ICELAND

STORIES

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THE MAN WHO CARED

Paul Sturbridge took care of people. As an insurance agent for twenty-seven years, he figured his policies had interposed themselves between a quarter of Billings' population—taking into account the public buildings and services under his company's umbrella—and the vicissitudes of nature, accident, illness, crime, and death. If he could not outright protect, he could at least mitigate, compensate, and console. Though short in stature he was broad at the shoulder and seat, and whether behind the office desk or in the still-smoldering ruins of a family home, he felt almost physically capable of absorbing his clients' anxieties and griefs. In case of emergency he demanded to be contacted personally no matter what the hour. He had housed flood victims under his own roof—for those who had lost all, a motel was no proper comfort.

Naturally Paul was his company's face to the world, speaking forthrightly into the TV camera with wavy black hair and a sober furrow in his brow so pronounced it could have been a fold. A brief clip in the commercial showed him accepting a national award for customer service. "Just a fussy mother hen, that's all," he said deprecatingly.

But then death interfered. In June the Sturbridges' last child graduated college. Paul looked at his wife JoAnne, a former part-time receptionist at the Nissan dealership, now assistant personnel manager, and saw that she was financially independent. She busied herself hosting a literary group and directing the church's youth choir. She knitted yarn dolls for friends and relatives, floppy-cuddly with exaggerated features, like folk art. If he were to be taken suddenly, Paul thought, Joanne would mourn, the children, too, but it would not be the blow that struck them down. In that moment he understood he would die.

Across the desk from him, a client argued for the most generous life insurance benefit to leave his widow and heirs. The man's features misted and contracted with the pain of departing from them, but softened with the promise of their home paid, basic needs guaranteed, their path widening into pure prospect.

"Once you're dead," Paul said, "it won't matter to you what happens to them, any more than it will to them. They'll die, too, along with their children, and the children of those, and so on. Ad infinitum. Ad nauseum. Before even being born they're all dead.

"You might say, then, 'I'll blow off the policy and save the money for my own pleasure.' But why bother? Soon enough you'll die, and whatever you thought of as pleasure will go with you. Eh?" He paused politely for agreement.

The company put Paul on leave of absence.

The job had earned him a six-figure house on the Billings Rim—back when the average home cost fifty-five—as well as a hunting cabin. JoAnne kept herself pretty at least in part for him. When weather permitted she jogged, and her backside in the satiny shorts still kept the foolish, profound womanly sway, her tinted black hair alive in a ponytail. They talked of their outings as "dates." Their children liked their company, phoned to chat. For their silver anniversary the kids had taken them whitewater rafting on the mis-named Stillwater, conspiring with the other paddlers—strangers from Arizona, California, Germany—to sing stupid love songs all the way as the coxswain barked

interruptions of “all forward...left back.” Sugar, Sugar. Wild Thing. Stand By Your Man. “Wild thing, I think you move me,” their son had bellowed as a suckhole flipped him half out of the rubber craft. He and JoAnne must have done something right.

And yet when the couple seated themselves in the darkening movie theater for a Midnight Classic, *The Wonder Boys*, and from the surrounding speakers Bob Dylan’s cinders of voice rasped, “I used to care, but things have changed,” a cavern opened in Paul that burst through him to become everything.

What consequence whether one’s span was telegraphed by one long dash, a short dash with a couple of dots, a mere dot alone, since once sounded the clicks were swallowed alike into the same silence. And to listen into that microcosm of a dash, break its minute entity into more infinitesimal components, what matter the specific arrangement of sound waves, if they occupied time as selling insurance or ice skating. Or killing children, who would only die a dot sooner rather than later.

Paul took to scrutinizing his surroundings, to determine if anything was different from anything else. Not really, they were all things, the veined leaf on the tree, the auto tire, the sun pouring its cool light on late summer, the blonde at the bar with her hastily puffed cig, brass buttons stamped with anchors, clean line of nose, dewdrop earrings, smudge where collar met neck, nick of cleavage. He took her to a motel, but as their mouths joined he inexplicably said, “No.”

Confessing to JoAnne, he said, “I nearly went with a harlot. Not a harlot,” he corrected, “but a sinner like me. Only there is no sin. You’re the best, most steadfast woman. That’s what you’ve hoodwinked yourself into being. It seems better than what others have hoodwinked themselves into being, though it isn’t. But I’m glad I think this about you, even though I’m wrong.”

Paul stopped attending church as it became clear there must be no God. If he was so vulnerable to the fear of death, he must have invented belief as a convenience. And so then did everyone else delude themselves into belief through unacknowledged terror. The

terror was immediate and real, which made belief by contrast pitiful and transparent.

Driving home with a pound of coffee for JoAnne, he believed there was nothing to prevent him from diverting the car into a tree. It wouldn't be an act of anger, despair, or self-pity, but merely an acknowledgment. Going with the flow.

Disgracefully, he found himself provoking JoAnne further, hoping that risking her loss would goad him into an effort to regain her, thus occupying his mind. Labor Day, after JoAnne had driven him home drunk from her family's barbecue, he lolling across the passenger seat, he had brushed his teeth before the mirror—drinking sometimes still afforded a thoughtless bliss in ritual—lightly stroking the gums before falling in a heap at the foot of their bed.

When his old friend David called to remind him of their annual hunting trip, which in his cogitations he had forgotten, he welcomed the distraction, wondering anxiously how far it might carry him.

JoAnne's response had been calm, controlled hysteria. "I know you're not coming back," she said. Now she'd risen in the middle of the night to see him off. Her black eyes receded from him above the high cheekbones—she was proud of her trace Mandan-Hidatsa blood—and the flannel nightgown hung straight like a ceremonial garment. Paul clasped her, the moment dark and still as if the two of them were suspended in a pool, while his feet shifted in the way of treading a StepMaster.

His friend's shack was scarcely larger than the Dodge Dakota that Paul parked in the dirt. Paul crossed the bare plot of yard. David stood in the door frame like a side of meat hung from a hook. Even his cigarette looked lopsided. Above the stubble the skin at his left cheekbone was abraded, a pink shine.

But at the sight of Paul, David's blue eyes snapped sharp, and his Cupid's-bow lips smiled. He had been a handsome man. At forty-eight he maintained the erect carriage to match his stiff crewcut, now gray. His weight was unchanged since high school and a

state championship in tennis. When he hadn't had dealings with David for a few months or so, the case now, Paul could be moved, seeing him.

In this shanty the kitchen lay just inside the doorway, and David had poured him a cup of coffee before Paul even removed his coat. Four a.m. in early November, it was unseasonably warm. By evening, though, an arctic air mass was expected to loop down, dropping the temperature fifty degrees or more, and Paul would have canceled the hunting trip had not David's invitation been so transparently a plea.

"Shot of Jack?"

"What the hell," Paul said, holding out his cup. "Wild men on the loose."

Seizing the quart of bourbon by the neck, David wristed a dollop into the coffee with practiced flair. He had been most recently a bartender. "Hey, almost bought a Kawasaki," he said.

"Yeah? What kept you?"

"Forgot I was broke."

"That's too bad. I can see us bouncing along the stream bed, guns on the handlebars, shooting the shit out of the woods, deer falling out of trees." Paul gulped his coffee, which tasted like warm metal. He had forgotten; David was the only person with whom he talked this way, thought this way. Loose lip. Spit out your brain without thinking.

"Yeah. It was going to be yellow."

David had tidied for him, Paul noted, following the broom's fresh tracks on the dusty linoleum. A plate and bowl glistened in the dishrack, still damp. But the living room looked as if a plane had crashed through the roof, tarpaper curling from the wall, wooden ribbing exposed, a broken chair listing. As if the air were colder, he stood with his back to the electric wall heater.

"Want to get our day in, beat the storm, better shove off," David said.

They loaded his gear in the bed of Paul's Dakota 397.

"Whip that one in the face," David muttered as Paul slammed the tailgate shut.

"What?"

David stared through him.

After gassing up at a truck stop, they left the freeway. Black, silent towns humped along the road, then blended back into the dark.

"If we hadn't been neighbors, we never would have been friends, would we," David said.

"It doesn't matter how things happen," Paul said, but David was right. Through junior high David had built model cars, then in high school customized the real thing, and always he played tennis, while Paul concentrated on school and reading. The preferred subject was heroes, from Audie Murphy and Scooter Burke all the way back to the Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Aeneid. He memorized "Horatius at the Bridge," took a year. In college he sampled lit courses and considered he might become a poet. Driving a carload along the Clark's Fork of the Yellowstone, reciting, "Winter is icummen in…SING GODDAMN!" he'd banged and yanked the steering wheel so hard, in rhythm, that it pulled off in his hands.

But David had built him a treehouse in sixth grade, which was their fort during the neighborhood slingshot wars. They aimed pebbles through the corner of the window while gravel smacked and pitted the pine boards. It was the era before lawsuits. Summer, Paul and David slept above the ground with maple leaves brushing the roof. During the spring of seventh grade, when his parents' divorce led to insomnia, Paul broke the sleeplessness with a night in the sweet-smelling pine, waking to stinging morning cold and his down bag crusted with frost.

The Dakota's brights searched alongside the blacktop, for the turnoff to Paul's cabin in the mountains, and he slowed. Beside him David's fingers methodically rubbed the left cheekbone, whether cause or effect of the rawness Paul couldn't say. Already the

livid skin and a stale odor David had brought to the cab had chased Paul's earlier gaiety. In his thirty adult years David had fixed cars and mixed drinks. He'd gone to war, divorced twice, done time, de-toxed, dried out. He'd served as wilderness guide and game warden, and driven repos. He'd been shot at, home and abroad.

In truth, David had become, long had been, an obligation owed to Paul's own past. Paul would have to identify his main feelings toward him as worry and pity. And weariness. He'd done one of those 'interventions' before there was a term for it, and David kicked out his headlights in thanks. Lending him money provoked fights with JoAnne, who loathed him. He'd picked up David stranded in two states, testified as a character witness in both his trials.

"I can't find the donkey," David said. "Kick your fucking ASS," he shouted and sprang in the seat.

In the middle of the dirt road Paul jounced the Dakota to a halt. "What are you talking about?"

The clean line of David's jaw set.

"Are you doing drugs?"

David laughed softly through his nose.

Paul drove on, unease hobbling his foot on the gas. The truck crept, speedometer hovering between 5 and 10. However derelict his state, David always had gathered himself for a hunt, shrewd and resourceful. Afterwards they drank and swapped stories like any two friends.

Gray lodgepole trunks flitted past the highbeams.

Ensconced in a stand of spruce, the cabin was tightly knit of peeled logs chinked with mortar. The moon finally had broken through cloud cover, and Paul easily found the deadbolt, jiggling the key until the door swung open. Moonlight raced across the plank floor. Paul lit a kerosene lantern. The sparse, crude furniture was scattered like old conversations. Unloading the truck, the men propped their overnight gear inside a wall.

Paul stuffed a day pack with ammunition, thermos, jerky, and his Thinsulate parka. They wolfed sweet rolls and smoked sausage.

"Something's wrong with my head. It's like I turn around and something's missing." David whirled to illustrate, elegant, six-foot, graying man hamming like...the 3 Stooges, Paul thought.

"Have you seen a doctor?"

"I'm in a bad way," David said brokenly, and he had Paul's attention. What most unsettled and infuriated others about David's behavior, Paul included, was the mask of stoicism. Handcuffed, retching drunk—or pointing his boot toe through the headlight globes—his face was blank beyond nonchalance.

"Hey, maybe this isn't the best thing. I should take you somewhere," Paul said.

"Naw, don't do that." David wrung his hands. "I need food. I need deer meat. I been starving."

"That's what we're getting," Paul decided, flicking lightly the back of the other's head, tilting his cap.

Slinging their venerable rifles over their shoulders, the men clumped over dry needles, no attempt at stealth as yet. The first reliable deer trail was a mile away.

As the terrain opened into boulder-strewn sage, morning backlight blued the distant evergreens. David's carriage improved, his military deliberateness restored, yet fluid. A half mile from the creek, without altering his gait, he subtracted sound from his footsteps. This was the time of day the whitetail would return from browsing along the water's edge, to bed down in the deeper woods higher up, against the gently sloping, crumbling canyon walls.

Fresh droppings clustered in the path. Young cottonwood trunks by the creek gleamed white where bucks' antlers had rubbed them clean, the bark hanging in tatters.

The men's practice was to still-hunt from cover while the deer were mobile, then, failing a kill, stalk them to their hidden sleeping places. Paul settled into his stand, a trio

of granite oblongs fronted with juneberry bush. The peculiar warmth coated his skin like oil, and then wind gusts kicked up, tousling the foliage. Turbulent, with no consistent direction, the eddies were charged with confused smells, water, the dankness of fallen leaves, sage. Paul's stand lay between the stream and a belt of lodgepole at the foot of the lichen-splotched ridge. Beyond, anvil-shaped mountains rose to the sky. David had concealed himself nearer the stream. His boots protruded like chunks of log from a dense thicket of bare willow saplings.

Perhaps agitated by the indecipherable wind-borne scents, the deer didn't come. An hour passed.

Paul glassed the canyon slope with his Zeiss 7x35's, detecting an antler among the branches the instant before the eight-pointer broke cover, dashing uphill, then folding back into the trees. He was at least three hundred yards away, too long for Paul's Winchester. David hadn't risked the wild shot, either.

Paul figured out what puzzled him. Rather than bounding with tail raised, the buck had run flat-out, tail and neck stretched straight, head down and mouth open. He'd been pursuing, not fleeing, probably an unseen doe, in the full rut. If they were patient, the doe might double back, the buck following.

Twenty minutes later, they did. The doe minced into the opening, ear twitching, peering behind. Muzzle lowered, the buck stumbled from the woods' edge but head-on, a poor shot. And then they spooked, the goddamned neurotic whitetail, for no apparent reason, bolting up and over the ridge.

David ran after in his knee-pumping upright stance, the rifle absolutely still in his hands, Paul jogging alongside until they reached the ridge top, panting. Clouds careened overhead, darkening from white to gray to black, and a narrow squall twisted through the mountains like a grimace. The chill was precipitous. Below, the valley was bisected neatly into sun and shadow, and as the buck plunged across that line the upraised taper of his tail abruptly dimmed. The first snowflakes shook down.

They bushwhacked through scrub oak and scree down to the valley floor, picking up the deer trail in a dry draw. He had slowed to a trot, hoofprints a yard apart, which still would leave him well ahead. The doe must have taken her own way. Paul felt stalked by ghosts of themselves, footfalls in his ear, the bare cottonwood spires closing in overhead. The personality of the man beside him was an absence, and the past rushed all the more into the void.

The snow hit hard, filling the buck's tracks so that they lost the trail. They walked shrouded in falling snow.

David grabbed his shuddering arms and hunched forward. He'd brought no coat. "Here." Paul produced the parka from his backpack and traded for his friend's cracked leather jacket. Though he could feel the cold, his fleece pullover and the heat of their labored walking kept it out of his joints.

"Track should show up easy in the snow now," David said.

"Snow will fill them up fast as they're made," Paul said. Snowflakes gummed his eyelashes. Wind skirled in the treetops. "We need to go back."

David switched on his taut, deaf face.

Paul seized his arm. "We've got to go." It was a blizzard. They'd lost even the banks of the narrow gully. If the snow didn't let up he'd need his compass just to find their way back.

"I saw JoAnne's beaver once," David said. The cheek wound was blood red.

"Bullshit you did."

"I crawled under the dining table when we were eating breakfast, coffee cake, and her knees were apart in her robe. Her blue terry-cloth robe."

The confession, or boast, was ludicrous. In twenty-five years David had not eaten breakfast at their home, and JoAnne didn't own a blue terry-cloth robe.

David leaned into his stride.

The snow was ankle-deep. The cold doled out responses slowly, and only after

another hundred yards of blind driving off his calf muscles did the apprehension follow that David meant him harm. His features stoical, all the expression pulsed in the scarlet badge, where Paul read spite, cunning, and even love. David had decided to walk off the edge, and he wanted Paul with him there.

"You want to freeze your ass, fine. You're not taking me with you," Paul said. "I'm not doing this. Are you coming with me?"

David's cherry lips smiled, and he angled forward.

Paul zipped the borrowed jacket over his fleece, layering last the orange vest. Then he turned back, the motion of his legs away from David filling him with disbelief. He squinted at the fogged compass, cleared the lens with a gloved thumb. Snow blew sideways. It had removed definition from the landscape. Peculiar, he had an inner sense and a logic saying the ridge lay to his left, but that was all.

Ice was crusting Paul's eyes. A smothered log chopped his feet from under him, and he sprawled. Swiping snow from his face, he resumed his pace. Jammed in the pocket of David's jacket, his hand encountered the Marlboro pack. Though Paul didn't smoke, David would light him one the night of a hunt, after they turned the Jack bottle upside down, the last ritual before dropping onto their cots. Frowning with concentration, he would take a draw, exhale, hold out the cig. Paul would reach with thumb and index finger.

Their footsteps were making a line in the snow, his and David's, that was growing at both ends, that was extending itself in opposite directions. Otherwise, nothing distinguished the snowscape. How quickly the rough brush and jagged rock outcrops were erased in the bland blanket of white with its trivial gradations, a pabulum to the eye. Paul felt a sinking drop within him. It was the richness of consciousness the past few hours, so familiar that he had accepted it thoughtlessly, leaving him. In its place was music, or what he used to think of as music. It was the songs of the rafting trip, but instead of progressing toward melody and resolution, the notes were just sounds. He was

left with sounds that bore no relation to each other, in a field of snow. He thought of his children, mistaking limitlessness for meaning. This could happen, which led to that, which led to the other. They were just at the root of the tree, not imagining that past the trunk, limbs, branches, twigs, were sticks outlined against a pale sky.

Though all sense told him to keep moving, Paul stood stock-still. Without thinking, he reversed himself again. David could not be left behind: the message leaped from his heart to his brain, an involuntary surge, the rush of good, red blood. Now the snow flew directly into his eyes, as it would into David's. Already it was erasing his prints with its soft packing. Of course there was no trace of the other man, who had no compass, who could be veering anywhere. Paul quickened the crunch of his feet, the only sound. Any faster, and he would panic. Panicked, he ran into the wall of white. The thickening blanket dragged at his boots, freezing his feet.

And then the dim column materialized, first a slight density in the snow, then solid form, the drab brown parka. David's face seemed set in ice. This time he allowed himself to be steered without a word, Paul's arm around his back. Paul buzzed the stubbly gray crewcut with his hand.

They moved through a whirl of atoms. Cold penetrated to his bones as if it originated there and moved outward. As their legs plodded without feeling through the blankness, shifting casts of white suggested shapes that might emerge but did not, as if nothing was casting shadows on nothing. Maybe there was a heaven, Paul thought dreamily, and it was no more than this white dissolve, the eternal awareness of being one with God. Maybe the nothing he had been experiencing actually was everything. He began praying, but it was only "Oh Lord Jesus Oh Lord Jesus" repeated over and over. His body was freeing itself, he was losing it. Then he saw the cabin.

Inside felt positively tropical, though the wall thermometer read 28. "We've never not got a deer," David said. He looked terrible, weary beyond mournful, eyes red-rimmed like a hound's. Heat still radiated from the cast iron stove, and the men stripped before it

to don their second set of thermal underwear and heavy clothing. David's teeth chattered. Paul threw on more logs, and David poured a few inches of Jack into plastic cups, hands shaking. He'd stashed a 1.75 liter in his bedroll. Outside the window the snow couldn't fall fast enough, it couldn't wait to dump from the sky like sand from a bucket. Laden spruce limbs drooped past the roof overhang, their looming black undersides the only holes in the white. Paul lit the kerosene lamp, and the men sat in rough pine-slat chairs, with their whiskey. Famished, they each consumed a can of beef stew heated on the wood stove.

"In sixth grade we sold the most Boy Scout Jamboree tickets," David said. "We rode from one end of Billings to the other. I had a chopped custom Schwinn and you had a Jap bike. We'd memorized the pitch: 'Good morning, ma'am, we're from the Boy Scouts of America. We hope you can help us out by buying tickets to the annual Boy Scout Jamboree in beautiful Denver, Colorado. Even if you can't attend, your contribution will help the Boy Scouts.' Only you kept making it up. 'The Jamboree is on Mars but buy the tickets anyway because we need the money...Hi, we're Heckel and Jeckel from Heckyjeckyland.'" David laughed.

"I'd forgotten that."

"At the end of the day we coasted down from the Rim without touching the brakes once. It was like a roller coaster when it feels like no gravity. You were scared."

Paul started a story about the treehouse, trying to shoot baskets into the neighbor's yard, and the mother kept retrieving the ball for them, and she was wearing a red bandanna for a top, and the dog was running around, chasing the ball...and it was pointless, he'd lost the thread, brain dim with fatigue. David had fallen asleep, cup still slung loosely in his hand. He started slightly when Paul removed it.

Paul cleaned up and spread out his sleeping bag on one cot, unrolling David's bag, as well. Paul put another log in the stove. Staring out the window, he could sense the snow more than see it, as if the night were alive and moving. Before lying down he

jostled David's shoulder. When the other didn't stir, Paul shook him, then pressed beneath his ear, a trick he'd read in an adventure story. David's body did not move, and there was no pulse, nor at his wrist. There was no breath from his nose. He was dead.

Paul stood in bafflement. David's stillness seemed a product of his own mind being drunk and exhausted. If he washed his face in cold water this might go away. Instead he poured himself a drink, and another. He couldn't leave, night, blizzard, snowdrifts up to the wheel wells. He drank another three fingers from the bottle and laid David on the second cot, covering him with a sleeping bag as if—what? He might be troubled by the cold? Still he performed the task with drunken doggedness.

He lay down and slept fitfully, pitching about semi-conscious, unable to grasp where he was. He dreamed of swimming up from great depth, straining for the greenish-pale wash of the surface far above. His last breath was imploding, and airlessness tore at his chest. The green was collapsing into black, silent white dots spraying across his eyes as the silence became more profound, clinging to the slow-motion striving of his arms and legs. After an hour or two he woke half off the cot, head nearly touching the floor. He got up to stoke the stove, and with a gladdening rush he saw, in its glow, David sitting in the slat chair. On its arm rested a full plastic whiskey tumbler, the amber liquid glinting warmly as if the fire were within.

"David, Jesus, I dreamed—" Paul began, lurching toward him. He didn't like his friend's posture. Legs didn't bend that way naturally, and he reached out rudely to confirm that the spectator was a corpse. The touch of the dead hand raised the hair at the back of his neck. He maneuvered the balky, slumped body onto its cot, then pitched into bed, falling asleep despite the sound of his own groaning. He dreamed that people had long tails useful as ropes or knouts, but in frustration he was slamming his against the refrigerator.

Waking bolt upright, he knew exactly where to look. Again David sat in the chair, feet propped on his rifle case, unlit cigarette dangling from his hand. Paul ignited the

lantern mantle and turned the flame up high. David's lids were closed, long lashes exceptionally delicate above the freckled cheeks and the scabbed sore. His lips were pale and seemed to have shrunk.

Paul opened the cabin door wide and snow trickled onto his feet. Sliding his hands under David's legs and back, bracing his knees, he lifted the weight into his arms, carried it out the doorway and threw it into a drift. Through the clearing sky, the moon deepened the hollows of his bootprints as he followed the same brief path to the indoors. He didn't look back. Sleeping, he received bright, eager dreams bathed in unnatural light. The snow was cold sand, he on hands and knees.

When he woke he sensed the dawn even before seeing the graying at the window. Beside him David was stretched out on the cot, covered with the down bag. Left elbow crooked, the hand was tucked under his head in an attitude of ease. Melted snow pooled under the cot.

Paul threw all their belongings in the pickup bed. Reverently he laid David's body, stiffened, as if stuffed with batting—which in its restlessness had overthrown science, had disproved the material world—on top. Despite the cracking of branches, the storm had passed. Paul stayed rooted, staring unbelievingly at his hands. A rushing through the trees stirred the ice crystals in the air, adding to the impression he was being watched. By David, perhaps, or by Jesus. He was a very small patch in this field of white.

In the rearview mirror, the long form, dusted white with new snow, was turning to ice in the subzero morning. Sunlight slanting between lodgepole trunks outlined it in a rim of fire. Banging into a buried rut, the truck's wheels left the road and the body went airborne, allowing Paul a fractional second to believe it would not return but levitate directly into heaven. Was David Jesus Himself, disguised, testing?

After David's funeral Paul returned to work, and with JoAnne it was like first courtship all over again. In church he lifted his voice in praise. David was the

Resurrection and the Life to come, and Paul saw him everywhere, peeking from the cornices in church, outlined in the green buds of a false spring.

JoAnne sat him down, his hands in hers. “You know, I don’t think God wants us to come to Him through folly,” she said. “I don’t think he would raise the dead just to open the heart of one soul.”

“You mean, why am I so special?” Paul said. “Why doesn’t He field an entire major league baseball team of the dead and thereby bring His light to millions? That doesn’t trouble me, JoAnne.” He laid his hand on her arm, joy of his flesh. “God knows us, each one. He chose what would work for me.”

But a little doubt did gnaw at his horizon. When a few days later JoAnne asked, “Think. Is there anything you might have forgotten from that night?” Paul did sit with his fingertips to his temples and closed his eyes.

“You were drunk,” JoAnne suggested gently, “and you just thought David moved. Maybe you wanted him to move. After all, he ended up where you put him in the first place, really.”

Paul thought he was seeing something. Along with David’s fresh impress in the snow, outside the cabin. Footsteps, two sets, leading to the body’s imprint and then back, with the distinctive pattern of Paul’s boot tread, inverted pyramids. If he had moved David himself, then probably there was no God.

Paul felt as if there was another person inside himself, and it was he whose eyes had watched him in the frozen clearing, laying his friend’s corpse in the pickup. Three times, while he slept, that person had brought David to life, unable to accept his death or to stop tending him. That person had deluded himself that existence mattered, a core of delusion built up over the course of a lifetime, layer upon layer like sedimentary rock. That core was obdurate to reason, too strong, resisting knowledge and truth. That person unbalanced Paul, made him walk lopsided, lift JoAnne’s arm to his lips.

The doubt meekly introduced by JoAnne fatally undermined Paul’s religious

faith, yet left him suspended above his previous unbelief, perversely incapable of despair. He must accept either of two delusions, the mystery of God and the life to come, or that self who mattered, a social construct or a personal one. In fairness to God or "God," just in case, he remained a regular churchgoer.

Paul was powerless. Enslaved by himself or by "God," he persisted with resignation in the cynical task of assuaging his clients' imagined "concerns." He made "love" to his wife with "passion." He humored his children's "affection" for him with desperate "fondness," and his family grew in "happiness" throughout his old age.

MEDICINE

The Buffalo Vision

Late on the third night of the Sun Dance, most of the hundred Crow people within the Big Lodge had fallen asleep. The fire was low, the singers' voices hoarse over the drumbeat.

Only John Sees the Hill still danced in place, his back to the circular wall of upright aspen boughs. Shrilling his eagle-bone whistle, John weaved toward the Center Pole, a white cottonwood limb. From beneath its forked crest a mounted buffalo head stared at him blindly, firelight seething across its brown wool and steely horns. John's legs wobbled, though an eagle plume stood stiff upright in each of his fists; like the other dancers, he had neither eaten nor drunk in over two days. John ran at the animal, daring it to turn its anger on him and release its power. But when the buffalo's lifeless eyes ignored him, John retreated to the shadows. Mouth parched, drained of sweat, he felt like a column of dust. The round moon shone down, so bright it could break.

Twice more John shuffled, stumbling, to the white tree, only to fall back. Panting, he saw the night as a tilted, spinning wash of light and dark.

The drum and singers kept a steady murmur. Beside the fire John's father Clayton, one of the two Sun Dance chiefs, sang along, wrapped in a red Pendleton. He raised first one bare foot, then the other over the embers, spreading his toes like a hawk grasping its prey. Those talons seemed to enter John's body, invigorating him with the knife-like pain. Again John advanced toward the buffalo, bouncing on his feet. The singers' voices surged, lifting and strengthening him, carrying him like the wind. The buffalo's nostrils flared, puffing steam, and its eyes reddened and hardened with fury. John flew joyously. The animal hunched its shoulders, its bulk filling John's sight. He danced into its face. Lowering its head, the buffalo charged. The thunder of its hooves threw the ground sideways. Red eyes hated him, then the horns hooked him, tossing him skyward.

John's body lay on the dirt beneath the stuffed head. The drummers pounded and sang. Clayton strolled back and forth beside the fire.

John looked up at the moon shining through humps of clouds, which were like buffalo lying down. The silver disc sliced an animal's neck, separating the head from the body. Whistling, the head soared into space, a fiery comet among the stars. John entered the buffalo body and instantly felt both its earthbound mass and the head's free swooping flight among stars that were chunks of crystal. He woke laughing with joy and crawled to his bed of cool reeds.

On the final morning, the more than one hundred Crow men and women whistled up the sun with their eagle bones, their hands symbolically washing the first rays over their bodies. Songs were sung, the blessings of Akbaatatdia, the divine spirit, invoked by the Sun Dance chiefs. In his turn, John approached the Center Pole for the last time. Leaning his hand against it, he lit a cigarette, letting his prayers of thanks rise with the smoke to his friend the buffalo, up the fluttering cottonwood branches, and beyond.

Four chosen women entered barefoot, carrying water to each dancer. Just before the people formed two lines to pass from the Big Lodge, John caught Clayton looking at him, eyes filled with tears, and couldn't help smiling back. Then Clayton turned and led the procession through banks of spectators to a table heaped with fresh fruit and drinks. John's wife Millie stood proudly, on either side their son and daughter. Their hands reached for him and wrapped around his body. Millie cried on his shoulder. John closed his eyes, and the images pitched in his head, the buffalo, the moon, coals pulsing with the drum, green leaves waving against the blue sky. When he opened them, a very tall blonde woman was staring across the swirl of dark heads between them, pretending to watch the last worshippers leave the Lodge. John grinned at her before quickly averting his face.

Medicine

As daybreak had fired the colors within the Big Lodge—the varied greens of aspen and cottonwood leaves, brushy lodgepole needles, grass; the multihued Pendleton blankets draping the seated dancers—Clayton had raised his arms in prayer. It was the first morning's sunrise service, thirty-six hours before John would confront the buffalo. First Clayton gave thanks for the return of sacred Crow relics, after an eighty-year exile, by the Smithsonian Institute. That had been the occasion for the Sun Dance. Then he prayed for the dancers, their families and tribe, the well-being of Indian people and the rest of humanity. He prayed for the whites who, lured by the notoriety of the Smithsonian case, had journeyed hundreds of miles, hoping to "go in"; no room, he'd had to tell them. "Let our sacred Sun Dance," he beseeched in Crow, "find its way into their lives, too. Aho." In his heart he was praying hard for John, that at least this one of his sons would keep true to Crow way.

