come?" and the woman answered, "You tell me." The man slapped his hand on the bar, and she laughed. Their drinks didn't spill, Reynolds noticed, so it was a solid, quality bar. "I can't fucking believe you," the man said.

"Fucking believe me," the woman said then, more in resignation than mimicry, Reynolds thought, but he invented a series of insults that ended in gunshots, the policeman he'd seen the night before taking notes from his witness lips. Lauren would say, "What do you expect for Christmas in a place like that?" having the advantage of common sense and paying attention to her surroundings. And then the man threw a roundhouse right that caught the woman flush on the cheek and sprawled her off the stool onto the floor.

She landed directly behind Dylan, and Reynolds thought his son might have missed the whole scene, listening to the song on the jukebox or lost in the pleasures of chicken wings, all of it happening in his blind spot. "Unhh," she said, and Dylan reared out of his chair, his fist already swinging, driving into the man's nose, which exploded in blood.

"Wait," Reynolds said, rising, but then he saw several strangers with beards and T-shirts and the forearms of the physically active, and any one of them looked like he might step forward with a handgun or a knife. He heard the barstool crash, the thwap of fist to face, but he kept his eyes focused on the hands of every man who looked as if he couldn't read.

None of the hands lifted. Behind him, he heard the drunk saying "Okay, okay," and when he tried out a glance, he saw him scrabbling backwards on his hands.

"Go fuck yourself," Dylan said. Reynolds turned back to the crowd and saw, to his eternal astonishment, that no one was going to challenge him.

The woman moaned and sat up. Reynolds thought, for a moment, of picking up a wing, but Dylan reminded him to rewind his brain.

"Somewhere nearby are reinforcements," he said. "We need to be the first to leave."

Reynolds nodded. "Of course," he said, but he refilled his mug and drank off half of it, assessing the room from left to right and back again, regretting the seven wings he counted on the serving plate before he followed his son outside. "You handled that, for sure," he said.

"He was a pussy."

"He was drunk."

"Whatever," Dylan said, and then, "Can I drive?"

"No."

"I'm not drunk," Dylan said. "There's no traffic."

"That's got nothing to do with it," Reynolds said. He backed the van up and drove through the traffic circle into the road to Sea Pines. "The pass is still good," he said, but Dylan was rewinding a tape. The guard, the same man who had stopped them three days before, nodded. Reynolds said nothing until Dylan turned up *The Best of ZZ Top.*

Reynolds looked for a place to pull off. ZZ Top was singing about a whorehouse—"a lot of nice girls up there"—the boogie beat insistent, but he drove so slowly that Dylan said "What's the story?"

"The police in some town in Nova Scotia raided their own Christmas party because they didn't have a liquor license."

"You should send in the one about the Snowball Police," Dylan said. "You should have them print one about the assholes who catch one snowball thrower out of five hundred and it turns out to be your son."

"There's a six-pack behind the seat," Reynolds said, and Dylan, without comment, reached back to pull it forward. "I want to walk the golf course. I want to finish that beer sitting on the tee of a par five hole."

"No thanks," Dylan said. "There's bound to be guards. Or dogs."

"I want to imagine my tee shot clearing the fairway traps at 250 yards, my 3 wood carrying the water to the green, leaving me to stand over an eagle putt."

"At a place like this they might shoot us."

"Here I am asking my son to break the law—underage, trespassing."

"I'll do the underage," Dylan said, opening a beer for himself and passing one to Reynolds. The idea of walking down a fairway he would see on television in the spring suddenly reminded Reynolds of all the pictures of the Iraqi army from the winter before: little, skinny, mustached men shaking fists and weapons at the camera. He thought he could start his own book of lifetime encounters. The tollbooth guard—works on Christmas, he thought, counting backwards. The woman on the floor of the restaurant—lacks judgment; the man who struck her—pussy. He licked the stubble above his lip. Up ahead was a place to turn around. Right now, drinking this beer seemed important regardless of where they sat. There were two more for each of them. There were convenience stores every two miles along the highway in case they decided to buy more.

"I should shave this off again," Reynolds said.

"You won't," Dylan answered, definitively enough to allow Reynolds to take a long pull on his beer, trusting his blind hand on the wheel.

Blockhead

At twilight, just before the mid-August family reunion Saturday picnic broke up, Uncle Chew thunked an anvil into a burlap sack, snatched the flaps together in his mouth, chomped down, lifted, and hurled that anvil-filled sack the length of a beer-can-covered picnic table.

"Chew's still got the right stuff," my Aunt Myrtle said, and she threw herself against him as if he'd just come off stage at Woodstock '99. I saw my father nudging that burlap sack with his foot, testing the weight to see if Uncle Chew had used a stage prop anvil.

"You want to give it a toss, Keith?" Uncle Chew said. He knew his brother had the skepticism of Thomas the disciple, and he'd kept his eyes on that sack regardless of his wife's cleavage pressing against him.

My father said, "No, Danny, that's your department," but he took one step back from the burlap sack and bumped against the picnic table that Uncle Chew had lifted with his teeth six years earlier when the reunion had fallen exactly on the day of my eighth birthday.

"Well, all that driving and heavy food has got me bushed," my mother said, calling up two of her excuses for getting to the spare bedroom before nine o'clock. "See you at church, Danny," she said. Neither of my parents would use his nickname. "It makes him sound inbred or something," my mother said every time the summer reunion, Thanksgiving, or Easter threatened us with the triannual trip into central Pennsylvania where my grandfather Malcolm had moved in with Uncle Chew eleven years ago. Since then, he'd made that farm the home of the three Wycoff get-togethers he'd hosted since his own father had died between two freight cars outside a Pittsburgh mill during the Korean War.

Uncle Chew didn't farm. He'd bought the sixty acres with Aunt Myrtle's inheritance money, my father had told me, and after a year of planning to farm, he had rented the land to a man who grew corn. He'd had it up for sale since the year he'd lifted the picnic table with his teeth, counting on the rumor of a new highway looping so far into the country there would be developers following its route with top-dollar offers. "Sitting pretty is where we'll be," he'd been saying for years. "Miller time."

"That commercial hasn't been on in so long," my mother would say, "I think he's moving to someplace where they set their clocks another hour ahead."

Since the beginning of June, Uncle Chew had worked at Iron City, the local health club. He said he created workout programs, but the place had four benches, a ton of free weights, three treadmills, and a stepper. "If the club was worth anything," my mother had said on the drive over from Pittsburgh, "they'd be hearing from the beer people."

"You don't know that for certain," my father had said.

"I bet he hands out towels, Keith. He rings the cash register and turns out the lights."

It had sounded like a signal to me, so I'd leaned forward from the back seat and blurted, "How can Aunt Myrtle stand to live with Uncle Chew?"

"I don't know, dear," my mother said, half turning. "Maybe he has a good side."

My father stared straight ahead at Route 22 as if it were ice-slicked. "He's such an asshole," I said, sliding myself closer to the door behind her.

My mother looked over at my father and then out the front windshield. "Don't talk like that," she said.

"But he is," I said. We'd just passed Ebensburg, more than two hours left in our drive. My father turned off the radio that was losing the signal from the Pittsburgh cutting-edge rock station. Unless I talked to myself aloud and answered, I knew I wouldn't hear another word until I rolled down the window at a traffic light where people were crossing the street.

Now my mother stood on the grass as if she needed to hear "See you in the morning" before she could go into the house. "I don't blame you," Aunt Myrtle finally said, pulling herself away from Uncle Chew. "Whatever do you do, at forty, with a boy just starting his teens? You'll be forty-four, and he'll still be dragging mud into the house. Those three girls of mine kept me jumping."

Aunt Myrtle was two years younger than my mother, and she'd waved goodbye to Jeanie, her youngest, on the day she'd graduated from high school in June. "To the army, that one," she'd announced after her first beer. "Don't that beat it? But I feel like a spring chicken again with all them flown the coop."

Spring chicken or not, Aunt Myrtle was a grandmother three times over already. I'd calculated, once, that she'd be a great-grandmother before she was fifty, that she had a chance, if her liver didn't fizzle out, to live to be a great-great-great-grandmother to a girl old enough to be asking for a training bra.

"You ought to see the list of extinct animals Justin brought home from school." My mother seemed to have forgotten how bushed she was. "Say some, Justin," she said.

"Nobody wants to hear them." I hadn't said a word since I'd asked for a second hamburger.

"Sure they do."

"The laughing owl," I said. "The Falkland dog. Steller's sea cow."

"Sea cow?" Aunt Myrtle said. "You're making them up, aren't you? You're trying to see how ignorant we can be out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Cape Verde giant skink," I said. "Honshu wolf. They're real."

Grandfather Malcolm pushed himself up from a plaid lawn chair. "Well," he said, "I never heard of one of them."

"That's because they're long gone, Dad," my mother said.

"You'd think one of them would ring a bell. I'm old enough to maybe seen one in a zoo once upon a time ago."

"He learned all the National Parks, too," my mother said.

Aunt Myrtle brightened. "Well, we know all about them at least. We been to Yellowstone. We seen Old Faithful and some grizzly bears."

Uncle Chew opened another beer. "We didn't do enough drinking to see any of them missing animals."

Grandfather Malcolm frowned. "There's church to be got to in the morning, Danny."

"I'll drink to that," Uncle Chew said.

Grandfather Malcolm limped toward the house. "It'd be a blessing," he said, "if somebody could name something we can see right from this here yard." He paused at the back door. "I thought not," he said, and then he disappeared into the house, but suddenly my mother and Aunt Myrtle followed him as if they'd thought of all the names for trees and bushes.

"Here's one for you, Keith," Uncle Chew said. "This Chinese girl went off to Australia as a foreign-exchange student. You know, a high school girl, seventeen or something like that, and when the family met her at the airport, the father walked up and said, 'Hello, how are you?' and the girl looked him in the eye and said, 'Fuck you, you fucking cocksucker.' "

Uncle Chew paused, and when my father didn't say anything, he gulped at his beer as if he'd stopped on purpose. "Turns out," he started in again, "she was learning English from some double-language comic book, and somebody at her school had altered the page that showed a Chinese girl answering her host family." Chew laughed. "Don't that get it? Right there in the little bubble coming out of her mouth. 'Fuck you, you fucking cocksucker.' "

"Where'd you hear that story?" my father said.

"A customer at Iron City. He got it off the Internet."

"Nobody would say something like that. Not even in the wrong language."

"You don't believe your computer? I thought all you computer guys followed that little arrow wherever it went."

My father, for the last two years, had been doing PR for a Pittsburgh hospital. "Makes the dead smile," Aunt Myrtle had said when she first heard about it.

"Not hardly," my father said now.

"You bookmark all the best porn sites?" Uncle Chew said to my father. "Ain't that what all you computer guys do? I been reading

about that. They should just put all that pussy on the TV for the rest of us."

"That's enough in front of the boy, Danny."

"The boy needs to hear more, the way I'm seeing it. He acts like he swings both ways."

"Slow down, Danny."

"No man's going to tell me what I can say or can't say, not on my time, not in my house. You're your own boss in your own house, and you can tell any goddamned story you want."

"The boy will become his own boss everywhere once he goes to college."

"How's that work?" Uncle Chew looked me up and down. "Your father went to college, and he can't even make his son walk like a man."

Uncle Chew opened another beer and took a long swallow. I took it to mean that Uncle Chew thought I carried myself like a fag, that he possessed a sort of second sight, and it was directed toward discovering who was choosing to be gay. "Your father can't find it in himself to be tough on you, so I'm pitching in," Uncle Chew said. He lifted a full can out of the cooler and walked toward the car. "Come on, Justin, let's me and you take a little ride."

"No," my father said, putting down the beer he'd been holding since we'd finished eating an hour before.

"Well," Uncle Chew said, "at last."

"I can't have you drive the boy."

"Then you drive, Keith," Uncle Chew said. "This won't be but a few minutes."

Uncle Chew's pickup had a bench seat, and I slid in between my father and Uncle Chew as if the three of us drove off into the night every time we visited. "A few minutes," my father said.

"Point it straight to the humpbacked bridge and hang a sharp left. It ain't but two miles." Uncle Chew rolled his window down, drained the open can, and pitched it onto the shoulder. "So," he said to me, cracking the fresh one, "you all set on college not even set foot in high school?"

"I don't want to be stuck in the mill," I said, looking straight ahead and seeing the humpbacked bridge rearing up in the headlights.

"Hard left now," Uncle Chew said, and then he stuck an elbow into my ribs. "Far as I know, in your neck of the woods there's just one mill left for you to be afraid of."

"Or any job like that," I said as we turned into the county park.

Uncle Chew leaned across me. "You worked the mill once, Keith."

"Danny, the mill was just a summer job during college."

"Paid good, that's what you was always crowing about," Uncle Chew snorted. "Paid so good nobody'd buy American anymore. You know where steel comes from now, don't you?"

"I don't give it much thought, Danny."

"Of course you don't goddamned know. Nobody knows, but it sure as shit ain't made by anybody we know. Now stop up here by that there shelter."

My father pulled in and waited, the engine idling. I didn't see anybody at a table or out walking, but there were two cars parked together on the other side of the shelter and a car alongside a van in the clearing just ahead. "You keep looking now and maybe you'll get an eyeful," Uncle Chew said.

"We're not staying in here," my father said.

"Why's that?"

"You know why."

"Go ahead and say something," Uncle Chew said. "Go ahead and start. This here's not a National Park, that's for sure."

My father shifted into first gear and began to turn. Uncle Chew opened the door and hopped out, swaying a little when his feet skidded on the gravel. He leaned into the open door, walking as the truck slowly turned until the headlights passed across the cars beside the shelter. "Whoops, there," Uncle Chew said, and when the lights faced the way we'd entered the park, my father turned them and the engine off. "It's not too late for you, is it?" Uncle Chew said to me. "You haven't made up your mind?"

"It's not like that," my father said.

"Hell, it ain't. Nobody makes you open your mouth or spread your legs but your own damn self."

Uncle Chew slammed the door shut and walked past the car and the van, disappearing down a path into the woods. I stayed in the middle, not moving. For five minutes my father and I sat like that in

the front seat. A car drove by, slowly, then stopped, then it moved on. My father, finally, said, "What do you think we look like here?" and I slid over to the door. Another car and five more minutes went by, and then Uncle Chew stepped out of the woods exactly where he'd entered.

"See," Uncle Chew said when he climbed back in. "I can walk through the valley and fear no evil."

I looked around. "What valley?" I said, and my father fixed me with a dreadful frown.

Chew spit out the window. "God help us," he said. "You don't see any normal men out here waiting in their vans for women to cruise by. You know what would happen if the rest of us took a mind to screwing each other in the ass—we'd be like those animals your boy brought home from school."

"They were overhunted, Danny. They had their habitats taken away."

"This here's more a habitat than a park. Somebody ought to build houses here and help them go extinct." He leaned forward and turned so he was looking me in the face. "Do I have this wrong, Justin? You tell me I don't have any reason to worry, and I'll shut up about it."

"You're worrying wrong," my father said.

"That's what Dad does full time," Uncle Chew said. "It's like interest on his rent money."

"You took him in knowing he'd keep a lookout. You let him pay when he could stay with us for free."

"You know what Dad says to me when I tell him he's free to go? He says, 'Keith don't need saving.'" Uncle Chew spit out the window again, and then he swiveled and laid his fist into my stomach and took the wind out of me so I doubled over and felt like I'd just inhaled a throat-size piece of the country sausage he'd pile on my plate, like he did every summer, the next morning.

"No more," my father said.

"Of course not," Uncle Chew said. "We seen what we came to see."

Church started at 10:45, and it was mandatory. My father and Uncle Chew sat on either side of Grandfather Malcolm. Next to

them my mother and Aunt Myrtle surrounded me. When the organist started in on "Faith of Our Fathers," everybody but me and my father belted it out like Karaoke Christians.

In the pew in front of us, just to my left, were two high school girls in sleeveless dresses. I watched their breasts rise and fall as they sang. The closer one leaned forward, and for half of the final verse, I could see where the light blue bra cup swallowed her right breast.

Before we sat down, the minister had us recite a prayer straight out of the hymnal, and then the bodies of those girls settled into the pew. Aunt Myrtle poked me in the side as the minister opened his Bible to read the Gospel lesson. "What was you praying for?" she whispered.

"Nothing," I said, which was the truth. All I'd done was wait for the words to stop and heads to lift. She smiled and looked up at the minister as if he were revealing the secrets of eternity.

The sermon, it turned out, was about John Wilkes Booth, so odd I started paying attention. The minister, sweating in the heat, told us that shortly after Lincoln's assassination, forty different men confessed to the shooting. All of them, to show they were authentic, cited facts only the true killer could know, and after a while most people didn't remember enough to argue with the best of the frauds, some of them getting their pictures in the newspapers. "Here a Booth," the minister said. "There a booth. Everywhere a Booth."

After a while, all of the men who claimed to be Booth got old. There weren't so many eyewitnesses left to dispute them. The last Booth was stuffed and toured around the country. He was advertised as the world's greatest evil. "My own grandfather," the minister said, "saw that mummy when it came to his town when he was a boy. He paid a penny. 'A lot of hooey,' he told me once, and I've never forgotten. A lot of hooey. Think about it, my friends. The Booth Mummy, whether or not it has visited your town."

An hour later, Grandfather Malcolm, sitting down at the table, said, "We oughtna be taken in by any old somebody says he's some self or another."

"I don't need a man in a robe to tell me that," said Uncle Chew. Like everybody else, he had a lemonade in front of him.

"It's about time," my father said, "for somebody to claim he's Lee Harvey Oswald grown old—he'd make the talk shows and such."

"A man says something like that they oughta shoot him dead a second time," Aunt Myrtle said.