Saturday afternoon, the second full day of the Sun Dance, a line of barefoot supplicants passed into the Big Lodge to be doctored by Clayton or the other Sun Dance

Chief. While the patient placed both hands on the Center Pole, Clayton prayed, touched his medicine feathers to the trunk, and whisked them over the person, concentrating on the source of the ailment. Many improved on the spot, a limp straightening or emphysemic wheeze subsiding. A man only middle-aged but vacant and dribbling with Alzheimer's was led by his daughter to the cottonwood. With the feathers close alongside the man's head, Clayton drew out the sickness and scattered it to the east. "I've never seen so many going into a Sun Dance," the man remarked. "Rain coming, though."

The temperature had dropped twenty degrees under low black clouds, and wind swirled dust into the people's eyes. Still the line stretched far beyond the Lodge's aspen enclosure. Thunder crashed on them, lightning ripping the clouds. A tree on the nearby ridge exploded, and minutes later a siren wailed from the BIA fire station, but a wall of rain blotted out the flames. The storm surrounded them, a chill mist gusting sporadically. At the rattle of approaching hail, the dancers drew their blankets over their heads. Above them, though, a circle of sky remained blue, and Clayton kept doctoring. Despite the storm's rumbling, the sun broke through with an unearthly, streaming light that made all look as if they were rising up. Clayton's voice shook with emotion as his prayer brought the healing to an end. Later it was learned that two-and-a-half inches had soaked the Arrow Creek valley, not a drop in the Big Lodge.

For each petition Clayton spread his palm against the cottonwood and smoked. Dozens of cigarette butts clumped in the dirt at the base of the pole. He didn't doubt that his prayers would succeed. Whites always were astonished at Indian medicine, calling miraculous or supernatural that which to him was a simple fact of life.

Hours later, among the sleeping dancers in the near-dark, Clayton received the final blessing of seeing his son "take a fall" beneath the buffalo head, and of feeling his own heart full to brimming.

Clayton's first son described himself as "cosmopolitan," a word Clayton knew

only as the title of the women's tit magazine. He'd lived in San Francisco, Japan, the Virgin Islands, every time losing himself in drink, so that Clayton would have to go after him. "Dad threw out the lasso and drug that dogie home," John would say. A Crow woman had him now, in Billings. He'd helped cook frybread for the Sun Dance buffalo feast, organized by Clayton's wife, Berenice.

The second son, who had dug the pit to roast the meat, worked for the tribe in Crow Agency. "He's sound-headed," Clayton told Berenice, "but spiritually he's along the way of being a dud."

John, the youngest, had shot the two bulls served at the feast. Already this triumph was legendary. After hours of driving, he and his father had tracked the tribal herd to a grassy plateau. By ritual law each hunter was allowed only one shot per animal, which must die from a single bullet. When the Crow game warden had missed at 150 yards, the herd had stampeded up a hill, 200, then 250 yards away. John fired and a buffalo dropped. "Hit him just over the shoulder. I could see that bullet going the whole way," he said, and shot again. "Neck," he said as the second beast fell. Jumping up, he ran to the kill, leaping a stream along the way, waving his arms. Clayton knew that only spirit could have made those buffalo give their lives to him.

With the Sun Dance at an end, Clayton "smudged" his fan of medicine feathers in sweet, holy cedar smoke, preparatory to wrapping and stowing them. The feathers, bequeathed to him by his father, had belonged to generations of powerful medicine men. After he'd received them, it was five years before Clayton felt deserving to use them. He'd gone in two, three Sun Dances a season, traveling state to state. The muscles of his chest had been torn by the Lakotas' ritual piercing. Through vision quests he had scourged his body and spirit with hunger and cold to let the knowledge in. When this life left him and the feathers dropped from his hands, Clayton thought, only John's hands could open to take them.

The Tutor

Clayton ladled water from the metal bucket onto the glowing rocks. Steam hissed, and John breathed deep, searing his lungs. He grunted with satisfaction. In the dark of the sweat lodge Clayton's voice began its incantatory praying, reciting a litany of ills and sorrows endured by people that he never would meet. Three weeks after the Sun Dance, correspondence was so overwhelming that a burlap sack served as Clayton's P.O. box. "It's like to being Elvis," Clayton said. Most consisted of touching, even heartbreaking pleas—for a dying child's recovery, the return of a husband's love. Stories of alcoholism and drug abuse. Clayton struggled through the English to get the gist. A New Mexico man asked for victory in his upcoming campaign for constable. People wanted help with their bad cars and backstabbing relatives. "Dear Abby," Clayton said, but he prayed for them all, including the Rhode Island lady suffering from shingles; the images puzzled him, of roofing materials buzzing her like angry insects, or her groaning face above gables protruding from her ribs. Maybe she was insane.

In thanks, some letters enclosed cigarettes or even small bills—welcome, as the Sun Dance had left the family in debt despite their selling off land. Clayton begged for the worthiness to carry these people's hopes.

John switched his own back with willow twigs, driving the heat into his body. Only the second pouring, and he felt incandescent. After the prayer, meditating and drifting, Clayton and John would say whatever came into their heads. "I need the truck for Billings tomorrow," John said.

"Pick me up a case of them motor oil," Clayton said. "What are you doing in Billings?"

"Finding a job. I need a place while I'm taking classes."

After a pause Clayton said, "I didn't think you were really going to go ahead for

that college."

"I need them teaching me. I see plenty in my mind, but my hands...The kids do better drawings." John laughed. Anger was impossible in the sweat, even at himself. The reason he'd gone in the Sun Dance—"you got to have a reason, the Big Lodge ain't the mall," Clayton said—was his acceptance by Montana State-Billings, eleven years after high school, bad grades and all, thanks to four landscapes rendered in Wal-Mart poster paints. A neighbor had helped him decipher the applications. The same man not only had praised the pictures, but bought one for $25. John could only shake his head in amazement.

"You can't leave Millie and the children all year," Clayton said.

"I'll bring 'em."

"Your kids in a white school?" Already, while comprehending Crow, the boy and girl responded in English.

With no reply John felt tight, closed in. The idea of obtaining his own income had excited him. All he earned from firefighting or repairing cars went straight to the family. He and Millie had lived with his parents for their entire marriage, eleven years.

"You have a place. With us," Clayton said.

Be a cold winter, hitching fifty miles from Arrow Creek to Billings and back every day, John didn't say.

"We'll fix the old Toyota for you, have it to kicking up its heels," Clayton said.

At first, as John had trusted, the buffalo vision touched with grace his experience of college. He found all his classes. The white students would pause and explain to him in detail the campus layout, drawing maps. He was a sunny being, he felt, whose brief company pleased them. The way he moved exhilarated him, light, loose, kind of crooked like a dragonfly's flight compared to their beeline marching.

Home, he painted boldly, uninhibited by his lack of skill. The tubes of acrylic

released bombs of color, things not seen in this world. He might set a blue-faced warrior, mounted on a red horse, beside a yellow boomerang-like object suspended in the sky. Often, though he never would reproduce the sacred vision directly, buffalo and moons possessed the canvas, inspiring the other elements to follow them. His six-year-old son Dan sat at his feet while the pictures formed. “Ho,” the boy exclaimed as an orange bolt split a mountain. The family’s curious hovering, rather than making John self-conscious, gripped and pushed him so that he felt he was painting with their collective mind.

Only Millie scarcely could take notice. She greeted his late arrivals in Arrow Creek with brusque sarcasm, until they went to bed. The past six years she’d used a diaphragm, but now she teased him by pretending to throw it away. She was lean, with fine bones, pockmarked skin, and a rare, girlish smile. One night he embraced her with the diaphragm still in its case. Initially she went slack—they’d agreed that Dan would be their last—but then she let herself go with him. Her legs scissored around his back as he whispered in her ear, “This baby will be born under good luck. Lucky, lucky baby.”

Assessing John’s torrid output as “highly promising,” the art professor gave him a studio key.

Academic courses, however, the English, math, history, were a nightmarish blindness. Lectures, textbooks—John comprehended nothing. Fluent in Crow, he barely read English and spoke it either haltingly or in desperate, helter-skelter bursts. While Millie, who kept the family’s account book, guided him through math homework, she couldn’t take his tests. The longer he waited for the blankness to lift, the worse it was. Three weeks into the semester he called Teresa Gundersen, the tall, blonde woman, in her forties, who had waited to glimpse him outside the Big Lodge.

The year before, after watching him fancy dancing at Crow Fair, she’d slipped him her phone number on her husband’s business card. His lobbying for the Montana timber industry generally kept him in Washington, D.C., she said.

Less than an hour after he phoned, Teresa joined him in the studio where he was painting a green, disembodied head. A horn grew beside one ear, balanced asymmetrically by a curly forelock. Pow wow music thumped from a tape recorder.

"Stunning," Teresa said, flinging up her arms. Her bosom strained against the buttons of her red silk blouse, just as her tummy bulged out her jeans.

"My professor told me I'm running away from the field. So I look at him. Wha'?" John cocked his head. "It's good. It's good." He laughed.

Teresa cased the studio, examining the various student pieces. "No competition," she confirmed. John smiled in response to her small talk. "You sang at Crow Fair with your dad," she said. "What are they saying?" She indicated the tape player.

"It's a forty-nine, love song, you know. Indian blues."

"Sing me one."

John clicked off the machine. Pounding a heavy cadence with his palm on his knee, he chanted two stately, loping verses.

Teresa's hands folded in her lap. "What does it mean?" she asked humbly.

"Aha, don't you want to know," John said.

"I'm serious."

John laughed, his long ponytail shaking.

"Well, let's play this then. I bought it at the mall." She popped in the cassette. "Bulgarian women's chorus."

At the first ethereal, a cappella notes John was transfixed. The crystalline dissonances went straight to his groin. The voices were naked angels, like a cottonwood stripped of its bark, more, a purer white than Earth could allow. He looked up at Teresa. Shy to betray desire, she leaned fidgety against the wall, a 180-pound waif.

John danced her to the floor. The music took him away even while his body

feasted. In thanks he kissed the woman's breasts over and over. They were big enough to hide in.

It was while Teresa dressed that he said, "I had a question." Opening his composition book, he pointed to 'thesis.' "Is it more than one of 'these'?"

"Poor boy," she said. "We're going to have to hold a regular study hall."

Within a few weeks John was passing all his courses but American history. Like many traditional Crows, he was unconcerned with strict chronology; his father might state a given duration as "two month, maybe three years." John couldn't say if Lincoln freed the slaves before or after Martin Luther King.

Teresa drilled him in grammar, spelling, and math, besides negotiating extensions with his professors. She dictated his reports, and when that proved agony typed them or wrote them out for him to copy.

Education pelted him like a gale with broken sticks and tossed leaves of knowledge. "Picasso, ah yes Picasso," he told Teresa. "The sad blue people, and bulls, analytic cubism made the illusion of the depth, synthetic cubism the picture is flat...ran, has run, will have been running..."

Millie said, "When we were trying for the baby? It was the wrong time of the month. I knew, but I was still hoping, until today."

John squeezed her hand and pursed his mouth as if he hadn't forgotten. Then he felt a sharp regret, remembering how he loved the calmness in her face as she held a newborn to her breast.

But as the semester progressed and he returned later and later, the kids dozing in front of videos, waiting, Millie withdrew into silent rage. On a morning, actually near noon, when John splashed the sleep out of his head at the kitchen sink, Millie sat brutally beading a pair of deerskin boots, shoving a needle through the leather.

"It's a shame, poor young wife," Berenice said.

"There's a culture festival they're doing down in Wyoming," Clayton said, "and they're wanting us to share our Crow dancing." 'Us' obviously included John.

John shook his head. "Midterms are the week after."

"Good," Berenice said.

"But I got to read them books."

"Don't tell me you can't dance with us," Clayton snapped in Crow.

The next day John packed a bedroll. "I'm staying in Billings the next three days. Got to make up all that studying I'm going to lose. Maybe sleep a little on the studio floor." He drove away before anyone could stop him. Teresa rented them a motel room.

"Why do you cover up?" John asked. Teresa had dragged the king-sized sheet around her and into the bathroom, affording him only a peek at her snowy avalanche of flesh.

"I'm a grandmother," she said, trailing the sheet back to bed.

"No, you look young. Strong," he said, flexing his arms. "Like one of them." He indicated the track and field on TV.

"A shot putter?"

John laughed, not understanding. He'd noticed that Teresa always claimed the last comment in any exchange, but that was only fair since apparently she knew everything. Mention Kandinsky, whom John had adopted as his favorite artist, and she discussed the transition from Die Blaue Reiter to the Bauhaus. "Of course the war intervened. Franz Marc dying so young, a tragedy. Or the poets! Brooke, Owen."

"The Vietnam War?"

"Did you know that people actually have been fighting wars since before you were born?"

"Sure. The Crows fought the Lakota a long time. Ten years."

"Try a couple of centuries." She even knew more about the old-time Crows than he did, the society of men's clubs, the ancient linguistic affinity between Crow and Lakota. "But Crow men always were the most beautiful," she said.

In bed, though, she lay stiff and shrinking as if hardly daring hope that he'd touch her. He would straddle her, letting his cock and balls brush her belly, up her breasts to her chin and lips. Then she'd sigh and begin to stroke him, murmuring into his skin, tightening her grip. She was very powerful, and her rolling on top gave him moments of real anxiety before his strength welled up to match her. He'd decided to find nobility in her handsome, broken features, though the sight of her in bright day made him cold.

The culture festival was grim. Under a leaden sky snow fell steadily. Since John's three-day absence he and Millie hadn't spoken, and the children were cranky, whining and stamping as he tied on their beaded leggings. The entire family, including his brothers and clan relatives, danced or sang with the drum.

John crouched and darted, ruffling his turkey-feather bustle. Against the monochrome afternoon the Crows, vivid in colored fabrics and cut-glass beadwork, plumes wagging, undulated like autumn foliage. Berenice wore an elk-tooth dress, Clayton full headdress and white buckskins. He beckoned the mixed Indian and white audience to join the Round Dance, in friendship. Dipping lightly into the crossover step that rotated the circle, watching the exuberant, giggling whites trip over themselves, John wondered how friendly Clayton would feel when he learned Teresa's request: to participate in a real Crow sweat.

The festival grand marshal presented T-shirts, seventy-five bucks gas money for the three vehicles, and profuse gratitude.

"Glad to do it," Clayton said. "We know us Crows got something the world needs. World's a pretty tore-apart place, like a old tipi ripped up by the wind, and the snow coming in."

John waited midway through the long drive home to Arrow Creek before proposing Teresa's wish. "She's my tutor," he explained. "I'd be flunking without her."

"This white woman breaking up your home doesn't sweat in our lodge," Clayton said.

"She's my teacher, that's all. She gives me over and over. So I'm just taking and taking, like sucking from a big tit?"

To refuse would be inhospitable, Clayton admitted in Crow, expressionless.

Late on a Saturday afternoon, well past dusk, Teresa drove up in her new Scout. John's footsteps crunched in the snow as he greeted her. Down by the creek a fire blazed, Clayton shoveling in the rocks that would cook the sweat lodge, a dome of blankets and old carpeting draped over bent willow poles.

"Dad's running late," John said. "He was hauling the rocks and the truck got a flat. Oh, he was mad." John shook himself comically like a wet dog, nervous. All day he'd endured, even joined his family's jokes. "Tutor?" his 'cosmopolitan' brother Martin had said. "The sweat'll blister the toots out of her tooter. She'll be lucky if she can sit on it." But Millie, Berenice, and Martin's woman would sweat with her. Berenice had promised to take care of her, translating the prayers, explaining how to breathe through cupped hands against the cool earth if the heat became too intense.

The family introduced themselves solemnly until Teresa asked Clayton, "Where'd ya get the flat at?" attempting an ingratiating folksy diction.

He gazed at her. "What?"

Teresa repeated the question.

Removing his cap and turning it over in his hands, he said decisively, "My hat's not flat," and walked away. Amid the Crows' roaring mirth, Teresa closed her eyes, face scarlet. Then Clayton got it. Laughing until the tears came, he patted her arm.

The women traipsed off to the sweat lodge. John realized his anxiety was for his friend's pleasure, for the sweat's spiritual benefit to enter her life. The thought of her joy

snatched gladness out of him like a startling, gorgeous scarf from a magician's empty sleeve. He couldn't relax, shredding cigarette butts with his fingers while an hour passed. Hearing Teresa's shriek he bolted up, recognizing only from the accompanying laughter that the women were bathing in the icy creek. Soon they burst in the door, ruddy and streaming.

Over steaks and potato salad Teresa expatiated on the differences between the Crow sweatbath and what she'd read of Cree, Salish, and others' practices. She shared gossip, courtesy of her husband, the lumber flack, about congressmen's sexual escapades. She dropped names, a party at Mel Gibson's ranch, an exclusive gala opening for the celebrated Crow artist Shane Two Bears. No one else spoke. "God, what a loudmouth," Teresa said, muzzling herself, and rose to help Berenice clear the table. She joined the women washing the dishes. Though it was past midnight when they finished, neither Berenice nor Clayton invited her to spend the night. She hugged the women in farewell, towering over them.

Scarcely had the Scout's engine turned over when Millie said, "Hulk Hogan." The family cracked up. Berenice's shoulders shook.

"Da Crow sweat..." Martin bellowed, assuming a grappler's stance, chest puffed.

Smiling angrily into his plate, John abruptly shouted, "She's a genius."

"How many times you wrestle her?" Millie said. "Bet she pins you right on your back with your legs in the air."

"I ride her until the sun comes up," John said in Crow. "She's not bony like you. Bony woman! This whole year I'm going to school," he continued in English, "you're just bony. Sticking me any time. You're like a"—he found the word—"skeleton to me." Clayton ordered them quiet. John slept on the couch. The next morning Clayton said Berenice would need John's Toyota for a week or more while he took the truck hunting back in the mountains.

"What do I do?" John said.

"Help me," Clayton said.

John phoned Teresa. He collapsed his easel, rolled up his canvases, and tucked them in a gunny sack.

"You ain't going," Clayton said. John kept packing. Millie took the children to her mother's. Berenice was crying. When Teresa braked in the drive, John flung the sack over his shoulder. Clayton blocked his way, a compact six feet standing slightly bowlegged, hands dangling. Under his shock of black hair his eyes held John. Like a sleepwalker John swept past him, the sack bumping his father's arm.

Teresa rented him a one-bedroom apartment near the campus. That night John dialed home from a pay booth, asking for Clayton.

"He's hunting," Berenice said.

"I called to say I'm sorry for walking out," John said in a trembling voice. "He's got to understand, I can't leave school."

Berenice sighed. "He ain't feeling well."

John took off walking, hat pulled low against the cold. Up the steep escarpment known as the Rim he hiked, past the fake day of the luminous but nearly deserted airport. He tramped Billings Heights, downtown, west around the mall. The wind burned his cheeks. In an intersection he saw Clayton, red Pendleton and Sun Dance skirt undisturbed by accelerating cars. Clayton's hand clenched over his heart, thumping his breastbone. Then he vanished. Tears iced John's lashes, fuzzing his vision into bright blobs and wispy shadows. He strode on aching legs, awaiting whatever would happen to him, his heart maybe. He imagined it leaping from his chest, pumping on the sidewalk. When morning came he felt like stone, some strong new stone dug from the earth, yet to be named. He brewed coffee in his new home and went to class.

Just before Christmas break Clayton knocked at the apartment, handing John the keys to a full-ton Ford pickup only two years old. "So you can get home," he said. Millie

had moved to her new job in Crow Agency, but the kids visited some weekends and holidays. The evening after his last final John's new machine was eating up the pavement to Arrow Creek, laughing at ice patches.

Clayton welcomed him at the door. John's drawings and sketches were hung all over the living room. Berenice served roast venison. Clayton hauled out the drum and the men sang, warmed by the fire, before a midnight sweat. Lying on his back inhaling the scalding steam, John felt the knots in his muscles—the stress from finals, his incomprehensible textbooks, the whole concrete claustrophobia—melt away into the ground. Before rinsing in the creek, he and his father stood under the cloud-shrouded moon as slow, fat snowflakes dissolved on their steaming bodies.

The children were standoffish at first, and Trina, eleven, conscientiously refrained from calling him Dad. "Take me for ice cream, John."

"Millie's poisoning them against me," John said.

"What do you expect?" Berenice said.

But they played with him, sledding and rodeo, in which he was the bull to be roped, ridden, and tugged to the floor. They helped him stretch canvases.

Millie herself, when she lingered picking them up, was surprisingly deferential. "Still in the ring with old Hulk," she said, but not mean, inviting him to laugh, which he did. She zipped around in a used Taurus and dressed sharp, with padded shoulders and red lipstick. While the family shopped in Billings, they stole an afternoon together in their old room, fucking with the desperate, tittering carnality, and self-pity, of illicit lovers.

"I missed you so much it told me something," Teresa said three weeks later, when he returned to the city. "I'm leaving Captain Clear-cut. After twenty-three years. Good-bye half-million-dollar house on the Rim. Farewell cook and maid. Etc."

"So where you living?"

"In the morning dew," she enthused.

"You can stay here 'til you find a place."

They upgraded to a two-bedroom. On her middle school teacher's salary, "I think I can swing it," Teresa said. She attempted meals—"take-out Chinese to the rescue again, I'm afraid"—and vacuumed with gusto. But she scorned John's lack of academic progress. "That's your idea of a sentence?" she exploded. "'It's becoming Americans be going over doughboys?' And there are no 'Germanians.' Sounds as if flowers are conquering Europe." Coaching math, she leaned her expanse of face into his, counting loudly on her parsnip-sized fingers.

"If I'm so stupid, why are you bothering with me?" John said.

"Oh, baby." Her hands covered her face. "Oh, John baby." She rocked back and forth. Kneeling, she pushed her head into his lap so he scarcely could understand her. "I'm scared," she said. "I've thrown it all over for you, you know. And you're not like other people. You're gifted. I'll never be able to count on you. I'll never know what to expect from you."

In her words John suddenly knew himself. Always something had divided him from others—Millie, his children, mom and brothers, even his dad. Teresa had named it. It was as if he'd been lost his whole life and now recognized his own woods. He was a great boulder brilliant with red, orange, green lichen, encircled by trees whose roots twined around him like veins from a heart. You were so long finding us, the holy trees said, but now you're here. Swept by gratitude, John said, "Let's get married."

Teresa lifted her head. "So sweet." She rubbed her knuckles against his cheekbones. "Of course we're both married already, but screw the details."

Teresa coaxed a deal with the history prof, permitting John to focus his term paper on Native American history, specifically that of the Sees the Hill family. He salvaged a semester D, along with two C's, a B, and an A.

The spirit told John what to paint, and his hand grew surer. His beloved acrylics exuded the almost unnatural radiance of Pendleton hues, or the shimmer of cut glass. Strangely, his breakthrough occurred in watercolor, a Crow in full battle regalia, face blackened for a slain enemy, descending from the sun into a tipi. Composition dynamic, colors bold but harmonious, brushstrokes deft, the painting was completed in less than an hour, and John emerged as if from a dream. “That’s the painter you’ll be a year from now,” his professor said. “And after that—” He spread his hands wide.

If he were to continue visiting home, John said, Teresa must come, too. Millie vanished altogether. The family’s revenge was to make Teresa a servant. If Clayton needed a gasket from Billings, “Send Hulk,” and away drove the Scout. After dinner the Sees the Hills would rise abruptly and retire to the living room, abandoning to her the food-and-dish-strewn table and overflowing kitchen.

“And nights I lie with beauty,” she said.

The Rendezvous

Almost a year after the Sun Dance, Clayton’s celebrity persisted. An item in the National Enquirer featured his “transcontinental healing” by mail, referring to the “miracle” of the encircling thunderstorms having spared the Big Lodge. Anthropology students had camped on his lawn the previous week.

But since the moment the past winter when John had brushed past him, sack over his back, to Teresa’s waiting Scout, a stone had lodged in Clayton’s gut. It blocked his breathing and wouldn’t let him shit more than every three or four days.

“I’ll run that Hulk out of here,” Berenice had threatened more than once.

“We’ll lose him,” was Clayton’s reply. Now, the horses knee-deep in midsummer green pasture, John emerged past eleven every morning, yawning in low-slung cutoffs, to paint. Last night an outrage: a clan uncle staying over, the family was short a room.

Teresa volunteered herself and John for the rollaway couch. But after dinner they grabbed and tickled each other into the kids' bedroom. For hours Trina and Dan waited up, bleary and red-eyed in front of the TV, before passing out on the couch. Outside the closed door Clayton would begin to speak, and the stone would paralyze him, stick his mouth open. Picking at his toast and eggs, he felt flaccid with age. Across the table Teresa chain-munched bacon.

"Today whenever he shows his face he makes his own damn breakfast," Berenice said. "Too late for that one, already ate the whole pig." She jerked away Teresa's dish with a peal of cutlery.

Teresa rapped the family's black ledger, which she'd taken over in Millie's absence. "A shambles," she said. Cashing in the last holdings over by Yellowtail Dam would square the Sun Dance debts, but what then? Sell out the land from under their own house? She cited "whopping" payments on John's truck. "In fact the interest rates are extortionary. Racist. We could sue."

"Things have a way of working out," was all Clayton could say.

John bounded in, freshly showered and sleek as an otter. "Surprise," he said, winking at Teresa. "A gallery in Red Lodge is hanging my watercolor, 'Creation Myth.' We can go?"

Clayton welcomed the distraction. The entire family, even a resistant Berenice, piled into the pickup.

Red Lodge was an hour away. The painting attracted a knot of viewers. "Look at that," John said, pointing to the price tag, $375. Teresa beaming at his side, he answered questions.

"My Crow way keeps my feet on Mother Earth," he explained. "But my art talent flies all over the universe. But they're both the same."

On their way out of town, they noticed a sign for the Beartooth Rendezvous. The children pleaded to see it.

"Make 'em happy," Clayton told John.

A rutted dirt road led up the plateau, where the mountain men's encampment of booths, log lean-tos, and tipis spread over several acres. But admission was five dollars apiece.

"Just wait," Clayton said. Claiming to be "one of your Crow dancing performers," he crashed a board of directors dinner, barbecue-chowing, buckskin-clad men glinting with wire-rims and Rollexes.

"I'm looking at your what's-happening on your paper and I don't see anything about the Crow Indians that live here many tens of hundred years," Clayton said. While he negotiated, his family was invited to browse the exhibits, then share the barbecue. The Mountain Man Society president, topped with a coonskin cap, questioned him with keen, squinting regard.

"The Sun Dance doll that the Smithsonian company was handing over to the Crow tribe," Clayton said, "my great-great-grandfather owned it. That's why it was up to me to be holding the Sun Dance for the people." Originally the Sun Dance was a vengeance ritual, the doll a fetish with the power, if used properly, to help kill one's enemy. White administrators suppressed the ceremony for generations. "This Sun Dance now is thanking the Creator for getting through some hard time, for good luck. It's gathering up a heavy spirit force for the people." Clayton shook his head. "Big, big spirit. Like a tornado!"

"In the old days then," the president said, "the Big Lodge meant bloodshed."

"Crows killing everybody." Clayton nodded solemnly, then guffawed. "Scared him now!" He drew the edge of his hand across the man's neck. "No, like Chief Plenty Coups told us back in 1910, 1800's something, white is coming and no one's chasing him off, might as well learn to live with him. What the Crows have, the Creator is giving it to them, and they give it to everybody.

"The thing we're looking at here is heritage," Clayton said. "I know my relatives

as long ago as when you Pilgrims back there is getting ready to eat that Indian corn and smoke that Indian tobacco. Some say the mountain lion and the eagle is our relatives. This man—" He patted the president on the shoulder. "What people you from?"

"Polish."

"All right, Polish. You speak Polish? You do your Polish dances at this rendezvous? You and your wife and children wear your Polish clothes to church?"

"I got them mountain men pretty down in the mouth," Clayton said, rejoining the Sees the Hills, who were watching flintlock marksmen blast a stuffed deer. "They look around like they got empty hands. 'Hell, we ain't got no heritage.'"

Not only had Clayton been elected to the board of directors, but the Crows were hired to dance every afternoon for the next two weeks, eleven-hundred dollars total.

"We're a tourist attraction?" Teresa said.

"Didn't I tell you something would come along, bookkeeper lady? The white wants to give back to us, I don't push it away."

At sundown, the Sees the Hills, honored overnight guests, were shown to their tipi. It was oddly squarish, the fabric stiff, sporting a leering thunderbird.

"Tipi Motel 6," Clayton said.

The Crows were a hit. Admissions nearly doubled for their shows. The dance troupe had shrunk, as Clayton's Arrow Creek neighbors, skeptical of his renown—they called him "the little god"—shied away. But his most profound satisfaction was bringing his own family together again. Drying out after a binge, Martin drummed with shaking hands, grasping the stick as if it were pulling him out of quicksand. Gerald, the son from Crow Agency, sang despite his bad luck. His wife had been hospitalized for a jumping eye, and driving home from visiting her, he'd been rearended at a stop sign. Feathers twined in his braids hid the neck brace which had put him on sick leave.

Long before, Teresa had booked what turned out to be the gig's second week for her annual vacation in Colorado, with her daughter's family. Immediately after she left, John fetched Millie, though she had a new boyfriend. She spoke downcast, inaudibly. Afternoons she whipped into her shawl dance with fringe flying, face drawn. John stalked tautly, a stealthy warrior. Otherwise, the most Clayton saw of them was their backs growing tiny as they walked hand in hand toward the surrounding woods.

"So, what happens when Hulk comes back?" Clayton heard in his mind. "Some nights, when the snow piles up over the windows week after week, Berenice and I get mean, sitting across that lonely table, killing each other with our eyes. Still we're together thirty, forty years." But when he faced John his tongue was a dead stone in his mouth.

Throughout their stay the mountain man president shadowed Clayton, questioning and jotting notes. He was an author of popular regional histories and fictional biographies of personages such as the explorer-priest Father De Smet and trappers Jim Bridger and Old Bill Williams. "One based on Crazy Horse," he said. "Sioux Marauder. At least that's how they thought of him at the time." The last day of the rendezvous he insisted on a tour of the gallery displaying John's watercolor.

An hour later, Berenice tugged Clayton's shoulder, alarmed. John was running full-tilt through the camp, dodging carts and bonneted matrons. "He wants my picture for his book cover," he shouted. The author had assured John that his publisher would pay at least a thousand for the rights to "Creation Myth." "I can't believe it. Ohhh." John smacked his forehead. He paced the tipi like a lunatic. Millie couldn't calm him. "Jeez." He hit himself again.

John began the fall semester in Arrow Creek, commuting to Billings as did Millie to Crow Agency, an arrangement that lasted until he flunked his first midterm. He moved into Teresa's apartment. Millie packed up again.

On Clayton's answering machine, purchased against the encroachments of fame, a

girl's message piped, "Sir? I'm in Mr. John Sees the Hill's art history class? I mean, he doesn't teach the class but we're in it together. I..." The voice stammered away into nothing and hung up. Clayton erased it.

Calls from New York, a Helen Feld, assistant art director for the mountain man's publisher, were to be saved. The dust jacket illustration was a done deal. Still she phoned both the apartment and the house, even on weekends.

The Sees the Hills and Teresa were seated for dinner when she rang. John settled into an easy chair, leg over the armrest. He chuckled softly into the receiver. "I'm a simple Indian man," he said. Gradually he frowned. "Hello?" He shook the phone.

"She said she had to catch her breath," he told his listeners afterward. "She said, 'I'm melting.'"

The Gift

"Do you have slides of your work?" Helen had managed to continue.

"Oh yes, yes," said John, who didn't, but was certain Teresa could arrange for them.

"I'd like to see them. I have friends who would like to see them."

By March, during his second year of art studies, John would be adding to his book cover a one-man show in New York. Helen scheduled the opening for his spring break.

He was infatuated with her voice, the nasal vowels, their strange liquid music like the buckling of a saw cutting wood. He imagined she might be Chinese.

"You're probably married," she said.

"Separated."

"I'm sorry. I have a boyfriend. He's a restauranteur, fat as a bear."

Wildly jealous, he ransacked his English, retorting with an old TV commercial.

"Me? You can't pinch an inch."

"I'll just bet." A gloating silence ensued.

"When we're quiet I can really feel you at the other end," he said.

"Home in Pennsylvania I have a favorite niece who sleeps over with me," she said. "Every morning we do each other's hair. Hers flows halfway down her back. Mine. Ha! Takes two hours, and then if the humidity changes it falls like a souffle. She's all love for the planet. PBS had a program on vampire bats being poisoned for killing cattle. She cried her little heart out. For the horrible, crawling bats. 'What's your favorite wildlife where you are, Aunt Helen?' 'I saw a squirrel once. Giant rat with a bushy tail. I would've hit it with my purse if it had come any closer.' I wish she could meet you."

As the departure for New York approached, he painted in such a prolific frenzy, the surfaces so large, that he and Teresa would have gone broke replenishing acrylics and oils, not to mention framing, had not Clayton chipped in. He had tapped a steady market for the dance troupe's services, the most lucrative engagement a nearby off-rez town's centennial parade. "Thank you white people, helping send my boy to college," he announced.

The painting most admired by John's family, the huge "Grandmother Storyteller," billowed across the canvas brown and red, the whole daubed with the colored handprints of schoolchildren he was teaching as a visiting artist. He also posed Teresa nude in various contortions. Since his brief reconciliation with Millie, Teresa was dull, resigned and dogged in her affections, unrepentant in her contemptuous flicks. "It's O.K. to speak English, honey," she said of his gnarled attempt to define conceptual art. She indulged his "phone sex," calling Helen "1-900." The Crows referred to Helen as "Melting Woman."

Of course the buildings loomed monstrously above crushing human mobs. But John's dominant sensation, his first hours in New York, was that he couldn't feel the ground. Anywhere. "I'm going to fall off the world," he said.

"Never thought of it that way," Helen said, nodding. She'd met them at the airport. "Figure right under here"—she stamped on the sidewalk—"there's subway." Noise and heat escaped a metal grate. "Two levels. Nothing but concrete and steel and pissy air a long, long way down."

From the publishing house she'd wangled a donation to cover three nights' lodging for the entire family, including Teresa, so they could perform at the opening. In return, the gallery would sell the book featuring John's cover art. "Look," Helen admitted. "The gallery's a basement, can't afford to change the lightbulbs. But among the cognoscenti, it's got cachet."

Saturday occupied them uncrating and hanging the artwork. The opening that night was thronged, though overshadowed in the media by a Shane Two Bears show uptown. "Damned luck," Helen said. "Two Crow painters opening the same week? God's an old white bastard who hasn't forgiven you for Custer."

"Crows scouted *for* Custer," Clayton said, but Helen had flitted away, gladhanding newcomers before prodding them back to John. Helen! In moon-white makeup and heavy eyeliner she turned to John the face of a startled animal. Her coif, candy-apple red, was teased straight up into an inverted flag of pubic hair. Her earrings quivered. Perfume, hair spray. Round hips swiveled her short legs into a voluptuous scurrying. She baffled his senses into a happy swimming.

The conversational hubbub added to his delirium. A blonde-maned woman in black, legs planted wide, hands clasped behind her tailbone, stared at his painting while her bearded escort explicated animatedly, hands darting over the surface. Faces surrounded him, opening and closing mouths. He gave out short answers, smiles and nods. He wore a suit and tie, bought by Teresa, and a hundred-dollar black Stetson, given by his father, which he'd adorned with a single white feather. The other Crows were in traditional costume, Clayton the white buckskins. At a signal from his father, John

squatted by the drum and began whacking the heartbeat cadence. Clayton sang, joined by the family, then led the entire assemblage, spilling champagne on their evening clothes, in a snaking dance. The drum ceased; the dancers came to a standstill looking stunned, beatific. Clayton stretched his arms. “Aho.”

“Aho,” the congregation echoed.

“This is fun,” John told his father. “Let’s stay some extra days.”

“Good,” Clayton said in Crow, clasping his shoulder. Teresa and John’s brother Gerald would be returning home for work Monday morning, with the rest of the family having booked a flight Wednesday, planning to foot the extra hotel bill. “Hulk will know what to do,” Clayton said.

John shook his head vehemently. “You know what she’ll think. Pussy. Her.” He indicated Helen. “Let her wait and get mean after we’re home. Ask Martin.” No prob, Martin said, just exchange the tickets.

Helen expertly mediated John’s conversations, waiting, as he untangled his incoherencies, with such patient expectancy that his listeners relaxed, not noticing the gaps. He spoke confidently, experimenting with his tie, coiling the silk around his fingers and letting it unfurl like a frog’s tongue. When he and Helen drew together, talking, their foreheads almost bumped. Teresa loomed nearby, stolidly sorrowful.

“Who’s the roller derby queen?” Helen said. “She’s awfully protective.”

“That’s Hulk Hogan. Family friend.”

Attendance dwindled. Helen tried on his hat. He spun it around her haircrest.

“Where’s your man?” John asked.

She shook her head. “He only comes out for Chinese dissidents. Solzhenitsyn. He’s a...convenience. He takes me places I like to go. He’s always badgering me to move in with him.” Suddenly she said, “It’s over.” She smiled and unsmiled. She wiped her eyes, mascara running. John hugged her, stock-still in the emptying basement. “Can you come home with me?” she said.

She hailed a cab for the family.

"Taking me out for dinner," John said.

Helen's West Village apartment betrayed the stylistic dissonance of its four renters, geometric polymer stools abutting a Queen Anne couch, Frieda Kahlo sharing the wall with the anguished Han Solo frozen in carbonite. The three roommates lined the couch in their pj's like daughters awaiting a goodnight kiss as Helen swept John past and shut the door behind them.

She kept interrupting their lovemaking. Lifting his hips away, she grabbed randomly a magazine from the nightstand and read him, in a calm tone over hiccupping breaths, critic Arthur Danto on Mantegna. Droplets fell from her nipples. His cock stuck straight out between them. When they began again, he ground his head into the pillow, with pleasure, her pussy closing around him. They moved apart and stood by the window. Below, lives passed slowly in cars. An arm extended from a black sedan, exchanging for a blood-red splash of flowers an eyebrow of folded currency. A youth jumped the bumpers and was honked to the other side of the street. "I wish we had sweetgrass," John said. "I'd like to smell that burning right now." They rocked each other on the bed. He was blacking out. The springs chittered. He slapped at her belly and thighs, not to hurt but to love her both ways, as pure flesh and as Helen, so that he broke free into a despair of wanting. His palms' tingling from the reddened smacked meat of her made him sick to his stomach until he came, washed clean and empty. "Shit, I'm happy," she said again and again.

Led by Martin, the family bussed to the apartment only a half hour late for brunch, Sunday noon. Helen had prepared the spread. The awestruck roommates served the Crows. Clayton was telling an old-time story. "And so it's the wagon coming through the gap, and the children fall out the back. The hoot owls take them children, and it's

maybe five, ten year they keep them. The hoot owls raise them babies."

"Hoodows? Is that a tribe?" Helen asked.

"Hoot owls. Hoot. Owls. Loving God, what a simpleton," Teresa exclaimed.

"I beg your pardon. I could swear someone who is eating my food—no small amount of it, I see—just spoke rudely to me. You're welcome to finish your meal on the doorstep."

Instead Teresa walked straight down the hall into Helen's bedroom. Helen followed. While Clayton resumed his story, John strained to hear the women's voices, Teresa's spiralling upwards and downwards in pitch, Helen's interjections increasingly subdued, but he couldn't discern their words.

Teresa emerged and sat at the table. Leaden, John dragged to the bedroom.

"Liar!" Helen said. "'You're not the first,' she says. 'When you're through he'll be back.' She looked hollow, no person inside. It was horrible. Then she rears over me as if she's going to attack me. Liar." She kicked him. "Your woman came all the way to New York with you. Go take her."

Brunch adjourned hastily. John expected Teresa wouldn't fly, but the next morning she and his brother caught the subway for Kennedy. "I won't get in your way," she said.

Helen, when he phoned her office, addressed him as Mr. Shah-of-Persia. "I'm all for multiculturalism," she said, "and I don't know what the Crow tribe believes, but in the tribe of Helen the harem stops here. The lying stops here. Is that clear?"

"Yes," John said.

"It's spoiled, but maybe it will come back. I love you, I can't help myself."

"I love you," John said.

She would see him the following night.

Clayton was grave. He had learned the hotel's rates. But he'd found an Indian shop listed in the Yellow Pages, on Fifth Avenue. While Martin exchanged the airline

tickets, he and John would pay their respects to the New York Indians.

Sightseeing, Clayton's head swiveled, his large brown hands darting and weaving as if conjuring from thin air the turbaned visages, heaven-seeking glass pinnacles, belching buses, Amazon women furred to the pelvis and naked below, a faraway spider web bridge dissolving in the foul air. John traipsed in a black mood. Love pulled him down. Everything about Helen mattered, her flushed earlobe, the boyfriend who might be ex, her anger, the bat-loving niece in Pennsylvania. He worried about the fate of bats on the planet. The death of even one would hurt the little girl. It was unbearable. Sheer admiration for Helen oppressed him. He couldn't wait out the hours until her soft push against him, for her disappointment or accusation, anything she might feel towards him. Most, he needed her to want him again.

Moon Lodge was nearly lost in the jumble of signs, the storefronts and eateries jamming together. Then, through the pervasive aroma of spicy grilled meats, John detected smoldering sweetgrass. Inside, bins overflowed with sage, cedar, herbs. Stacked pow wow cassettes. A buffalo-hide rug. Indian men lounging at the counter half-nodded in greeting.

Introductions followed, with handclasps all around. "Old Muskrat, he lives here off-and-on, sleeps in the back room," the proprietor said. Old Muskrat and a couple of others seemed pretty beat up, clothes filthy and drooping, stinking of sweet wine. The proprietor, a Wyoming Arapaho whose Iroquois wife studied at NYU, opened sodas for the Crows. Clayton uncovered the inevitable links in the Indian network. He had finished second to the Arapaho's uncle in traditional dancing, Rocky Boy Pow Wow, 1978. As a fire crew chief in 1981, he had led Old Muskrat from a ravine moments before it vaporized in a clap of flame. "Knew I recognized you," he lied kindly. "Ever since we come off this jet," he said, "I've been thinking, where do you sweat in this New York?"

"Sauna at the YMCA," a customer said. "Not hot enough, and we can't pour because it shorts out the heater. But I pray. They don't look at me funny any more."

"My son's rich lady got a little land," Clayton said. "Come over tomorrow night, we build a lodge there." The shopkeeper promised a load of rocks. Clayton left practically skipping. "Indians everywhere," he said.

They separated, John bound for Helen's. She smiled him in the door but gently deflected his hand from her waist. "Best just talk tonight," she said.

"I didn't mean to lie. It was true to me," John said. "I saw you at the airport and...bam! Hulk wasn't my woman. Hulk wasn't even on the world."

"And it slipped your mind to tell her."

Berenice was frantic when John returned to the hotel. Ten p.m., and no word from Martin.

"Cosmopolitan. Knows his way around," Clayton muttered.

"I'm calling the police," Berenice said.

"Do you remember when Martin sold the shotgun for a half gallon of scotch, and you locked him in the toolshed?" John said.

"I'm working not to remember that," Clayton said.

By morning Berenice had satisfied herself that Martin wasn't dead, in jail, or hospitalized. From her office phone Helen confirmed that Martin could have sold the airline tickets, illegally. They could bus home, she suggested, cheaper than new flights at short notice.

"I don't know if you could be lending us the money until John sells some of them paintings," Clayton said.

Helen took personal leave and moved the Sees the Hills into her apartment, giving the parents her bed. "The money. I'm not cheap," she told John privately. "But it's not by preference that I brush my teeth elbow-to-elbow with three others every morning."

The Arapaho's stones arrived on his borrowed flatbed. The Indian men hauled them through the foyer, prompting an appearance by the landlord, who lived in the

basement. The fire pit to heat them would be a code violation, he said. That stymied everyone until Helen remembered a potter with an electric kiln across the way.

The common, overlooked by Helen's kitchen window, was a wretched patch of dead grass the size of a boxing ring, edged in dingy concrete, enclosed by apartments' birdlime-smeared backsides. While the Arapaho returned the truck, the stones baked and the sweatlodge was erected from chairs, broom handles, blankets, and old rugs. Nightfall, the men went in, taking runs pouring and praying, the city Indians in English. Afterward they lolled behind a screen rigged from sheets, singing to where the moon would be if they could see it.

Lights went on, heads thrusting from windows.

"Real Indian sweatbath, five dollars," Clayton called. "Fundraiser, send the Indians home."

"You can't get money," John said, looking at his father in disbelief. "This holy thing."

"Collection plate in church," answered Clayton, who like most of the Arrow Creek community attended services as well as practicing native religion.

"It's bogus, brother," the Arapaho said.

"New York takes two hundred, three hundred for a hotel, it can pay," Clayton said.

The Moon Lodge contingent left hurriedly.

Helen's household sweated free, with Berenice. The sheets offered little protection from an overhead view, and by the time the women pranced into the building, wrapped in towels, each face a sundae of streaked makeup, several jostling, cheering men had gathered. Clayton collected five a head. "It will help them more than a movie," he told John. "Do it."

As John's ladle spewed up the first blast of steam, his party wheezed and roared and plunged forward against the ground. He smelled alcohol. Though he was a veteran of

a thousand far hotter sweats, these mild vapors burned his lungs and throat, made him want to jump out of his skin. Pressing his head to the questionable earth brought no relief. His voice droned interminably as if it belonged to someone else. He wished it did. Finally freed, he hurled the ladle at Clayton's feet. "No more," he said.

Clayton served past midnight, including the landlord, who demanded and received a cut of the profit.

Meanwhile, John had blundered into the darkened living room, momentarily flicking on the light to locate Helen on their mat. Above the quilt her shoulders were bare, face blinking, rapturous. Even as he shed his clothes her hand lazily skimmed his leg.

"I'm sick with myself," he said.

Her insinuating fingers became practical, tender. "I didn't understand what the dispute was all about," she said.

"My Dad wouldn't tell me to do anything wrong." But the words were wispy, empty as ash. For the first time he noticed that his father had shrunk to a very small man, no higher than John's knee. John wavered as if he had nothing to reach out for, to hold him up. He felt at the ends of his hands for Arrow Creek, for lodgepole pines bent under snow, the sharp reports of branches breaking in the pure cold, but they were taken from him, too. The Big Lodge didn't exist, nor the creek itself, into which Clayton had thrown whole venison steaks and potato salad in thanks for the life-giving water. The skyscrapers were real. A helicopter flew over rooftops, its chop-chop-chop momentarily louder than the din from canyons of traffic. He embraced Helen, who was everything.

Clayton winced throughout the next day and once hopped. "You get Helen to give you medicine for that plug-up bowel," Berenice said. His face was flashing light and dark like neon.

Helen came home elated. The gallery owner would buy the monumental

"Grandmother Storyteller" himself and pay immediately. Even minus commission, that clinched the bus. Otherwise, only a lithograph had sold, $175. "Everybody loved the art," she said. "But Two Bears is today's Indian meal ticket. That's the market."

"Please, let us stay for the weekend to find Martin," Berenice said. Of course, the household agreed.

But Martin phoned that night. Helen beckoned John, whispering. "'Not the old man,' he said."

"You missed your plane," Martin blubbered. He'd awakened that morning in a hotel bed. "Ni-i-ice," he intoned. "Canopy, with fringe." But they'd thrown him out because the money was gone.

Come to Helen's, John directed.

Martin wore a new silk shirt under his jacket. Clayton knocked him to the floor. Shrieking, Berenice rushed between them, pushing Clayton's chest. He waded through her and, as Martin rose from his knees, slugged him down again. "Get that bad spirit out of my sons," he panted, hands clubbed. John and Helen walked him to the couch. Clayton's fist was clammy. Martin's gaping mouth bled into the carpet.

Speaking for the freaked-out roommates, Helen asked the Sees the Hills to leave the next evening. She'd take the day off, for John.

In the morning he showed her the pencil sketch of a Crow woman in childbirth, which he'd titled "Earth Mother."

"Not my niche, two abortions later," she said, grimacing.

John was stunned. "You killed those little babies?"

"Wait a minute, Almighty Loving Papa, where are your kids?"

"Millie."

"The mother. And how often do you see them?"

John was silent. Then he said, "When Dan was five, he could skin a deer."

"Well, around here the kindergartners just flay each other," she said. "All those kids nobody wanted but were born anyway," she added.

"Together we can put back one of those babies. I want to stay here with you."

Helen smiled and shut her eyes. "Mmm. I just wanted to feel that all over me. You finish school. My lover is no dropout. I'll come to you, I promise."

She offered him the Met, Guggenheim, MOMA. Stubbornly he insisted he wanted only to see the Shane Two Bears show.

Two Bears painted traditional Crow warriors exclusively, in gouache. Through invisible brushstrokes his palette played minute variations on earthtones, then ranging into rosepetal red and the blues of dusk. Pelage and plumage were scratched directly into the paint. Relentlessly energetic, the figures slung themselves beneath galloping ponies, slithered through buffalo grass, pounced from ambush. The hint of caricature in their features made them not comic but more—craggier, fiercer.

The artist himself usually dropped by afternoons if they cared to wait, the saleswoman said.

"He's a kind of cousin to me," John said, knowing the exact relationship only in Crow.

"Cousin," is what Two Bears boomed in a magnificent orator's bass, a half hour later. "Is this all an illusion?" His wide-flung gesture encompassed at least Manhattan, if not the Atlantic Seaboard. "Aren't we really in the Beartooths, horsing our pickup up some two-rut road to hell? Felling lodgepoles for our tipi at Crow Fair?" He was big, in jeans and a Pendleton shirt, with wire-rims and a sparse, silky mustache.

John explained.

"First-rate," Two Bears said, promising to view John's show immediately. "For now, we toast with champagne."

"I don't drink," John said.

"Good for you."

Riding the bus downtown, John said, "I might as well cut my hands off."

"He can knock those off in his sleep and probably does," Helen breathed in his ear. Her tongue tip became an absence, the dampness in an empty bed.

In the aftermath of New York, John received a box from Helen weekly. One was a black Italian silk shirt, another a sumptuous volume of Kandinsky, then pine cones from her Pennsylvania hometown.

Clayton shit blood, so that Berenice, who scarcely had spoken to him since the attack on Martin, drove him to a Billings hospital for overnight observation, which determined nothing. He sat outdoors on sunny days, his face paled to granite.

Berenice and Martin treated themselves to margaritas at La Placita in Billings, which featured an enclosed patio with a Spanish-speaking parrot. Once her right leg stepped hip deep into the fish pond.

John's home had changed. Spirits had retreated from the mountains' shaggy evergreen brows into the fastness of the range. Upthrust sandstone turrets, whose conversations of light with the shifting weather had delighted him, were lumps of geology, another course he was failing. The sun spangling through new spring foliage hurt his eyes with a dazzling pallor that reminded him of death.

He thought only of Helen, who was chopped off from him. He wondered if she could forget him during her job. He imagined her smothered in the arms of the fat, hairy cook or whatever he was, and he ran around half-crazy. He feared she secretly disrespected him because his show had been defeated by Shane Two Bears'. His waking hours were besotted with her pink nakedness, though the nudes of her—all he painted—abandoned the customary fanfare of his palette for grays and sepias bleeding into the umbra of the black background.

During the hour so on the phone with her he was eager, happy. He was calling her

every day until she told him she couldn't afford it. They tried to plan. "I don't know what I could do in Billings," she said. "I'm an art history major." If he boosted his grades, he could transfer second semester the following year, perhaps to NYU.

But he'd fallen too far behind after the week in New York, then the days bussing across the continent. Having pledged to avoid Teresa completely, he failed all but studio art. He pitied his bad luck loving a doomed abortionist, a love he would follow to its bad end. Come, marry me, he pleaded.

Busting her savings, Helen flew out for a week in July. The Sees the Hills hosted and feasted her. Every outing, even watching a sunset from the back yard, was a family activity. Berenice followed her and John. Gerald brought a venison haunch. Perked up by the obligation to be hospitable, Clayton spun tales of history and legend in his inventive, sometimes guilefully misleading English.

"Your father is brilliant," she told John, "but he's on tighter than my diaphragm. I check under the bed for him." If she moved to Montana, Helen said, they must rent an apartment, which John would split; her earning power would be zero. "I recognize that blank look, Mr. Artist-Chief. You wouldn't fall down dead with a regular job."

"There's women in my classes want to buy me a house," he said. "My English teacher says take her cabin for a studio." He winced saying this, a pain in the cheek as sharp as when he'd hooked himself fishing.

"Nice," she said, then huskily, "Nice."

At the airport they kissed with violent want and played meditatively with each other's hands as if making up for what they'd forgotten, though they'd had sex many times.

Suffering Helen's absence was like swimming in numbing black water, his limbs heavier and heavier until at times he simply wanted to stop. He got in a fistfight with Gerald, cursed his father. Berenice threw him out for a week. On matchbook covers he

painted parts of his body, nipple, cock, birthmark, and sent them to Helen.

She prevailed on him to enroll for fall semester. He must be tutored, he said. Teresa had agreed to a neutral site, the student union lobby. “Don’t worry. I love you,” he told Helen.

If her call didn’t find him home, Helen became abusive, words he hadn’t heard her use. She wept and apologized. “I’m buying something special. Based on your costumes,” she said mysteriously.

The package arrived while he was attending class, so he heard second-hand from Berenice. “It’s a box. ‘Phew,’ I say, and the post office holds her nose. ‘I thought you’d never pick it up,’ post office says, and I say, ‘I’m going to bury the stinky thing in the ground.’ But before I do I cut it open and it knocks me over. Phawgh. It’s a rotten dead bird covered with bugs. She’s crazy, this girlfriend, sending us this filthy thing.”

John didn’t recognize Helen’s voice, its high-pitched, cracking laughter. She’d ordered feathers for him at Moon Lodge, and when she poked in the sack, “there’s a beak. A whole head. I crumple the bag shut and mail it the hell out of here.” Moon Lodge assumed she was bringing it home to be plucked that day, she said. “I puked and puked. I’m sick talking about it.” She hung up.

Without warning, in early October, she called from Billings airport. John found her at the baggage terminal, black denim pantsuit already showing the rise in her belly. She threw her arms around his neck. “I don’t know what to do,” she said. “Marry you, with all your little girls and their real estate?”

“Oh yes, yes.” He nestled his face against her ear. “I mean no girls, no. You’re really here!” He laughed, carrying her and the luggage to his truck.

“I’ll be a secretary. I’ll cocktail waitress in a frilly mini. Ranchers will scream and run. Will your Dad let you divorce Millie?”

"It's not 'let me.' He don't have a say."

"God, it's beautiful here," she said. "All the autumn leaf dust will make my sinuses explode."

They contacted a Billings lawyer about the divorce. Helen would have to fly back for at least a month to wrap up her job, settle the lease, which was in her name. John announced the engagement at dinner, staring down each of his parents in turn.

"I think Berenice would kill me if she could," Helen said. Later, undressing, she said, "Why can't I get out my head the suspicion that I'm marrying the slickest dick in the West?" She looked at him searchingly.

"Wo-hoh." With a banshee laugh he tiptoed mincingly, cradling his privates. He kissed her belly, dancing her by the waist with his mouth still stuck to her.

"I'm going to have one this time," Helen said. She sat on the edge of the bed with shoulders rounded and hands clasped between her thighs so that her breasts spread comfortably and ungracefully against her belly.

John looked down at her body, aware in that moment of the body's living for itself without caring about its effect on him. The realization made him feel shunned and powerless, and devoted and happy. Clearly, in the months and even days to come he often wouldn't recognize himself. Life got bigger and bigger. He wondered if it was that way for everyone.

Aside from her coaching him through a midterm, they took days at a relaxed, spontaneous pace. Initially John complained about her tutoring style; she asked questions but provided no answers beyond further questions. "But I understand it," he said finally, thumping the textbook. "It makes sense."

She tired easily, but her weariness was rosy and euphoric. "Maybe it's the baby," she said. "I don't know, I never carried one this long." He liked to drive one-handed, the other interlocked with hers over her belly. She indulged his tour of Billings malls. "Very

modern," she said. Preferring open spaces, she restored some of his pleasure in the land.

In search of wild horses he eased the truck through a mountain gap and up a tilted tabletop peak. "There," he said. Fifty yards below, the herd grazed along a verdant coulee. Their manes and tails were immensely long. John cut the engine and opened her door.

"Shetland ponies in hats scare me enough, thank you," she said.

He drew her by the hand. The animals shifted in unison like a drill team, first downhill, then, regrouping, toward them, led by a buckskin stallion. John descended the slope alone. "If you need this macho exercise to be good in bed, I don't want to know about it. I'm not looking," she called, looking. The stallion broke into a run, hooves thudding, nearly upon John, who yelled "hah" and waved his arm. The horse scrambled to a halt so abruptly he slid on his haunches. John pulled a clump of waist-high grass. The stallion knocked its legs together, skittering sideways. "Here, eat," John said. The horselips peeled back, teeth nipped away the bundle. Tossing his head, the animal retreated, munching.

John led Helen to the drop, the valley, buff and green, stretching into the haze. "Makes me greedy for quiet," she said. He cupped her neck and the hard breeze blew her hair against his hand, the first time he'd seen it move; watching her spray and sculpt her hair, and "put my face on" was a daily wonder.

When they reached the house, Teresa's Scout was parked in the driveway. In the living room Teresa stood up, unkempt and jowly, to wait out the awkward formalities. "It's taken me days to get up my nerve," she addressed Helen. "I don't know if I'm telling you this in compassion or revenge. It's the truth, take it or leave it. John lies. He's still fucking me. Millie just had their third kid, for all he cares about it. He has kids by at least two other women on the rez, that I know. And the co-eds. Little candy-striper voices phone my apartment. 'Oh, is this Mrs. Sees the Hill?' And they hang up.

"I hit him with all this and he doesn't even bother to deny it. But you, you picture

him waiting for you like a monk in his sweat lodge while you swell up with his baby." Her lip perspired. Finished, she didn't know what to do, looking around as if expecting someone to invite her for dinner.

None of the family met Helen's eyes.

"Sorry," Teresa said. Backing out, she bumped the doorframe jarringly and clutched her shoulder.

"I knew it," Helen said. She jerked her fist against the wall. "Who will drive me to the airport?" Clayton went for his jacket.

John followed her down the hall. "She's lying." His voice rose. "Big fat Hulk bitch jealous to killing us." He couldn't think straight. Frantic, he spread himself against the bedroom door. "It's months and months," he pleaded. "You're here now. You're always here. It's O.K." Helen opened the door and crouched for the luggage under the bed. "Please," John cried. She didn't say a word to him, ever again.

When Clayton returned three hours later, John launched himself at his father. "You fuck her?" he shouted. "You have a good time fucking her?" Berenice threw herself between them.

John called New York repeatedly, and they hung up. He left messages on the answering machine. Finally, weeks later, a roommate said, "She's gone. She got an abortion, she had her tubes tied, and she went home." John asked for her number and the woman hung up.

He was haunted by a Crow baby in a beaded cradleboard floating down a black river. The baby's eyes were closed.

He couldn't believe Helen had ripped him out of herself and thrown him away, then closed herself against him forever.

But worst was Helen hurting so badly. Her disappearance made her pain terribly large, as if it stretched from her apartment to whatever unknown place in Pennsylvania

she had gone. He had torn something from the living Helen. Throughout his days she screamed to him. He felt his whole body as her scream. He had to shut his ears against himself.

The earth and the days became one long silence. He twiddled and fiddled through his time like an idiot.

Only one thought consoled him, imagining Helen giving birth to her niece, the bat-girl. Helen stroked the girl's long hair. The bats were ugly and funny.

Amusing Trina and Dan on one of their rare visits, he doodled with watercolors. Materializing on the stout, absorbent paper, in startling detail, was "Winter Warrior"—he knew the title instinctively—moccasined feet padding frozen turf, hunched slightly, an exaggerated curve to the neck. His hands had shown him the virtuosity of Shane Two Bears.

He persisted as a distant, sinking shadow of Two Bears.

The Sun Dance

Short of breath and weak from self-starvation, Clayton went to a healer. "I've got blood coming out both ends," he said.

Stripped, he lay beneath a buffalo robe, doubled up, aching. The healer pushed his knees down. Pale winter light flowed in the window. The healer sang continuously over the sick man, then knelt beside him. Growling in back of his throat, he placed his mouth on Clayton's lower abdomen and sucked forcefully. Pain seared Clayton's gut. Three times more the medicine man made a tube of his lips against Clayton's skin. Rising, he spat out a stone half the diameter of his palm, a fire-red agate veined with green and blue. "Your son is lost," he said. He opened the east door and threw the gem far into the snow.