My grandfather extended his hands to the side in either direction. Uncle Chew took one, my father the other, and in another second we were all locked together by the hands around the table, listening to my grandfather's prayer. "May we remember to keep the Sabbath, refusing the sins of alcohol and amusements. May those who give in to abominations justly suffer. Praise God."

We set in on the chicken and waffles, nobody saying anything until Aunt Myrtle sat back and said, "The table seems so small this year without any of my girls."

"Nebraska's a long ways off," Uncle Chew said. "So's Wisconsin."

"What a thing to marry and move off so far," Aunt Myrtle said. "I can't even find Nebraska on the map."

"Farming don't let you run off and leave it," Uncle Chew said. Thunder rumbled in through the dining-room window.

"I know where New Jersey is. I know where my Jeanie is at least, but the army don't let you go home for reunions." When the next thunder rolled in, she brightened. "Remember," she said to my mother, "when we walked to the store with Justin when he was little, and Jeanie my youngest was along? He was afraid of the rain?"

My mother shook her head.

"He was such a sissy. He wouldn't leave the store without something on his head."

"He's not that way any more."

"Well, he was that night. Six years old, I remember, because it was the last summer we lived in Pittsburgh. That makes Jeanie ten. She still laughs about it, how she danced in the rain while Justin stood in the doorway and cried."

"So we got him a cardboard box," my mother said. "It was taken care of."

"With Heinz 57 on the side," Aunt Myrtle said. "He looked like a little blockhead with that box on his head. Jeanie splashed in every puddle for eight blocks. I thought he'd break his neck going up the stairs with that box over his head."

My mother didn't say anything else, but Uncle Chew was staring at her. "Your mother was a beautiful woman," Uncle Chew said to me. My father looked up but didn't interrupt. "Surely she was. You take my word."

"No need to go on like that, Danny," my mother said.

"There's pictures somewheres," Uncle Chew said. "The four of us was a fine looking quartet, all right."

My father smiled. "See?" Uncle Chew said, "and it's not the beer talking. Maybe you thought I was drunk last night, but here I am sober as your daddy in church, and I'm saying your mother over there was something to behold."

My mother looked shapeless beside Aunt Myrtle, who said, "You know what keeps a man at home?"

"We're fine on that score," my mother said at once.

"Really? Don't that beat it, then, and here I am doing sit-ups and walking a treadmill."

Grandfather Malcolm pushed his plate to the side. "Thanksgiving will be something," he said. "The whole kit and caboodle back under the same roof."

"And the babies," Aunt Myrtle said. "Jeanie in her uniform."

"Everybody reports in for turkey," Uncle Chew said. He looked at me. "State of the union and such goings on."

I finished Aunt Myrtle's peach pie and excused myself to go upstairs to the bathroom. As soon as the table was cleared, I knew my father would be telling everybody it was time to go. When I came out, Uncle Chew coughed and waved me into his bedroom. "Myrtle's right," he said. "Women's bodies don't handle fat well. A man with an inch of spare tire can get by if his chest is hard, if his muscles have definition. A woman with the same fat seems so flabby you give up wanting her."

I sat on the bed and watched Uncle Chew fumble under the dresser. "You seen any naked girls yet?" he said.

"No."

Uncle Chew snorted. "No, I mean in pictures and such. The pornography." He straightened, holding up a videotape box. *Triple Play,* it said on the front. Girls were mysteries. I saw boys naked every day at school. I didn't have to imagine anything about their bodies.

If Uncle Chew was going to show me porn to help me focus on girls, he was going about it wrong. It was the not knowing that made them exciting. "You look close now." He shut the bedroom door and turned the lock. "Lookit here."

On the screen a man and a woman were already naked, the woman lying on a kitchen table, stroking the man, getting him hard. Uncle Chew stood beside me. "Who you watching, the man or the woman," Uncle Chew said. He rested a hand on my shoulder. "Damn, I should just up and do it with you," he said. "It ain't nothing special. Then you'd know, and maybe get it out of your system."

I stared at the carpet under the television stand where it was stained as if somebody had been tuning and tipped a glass of something. "Be doing you a favor in the long run," Uncle Chew said.

I guessed cola. The stain seemed too dark for beer. I started listing the possible brands—Coke and Pepsi, RC, house brands like the Weis Quality in Uncle Chew's refrigerator.

Uncle Chew stepped in front of the television. "Let me show you something," he said, and I nodded as if he'd told me he had a new car in the garage. Moa, I said to myself. Elephant bird. West Indian monk seal. Norfolk Island kaka.

I wanted to tell him I walked in the rain these days. You couldn't carry an umbrella to ninth grade. You got soaked and acted like you wanted it that way.

And then he turned, walked behind the metal stand, and clamped his teeth on the handle on top of the portable television. He lifted it, and the television swayed a little while a second man walked in on the couple on the table. The man undressed while he watched, played with himself as the first man pulled out and came on the woman's stomach just as Uncle Chew carried the television over to me, holding it so close the images blurred a little. "Ooh, yes," the woman moaned. "Ooh, yes." But I knew as long as I didn't say anything Uncle Chew would keep the television in his mouth. He could hold it for half an hour, I would have bet on it. Plenty of time for my father to call from downstairs that we had to leave or we'd never get back to Pittsburgh before dark.

Zombies

Boys didn't get killed on the highway during the winter. A hundred and fifty inches of snow, on average, slowed them down. The drift-forming wind off the two nearby Great Lakes saved them. Even when there were three days of thaw in February, sending them out to the east–west straight stretches of highway that opened first, they survived the nightly patches of black ice, careening off in 360s that called up the stress astronauts simulate during training, but slamming, eventually, into cushions of plowed snow in front of every telephone pole and tree trunk and bridge abutment from Buffalo to Rochester.

Spring was fatality season. It sprouted a new crop of licensed drivers who hadn't yet gone over a hundred miles an hour or used the formerly drift-clogged back roads for racing. They accelerated through curves with a beer in one hand while three buddies cheered and chugged and cranked Van Halen and AC/DC.

Bon Scott Lives they carved in their desks all winter. *Teacher Leave Them Kids Alone,* they scratched out, quoting Pink Floyd in a variety of hand-designed fonts during study hall. In the spring of 1980, it was hard to make out the old messages like *Frampton Comes Alive!* and *Disco Sucks Hard Like Mr. Elmann.*

Elmann was the Spanish teacher who inspected boys' rooms while his students translated passages about the wonders of Spain and the pleasures of each season near the Mediterranean Sea. I was the English teacher with a master's degree who was looking for a job somewhere else, preferably with students more than eighteen years old. By late April, when Dave Reeder left county road 1284 and broadsided a tree directly into the driver's side door, I was losing confidence in making any sort of change besides one that was barely a step up the hill of universal education.

Reeder was killed instantly—severe blunt-force trauma. The crash

happened so late on a Saturday night the accident didn't make the paper until Monday morning, the news spreading by the ancient method of word-of-mouth.

Please Delete, it said beside his name on the absentee list when it was delivered during second period. *Deceased,* it said in parentheses. "He wasn't drinking," a boy in Dave Reeder's section explained at the beginning of class last period that afternoon. "He was mad at Shelly. They had a fight."

Shelly Kantz was absent, but the class didn't need details. They wanted to talk about how the whole disaster was passing by without a mention by the school, and I listened to them for half an hour until, with ten minutes left in the period, a woman from the office walked in and laid a short story anthology on my desk, patting it twice with her hand before she left without speaking.

Every student knew that textbook belonged to Reeder. Nobody said anything for more than a minute, and I started to think that book might levitate from being stared at by twenty-six students. And then, just after the minute hand lurched forward for the second time since that woman had exited, a girl in the first row muttered, "This fucking place fucking sucks," and the rest of the class murmured, "For sure" and "Yeah" and "Right on" before they settled and waited for me to decide where the last few minutes of this day were going.

"Sorry," the girl finally said, "but it does."

"Maybe they'll come on the P.A. now," I said. There were six minutes left before the dismissal bell.

"Not hardly," the girl said.

The minute hand lurched again. If the principal was going to ask for a moment of silence or even just mention Dave Reeder, his time had just about come and gone. "Doesn't this piss you off?" another girl said.

"Yes," I said at once, because it was not only true, it was better than saying, "Here's another life skills lesson for you, a boy's death going unacknowledged because he was the kind of student the school wished it had fewer of."

Life Skills. It's what I taught to twelfth-grade non-regents English. They learned everything from tax forms to credit card applications

to resumes. The students role-played. Some applied for loans; others approved or disapproved them, explaining the reasons in terms of collateral, interest, and income. They learned those words had something to do with them. Letters of reference. Renter's insurance. A lease. By pretending to deal with all of these nuisances, they learned the vocabulary of the everyday.

The stories they read in that anthology, one per week, called for choices—to exact revenge or not, to lie or not, to reveal the identity of a wrongdoer or not. The students talked heatedly about where lines should be drawn; they offered anecdotal evidence and considered the argument won.

And the papers they wrote, one per month, were constructed from firsthand research. They interviewed people with jobs and families, people who lived in public housing, people who worked night shifts, and those who'd been laid off. In a school the size of this one, there were enough non-regents seniors to fill five classes like the one Reeder had been in, and I taught all of them. In a community the size of ours, there were enough former non-regents students to supply oral histories about disappointment to every succeeding class.

The memorial service for Dave Reeder was Tuesday evening, held at seven o'clock so as many students as possible could attend. I counted two teachers and the vice-principal, and then I stopped looking for things to make me angry and listened to students, most of them mine, tell short, sentimental stories that featured Reeder.

Wednesday afternoon, Shelly Kantz was back in class. "Mr. Cose," she said, shifting from one foot to the other in front of my desk while the room emptied after the bell. Thin to begin with, she was so skinny now I thought she'd fasted since the moment she'd learned Reeder was dead. Eighteen, she could pass for fourteen, her rust-colored hair in tight curls that reminded me of Little Orphan Annie.

"Mr. Cose," she said again, and now that the room was empty, I said, "Sit in my chair, Shelly, if you want to talk."

She sat down so carefully, leaning on both chair arms like someone expecting pain, that I thought she'd been in an accident of

her own. When she glanced up as I pulled a graffiti-choked student desk chair close to sit in, she was crying.

Shelly told me right off that she was pregnant. "That's why we were fighting," she said. "Dave was mad and then so was I. I told him we'd talk the next day when he wasn't drinking; I told him we'd figure this out. But then . . ." Shelly paused, and I looked at where her white blouse tucked into her jeans. I thought if I lifted that blouse up I'd see the muscle definition produced by a million sit-ups.

Shelly looked at the clock above the door and then at the open door itself. "I want the baby so Dave stays alive," she said. "And I don't want the baby because I'll always see it and remember that's why he's dead." She stared at the door now as if she expected the class to return for an extra-credit session. "How do I choose?" she said. "If I wait much longer, they won't give me an abortion. And don't tell me to ask my mother. I know exactly what she'll say, so there's no sense telling her until I have to."

"Can you wait two more days?" I said. "I don't know what I'll say, but I'll say it Friday."

"Sure," Shelly said at once, "but if it's any help, every girl I've asked has said 'Have it.'" I nodded like I understood, and then she added, "And every one said name it either David or Davis when it's born."

Wednesday was my weekday night out with Claire Ellis, who I'd been seeing since Christmas break. Claire was a waitress who had off Monday and Thursday, so she considered Wednesday night a Saturday.

She'd been sitting in the Scoreboard Lounge, the bar I'd chosen among the four bunched on the two business blocks of Lissum, New York, eighteen Wednesdays ago, and here we were keeping that midweek streak alive in the Carnival Bar, two doors down from where we'd met.

"They're role-playing job interviews tomorrow," I said. "It's the highlight of the year."

"You save that one for near the end of the year to keep them coming back?"

"It's the one they practice for."

"The great motivator."

"Me and Ronald Reagan."

Claire looked puzzled, one step, I thought, from boredom. She seemed distracted by a man in a flannel shirt and jeans at the bar who I thought, by his age, might be her father. "What?" she said.

"That's what he's using as a qualification for president."

"You ought to run then," Claire said. "You play to a tougher crowd than that waxworks phony."

She glanced away again, and when I followed her look, the man was making his way toward us, taking a sip from his Genesee Cream Ale bottle, shuffling two steps, taking another sip and then shuffling. I started imagining that bottle, once he'd emptied it, breaking over my skull. "This ought to be good," Claire murmured, and then the man tilted his head back as if the cream ale had stuck to the bottom of the bottle before he came to attention and slapped the bottle down on the table next to us.

"I've been told you're Shelly's English teacher."

"Mr. Kantz?" I tried.

"You been speaking with her?"

"She's in my class."

"I mean speaking. A funny thing to be sitting down with a young girl after the last bell." He looked at Claire. "I know you. I've seen you around."

Claire nodded. "I get out some," she said. "I've lived here all my life."

"My oldest boy went to school with you. He just turned twenty-three—I heard your name at our dinner table."

"That would be Chester," Claire said.

"You have advice of your own for Shelly? You know, where she should be seen with teachers and such?"

Claire laid her hand on my arm, but Kantz looked at me. "Don't you have school tomorrow?" he said. "Or you planning to call in sick?"

"Two beers are healthy," I said, though I kept to myself the two I'd had before I'd picked up Claire and the two I intended to have before we left.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Your daughter's life is her own. I don't live in it except when she's in the building."

"My Shelly was this close to being in that car with that boy," he said, holding his thumb and forefinger nearly together. "I hear you let them kids talk about their driving and their drinking and such in that class of yours."

"We talk about a lot of things."

"You know Charlie Reeder?"

"Dave's father?"

"Stepfather. He come to school about his boy?"

"No."

"Charlie Reeder, he has a fondness for guns. You think he knows what goes on in your class. You think he'd like to know who was learning his boy the ins and outs of alcohol and him sitting over to the far window there and maybe with a problem if I go over and point you out?"

I glanced over Claire's shoulder at a man in overalls who looked the image of Jack Sprat. Despite Kantz's threat, I conjured a fat wife for Charlie Reeder, a woman astonished by the power of her husband's metabolism. "Why don't we talk after school some day when everything's settled a bit?"

"But not tomorrow? Tomorrow, you're calling in sick."

"Next week, Mr. Kantz. I'd welcome it."

"If you're not busy in there right after school."

Kantz moved away, heading toward the skin-and-bones man he'd said was Dave Reeder's father. When he passed him, he turned and grinned, and then he walked out of the bar.

"His boy's a talker," Claire said.

"The gene pool is a powerful thing."

Claire frowned. "That girl needs a baby like her father needs stupid pills."

"Is it that simple?"

Claire looked puzzled. "You asking me what I think?" she said. "Yes."

Greg Newton, the principal, called me to his office during my free period on Thursday. "Word is you have all your classes up in arms about Dave Reeder."

"Word is?"

"An assembly. They expect one."

"The students were disappointed nothing was said by the school. I let them talk."

Newton looked at me. "Are you not looking for a new position?" he said.

I hesitated and then managed, "I'm thinking about it," sounding as lame as any no-homework excuse maker.

"There's no need to be vague," he said. "This office receives calls when the process moves along."

I wanted to ask if he'd heard from someplace else besides the next county's community college, if a dean had called from a school where students stayed past their sophomore year, but I opted for a silence that could stand in for "I'm pleased to hear that."

"You've been here just these three years," Newton said, "and you're ready to move on. If you had a regents position, do you think you'd be in such a hurry?"

"I'm not applying to high schools."

"Yes. You intend to bypass the next step up. Doesn't that speak to your real feelings?"

"I'd be applying even if I had a regents job."

"Of course," Newton said. "And you with tenure just a month old." He pushed his chair away from the desk and stood up. "And if that boy had killed himself five weeks ago, would you be so bold?"

"The class is called Life Skills. Talking things out is something they should learn."

"Is there a test coming up? Do you get to correct anything?"

"Another six weeks, and they'll have all the tests they need. Those are the ones they need to pass."

Newton folded his hands and hesitated so long I thought he was preparing to ask me to pray with him. "My experience with these situations," he finally said, "shows me they move on with their lives more quickly than the regents students. There's more where that accident came from, so to speak, and it's approaching rapidly. You could disagree, I understand. But tell me, how many cases have you witnessed? The two boys last June? We were in final exam week by then. The boy your first year? He was over Easter break, so he was in the ground when we returned. And that boy two weeks later the

same year who was a regents student? He was a class officer—the students requested the tribute."

I wanted to tell him the reason why I had to leave: that I couldn't stand to lie to people like him, that I was worried I lacked the courage to be honest, and so I needed to find a place where there were fewer of his kind, or where I could start in new with the intention of being who I imagined I was.

And it wasn't just him. It was the English teachers who joked about the serious books they never read and the television sitcoms they preferred. Ernie Lauver, who talked about getting laid to the Bee Gees. "Those screechy voices get her hot for some reason. She comes faster than I do when they're singing."

"That would be instantly," Roy Stockard said. He had the English regents job; the Bee Gees lover had the history regents position.

"And you know what she says every time?" Ernie Lauver went on. "'I don't know what gets into me. You ever get like that? So wired up you don't care about anything but yourself?'"

"Did you tell her that happens to you every day at the beginning of every class?" Stockard said.

Which was one time I smiled out loud . . . which was nothing I had to do in front of Newton, because all I was required to do was not argue.

Thursday night I went to the Empire State Diner, the restaurant where Claire worked. I ordered the hot turkey sandwich and a root beer, and when she brought the drink, topping it off with no ice to cut me a break, I said, "I have an interview in Batavia next week. It's just the community college, but it's a step up if it happens."

Claire didn't look unhappy. "Good for you," she said.

"I thought you should know."

"We're not married."

"An interview's not a job offer."

"We're not committed."

I was ready to say the community college was only thirty-five miles away, that I didn't have to move in order to take the job, but I let everything suggestive of the future drop. It hadn't taken me eighteen weeks to decide Claire and I were a couple whose close-

ness depended on nothing changing. As long as we didn't move in together. As long as we saw each other three times per week. As long as each night out pointed toward sex. As long as we had food and alcohol in front of us beforehand. As long as we could talk about what had happened to us rather than what we thought.