Clayton walked home light and whole, with the absolute freedom of despair.

Having sarcastically dubbed Clayton “the little god,” the Arrow Creek community now reviled him as “the little devil.”

On leave of absence from school, John occupied the farthest corner of the Sees the Hills’ remaining land with a glamorous white woman of indeterminate age. Identifying herself as Crazy Horse’s great-granddaughter, she was reputedly an ex-call girl. She’d established a tipi encampment, the Holy Confluence, to effect upon a wealthy clientele spiritual transformations through traditional Crow sweats and rituals led by Clayton, and feasts hunted by John. For select guests the woman herself conducted private sweats.

Rumor held that Clayton had sold medicine power to her. He’d unwrapped his medicine bundle and temporarily purloined the Sun Dance doll for her viewing.

The mountain man author was collaborating with him on a book about the Sun Dance, encouraged by a substantial advance. The crux would be the staging of a second Sun Dance, which Clayton had arranged to photograph. The mountain man was squeamish about this breach in tradition, but Clayton argued, “Now the Sun Dance will never die. This book is the Bible for our children’s children. Need to know how something’s supposed to be, look it up right there.” The occasion would be John’s grand prize at the Billings Art Fair, awarded for one of his gouache warriors.

With the family dancers starring in festivals from Washington, D.C., to Alabama, Clayton drove a brand new-Bronco and was building a house for each of his three sons, even Martin, who lived with a busboy from the New York hotel where he’d awakened from his spree. Since following Martin west, the man had taught him leatherwork and rudimentary silversmithing, and the two sold well at craft shows. Martin had not drunk alcohol in months. “Still my son,” Clayton said. “Put him in a dress, still my son.”

John wasn’t unhappy with the spirit woman, who treated him graciously and had the body of a movie star. He missed Teresa and Millie. “I’m too fat to fuck,” Teresa had

said when he called for a chat. At 230 pounds, she'd been christened "Mt. Hogan" by Martin. Millie's boyfriend was so paranoid about John that he fired his .38 Magnum at pickups that merely resembled his.

During a late spring hunt Clayton and John stalked a deer halfway up a brushy canyon. Rifle cocked, John climbed toward a huckleberry thicket. Rustling froze him. Clayton crept alongside. Both raised their guns and held their breath. A rock cracked.

At that moment the sun broke through the clouds, bathing the hillside in the golden illumination of an ancient age. Into the shimmering the buck ambled unconcernedly, cropping the gilded grasses. Clayton fired, and the deer dropped to its haunches. With John's shot the forelegs crumpled. The men plunged forward through slapping branches, hacking with the rifle butts.

Beyond the bushes they found no deer. The grass was not indented. No huckleberry twigs were broken. There were no blood spots, or hoofprints.

Clayton mumbled a prayer in Crow. John felt his eyes rolling like a terrified animal's. His father poked under the brush. Together they scrambled back down the slope, heads swinging left and right. "Let's go home," John said. They stampeded out of the canyon.

All the drive home they scrutinized a filament of smoke that seemed to exactly mark their destination. Arriving, they found Berenice pacing beside a smoldering pit, what remained of the sweat lodge. "I'm hanging laundry, and right in front of me pop! like the Fourth of July, and the whole thing's burning up. I'm screaming and yelling but nobody else is around," she said. "I get the hose, but it's gone, just like that. A big ball of fire."

"When did this happen?" Clayton said.

"Maybe half hour."

The men looked at each other. Clayton told her about the deer. "Same time," he

said.

"Oh shit," John said, shuddering from head to foot.

"Don't tell nobody about this," Berenice said.

Clayton shook his head. "It happened. People will know."

"Clayton's lost his medicine." That much was agreed upon, and most awaited the impending Sun Dance with dread, certain calamity would fall on all their heads.

The night Clayton led the procession into the Big Lodge, only twenty-eight went in, half of them white. Many more assembled outside on folding chairs and lounges. If divine retribution were to immolate the Sun Dance, nobody was willing to miss it. Disparagements were traded.

"Never seen that other Sun Dance chief. Where'd Clayton get him?"

"He looks like a teenager. Where'd he get his medicine?"

"Clayton couldn't get a real medicine man for this fake Sun Dance."

Singing and drumming urged worshippers toward the Center Pole, sacred pathway between heaven and earth. His ceremonial skirt trimmed in gold brocade, Clayton looked like an emperor. Under the moonlight John closed his eyes and saw a rain of warriors in the style of Shane Two Bears. For three days band after band leaped and gesticulated, twanged bows and arrows beneath galloping ponies, shook war clubs. Spotted, striped, and daubed, their afterimages crisscrossed in his mind.

For Clayton's doctoring only two came forward, both white. A heart patient too ill to walk left the Big Lodge under his own power but relapsed the next day. The other, despondent over a divorce, claimed to feel better afterward.

Emerging from the Big Lodge on the last afternoon, Clayton faced a line of hills, a gray limestone escarpment that dully returned the sun's light. Beneath the formation were interred hundreds of Crows who had died a century earlier, many wrapped against the winter cold in smallpox-infected blankets issued by the United States government.

Others were lost in war against the Lakota and Cheyenne, or in their own feuds and disorders. Clayton stopped, overwhelmed with sorrow and brotherhood for his ancestors. Over the years that sadness would be the one weight in his free flight of despair.

Beside him, John also gazed at the ridge's cold glow. It caught at his heart to wonder how many of the warriors teeming in his head had fallen down there, sleeping.

The much-feared catastrophe did not occur. Though shunned by the Crows, the Sees the Hills continued to prosper. The Sun Dance book sold moderately, John's warriors briskly. As it had for centuries, the community endured. Many who had entered the Big Lodge were succored and uplifted by the hallowed ritual, even for the rest of their lives.

HILLS

The town was forthrightly named—Hill. The name was also modest, even for rural eastern Iowa, because the scattered buildings and checkerboard fields rode swells of hills as far as the horizon. Viewed from the highest wooded crests, the flat gray sheen of rivers snaked placidly among shades of green. During heavy rains these would overflow their banks to inundate the lowlands. From the sovereignty of his own hilltop Joseph induced vertigo gazing out at this panorama, hazing out to its edges in all directions. He did this deliberately, squinting his eyes to blur definitions, until all swam in a sea that washed land into sky. Swaying slightly, a trifle nauseated, he blinked and turned toward the house. The exercise was his jolt from the everyday; he didn't drink.

"'At last,'" Joseph concluded, "'things grew so exciting that his dear families went off one by one in a hurry to the banks of the great grey-green, greasy Limpopo River, all set about with fever-trees, to borrow new noses from the Crocodile. When they came back nobody spanked anybody any more; and ever since that day, O Best Beloved,

all the Elephants you will ever see, besides all those that you won't, have trunks precisely like the trunk of the 'satiable Elephant's Child.'"

A third-grader, seated cross-legged on the carpet with the others, raised his hand.

"Yes?"

"Thank you, Joseph," he said.

"Of course." Joseph, Superintendent of Schools, inaugurated every event, whether a PTA meeting, School Board budgetary session, or national conference presentation, by reading a story. Already in October he had read at least one story to each elementary classroom in his district, including his wife's. True, the Parkland School District consisted of only three elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

"Thank you, Joseph," called his wife, Kirsten, from the python's walk-in terrarium. She was preparing to release the rabbit for the snake's dinner. Already Joseph's audience had begun twisting their heads back over their shoulders, not wanting to miss the routine primal horror.

"Thank you, Dr. Hutton." A ruddy farmwife pressed his hand with uncommon urgency. She must have heard.

In answering the peremptory summons of the Parkland School Board, Superintendent Hutton anticipated yet one more iteration of an ongoing dispute with the new majority. Since the special election of the fifth Board member, the Board had urged adoption of Six Traits as the writing standard, along with developing an annual writing assessment and ongoing quarterly prompts in keeping with the Traits. The successful candidate, Trevor Clark, had amended No Child Left Behind to No Iowa Child Left Behind as his campaign slogan.

For fourteen years, Joseph had guided the district by Whole Language, which practiced assessment by a year-long portfolio of writing, writing, writing! Writing across the curriculum, across genres, across butcher paper scrolls, across the walls. Writing!

The past session had degenerated into mutual sneers and mockery.

"'Invented spelling.' 'Miscues,'" jeered Clark. "How do you spell 'failure'?"

Joseph quoted from a Traits rubric: "'A strong, perhaps creative, beginning… effective and/or creative use of a wide range of conventions with few errors.' There's your War and Peace."

Joseph knew he would lose. In fact, it was likely his contract would not be renewed after the current school year. Gingerly, he had hinted to Kirsten a new career as itinerant speakers/consultants for the dwindling Whole Language constituency nationwide.

Crossing the parking lot to Admin., he savored the weird animation of sunset hues reflected off the hulks of autos. With the Board in executive session, the chamber was empty save for the five expressionless mugs before him.

Though a story was folded in his pocket, written by one of Kirsten's students, he sensed he wouldn't be reading it. It told the true tale of a boy who suffered from a skin condition. Classmates taunted him; fights ensued. By the end, the author had written, "So then I wanted to be his friend because I didn't have any friends, either. After that Caleb got more friends, not like 10 friends but only 4 friends, counting me. It didn't solve the problem. People are still calling him names, but Caleb gets more company. Caleb is not being that mean any more. Now he even has five friends. Being Caleb's friend is fun because we make up stuff."

Joseph had long since ceased to be surprised that such wisdom could reside in an eight-year-old, if given the chance to be released. He hoarded boxes of copied student writings in his office. They had become his preferred leisure fare. He barely cracked a book of adult fiction.

The Board Chair had not invited him to sit. For now he would fight the fight. Mentally, he had bulleted his defense:

- Parent participation rising continuously over his fourteen years, up 21 %

in the past three years alone, as measured by classroom visits

- Math, science, and social studies scores holding solid on the Iowa Basic Skills Tests
- All areas of literacy improving except, admittedly, spelling.

"But there's no backup," Member Clark had interjected at the last meeting. "Your students are only as strong as their teachers." He had flung his hand toward Joseph, almost a plea, maybe a dismissal.

Mrs. Finch, the Board Chair and Hill's librarian, ruffled her papers. She had been an ally. Eighty years old, towering hair dyed russet, she spoke in a voice cracking with age or emotion, "It has been alleged that you have misappropriated funds. Therefore we are suspending you from your position as Superintendent, with pay, pending a complete investigation."

Joseph laughed outright at the "evidence." While cleaning out a file cabinet untouched for decades, Member Clark had uncovered reimbursement forms from a Teachers Applying Whole Language (TAWL) conference in Tucson, Arizona, in 1994. Under Materials, one of the delegates, a Parkland District teacher, had meticulously detailed various publications, plus "cowboy hat" at $60 and "bolo tie" at $18, for a total of $140. Joseph's lump sum for Materials was $565, and his food bill was double that of the other two delegates combined.

"Why didn't you itemize?"

"Sometimes we did, sometimes we didn't. No one seemed to care. We got slack," Joseph admitted. The third delegate, a then-Board member, hadn't itemized, either.

"But he is not our current Superintendent."

Because he was Superintendent, he spent more, Joseph said, allowing his voice to expand with exasperation to its commanding clarion pitch. He ordered more materials. He dined with other superintendents and officials. "This is ten years ago!" he exclaimed. The words echoed. The walls were becoming milky. He could almost taste them, sour on

the tongue.

"Wild West costumes?"

"It was our team uniform. It reminded us to implement what we had learned." His voice sounded pinched. His chest constricted.

Member Clark demanded records that Joseph no longer retained. He cited other years, further "discrepancies." A bowling ball struck Joseph's chest, rolled down his arm, up again into his ribcage, back and forth.

"Trifles," Mrs. Finch snapped. "If this is simply a witch hunt, Dr. Hutton, be assured you will be promptly reinstated."

"This is only the beginning," said Member Clark.

Joseph was strangling. "I think I'm having a heart attack."

Secondary unstable angina could result from an extremely accelerated heart rate, the doctor informed Joseph. In this case it did not indicate atherosclerosis. Considering his age, fifty-seven, and slight overweight, the doctor did recommend modifying his diet.

"Then I'm not sick," Joseph said incredulously. "I heard the beat of angels' wings.

"I'm big for my size," he added defensively and, he realized, incoherently. Ordinarily he felt comfortable in his six-two, two thirty, but since the attack he'd felt like a smaller person inside an unfamiliar mold. Homunculus. His image in the mirror regarded him furtively.

"Depression is not uncommon after a medical event." The doctor calmed him.

"After a day of self-doubt and a week of self-pity, I rallied," Joseph would tell his supporters. The Parkland Board hadn't thought to ban him from classrooms, so he volunteered, teaching his old subject, history. He assisted Kirsten, manning her third-grade learning centers in rotation. Along with the python, these included a chem lab,

writing and publishing center, rare books library, anthropology museum, music corner, art studio, and George the guinea pig-psychologist, to whom the children would whisper their troubles while nuzzling him in their laps. A seeming recipe for chaos, but not in Kirsten's hands. Before gaining her education degree, and divorcing her first husband, she had managed everything from restaurants to a sailboat manufacturer's office. Her alcoholism had prevented her from sustaining a career, but she had dried out two years before both she and Joseph were hired by Parkland, he as Superintendent, in 1990. They married a year after meeting.

Returning from a day in her classroom, once they were inside the door she stripped and pranced naked into the kitchen to put the teakettle on. To her it was a creed and a challenge that no activity, no matter how mundane, need be un-erotic. She would treat Joseph's body with avid irreverence, kneading his soft belly, rolling his fat dick between her palms. She seized or tweaked or stroked or licked his bulbous nose, fading strawberry-blond tousle of hair, pecs, thighs, anus, toes. She imprinted so many reminders of sex on his person and their household that everything reminded him of sex. The living room couch and armchair held the odor of sex, and the stove and washing machine swirled with fleshy memories. Weighing himself to placate the doctor—time for sex!

Joseph often thought she looked crazy with her glittering eyes and wide, trembling mouth, but that excited him, to be coupled in bed with a sweating, swarming crazy woman, and in life.

Yet in her classroom she demanded sanity. In an environment so stimulating and rewarding, which practiced empathy and respect (even the feed rabbits received a farewell song before their slaughter), a student would be nuts to abuse and risk those privileges, and they didn't.

Below the fine rings of wrinkles at her neck, Kirsten's body had not aged, trim and taut. The tips of her curls were frosted gray. Her face showed the caring lines at

forehead, eyes, and mouth, and it could not have been more beautiful to him.

Defiantly, Joseph and Kirsten convened a Western-themed solidarity party. He grilled steaks on the stone barbecue while Kirsten served refried beans and homemade enchiladas inside, using souvenir recipes from her own trips to Tucson. Past TAWL delegates—teachers, former Board members, parents—sported bolos dangling down the pearlescent-buttoned fronts of their cowboy shirts, men and women both. Local families stared as dignitaries from Canada and New Zealand bumped the brims of their Stetsons, hugging. Ten-gallon hats bobbed among the crowd flowing to and from the farmhouse. Children rolled and ran on the grass. Joseph scooped them up, knowing them all, chest tightening now with joy.

Visitors and locals delivered speeches.

He had retained a lawyer, Joseph announced. TAWL scribes were submitting and posting articles shining a light on the retro forces of standardization.

"Our little tiny District," said a dad in proud wonder.

"I'm sorry to do this to you, but we need to remind ourselves why we're here," Joseph said, and quoted raucously from the Six Traits.

"Six Traitors," someone yelled.

The story Joseph read, before cutting the row of Black Forest cakes over which he had labored the past two days, was by a Native fourth-grader from a reservation outside Tucson. In it, a boy was transformed into an eagle, learned eagle ways, and returned to his family with two hearts, human and eagle. "I didn't know why I had chosen this story until now," Joseph announced. "You have given me a second heart."

"That's all very well, but what about money?" It was Kirsten's Tante Mariette, dressed in a fringed buckskin miniskirt at age eighty-two. "You're going to lose your job, and lawyers cost money. I know, I was married to one, and I'm rich."

"That isn't the point, Mariettchen," Joseph said. "And they're not going to win.

This will backfire on them." He no longer worried when his heart started yammering at him.

She strode to the head of the table, fringe twitching, and signed him a check. Snatching off his cowboy hat, she dropped it in. She turned to the guests, crammed around tables smuggled from school MPRs. "You've filled your mouth. Now put your money in it."

People rose. Despite Joseph's protesting upheld palms, they trooped past, filling the hat.

"Maybe this *is* the point," he murmured to Kirsten.

Guests sang, danced, played music, drank, kissed everyone else. Some were leftover hippies, so there was pot. Because they were educators, all helped clean up.

Tante Mariette, either tactful or more likely exhausted, ascended the stairs, leaving Joseph and Kirsten alone, holding hands on the couch. She was staying overnight.

Kirsten's parents, also alcoholics, had died young, unregenerate. Tante Mariette, who had been arrested by the Nazis for wearing the swastika as a skirt, had charmed the Hauptführer into dropping the charges, then survived the war in Germany, merely drank. "She was kind of a mother," Kirsten said. "Though she claims to hate kids." Kirsten had no children. Joseph's grown son taught overseas. Both liked filling the rambling farmhouse with people. Tante Mariette drove down from Iowa City with her son, his two daughters, and their children whenever they visited her. She spoke fiercely to the great-grandchildren but gave them presents and sang them German nursery songs, involving violent jouncing and plunging, that they found hilarious.

"On Monday we'll be rehearsing the first act of the opera," Kirsten said. "So they experience the full effect, the lyrics, music, and costumes. It will blow them away. But they need help writing the third act. They figured someone needed to die, and at first no one would do it. But then Valerie came up with the idea of a dying aria, and now everyone wants in. Maybe I'll just let them all die. It will be like Romeo and Juliet, a

heap of bodies, only singing."

"Sure, I'll come."

The hatful of money looked like a magician's trick.

In the morning Joseph smelled a cigarette from the upstairs bathroom. With the same Dietrich-esque hauteur as in recounting her amours, Tante Mariette declared her Crohn's had flared up again. "I have to smoke to shit."

It was not until spring that the Board finally fired Joseph. Promptly he filed suit for wrongful termination. Immediately his father drove the nearly 2,000 miles from San Diego, pulling up in the driveway in his powder blue Mercedes sports coupe. He bounded out, five-foot-four, brown and bald as a nut.

"Ach, Papi," Kirsten teased, embracing him. Mr. Hutton enjoyed being re-cast as a German patriarch. He had founded a supermarket chain in San Jose, sold out to Safeway, and retired to the beach with his millions.

Joseph insisted on his father touring the grounds with him, stretching his arms over the Edenic spring landscape, the running hills, scattered copses breaking into green, the neat cultivated whorls of crops, on a day the white banks of clouds seemed to be funneling blue sky onto the land. Growing up in seasonless San Jose, Joseph felt as if Iowa's extremes literally kept him alive, furnace July, the interminable leaden winter stillness broken by the crack of frozen tree branches, even the tingle of terror at a nearby tornado.

Joseph owned the most immediate fields, purchasing a parcel at a time over the years. While aiming to farm them himself someday, at present he leased them to neighbors for corn and soybeans.

"The Count among his holdings," his father said.

"I have my eye on that hill, too," Joseph improvised. His voice strained as if to accommodate the swelling acreage. "Maybe plant a small orchard. Or vineyard."

"How do you expect to buy more when you have no job?"

"The spite and malice of that Board, the professional jealousy—it will be so apparent in open court. And when I say the Board, it's only three of the five. That's how close this is to being nothing. It's infuriating. None of this need to have happened. Remember, the settlement will not be just for back pay, there will be punitive damages for defamation."

Joseph knew his argument was reasonable, yet his words were babbling in his own ears. Walking beside his diminutive father, Joseph felt like a little boy clutching a balloon that floated above them, and at the same time he was inside that balloon, airy and formless save for the temporary shape of the thin, stretched, rubber skin.

His father's carefully measured check—statement attached—helped with the mortgages for the original property and the subsequent acquisitions. A recklessly loyal teacher volunteered as treasurer for the legal defense fund. The lawsuit was becoming Joseph's full-time job, if not in aiding his attorney gathering depositions, then in brooding and talking about it. He used the anticipated settlement as collateral to borrow money from friends. Kirsten's salary alone could not sustain them.

The escape was Kirsten's classroom, the world-in-a-drop-of-water effect. Leading a troop through the school garden, Joseph became immersed in their wild observations. One boy wrote:

> The fishpond is black like a big giant eye
> It kind of scares me and I feel like I fly.

The attorney's office was buttressed with polished oak columns. Over the long table they spread and sorted testimonial upon testimonial, elegant disquisitions on Joseph's theoretical contributions, blunt gratitude from local parents.

The Board recalled Joseph, and now his attorney, for a closed session. Member Clark in effect presided, as Chair Finch, the librarian, sat silently. Airline records proved

that on at least two separate occasions, Joseph had booked group rates for the delegation to TAWL in Tucson while billing the district for individual tickets. Through his Superintendent's office he had managed to pocket the difference.

"Our records were a shambles in those days, which you counted on. But enough survived. The little hick school district would never know," Clark waxed scornfully, "…the handshake with the greased palm…milk and bilk…"

The offer was exemption from criminal prosecution in exchange for withdrawal of Joseph's lawsuit and any claim to his former position. "The instances cited are still within the statute of limitations," Clark said. "God knows how many others there were."

Joseph knew. The funds had provided down payments for his farmland purchases.

It was almost a year to the day since the Board had first suspended him, verging into fall. As Joseph ascended his long driveway, the first tinges of color in the leaves darkened like blemishes in the dusk. The last few yards to the house Joseph felt as if he were wading through mud.

He had no way to frame the news to Kirsten, so he simply delivered it.

"They'll go to any lengths, won't they," she said.

"They have the documents," he pronounced heavily, yet with the unburdening relief in his heart.

"Joseph, you're not caving? They're forgeries. They dig themselves deeper and deeper into the hole."

"Kirsten, the documents are real."

"You're not listening to me. People won't let go of those cowboy hats. They wear them 'til the hats grow hair. They're a better investment than the thousands they're dumping into the Traits. I can't believe they're breaking you down like this."

Joseph helped set the table, awestruck. The hair stiffened on the back of his neck.

Deceiving Kirsten had a purpose and result. She stayed happy. She left for work each day with the same implacable joy. When she returned, Joseph invented meetings

with the attorney, new strategies.

When the lawsuit settled, they could use the money to buy Little Turk Hill across the river, she said.

Though the Board had pledged secrecy, someone leaked the story to the Cedar Rapids Gazette—though not the deal—and from then Joseph no longer could volunteer in Kirsten's class. She would come home stiffnecked with pride.

"What are people saying?" Joseph asked.

"They hug me."

His father called to say that he was cutting Joseph off. "Why did you waste all that time and money when you knew all along you were fucked?"

"I guess I didn't think they'd catch the airfare. Without that, they didn't have much."

Joseph went through the motions of applying to other districts, other states, even as a classroom teacher, but of course media had preceded him everywhere. His attorney re-submitted his fees with wounded indignation. Without the legal defense fund, he and Kirsten might not have heating oil.

Tante Mariette began sending a little bit each month. Joseph's own son, teaching English in Portugal, didn't make a dime.

In town, people he encountered while shopping, or waiting in the teller line at the bank, treated him like a bad joke they were sharing.

Kirsten led Joseph on a picnic up Little Turk Hill, to symbolically take possession. From its vantage point, the Hutton farmhouse nestled on its crest like crystals in green velvet. For Kirsten's sake he ritualistically annexed the granite knob where they stood, tapping the ground with his walking staff, planting the imaginary orchards.

Descending into the cover of trees, Kirsten shucked her clothes and seized him, her body both voluptuous and wiry. She was naked to the heart, he thought. He was so moved by her. Religious words he had forgotten since childhood—atonement, redemption, expiation—clamored at him. For them—for her—to continue in their beautiful house, he must bring in money for her.

He would farm. He apprenticed himself to Hippie Gene, the "Six Traitors" parent. Gene raised melons, vegetables, and berries, but for a novice, melons would be enough. They would sell directly to restaurants and farmers markets through a CSA, community supported agriculture. Since Joseph could rent Gene's van and compact tractor, investment in machinery would be limited.

"Hey, you're not going to jack my trac to Tucson, are you? No, we love you," Hippie Gene said. His wife had painted their two boys' poems, written in Kirsten's class, across the sides and trunk of their car.

Joseph had compiled a binder of initial costs, estimates, and projections, but Tante Mariette arrived for Christmas Eve drawn and defenseless. Though vamped-up as ever, she had shrunk within her clothes.

The great-grandchildren, young as they were, seemed to pity Kirsten, cozying up to her and playing with her hair. They regarded Joseph with gothic fascination, as if he had risen from the dead or formed himself from leaf wrack, animal carcasses, and swamp muck. Norman, Tante Mariette's son, was a large, mild man, whose wife had run off. He approached Kirsten with the same courteous, bemused deference he showed his mother.

While the generations grazed on Kirsten's spread of German meats, spaetzele and red cabbage, with lebküchen and pfeffernüsse for dessert, Joseph took Tante Mariette aside.

She wrote out a check for tens of thousands.

Joseph already had sold his first and second melon crops when, in late August, a deluge threatened his 40 acres. For eighteen hours, he, Kirsten, and Gene shoveled and

heaved a sandbag barrier at the Narrows, where an upthrust of bedrock squeezed the river's flow. Briefly the torrent topped the levee, but it did not breach. In the gray slop, surrounded by gray water under a gray sky, the gray rain pelting their slitted eyes, faces and rain gear gray in the monochrome light, they looked like mud people who had crawled to the surface for the first time.

At the final harvest, Joseph had turned a small profit, remarkable, Gene said, for a first year. The amount was less than leasing the land would have earned. Joseph's body had whittled to sinew.

A stuffed manila envelope, with his lawyer's return address typed in the corner, appeared in Joseph's postal box. He had mailed it to himself. Home, he paraded the packet past Kirsten and thrust it deep into the recesses of his private desk compartment. "Evidence. Recent proceedings," he explained. Strangely, in the midst of his playacting, he suffered an acute, piercing memory, in eidetic detail: a grave, sternly groomed boy was reading his poem to the audience of families at Literacy Night. Overcome with the sheer joy of the moment, he began clowning, turning the paper upside-down without missing a word, alternating lines in a fake British accent. He ended pink and beaming, his glasses slipping to his nose as he bowed.

Joseph sighed raggedly with the pain. He preferred it to anything he had felt since exiting the Board room for the last time.

Because her mother had died of breast cancer, Kirsten had kept her screenings faithfully since her forties. The annual mammogram revealed a lump she had not detected through self-examination.

She chose to treat the ductal carcinoma with a lumpectomy, radiation, and the prospect of chemo since the oncologist had discovered an incipient thickening in the armpit, as well.

In the few weeks before surgery, to Joseph it was like falling in love again.

Kirsten cried when they made love and allowed herself to be held like a child. Every moment not spent with her body provoked him, as time wasted, unless they shared it completely, gazing at the sunlight on a bare winter tree, or joking against the tension of the oncologist's waiting room.

Farming was out of the question if he were to care for Kirsten. Joseph sold off the extra parcels. His domain now consisted of the land they lived on.

The night before her surgery, Joseph didn't expect to sleep, but he must have because he awoke to footsteps in the house. He followed them down the stairs from their bedroom to the living room. Kirsten was unable to stand still even when he held her by the arms. Her feet shifted back and forth, practically running in place.

"I have to walk," she said. They went up and down the stairs together. "I'm scared," she said. "When they cut me open, they're going to find more. The breast will be gone. The cancer will be everywhere. I see myself coming out of anesthesia, and the first words are, 'I'm sorry—'"

Joseph ran the bath, insisted she lie in it. He stripped and sat behind her, gently soaping every part of her, starting with her neck, the spray of freckles on her back, memorizing her skin. "This is you. You'll be here," he said.

Following the operation, get-well cards massed across their mantel "like the Spanish armada," Kirsten said. Within a week she was back at work, perched on the couch with papers strewn.

Joseph drove her to morning chemo when the rounds began; she taught in the afternoon and passed out in a chair at home. If she needed, Joseph would carry her to bed. As her hair fell out, she wore a Godzilla cap. Apparently she suffered no insecurity regarding her attractiveness, carrying herself as always. Any fight was within her; she showed nothing.

The morning of June 13 her session was canceled; Cedar Rapids was submerged under its worst recorded flooding. Outside the window, the waters lapped the bases of the

hills, leaving them islands just like their own, surrounded by an inland sea with constantly breaking symmetries of waves. Joseph was sorry for the fields' new owners but relieved for himself. They had money now, and within two years he could draw early Social Security.

With the final radiation treatment in July, the oncologist declared Kirsten free of cancer. She would require a checkup every three months. Already her hair had begun growing in, white and fine as down.

She never mentioned the lawsuit or settlement again.

"Loving you has always been the most important thing to me," Joseph said. "I don't know why I couldn't have stopped there." He didn't know if he was speaking plainly or wooing her.

After Kirsten was diagnosed, Tante Mariette had visited often, driven by Norman or a granddaughter. In the midst of Kirsten's chemo she announced that she had moved from the two-story gingerbread Victorian, left by her husband, into an apartment. "More cuddly this way," she said. Then she added, "An old man in the corner up by the ceiling, he keeps throwing dirt at me."

Kirsten slowly repeated the sentence back to Tante Mariette.

"No, he keeps running across the roof," Tante Mariette said.

At Christmas Tante Mariette cried out, "Ach, Gott," and dropped.

Kirsten wept shudderingly at the funeral. She was talking to herself in German. Her arms wrapped around herself, she seemed to be embracing another person.

After Tante Mariette's death, Kirsten renounced sex. "A body passes its expiration date," she said. "After fifty, it all goes to shit."

Crimson, apoplectic, Norman upbraided them both, "my mother forced to live her last days in a box." Tante Mariette wasn't rich, he said. Her husband's loot, the two had whooped it all up while he was alive. "What was left, she gave to you! She had no

money. Now we have no money." Perhaps it was true. Family lore had it Norman's ex-wife had taken him to the cleaners.

Whatever the case, Tante Mariette's family refused to see the Huttons.

A new generation of parents, who knew nothing but the Six Traits, pinned their hopes on "exceeds the Standards" or even "meets the Standards."

Defying administration's directives, Kirsten categorically refused even to mention the Six Traits in her classroom. Tenured and popular, a recent cancer survivor, she scarcely could be fired. But the District threatened her relentlessly with transfer.

"I'm too old," she said, and took early retirement. She launched a ranting blog to which, after the first torrid weeks, few responded, and peppered email correspondents and Facebook friends with links ranging from comical to heartwarming to apocalyptic.

Kirsten's follow-up exams continued to show no cancer. One day over breakfast, she said, "My life was renewed. It's an insult to live it trivially." Joseph waited to see what she meant. They still tramped the woods together amid the changing seasons. They read aloud passages from educational journals. Their slowed pace only enhanced Kirsten's grace. The white hair fit like a cap her neat animal face. She moved more lightly, a gesture in the air. In bed, tucked under their quilts, her breathing opened up into the night.

Of course he hadn't told her about the women at TAWL, and it was unlikely she ever would know. Reserving a hotel room separate from the conference, "for peace and quiet," had cost the district nothing extra. The event organizer, and the linguist committed to reviving dying languages—what a missionary she was!—and the hotel concierge. Each was like opening a new book. They were only books, but still books.

Sitting at the desk in his house, their house, with the hills marching away outside the window, toward the rivers, Joseph felt that expansion, the stretching beyond himself,

as if he might merge with the bare tree branches and bare furrowed fields filled with frost, a yearning near tears. His heart gonged in his chest. He heard Kirsten’s sounds from the kitchen.

ICE-T

In the seconds before his tires hit the black ice, Bob Weiss apprehended that the reservation experiment had gone bust, a false start—after the school year ended, he would leave. Nearly unconscious with drink, he didn't slow down. The undersized pickup left the road without hesitation. It was January, the edge of Crow Indian country in southern Montana. The pickup snapped off a swath of bare branches before overturning beside a frozen pond.

A scant half hour later two of Bob's students, juniors at Arrow Creek High, spotted the headlights staring walleyed into the trees. They stopped their rusted Impala, dragged the cold, inert form from the wreck, hightailed it into the rez town of Arrow Creek, and dumped it on the living room couch of another teacher. Bob was O.K. He slept the weekend.

Bob's students immediately dropped the 'W' from his name, in honor of his driving exploit. Then, from 'Bob Ice,' the rapper boys with the backwards Bulls caps dubbed him 'Ice-T,' from a used CD they'd picked up in the swap shop in Billings. Some of the girls

preferred ‘Encino Man,’ after the revived frozen Stone-Ager, star of a video they rented from the Arrow Creek Lunch and Trading Post.

Bob looked the part of a Montana mountain man, tall, angular, and bearded, though balding. But he was from Ohio. He walked stooped and was given to rudely sudden intimacies. For instance, the first Monday after the accident he told his class, “They said I was passed out, but I was awake the whole time, looking through that hole in the windshield at the cold stars. I knew I was freezing. You’d expect to see stuff like the face of Jesus, but I was with this French whore. I’ve never been to France, you understand, this is in my head. She’s saying in her accent, ‘Ro-bear, tonight we make baby. I take my basal temperature, my body is ripe.’ And we’re going at it, and she’s talking about the baby, his curly hair and big chin. It’s all an act, a whore’s thing, but extra creative, and personal. For me.”

The kids had the impression of peering into the Visible Man. They didn’t necessarily like what they saw, but they liked him for being weird enough to show it to them.

Bob taught vocational agriculture, his second year after fifteen with USDA. Enrollment for his specialty was near zero, so he’d diversified into woodworking and auto shop, both popular. Crows didn’t want to farm, he’d concluded.

The following weeks he replaced the truck and drank even more incautiously, keeling over onto the floor of his triplex with a thud that alerted his neighbors. In class he’d be still drunk. It was said he drank with the kids. Indisputably, he bought Mortal Kombat and allowed them to play at his home all hours, so the next day they’d be as hollow-eyed as he. The principal warned him, but in mid-year, for the rez, it was tough finding teachers without criminal records or certifiable mental disabilities.

Bob couldn’t think past the end of the semester, to what he’d do next. USDA had fired him for prolonged drunkenness following the breakup of his second marriage. While earning his teaching certificate he’d worked a series of jobs. Most memorably, he’d cooked for Ramada Inn until a buffet luncheon when he’d composed a salad of whole, unpeeled oranges garnished with unshelled boiled eggs. Diners examined it in wonder but without

sampling. Then he'd stacked apple cores like Lincoln logs around a pâté.

Bob met Iulia Deac at a Billings bar. He bought into the idea that being Slavic made her hot. She wore men's Levi's with the button fly, the bulge of her tummy parting the denim flaps like labia. Yet she volunteered that she was a Seventh Day Adventist, that the liquid in her highball glass was straight ginger ale, and that the bar's dense smokiness inflamed her eyes.

Bob took her to an all-night coffee shop. Summers in a rustic cottage on Lake Erie, when he was a boy, had given him a sense of home, and that made him a lucky man, Bob said. He had no children. Iulia's two belonged to that "old life," she said, jerking her head as if at something over her shoulder.

That night she wouldn't let him touch her, but over the next few weeks Bob forced himself into athletic sexual feats for which she complimented him. She quit her job with the phone company and moved onto the rez. Next to his flyweight Isuzu, her white '71 Chevy pickup looked more at home, huge, slightly crushed in, like a lunging animal. Iulia volunteered in the classroom as a general go-fer, circulating in the barn-like shop amid the table saw's whine and the sharp reports of the impact wrench. She said she was thirty-eight, nine years younger than Bob, but with her hair dyed jet black she could have been in her late twenties. She also dyed a blonde-and-brown streak down the middle, which some girls imitated. To the boys, she was a chunk of raw sex set down to thaw in the big cat cage. They circled, biding their time, practically rubbing their heads against her. Her demeanor was proper, brittle, scarcely smiling. Yet Bob couldn't control his voice. "This is how you stay in school when you're flunking everything else?" he yelled at Alex Old Bull, who wore a T-shirt with rain on the front and lightning in back. Alex had leaned behind Iulia's neck and whispered in her ear.

"Just jivin', Ice. Sorry." The boys nodded and went back to work. Unafraid, they had no heart for shaming him.

In fact, with Bob, Iulia was more often romantic than sexual, as if they were still

courting. She didn't approve of their sex without marriage. If he didn't drink so much, she said, he could afford to take her on a helicopter ride. "You put away that habit of poisoning your body, and your mind goes more places. Being up there..." she said. Her eyes closed, mouth tightened into a line, forehead clenched. She didn't nag, but that yearning was a hollow place, scary if left unfilled. Besides, Bob liked the transaction, a high for a high. After a month on the wagon, he drove her to a helicopter pad in Billings, April 2.

The weather and view were magnificent, but it wasn't much of a social afternoon. As they flew over the vibrantly sallow skin of the earth, furred by woods, cracked with gullies, the uplift of mountains patched with snow and shadow, Iulia prayed and cried. She wasn't frightened, but rather something private she tried to convey with her wet face turned up to him.

They become engaged.

Bob heard of a paleontologist who would take kids fossil hunting, so he organized a field trip at the beginning of May. Hell, he thought, you invent your own job in this place. Maybe some kids would grow up to be paleontologists. The high school, junior high, and elementary combined for the event, two busloads rattling and swerving twenty-five miles on a narrow gravel road into the badlands. Finbacks knifed into the sky, cliffs dropped off sheer. Dry coulees spilled boulders onto a suddenly red outcrop of sandstone. Several acres appeared to have been blasted by a giant blowtorch, ash heaps littered with sugary crystals and rocks forged into nearly recognizable shapes, a melted camera, a horseshoe. The kids were wondrously excited, yelling to each other as they scooped up ancient sea life and even dinosaur gizzard stones. Atop a ridge, a teenager gave a great cry and whirled a flat stone, like a discus, into space—not approved procedure, but funny enough.

Iulia had made lunches for all. Across the primeval landscape kids were eating her sandwiches. Bob felt staunch with a sense of possibility. Adhering to the paleontologist's

lecture on the way over, he helped the youngsters discover fossils. A ten-year-old, disconsolate that he'd found no gizzard stones, collected three of the strange rounded pebbles, so ordinary but for the glassy, luminescent polish. He knew Bob. "This was really in a dinosaur's guts, Ice-T? Ho," he breathed. Bob said he used to imagine what kind of dinosaur that people would be. His grandmother was fat with a little head, so he called her brontosaurus. "You're Ice-T-Rex, man," the boy said. He tagged after Bob the rest of the trip. Bob was tempted to hold his hand. Walking back to the bus, he said to Iulia, "I could live with these kids."

But already Iulia was slipping. Twice Bob had come home to find her rocking out to devil-worship heavy metal, and when he asked if those were Seventh Day Adventist hymns she poked him in the belly and armpit, flirtatiously, but it hurt.

The week after the field trip she started taking off in the big white pickup. He said what the hell and she jabbered as if she were on something, about a movie with a talking butt, about people with really big gobs of fat that moved independently of the rest of them.

Then she was gone two days and nights. Bob cruised the parking lot of every Billings bar, drove up and down residential streets scanning driveways and open garages. Late Sunday afternoon she pranced in, purse balanced on her wrist and eyes staring out of her head. "I left some stuff here," she said and disappeared into the bedroom. Bob ran out and deflated one of the Chevy tires. When he stood up, she was pointing a pistol. Bang! The Isuzu's left front tire popped. Bang! The left rear. The gun swung to Bob's head, and he dove just before it fired again. From under the Chevy bed he saw high heels heading fore and he crawled aft. He heard another shot and shattering glass.

The BIA cop from across the street called her off, cuffed her, and took her in.

After her arrest Bob set fire to the vacant lot behind the triplex. The flames leaped as high as the windows before kids smothered them with blankets and hoses.

"I was burning her picture," Bob explained to the principal. "The grass caught,

and I said, 'Oh, what the hell.'" The principal said his contract would not be renewed, but Bob could say he'd resigned.

As part of his severance, Bob negotiated an extension that included building maintenance over the summer. For Fourth of July he drove a group of kids thirty miles up a twisty dirt road into the mountains, to an ice cave.

They stepped into the mouth, sliding immediately on the slick gelid floor. Lumps of ice reared like ghosts.

"Hohhhhh," exclaimed Leonard (Poochie) Runs Behind.

"Where Encino Man rises," said his girlfriend.

Despite the warning signs, Bob let them duck under the railing and explore the recesses hidden in darkness. Their voices fluttered past his head like bats. They seemed to be going far away from him.

Afterward, the kids still were stirred up, gathering wood for the fire back at the picnic grounds or huddled in an only slightly menacing knot around the boom box. Butterflies skipped through the pines. Bob poked sticks into the fire. The pot for corn was balanced at a rakish angle on two stones.

"Why are you quitting, Ice-T?" asked Poochie. Poochie had been famous for imitating two women arguing shrilly at Crow Fair, the performance including background powwow singing, until his voice had changed. He'd been suspended five weeks for bringing a .38 to school, then rallied and finished the year. But the guy who snitched, Poochie would kick his ass. Kick his *ass*, Poochie thought. He'd imagined ways of killing him. No one had found where Poochie had hidden the gun.

"How'd you like to be written up all the time?" Bob answered the question.

"That'd be about right," Poochie said.

"I spent more time with the principal than you did. No, I gave this job two years and it's not working out. A man reaches a point in life when he's got to make a change."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," Bob said.

But Poochie was no longer listening. 'A man reaches a point in life when he's got to make a change.' The words rang his head like a rock hitting him. Damn, he thought, he was going to shoot a guy? And then jail, and his dad was a low weak bastard but did his mom need her heart broken right now? Poochie looked down the slopes at the lodgepole trunks half lit, half in shade, and the white clouds springing up over the treetops, and the blue going on forever, and he broke a sweat. His chest felt caved in. Dump the gun, dump the sucker fast, he thought. Sink it in the creek, easy, done. Already his breath opened wider. Damn, damn. A message could come from anywhere, and this one had come from Ice-T, an old guy who had lived through a lot and was still in there kicking. Poochie was in awe of the man, he looked at him with such love that he could not speak.

Everyone was stuffed with hot dogs. After all his hassle boiling the corn, Bob Weiss thought, nobody wanted to eat it.

PILLAR OF FIRE, LAKE OF FIRE

OK then, all right, Mick thought, so Bobby wasn't getting up to drive him to Sea-Tac airport. Mick could give a shout to Yellow Cab, still plenty of time. He had tidied the couch, folded the sheet and blanket. He'd scrambled three eggs along with his toast, since you never knew with the airlines. The flight out, they'd served him kosher by mistake, salmon, not bad. L'chaim, mazel tov, he'd said. Any New Yorker could talk some Hebrew.

No action behind his brother's door. What a depressing house, how could you live that way. A film of grease lay over everything, and with the salt always detectable in the air, it smelled like stale french fries. Lumps of furniture in the gray dawn light. The grandfather clock beat out the seconds. It was Bobby had invited him west. Come on out, I got a chopper shop, we'll ride, we'll canoe on the lake. As if there was no cloud over the house, cool, so Mick went. And then five days of nothing, Bobby and Edith on the couch, TV, make your own baloney sandwich or Stouffer's. Mick even said, Let's go down grab a beer, and Bobby says, Case in the fridge not good enough for ya? Bobby had

put on forty pounds, Edith too. It looked like their biggest plan was sitting around waiting for a heart attack. Bobby used to be Navy, right across Puget Sound in Bremerton. Stud in Dress Blues, chief petty officer. Lob a few sixteen-inchers into that Beirut, tidy 'em right up, he would say.

If Bobby stuck his head out the door now, Hold on, don't get your panties in a twist, I'm taking you, it would still mean something, right at the end. Mick brushed his hair again.

A doorknob squeaked, but it was his niece Bethany, looming in her doorway in a T-shirt and striped boxers, like Al from *Married with Children*. With her hulking shoulders and frizzy hair, it was hard to picture Bobby jumping her, but that's what she said. The investigation didn't say yes or no.

"Don't stress, Uncle Mick, I'll jack their keys," she said, and, skirt wrapped around her middle, she had them on the road. Passing Bobby's bike shack, locked and peeling, a graffiti battleground, could have made him sad, but you make your own bed.

The traffic on 99 South, toward Sea-Tac, piled up so suddenly it looked like the red brake lights were tumbling onto the road, toward them. "Damn," Bethany said, clapping her hands over her head almost festively. "Time to get creative." She swung onto a side street.

"I'll see what the radio says." Mick punched the knob.

The radio said jets hit the World Trade Center and the towers fell. A jet hit the Pentagon. Another jet crashed, maybe shot down by F-16's. Other hijacked jets maybe flying around, aimed god knows where.

"Are you shitting me?" Mick said. This was shock radio, right? Like the fat guy and *War of the Worlds*. Mick rolled down the window and looked up. Sky empty. OK.

"Look over Sea-Tac," Bethany said. "There are no planes in the air. It's closed. It's true."

"Holy shit. Holy shit. Pull over." His home, and his wife Sally, were on Long

Island, an hour from Kennedy—a half hour from where he and Bobby had grown up. He crammed coins into the pay phone, but the recording said all circuits were busy.

"What if they bomb the Space Needle?" Bethany said.

"Is your cell nationwide?"

She shook her head.

Sally and he would be watching the news, knee to knee. Their way of sitting was almost falling, kind of rolling together. Sometimes one would bump the other over and they'd just lie that way. "All flights are grounded. They're talking about martial law. Holy Jesus. The Twin Towers? They blew up the Pentagon? They have nukes?"

Bethany began crying.

"Well, the Air Force is on the job now," he said, rapping her shoulder solidly.

Bizarre how the brain works. OK, we're at war. Now what? "Don't take this wrong, honey, you know, but I don't care if the USA is nuked into glowing green glass, I'm not going back to your folks' place."

"I've got a friend works at Hertz." Bethany sat up. She jabbered into the cell. Though the lot was cleared out, she reported, a car had just come in, and they'd hold it for him. "Felicia. My bud," Bethany said proudly.

A lone fighter droned in circles overhead. A lone Chevy Impala occupied the expanse of the Hertz parking lot. Bethany's chickpal was barely taller than the counter, with freckles and hair tied back in a pony. Behind her on the TV screen the slender blue towers erupted orange flames and billowing smoke. Then they slumped to their knees like a tired person and disappeared into dust.

It was as if a tidal waved had reared up in front of him, in front of all of them, and if there's something you want to do in life, better do it right now.

Felicia the Hertz girl was hyped, hands and fingers fluttering, dark eyes huge and bright, her hair taut, glossy and reddish at the roots. "Stock up on bottled water," she said. "They're expecting a biochemical attack."

"I'm going to stock up on beer," Mick said. "A case right in the back seat. Who gives a shit now, right?"

"I didn't hear that," Felicia said. "Initial here and here. Sign here."

Mick stowed his suitcase in the Impala trunk. The car was silver.

Bethany's footsteps clopped on the pavement, and her big arm slung around his neck. "Felicia thinks you're cute. She gave you this." It was a map, hand-drawn on a brochure. She'd written little radiating lines around a lake. "She'll be out there in two days. Her family has a cabin. Wait for her. Montana. It's right on your way, off I-90."

"The world's falling in and she wants a boff? Sheese…" Mick stroked his belly. "I'm a Married Man."

"Why anybody would be faithful to a dyke, for Christ's sake."

"Sally just bowls with them. Don't be like everybody and jump to conclusions." He smacked her lightly on the back of the head. Being 5' 4", he had to reach up. The torso of a Mr. Universe, it was just that his legs were short.

"Stop hitting me, or I'll lay you out, I swear," Bethany said.

"People, people. Can't we just get along?" Weird, he thought. For what you hear about abused kids, she was the only one in Bobby's house with any life. Before the trip he had let that talk roll off his back, but Bobby's house was poisoned. It was pus. He couldn't say. It wasn't something you wanted to think about.

"Well?" she said.

"Well." He opened the car door. "You don't go anywhere near downtown, you listen to me? Lay low, and you'll be OK."

"Take me with you, Uncle Mick," Bethany said. "I don't want to go back."

He could never find a reason to say no to people. Like there was no reason Sally shouldn't bowl with the lesbians, so you were stuck saying, why not? "Pass me your luggage," he said, slinging an imaginary suitcase into the trunk.

"Thank you. Thank you." She smothered him in a hug.

"Holy Christ." Freeing his head, he sneezed, squinted, and rubbed his face dramatically.

Bethany considered. "Dad will think I'm in school, for now."

"Fuck Bobby, excuse me. I'll handle Bobby."

Bethany left her father's keys and phone number with Felicia.

"Probably rent it to the next caller. Bye, Bobby, pick up your car in Oklahoma City."

Bethany laughed with her whole face. Teeth, eyes, even her hair seemed to laugh.

Once on the open road, Mick cracked a beer. He'd never seen so many huge, in-your-face mountains, some even snow-capped. They seemed wrong, like animals escaped from the zoo, running all over the place, that used to be wild, but now they were supposed to be locked up. But it was a kick in the butt seeing them, too.

Bethany hung her head out the window like a St. Bernard. Truth be told, the idea of driving all those days alone had made him gulp. A plane ride, you nodded off, bam, you were there. Driving alone, coast to coast, you could get artsy-fartsy with yourself.

Mick turned on the radio. No-fly zone over D.C., car bombs intercepted at the Capitol? The President was off somewhere. There were maybe 25,000 people in the WTC, they said. There was no way to think about that. There are 8 million stories in the Naked City, minus 25,000. Imagine 25,000 people in a stadium. Suddenly they all catch on fire at once. Imagine Sally with her chubby pink cheeks that got shiny when she laughed, or Bethany in baggy boxers talking on the cell, her hair sticking out stiff like a Christmas tree branch, and multiply that by 25,000. There was no way to think about it.

He turned it off.

Bethany's hair ducked in from the wind looking like Don King's.

Mick couldn't help himself. "Part of the reason I came out," he told Bethany, "and your dad said it would be a hoot, too, ride bikes, go out on the town, but part of it for me was I wanted to put it to him direct. 'Did you do it?' I wanted him to look me in

the eye and say, 'No, she's a crazy liar.' But there was never a time. They were like two piles of garbage on the couch, excuse me, talking about your parents."

"He did it, the cocksucker." She nodded up and down. "When I was littler, I thought he was punishing me, and I thought if I was better he would stop. So look at it this way. Here I am, on the honor roll. I wash my own clothes and dishes. My room is as neat as a science lab. I'm a prize."

The next town on the road sign was 30 miles.

"Can we stop? I need new clothes," Bethany said. "I don't want anything from that old house. Not my CD player. I thought I had favorite clothes. I don't even want them. It's like the beach where sand gets into everything, your sunglasses, the towel, your hair. Your swimsuit. You don't want to touch anything."

"The whole place feels like it has grease on it," Mick said. "Eat grease. Shower with grease. Bobby's Grease Works. Bobby and Edith sitting there like pools of grease."

"Grease, that's good, too, Uncle Mick," Bethany said encouragingly. "Greasy sand." She stuck her head out the window again.

So if she was telling the truth, how did your brother get to be a pervert? Here you go artsy-fartsy anyway.

Even sloping out of the mountains, now there's a valley big as Jersey. The maps didn't do justice to the space in this place. Mick topped off the tank in Ellensburg, full of orchards. They said oil had jumped, gas might hit $5 a gallon. He rang his home number. "All circuits are busy…" It was as if Sally was wiped out, all New York wiped out. He tomahawked the phone receiver into the cradle. The station attendant was watching a portable TV, again the towers burned and fell. The Pentagon lay on its side burning. Sally couldn't phone out, either, likely. Two dots on the continent. Day to day you didn't think how over-the-top big this country was. Out of the mountains, the vast land seemed to tilt as you looked right to left. His little home on Long Island would be swallowed up in this space.

The truck stop included an annex where Bethany picked out stretch slacks and a T-shirt, “You are the apple of my eye,” showing two red fruits behind spectacles.

At the town of Vantage, the bridge over the Columbia was long, long, backed up with traffic. “If I’m a kamikaze bomber, I’m thinking this is the jackpot,” Mick said. Exhaust fumes seeped through the window. His foot started tapping.

“A thousand points for the Impala. Nice car.” Bethany drummed the outside of the door. “So what’s your bowling average? Or should I say, what’s your wife’s score with the team?”

He didn’t mind her ragging on him, trying to lighten up. Sally wasn’t a lesbian, he’d argued with himself. They did it. On Friday when Mick got off work, they smoked a bong and split a Carvel log and did it. Sometimes during the week they microwaved a bag of popcorn and watched DVDs and did it on the couch. Some people were wired more for fun than for work. Mick was the second kind, fifty hours a week at the paper warehouse, maybe why they fit together. After her morning as a crossing guard, Sally liked to eat, she liked to party, she liked to bowl.

To be plump, on the lazy side, went with easygoing. Once he’d detoured on his way to work. Idling at the crosswalk, unnoticed, he’d watched Sally hoisting her stop sign and leading the rug rats across the painted safety strip. Thrusting out her chest and backside, she waddled like a duck, pecking the air with her nose. The kids copied, like ducklings.

“What I don’t get,” he said, “why would you need a lesbian bowling team? You don’t have a Breast Man softball league, or Ass Man trapeze troupe at the circus.” Bowlers of Bilitis. And Sally insisted on wearing the T-shirt, red so you couldn’t miss it, Bowlers of Bilitis, a bulgy babe like a defensive tackle with left thumb up and right fingers buried in the bowling ball like she was going to squeeze the juice out of it. “I can’t be the only one in regular clothes. It’d look stupid,” Sally said.

He’d rolled a couple of frames with them, be sociable, give them some tips. They

didn't look anything like the T-shirt, just a bunch of girls. The only strange thing was that they acted like he wasn't there. Not rude, not all of them. Some of them bowled pretty decent.

Bethany stepped out the door as a flyer skipped past. She chased it down, a windsurfing rally. Like big kites.

"A souvenir," she said. "To mark my way on this trip. I need to own *some*thing."

From Moses Lake she added a postcard of Chief Moses. "How to look dignified even wearing silly pants," she said.

At the cafe where they stopped to eat, the customers looked spooked, huddled. It was like in fourth grade when they'd been evacuated farther inland for the hurricane, he, Bobby, and their brother Ralph, and a school was set up for the night, rows of cots. All these strangers seeing each other in their bathrobes like they were related.

Bethany chose a sunflower magnet. "Thanks for floating me, Uncle Mick," she said. "Until I get a job."

Mick borrowed her cell, sighed, and hit the speed dial.

Bobby blustered, "I didn't bring you out here to kidnap my daughter."

"Why did you?"

"What the fuck difference? I wanted someone to hold my hand and walk on water with me."

"You got something on your mind?"

"Yeah, I got something on my mind, my hair."

When Mick said, "With Bethany out of the way, maybe CPS backs off," he half-waited for the cuss-down, that lyin' bitch, tell her get a haircut and she yells rape, you're fuckin' me. Something like that. Something. Finally.

But the silence at the other end told him different. Told him everything. Bobby didn't hang up. He waited. For what? Like he's accusing me, Mick raged, like I slapped him down by saying it. Maybe I did slap him down, pervert greaseball brother. O.K., I do

feel bad, all right? He said none of this into the empty receiver. He replaced it.

You start at the beginning, with your mother who gave birth to you. To himself, and with his brothers, he named her The Claw, because she was straight and sharp, not an ounce of fat on her. And wiry. Though five feet even, she'd broken their father's rib squeezing him, just play, and he was almost six feet. Mick had gotten his mother's genes. Body of steel.

Ma was tough. She'd ream you out and could knock you down with one arm, but that was because she needed to enforce, in a house of three boys. She'd trick you. She'd promise skating on the weekend, and when Sunday came she said, "My feet can't take it. Twelve hours at the Cork and Bull last night. Are you trying to kill me?" She was a cocktail waitress. Even dying, she'd asked him, her husky cigarette whisper, "Mick, Mick, tell me what you want. You want the car? The travel trailer?" "I just want one thing," he said. Growing up, he liked the fireplace poker, the handle cast like an eagle's head. By the next day when Mick returned, Ma had sold it to an auctioneer, from her deathbed.

That was Bobby all over, come out and play, and then two greasy blobs on the greasy couch.

"Your neck hurt, Uncle Mick?" Bethany asked when they started.

Mick had a neck like a telephone pole—all the brothers did—and just as stiff. The warehouse didn't help. "Only when I turn my head," he said. "Or look up or down. Or stick my head up my ass." Everybody had their trials, it's just that some could laugh about it.

"While you're doing that, I could drive. I got a hundred percent on my test."

"Nah. It's good."

If Ma was the Claw, Pop was The Cheese. He delivered for Kraft. He brought home cheese blocks for the family. House of Cheese. Mick once had dreamed of being buried in blocks of cheese, like an earthquake, and the cheese house had fallen in. He

remembered the yellow light and the sweet, rich smell. He ate his way out like a rat. Pop carried a fifth of Canadian Club in the step van.

On nights Pop went out to drink, the brothers collected in the same bed. It was Ralph's, not because he was the oldest but because he peed himself at Pop's footsteps coming up the stairs. "Pee your own bed," Bobby and Mick said. So he would: clunk-clunk on the stairs, the hiss streaming onto the mattress, and rising stink. They'd always done something wrong, so Pop had his excuse. Ralph stole, Bobby got in fights, and Mick pulled girls' hair. Pop got madder because they weren't in their right beds. So they're lying together in pee, stinking little kids, and the hand reaches out of the dark. Whack, slap on the face. Your eyes and nose ran with the sting. Your nose bled, blood in the mouth. Then the belt might come down anywhere because Pop couldn't see, either—your head, your neck and chest, legs, your weenie. His grunt of breath, and crack! The belt felt like pieces coming out of you. Nobody yelled, because then he hit harder. When he hit you with the buckle, it took the meat right off the bone. Ralph and Bobby got the worst, Ralph because he was soaked with pee, Bobby because he tried to pull Pop off the other two. Pop threw a lamp that broke Bobby's toe. At school he had to say he fell out of a tree. He did fall out of trees. No matter how drunk, Pop kept the gashes where clothes would cover them up.

Mick wondered what Mom would be thinking, watching TV with the noises from upstairs.

The three brothers.

Ralph married a dragon, a psycho with pills to prove it. Mick didn't mind profanity from a woman, spice, but Ralph's wife was a sewer mouth, and a screamer so you didn't miss any of it. Mick would like to see her *without* the meds. Ralph slunk off like a bad puppy. But he had his outlets. He was a criminal on the side, petty theft, fencing now and then.

Mick stopped at every exit to try Sally on the phone. No go. He bought them

snacks or used the head. Behind every counter, smoke and flame rolled from the Towers.

To fuck Bethany, Bobby's own kid, that would be like eating your own children, taking them back into you, like they'd never been born. That was the only way Mick could explain it.

Finally, in Spokane, he got through to New York, holding the phone receiver tight to his face like an ear of corn. "I'm driving to you as fast as I can," he told Sally.

"I'm alright. The girls are over. We're flamin' J's and drinkin' Lambrusco. We're gettin' giggly. If a bunch of Arabs drop out of the sky and shoot us, we'll die happy."

"What the hell," Mick said. What the hell. At least she was O.K., he reminded himself.

Today was the longest he'd driven since whenever. He couldn't move his head. The telephone pole of his neck was stuck way in the ground.

Before finding a motel, they needed to set up Bethany for the night. Pawing through frilly pj's on Wal-Mart racks, she snatched a flannel tent like a medical gown. She collected a toothbrush, two teenybopper fanmags, and a pack of Tampons.

"How about *that*," she said, face like a furnace.

"No biggie. I buy 'em so much for Sally, I'm an honorary member of the club."

"This club has monthly dues."

"Really? Geez, I never knew. You're very enlightening."

She added a Gonzaga cap, rabid bulldog with Go Zags.

Across the tracks, their motel squatted low like a string of boxcars, half the neon on the fritz. As Bethany stepped onto the gravel parking lot, she hyperventilated. Stumbling, wheezing harshly like a lugging fanbelt, she sagged. Mick caught her by the waist and arm. She felt boneless. He steadied her slumping weight. She let him half-carry her to the porch, leaned on him while he fished for her key.

"Anxiety attack," she said. "I have pills, but of course I didn't bring them."

"Anyone would stress, day like you had." He eased her onto the bed with its stiff,

purple-flowered spread. He patted her knee.

"I like having them. It knocks the crap out of me, and I feel better afterward."

She arranged the flyer, magnet, Chief Moses, and cap on the dresser. "There. New footsteps in the snow. I was here and here and here."

They sat and looked at them.

"I'm bushed," Mick said. "Any trouble, come on over."