It was a list of qualifiers in large print, but I knew I was willing to make that forty-five minute commute each day to keep things steady. The danger was that, like my students, we were both selfish enough to read those messages and then ignore them.

In the faculty room, over lunch, George Lavin, who taught chemistry and physics, watched Elmann slip into a corner chair with his brown bag before he said, "Watch out, Larry, Cose here is soliciting for the Dave Reeder memorial fund."

Elmann looked grim. I guessed he hadn't laughed at a school joke in so long he wasn't required to. "My job is that much easier these days," he said.

I lifted my turkey sandwich to give myself something to do, but Lavin wouldn't let it go. "A plaque, Larry. For the school lobby."

"We'll see about that," Elmann said, rustling his bag open as if he was frightening off the spirits of bitterness before he reached inside.

"Ten dollars," Lavin said. "Everybody's in but you, Larry."

"I'll pay to have it taken down," Elmann said.

Lavin grinned like his favorite song had just come on the radio while he was drinking in a speeding car. "The drive-in opened this week," he said. "*Dawn of the Dead.* The zombies are back. Is that an omen or what?"

Elmann fished out a tub of yogurt and a banana. He folded the bag and creased it flat before he tucked it in his pocket. A woman's lunch, I thought, but I left it to Lavin to bring something like that up to Elmann.

As Elmann peeled that banana, I remembered the afternoon Dave Reeder lit a cigarette as I approached him on the sidewalk outside of the school during final exams the year before. "School's over," he'd said. "You can't tell me what to do."

"You going to be a senior?"

"Yes."

"I'll see you in the fall."

Reeder had exhaled, watching the smoke in a way that said *Go fuck yourself.* "Maybe I'll quit," he'd said as the small cloud drifted away.

"School or smoking?"

Reeder had slipped the cigarette between his lips, letting it angle slightly down and to the side so naturally I figured him for practicing in front of a mirror. "When I'm in your class," he said, the cigarette barely bobbing as he pushed the words through his lips, "am I required to act like you're cool?"

When class ended on Friday, Shelly didn't get out of her chair. She looked even thinner, and I caught myself, as I sat in a desk across from her, wondering if a fetus would abort if the mother failed to eat enough.

"I went to the drive-in last night, Mr. Cose. A bunch of the girls thought I should go. A zombie movie. They thought it would be good for me. Zombies. It started me thinking."

I glanced toward the door, half expecting to catch her father listening. "I heard the zombies were in town during lunch today," I said. "I saw my first zombie movie when I was in college."

"Really? Are you sure? This one's new. It has to be because the zombies go to the mall where the four people still alive are hiding."

"They built a mall in my town when I was seven years old."

Shelly didn't seem to hear. "The one girl who's left alive is pregnant," she said. "It was so sad when her boyfriend turned into a zombie."

"But she gets away?"

"Yes. That was the good part." Shelly smiled like the animals do in children's books, and then she went dark and quiet. This time, when I looked toward the door, I expected Charlie Reeder and one of the guns he loved, its barrel as big around as his wrist.

"The movie I saw was called *Night of the Living Dead,*" I said. "Yours is called *Dawn of the Dead.* See?"

Shelly nodded like someone who wouldn't admit she needed a translator. "Mr. Cose," she said, "you know what? If the dead come

back they'd know who to kill. Who deserved it. They would have been watching us and they'd know."

"The zombies don't know anything," I said. "They kill everybody."

"That's a movie," she said. "In real life they wouldn't. They'd know who the liars were. They'd know who cheated and who stole and who was a pervert. All we know are the ones who get caught, like Mr. Fisher, my fourth grade teacher, with his pictures of little girls."

It came to me that Shelly's zombies would still kill everybody, but I didn't say anything, and Shelly seemed to be slowing down. In a minute, I thought, she'd ask me my opinion about the baby, but then she looked out the window and said, "There's no way the dead are allowed to see us. The longer you were dead the more you'd know about how awful people can be. It would be hell. Dave can't be watching me kill his baby."

"He won't know," I said, confident of one thing I was telling her.

Shelly stood and sidestepped into the aisle that ran along the wall. I pushed myself up, but I didn't move away from the desk. "But the baby has a soul. And when it goes to heaven, Dave would know."

"He won't blame you. He'll understand." I felt like I was going to throw up if I said another word, but then Shelly began to back toward the door, pausing for a moment with one foot in the room and one foot in the hall. "My Dad talked about you last night. He called you a sot. He said you consorted with whores. He talks like he's in the Bible when he's mad. I had to look up *sot.* I had to look up *consorted.* I think we're all going to hell, Mr. Cose."

When Claire and I each had a beer in our hands Sunday night at my apartment, I said, "Were you a regents student?"

Claire didn't say anything, as if she was trying to decide which answer I preferred, and then she said, "No. I was in a lot of classes with Chester Kantz."

"It doesn't mean anything."

"Yes, it does," she said.

"I mean in the long run."

Claire turned the beer bottle in her hand the way I'd seen women

do who hated the taste. "You know what we did when I was in senior English? British literature."

"See," I said, "you really were in the regents class."

"No. We had the same books as they did, but we skipped half of them. Instead of five poems, we read two—that sort of thing. I used to look at the other poems and wonder what those classes talked about after they read them."

She stopped turning the beer, put it down on the carpet beside the couch where we were sitting. "The teacher read the stories and poems to us," she said. "He had a nice voice. I liked listening."

When she paused, I started to tell Claire about the zombies, how every last one of them needed to eat those who were still alive. "That's so stupid," she said. "They'd run out of food and that would be the end of everything."

"The zombies don't care. They have to eat."

"If I was two years younger," Claire said, "I would have had you for English. You ever think of that?"

I nodded. "I read a review of *Dawn of the Dead* after Shelly told me the story. It said the zombies come to the mall because they remember it was a place they loved."

"We wouldn't have read any of those poems if you'd been my teacher. We wouldn't have had that book at all."

"It said the movie starts where *The Night of the Living Dead* ends, but Shelly had never heard of it."

"Neither have I." Claire picked up the beer and drank so long I thought she was trying to see if she could chug a full bottle. When she took it away from her mouth, she gasped. "Do you read to your classes?" she said.

"No," I said, and this time I waited to hear if she was going to add anything.

"What happened?" she said. "There's always survivors in monster movies. What did the last living people do?"

"They fly off in a helicopter. They want to go to a place where nobody else ever lived so there won't be any zombies." I was ready to keep going, but she stopped me.

"That's so sad," she said.

"You sound like Shelly," I said. "They get away."

"But everything's lost," Claire said. "All the dead will be forgotten except the ones that the survivors knew."

"I don't think you're supposed to think about that. It's supposed to be a happy ending. The girl is pregnant. Everything can start over."

"That's corny," Claire said. "Nobody would believe that."

"It's not that simple," I said. "The one guy who gets away isn't the father."

Claire brightened. "Good," she said. "That's better. It's so terrible I believe it."

"Maybe you should call Mr. Kantz and ask to speak with Shelly."

"They should make zombie movies for every time of day," Claire said. *"Noon of the Zombies. Twilight of the Zombies."* She laughed, and then she leaned toward me and said, "You should read to those kids in your classes."

"Not really."

She straightened again, and though I didn't catch her at it, I thought she'd sat up to see the clock on the wall behind me. "No wonder you want to change jobs," she said then. "You think everything's a metaphor, even that stupid movie."

She stared at me as if the word *jerk* was condensing out of the vapor of doubts she had about me. Suddenly, everything I had prepared myself to teach to college students seemed as boring as Adam and Eve flying a helicopter to Eden.

"Chester Kantz always let me drive," Claire said. "He knew he'd get home alive with me at the wheel." Claire finished her beer, sucking at the foam stuck to the inside of the bottle before she hissed, "Life skills," without taking it from her mouth.

"None of this is my fault," I said.

"You could have told Shelly to have the baby."

"It's better for her to decide."

Claire set the bottle on the carpet and stood so she was looking down at me. "You could have told Mr. Kantz you were ready to settle up with him right there."

"You pressed on my arm."

"That was to shut you up," Claire said, stepping behind the couch so I had to lean back to see her.

"I don't get it."

She vanished then, either ducking down or retreating, and when I arched up, leaning farther, I heard her murmur, "Because I knew whatever you were going to say wouldn't settle anything at all," the words sounding as if they were seeping through the wall.

Natural Borders

When Buck Keister and his former nun of a wife, Merle, took to riding their his-and-her motorcycles naked, word got around so quickly it was as if a suicide watch was posted. Folks found reasons for themselves to be out the county road and all along those unpaved local lanes that crisscrossed the reclaimed strip mines where Buck Keister had set his trailer a quarter-century ago just after the coal played out.

Excuses for such drives were necessary if Buck and Merle were to be eyeballed by the reliable, an honest-to-God confirmed sighting, not another rumor like the years-old one about blood sacrifices of cats and chickens inside those spray-painted red pentagrams in the back parking lot of the boarded-up elementary school.

"Merle had some catching up to do" was how most neighbors saw it. And she'd surely chosen a righteous path to follow for that when she married Buck; he'd been left by two wives, who were unwilling to see that trailer on uncertain land, and the possible mayhem Buck brought to them, as the last stop on their life's tour.

Maybe it was something about Buck being the tallest man in the county. Shot up as a teenager towards those heights you only hear about during basketball games telecast from cities nowhere near our stretch of the woods. Buck had made the down payments on the motorcycles. He'd been seen giving Merle pointers, as understanding, it looked like, as any well-heeled golf pro at the three private courses tucked into the prosperous corners of the county.

The naked part, according to some, had been Merle's way of keeping Buck sober. Once she'd got the hang of things, she'd seen her chance to raise Buck's bet of speed, power, and danger with sex. And what's more, she had Buck lugging her arts and crafts all over Pennsylvania, sitting for hours in booths they rented to sell sliced

and varnished cross sections of tree trunks Buck harvested from the oldest of the coal company restock.

Some had landscapes pressed on. Some deer or eagles. The kind of scenes most folks display on the sides of vans. Mostly, she turned them into clocks. "Good for Merle" was what most said about her way with wood. She didn't put smut under those big and little hands; Buck set up and took down, so it slowed his drinking down some, fidgeting in a chair or slurping Cokes and checking the other booths for ideas and prices.

The story got out, though, that it looked like he'd turned into a darkness drinker, swallowing that first gorgeous beer as the blue blinked out toward Ohio, another festival ended on the outskirts of a town loaded with antique stores, tie-dyed shirt shops, and three sidewalk restaurants where you couldn't get anything but flavored coffee and sweetened dough. What's more, you watch fifty sets of those clock hands stand still all day, and anybody'd get antsy.

"Hey Buck," I heard Roy Hollenbach at the hardware say last week. "I hear you're Buck naked now."

"Before God," Buck said, "like everybody."

"You giving him more than a fair chance to size you up."

"You run that fat woman of yours out-of-doors and see if it don't get her to leaving dessert to the kids."

Roy shook his head, knowing the truth, but Buck looked a bit peaked to me, like that nun of his was going to roll over more than her months-old Harley.

And who am I to speak? My wife, Dorene, buys things with the Coca-Cola label on them. Doesn't matter what, long as it's got those words in that old-fashioned script they use. "Bill Hauck," she says each time she catches me looking funny, "you just don't know the pleasures of gathering."

I grunt some but leave her be. Coca-Cola shirts, they're common. Coca-Cola lamps, they're everywhere. But you have to be hunting to find six different waste cans, four different picture frames, all those little jars filled with spices and what-not. And those weeble-wobble people she owns, families of them dressed in Coca-Cola outfits from around the world. Russians, Dutch, Italians, all dressed up like they were about to folk dance a tribute to sugar and water.

Buck's wife, that nun, she sat me down over coffee four days back and started telling me about giants. Buck's a big man, she said, big enough to turn most men's faces up to him, but the Bible tells us that the big don't fare well in life.

"You know about Goliath?" she said, beginning like an evangelist, and then, backpedaling from whatever she saw in my face, "Of course, excuse me."

"That's okay," I said. "I couldn't make him out, them figuring him in cubits."

"And spans," Merle said. "Nine and a half feet to as much as eleven, depending on whose arms and hands were doing the calculating."

"That kind of measuring makes a man any size you want him remembered as," I said right off, thinking that might bother Merle some, my complaining, but she was set on something else.

"It's the Nephilim that's most interesting," she said, "the angels who wanted to sleep so badly with women they gave up heaven."

"That's one I understand," I said.

"Do you now?" she said, smiling so I wouldn't take offense. "Their sons were the big boys of Genesis. They were the original 'giants in the earth.' And no sooner they grew up than the Great Flood ended all of that nonsense."

I considered on that, whether or not those giants were such a reminder to God about the power of lust that he said "enough."

"Buck is just six-foot-eight in his bare feet. You can't count the soles of his boots when you measure a man." I didn't say anything. She was leading me somewhere, and I gave her enough room so I could step off that path if need be.

When she started up again, she was, it looked to me, in a different part of the forest: "I was officially a nun," she said, "if you want to know, for exactly one thousand days. I kept at it those last weeks just to make the round number. It was nothing else but vanity took me most to the end of that third year. I was long past seeing myself as the property of God."

"That's no territory of mine."

"Isn't it now?"

"You come by our way, Sheriff," Merle said. "You'll see how Buck's

gotten the Lord in him stirring up his insides over what he has title to."

When I got home, Roy Hollenbach's wife was heading to her car carrying matching Coca-Cola mugs. "Look here, Bill," she said, "aren't these cute as a baby's smile?" I gave her my version of a grin, not cute at all I could tell, and watched her turn her back to the Ford before dropping into the front seat, both of her thick legs swinging out from under her at the same time, the faint whoosh squeezing out of the seat, sounding like what you'd hear in a last-breath nightmare.

These last weeks Dorene's taken to giving away her Coca-Cola things. To everybody who visits, for starters. As if she was repaying them for kindness. And her with her nurse's job for the baby doctor, spreading Coca-Cola all over the county like it was the name of infant formula. "Maybe," she said, "they'll remember at election time the sheriff is married to the woman who loves Coca-Cola."

"'The Sheriff,' they'll be thinking, 'lives with a crazy woman,'" I said.

"Crazy's who keeps everything to herself. Crazy locks it all up and puts in alarms to let her know thieves are interested in her key chains and mugs."

I thought about Merle and her Bible stories. "Crazy's the woman who gives up God for the tallest drunk in the county."

"Don't you imagine God as tall," Dorene said.

"I can't imagine him at all," I said. "He might as well be wearing that Coca-Cola sweat shirt that promised peace, love, and harmony to the whole world if only all of us would shove our coins into the soda machine."

The next afternoon I swung out County Road 4012. I didn't have a reason to stop. I didn't have a reason to be up their dirt lane. So I wasn't surprised Buck bounded out of the trailer. "You know you're trespassing there, Sheriff. Just cause I drive across my front yard don't mean that patrol car of yours can go any whichaway."

"You fussy about your lawn now?" I said. "Besides, if someone was to come around, would you know where your property line starts and stops?"

Buck spit and took three steps and spit again. "There's a property line—me standing here saying it's so."

"Dogs do that, Buck. They piss and move on and think every dog will respect their mark."

"It's money you're talking about."

"It's the law."

"Yeah, right. I'm talking about protecting what's mine."

He nodded back at the trailer as if I'd know what that signal meant. I saw Merle step into the doorway carrying her motorcycle helmet and wearing a robe. The sight of her made me look at Buck again, his loose shorts and undershirt, his helmet already looped over a handlebar. Buck smiled then and pulled his shirt over his head. For a man who drank too much, he kept after his stomach and chest muscles. I thought if I wanted to see them naked I had only to stand there like a chained dog.

Buck backed up until he was maybe six steps from the trailer, Merle and the cycles just behind him. "Right about here is line-drawing time," he said. "The rest can sink."

Merle touched the velvet belt that was looped around her robe. She looked as much a former nun as any of the women who welcomed the fallen angels of Genesis.

"You know," Buck said, "there's always a way to set up natural borders."

"Fences," I said. "Dogs."

"Beehives," Buck said. "There's them who does it."

Merle climbed on her motorcycle with a flourish, that robe sliding up her bare thigh as if she'd decided to invite me to ride behind her. "Dried cornstalks," Buck went on. "You step in them and you're heard forever."

"I imagine."

"Mint," Buck said. "You think of that one, Sheriff? A prowler steps in mint and he's good as caught. You smell him out and kick his ass, and he knows he's brought on his own deserving."

That night at dinner Dorene shook her head. "Buck couldn't keep a dog off his property."

I thought of how I'd looked in the mirror while I drove off Buck's yard that afternoon. I thought of Merle tossing that robe behind her

as her cycle crossed that line Buck saw underfoot. "Back where I grew up," Dorene went on, "fellow thought up using a hedge as a wall."

"We have a hedge, Dorene. Neighbor kids jump it."

"Not this stuff. It has long, skinny needles that rip you easy as pie. It gets way up to twenty feet or more, thick and scary with those thorns. So thick it stops a jeep. Government came down to take a look. They were thinking terrorists."

"It doesn't grow this far north, I take it."

"I don't know. Never seen anything like it except in Tennessee. But you want to let nobody through, there's plenty of ways to choose from."

I nodded and lifted a Coke from the refrigerator. Dorene smiled. "I ought to give Merle a Coca-Cola gift," she said. "Maybe start her towards something."

The following day I had reason to trespass out to the strip mine. Merle had managed to phone in an official invite before I heard Buck holler for her to "put that fucking phone down."

Buck was outside the trailer, dressed, I was happy to see, and Merle fully clothed as well, but things had gone so poorly since Merle's call he had a gun up to her head and his arm wrapped around her throat from behind, just like I'd seen in a hundred movies. In every one of those movies, the lawman figures out a way to disable the crazy guy, but I couldn't remember one of them right off just then, when I needed to. I'd never fired my gun at anything but paper targets and tin cans. The only psychology I had faith in was making the punishment fit the crime, and right then it looked like it was up to me whether I was working toward the death penalty or locking down Buck for a month or two of rehab courtesy of the county. Worst of all, some horse's ass in a dirt-crusted pickup took to parking a hundred yards over to the woods, so Buck knew he was on the grapevine.

"I need your help here, Buck," I said. "I'm looking for a way to save Merle and you at the same time."

"I don't want to be saved," Buck said, but Merle held her peace.

"Everybody wants to be saved."

"That's exactly the problem."

"You want to be different."

"A man's got to have something just his. All I got is my own way to damnation."

Merle was getting to me with her quietude. Somebody in her position, seemed to me, should be offering up her own version of a solution. "You married a nun," I said, inviting her into the dialogue.

"Yes, I did. I saved her from hell fire. She was living in sin, her with her vows and all."

"You fooling with her when she was still a sister?" I said, Merle's silence starting to do me in.

"There's no make-up for things I've done. I might as well be dead shooting Merle," Buck said. "And I might as well be dead facing anybody but the blind, deaf, and dumb when the word gets out on this here state of affairs." He squinted off to his right toward that truck I hoped would turn pillar of salt, and then he looked Merle in the eyes so long I thought he might be working toward goodbye, Merle giving him back a stare, until he said, "And I might as well be dead if I lay this gun down like the all-time jackass of Sharpersville."

There it was, what the union and management people call an impasse. Buck saw himself the fool any which way, and it seemed uncertain if he was going to pick the least of his evils.

"It's Merle you have to live with, Buck. You're not under the same roof as the citizens of Sharpersville."

"That don't make it easier."

"Merle's likely as anybody to be the forgiving kind," I said, my face flushing so fast I thought Buck would read it as a signal to stop this foolishness and shoot me for lying. And rightly so, I thought, as he drew the gun away from Merle and swung it halfway in my direction before he knelt to lay it on the packed earth.

"I deserve these handcuffs, Sheriff," Buck said at the station. "I need to wear them until Merle has a mind to speak again."

"Give her time."

"It's looking more and more I've a mind to do everything wrong."

"You put that gun down, Buck. You did that right."

"I don't rightly think so. That was another lie."

"Nobody means something like that, Buck."

"There's one of them eternal circles, then," Buck said. He shifted his eyes away from me and fixed on the wall. "You got one of Merle's clocks," he said.

I smiled and followed Buck's look. "That's right, Buck."

"You just one fucking liar, Sheriff. That there's store-bought. You can see it for your own self if you stick your nose behind it and pry it away from the wall."

What is it that we bring ourselves to do sometimes? I clipped Buck a good one alongside his ear where his beard stubble turned into the bristles of where sideburns would start if he ever had a mind to them. He didn't seem to have paid one bit of attention to that billy club, but now he said "Unhh," and his hands lifted and jammed on the cuffs, letting me choose which part of him I wanted next.

I rammed that billy point-first into his belly, driving it up into the solar plexus like we learned twenty-five years ago when the long-hairs were asking for it. I lifted him a little because I had the time to get my legs behind that jab. Buck sat down where there wasn't a chair. With his hands cuffed behind him, he just rocked back like a baby and went feet-up. I waited, but Buck was focused somewhere above my head. "I had that coming, Sheriff," he said at last. "We're all square now."

"See?" Dorene declared when I told her the news, and then she started sweeping it under the table by saying, "You know why polio erupted in modern times?"

"We're not old enough for polio," I said. "They did the Salk the year I was born and I'm older than you."

"Because things became too clean."

"That doctor just wants to boost his business."

"This has nothing to do with him. It was on the television this last hour."

"Everybody knows then."

"PBS," she said. "It's still a secret. We used to be exposed when we were babies, mild cases made us immune later on when we needed to be. And then we cleaned things up."

"What things?"

"Fecal matter."

"Shit?"

"You become a nun, you ought to stay a nun," Dorene said. "There's things worse than polio you need to know early."

In the morning I heard Buck taking his forearms to the holding cell wall. He was right-handed, and after a while I could call the right, then the left, as it thudded, because he threw himself behind his blows better with the right. For sure, what a jackass, I thought, and then, after I'd listened for longer than I expected, I started hoping each thud was the last one and that I'd never hear that sound again.

He wasn't going to hurt that wall, but he was strong enough to make me imagine a groan starting to hum inside it. When I placed myself in front of the bars to put a stop to those thumps, Buck picked up the copy of *The Book of Lists* Dorene had me put in each cell—"to calm their souls," she'd said—and held it open to me. "This here fella's a sight bigger than any of Merle's Bible people," Buck said. He pointed at a picture of a man named Robert Wadlow. "He got himself big and then he up and died."

So Buck had heard the gospel of giants, too, but I had to admit the guy in the picture looked the part of a world's record; it said right there he was eight feet, eleven inches. The parents of Robert Wadlow were standing beside him, looking up as if they'd never seen their son before. "How did they manage?" I said.

Buck whistled between his teeth. "That's you, all right, Sheriff. You and your woman with no kids so the two of you try to take care of the world for other peoples' children."

"Yours are long gone, Buck."

"But they're mine. And here you are knowing the grown men of this world are past help, so you and the missus work on the young. You have yourself kids you'd know there's no saving them from themselves neither."

"That's my lookout, Buck," I said.

Buck kept up with that whistling, shrill and thin, like he was talking to dogs. "Head up, eyes open, Sheriff. That's the ticket."

"You want to make yourself bigger?" I said. I studied Buck until I saw him glance at my holstered gun. "You look up in there the one about the man who could grow himself. Six inches. He just heaved himself up somehow, breathed different, shrugged his shoulders and tensed his muscles."

"Bullshit," Buck said, but he was turning pages, looking down and then up at me like a child who'd been caught pretending he could read.

Dorene was the expert on all those lists, but I'd taken a mind to this fellow. "It says right in there he didn't use lifts in his shoes. It seems there's plenty of parts of yourself you can work upwards."

"Meaning?"

"Hips. Knees. Chest. Throat."

Buck stopped thumbing the pages and thought it over. "I could easy make seven feet that way," Buck said.

"Pretty near, I imagine."

"Pretty goddamn near. I don't have to be no expert. I don't need the whole six inches or whatnot."

"Control, Buck. That's what all this is about."

He tossed the book onto the cot, and it flopped open to the pages about unusual deaths of celebrities. "I never raised a hand to none of my women," Buck said. "I ain't started now neither."

"Nobody said anything about raising a hand, Buck."

"It don't matter what's been said. It don't ever matter what's been said."

"That's got the rightness of common sense," I said. "Surely it does. But nobody's thinking that way either."

"Lying's what you got to swear to for that badge."

"You raised a gun to Merle," I said. "You put that weapon behind her ear like she was an old dog."

"That don't bruise her none. It don't raise a welt or break a bone. It's over when it's over."

"Meaning Merle and myself ought to see that gun as a sort of verbal abuse."

Buck nodded. "That's it exactly. The gun's just talking. It don't mean any harm."

"There's words in this world we can't ever take back, Buck."

"I surely know that, Sheriff," Buck said, seeming to settle. He stepped back from the bars and looked up at the ceiling as if he expected it to pop open like a beer can.

"Consider on that, then," I said.

He made a gun with his index finger and thumb, pointed it at me. "A man takes nothing back, Sheriff. You either know that or you turn into one sorry sack of shit," and he held that gun on me until I turned and walked back into my office.

When Merle showed up before noon, I closed off the door between my office and the cells. Buck didn't need to be encouraged right off. She didn't need to hear him if he took a mind to put a fresh series of forearm shivers to his wall. "You don't have to follow the church on this one," I said.

"Everything has a reward in the eyes of God," Merle said. "When I sang in the junior choir, I got candy. When I vowed I loved Mary the mother of Christ, repeating the exact words of the priest, I got a reduced price, Three Rivers Stadium grandstand ticket, and a seat on the parish bus to nine innings with the Knothole Gang on Saturday afternoon."

"I remember those trips," I said, swimming through the syrup of our nostalgia.

Merle brightened. "You a Pirate fan?" she said.

"We lived too far for Pittsburgh," I said. "The only time one of our bus trips went the hundred miles was to the Police Circus at the Hunt Armory. I'd made a fire scene poster, and my mother paid three dollars to enter my safety slogan in a contest. So I got a pass to the circus, a bag lunch with grapes and a bologna and cheese sandwich I heaved out the bus window when we pulled out of Altoona. Before we boarded that bus, all of us poster kids had to listen to fire lessons, the consequences of smoking in bed or playing with the pilot light or toying with the shiny red can for gasoline."

"Lucky you," Merle said. "All my lessons were about eternal flames. Hell was a kind of scoreless tie, inning after inning of three-up, three-down, because God was a fireballer who could smoke them past sinners forever."

Merle laughed then. "Father Joe was a fan," she said. "You wonder

how even a child could have believed such silliness." She looked at the clock on my wall as if she were deciding something. "Buck wears diapers when he's into the bottle," Merle said.

"Nobody does that," I said. "I'd quit drinking altogether before I put up with that kind of humiliation."

"It cuts down on wasted time when he's shooting pool and such," she said. "That's the philosophy of Pampers."

"You buy him the baby kind?"

"Drinking's his own purchase, Sheriff. He can't bring himself to buy Depends. People would get the wrong idea."

I measured around Buck's waist in my head and decided Merle was giving me a test I was about to fail. "There's no baby has half Buck's big ass," I said.

Merle glanced at the closed door. "He's got adhesive tape for that, Sheriff. The double width. It doesn't come away easy off a man's skin."

I went home for lunch. I couldn't sit in that office with Buck's empty cell and the sight of the two of them disappearing into Buck's old ratty Chevy. "It's not Buck getting out got you down," Dorene said right off.

I put my feet up on the chair opposite me at the kitchen table, and Dorene leaned on that chair. "Buck ran off at the mouth about us not having children made us ignorant of our good intentions."

"We had children," Dorene said at once.

"Most would say miscarriage."

"We gave them names. Stephanie. Stacey. You don't give names to blood in the toilet. You give names to babies."

"They were too early, Dorene. Even for science."

Dorene drew her hair up with both hands and held it so long I thought she meant for me to fetch something to tie it with. When she pulled it tighter, that hair looked stretched for shearing. "That cruel bastard," she finally said, "him knowing I delivered two dead girls. And you letting him go."

"I don't make the law."

"Listen to yourself. You sound like a television sheriff."

"It's Merle has to live with him."

"Lucky her. We have to live with ourselves."

"Enough, Dorene," I said.

"It surely was," Dorene said. She leaned across the table, her hair tumbling back down as she tested my Coke can with her hand. "You want another?" she asked, and when I shook my head, she carried the empty to the sink. "The girls would have loved their Coca-Cola," she said, holding the can under the faucet. "They'd be that age right now when you practically carry a Coke with you all day."

Six hours later the dispatcher had me heading out County Road 4012. "Trailer fire," she said, "fully engaged."

Nobody but a stranger would have thought anything but Buck and Merle, though I was making a list, one by one, of the other trailers out that way. Six, I came up with, and more to come if I'd had the time to recollect before I saw Merle step out of the scrub oak and sumac, staring at my cruiser as if she expected to mental-telepathy it into a four-wheel drift.

A stone's throw up ahead was the elbow joint of a curve where that girl who was such a cheerleader killed herself and nearly four others speeding into the sycamore been standing guard since before cars were a twinkle in God's eye. Merle didn't know that, more than likely. Less than two years out there, half of it spent at carnivals. She didn't know anything except what Buck let on was important.

"I knew you'd be coming by," she said.

"That's what I do."

"It's not anything like you think," she said.

"We got to be checking to find out which way we're thinking."

I was hoping Buck wasn't in that trailer as much or more than Merle might have been at that moment. Or leastways Merle was maybe about to tell me the census had dropped a notch the last hour gone by, because Buck had up and thrown his own self in among his television and Lazy Boy, that all she'd done was start things up and let Buck decide where they were going.

I'd seen the aftermath of trailer fires before, the rubble so folded up on itself you think of people who drive those tiny cars at high

speeds, the consequences of economy. You were out of there immediately, TV or no TV, or you were in there forever. Anybody eyewitness to a trailer fire wouldn't lay down to sleep without twice checking every source of possible fire.

The weakening daylight didn't keep me from sniffing gasoline. I got out and came around to the passenger side. "I smell like it, but I didn't burn him up," Merle said. "Ask me right out—I'm not going to lie to you."

"That's good, Merle. Truth is what we need right now."

"A body's got only one cheek to turn, Sheriff. Isn't that right?"

"I don't recollect Jesus like I oughta."

"One side and then the other, Sheriff. You look at yourself and see if I'm right."

"I'm thinking on that Bible story, Merle. There's more to it than that. God's not that easy."

"You keep that up, Sheriff, and you'll be running for priest. Folks always have a mind to elect somebody makes everything seem hard."

Merle leaned back against the door, lifting her arms above her head like a flirting schoolgirl. For a moment, I watched the way her breasts lifted inside her thin sweater and imagined her on a motorcycle, more than those few inches of stomach exposed. Mosquitoes were rising into the twilight. Merle slapped at the side of her neck, and she folded her arms where the material settled back down over her stomach.

"What are you thinking, Sheriff," she said. "We ride in that car of yours, we'll both be naked?"

"Not this minute, I'm not," I said. "Right now I'm thinking differently."

She tugged at the sweater, drew the toe of her shoe through the roadside dust. "Buck says he owns all the way to here if he says so."

I looked past her into the woods. It was more than a hundred yards straight through to Buck's clearing. I heard a siren skidding our way, but I was thinking about what sort of booby traps a man like Buck would use to border his privacy.

"You're misunderstanding," I said.

"But you want to know if Buck's dead."

I heard the fire truck brake a bit as it passed, getting ready for that curve, but I didn't look at it, not even when whoever was driving honked. "No," I said, keeping my eyes on the woods behind her, "that's not what I want to know."

The light was different now, as if the fire a quarter mile up the road or a hundred yards through the woods had taken the shadows out of the air. I breathed awkwardly, almost panting. Fire fed on oxygen, I thought, and then I squinted at the sun just above the tree line, where the head and shoulders of giants would reach if they chose to reveal themselves.

Don't Breathe . . . Breathe

Larry French stepped out of the shower, dried himself, turned toward the toilet and sucked his breath suddenly inward as if the world had turned jalapeño. "Hunnhh," he hummed, letting it out, the pain a bullet in his lower back. Don't go down, he thought, his knees on the carpet, his hands gripping the sink while his teeth ground and the explosion in his left kidney drove its firestorm into his skull.

"Go away," he heard himself mumble, but this thing wasn't listening. "Kim," he croaked then. "Kim."

The bathroom door opened so quickly he marveled at the power of agony. "What's wrong?" his wife asked exactly like she should.

"I'm in some trouble here," he outlined.

"What kind?"

"Kidney stones," he declared like a burning bush.

"What do you mean, kidney stones?"

French was certain his wife would go to hell questioning the obvious. They would meet within the flames, and she'd ask, "Are you here, too?"

"Call somebody," he said. "Call anybody," he added, clarifying himself. He was trying to pull on his underpants from behind, dragging them up to his knees where they jammed and bunched. How sordid, he thought, to get caught naked by disaster.

French treadmilled on his knees. He stood hunched like someone modeling a fossil found in Kenyan rock, and partially clothed, worked his way to the bedroom to flop among the laundry piles his wife had stacked there. While Kim pushed buttons on the phone, he began to chew one of the unmatched sweat socks to keep from humiliating himself further by screaming.

What he reminded himself to tell his wife when he recovered was she never shifted the Celica into fifth gear during the trip to

the hospital. Twenty miles of open road, and she'd run the car at sixty in fourth gear. He thought she drove too close to the edge of the highway, that because she glanced over at him two or three times a minute, she was not allowing herself enough margin for the moment her hands would pull right with her eyes. His kidney was settling into aftershocks; by the time they arrived at the emergency room, he regretted not thinking to bring an oldies tape along for the ride home.

Kim checked him in, handled the Blue Cross formalities. On the wall across from where he sat to wait hung a sign that said Don't Take Your Organs to Heaven.

"No problem," he thought. It seemed to him that his life had put him in compliance. He settled back in his chair and estimated he'd be waiting at least an hour because the hallway was lined with the quiet and the resigned.

"Larry French," a nurse said. Kim was still busy with forms—what a coincidence, he thought, looking for his namesake among the patients. "Larry French, please," she repeated, and when no one answered, he got up to follow her like some oaf whose reflexes had been slowed by an overdose of bad genes.

She put him through the same preliminaries he'd received for a dozen routine checkups. His blood pressure was locked at 126/80 like it had been for ten years; his pulse was seventy-two. If the nurse stood him on the scale, she'd learn he was six feet, two inches tall, and 205 pounds—ten pounds more than he'd weighed in college, the same size sweaters and pants for twenty years. There were days he wore shirts from college to work—pin stripes, whites—he'd seen the reappearance of madras, paisley. Instead, however, the nurse sent him to collect a urine sample, and when he returned, astonished by the absence of pain, she directed him to a room where a man was already lying on one table, leaving a second one for him, a curtain drawn between them.

Kim entered with a doctor who looked young enough to be working his way through his first day on the job. She was carrying a magazine called *Country Woman,* and though the model on the cover wasn't wearing a coonskin cap or a peasant dress, there was no reason to believe his wife had any intention of reading

one word inside its covers unless he lapsed into months of coma. "Larry," the doctor began, like someone who'd just flown in from Zanzibar, "what seems to be the problem?"

"Kidney stones."

"Oh?"