"I'll be the baby on your doorstep."

Mick brushed his own teeth. As soon as he hit the hard bed, he knew he'd need an extra pillow for his neck. He and Sally tuned each other up. He crunched her shoulders around, and she pummeled his neck, like tenderizing meat.

He wondered how Bethany knew Felicia, several years older and a firecracker. Her freckled face might mean freckled tits—and pow, instant fattie. What would the Bowlers say to a guy with a fattie stickin' out like a sore thumb?

The brothers' necks, now you think of it, it wouldn't have anything to do with having the shit beat out of you, thrown down the stairs, and so on?

Mick slipped on his pants and padded to the office, where the night clerk watched the same story, the blue glass bursting into shards, into flame. Screen after screen throughout the day, from Hertz to gas stations, restaurants, the pictures blossomed until now, in the privacy of Mick's motel room, meaning lifted from them in a gentle daze. He saw stern blue crystals, shrouded in soft white and black, shot through with vivid colors. The fireball was a beautiful, glossy orange, so orange it was like not from this world. It was like the bacteria culture he'd grown in seventh grade, so orange it looked fake. Beautiful? Was he nuts? He fell asleep with the fireball mushrooming in his head.

The next morning he was guided by the pillar of fire. After Idaho there was Montana, mountains, mountains, more mountains that bent the eye.

When he called, the Bowlers were making waffles. "I'm going back with them,"

Sally said. The Bowlers shared a broken-down mansion overlooking Long Island Sound. "When I thought we all were going to die, I wanted to be with them. That told me something."

What the hell.

A billboard in the city of Missoula advertised Felicia's lake. What the hell, Mick said, and felt in his pocket for her directions. They were in yesterday's shirt. He pulled off the exit, opened the trunk, fished in his suitcase for the scrawling on the Hertz brochure. He should head north on this new road, Route 93.

"You going to do her, huh?" Bethany said.

"Maybe."

Her face changed horribly, an expression like a boxing fan's, getting off on a fighter beaten to death in the ring. It was a porno-whore face, hung on a sixteen-year-old.

The two-lane highway climbed, slower than the interstate. Beside the road a rusted station wagon had conked out, its mechanical guts scattered across the ground. A hairy slob leaned into the engine cavity, while his woman sat in the dirt, bowed forward like a glum child. Her simple shift was unbuttoned in back, split at the neck, spread out at either side. The shock was that she wore no underpants. The crack of her ass and the split in her dress seemed one and the same, as if she were ripped apart from top to bottom.

"Look at that chick's naked ass." Bethany craned.

The floor fell out of Mick's good sense, whatever that might be, and the feeling of falling was that beauty again. He was wrong to feel it. Letting go and falling through space. It was a beauty like being pushed down under water with your eyes closed. A cop shot doing his job, guarding the people, and all the blue uniforms around the family at the grave, and the flowers. Beauty was falling through all that, and he was a fuckin' nut job, a New Age monkey.

There was nothing beautiful about this poor kid Bethany being raped, by her father, no less, her father who stood up for Mick and got kicked sideways to Hell for it,

Bethany's parts feeling dirty to her, that dirtiness going up into her, through her, like something eating your brain…but there it was, falling and no one to catch him, beautiful. There were chords that hit you, no matter how bad the song was. The chord would stop you, with shivers, you were gone. This beauty was like a foghorn, a deep belling sound that shivered through you, to your bones.

He couldn't get it out of his head, as if he were trying to irritate himself by thinking "beautiful, beautiful, beautiful."

"Everything is beau-ti-ful, in its own way," the man sang. Well take this beauty, too, asshole, that your brother who stood for you, eye swollen and bloody ribs, only to be knocked down again, would turn out to be a drooling pervert. Beauty caught Mick in the chest.

The road followed the steppingstones of mountains. For miles they observed the mirror sheen of a huge lake. Arriving at a junction, Mick took the route up the western shore. Off to the right, the lake surface would glimmer, then disappear behind pines.

There, the landmark for Felicia's road, a bare tree topped with osprey nest. Then half a mile, she'd written. Mick slowed. Busy Felicia with her active hands, jumpy red hair. She was the kind would use her long red fingernails, mouth. No holds barred. Even her images wouldn't sit still in his head, titties and belly slurring together, bouncing, riding him. It was the kind of sex you only dream about, read about, see in the movies. Once in a lifetime, right?

Or hey, it really worked out, the *three* of them cruising along in the silver Impala, Felicia's hand on his knee, rolling toward that empty, waiting apartment on Long Island.

The car leaned onto the rutted dirt turnoff, pitching complacently. They were enclosed in woods.

But thinking of Felicia's hot bod that way, with Bethany right beside him, felt greasy itself. Disrespectful, even. She looked shrunken in the seat, if that was possible, squashed down by the load of hair. Her face was a sour old lady's. With her dentures out,

he added, pissed, blaming her if he wasn't going to go through with it. "I'm not going to be a monk the whole rest of my life, just for you," he said furiously.

"Who's asking you?"

"We're just going to have a look at the lake," he said. "That's all." Because you don't want to give up Felicia yet, the possibility, the idea, until the last minute.

"Yeah, right," Bethany said.

Through the dark trunks, strips of sky alternated with silver-blue lake. The shade stilled Mick and Bethany. Mick eased the car off into a bank of ferns. He felt them mash under the chassis. He trod through the silent pines. Bethany strode beside him, crashing the occasional bush. The trees parted for the silvered expanse of lake. They crossed sand and damp, glistening pebbles. They hunkered down on the shore. Mick scooched his butt into the pebbles. Arms around her legs, Bethany rested her heavy chin on her knee. At first not a ripple disturbed the clear water, though a whisper rustled the leaves behind them.

"I keep thinking of those people falling out of the buildings," Bethany said. "All you've been in your life, all you've done, and it comes down to, do I jump or burn? It's impossible. It can't be. I can't believe it."

"Don't think. But yeah." The morning sun pulsed orange across the blue waters. A breeze skimmed the surface, shivering the reflected mountains and long pines that lay across it, as if under glass. The golden blaze broke into flames.

A city burned on these waters, spewing orange fireballs and thick black smoke like inverted tree roots, torn up, the dissolving towers shedding people, glowing sparks blackening to cinders, falling black specks, motes, dots, notes. A rush of notes blew through the trees. The ground gave way under shuddering, deep music. The heavy beat marched through him like sheets of rain.

"It's beautiful to be alive," Mick said.

* * *

Bethany relaxed when he headed the Impala back the way they'd come. She got

amped about the mountains. "*They* survived yesterday," she pointed out. "They always do."

It rubbed off, seeing them through her eyes. He could get used to the scale. Outside, mountains lying across everything. The air coming in cool, warm when the car stopped, huge caps of ice in the distance. Lakes catch the mountains and sky. At every stop, replay, the Towers burn and fall. OK, if they're showing the same thing, probably nothing new has happened. A lot of people even got out. A lot died. Cops and firemen died, trying to save them. The music swayed through him, falling, but he was getting used to that, too. Sally had bouts of vertigo when she "worked too hard."

Maybe it was over. In that case, the road was just a road. The mountains were something that the Earth did when it bumped together.

Bethany collected a pinecone to go with a pebble from the lake. She pulled a miniature carving from her pocket, a moose playing golf. She glared down at it like it was telling her dirty jokes. "I klept this," she said. "Yesterday, while you were paying." She frowned so hard her face would break in half. "I never steal, Uncle Mick. 'Steal! Steal!' was all that was in my head. I wanted to grab the hunting knives, the sign for lunch specials, the roof of the restaurant. I wanted to take it all. I picked the jankiest piece of crap I didn't even want, just to do it."

She threw the moose out the open window.

"Easy does it. Next town with a PO, I'll mail them a check."

She brightened. "That's right. I'll add it to my tab. Uncle Mick? I should bring it with me then, to remember."

Smoking the brakes, whipping the wheel, he spun the Impala into a donut, into reverse, fishtailing. Bethany yipped, laughed. "There," she yelled. She hopped out, stooped over the grassy shoulder to brandish the moose. "I began the wrong way. Re-set," she said. The moose had lost one antler, and there was a nick at the base. "Oh, well," she said.

It was like the wind had torn his brother out of his hands, with Mick still trying to hold on to him, Bob the father, Bob the son, Bob the holy ghost.

The same wind streamed Bethany's hair. "So you wimped out with Felicia."

"Yah. I'm just as glad. I'd rather piss and moan over losing Sally than fuck her out of my system in a blaze of glory." He wasn't ready to let Sally go, even if she'd let him go. People had to go at their own pace.

Felicia might not have shown up anyway, or when he knocked on the door, "Who the hell are you?" The problem with a woman like that is keeping up with her, when you grind out the fifty hours and you get tired.

Up to the lake, back from the lake, around for the moose, back again. When they were kids, the brothers would scuffle ant trails, just to mess with the ants. The ants would wander cockeyed every which way. Years after, payback from the ants, the car driving in circles. Dizzy, end up in Canada.

He spent more change in a pay phone, wondering if Sally had moved out yet, but she picked up. "Where are you, Mick?"

When he told her, she said, "That's so far."

"You going to be there when I get home?"

"I think so. I don't know what to think. Maybe like joint custody, you know, weeks your place and weekends the team. And switch months. The first month, weekends with you, the next month, weeks. And so on."

"Whatever," he said gladly. He had his own little domestic wrinkle, which he'd save, surprise! But Sally was like him, couldn't say no, not to the Bowlers, not to him. When the time came she wouldn't say no to Bethany. The couch was a foldaway. For now he'd have to picture Bethany's knickknacks lined up in the living room, a few on the TV and the window sill, where she could see them when she woke up. But as soon as they could, she'd have her own bedroom, which she could set up any way a big moose of a teenaged girl wanted, with hockey posters, or roses if she decided to go pretty. She

could lock it if she wanted to.

"Do you know how to bowl?" he asked Bethany, sliding back in the car.

"You're not turning me over to those diesel dykes." She licked orange Cheeto dust from her palm.

"Don't be a yo-yo." His fingertips flicked her temple. "It might come up, is all."

"I swear—" She slugged his shoulder.

"Oh, you hurt me so bad." Mick did an exaggerated recoil, swooping the car into the oncoming lane and back. "Lesson One. Don't fuck with your driver."

She punched him again.

He took them down a dirt embankment. The Impala bounced over humps and bushes.

"Jesus," Bethany said.

He revved them back onto the highway.

She finished the bag of Cheetos. Lolling in the seat, she slung one leg out the window. It felt weird to be backtracking. Every moment was two moments wasted, the one, and the moment hours earlier going the other way, canceled.

"I can spell you a while," she said meekly.

"I thought you'd never ask." His neck was a concrete pylon, and nerves in unexpected places all the way to his wrist and chest were going chinggg.

She'd left him plenty leg room on the passenger side.

She floored it. The tires wailed, and they were thrown back like 7 G's. The needle climbed to 90, 95. He didn't give her the satisfaction of saying anything. For this part he was along for the ride.

ICELAND

Five years earlier, emerging from his mother's home and a grad program in ESL, sharing a lover with her incarcerated husband, Russell could not have imagined this bounty and beauty of his days.

A Sunday morning, Russell lolled with Glenda, his wife of four months, on their sloshing waterbed. The sheets were drenched with her musky fluids. They had named Lake Glenda after her flood of coming. His wife's coming was a force of nature. He should be able to claim some sort of credit, even if he felt more that he was being carried downstream.

The following morning, as outreach staff for the university, he would kneel beside rural twelfth graders, coaxing from them urgent life narratives written in that poignant new tongue, English with Spanish phonetics: "Ay huent op the jil wis may broder cos aur farm was on fair. The smok was so bad ay cudnt brid."

But today, Sunday, at eight o'clock in the evening, Glenda's younger daughter, Cissy, would return to Arizona after a year in New York.

When Cissy and her older sister, June, had moved back to their father—the biological one—Russell worried for Glenda. “I’ll have to build a wall,” she said, hands enclosing herself despairingly. Their desertion accused her. Cissy would be nearly twelve, June fourteen.

Throughout that Sunday Glenda doggedly scrubbed, tidied. The sewing machine hammered as she hemmed new purple drapes, Cissy’s favorite color.

After breaking up Glenda’s second marriage—to the stepfather, not the biological one—Russell had taken on a scoutmaster role with the girls, traipsing them off to zoos, hikes, historic sites, ice cream parlors. They brought him homework problems, crawled on his head.

What did fathers do? From his own experience, fathers came home from work and drew boundaries. They built toys for you. They drank and hid in their rooms behind loud music. They drove too fast and nearly drowned putting out to sea in the midst of storms. Eventually their sailboats were discovered adrift 70 miles off the California coast, in waters of glassine calm, with no one aboard.

They stood for right like Atticus Finch. They ruled cattle empires in countless Westerns. They crumbled like Chevy Chase.

At the airport terminal, Russell and Glenda clutched a welcome-home bouquet, shivering in the A/C though outdoors the desert air was sultry.

“I love you,” Russell said. The words, which came hard to him, slipped out with suspicious ease.

“You have such nice legs,” Glenda said, reaching purposefully under his shorts. She complimented everyone, especially him. A stewardess walked Cissy through the portal, stumpy in a long shirt almost to her knees.

The gangway from the airplane to the gate is a tube, some ribbed and segmented material. It’s like being inside the sea monster in a cheesy sci-fi movie, but it’s jolly,

people walking its innards with quick steps, and no one is hurt. You are hastening, too. And now emerging. Your mother is the most gigantic person in the room. You know in your mind that she's only a few inches taller than you, yet her sheer mass is shrinking the pale cavern of the airport waiting room, its corridor, groupings of toylike passengers embracing, and especially the thin, blondish wisp of a man beside her. She is sucking them all in, like a vacuum cleaner, but not you, you are not being sucked in, even as her hug wraps around you, and the blondish man performs his hug.

To her purple bedroom Cissy added a portrait of stepfather Paul on the dresser. Smiling formally, his close-cropped beard the exact length as his wiry black hair, Paul reminded Russell of a zek in the gulag.

As the lead ESL tutor at the university, Russell had evenings free after prep. Remembering that Cissy used to exercise with him, showing off her gymnastics moves, he invited her jogging.

"No thanks," she laughed. "I don't want to get all sweaty. Yuck."

Friday they surprised Cissy with a clothes shopping spree. Cissy surged from rack to rack, calling out. Russell enjoyed the hunt. While '84 fashion encouraged Cyndi Lauper zaniness, Cissy, he understood, sought the inscrutable, plain shell tops, solid colors. Try to read me.

"Here, Dad's found a good one," Glenda said.

"Not 'Dad,' 'Russ,'" Cissy corrected. "He's not my father."

Glenda shot a concerned look past her. "We are married now. Russ is your stepfather."

"I understand," Russell said. "Two already, right?"

"Daddy Paul is my father."

With his silence, Russell knew in that moment he had given up any chance to contradict her, to assert otherwise. The silence, the relief, swelled in him like a void. For

the next teetering hour, Russell and Cissy, allies, left Glenda in their wake to zero in on clearance tables, Cissy parading garment after garment before him.

Later, as Glenda murmured with the girl in her bedroom, Russell seated himself on the couch with a stack of family photo binders, prepping. Older daughter June always had charmed him, extroverted, witty, impulsively affectionate. She hammed in a tiara, oversized reading glasses, gym leotard. Cissy's expression receded, otherly, gazing elsewhere. Only in her solo poses did Cissy fill the frame with her presence, the big gestures, commanding expressions. After Glenda, this was now the most important person in his life. He scarcely knew her, the shadow to her vivid sister.

At the end of their first week, Russell's assistant threw a homecoming party for Cissy. Patricia, a recovering alcoholic, blasted good will in all directions. "She tempts my baser nature," Russell said. "I could be the evil potentate—'Patricia, bring me the silver horn of the dragon from Middle Hell,' and she'd do it."

But Cissy glowed with Patricia's effusions, "what precious bangs, those freckles like fairy dust." Reticent in public, her phrasing tentative, Cissy tumbled out stories and commentaries.

Patricia was housesitting far west of town, toward the mountains. She led a tour, saving the highlight for last, a chicken coop. "Fresh eggs every morning," she said.

The birds strutted and nodded. "How adorable," Cissy said, reaching her fingers through the wire.

"Cissy, take your hand out. They can peck," Russell said.

"He's not my father," Cissy told Patricia. "I don't have to do anything he says."

Driving home, Russell stared through the windshield, awestruck.

"This is a family, just like in New York," Glenda said. "And each family member needs to take responsibility. Russ and I will wash the breakfast and lunch dishes every day, but we'll alternate the dinner dishes. I'll go first, then Russ, then you. Will it help if I

make a chart?"

"I'm not washing his fucking dishes," Cissy said.

Russell glanced at his wife, who looked away, and Cissy got up to watch TV in the living room. He followed her. "You'll wash the dishes like anyone else. We all use them," he said.

Half-rising, mouth working, she shouted, "You can't make me. You can't take my arms and put a sponge in my hand and a dish in my hand and make me wash it."

"Cissy, please wash the dishes," Glenda said, behind him.

Cursing and muttering, Cissy slammed plates back and forth in the sink, and into the drying rack. Corningware, they did not break. Russell's plate, glass, and silverware she left on the counter, encrusted with food.

"It's not you." Glenda stroked his hand. "When she was seven, Cissy told me, 'I hate you. I wish you were dead.' I'd sent her to her room for punching June." The warmth of her touch calmed Russell abruptly, like an elevator hitting bottom. Glenda was known for her heat, literally. The New Age moms at her preschool called it 'chi,' lining up for her shoulder massages.

Before the school, Glenda had managed the circulation department for a New York publisher. "Find people's strengths and trust them, and things run themselves," she said. "True for staff, true for four-year-olds."

Friday night, Glenda and Russell escaped to a bar. "We can call Patricia to sit for you," Glenda had told Cissy.

"Why? I'm almost twelve."

"All right. We'll leave the phone number." They'd ordered pizza. "Just two pieces is enough, honey."

Across their frosted drafts they made wide, stunned zombie eyes at each other.

"Can you remember how we woke up less than two weeks ago?" Glenda said.

As she spoke, the waterbed gurgled again, the sheet sodden and fragrant against his skin.

When they got home, the pizza box was empty and Cissy's door closed.

"That was going to be leftovers for today," Glenda said the next morning.

"Don't look at me. I didn't eat it. Maybe he ate it."

"Cissy, they told me you'd been sleepwalking in New York," Glenda began delicately.

"Check my breath." She turned to Russell. "Check my shit. You can weigh my shit." On the way to her room, she picked up his plate and fork and threw them in the garbage.

The summer before they married, a couple had driven Russell and Glenda across the Mexican border to the railroad station in Nogales, for *buen viaje* cocktails in their Pullman compartment.

As *ranchos* and cottonwood groves, suffused with auspicious tequila light, accelerated past the window, the haggardness from her daughters' recent departures smoothed from Glenda's face. With the sky piling on the colors, crimson, magenta, violet, they could forget the trip's stark test. "I can't stand this any more," Glenda had said. "Either we get married or we split up."

In the morning, the sun lent a gem-like patina to beach and sea. Beside the train, *trabajadores* heaved ice blocks onto the roof, where the conductors fed the cooling system. Lounging in comfort, Russell and Glenda watched heat devils dance up from the desert. In adjoining cars, where the machinery malfunctioned, passengers knelt in the aisles, drenched with sweat, mouths open.

Not that their own luck held intact. Disembarking from the train, they were robbed, the valise containing all his familiar, favorite clothing lost. Russell often had the impression of burning each of life's way stations behind him and wondered if his inattention here were another form. So they ate a plateful of succulent *carnitas*, bought a

new wardrobe, and stepped into Mexico.

In Guanajuato, the local parasite struck. Pale and clammy from diarrhea and vomiting, they tottered forth resolutely to sightsee, climbing a hill. Overlooking the picturesque cityscape, Spanish colonial, they swayed together semiconscious, bellies bucking and roiling. Hilarity overcome them, nearly pitching them down the slope. At the mummy museum, the naked, grimacing dead beckoned. “Soon, darling,” Glenda promised. For dinner they attempted chicken broth, spoonful by trembling spoonful. Meeting each other’s eyes, they broke up again in choking laughter. “Even sick, I want your dick,” Glenda said, and more semi-delirious rhymes. “Oh what luck, let’s have a fuck. God in Heaven, ain’t this livin’.”

“We have to leave so they can get married,” June had said. “He’ll never marry her as long as we’re around.” Because you wouldn’t part from your sister, you had agreed, and together you had moved back east, with your father—not your real father, your stepfather Paul, but your first father.

And it hadn’t worked out for you on Long Island. Daddy Frank had remarried, a smart, angular woman with a nasal voice and a good job, and she had presented him with two children, your sister and baby brother. The lot of sitting them fell to you, and that was the best, because you loved them. You didn’t scold your brother for wetting the bed. You changed him and read him back to sleep, he hanging on your voice until his lids closed. You made his plastic animals tell jokes. He ran around like a whirlwind, making a continuous, bouncy “uhhhh” sound, and caught you around your knees. You walked him that way, his little bare feet gripping the tops of your shoes as you stepped high, left, right. You could help your sister with her homework because she was three years younger than you. It was good for her that you were wise. Daddy Frank worked long shifts, and Mama Stefanie could be harsh.

But they got the attention, the parents’ natural children together, boisterous and

adorable, and June insisted her place as always with her loquacious charm, and you were left the silent partner, as usual, only more so, lost in a bigger crowd. Pattern: June hogs the spotlight, talks rings around you, talks you into a mute, choked, ridiculous corner until you slug her or push her or slam her hand in the car door, and get in trouble.

And at night the special attention, Daddy Frank going into June's room, you waiting for him to come out, and waiting, until you lost your vigil and fell asleep; over breakfast, June moody with skin eruptions and no appetite.

No wonder you went sleepwalking. You were already on your way.

Even after Mexico Russell had not been certain, as the months rolled by. He'd always fancied himself marrying a musician, he grinding and polishing away at the language joints while music billowed through the home like a swarm of migratory butterflies.

But after years of entanglements with intriguingly neurotic, sexually vexed women, he was beginning to realize that character strengths were complications, too. It was just that they fit together rather than sticking out at weird angles. He admired Glenda's competence, her organization, her life story, oldest of seven escaping alcoholism and abuse.

So what if she made cork people, dressing them in fabric scraps and naming them after TV sitcom characters, or liked to Sing Along with Mitch.

Without intending to, she put him in his place. And her heat. Carnality. He was a different person to himself.

He forgot exactly why they had quit each other, early on, but he remembered them perched on barstools, him looking into her face and saying, "We're not going anywhere, but I know we'll always be important to each other."

If they broke up now, "I would have to build a wall," Glenda admitted. "The biggest." Her face and voice went flat when she said this, and an awfulness seeped into his nerves and bones. The thought of Glenda hurt made him sick.

If he wanted a child with Glenda, they shouldn't wait. She was already thirty-six (he thirty-three).

A week before the wedding, he lay on his office couch as dusk fell and imagined himself dead. He stopped his thoughts. Footsteps and voices sounded outside the door, motes of darkness drifted through the air. Peace followed him into the next day.

On the eve of the ceremony, old college friends poured in. "I had to come. I can't believe he'll go through with it."

"How encouraging," Glenda said.

It was 1984, a post-hippie wedding. Friends and family milled outdoors, against the mountains. Over a row of spitting grills, volunteers speared chickens with long forks. A rangy Appalachian girl in ironic tie-dye played fiddle tunes from table to table. As a colleague performed the wedding march on his trumpet, banners waved, and the gaily attired throng of well-wishers curled around them.

"Like this ring," Russell began, "there is no beginning or end to us." He choked his way through it as the guests waited apprehensively.

"I couldn't sleep all night, I was so overwhelmed," Glenda would say.

And still he didn't know that the marriage would be enough. During that breakup with Glenda he'd landed in a one-night stand, immediately afterward contracting meningitis. "Opportunistic illness," the doctor had remarked. "Any recent stress?" Ever since, Russell had needed sunglasses outdoors. Just a month before Mexico, he'd willed himself through an afternoon in a visiting lecturer's apartment, as a pact: you could have an affair and not kill yourself.

After a maskmaking workshop, Mom wants to try it on you. She lays you on a soft mat on the rug, with tinkling God music in the background. Beside you is a tight roll of white bandaging, like they use for making casts.

She bends over you so near, her face is fuzzy. Unexpectedly, vastly, a sob rises in

your chest, and your body buckles a bit to fight it, swallow it.

"Are you all right?" Mom says.

You nod, and she begins spreading Vaseline on your face in gentle, circular, tamping motions. Immediately the heat of her sliding fingertips is almost frightening, like focusing the sun through a magnifying glass. But the pressure of her fingers is so gentle and tender that your eyes close, and tears leak out the corners, rolling down your cheeks uncontrollably, helplessly. When you open your eyes Mom is crying, too. Her tears actually drip on you. Next she runs the white cloth through water, softening the plaster, and applies the cool strips to your forehead. Press in place. You are drifting like a boat that swings out on its rope, then draws back. The layers build on your temples, your cheeks, and you miss the rest because you do fall asleep, waking when it's finished.

Mom lifts the shell off easily. Clearing your eyes, first you start, betrayed, because she has turned you into a ghost, blank white with holes in the eyes, nostrils, and mouth. But as her finger traces them, you recognize the high forehead, soft, curving cheek, firm chin. You.

"When it dries, we can paint it," Mom says, but you say no, leave it, you like it the way it is.

Cissy began junior high.

As a preschool director, Glenda managed bookkeeping, public relations, and promotion along with her teaching. Meanwhile, her adoring families, assuming correctly that she wanted to hear about their children's every cognitive, social, and emotional breakthrough, called her all hours. Sometimes she went to bed exhausted.

"I'm awake," Russell told Cissy. "Let's put on our suits and cool in the pool."

"Fool," she added, laughing. It was a joke.

You are sitting in the blue plastic wading pool, set on the dry crabgrass outside the back wall of the house, with him. He is telling you soothing stories about students

who at first can't write an English sentence, but then create paragraphs, and essays. His words are just an airy blend. There is something irresistible about being outdoors under the stars, both in your skin. You can't help talking. You are telling him what it was like on Long Island, before Daddy Paul's company transferred the family to Arizona.

"Our house was a block from the beach. It was like a palace, so much space. We had a playroom and a fireplace. The sound of the waves put me to sleep. When Mom's grandpa died, his ghost came and touched her on the shoulder when she sat on the back porch. They talked to each other. She wasn't scared."

Daddy Paul considered June a brash loudmouth. He would literally raise his arms as if warding off a goblin or a big mosquito. He appreciated reserved people. He approached you with his mild, distracted smile, then the kiss up your neck and cheek, with his scratchy beard. When he kissed you, he closed his eyes. Sometimes he would lay your cheek against his, eyes closed, for the longest time, as if he forgot what he was doing, but he hadn't, because when he opened them he turned and smiled into your face. "I've just been to the nicest place," he said. "You're the nicest place I know."

"Cissy," the voice broke in. "I know you're angry with me because of Paul."

"Paul? That was all Mom. You just happened to be there."

"Cissy, I don't want to take Paul's place."

As if he could. Why even say the words.

When it was going wrong at Daddy Frank's and the sleepwalking began, you asked Daddy Paul if you could live with him. After Mom divorced him he'd moved back to Long Island and rented an apartment. He told you no. "Go back to your mother. You need to get to know her the way I have." He laughed barking, away from her.

"Cissy." The voice. "It's a lot of work hating someone. Or being hated. You must be tired all the time. I'm not going to pretend I'm Superman. You wear me out. Having fun is really easy. You know how to have fun. I know how to have fun. I'm not trying to be anyone else. I'm Russell. You're Cissy."

It's good to have someone speaking seriously to you, becoming part of the liquid as you lie back in the pool, making faces that he probably can't see in the dark. But as you both step through the back door, wrapped in towels, the light goes on, wrinkled pruny blondish nothing, and you realize you've been tricked, hypnotized by a voice in the dark. Never again.

For a week Cissy didn't communicate with him once.

"Cissy, please pass the butter." She chewed her toast, head bowed to the plate. He reached across her to get it.

And, "Cissy, do you want me to look over your Power Writing? I actually know a little about grammar." Her hand continued its slow progress across the page, without a flicker of expression on her face.

"It's like the Amish, shunning," he told Glenda.

For what she needed, Cissy asked her mother. The milk pitcher, signatures for student forms, the twentieth President.

"It's like the monks with their vow of silence," he told Glenda. "How does she keep it up? I almost respect it."

Russell sat Glenda down on the couch. "I need you to back me up. My stomach knots when I drive up to the house, and it stays knotted until we go to bed. Tell her no once and see what happens. Don't drive to the store for her science project supplies. Just don't do it."

"Don't make me choose between you," Glenda cried. "You're the most fun I've ever had." She leaned back with her hand on his knee. "The child needs a place for herself. Frank. Paul. Russell. New York. Arizona. She needs a home for once in her life. Please. You're the most fun I've ever had," she repeated.

He didn't have much competition.

He knew that Glenda had stood in for her mother, Liz, a drunk, cooking and cleaning

for the six siblings, the surrogate at school functions. When Liz divorced Glenda's father, the new husband drank highball glasses of straight rye with Liz and beat her sons. Glenda interposed herself between the belt and her brothers; he threw her down the stairs.

"I married because my stepfather was closing in on me. Twice I woke to him standing over my bed, my covers pulled down. So I married Frank. It was my only idea." She shook her head.

Unable to afford babysitting, Glenda took June on her own shifts at Frank's U-Totem. "I think her first words were, 'Regular or hi-test, sir?' I told her, 'You're a gas,' and she got it. We played something like checkers with the Tom's Cheezers snack packs." After the franchise failed, Glenda's first husband, Frank, broke down, quitting jobs and buying from every door-to-door salesman, gold-embossed Bible, nuclear-powered vacuum cleaner. They moved in with Glenda's family. Cissy was born. Their rent was Glenda's cooking, cleaning, and ironing for the others.

When Glenda divorced Frank and married Paul, Frank choked Paul purple on the living room carpet. Glenda held a knife to his head until he let go. Frank stalked her for a year.

Though an excellent provider, Paul called Glenda "an energy vampire." "We had different levels of drive," Glenda said. "He used to hide in the toilet. When I think of him, I picture him sitting on the toilet. I smoked pot every night so I wouldn't have an affair."

Glenda's household, when Russell first stepped into it, had revolved around her girls, their ballet and gymnastics, homework, school events. She taught them all the songs and games. She counseled the dramatic June. For Russell, an only child, they gave his lover an added abundance and exoticism.