What did they write on the forms they carried? "Or a synonym," French said.

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

French was baffled again. "I thought perhaps you didn't appreciate self-diagnosis."

"It is a risky venture," the doctor said. He appeared annoyed, as if he wanted to withdraw from the case. "Well," he finally restarted, "on a scale of one to ten, ten being the worst, how would you number the pain you experienced earlier?"

"Ten."

The doctor smiled. At once, French was sure there were many worse tortures, that someday his body would signal "ten squared," and he would be begging for a gun, for an overdose of morphine, for a high-rise window to leap from. Behind the curtain the other patient was saying, "I drink my beer most nights. I smoke my pack and some a day." French hypothesized his imminent list of vices, itemizing the evils that might account for his agony.

A woman in orange materialized in the doorway. "I'll be with you again in a while," the doctor said, the woman replacing him, and suddenly French wanted to apologize, to say, "I don't know what it is, doctor, but the pain was something awful."

Kim rolled *Country Woman* into a flyswatter; she tapped it on her knee while the woman in orange unloaded her cart. "I need to set up an IV," the woman said, and French understood that he was not leaving in ten minutes with a lecture to drink more fluids. He heard his father putting off seeing a doctor; he heard him refusing to enter a hospital. "People never get really sick till they go in the hospital," he'd explained. "You ever notice that? People get along just fine till the doctors get them in there and start finding things."

The woman in orange was finding things. She was reading his apprehension from his tensed arm. "It's routine," she claimed. "It's nothing."

"I may give you trouble," he volunteered. "I have anxiety attacks when I feel vulnerable."

"It doesn't hurt."

"It's not the pain, it's the uncertainty."

"Just a little prick, and then it's all taken care of."

He was panting as she probed. She stabbed his arm where it folded at the elbow. Immediately, she fluttered and settled, fluttered and settled and said, "This vein doesn't want to work for us." French was sweating and searching through his file of images to find a way to leave this room.

"Are you okay?" she said then, confirming that he'd turned pale, that his eyes were losing their sense of occupancy.

"I'm working at it."

As if that made sense, she nodded. She looped around his body and took his other arm. "Let me try your hand," she said, and he began to cut grass, the mower tracing diagonals across his lawn. He turned and retraced the path, keeping so close to parallel the grass would look ruled. "There now," he heard during his third swath. "See?" He kept his head down, following the pattern he'd established. He did not want to observe anything gurgling into his body from inside a bag; he could not ask why he needed to be fed like someone climbing a critical list.

"We're going to take some X rays," the woman announced then. To Kim she suggested the coffee shop, a newspaper, another issue of *Country Woman* if that could busy her for an hour. Kim nodded, forfeiting whatever questions she was allowed. "See you later," she said, replaced by a man with a ponytail who had to be there, French was positive, to wheel him down the hall. In the hierarchy of hairstyles, this was an orderly. Who would believe, he thought, that employees of this hospital emitted such signals? That the people entrusted with his life were extensions of the high school castes that thrust through succeeding generations?

The woman in orange followed as he rolled. "Do you have an allergy to iodine?" she asked.

Childhood cuts, he thought, and went blank as a noble savage. "How would I know?" he said.

"How about seafood allergies?"

"No."

"You're probably okay then."

He locked onto "probably." He translated it into odds while an X-ray technician explained the IVP she'd been instructed to run on him, how the iodine solution would illuminate his X rays, how the pictures were staggered in intervals that would pin him under the machinery for an hour or more. "There are people who occasionally react to the iodine," she finished.

French had no difficulty interpreting "react." Muscle spasms, he thought. Convulsions. Seizures. Death. He began to recite his anxiety confession. "It's okay," she said. "We'll be monitoring your reaction. If you have difficulty, we can flush the solution out." He nodded like the brainwashed. "Look," she began, "here are the things you should expect to feel. They're all perfectly normal." He stared upward at her eyes as if they were television cameras filming his emergence from five years of prisoner-of-war camp. The world, he could tell, had been lurching forward all along.

Minutes later he felt the rush of iodine solution turn his arm cold from the inside out. "Zero at the bone," he remembered from some poem. Emily Dickinson, he guessed. Or Elizabeth Bishop. Some woman writer.

He was happy to have a puzzle. As soon as his body began to warm the way the technician had forewarned, his breathing went shallow, his palms turned clammy, his heart threatened to stall, and all of the female writers he'd ever been force-fed turned into crones on a heath. The next set of symptoms, he knew, would be either absent or, if he was allergic, itching, hives, his skin taut and telling him the aliens had arrived and were gathering to plug his autonomic systems. "Doing okay?" the technician asked.

"Uh-huh," he lied, seeing himself hitting a spin serve kicking high to the backhand, following it to the net to knock off a forehand volley. They were natural images to repeat. He'd been serving and volleying that morning, and now he concentrated on the pattern, the open court his shots created, the solution to the geometry of tennis. From the speaker somewhere behind him, he heard Bobby McFerrin croon "Don't worry, be happy," and for all French knew, the song was part of a tape loop designed by a consulting firm.

He told himself to listen later, once the iodine had proved it wasn't lethal, to catch whether or not the McFerrin jingle would be followed by commercials or more upbeat musical promises. "We Shall Overcome," he thought. "The Ballad of the Green Berets." "Deck of Cards." "The Desiderata." He regulated his heart with the titles on his list. "If you want to be happy for the rest of your life, never make a pretty woman your wife," he sang to himself, his life extending, the technician saying "There" and fleeing to stand behind a wall of lead while she flooded his midsection with radiation.

An hour later, when the ponytailed man rolled him back down the hall, the doctor he'd spoken with was clipping an X-ray photo on a screen. French, staring as the orderly wheeled him by, saw nothing but shadow and light and confirmation he had all the things inside him that guaranteed mortality. He wasn't a comic book character, someone whose X rays revealed machinery, computers, the solid-state connections that said life went on and on.

Kim hadn't returned to her chair. The orderly aligned French's table with the wall, checked the IV connection, and left him to name more tunes. The man from the other bed, on his feet now, dressed and holding an unlit cigarette, pulled the curtain between them back halfway. "Life's a pisser, ain't it?" he offered.

"From time to time," French hazarded.

"Woke up this morning and my leg was gone," the man said. "Hip to toe so cold you'd think it was packed in ice like a big old fish." The man put the cigarette in his mouth, pulled it out and stared at it. "Spots on my foot. Spots on my ankle. I sure as hell knew I was in for it."

"Sounds like a circulation problem," French lobbed.

"You can bet on that, fella. I had myself an artificial artery put in that leg two months ago. The real one was crooked somehow. 'What do you mean "crooked"?' I said at the time, and now look what I got myself. I bet they got me one more crooked thing in there now. They got that thing all bent to hell like it was a straw some little kid's been fooling around with all during his school lunch."

The man dropped the cigarette into his shirt pocket. "You should have seen me putting on heavy socks, pulling on my pants, trying to

get that leg warm. The wife thought I was nuts, but then she figured it all out. Don't take no genius, but I don't know what they got in mind for me now."

French thought he knew. He thought they'd wheel him to the operating room as fast as they could and open that leg for repairs. Maybe nothing here took no genius. He'd told himself "kidney stone" before his knees hit the floor of the bathroom; he knew before the doctor returned that he'd be prepped for the inevitable recurrence of pain that would signal the resolution of his problem.

So when the doctor popped back in, Kim trailing behind, he was ready to tolerate the obvious until the doctor waved him home. "We'll have you out of here in a few minutes," he began exactly as he should.

French smiled. The other patient gave him a high sign. The doctor initiated the catalog of routine therapies—pissing through a sieve, gulping extra liquids. And when he finished, he added, "However, we've detected an abnormality we want to investigate further."

Every pore opened. French went dizzy with the understanding his life would end before the man with the bionic leg. "Probably unrelated to the attack you've had today," the doctor said, "a cyst on the kidney. It may be nothing but collected fluids, but we need to investigate."

For cancer, he thought. The pain in his lower back was pulsing the flashing red of *stop*. He could not speak. "Most likely it's a benign condition," the doctor said. "There's no sign from your tests that it's likely to be otherwise. We'll schedule an ultrasound to get a clearer look."

"Today?" French managed.

"Unfortunately, we don't have the capability today. We'll set you up for the first thing Monday morning. Any questions?"

The IV hung heavy as malignancy. Already it seemed familiar, something he'd adjusted to as readily as glasses. "What's a worst case?" he said.

"Polycystitis. The kidneys are attacked by multiple cysts, which ultimately leads to kidney failure. But that isn't likely. The cysts would most likely appear simultaneously on both kidneys. Your other one looks good."

So it was cancer, French concluded, one tumor in one kidney, shards of crazed cells breaking off and drifting though his blood looking for new homes. He hadn't expected an answer. He'd expected an "I wouldn't worry if I were you" pat on the head, and now he was listening to his right kidney to hear the first eruptions. "We can send you home now," the doctor said, and then, opening a cabinet and holding out a set of funneled strainers, "party hats."

His wife laughed. It sounded to French like hysteria, but she would tell him she believed in the favorable odds set by the doctor. "We want you to capture the stone for analysis," he heard then, vowing not to mention his terror, pledging not to give Kim the opportunity to reply, "You're fine." There was enough to do waiting for pain. There were more tennis points to be played in his head. More trivia lists. More puzzles.

After all, he was almost certainly fine. The anxiety attacks were born from imagination. Right now he wanted to sweat, to hyperventilate and go clammy with the artificial shock. He wanted to faint and wake up to the embarrassment of ammonia.

Kim left with the doctor to set up his next appointment and to probe him for the truth. The woman in orange returned to disconnect the IV. "You made it just fine," she said, and French smiled. He wanted this woman to rig the dialysis unit; he wanted her to handle his life support equipment. "There's plenty worse, you know," she said. "Plenty for sure who whimper and complain."

He was on his feet, elated to be leaving the gowned and prostrate. No matter that he was returning in two days. By walking outside he was asserting hope. He stepped past the curtain and saw that the man with the faulty artery was sitting on the edge of his examination table. Clipping his nails. Finishing the little finger on his right hand and glancing up at French. "Might as well get something done while I'm in here," he said. "Keep myself occupied and all."

"Sure," French agreed.

"You know, I'm getting these spells, too," the man said. "I'm dizzy too much to suit me."

"How long have you been getting dizzy?"

"Not yesterday. Not last week. I don't just come running in here at the first sign of something unless it's special like the leg."

French managed "Good luck with all of it." He found Kim completing the busywork of scheduling and stood holding his strainers like logos for breakdown. A display of houseplants dominated the area where the elevators opened and closed. *Which of These Plants Is Toxic?* a sign asked, and he intuited, immediately, that the proper response was *All of Them,* that every quiz in this section of the hospital could be successfully taken by choosing the worst of all answers.

As soon as she pulled into traffic, Kim started talking. She covered gossip, road conditions, groceries, and the movies at the drive-in they passed. "It would be easier if you turned on the radio," French suggested, after fifteen miles of not replying.

"I didn't think you wanted music. I thought you might want companionship."

"I'd settle for silence."

"I'm not going to let you brood," she said.

She cleared her throat then, a sort of pause. Since she was driving into a congested area of the road, she faced forward, and he could stare at her. She'd been losing weight, twenty pounds in the past two months, but he thought her face had become puffy somehow, as if it were inflating, as if its structure had broken down in a way she'd carry to the grave. Her hair had sufficient gray to reveal how it would look for the next twenty years. Or thirty. Forty. Gradually thinning into a hideous, scalp-exposing nest of white.

With disinterest, he saw how the other ten pounds she planned to lose would not alter the slackness in her chin and at her throat. She was a month, perhaps, from wearing the clothes untouched in her closet for three years, and he knew, without asking, that all of them would be unsuitable.

When they got out of the car, he walked as far as the side porch and stopped. French felt distant, out of the body that was reluctant to reenter its house. "We're not together in this," he said.

"What?"

"You're not in this with me."

"Of course I am. Anything that concerns you, concerns me."

"You don't have to feel guilty."

"You're just saying that."

"But it's what I want, Kim," he told her. "Believe it or not, I want to be alone in this."

She grasped his hand, and he allowed her to hold it for a few seconds before he pulled away. He'd drawn away every time he could remember since their last child had been born. They had been thirty; the boy was now fourteen. She had to realize what he would do each time, and she would not stop. She could not help, apparently, taking his hand.

That night, at hourly intervals, French woke to nausea. Each time he hurtled to the bathroom and discovered he couldn't vomit. Each time he held the sieve in front of himself and braced for pain. Six trips; six urinations. In one day he'd accelerated through the second half of his life span like a vampire caught in the sun. After years of night panic for the damage in his heart, a whole new set of symptoms had lunged and grasped.

The ultrasound examination passed so quickly and painlessly he was sure it was a placebo. How did the woman who'd smeared him with warm jelly prepare herself for her daily charade? To give hope, he could hear her assuring herself, and when he was told he could learn the results before he left the hospital, French nearly smirked in despair.

He trudged to the nearest set of chairs. He sat across from the open door to a room where a nurse prepped each patient while the temporarily ill and the dying watched, and since he and a man wearing overalls were the only ones waiting who were not on crutches or in casts, French learned one more way brotherhoods were formed.

"Are you taking any medications?" the nurse asked the man in overalls after he sat down. "Insulin," he said, "and something for the lung complaint."

"Theolair?" she guessed.

"Yeah, and Percoset," he added. "And sometimes Nitrostat."

"Heart problems?"

"Had the bypass in '82, but never was the same since. Drink a lot of Maalox, too."

French wanted to ask this man how he was still alive; he wanted

to know the secret code of the colored levers that the nurse swung out from the wall each time she placed a patient in an examination room. Two yellow, one red, and a blue he'd tabulated so far. There were five more colors—what sentence shaded each? In this rainbow, there was a black, and French, to see if the symbolism were overt, was keeping his eye open for which lever would swing out near the door entered by the overalled man whose throat was swollen, who had heart trouble, diabetes, and a touch of emphysema.

Blue, it turned out, so the hospital had subtlety. Because he was not being treated, French was led, a minute later, to a room in another hallway where renovation was going on. He sat on a chair and recognized, at least, that nobody was going to rig an IV to him today. The room had no beds, no instruments; besides his chair, there was one other and a small table, holes in the walls where wiring curled ominously in the shadows. It looked like every room in his house two months before the builders had finished it.

After a minute, he stepped outside and checked his lever. White jutted out from the wall. He was lost in guesswork.

The doctor who showed up offered the same evasions. "The ultrasound was inconclusive," he said. "It confirmed the irregularity but showed us nothing telling."

"Now what?" French asked.

"We've scheduled you for a CAT scan, which should let us know for certain if we're dealing with anything here or whether things are fine."

He paused as if French had a choice. "When?" French said.

"Next Monday," he said, and then, "You should know that these referrals are common. It's not our job to assume the worst until we can verify otherwise."

"Great."

The doctor acted as if French was supposed to ask a question, but French had had enough of feeding lines to men trained to sniff for death. "Okay," he finally said, standing.

The doctor followed him through the door. They passed one red lever and one black lever, but French could not determine the conditions of whoever lay within. "If I were you," the doctor said as

they approached the appointment desk, "I'd be mildly concerned." He paused again, but when French allowed the gap to spread, he said, "Well, good luck" and went back for another file.

The next afternoon he heard his first kidney stone story. By Wednesday morning, he'd listened to three more tales of woe: One colleague had thirteen stones at once; one had watched a man collapse in a public rest room; one had suffered an unexpected attack on a train traveling through Korea. "I didn't know what to do," he told French. "I ended up locking myself in the bathroom on the train. I stayed in there for half an hour wishing I was dead. I was so disoriented I actually thought about throwing myself off the train because, at the very least, I'd be knocked unconscious, and, at worst, I'd be dead. Ways of lessening pain, I thought, and I sat in there hearing people shouting through the door in Korean and smelling a cross-country trip's worth of piss and shit. It smells different, you know. It must be the spices they use in their food, but I'll never forget. You put me in an outhouse now, and I'll tell you if a Korean has been in there."

It was the only story French enjoyed. He nodded, encouraging his colleague to take the tale as far as he wanted. "Somebody put me on a baggage cart," the man said near the end. "He wheeled me from the train station to the hospital, about three blocks, and I spent an hour trying to convince a doctor not to operate. I was willing myself to recover. I didn't want to wake up in Korea with one kidney."

None of the kidney stone victims, however, recognized how askew French's reactions to their stories were. They were nostalgic, happy to have suffered and survived; French was peering ahead toward horror so distant a cousin to kidney stones it could just as well be extraterrestrial.

That night he discarded the last of his strainers. There was enough foolishness in the world without him sloshing urine down a funnel. By Saturday, he decided to give tennis a try, and, aside from stiffness, he felt fine. He played two sets of doubles and figured he'd gotten his feet back under him.

He stayed to drink a beer, leaning against the trunk of his car, watching the high school girls who had replaced his doubles

match. A woman he'd played mixed doubles with in half a dozen tournaments stood beside him listing her latest injuries. They'd won something called the Lipton Tea Regional Championship five years before, one of those tournaments that promised eight teams from across the country a trip to the U.S. Open if they could win a sectional tournament. Neither one of them had been interested in driving three hundred miles to play against thirty other teams from six different states. Surely, they'd agreed, half of those teams would overwhelm them.

Now she wanted French to understand the pain she put up with in her feet, but French was keeping an eye on an old man he'd seen watching his match. The old man was sitting behind the wheel of his car, which was parked beside French's Celica, and he was dead.

The woman moved the pain to her back. A herniated disc, she claimed, but French was calculating whether or not he could get into his car without acknowledging he was passing a dead man who slumped back with his mouth gaping the end of his final breath. The old man's Ford faced outward, his was pulled inward—French would have to back out and see the body once more and act, when somebody went over the story later, as if he hadn't noticed him.

"And headaches," she said. "I think I'm having a stroke sometimes after I've played. One of these days I'm going to drop right there on the baseline."

"I know what you mean," he said.

"We're not getting any younger. I'm so close to forty I can smell its breath."

"The forties are the onion years," he offered. He wondered if she had pain in her hair, if there was one more tale of woe before he had to deal with the recent dead.

"I'm on," she said. "I'm ready to suffer for the cause." A woman, French confirmed, was waving from the bench by the far court. He stepped toward his door. Closer, the dead man looked exactly like an image for eternal remorse, and though he didn't want to initiate an hour of calls and condolences and reports, French bent to rap his knuckles against the side window.

The old man jerked and sat up like Boris Karloff, glaring at him.

French mouthed "Sorry" and opened the door to his Celica, wishing the old man a heart attack on the freeway.

Monday morning, before he drove back to the hospital for the CAT scan, a secretary waved him over. "Mr. French," she said, "I can tell you this story because you're done with yours, but I have a friend whose mother, about fifteen years ago, had an IVP done in a doctor's office, and in ten minutes she was dead. Just like that, she stopped breathing. A massive allergic reaction."

French was out of murmured responses. He tried "They told me they were monitoring me."

"You bet they were, Mr. French. Do you think anybody does IVPs in a doctor's office anymore?"

French had no idea. It had taken him forty-four years to hear the word *IVP.* "Probably not," he said.

"You bet they don't, Mr. French. Ten minutes. How would you like to get killed in a doctor's office?"

French appreciated her story. The most prevalent abstraction in the universe was irony; all he could do was try to anticipate better.

By the middle of the afternoon he was checking in again, following directions to another waiting room where a woman sat watching television. A daytime host he didn't recognize was talking with glamorous women who were disfigured. Cancer. Polio. Birth defect. Artificial leg. Braces. Hands like hooves. The woman with polio said she'd contracted the disease as an infant. To French it sounded more remote than the hereditary cloven hands.

A nurse popped in carrying two large cups filled with what appeared to be strawberry milkshakes. She gave one to the woman. "Drink this one now," she explained, "and then one every half hour for three hours." She placed the second cup on the table beside her.

"Good stuff?" he asked the woman after the nurse left. She was sipping it, analyzing perhaps, guessing what was being masked by the flavoring.

"Where's yours?" she said.

The nurse reappeared. Her hands were empty. "Larry?" she said.

"I guess I don't get any," he managed as he stood. He tried to imagine which part of her digestive system was malignant.

"Put your hands over your head," the attendant said after he was in place on the gurney. "You'll go all the way in now, but I'll bring you back out before we begin." This one was easy, he discovered. French could deal with closed spaces. The attendant delivered exactly what she'd promised, and twenty minutes later he was waiting to be released.

"Good," she said. "Now we have to get the iodine into you again." French stiffened. "You didn't have any problems with the IVP you had, did you?"

He wanted a strawberry milkshake. He wanted the child's play method of discovering death's location. "In my hand," he suggested, retelling his disclaimer.

"Okay," she said, but he couldn't visualize anything patterned. His service toss disappeared into the clouds; his lawn extended indefinitely. "My, but you're right, aren't you," the attendant admitted. "Your veins just don't want to cooperate."

She took his other hand, turned it sideways, and he felt so vulnerable everything he imagined turned white as the descending fog of the ceiling. "You asshole," he swore at himself, beginning a chant to keep himself from hyperventilating. He heard "finally," but now his arm's blood began to crystallize, and he couldn't tell her how this second dose so soon after the first would lock his lungs.

"There," she said, "we're okay, aren't we?"

He wanted to ask her if the hospital still had an iron lung, but he said "I guess." Like a trouper. Like someone who was owed a year without humiliation.

This time, when the table slid forward, he kept his eyes open. *Do Not Stare Directly at Beam,* the label beside the slot above his eyes read when he stopped. Perhaps all of this was a secret stress test to prove his fitness for marketing windows and siding and exterior accessories. He heard the subtlety of gears and tensed. He would go blind or die correcting the careless to himself, but he slid backwards until the laser was pointed somewhere below his heart and lungs.

The attendant said "Don't breathe" through a speaker that suggested she was sealed in concrete and lowered in water. She might

have been saying "Up periscope" or "Dive," and he held his breath and closed his eyes again to keep from staring directly at anything.

"Breathe," the speaker crackled. French inhaled. "Don't breathe," he was told. A light flashed against his eyelids. "Breathe," he heard again. Quickly, this time, he exhaled and inhaled, squeezing air into himself, but the next command didn't follow. After a minute there was nothing to do but open his eyes, read a gauge set at 1875 mm, see that a light glowed inside a sign saying *X Ray Off.*

The numbers rolled back to 1870. "Don't breathe" came from underwater, and he accepted this one eyes open, staring at *X Ray On* as it flashed and the laser pulsed and he turned into someone taking a first, tentative bite from a forbidden apple.

He sat up in bed that night watching Kim undress. She was even thinner now, another five pounds lost since he'd collapsed. "It's getting easier," she said. "I don't want to eat much of anything anymore, and all the walking I do in the evenings keeps my mind off food just when I might give in and eat something out of habit."

She looked like someone else's wife, somebody he'd covet. When she turned, nearly naked, to reach under her pillow for the oversized shirt she wore for sleeping, her breasts were so perfect they seemed to be on film. She pulled the shirt over her head and smiled. "One more day," she said. "Tomorrow they'll tell you you're fine, and then you can finally relax."

He wanted to drag her down beside him, lift that shirt and touch every part of this stranger's body. He wanted to believe that tomorrow night he would be able to move without listening for the jostled voice of cancer.

After French answered another list of questions the next morning, the urologist said, "I need you to drop your pants," and French lay back on the examination table while the doctor pressed every area that made him flinch.

"Tender?" the doctor asked.

"Uncomfortable."

"I need you to drop your drawers," he said then.

How quaint, French thought. He lay naked from the waist down,

feeling his genitals shrinking and retracting as if they were cowering from the gelder's blade. He could imagine the doctor, after he'd left, saying "The smallest dick I've ever seen." His groin felt inside out; he squirmed, and the urologist looked at him, his hands gripping French's balls. "Got you the wrong way?" he said.

In a minute he was on his feet. "You'll feel some pressure now," the doctor said, pulling on a latex glove. The breath exploded out of French in an "Oh." His sphincter muscle opened, but the urine sample he'd provided fifteen minutes before saved him the humiliation of pissing on the floor.

"Okay," the doctor said, discarding the glove. For all French knew, he'd be asked to give a stool sample, be told to squat over a bucket until he could grunt one out.

The doctor, when he excused himself, left the door open, and French passed the time watching doctors pinning X-ray photos to a screen. They peered at the mysteries, took them down, and disappeared into other examination rooms. When his doctor, at last, slapped his CAT scan pictures up, French saw thirty photographs of his kidneys which looked, from where he sat, like brothers to all those he'd tossed carelessly into frying pans. At the grocery store, the butcher gave them to French for free, lamb and veal kidneys, what the store had always discarded or handed to women who pampered cats. When he passed the packages through the checkout line, the clerks handled the bundles like bombs whose wiring confused them.

Which of the spots was going to kill him? Before the urologist had begun his exam, French had heard the patients in the rooms on either side of him being prepared for surgery. One had four days to put his life in order; one had been admitted immediately. When he had a sore throat or a nagging fever, the general practitioner examined him in a carpeted, soundproofed room with the door closed. Here, the seriously ill were told news that thundered through the hallway to each anxious patient who could compare symptoms and diagnoses, rate his or her standing on the depth chart for illness.

"Your X rays, I'll say right off, are not very impressive," the doctor began after he stepped inside.

French noticed the door had been left open. He smiled, wanted to laugh. "Bad technician?" he said, but the doctor didn't respond. "I know I'm out of shape," he tried.

"Nothing jumps out at me," the doctor continued. "Nothing is definitive."

Perhaps he was already dead, French thought. Perhaps this was one of those hells where the sorry spirit spends its time trying to communicate with the living, observing and listening and mingling, yet unseen by all of the people who have years to live.

"And you're not symptomatic."

French nodded, trying sign language. "But the IVP called up the question," the doctor said, "so we have to press on. However, it's a bit compromised by stools and gas, and the ultrasound and CAT scan seem clear except for showing your left kidney to be larger than the right in the lower lobe."

French reminded himself to take an enema and a shower before he ever allowed an ambulance to be called. Vigilance, he told himself. Preparation.

"We want to make sure you don't have a mass in there, that you're not going to lose a kidney to cancer." The doctor's tone was no different than a car repairman's when he explained the rotation of tires, but every room in this hallway was filled by someone eavesdropping and hoping the angel of death had settled elsewhere to fill its quota, that the blood in their toilets was as temporary as a beaten boxer's.

"I know you've had enough anxiety to last you a while, but bear with me for a few more hours. I'm going to take your film to radiology; I'm going to pull some heads together on this one and see if we can clear things up because the next procedure, if there's still doubt, is a more invasive one."

French saw himself being prepped, heard himself counting backwards from one hundred. "No knives yet," the doctor said, "but a needle in the groin area, a catheter. It's called an arteriogram; we inject the dye directly into the kidney. That usually tells us what's what, but we don't want to subject you to that unless it's necessary."

French agreed with that. The groin area sounded like a euphemism, but by the time he had driven home, he was sure his kidney was gaining weight within him.

He had four hours until his wife returned from work. He had until midafternoon before his teenage sons were freed from high school. At three o'clock, the phone rang.

"This is Dr. Jacobs," the voice said. "I've shown your pictures to Dr. Karol, the head of urology, and I've consulted with radiology, and we're in agreement your pictures are within the realm of normal irregularity."

There was a pause, but French didn't fill it. He was concentrating on his kidneys, gauging the minute difference in weight between the left one and the right. "So, good news for you after all," Jacobs went on, and French knew it would be months before he believed him. "I carried the pictures down to radiology myself," Jacobs said. "I wanted to make sure as soon as possible for you. So, if you experience further difficulty—pain, blood in the urine—let us know, of course, but that shouldn't be the case and you can get on with your life."

"Okay," French had to say. "Great," he added then, thinking Jacobs would expect it. The lower left side of his back felt thick and heavy.

"Well, it's nice to be able to make this kind of call," Jacobs concluded. "I didn't want to keep you in suspense any longer than necessary. We've caused you enough anxiety as it is."

He heard his older son enter the house and bound downstairs to turn on his stereo. The fourteen-year-old, he remembered, had a soccer game immediately after school, and French decided to walk to the field to watch.

At the end of his street, somebody had purchased the last lot by the cul-de-sac. French recalled being surprised when he'd heard, because the slope of all the lots on his side of the road increased until it seemed nobody would build on the final lot, which fell away from the curb itself.

Whoever it was had hired someone to truck in fill. Dozens of truckloads had been dumped already, all of them since his attack. If he were hospitalized, French thought, a house could appear here while he was gone.

From where he was standing in the vacant lot, he could watch his son play his Youth Soccer League game on the high school field. This was his last spring of eligibility. In the fall, if he wanted to, he could try out for the high school team and play three more years on this field.

The coach of the other team, once the game began, yelled at his players with an Eastern European accent. As soon as French heard it, he knew his son's team, coached by a local orthodontist who had a fourteen-year-old son as well, would surely lose. French's son chased the ball. He ran back and forth, up and down, and within minutes was bent over with his hands on his knees. The other team stayed spread. Their fullbacks moved upfield instead of standing ten yards in front of their goal. After the second quarter began, the other team passed the ball leisurely in the dead space in front of the fullbacks, and when the fullbacks retreated further, standing nearly on the goal line, one of the forwards hammered in a shot.

French's son hung his head. He sprinted for two more minutes and then bent over again, and before the quarter ended, the score was three to nothing. "Hustle, hustle," the orthodontist yelled from time to time, applauding when French's son ran all the way back from his wing to steal a ball from an opponent who was maneuvering unchecked in the penalty area.

French was enraged. He walked around the piles of shale and rock and clay, discovering chunks of asphalt, as if the fill had been gouged from a parking lot renovation. Finally, he picked out one large attractive stone, nearly white, with rust-colored spirals. He tested its weight. He could lift it, but he faced a two-hundred-yard walk back to his house if he wanted to stash it someplace in his yard.

He hoisted it anyway and started walking, lugging it with both hands, the rock pressed against his stomach. It would do him good, he thought, to get rid of his anger in labor, but after he'd covered one hundred feet, using short, jerky, stutter steps, he understood how foolish this task was, how anger was insufficient. His lower back ached. His weakened kidney, perhaps, could split from the strain and burst inside him, spilling blood and urine that would well up around his organs until he drowned.

"So be it," he said, pushing on. "So be it. So be it." Another chant for his repetition file. There was no way he was going to put this boulder down until he reached his property.

Maybe five hundred steps it took him. Maybe fifty *So be it*s until the rock thumped onto the mulch he'd raked in two weeks before. His shirt front was clay. His back hurt so badly he could not sit or stand erect. The stone, as soon as he dropped it among the shrubbery, turned hideous. Hunched over where it had fallen, French examined its surface. It seemed alien. It looked as if it might grow.

Ant City

"You boys want to make some money this summer, I'll pay you penny an ant," Clyde Collins told me and Paul Coates. He'd seen, just like we had the night before, Joseph Cossman on *You Bet Your Life* allowing Groucho Marx to throw out one-liners about his ant farm business, all the while knowing he was getting free advertising.

School had let out the week before, but Clyde Collins had graduated and was looking for ideas besides the steel mill or the railroad yard or the oil refinery. "Nobody around here would want an ant farm if they could get an ant city," he said. "I could sell them as fast as I could make them, and then I could start shipping them all over."

The only reason Clyde talked to us was because his best friend was Paul's older brother, Leonard, and he didn't have anything else to do, either, now that high school was over, the two of them teaming up, banking on their four years of metal and wood shop. Leonard Coates had made furniture that was in his parents' living room—a bookshelf, a coffee table—you couldn't tell them from the store-bought pieces, so how hard could framing pieces of plastic be?

"Only red ants," Clyde said. "You heard the guy. And no queens. You scout around for a week while we get things going, so you'll be ready when the time comes."

He came back the next night with a truckload of sand. "There's places that won't miss it," he said, but he kept the loaded truck in his father's garage.

Paul's father had a store in Beaver Falls where he sold groceries and magazines. Clyde's father managed a liquor store twenty miles away, just over the state line in Ohio. "Why the hell not?" he said, when Clyde asked him to stock Ant Cities. "I'll say it's a fund-raiser, and we'll sell them by the dozens. Some of those winos coming in

for Night Train and Thunderbird will think they're buying a cheap TV."

Not quite, I thought, but the first one Leonard and Clyde put together, a sort of floor model, without the plastic glued in or anything, looked like a slow-motion kaleidoscope, the tunnels, if you watched long enough, caving in and being rebuilt, the ants working at construction because it was the only thing they knew.

It was enough of a start for Clyde and Leonard, a hundred in each store, and as soon as they started selling they were going to the new shopping center along the Ohio River to see how things would go.

Kidnapping ants went slowly at first—fifty cents' worth the first day—because we hadn't done any preparation except for five minutes with the anthill in Paul's back yard. Paul let them crawl on his hands before he shook them into his jar, but I tried scooping them, tearing off legs and squashing them with the jar rim while all the time watching my feet to make sure I wasn't being attacked from below. I'd read at least ten comic book stories about army ants; I'd seen the skeletons of the men who didn't watch out for them. But then Paul figured out a straw strategy, and we took turns blowing air into their nests and scooping all the ants that surfaced. Pretty soon we could catch dozens at a time without scattering the rest, and Clyde told us to slow down until he was ready to deliver, because he wanted his ants to be fresh.

We'd all gone down to Clyde Collins's store to see the stacks of Ant Cities piled up near the cash register. Clyde and Leonard had made plastic buildings and churches, and they'd added a road and a bridge and a couple of trees to each city that sat on top of the sand. "There's room for the ants to climb into those buildings and look out the windows," Clyde said. "Wait till somebody sees ants going to church. What a kick."

If you bought one, it said on the package, you got a certificate with Clyde's phone number on it, and he promised to drive to your house with a package of healthy ants. "We'll change it to getting ants through the mail as soon as we get rolling," Clyde said, but I thought it would be great, and so did Paul, to ride along with Clyde or Leonard and walk those ants up to the front door of a house where Ant City was waiting on a kitchen table for its new residents.

"Thirty ants for Ant City," I planned to say, and the mothers would smile and say "thank you," asking me to place the air-holed container right beside the case. Those ants would arrive in two-ounce liquor sampler bottles with the labels steamed off. Mr. Collins had hundreds of them lying around, gifts from distillers and salesmen. Those ants would be scrambling all over each other, but as soon as they were dumped into the Ant City, they would get right to work.

Paul's father had been working all spring on a building project of his own. He'd knocked out the wall that separated their house from the garage. He'd tiled the garage floor and even put in a picture window, and now he wanted everybody out of his way while he put the finishing touches on paneling and paint to complete the transformation to a Living Garage. "Your Uncle Eric, the writer, says *House and Garden* is going to promote this, that they'll be looking to pick a Living Garage for picture-taking for the article." Mr. Coates slapped Leonard on the back and handed him a framed copy of the blueprints he'd drawn up on his own. "Put this over there with the magazines on that stand you made last winter. It goes up the minute I'm done." Paul and I watched them from in front of the TV, which, without the wall behind it, sat in the middle of the room. I knew Paul's uncle worked for a magazine, and I looked for *House and Garden* under the blueprints, but if Mr. Coates subscribed, he kept his copies somewhere else.

"You think you're going to be in a magazine?" I said to Paul.

"Why?"

"You heard your dad."

"A Living Garage is for putting your car inside the house like a television or a Hi-Fi. Nobody's going to put their car in their house. Wait till winter. We'll have a huge place to play."