The month after Cissy arrived, Russell and Glenda quit contraception.

Within weeks they were celebrating with champagne, a token sip each for Glenda and Cissy.

Hearing the tires on the gravel, you roll down the sheet. The cooler duct blows directly across you on the top bunk, but instead of coldness you don't feel your body at all. You are head and feet and the clingy pink underpants and no more. Though your eyes shut, of course you're not asleep, not with the door wide open and the kitchen light diffusing over you, more like a dusting of light than a beam.

Their voices are hearty at the front doorway, quelled as they notice your room open, silent as they bear down straight upon you before turning into their room.

Maybe Russell would come back, as Daddy Frank came for June. You don't know why you want this, except you know it would blot out everything.

The door ajar was the first anomaly, and then Cissy exposed, stretched on top of the bedclothes, soft belly, prominent rib cage, slight rise of white breasts. Russell and Glenda hurried past.

"Do you think she just conked out and forgot?" Glenda asked.

Cissy's image lodged in Russell like a baited hook. It made her physically repugnant to him.

Cissy stole from him, the quarters he stashed in the car for parking meters, but personal items, too. He found his bathrobe and slippers in her closet. The Dodger cap that protected his receding hairline from the sun, she had wedged among her stuffed animals. The car keys went missing; late for his students, he pawed through Cissy's dresser, jewelry, jeans, feeling like a pervert.

The keys were in her change jar. For good measure, he scooped a handful of coins and pocketed them. Then he grabbed her best dress shoes and on the way to the university tossed them into an open dumpster.

She never mentioned the loss, but the thefts stopped.

Standing apart from himself, the Russell he saw dealing with Cissy was an

ignominious person. He was beginning to understand the cost he paid for taking the girls' home. June had given him a free pass. Cissy was the bill collector.

I'm going to be a father. Russell couldn't get over it. Driving, he would well up over his cassette tapes, even hardbitten performers like the Pretenders. "The news of the world…" Chrissie Hynde sang, and he hiccupped with grateful, mystified sobs. He drove up an overlook to survey the city at sunset, all the lights glimmering on across the valley, just to let everything set in.

"I'm going to be a father," he boasted to the wedding fiddler, a long-time friend with whom he occasionally had drinks. She hated her own family with Southern ferocity but toasted his. The saloon, a faculty hangout blocks from the university, was noted for its Old Fashioneds, and the bourbon fire felt as deep and rich as the polished wood of the bar.

"Paterfamilias," she delivered in her Virginia drawl, and liking the sound of it, said it again. Tall, lean, with lean yellow hair, she stooped toward him slightly. "Tell you, no wee ones going to spring from these loins, darlin'." From then they dropped the subject of parenthood and swapped old stories, misspent youth stories, while grooving to the music. The barmaid was on a New Orleans kick, Neville Brothers, Doctor John, the Meters, and they bobbed their heads to the tricky beats.

The world had gotten so big to him, he needed Old Fashioneds to fill it. Six of them, and he and the world felt about the same size.

At last call the fiddler said, "They have gone and taken our music."

To be large as the world but lacking music was intolerable. Buying a packaged pint, he took her to his office, where he kept a boombox for the occasional idle hour. They clinched on his desk, grasping each other by the shirt like arresting officers. He never had kissed her wide mouth and long tongue, and as he cupped her small breasts the beat marched forward purposefully in his head.

The fiddler's eyes opened. "What the hell is going on?" she said, looking around

in real terror.

Russell awoke from drowning. “Thank you, thank you,” was all he could say.

Over the next days he hid his obsession with the new disease, AIDS, from Glenda, not daring to touch her skin. The fiddler was the unlucky, bedeviled type; she would have the sickness. Could it be transmitted by kissing? He’d seen the footage—Glenda wasted and shaking in the hospice bed. She couldn’t guess why he served her so closely these days. Though no particular discomfort had set in, he brought her soup, bathed her brow with a warm, damp cloth, could not take his eyes from her as he fingered her wet curls. When a doctor convinced him there was no danger, he felt she’d been given to him a second time. Instead of ebbing unto death, she grew big with their child, her belly marked with a shadowy line down its center.

Your mother lies around like a blob while he waits on her hand and foot. “Can you throw together the spaghetti for Cissy? I don’t know why I’m so tired all the time. I don’t remember this with the other two. At the end of work I’m just dragging.” He’s all over the kitchen with the can opener and the spices.

“You lazy pig,” you scream into the bedroom. “Get up.”

Cissy took a job. In the evenings she was gone, selling candy and knickknacks door to door for Youth Pro.

At first Russell and Glenda sat in hushed gratitude on the couch, hand in hand, watching the kindly dusk fall. With the advent of spring, they strolled their neighborhood, Glenda swaying in ungainly grace. As summer approached, the ice cream truck jingled optimistically. Passers-by smiled and paused to chat, displaying newborns in their prams or *novios o novias* on their arms, smiling shyly.

At some point Cissy would bang through the door and into her bedroom.

For safety, YouthPro paired the saleskids. Cissy’s partner and friend, a lumbering

girl with unkempt hair like a bear, who seemed to Russell and Glenda a bit slow, spoke with her hand in front of her mouth. Even threats to fire her could not break the habit. Cissy found a way out, a division of labor. Her friend hefted the boxes and Cissy talked for them both.

Your friend Bear may have flunked seventh grade the year before, but she knows how to cook for herself and drive the family car for shopping. Her parents are crackheads. Their house is pure filth, food glued to the counter with liquefying mold and toddlers running naked, crapping and peeing on the floor right in front of you. She doesn't know how many people are living there because it's never the same from one day to the next.

You offer to call CPS, but she says no! She doesn't want to lose her house.

After selling, you both squat in the gravel driveway outside your house, talking. Her nickname has been Bear since kindergarten. At school the boys make audible gagging noises behind her back. She has only you to confide in. She cries on your shoulder, her weight almost knocking you over. You have to put out your hand to steady the two of you. Sometimes you both crawl under the hedge to smoke a cigarette.

You plan how your friend can use her money for a lock on her bedroom door, her own TV and mini-fridge. On the walk home she cries again, leaning heavily into you, and to help her feel better you tell her, "That man molests me. It started because when Mom is pregnant, of course she can't do it, you know."

"What does he do?"

"I can't even say it," you whisper. "I can't talk about it." You look down. You almost can imagine his hand has been there. His mouth. The scorching sickness and rage rise like bile from your stomach. "I can't upset her now. It might damage the baby. But when I tell her, she'll kill him, I mean, literally." It sounds impressive. "I don't know what will become of us then, my mother in prison. The baby wasting away. It's so tragic.

But I won't let the baby die. I'll keep it going. I'll have to quit school and work full time. Even though Mom probably would want it to die because it reminds her of him."

Your efforts are in vain. The child perishes. On visiting days you and Mom stretch out your arms wordlessly toward each other, palm to palm with the bulletproof prison glass between you.

The delivery waiting room is like Grand Central Station, or a bus stop, or—that's it, the Statue of Liberty, the little Ellis Island museum, the black-and-white photos of immigrant families. The families here look like that, hands on knees, grave. You are the little girl sitting on her steamer trunk, legs dangling, eyes large and luminous for the camera. Your parents have died in passage.

Just as your mother has died, here, in delivery. She is lying dead on the silver table. In their flurry, what to do, how, send for the body bag, get rid of her, they have forgotten the daughter in the waiting room.

A nurse comes for you. "Do you want to see your baby sister?" Your mother is sitting up in the white bed, wearing a powder blue nightgown with flowers. She is wrung out like a hurricane survivor, but her face colors warmly, and in her arms she holds a little caterpillar wrapped in white, with the face of a praying nun.

They let you hold the warm bundle of impossible lightness. There are three women in the room! And he in hospital scrubs, like a mere orderly.

Glenda had trouble with letdown. Howling, the hungry baby sucked futilely at her engorged, inflamed breasts. While Cissy prepared formula, Russell tried to comfort the infant with cuddling and finally a pendulum-like swinging that alarmed him. His wife's breasts were stones on fire. The baby shrieked unless rocketed into space. No one slept.

As instructed, Cissy cooled the formula to its proper temperature. The baby sucked greedily at the rubber nipple, eyes glazing with satisfaction. Burping on cue, she

fell asleep on Cissy's shoulder. Russell plunged onto the bed, briefly unconscious.

Under your mother's instruction you bathe your sister, solemn frog with gravely stirring limbs. The umbilical stub makes her look incomplete, unprepared for life. Her vagina blushes like an apricot.

Already the baby Lindsey recognizes you, the sapphire depthlessness of her eyes focusing suddenly to a point when you bend your face to her. For that moment, you are aware, your face is all she knows. She is living in your face as you live in the world. A shudder of happiness passes through you, and you pick up the wet body to hold against your cheek.

And Mom's face, as you set Lindsey down in the tepid liquid, is open with understanding. That look of frank collaboration and appreciation between equals is one you'll hold fast to, and return to when in doubt.

"Cissy has been indispensable," you will hear her say.

Meanwhile, the orderly is poleaxed like a stunned steer as the hammer comes down. He floats around the house like a kite, disturbed by the slightest breeze.

A patient friend coaxed Glenda into letdown, and the baby gained weight at an acceptable rate. Russell's study of root affinities among the syntactical and idiomatic diversities of his Mexican students, published as several papers, had earned him a startup grant toward a broader research project. The little money, on their frugal budget, allowed both him and Glenda to work part time, she mornings and he afternoons, so each had Lindsey Time. Now began what Russell called the Rapture of the Child.

A baby's development was so rapid, like trying to read a book with someone turning the pages too fast. Lindsey's eyes were following everything. Her awareness and depth of field expanded seemingly by the hour.

Now they were touring the back yard, the lacy mesquite leaves, the sudden event

of whirring bird wings. Lindsey touched the chunky, fissured bark. When he blew the leaves into a flutter, her hands flailed excitedly.

At five months she tried crawling to him on the bed, more like swimming, ferocious concentration on her face as she inched forward, a primeval motion, and out of her mouth came a deep, hoarse sound unlike her voice. “Da, da.” Coincidence? Accident? He wouldn’t hear of it.

He trusted in his expert wife. “We don’t push, but we’re always ready to follow her lead,” Glenda said. Ten months old, Lindsey rose from the floor and tottered between her parents. The child enunciated as if words were a form of worship. “Pretty.” “Dada.” “Mama.” “Beer.” She would stare at the play of light through Russell’s glass bottle.

“This isn’t normal. We’ve made an amazing child,” Glenda said.

How Lindsey laughs, shaking, from her tight little belly all the way up to her wide-split mouth. Her head, still scarcely downy, smells like cinnamon.

Peek-a-boo, sucking her toes or her whole foot—how easy to cause her happiness.

Cissy let go her job, attaching the baby to herself first thing home from school. One night she would not give up Lindsey to Russell, swinging her out of his reach. He was not about to physically wrest his child from her, but when Glenda took her turn, she passed Lindsey to him.

“Lindsey looks just like Mom,” Cissy said, “except she’s bald like you.”

“That mole on your neck is so gross,” Cissy said. “It looks like the testicles on our lab rats. It looks like cancer.”

Closing the bedroom door behind him and Glenda, Russell unclenched his muscles, which ached from his chest and neck down his arms, as if he’d been doing isometrics. Who needs a gym when you have family, he thought, laughing at himself feeling sorry for himself.

Nude, Glenda sashayed for him in her swashbuckling, five-foot-tall way. “You know what’s fun?” she said. “You like to watch me just as much as I like to watch you.”

Cissy’s orthodontia, paid by Paul, required surgery. After the first procedure, standing in the kitchen with face bruised and swollen, Cissy fainted, Russell catching her before she hit the floor.

Shopping for baby supplies with Lindsey the next day, he and Cissy received probing glances, as Lindsey joyously pointed to bottle after bottle, identifying all as “beer.”

“You know what they see,” Russell told Cissy. “There goes the alcoholic with his FAS baby and child bride.” He indicated her face. “And he beats her.”

Cissy could not stop laughing.

The orderly’s legs displace you, splayed out across the living room, leaving you one fringe of wall. He looks massive tonight with those leg columns and thick trunk, shoulders heaving and head bobbing as he pattycakes Lindsey, your munchkin, who almost disappears when he rocks forward. Burbles of laughter.

“Make a pig face, Lin,” you call. That’s your private joke together, on the cooing waitresses and doting old ladies who contort themselves over her highchair. “Precious!” “Make a pig face,” you command, and the baby wrinkles her nose, curling her upper lip to reveal sparse peg teeth. “Oh!” the worshippers exclaim.

But Lindsey is squinting with laughter, plumping her tiny pink hands into his wall of palm.

“Lin.” She’s not deaf, her blue eyes do not leave his face. It’s pure malice towards you.

Slithering forward on the carpet, you jab your forefinger into her ribs. She jackknifes, and her laughing face caves in.

“Stop, that bothers her,” he says, as if to an idiot. Lifting the baby, he jogs her

and smoothes her head.

"Patty," she says, so he sets her down.

"Peek-a-boo," you say over his shoulder, but your face might as well be a flap of skin because she keeps flopping her hands against him as if she's possessed. What would he think if you picked up the chair and drove the leg through her skull, right before his eyes. You poke her again.

This time Russell stayed her with his outstretched palm against her arm.

"If you hit me again, I'll call the police," Cissy said.

He looked at her; at his baby. The only witness was an infant. A yellow discoloration lingered on Cissy's cheek, but the officers must realize it was not fresh. The sick anger clotting his throat was as much at his own fear as at her. A scene played out, a deranged Cissy lunging a knife at Lindsey; in defense of his child, his fist crashing through Cissy's face. Levelly, he said into her eyes, "If you call the police, believe me, I'll give them a reason to come."

The next morning, Sunday, they're cooking together in the kitchen, Lindsey's mother and father, the sizzle of butter and birds tweeping outside. You could kill her. You could hold the pillow over her face or throw her against the wall. You lie face down on the floor, your head against her ribs and your hands plucking her terry cloth jumper. She winds and tangles your hair.

"Cissy, the pancakes are done." The girl snuggled with the tiny ragamuffin, Lindsey, who played with her hair. Cissy could love after all, Russell thought. Even her passion for Glenda seemed more that of a collection agency, dunning for a sum that never could be repaid. The national debt. But this was pure, unaffected. He was willing to be surprised.

Cissy missed June—they all did—so that summer they flew to New York for a family picnic. Russell had not yet met Glenda's family. "You'll divorce me," she predicted. The day of the reunion she had a splitting migraine.

Glenda's stepfather was celebrating with a binge. When Glenda's sister and brother-in-law parked too close to the house, in his opinion, he released the dogs, about which both were phobic. They leaped onto the porch railing. June arrived with one of Glenda's brothers. With a thick, curled perm like cake frosting and heavy false eyelashes, she affected a chatty, worldly-wise ennui that Russell, her old buddy, found impenetrable. Breezily, June condescended to Glenda, flicking her mother's wrist repeatedly with the tip of a long, red fingernail. The brother told a joke about a dead nigger whore. The stepfather attacked his car with a crowbar for undisclosed reasons apparently unrelated to the joke.

All ignored the baby, whom Cissy rocked in her arms, sitting on a swing under the spreading elm.

"Forgive me," Russell murmured to Glenda. "I thought you'd mythologized your family."

Later the tumult reached the front porch, where a screaming fight broke out between Grandma Liz, highball sloshing, and practically everyone else.

Gratefully, Russell noticed Cissy hustling the baby away, for a walk.

How did it happen? You are pushing Lindsey's stroller down a grassy hill—green, lush New York—she waving her arms in excitement as you gather speed, and abruptly you turn the wheels, the stroller pitches sideways, Lindsey flung out in a heap. There's that moment of shocked, dawning recognition that babies have before her face screws into a shriek, earsplitting, my God, you're broken her arm, her leg, but no, the poor limbs flail perfectly, it's pain, not damage, only the green grass stain and red abrasion on her cheek, and you wet it with kisses, wrong move, she's only more hysterical.

Mom has gathered her up, and her husband's arms are around <u>you</u>. "It's alright, Cissy. It was an accident. She's O.K."

So that's what it feels like to hurt her. Like claws in your ribcage, closing around

your heart. You will guard against yourself, always.

Russell's research project earned him a full-time position, adjunct faculty, that maintained his flexible hours. Glenda's school was turning a profit; it had been videotaped as a model for the National Association for the Education of Young Children. They bought a house, four bedrooms with a view of the mountains.

The year of motherhood had taxed Glenda, her hair lank, combing out in handfuls, face sallow. She had to arrange herself for a half hour before work not to look bedraggled. Russell was moved by her faded glamor, this visible depletion of self for the child. Desire could be pale, too, a winterscape. As he watched Lindsey scootching on the carpet, with Glenda marking lesson plans in a pool of lamplight, and Cissy darting between the bathroom and bedroom, hair in a towel, he was caught in the mystical thickness of family.

The curls have grown out all over Lindsey's little dandelion head. You can't resist her, lying supine on the floor, raising and lowering her above you. She gets this uncanny look, as if she's going along to please you, as much as you're trying to please her.

Showing her off, you wheel her stroller through the mall, and the people flock and dip over her like ravenous birds.

"What's that you've got there, punkin? I bet you can't say di-no-saur."

"It is an ichthyosaurus," Lindsey pipes.

Bear is with you. Bear lost weight. Bear got pretty. The involuntary hand before her face now seems weirdly coy, kinky. Bear has a boyfriend. Bear is having sex. Bear is a slut, but you stand behind your friends. To be supportive, you tell her her boyfriend is cute.

You wouldn't think pushing a baby through the mall is how to pick up guys, but it takes all kinds. You're polite, but they're all children. They don't know anything of what you know.

The summer of her second birthday, Lindsey discovered “Clementine” and “Abiyoyo,” singing them incessantly, and Cissy seemed startled when Lindsey spoke of “excavating” her sandbox and of dinosaurs unfairly “ostracized.”

“Why is styracosaurus behind the door?”

“He’s being ostracized.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Cissy said.

And Lindsey sees right through you. You try to provoke her sometimes, stealing a marker or favorite dinosaur, for instance, just to instill that germ of doubts—maybe I misplaced something, maybe I’m losing control—but she toddles right into your room, “Cissy, I know what you did,” and likely as not she finds the missing item herself. She doesn’t tell on you, though. That would be beneath her.

Cissy joined Future Farmers of America and adopted a pig. All her free time went to the school Land Lab. The adviser praised her as “extraordinarily dedicated.”

Princess recognizes your voice, thrusting her head between the bars of the pen and nodding, pawing the straw. Already you’re teaching her to walk properly for the judges, tapping her shoulder with the cane to give direction. She is darling, trotting beside you on her little hooves.

Pigs are not dirty. Princess dungs separately from where she sleeps. The straw bedding is baled in the barn, and there is no sweeter smell. The barn is hot and dark. Even past nightfall, after feeding and watering Princess and other livestock, cleaning her pen, walking her, you like to linger behind the barn to steal a smoke. Sometimes Bear joins you. Bear and Pig.

“It figures you would leave Daddy Paul,” Cissy said. “He’s the only person who ever loved me.”

"That's not true. I love you. Russell loves you. Lindsey loves you."

"Skip the bullshit."

"Paul was good to you. He was mean to me," Glenda said. "Everything was my fault. If I wasn't happy, there was something wrong with me."

"Right again, Daddy Paul."

"Then why am I happy now?"

"You look really happy," Cissy said with heavy sarcasm. "You look as fucking happy as a popped balloon."

"If I let you swear at me, I'm teaching you wrong, that it's O.K. I'm not going to communicate with you." And for exactly two hours Glenda did not.

"Mom, I'm sorry, all right? It just slipped out."

"Mom, you've made your point."

"Mom, you've always been such a goddamn fanatic."

They fought over Cissy's bingeing, as her face and body bulged. Fat terrified Glenda, curvy but trim herself, as the overflow of despair, of giving up.

Cissy patted her belly-roll with both hands, kneaded it. "I love it!" she said. "You love it," she commanded. "Kiss it. Kiss my fat."

At the Land Lab Lindsey toddles from sheep to goat to pig, deliberately bumping into them and standing with her face buried in their fleece or hide. "Like a drunken whore at a party," you laugh.

"What's a whore?"

Panic. "It's a silly woman."

She ponders. Silly is good. "I like it when Mommy is a whore."

"No, no, it's a made-up word. Don't tell Mommy. She wouldn't understand."

"All right, Cissy."

A PhD candidate is assessing Lindsey's phenomenal language acquisition. Her

parents are universally acclaimed for her development.

The Pig Rodeo would be a warmup for the County Fair. Shoats raced around an oval track, bobbing and squealing, in preparation for the showing. The surprise was that parents would be the pig handlers. Russell volunteered. The abashed parents received instructions and canes. Guide the animal with the scantest touch to shoulder or flank. Don't block the judge's view of the pig as you circle the ring.

Chaos ruled. Pigs squalled in every direction, parents lunging after with their canes. Parents jabbed canes into pig butts, fell over pigs. Meanwhile, Princess hoofed daintily at Russell's side as if remote-controlled. "It was like a blind man with a seeing-eye pig," Russell told Cissy after. "What a great job you're doing with her." He accepted the blue ribbon on Princess' behalf.

Once the car door shut the family in, Cissy stared ahead stonily.

The brutal integrity of Cissy's rejecting him, day after day going on four years, at whatever cost to anybody, most especially herself, struck Russell, shook him. He could not imagine such heartfelt ruthlessness of faith. He was privileged to know her. Inevitably, they had become intimates. She was one of the closest people to him on earth.

"This won't mean anything to you," he said, "but I love you, Cissy. I love you. I really do."

That and fifty cents will get him a cup of coffee.

The day Cissy hit fifteen and seven months, she obtained her learner's permit and consented to a driving lesson from him. The idea of her mobility appealed to all of them.

She sweated over the stick shift, the car vaulting forward and stalling. "This is bullshit," she said. "Bear can teach me. She's been driving since she was ten."

You and you alone are responsible for Princess, and so no one else shares the

credit for her progress. Practicing for the County Fair, you scarcely need the cane at all. When you enter the pen, she shivers with pleasure. One night you phone home a pretext and sleep up against Princess in the straw, under the sky, with a blanket covering you.

Mom takes you shopping for a County Fair outfit, real Levis and a Western shirt with purple checks and pearl snaps. You play country on the radio, and for rest of the evening you speak to each other in a twang.

You write Paul every two weeks, and he replies:

"Life can knock you down, but you're not one to lie there and get kicked."

"I remember, in the teeth of winter, a bird perched on a bare branch, singing. There was not a scrap of food. It would be dead soon."

"At the end of the day, the shadows lie so long and dense on the ground, they look more alive than what makes them."

On his birthday, Russell anticipated the usual backlash from Cissy. It sat hard with her, his taking the limelight. From early morning tension edged upward, which was too bad because birthdays, anybody's, were among his favorite occasions. Glenda baked a Black Forest cake, major production. Just off the kitchen, Cissy's bedroom door, uncharacteristically ajar, revealed food wrapper litter, heaps of soiled laundry, manure-streaked boots. "Cissy, I'm going to do my laundry," Glenda said. "I can throw a couple of your things in."

"No, Mother, thank you, I am fifteen years old and perfectly capable of washing my own clothes. I notice your sheets aren't the freshest."

"What are you doing in our bed?"

"I don't ask you what you do there."

"Look, I went in your room for a hanger and I almost threw up."

"If you go in my room again I'll kick your ass."

"I am not continuing this conversation," Glenda said.

"You know what, Cissy," Russell said. "It's not your room. Nothing in this house is yours. I may not be your father, I may not be your friend, I may not be anything to you, but I own this house, I and your mother. If you want to live here, you don't talk to your mother like a thug. Or I'll find you somewhere else."

"Like hell." With both hands she threw the cake, which mooshed into his chin and chest. She turned tail, slamming the door.

Glenda wiped the frosting from his jaw and the tip of his nose with a paper towel.

"This time she doesn't run to you," Russell said. "You don't take her in."

"You need to find a ride to the County Fair," Glenda told Cissy, "because we're not going."

"What do you mean?" All the air seemed to be sucked out of her.

"When you hurt one of the family, you hurt the whole family, and they don't want to be with you."

"That is the biggest load of psychobabble fucking crap. It's him," she screamed. "He can't tell you what to do."

"That's right. I'm doing what I want to do."

On the night of the pig show Russell and Glenda tried to watch movies in the living room, with a bowl of popcorn and a beer. They suffered stiffly.

About ten a car pulled into the driveway. An exchange of voices, and Cissy rushed past in her new jeans and Western shirt, forehead crinkled.

Later, the FFA advisor supplied details. At the outset Princess had veered left, and Cissy whacked her across the rump with the cane. Immediately she was disqualified.

Russell proposed Iceland for summer vacation. He couldn't explain why. Otherworldly images. "The astronauts trained there," he said.

Glenda trusted him. After all, he was the Minister of Fun. Lindsey would turn three

there.

After a week of two of intermittent insomnia, Russell began cautiously, “Iceland is the trip of a lifetime, and expensive as hell. If Cissy wrecked it, I don’t know if I could forgive her.”

“If I don’t get a break from her, I don’t know how I can keep it up,” Glenda said.

If Cissy stayed behind, Russell said, they could pay Patricia, Russell’s ever-compliant assistant, as her companion.

* * *

Patricia huddles at one end of the couch, legs folded over each other, like she doesn’t deserve to be there. “One thing straight,” she says. “This isn’t a sitter situation, nanny, in loco parentis. We’re roommates. Two gals hangin’ out.”

Your ears have become very sensitive. Her voice is like someone banging pieces of steel together in a huge silence.

Russell could understand the Icelanders’ famous belief in elves. Their home was a fairyland. By Snaefellsnes, the volcanic cone which served as a model for Jules Verne’s Journey to the Center of the Earth, his family watched a sunset for hours. The mountain’s icecap registered every changing hue of the sky, which reflected again from the ocean lapping at the black sand beach. Light never left the sky, and a couple of hours later the sun rose again.

Passing through Dimmurborgir, gnarled, blackened rock knobs, the tour guide explained, “The people say these are trolls who partied too late, and were turned to stone by the sun.”

Lindsey would have none of it. “It’s lava that cooled into those shapes,” she said.

Her favorite movie was Disney’s Robin Hood, and Russell made her a bow and arrow of kelp. It worked! The three of them together, everything worked.

“I’m happy at my job,” Glenda said. “With you I have my soul mate. The three

of us together completes the circle. I wonder how this all came to me, when so many people don't get to feel this way."

When Patricia picks you up at the Land Lab, she asks about your day. If you run into Bear, she tells you about hers. The words are nails they are hammering into your ears.

They walked miles under the tremendous openness of sky near the top of the world, up and down orderly urban hills in Reykjavik, on scalded bare earth past bubbling mudpits near Lake Myvatn, volcano plume in the distance. The raw wind blew free, and they bundled in their new Icelandic sweaters.

Lindsey's stroller broke, and a shop in Reykjavik lent them one, gratis, for the remainder of their three weeks. Russell lost his wallet. "Don't worry," a shopkeeper told them. "It's already at the police station." So it was, intact, not a krona missing.

"I could live here," Glenda said. Her complexion bloomed again, her hair lustrous, body lithe.

The glacier Langjokull shrank the three of them together in the vastness of white, their heads bowed against the wind. From far beneath, light bent through the ice, blue currents, green streaks. It shocked Russell, the ease of letting Cissy go. It was as if she were a form slipping away under the ice, a rose tint growing fainter and fainter.

By the waterfall Gullfoss, later that same day, the glacial melt burst forth, thundering past in a cascade.

Russell and Glenda dashed off a postcard to Cissy that night, a scrap of paper blowing away in the wind.

"Don't you talk any more?" Patricia asks. The words bore into your ears like the bugs in Star Trek: The Wrath of Kahn, just before their heads explode. "It's going to be a long couple of weeks if I spend them talking to myself."

"How much are they paying you for this?"

"That's not the point. I thought we were going to have so much fun, watchin' movies, roller skatin'."

The animals respect your silence. After Princess has been sold, you're in charge of all the stalls, a second chance after the county fair. They eat, shit, and sleep and don't make a big deal over it.

Patricia answers the call, hands it to you, but you fend it off. Patricia chirps into the phone, "Fabulous. She's excellent, just tired. We're getting along like a house on fire."

"Liar."

"I'm not going to spoil their vacation telling them you're being a sullen snot."

You fly at her, sinking your fingernails into her flaccid cheeks, holding on, shaking them until she windmills backward, falling over the footstool. Incredulously she touches her torn skin, eyes tearing with pain. Rising half-crouched as if she expects you to attack again, she sidles out of the living room. Her balance wavers, her mouth is lopsided and sloppy, and you can see how she was a drunk. At the dinner table she dumps a wad of bills on the table. "Your parents left this for you," she says in a voice so shaky it's already disappearing. "Bus fare, whatever. I'm out of here."

Patricia leaves groceries every couple of days and once a note. "Your parents called. I didn't want to worry them. I told them we were fine."

The ringing phone is like a menacing bush that shakes inexplicably in the night, that and the scratchy tracings on the answering machine. You won't touch it.

You feed the animals on your own schedule, sleep on the couch or under the table, wake at noon or in the dark. If you miss the last city bus from the Land Lab, you bed down there, maybe a couple of days until you're hungry enough to go home.

A postcard arrives. Mom tells a funny story about being dive-bombed by terns. The truth is in the image itself, an endless field of ice with a frozen sun hanging in the

sky. It is your mother, a blinding cold light. The cold invades you, a dread that fills you day and night, worse than dread because it already has happened.

One key fits the ignition, and you start the car as Bear taught you, a foot on the clutch. The car jerks and sputters backwards, stalls, and you start it again. This time you reach the street. You stay in first gear as long as possible until the engine roars. The shift lever slides into second with a whunk, and now you are cruising. No traffic at the intersection, you turn left. There's a cone in the middle of the street. You don't know if you flattened it on purpose. The VW is as big as a battleship. A few blocks away you aim at a garbage can. It rolls banging down the sidewalk. Then a mailbox. The car recoils slightly from the impact. But you forgot to check the mirror, and as you swerve back onto the street a face almost jumps into your window. You see it clearly, graying mustache, before your left fender swings into his passenger door. The crash throws you forward and sideways, and the wheel spins out of your hands. The other motorist has stopped. You grab the wheel again and floor the accelerator just before the engine dies. With that head start you reach home on an empty street, jamming on the brakes a second too late, so the front bumper gently inserts itself into the wood sheeting of the carport. Inside, you cower at the window, behind the curtains, and sure enough the man's car approaches, pauses, and moves on. You can't wait around for them to get you. Before you lose your nerve, you sit at the controls again, ease into reverse, and drive to Bear's house.