I was staying until 10:30. It was Tuesday night, and the *$64,000 Question* was on. Nobody in my house would watch because they thought it was fixed, but all the Coateses, even Leonard, watched, everybody trying to answer the questions.

Once they got in the isolation booth, I stayed quiet to concentrate, but I'd never gotten one answer right for $8,000 or more. "That's how they fix it," my father had said. "They can hear the answers in there."

Mr. Coates thought my father was crazy because one woman had won $32,000 answering questions on the Bible, and afterwards she'd done Bible readings on Ed Sullivan. "Nobody would cheat about the Bible. And Ed Sullivan wouldn't have her if he thought somebody told her the answers."

"Sullivan's on CBS, too," my father said when I told him. "They take care of their own."

Paul and I had to admit we were surprised Ed Sullivan would put a Bible reading on his show, but the contestant we loved was Robert Strom, who was eleven, just like us, and he had won $192,000 because the *$64,000 Question* had added more plateaus to keep up with the money the imitators gave away on the other networks.

Thursday afternoon Mr. Coates lugged in an enormous potted cactus, a rubber plant, and two miniature pine trees. Mrs. Coates helped him arrange them, and then he drove his new Ford Fairlane into the house and parked it with the hood perfectly centered between the rubber plant and the cactus. He had Leonard wipe up where the tires had laid down grit, and then we all stood on the other side of the room by the couch to look it over while he hung the glassed-in blueprints on the wall. The afternoon sun swept through the picture window and the car glinted and sparkled, the chrome shining. It was wonderful.

"Houses are so boring," Mr. Coates said, "but they don't have to be." Nobody disagreed, not even Mrs. Coates, who stood by the Ford, holding the door open like a model, while he took her picture. *"House and Garden,"* Mr. Coates kept saying. "Eric will get this snapshot on the editor's desk."

Saturday night, while Paul's parents were down the street playing Canasta, Leonard sat with his girlfriend in the car, playing the radio. Paul and I were trying to watch TV, but we heard "Searchin'," one of our favorites, and we turned the sound down on the TV, hearing "Let's Have a Party" being sung by a woman instead of by Elvis, and then Leonard opened the door and motioned us over. "It's time for you boys to get the hell out of here," he said.

"It's my house, too," Paul said.

"Not when Mom and Dad are gone."

"Who was singing?" I said. "How come they're playing somebody else singing Elvis's song?" I'd been playing the *Loving You* album for a week; I'd bought it the first day it had come out and was going to see the movie for sure.

"See?" Leonard said. "That's why you have to get out of here. You're so little you think every song Elvis sings is by Elvis. That's Wanda Jackson. You think it belongs to Elvis because he sings it in a movie?"

He tossed us two quarters. "Here," he said, "an advance on all those ants we're delivering next week. Now get out."

When Mr. Coates turned the key in the morning, the car went *rrrrr,* Paul said, and then it didn't make a sound at all. "You don't ever play the radio when the car's not running," Mr. Coates said to us that night. We nodded as if we thought it made sense for him to be warning us. "It's called a car radio," he said. "It's for when the car's running."

"You ought to paint the walls red to go with the car," I said. "Every house on our street is painted beige and light green and mushroom. And all of the furniture has slipcovers over it. Flowers and stuff like that. You could get red seat covers. They'd look as cool as James Dean's jacket in *Rebel without a Cause.*"

"It's *House and Garden,* not *Whorehouse,*" Mr. Coates said.

On Monday, Paul told me he thought the Living Garage was stupid. It was as if his father had caught a disease. "Other people build bomb shelters, and my dad builds a rec room for his car," Paul said. "What's he going to do, listen to CONELRAD while he waxes the floor?"

I didn't say anything, but I thought the only reason Mr. Coates could have a Living Garage was because he didn't know anything at all about cars and he didn't own any tools. Anybody else would have wrenches and pliers and drills and screwdrivers, oilcans and dirty rags; he had paper towels and window cleaner. He didn't bring that car inside unless it had been a sunny day or he'd stopped at the car wash. When the car was dirty and the weather foul, the house seemed enormous, as if the Coateses could have wedding receptions, as if a band could set up and a caterer arrive with food.

We found a big anthill in the vacant lot behind the Tolleys' house, but all the ants were the big black kind that Clyde and Leonard wouldn't pay for. The Tolleys kept a burn barrel there, just over the property line, and Paul stirred up the newspapers and wrappers that were tossed inside, setting a match to them. He poked a stick into a half-gallon milk carton and dropped a handful of black ants onto it. As soon as Paul dangled it over the fire, they scrambled up to the closed end because the carton was on a slight angle so it wouldn't fall off the stick. And then they darted back and forth, crawling over each other while the wax started to go soft halfway up, bubbling at the bottom.

"Why can't they use black ants?" I said, Paul lifting the stick a little so I thought he might be thinking of flipping the carton into the weeds, letting the ants run for it.

"I don't know. Leonard says only the red ants act like ants when they're on display."

"That's what Joseph Cossman said to Groucho."

"Really? I don't remember that."

"What was the secret word?"

"Get real."

"Leonard thinks you're an idiot."

"So tell me the secret word and win a quarter."

"Leonard's right. I could say anything and you'd pay me."

"No, I wouldn't."

"Radio."

"That wasn't it."

Paul lowered the stick again, and the carton started to turn brown and curl on the lower end. The ants had slowed down, packed together on the edge. "They're all looking at you," I said.

"Let 'em look."

"They're screaming."

"Let 'em scream." Paul leveled the carton, and it wobbled, bubbles forming where the ants were standing, and then the carton tipped and tumbled into the fire.

"Hear that?" Paul said.

"What?"

"Neither did I."

When we got back to Paul's house, Leonard and Clyde had over a hundred ant bottles filled and in columns on the coffee table. The ants looked excited, like they knew something was up. "We're taking these out," Leonard said. I felt like I was one of the ants trying to work out what was coming next. Leonard whistled, but it sounded like his mouth was full of sand.

As soon as we got in the car, Clyde told us his father and Mr. Coates had sold a hundred the first two days, but since then things had slowed down a bit, fifty in four days, and then he didn't say anything at all.

I pictured the one on television, remembered the little barn and the silo and the windmill. It had trees, and the ants looked like they belonged there. I started to think nobody wanted ants in the city. Having the tunnels underneath buildings and streets made the ants look creepy. It looked like a monster movie, like *Them!*

That's why kids would want to buy it, I thought—but parents were the ones paying, and a lot of them had to be saying they'd wait until the Ant Farm got to the stores because they'd seen it on Groucho or in an advertisement on the back of some magazine I'd never heard of. And then I decided Clyde Collins might not have thought this through.

But still we had a hundred and fifty sets of ants to deliver, and Clyde and Leonard had two hundred more Ant City cases ready to take to the mall if they could convince some store managers with their sales pitch.

"Forty-five hundred ants," Paul said. "Forty-five dollars."

Clyde said "You bet" so easily I knew he and Leonard were clearing a lot more than thirty cents per Ant City.

"We can make Ant Park next," Leonard said.

"Or Ant Swimming Pool," I said, starting to giggle.

"Ant Jungle," Clyde said.

"Ant Ice Cap," I shrieked as if all forty-five hundred ants had escaped their whiskey bottles and were swarming up my legs.

There were twenty-four houses with Ant City certificates in Beaver Falls. Not one of those houses had a Living Garage, but at seven of them nobody answered, so Paul and I left the ants in their bottles inside the screen doors. *Residents of Ant City,* it said on

the bottles, so nobody would be confused. In three of the twelve where I delivered, a woman smiled and told me to put the ants on the table beside Ant City.

Paul and I had been making up our own versions of the *$64,000 Question,* giving each other questions about horror movies and music. When we started playing the game with Clyde between deliveries in New Brighton and Rochester, Leonard laughed when Clyde got to thirty-two thousand dollars without a sweat, and if we hadn't stumped him at sixty-four thousand, asking him who sang "Dance with Me, Henry," we would have had to pay Leonard a dollar instead of him paying us a quarter because we'd given him odds we could stump Clyde.

"You jerks shouldn't even be allowed to ask questions," Leonard said. "That's not even worth a dollar. The answer should be Hank Ballard. The question should be, Who sang 'Work with Me, Annie'?"

"But then Clyde would get it right," I said.

"That's not the reason," Clyde said. "The reason is because people should care about the originals, not the watered-down cover versions. You never even heard of Hank Ballard and the Midnighters. You guys even watch *Hit Parade* and like it."

"They never heard of Wanda Jackson either. They think rock and roll started with 'Hound Dog.'"

"You know what we ought to do?" Clyde said. "We should decorate your old man's Living Garage with spare tires and broken tools. We ought to drag in an old refrigerator with the door ripped off so little kids don't get stuck inside it while it sits in the corner and rusts for twenty years."

"That's stupid," Leonard said.

"Ant Garage," I blurted, and Leonard told Paul and me not to say another word until we were done delivering.

"Tomorrow's the Ohio deliveries," he said. "You work up some good rock and roll questions or else you shut up the whole trip."

"You don't even have a garage to make fun of," Paul said after they dropped us off. "Your father sleeps all day and works all night. Going to your house is like going to school except for television."

"I'm sick of television," I said.

"You can't stop watching. Everybody will laugh at you."

"You won't laugh. You'll know I'm just taking a break. Like halftime at a football game."

"The teams always come back."

"Right."

"I won't tell you what happens on *Peter Gunn* or *Mr. Lucky* or *Johnny Staccato*."

"I won't ask."

Paul laughed. "You know you'll be watching. What are you going to do all night, look at Ant City?"

The next afternoon, when I walked to Paul's house, the door to the Living Garage was rolled up and the car gone, as if Paul's father had forgotten about it after driving to work. "Leonard took the car," Paul said. "Something happened to the ants and people started calling."

Insects swirled around the rec room, but Paul told me to leave it up. "Whoever drives puts it up and down—that's a rule," he said, but a minute later Leonard and Clyde rolled in, leaving a mud streak on the tile.

"The ants are dead in twenty-eight of the farms already," Clyde said. "It's gotta be the sand. It makes you think."

"Where did you get that sand, Clyde?" Paul asked.

"Nowhere."

The phone rang, and all of us knew it was number twenty-nine. "Maybe it's the glue," Paul said while Leonard answered and wrote down the address.

"Maybe the ants committed suicide."

"No, really, Clyde. What if the glue gives off fumes or something? Or what if it seeps into the sand?"

"We'll change it," Clyde said, but he didn't sound like anybody who had an alternative in mind.

"Nobody will order again," Leonard said. "They all want their money back. And you twerps can take these ants back to where you got them or else dump them in the street."

"You can't just quit," Paul said, but Clyde was already sweeping fifty bottles of ants into a cardboard box.

When I started to unscrew a cap as soon as I got to the end of the driveway, Paul said "No." We had to take them back to where we got them, he explained. They had to have a chance to go home.

At the red anthill, we opened the bottles and shook out the ants. They scrambled and acted crazy, crawling all over each other as if they were still locked in the whiskey bottles, and I started to think too much time had gone by for ant memory, that after a few hours we might as well have dumped them in the street.

Paul was angry. He wanted those ants to be welcomed back or something, see a gang of workers lugging a cake crumb from one of the picnic areas for a party. Finally, he kicked at the anthill and scattered them all over. "There," he said, "now they'll need all the help they can get."

That night we watched the *$64,000 Question* by ourselves because Leonard had ridden away with Clyde right after dinner, and Mr. and Mrs. Coates had walked to the movies for the nine o'clock show. "That Elvis movie starts tomorrow," Mrs. Coates had said. "We won't get a chance to see anything else for weeks."

The show was boring, because neither of us knew anything about opera; we didn't bother guessing the answers for even the easy questions, when anybody could shout the answer from the audience before the isolation booth came rolling out. "Who listens to opera?" Paul said, and he picked up his father's car keys from the top of the television. "Let's listen to some real music. We'll run the car so nothing will happen to the battery."

Paul sat behind the wheel and I rode shotgun. The Ford vibrated softly. Nosed between the towering cactus and the rubber plant, the car seemed to be driving along the line between the jungle and the Sahara in Africa. "We ought to open the garage door," I said after three songs. "People kill themselves like this."

"We open the door, my dad kills us when somebody tells him the car's running in his garage. We've only been in here ten minutes. Nobody dies that fast, and they're always drunk first anyway."

We listened to the DelVikings sing "Whispering Bells," and then Paul said, "I know why we ought to shut this off. They'll be smelling the fumes when they get home."

"Okay," I said, but then "Young Blood" by the Coasters came on,

and we listened to it the whole way through. After two great songs in a row, we both wanted to hear what came on next. Elvis, the disc jockey said, and we sat up, but it turned out it was the start of the "For Lovers Only Hour," and he was playing "Loving You." Paul shut off the radio before he turned off the car because he didn't want it to come blaring out when Mr. Coates got behind the wheel. "I do feel a little sick," he said.

"You make yourself sick worrying about somebody finding out. We'll open the door, and in a minute everything will be the same," I said, but I had such a terrible headache, I let my head fall back against the seat and closed my eyes for a few seconds to relax.

The words to "Loving You" swirled through my head, the whole song, even though I always skipped it on my album, and then Mr. Coates was opening the door and shouting, and Paul was slurring out a pack of lies, saying, "We didn't do it. The car started itself, and then the radio, too," using the plot of a comic book story we'd read last winter, Paul's father saying "Huh?" and me thinking there was a category we could have won for real, no fix needed, because Paul and I had read every episode of *Amazing* and *Tales of Terror,* not saying a word once a month while we each read one and then traded, so how could anybody know more than we did?

"You're lucky this isn't a regular garage. You're lucky it's three times the size."

Paul said, "I know. I know," as if he'd calculated the cubic feet from the floor plan his father had framed on the wall. Because I didn't live there, I didn't have to say anything, but I picked out the magazine rack Leonard had built, and I looked for flaws while I was thinking, but not saying, we'd been saved because "Loving You" came on instead of its flip side, "Teddy Bear." That if the deejay had turned the record over, we would have sat there for two more minutes because Paul and I would never turn off a fast song by Elvis. And if he'd kept up the good work, playing Little Richard and Chuck Berry and "Work with Me, Annie" by Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, we would have sat there happy and paying attention until he finally decided to play a slow song, or worse, the news had come on.

Dynamic Tension

"Listen to this," Ronny Wasko, my client, said. "Gandhi, you know who Gandhi is? He sent hisself a letter to the one and only Charles Atlas."

"The sand-in-your-face guy?"

"Every comic book I ever read had Charles Atlas on the back cover. Him or those ads for X-ray glasses and rubber vomit. But Gandhi? You've seen pictures, right? Who would have thought?"

I waited. Wasko was coming around to something he thought might help his defense, and when you shoot a minister, paralyzing him in your living room with your wife in the kitchen, you need to look in every direction for help and guidance.

"'I wonder,' Gandhi wrote, 'if there is some way you could build me up?'" Wasko slapped his hands together and grinned. "How about that?" he said.

"I guess things didn't work out."

"You got that right. But Atlas says he sent the stuff. The whole illustrated kit. Free. 'For the poor chap, nothing but a bag of bones,' he says in this article I read."

I thought of the isometrics I did in college. How we pressed one muscle against another or against an immovable object. I was a middle-distance sprinter, the 220, the 440, back when they counted in all-American yards. Somehow, the coach insisted, doing these exercises would make me stronger and faster.

During my sophomore year, my times were slower. I'd gained twenty pounds during a winter of binge drinking and snack food. The new coach didn't suggest isometrics. He had us run steps every day and hop fifty-yard intervals, first one leg and then the other. There was more, all of it based on stretching and spring and elasticity, and I started doing the isometrics each evening because I

thought I was losing a step to runners who were growing stronger through the dynamic tension of man against himself.

"People will believe me," Wasko said. "You'll see. That preacher was huge. Going to fat, all right, but you can see all those muscles in every picture, how he could tear me apart. Here I am all skinny and wearing glasses and old, for God's sake, older than you, right?"

I thought about lying, but I offered, "I'm fifty-two."

"Was I wrong? Fifty-four, I am, nearly fifty-five."

Wasko kept taking his glasses off and putting them back on. As if they were new. As if he wouldn't wear them for long because of vanity. "You ought to leave those in place then," I said. "Like they belong on your face instead of in a prop drawer."

Wasko slid the glasses back on. "Right," he said. "The meek shall inherit the earth, but I'm the fit one here. Nobody believes the out-of-shape man because they are products of sloth and gluttony."

"He's a minister," I reminded him. "And now he's paralyzed. He won't look threatening in his wheelchair. Nobody will notice if he's gone to seed."

Wasko took off the glasses to look at me. "That's your job, Mr. Werner. You make the blind see."

As soon as I got home I changed and took off for two miles of jogging. I'd been on the fitness highway since I'd been given this case to public defend. Wasko wasn't going to convince a jury, but I'll admit he'd started me seeing the bulky as jerks, and a few less pounds might help me see them even more clearly.

"Wasko might show up wearing one of those sheets Gandhi wore," I said to my wife after I'd survived twenty minutes. "He thinks he looks like a monk, for Christ's sake."

Shelly patted my love handles. "The Lord taketh away," she said, but then the doorbell rang, and she opened our house to a fat, white-bearded man carrying a toolbox. "Right down the stairs," she said, and the man disappeared toward any one of a dozen vulnerable items he might be there to repair.

"Who's this?" I said.

"I called an electrician, Ben. For that gauge that keeps sticking."

"He looks like Santa Claus. He probably has toy wrenches in that box."

"Watch him, then. Catch him playing make-believe, or maybe learn something."

I lurched down the stairs, my knees already stiffening. "Wife says this here regulator don't work," the repairman said. He'd already pried off a plastic cover where DANGER was printed in large block letters.

"I'd be afraid to touch something like that with the power still on," I offered.

"This here?" he said. "Not enough current running to keep a fly from buzzing. Lookit." He pushed a screwdriver into the mechanism, his eyes going wide, his feet stuttering backwards as he dropped the screwdriver.

"Oops," I said.

"How the hell that happen?" the fat man said.

"I'll leave you alone," I said, but he'd already turned his broad back to me, which is how I saw him a second time as he slammed our door and climbed into his truck ten minutes later. "Santa needs a real job," I said to Shelly over dinner.

"He said 'All fixed' when he left, Ben. There's no sense calling somebody if you don't trust them."

"Did he write 'All fixed' on the bill? Was there any mention of 'Guaranteed'?"

"I'm going to start running in the mornings," I announced, coming downstairs already dressed. "Two-a-days," I added, but sports jargon was lost on her.

"Maybe you should take on wills and deeds," Shelly said. "It's not shameful."

"The running does more than drop the pounds," I said. "I need an angle on this Wasko thing."

Before I made half a mile I regretted every short stride that threatened my hamstrings, and I veered into the business district for a sensible layover with coffee and a pair of chocolate-iced, custard doughnuts. Shelly didn't eat doughnuts. She wouldn't even look in the window.

Carol Beers, who'd been serving at Hole-in-the-Dough for all seven years it had been open, poured my coffee and said, "How's the clergy-killer doing?"

"That's hyperbole, right?" I said.

Carol Beers didn't smile. "That's intent."

"Good," I said. "For a second I thought the paralysis had spread to Pastor Bluto's heart."

I'd noticed the foursome at the next table. I knew the Chamber of Commerce crowd would repeat the town's opinion. Walt Fischer, the financial planner, lived six houses down from Shelly and me, close enough to be spokesman, and he swiveled in his chair. "This is a community of churches, Ben. Wait until you get to your empty office before you're so flippant. The echo you hear will sound like 'shyster.'"

"Why?" I said. "What rhymes with shyster?"

"Pastor Keister has served his parish for twenty-three years. If you didn't think God was dead you'd have heard the standing ovation he received when he rolled up the center aisle last Sunday."

Carol Beers slapped down the plate with two doughnuts so close to the coffee cup I knew she wanted me to see how easy a mistake could be made and liquid near boiling could spill. "I was among hundreds who kept their hands still Sunday morning. Not one of them, while I was standing over a putt, suggested Ronny Wasko should be gassed before his trial."

"You'll get that handicap down to single digits, all the time you'll be having," Walt offered, bringing up a round of laughs from the banking and insurance crew.

"I seen this preacher before, you know," Wasko said that afternoon. He had the glasses off, swinging them like a metronome for the tune he was playing. I thought about telling him how near-strangers introduced themselves to me now, how I'd become a celebrity lawyer like F. Lee Bailey.

"Tell me about it, Ronny," I said. "You haven't mentioned this to anybody far as I can tell."

"It come back to me when he started sniffing around my wife. This bar over to the county line. Who would know, so far off, it's a preacher? He always kept one hand on the woman he was with, and

that hand moved all the time—shoulder to elbow, across the back, along the thigh, around the waist—it seemed to be sizing her up like something you'd judge at a state fair. I tell you I was watching that hand and where it was moving, but pretty soon that sack of shit caught my eye and held it. I'm here to tell you, Mr. Werner, that's why I remember. You don't forget something like this except I've been under the gun here."

I followed the swinging glasses as if they might help me sort out the sense of Wasko's logic. I said, "A woman who lets herself be fondled like that must be afraid."

Wasko smiled. "You know what preacher said after he'd stared at me a minute?"

"No, I don't, Ronny."

"'What are you looking at?' preacher said. 'You skinny fuck.'"

"This might help, Ronny," I said. "Anybody hear him?"

"I did. That's the point. He was talking to me."

I managed twenty-five minutes of early evening running before I collapsed onto a kitchen chair. "You need more cases, Ben," Shelly said. "You'll be ripping an Achilles or something at your age."

"That minister was drunk. The blood test showed it. Wasko thought he was going to hurt him."

"You don't shoot a man for being drunk," Shelly observed from where she was lifting a frying pan off the stove.

"You have to admire Wasko's faith. Just before I left, he leaned forward like he was going to tell me a secret. 'I know it looks bad,' he said, 'but that preacher's not a holy man.'"

All through dinner Shelly listened to me retelling the eyewitnessing of Ronny Wasko. "You want to get him off, don't you?"

"It's my job."

"No, not like that. For real."

"For real? That jackass minister is for real."

"That's what I mean. You're glad Wasko blew out his wheels. You think he's a hero." She waved her fork as if a fly had settled on it. "Look, maybe Wasko knows you believe him, Ben. Maybe he thinks that's enough because he recognizes no jury will buy a philandering, murderous minister defense."

"Wasko should have shot a lawyer and hired a minister to represent him."

"You should stop joking, Ben. The tone doesn't suit you."

"I'm nothing but serious."

"There's no such condition, Ben," Shelly said, but I could have told her Ronny Wasko disagreed.

Instead, I said, "Shelly, it's not enough to know. You have to prove it," and when she inspected her fork as if she were looking for bacteria, I went on. "Here's a story with a moral," I said. "But it takes a while."

"We have time. There's ice cream."

"You mean yogurt," I said, but then I jumped right into my story: "When I was in sixth grade, a boy named Kurt Scharf dropped an easy pop up between first and second base during a recess softball game. 'Butterfingers,' Charles Timmons burbled, happy to be standing safely on first base instead of trudging toward the rest of us on his team; we were down two runs, listening for the bell that would announce we'd lost.

"Charles Timmons didn't say anything else, but Kurt Scharf picked up the ball, got a running start, and threw it as hard as he could, from ten feet away, at Timmons, slamming him in the stomach.

"Nobody on either team asked Timmons if he was okay or bent down to help him as he sat in the infield between home plate and first base. Kurt Scharf had started running, and we all chased him—twelve other sixth-grade boys trying to make up the fifty-foot head start he had.

"Kurt Scharf wasn't the fastest runner, but he had the endurance of the truly frightened. All twelve of us fanned out like cavalry, but he wasn't slowing down for the pain in his side or the struggle for breath, and Kurt Scharf reached the woods beyond center field and darted among the trees as if he'd been raised by wolves. Pretty soon our posse trickled out into the sunshine and walked back toward Charles Timmons, who was up and sitting on the bench near the backstop.

"We were late for class, and Timmons was waiting for us so we could all walk in together, thirteen boys filing in without Kurt Scharf. We sat at our desks while the teacher asked for explana-

tions. When nobody volunteered a word, she started in with moralizing and judgment, and we were safe in collective guilt."

Shelly started clearing dishes. "Sports metaphors," she said. "Wasko shot a man of the cloth."

"Wait a minute," I said. "This isn't about sports."

Shelly dumped the dishes in the sink, brought the frozen yogurt and two bowls to the table. "Coconut cream pie," she said. "You can almost believe it's bad for you."

"Listen," I said, "the next day, when Kurt Scharf returned to school, he just sat down two rows from me and got out his spelling book. Every morning, first thing after the Lord's Prayer, the "Star Spangled Banner," and the Pledge of Allegiance, we copied twenty words. Kurt Scharf dropped into the routine like a high fly settling into sure hands. He took his turn at recess. He even caught a line drive that Charles Timmons drove into right field, but we despised him. All of us."

"How come?"

"Because he didn't take his punishment. Because he didn't fight back."

"That's not what your story says."

"Yes, it does."

"Charles Timmons didn't fight back. You should have hated him."

"He had us fighting for him. And anyway, he was in the right."

The way Shelly looked at me made me want to take off my glasses and swing them. "Maybe you're remembering the details wrong," she finally said.

"Maybe I'm not done with the story. The next September all of us thought Kurt Scharf had moved away, but in October, Joe Yates said he'd heard Scharf still lived in the same house, only he went to another school. 'You have to pay the teachers yourself,' he said. 'You have to pay for your books.'

"Timmons said that was stupid because then you'd be stuck with books full of multiplication tables and sentences full of blanks you're supposed to fill in with *except* or *accept; they're, their,* or *there.* 'You couldn't even sell them,' he said.

" 'Did you see him?' we all asked Yates, but it turned out he hadn't.

He sort of knew where he lived, though, because Scharf had ridden his bus.

"We used the phone book to check. We weren't stupid. But Scharf's father was a doctor with an unlisted number. 'He was always on the bus when I got on. He was always on the bus when I got off,' Yates kept saying, so we rode our bikes past Yates's house, thinking it would be easy to find Scharf if he still lived here. We knew where kids lived who went to other schools, so his house would be in between. There were only four roads to try, and we found eighteen houses with box numbers and no names. Half of them looked big enough to belong to a doctor."

"Eighteen?" Shelly said. "Exactly?"

"Exactly."

"But you never found out what happened to Kurt Scharf?"

"All we knew, finally, was he didn't go to Catholic school. This was a school where you lived there instead of in your house. And that made us hate him more. It was bad enough having a teacher taking charge of you six hours a day, but you can't have somebody with authority in your house besides family. It's not natural."

"Don't bring this story up in court, Ben. Nobody will be moved."

I looked at the small puddle of coconut-infested yogurt in the bottom of my bowl. "I can tell you this, Shelly. If that minister came at me, I'd drop the gun and run."

"Look this up for me," I'd told Alice Glick, my clerk, before I went to visit with Ronny Wasko's wife, a woman so much more good-looking than her husband, a jury would think "paranoid" and "Ronny Wasko" in the same instant as soon as they compared them in a courtroom.

"Atlas vs. Gandhi?" she'd said. "Somebody took Gandhi to court?"

I was trying to imagine Gandhi on a hunger strike, looking through the before-and-after pictures mailed to him by Charles Atlas. After this injustice is taken care of, Gandhi would have been thinking, I'll start eating right and doing those exercises. He would have to recognize he was skinnier than any of the men in bathing suits, but look, he would have thought, at how they all turn out.

He had the self-discipline and the patience. All he needed was the time.

Why wouldn't Gandhi think this way? Already I'd lost eight pounds. And I'd been bothered, lately, that in none of the pictures I had of the minister was he wearing a clerical collar. In the one favored by the newspaper, he wore a hunting vest over a plaid shirt. Once, I thought, people announced who they were to the world through the clothes they wore. It was their work that identified them. Now they announced what they did with their leisure time, what sort of attitude they had.

The assistant district attorney, when he'd cornered me about pleading Wasko rather than "extending this unpleasantness," had been wearing a black and red warmup suit. "We can do this quick," he said, nearly running in place, "and get on with our lives."

One thing was consistent in this story. The minister had been in Wasko's house to counsel him and his wife. He'd been trying to patch up their marriage. But that was as much as I was willing to concede. A minister has an office for things like that. A desk to sit behind so he doesn't set a man off. Unless, I thought, he's the sort of wife-sniffer Wasko claimed.

Wasko's wife worked as a teacher's aide, sitting side-by-side all day with a twelve-year-old student who muttered obscenities and kept a diary full of threats. "To Die: Gretchen, Lori, Emily, Stacey, Ellen. To Live: Sam, Carl, Roy, Duane, Chuck." It had symmetry. Delores Wasko showed me a xerox she'd made of five similar pages. "The hell with the little prick's privacy," she said. "I read it every day to see if my name's in that damn thing."

The diary, she explained, had been suggested as a kind of therapy. Like playing war or cowboys, only on paper. "Maybe so," she said, "but kids don't play themselves when they pretend to shoot each other."

Dolores said she loved Ronny. She said Pastor Keister never touched her, but "anybody could tell he had a mind to."

"Ronny?" I said.

"Unless he was struck blind."

She'd asked the minister to talk with them. Ronny wouldn't see the sense of it on his own. "He don't study his own world," she said.

"I wanted him to learn different." It was the pastor's idea, she added, to visit them in their house.

"Ronny didn't set to it," she said. "Said he didn't need another tail-chaser sniffing around, and I told him to watch his tongue before God."

"Did you know he was carrying the gun?"

"No," she said. "Or I might have been afraid for myself. I'll tell you one thing, Mr. Werner, though I'll never own up to it in court. Before that preacher set foot in our house, Ronny said to me, 'Goddamn it to hell, Dee, if you ain't about to take every inch of me.' "

An hour later, when I sat down across from him, Wasko seemed in better spirits. He didn't touch his glasses. His shoulders, thinner than ever, looked like they were part of a wronged, innocent man. "I got one more thing for you," Wasko said. "That preacher shot hisself a grave oncet."

"A grave? Whatever for?"

"Man stood up to him years back. Turned him out of his house before he got a foot in the door. Shoulda learned me something."

"That he lived to tell everybody?"

Wasko snorted, but he didn't reach for his glasses. "Not long, it turned out. A couple of years, and his wife was nursing him through chemo. She wasn't out being the way for the Lord's mysterious work. Didn't let that preacher bury him neither."

Wasko smiled at me. "Preacher hated this fella so much, he took a shotgun to his grave. God's truth."

"You have corroborators on this one?"

"Everybody knows. I thought you knew already or I'da told you straight off. Graveblaster. Who you gonna call?"

Wasko laughed then, snorting. "Graveblaster," he said again, nearly singing. "Who you gonna call?"

"I saw the movie."

"Well then," Wasko said, still grinning, "you got the picture."

It was ninety degrees, at least, in the house, when I walked in. I knew at once the heating unit was broken, the gauge stuck at some low temperature that insisted the house needed more steam. "I'm not calling Santa Claus," I said.

"I already did," Shelly said.

"Oh Christ."

"He'll be here in half an hour. If he can't fix it, we'll call somebody else."

"I might as well place that call right now."

"You know enough to turn it off while we're waiting? Better to be cold than have the thing explode."

"Not likely to get cold that fast," I said. "I just found out the preacher shot a grave. I think Wasko's telling the truth."

"So what kind of man shoots a grave?" Shelly said.

"Somebody gutless. Somebody who favors easy targets."

I started to walk downstairs. "Turn that thing off and tell me the details," I heard Shelly call after me, and sure enough, I saw that the pressure needle was swiveled far into the red zone for danger. If the house were an airplane, a warning system would be screaming "Pull up!" There was still, however, red to spare, enough, maybe, to keep my house whole until Santa could eyewitness his handiwork. I walked upstairs.

"Good," Shelly said, and then she saw something in my expression that made her say, "You didn't turn it off."

"Wasko doesn't have a chance," I said, "but he has a lawyer. That's what we're there for—to lead the lost toward what they'll believe is self-discovery."

Shelly stood at the top of the stairs as if she could determine what she hadn't seen. "Ben, I know you didn't turn it off."

"No."

"Then I'll go down and figure it out."

"No," I said, blocking the door, "I want Santa to see."

"It's our house, not his."

"Nevertheless."

Shelly swept her jacket off its hook by the door, stood on the porch so I could watch her zip it up. "Okay," I said, moving toward the door. The difference in temperatures made me think of the weather systems that spawned tornadoes.

"Good," Shelly said, but I closed the door behind her. "I'll go to a neighbor's house and call an ambulance," she shouted at the window.

I stood in the kitchen. With nothing to do, I opened the refrig-

erator. Except for condiments and salad dressings, we had nothing but fresh. Not a prepared dinner in the house. People concealed themselves with clothes, I thought, but food still gave them away: the frozen pizzas of the lazy, the TV dinners of the lonely, the bright orange macaroni and cheese of the broken home. Or worse, the terrible, soy-extended, preformed hamburgers with black lines crisscrossed on their surface that announced your stupidity.

A list of such items seemed to scroll up the refrigerator door when I closed it, but I blinked them away. Unhappiness doesn't need a shopping list. I was going to try the kitchen cupboards when the phone rang. "Still in one piece?" I expected to hear, but instead it was Alice Glick.

"Is there a problem?" I said.

"*Atlas vs. Gandhi,* Mr. Werner."

"Right."

"There is a Charles Atlas who's cross-referenced with *Dynamic Tension* and with *bodybuilding,* but not with Gandhi."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"They weren't adversaries, Mr. Werner. Charles Atlas, according to himself, sent Gandhi a free sample of his exercise program."

I brightened. "Thank you, Alice," I said, and the joy in my voice, I hoped, would brighten her as well.

Ten minutes later, the doorbell sounded, meaning the electrician had beaten Shelly to the door. "Down here," I said, when the fat man sucked in a short gasp in the heat. "We have a problem."

"Stuck," he said. "You coulda shut it down."

"I didn't want to."

"Not hardly a tough one," he said, "but I'll just set you easy."

"No," I said. "I want to see if you can fix it without turning it off like you did last week."

"That was different. This is an emergency."

"We'll see." I backed up against the switch, and the repairman looked around me at the needle in the red zone.

"Goddamn it. You're crazy. You know that?"

"I want you out of my house."

"No problem there, fella." The repairman lumbered upstairs, breathing heavy. At the top he looked down. "You that son-of-a-

bitch lawyer has it in for Pastor Keister. I seen your name on the check your missus wrote. You gonna be scalded like a pig."

I gave him my best cheery wave. I'd bluffed him out the door, and I could call another electrician as soon as I shut the system down. The gauge was lurching back and forth just below the last calibrated pressure reading. I walked under the pipes, listening to them hiss, wondering where the rupture would happen.

I inspected every foot of the exposed pipe. Took my time. After a while there didn't seem to be any hurry. Shelly would be back in a few minutes, and I'd call her downstairs. "See?" I'd say if she came halfway down. "All better."

About the Author

Photo by Crystal Van Horn

Gary Fincke, a two-time winner of the Pushcart Prize, is the author of numerous books of fiction and poetry, including *For Keepsies: Stories,* which was named a Notable Book of the Year by Yearbook of Literary Biography, and *Emergency Calls: Stories* (University of Missouri Press). He is Professor of English and the Director of the Writers' Institute at Susquehanna University in Selinsgrove, Pennsylvania.