When no one answered the third weekly phone call, Glenda and Russell tried again, daily.

"I wonder if Patricia took Cissy on a little trip. They were hitting it off so well," Glenda said.

"No harm in Patricia pampering her a bit," Russell said.

Bear's parents hardly notice you hiding out there. Their house is filled with

garbage. It has access to a neighborhood park a few blocks away. You sit on the canvas swing, which molds itself to your bottom, dizzy and stupefied with the late afternoon heat, barely lazing back and forth. Your hair over your eyes, you don't bother to look up at the footsteps until the chains beside you creak. A boy has come out of one of the houses to swing beside you. He's tall, with jeans that fit too loosely, and the beginning of sideburns.

There's no need to speak. He stretches out his hand

and it feels as if you've fallen. You must have fallen off the swing. You're walking away from the water fountain with him, wiping drips from your mouth. You brush the dirt and twigs from your shorts. The base of the oleander hedge is littered with twigs. He takes you to his kitchen, where his mother serves bread with cream cheese and honey.

"You're a talker, aren't you?" she says humorously.

You pilot the stove-in car to the Land Lab. A pig is good company, and more is better. You maneuver a ewe into the back seat beside a pig, her legs folding down compliantly, and a goat rides beside you in front, tossing his head out the half-open window and bleating. Rabbits fit on the floor.

But by the time you lead the pig and goat and sheep into your mother's house, straining at their halters, they are frightened and they stampede through the rooms, shitting on the floor. The rabbits bolt in all directions, adding their green-brown pellets. This gives you an idea, and chasing them down, you capture two, supporting their warm, twitching bellies in your palms. Opening the door to your mom's room, hers and her husband's, you place the bunnies on the waterbed. They scamper to and fro, leaving a criss-cross of droppings on the spread and white pillows. Scooping up the animals, you carry them to Lindsey's bed, where, sobbing, you release them to run their shit some more, back and forth, like dark round pebbles.

You are part of their terror. Throwing open the doors, you run with them.

During the seventeen-hour flight, neither Russell nor Glenda slept. The first sight of their home reassured them, shaggy weeds and crabgrass befitting three weeks of summer rain, the blue VW and white Nissan truck side by side in the carport. But the car's left side was misshapen, and, investigating, they saw the crushed fender, headlight dangling like an eye.

Inside, the cooler was not running, the still air breathtakingly hot and foul.

"Patricia. Cissy," Russell called without expectation. The message light blinked. Eight clips played, seven theirs. The eighth, unfamiliar voice urged them to contact him as soon as possible.

Animal shit led them through the house, on the kitchen linoleum, carpeted hall, their shower stall and bed, Lindsey's diminutive pillow. "Why did Cissy put poop on my bed?" She cried because the cardboard house for her dinosaurs had been trampled.

No one questioned where Cissy was. Her absence was natural, a given. Russell was gripped by a conviction that something perfect, proportionate, had happened, that he understood how the world was balanced.

Russell dialed the eighth number. Cissy's kidnapper! flashed through his mind. They would have to pay everything. The caller was the lawyer whose car Cissy had struck. He provided details of the hit-and-run. A lawyer. They would lose the house. They would get Cissy back, but no house. Again the beautiful symmetry. "I'm not looking to sink anyone," the voice said. "I'm not pursuing a citation. I just want my repairs paid."

"Cissy sideswiped his car, but he's not angry," Russell relayed to Glenda. "We lucked out. He's a good guy." It was reasonable to be talking about a faceless stranger as if he were a new member of the family.

Glenda phoned the school and the Land Lab, which were closed for the day. Bear's stepfather said he didn't see anybody. She got Patricia's answering machine, by

then almost as familiar as their own. Then she called the police.

The doorbell rang, and Cissy stood outside flanked by two officers. They had, in fact, discovered her in Bear's bedroom.

"As a runaway, we can detain her or release her to you," one said.

Glenda embraced her, bending her in her strong arms, the teenager unyielding. She was fat, her hair and clothing sour. "Thank you for being alive," Glenda said.

The court mandated family counseling for runaways, but Cissy received private sessions initially. After the second, Glenda and Russell were summoned into the therapist's office. The teenager sat folded into an armchair, face mottled and puffy.

"Cissy has some truthfulness issues. We're trying to sort it out," the therapist said, once the adults were settled in their seats.

"She says you never attended her school events, that she had to take the bus."

Surprised, indignant, Glenda and Russell reeled off years, months, occasions, highlights.

"Cissy says you lock her in the closet and make her listen to you having sex."

Russell and Glenda stared at Cissy, who looked away.

"Jesus," Russell exhaled.

The therapist tucked her lower lip over her upper, nodding.

"She also says that while you abandoned her, she had a seizure."

"I blacked out. It was like sleepwalking. That whole day is hazy," Cissy said.

"She'll have to be tested," the therapist said.

"You know," Cissy said, "Frank sexually abused June from the moment we got to New York."

"How do you know?" the therapist asked inscrutably, patiently.

"He went in there at night."

"Was he carrying anything, like a glass of water, or medicine?"

"No. Sometimes. Not usually. No."

"It would be very, very hard for you to know exactly what was going on without talking to June herself."

"She wouldn't."

"Do you sometimes believe your father Frank prefers June to you?"

"Everybody does," Cissy answered airily. "Except Paul."

"We're here to talk about you," the therapist reminded her.

Cissy sat with her hands in her lap. "Mom didn't come to my pig show at the fair," she said and heaved herself forward, sobbing, her hands covering her face. Glenda held her shoulders as the three adults sat looking into the mid-distance, while she cried and cried.

"You're very tired, aren't you," the therapist said gently.

Cissy nodded violently, not raising her head.

"You want to rest someplace safe."

Again nodding.

"Cissy feels out of control," the therapist told the parents. "She threw a can at her friend Bear, at the Land Lab. She said she doesn't know what she's going to do. Cissy, look at me. You want to be safe, don't you. You want to rest."

Cissy's crumpled face nodded.

"I can sign you into the hospital. There are doctors there to help you, and others like you who need time to gather themselves and figure things out."

"You're kidding. You're bluffing, right?" Russell said.

"For her to cry, that's a breakthrough," Glenda said. "Finally we're getting somewhere. I'm not signing her into an asylum. She's not crazy."

"It's not your decision. Cissy is a danger to herself and others. You want to go, don't you."

Looking straight ahead, Cissy said, “Yes.”

You slip between the sheets of nobody’s bed in a neutral home and fall into a deep, deliciously uninflected sleep.

In the morning you pass another girl wearing the same floor-length pink cotton nightgown as yours. Her face is dramatic. “I don’t know how I’m going to sleep. The voices are at me all night.”

“Whose voices?”

“I don’t know, someone from TV. I can’t remember their names,” she says distractedly.

“I hear voices, too,” you say.

When the LPN passes out meds, your roommate has a whole cupful of pills. “For my seizures,” she says.

“I have seizures,” you say.

There were stories of rape and abuse.

“I was raped,” you say. “It was a boy on a swing.”

The first group rap session, a girl lists a string of suicide attempts, showing her scars.

“I want to kill myself, too,” you say.

Paul arrived with his economical gait and pained smile, and signed his acceptance of full custody. Russell and Glenda saw them off at the airport.

During Cissy’s second week with him, Paul found her lying on the kitchen floor, overdosed on sleeping pills. Paul’s voice on the phone shook slightly, but he did not say he was sending her back..

During her three years in New York State Mental Health facilities, Paul faithfully would relay the psychiatric progress reports, the anti-psychotic prescriptions, the anti-

seizure prescriptions. He made his stoicism a point of pride. He did not remind them that he had saved their family.

"And how he lords it over me," Cissy wrote to Russell. He, Russell, was the only man she ever could relate to, she said. "Those were the best years of my life," she said.

What endured in Russell's memory was the night after Cissy was admitted to the psych ward. As he had expected, Glenda held herself upright and remote on the couch, in the house that still seemed new to them. They sat together, conscious of the nocturnal sounds. She was denying herself the comfort of his hand, so he waited. Then their hands together felt like whole bodies lying with each other. After satisfying themselves this way, without a word or indication they got up and walked down the hall. Lindsey's door stayed open. She could be as active asleep as awake, and after she fell out of bed twice they had placed her mattress on the floor. The soft nightlight played on her quizzical features. They crossed the hall to their own bed.

* * *

After her release from treatment, Cissy returned to Arizona and found a big, tractable husband. She raised three children to respect order. The entire family sat and rose from the dinner table in unison. The children's toys were locked high in a closet, to be signed out upon request. All was documented in photo albums.

Though never reaching even Glenda's height, Cissy weighed over two hundred pounds. Her breath wheezed and she complained of leg pains. Incessant smoking led to poor circulation and ulcerated sores in her feet. She berated her husband, who now and again left her.

Since her expulsion from his family, Cissy and Russell maintained a cordial, undemanding friendship.

She held up newborn photos of her youngest and Lindsey. "See?" she pressed. "Don't they look exactly the same?"

Russell agreed.

"We were real sisters, and now she doesn't even remember. Give her these, would you?"

June's third husband was stationed in Kuwait when pain racked her groin, spreading up her belly and wrapping around her back. Appendicitis was ruled out. A neighbor, seeing June's toddlers roaming the street, found her doubled over comatose in the bathroom.

Glenda packed herself, Cissy, and Cissy's children into the car for an emergency mission to Texas, June's home. Russell stayed behind with Lindsey, who needed rides to school.

Nightly, Glenda phoned the news. June garrulous on painkillers, yakking at the nurses and joking with every passing orderly, conducting business by cell phone from the one comfortable position on her side. The eventual diagnosis of autoimmune disorder. "My body turning against itself," June said cheerfully.

Each of Glenda's phone calls began, "Honey—" Even her voice held heat for him.

Glenda and Cissy fed, bathed, and bedded June's and Cissy's children, six in all. "Cissy's indispensable, I couldn't have done it without her, but it's a nightmare. She's at me every minute," Glenda said. "Of course by the time we come home from the hospital, the kids are pent-up. 'You're just letting your grandchildren run wild?' she says. Every effort I make with June, Cissy lectures me, it's wrong, I'm incompetent. She accuses me of favoring June's kids. She times how long I spend reading to each grandchild, for evidence. She's relentless. She can never be satisfied."

CAMOUFLAGE

We were leaning against my boyfriend Salcedo's ancient Chevy Nova—Salcedo, his best friend Fracas, and I—when Fracas began nudging at me. Hip, elbow, insinuating, squirmy.

"Quit," I said.

Salcedo said nothing. His eyes, greased in night paint like ours, gazed forward. We were dressed out in Army camouflage.

The Nova hugged the curb. Across from us, the doors of the downtown Community Center swung open. Out poured the American microcosm itself—dowagers in diamonds, slouchy bluejean teenagers, burly tattooed types, natty professionals—hustling in lockstep straight for us. I heard them praise the evening's performance, a troupe of Chinese acrobats. "Powerful." "Weightless." "Defying gravity, between heaven and earth."

No one noticed us until Salcedo sprang forward. He was so handsome! Tall, black burr haircut bristling, he swept the blade of his hand like a bayonet across the advancing crowd, halting it. Those nearest jostled in momentary confusion.

"People of Iraq, your hour has come," Salcedo trumpeted. "Prepare to die!"

Immediately the throng began to shift away, though some lingered curiously. From my five-foot-five I stared them down balefully.

"What?" Fracas yelled. "Execute the survivors?"

"Kill them all," Salcedo shrieked.

"But the Geneva Conventions—" said Fracas.

"Are you disobeying a direct order?" Salcedo nodded toward me, and I popped the Nova's trunk, producing a burlap sack. Together, Salcedo and I flung it over Fracas, trussed him, and heaved him into the trunk, slamming it shut. I saw fingers stabbing cell phones as we gunned away from the curb.

"Are you all right?" Salcedo kept shouting over his shoulder. At every muffled reply from Fracas he drove on, reassured.

Celebrating at IHOP, we slapped five, Salcedo ruddy with laughter, Fracas tipping silently against him, like a capsized boat. Spooky, the effect of the happy GIs—still dressed out in camouflage—everybody at the surrounding tables loose and laughing along with us. They wanted to be us.

Except we'd bought the unis at Army Surplus. I was a high school junior, Salcedo a college philosophy major, Fracas a…void. I'd met them at a peace rally. I was bitter toward the "American people," so disappointed, as they scampered like lemmings toward an insane invasion of Iraq, February 2003. I wouldn't dignify our public stunts at malls, galas and the like as "protest," more yelps of futility.

Gobbling pancakes, Fracas regaled us to smutty monologues. He'd been screwing a co-worker on her day off, he informed us, when her husband walked in. "I didn't even hear him, we were snug tight. This sudden roaring, 'Fucking cunt bitch,' and so on, and he's hitting us with a chair. I up and stiff him on the jaw. He falls into the dresser but he doesn't go down. Then he starts groping in the drawer. Good bye. I'm through the window, grab the eave, swing myself up. I'm crouched naked on the roof."

Fracas squatting monkey-like, his sex dangling below his haunches, not a pretty picture. Clearing my throat, I hummed. Salcedo, palms pressed together, tapped his fingers against each other.

Fracas sidled in the booth, blowing IHOP-syrupy breath onto my hair. His shaved head made knobs of his nose and ears. I angled away. “So Leila. Who’s got the clamp on you?” he said. “You and your little nothing waist.”

“He’s none of your business,” I said.

“Let’s see ‘Cradle 2 the Grave’ next weekend? Jet Li,” Fracas said.

“All of us?” I said.

“I’m asking you, Leila.” Fracas’ eyes fixed me, blue as ice at the bottom of a crevasse.

“Ahaha,” Salcedo said as his fork slipped, spearing his thumb.

“I just told you I’m dating someone,” I said. “Why would you even ask?” We should have left him locked in the trunk, I thought. A little chant formed in my head, Fracas in a box, Fracas in a box.

I didn’t feel the way I looked, the genetically-coded curves and blond waves. I’d built up muscle with a hundred pushups and situps a day. I’d chopped the hair, tight ringlets shaped to my skull. I was a buff nerd. The Fracases of the world were undeterred.

Salcedo’s cell rang. His mother called practically every hour. “Are you with that *güera*?”—blondie—the voice crackled. Mrs. Salcedo detested me. She had a plan for her son—run with the *vatos*, chase *chicas*, serve his military hitch, then settle into law enforcement like all the Salcedos, MPs in Vietnam and Desert Storm, local police, Border Patrol. No wonder I was a threat.

“Fracas and I are messing around,” he answered.

At seventeen I’d wondered if I’d ever have a boyfriend, much less one with such daring, flair, and exotic problems. I felt protective of him.

“This society forces every Mexican to choose—outlaw or cop,” Salcedo liked to

say. “Wetback or La Migra.” But while days he trained with the police in a youth group—he really wanted to be a cop—nights we impersonated military personnel and committed criminal trespass. Wetback? La Migra! La Migra? Wetback! Salcedo slid under his own fence and arrested himself, over and over.

Salcedo was housesitting for his Tío Victor, a sheriff’s detective, of course. I suspect he went undercover. We let ourselves in the carport door, away from the porch light. For the first time we would spend the night together, but I wasn’t apprehensive. Salcedo had ethics. I had my typical synesthesia, experiencing emotion as a blank grid that slowly stained with color, tiny square by tiny square, like a mosaic. It took time for a feeling to assemble itself. It was almost as if I deliberated on it.

All I had to do was phone my parents that I’d be out all night. Their faith in me was nearly religious.

Lights off, Salcedo and I sank into the soft, cracked leather couch and watched *Black Hawk Down* on DVD, drowsing to the rattle of automatic weapons. Though a pacifist, I was stimulated by battle, the patterns forging from chaos toward a conclusion, how a handful of Rangers survived the streets of Mogadishu. Salcedo’s head rolled onto my shoulder, and he drooled lightly in sleep, dampening my shirt. Eventually we arranged ourselves lengthwise on the couch, opposite, feet to head. His feet, wedged against my cheek, smelled arid and sweet, like the desert surrounding our city. I heard his unguarded gulp of breath.

A wave of fondness broke in me, as if the color of Salcedo had surged out of him, flooding my grid, tipping it, pouring out of it, carrying me downstream. I might have been drowning. The feeling left me pained, awash, a knot in my chest bursting. Then it passed. I was all right. I was intact.

Salcedo’s cell rang. “I’m going to bed,” he mumbled, technically not a lie since he would, at some point.

In the morning Salcedo poured us cereal. “Fracas is determined to pursue you,” he

said. “It’s awkward.”

“Why? Give him the news.” I’d wondered why not.

“It would seem pre-emptive on my part. He would immediately desist.”

“Fine.”

“I shouldn’t take advantage because he defers to me.”

“So what did you tell him?”

“That it was strictly your decision,” he said stiffly, frowning into the distance.

I expected no less. We agreed that a relationship must not subvert the autonomy of the individual. “I don’t want to date Fracas.”

Salcedo’s arms relaxed at his sides. He always inhaled before smiling, as if awaiting a dive into pleasant waters.

Back home my parents sat at the kitchen counter, drinking coffee and reading the paper.

My dad congratulated me heartily for risking arrest once again. My parents set no boundaries for me because their love was boundless, I guess. They trembled at the sight of me. I could send them into rapture or swallow them up, and then there would be nothing left of me. Their love for me made terrible caves in their faces, of longing, concern, and investment. It was painful. Poor, dear parents.

They were always at each other with their hands, and nibbles. Secretly, I wondered, did they harbor the same desires for me? Love could be that dark and complicated, I suspected. Of course they’d never act on it. They were impeccable parents.

When I was four I fell in love with a dog. It was summer vacation. The dog’s name was Ann. We romped for days. She had a wanton way of lolling her tongue, her eyes sparkling and darting, that told me she and I understood fun as no one else ever had, that we were made for each other. When I learned we were leaving, I spent the last day lying on Ann, on a couch in the back yard. Every time she raised her head and wriggled,

trying to play, I burrowed my face deeper into her side, pinning her. I knew I was burdening her. I never wanted to feel that way again. I grieved and grieved on the trip home. The first day in the car I didn't talk. Talking felt like rape—of course I didn't use the word, wouldn't have understood what it meant—prying my jaws apart by force. In my mind I lay against Ann on the couch, drugged with aching. I felt triumphant over my parents. Even at four I knew they wanted only happiness for me.

I finally rescued myself by counting. At age two I'd counted to thirty; my parents videotaped it. Now I set my sights on a million. As we rolled through small Western towns, I roamed the thousands like an astronaut among the stars. My parents fueled themselves from chipped Formica café table tops while I sat buoyed in a cloud of numbers.

I still felt comfortable in multitudinousness. A dozen open books-in-progress lay strewn beside my bed.

I hooked up with Salcedo and Fracas at an antiwar march. Patrol cars cruised slowly, so close their sleek white shoulders almost brushed us, stoic faces and creased bull necks in the windows. Salcedo averted his head, shy of being recognized. His opposition to the war dumfounded his police cronies as much as his family. It was the conversation stopper, he said, like driving a car into a sinkhole.

Protestors chanted beside us on the sidewalk, their signs fluttering.

While calling down hellfire and brimstone on the government, Salcedo was incapable of speaking ill to another human soul. When hecklers jeered, he offered them Kant. "Bush's fallacy is that of end over principle," he explained, adding helpfully, "The hypothetical rather than the categorical imperative."

Passing motorists shook their fists or even honked and waved.

I caught this wild hope. If we could delay the war even a month, two months, we're staring into the Iraqi summer, "scorching," "dreaded" and all that. Maybe the war is postponed. Maybe…minute to minute…

Fracas impinged, matching my stride. Jumpy inside his shirt, he seemed compact, though he was nearly as tall as Salcedo. Because I'm not a casual talker, the Fracases of the world misconstrue me as a listener. He began on his ex-girlfriend, an older woman who had broken up with him and then refused to leave. He couldn't rise above her misery, her pasty voluptuousness, drug-dulled expressions, hair matted to her head.

"Kick her out," I snapped.

Fracas gestured helplessly.

And his mother, an alkie since his father left them. She wafted about her apartment, a smock draped over her thinness. "What is to become of us?" she'd called to him on his last visit, standing at the doorway, arms outstretched, like a waif.

"Get them both in detox," I said.

Fracas flung aside some imaginary object, as if throwing himself away with it.

Visibly, he perked himself up. "I saw last week, those Chinese acrobats had you going."

Fracas didn't miss much. The acrobats had sounded sensational. I imagined that equilibrium between muscle, nerve, and gravity, your tight little package of control on the verge of powerlessness. But still in command! That was how I wanted to live!

"I could have bought tickets." He leaned into my ear. "I could have taken you." Alone among us, he had a job, and income.

"I have a boyfriend," I said.

"A boyfriend," he breathed reverentially. "Oh oh oh."

"Fracas and I are taking a walk," Salcedo told the cell phone.

The march terminated at a city park, in boisterous milling. Bleachers had been set up. Wind whipped the tented food booths. Voices boomed over the mike.

Fracas squared up in front of me. "Who is the guy?" He demanded.

"What does it matter? It's not you."

"Do you know?" Fracas asked Salcedo. "I can't stop thinking about her. Look at

her." Fracas' fingers wiggled around my hair as if weaving flowers in there.

Salcedo went pensive, as if he might blurt.

"Don't bother him," I commanded Fracas. "I don't tell anyone my business if I don't want to. Leave it."

Fracas paced briefly, shoulders bunched as if he were walking on his hands. He raised and lowered his arms. No one wavered like my Salcedo. He looked as if he were chasing himself across his face. But Fracas had turned the blue on me, eye to eye. "All right." Fracas relaxed. "Hey, I brought some peace hair." He jogged to his car across the park, returning in a shaggy black wig. "Don't hurt me, man," he wheedled. He splayed his fingers in the hippie V. "I'm Reverend Love."

"Speech, Reverend Love," Salcedo urged gamely.

Fracas hopped onto a picnic table. "Don't they understand?" he orated. "Don't they understand what war is? It's people smashed to a bloody pulp, women, children, grannies, your brothers and uncles and cousins. Just smashed all the fuck up. Thank you very much." He bowed.

People nodded. "Yeah, brother."

"Righteous, Rev," Salcedo slapped Fracas' back.

"I don't care, really. People have always fought wars." Fracas shrugged. His mushroom 'do bobbed.

My parents thought it was great that I protested. Everything I did was great. If I'd cooked newborn babies into a pie, they'd have asked for the recipe. They went to bed jolly, and Fracas showed up. I hustled him to the back porch, pitch dark under the roof overhang.

Fracas yanked me into his arms, his chin grinding my skull. We staggered together before I broke his hold. I socked him in the gut and he doubled over with a whoosh of breath.

"It figures," he wheezed, straightening.

His voice infuriated me, and I slugged him again somewhere in the face. I could barely see.

"So that's what it's going to be like, falling in love," he said.

"You don't fall in love in a couple of weeks."

"Oh don't you. You don't stop dead in the midst of cooking your eggs, just to smile at the thought of this person. Or stand in front of the mirror paralyzed, with shaving cream all over your face, because what's the use of moving if she isn't there with you. Sometimes it's too heavy to get through the hour at work until I tell myself, yeah, but you're actually going to see her, and then in my head I see you and see you and see you and nothing else. Leila, you'd better get used to being with me or being in two places at once, 'cause baby, you're with me all the time."

"Fracas, you got that from a bad movie."

"Wake up, love is a bad movie. It's a stupid monotony."

He fell to his knees, clasping my legs. I stepped free of his arms.

"Don't you realize what you are?" Fracas said. "If this guy of yours had any clue…Bite my tongue. You'd walk funny for a week, that I can tell you. No. No. I wouldn't touch you. If that's what you wanted I wouldn't touch you." He backed away with upraised hands. "You're fine," he said. "All my life I've heard that, 'she's fine,' fine—hot. But fine, fine like a gold chain, the thinnest gauge, it feels like you're pouring nothing into your hand, but it's so strong you can't break it."

"Fracas," I said, "we're both involved. You have a live-in."

"I wipe her off my dick when she's done." He winced. "It's all she asks for. She's a very limited person."

"It's time to go," I said.

Fracas looked suddenly spent, like a washed-up prizefighter. "I love you," he said in a tired, wet voice.

"Look at that strange light over the mountain," I said. A dull orange-pink glowed and faded.

"It's the aurora borealis," Fracas said.

"In Arizona?"

"It's a miracle. Who cares?"

After he left, I sat rubbing my knees, my familiar knees, as if they were strange and didn't belong to me. The softness of skin on the inner knee, like rubber but warmer and more tender, the rough wrinkles in front with the faint prickling of hairs. I didn't want to stay there. It felt like elephant skin. I came back to the inner knee, cream. I wondered what it would be like to want to touch that part of me so much, and I almost got it. I remarked to myself that it was a long time to spend with one's own knees, but the comment just floated away, or it became part of the effort of my hands.

Inside Tío Victor's house I stripped Salcedo to his underwear. He hugged me, his lips feeding desperately on mine. "I never thought this would happen, being with you," he said. Unfastening my own buttons was interminable. This is what it meant, taking another's life to heart as much as one took one's own.

We stood facing each other. The moment elongated. Hand in hand, we led each other to the couch and sat as if at a prom, if they gave a prom for people in their underwear. The thought entertained me, stately couples waltzing, chitchatting, hovering over the punchbowl in their skivvies and thongs.

The cell rang and rang. The sound hovered in the near-dark as we waited it out. We waited.

We arranged ourselves on the couch, in our head-to-foot. Even with the furnace on we needed to wrap in a blanket. I imagined we looked like a giant caterpillar with a head at either end.

In the morning Salcedo drew me close with an arm around my shoulders. "I'm so

fortunate that you don't find Fracas beautiful," he said. "He's like a beautiful theory that breaks down in the real world. He should be perfect." He leaned back, hands clasped behind his head, so that the blanket slipped from his chest.

"You could say that about any of us." I had thrown myself on my boyfriend like meat sticking to meat, as if circumventing my brain were the way to resolve complexity. Instead the pieces were eluding me further. It was like trying to capture fish with my hands.

I told Salcedo what Fracas had done. I wasn't deliberating; I wasn't filtering; I was lurching like a drunk from one lamppost to the next.

"We all have to deal with the problem of Fracas' body." Salcedo spoke calmly, but his long, tapering fingers kneaded each other furiously. "Fracas is too much present in his body."

"Excuse me, but Fracas can deal with his own body. 'Here Fracas' body, we give you back.' We have to let him know what's going on."

"It's too late. He'll know I've been deceiving him." His words rushed out, "And I can't do that to him. He looks up to me." Almost as an aside he said, "I tutored him through high school."

"You talk about him as if he's a brain stem," I said.

"Oh, I know he's capable. High school was just a joke to him. I've begged him to try college."

"He's going to find out," I said gently.

"It will hurt him. I—" His fingertips moved to his temples. He shook his head. "He'll go away. I don't want to lose him." Looking puzzled, he turned his face from me. He was crying. His eyes looked out from between his fingers in the greatest surprise, tears streaming.

So Salcedo loved Fracas. I waited for disappointment, betrayal, revulsion. I didn't react at all. My first response was, can we still go out? Then, more sharply, how much I'd miss sitting close at the coffee shop, disputing philosophy or physics, Salcedo in a snug

black pullover, breathing in steam from the mug in his olive hands.

The next couple of weeks were a holiday, carefree, liberated, as if semester finals had been canceled.

When Salcedo got me onto the police training course, we raced up the rope climb, straining and grunting for advantage, first my knuckles in the lead, then his. Snatching the metal bar an arm's length ahead, I slid to the turf, where he congratulated me with a warm handshake. Our dinner together was free of male sulking, and he kissed me goodnight with the same drowning ardor, like a blind man using his mouth for eyes.

Sipping coffee, Salcedo jabbed his finger knowingly at the unknowable in Hume. We celebrated subatomic particles, whose motion was not a path but a sum of possibilities, all of them true.

Out of the blue I started teasing him, hard. The morning he was to lecture his fellow youth cadets—the aspiring police—on the philosophy of law enforcement, I switched his regulation boots with Tío Victor's, identical except for size. Puzzled, he clumped about the kitchen, shuffling and wobbling. "I'm in these boots over my head," he said, frowning deeply. I couldn't help myself, giggling—not a word, or condition, I would often apply to myself—which proved contagious. We laughed ourselves red, and when I confessed, we laughed some more, holding each other close, grabbing at each other's shirts.

Salcedo retaliated merrily, inviting me to a reception for his notoriously lecherous poli-sci prof, who swooped down on me. Salcedo immediately volunteered, "Leila is a student from Ukraine."

"Slavic women are the most beautiful in the world. Your English is excellent," the prof told my bosom. People always think I'm foreign anyway because I enunciate correctly.

"They teach tough in Ukraine, not like this namby-pamby country," I said. "My uncle was shot, writing 'lay' for 'lie.'"

The next night we ate out, and I lied confidentially to our waitress that it was Salcedo's birthday. As he mopped his gravy, waitstaff in suggestive beachcomber togs circled our table, singing, clapping, dancing, pulling him to his feet. Hips shaking to a birthday chant, they hauled him among tables like graverobbers with their corpse. Dancelessness was a bond between Salcedo and me.

Laugh, laugh.

"Revenge is a dish best served cold," Salcedo promised, voice cracking with hilarity.

And his cell phone chattered and snapped. Ohboy, if Mrs. Salcedo thought *I* was the problem—

"You're like iron and moss," Fracas moaned to me, almost sang. "Sweet, damp moss. White lilies growing from the moss."

"Or manure," I suggested.

"If it wasn't for the other guy, we'd both be after her, wouldn't we?" Fracas said. "I'm after her anyway, but you have morals." Salcedo evaded the blue gaze.

"It hurts when she moves. Doesn't it hurt you when she moves?" Fracas asked Salcedo.

"Doesn't hurt me," I said.

Fracas played our protest farces as Reverend Love now. He evolved into a menacing, shambling…*thing*, the stringy black wig covering his face, his jacket patched and greasy.

While Salcedo and I, fake GIs in camou, chatted with a graveyard 7-11 clerk, Fracas squashed his face against the outside of the door, features blurred unrecognizably against the glass.

"Lock it! It's the crazy Rev," Salcedo shouted. "He lost his mind in Desert Storm."

"I'll call the cops," the clerk said.

"Too late. Sometimes candy calms him," I said. Shoving aside the door, I held the colored sugar lumps outstretched in my palm. Fracas pecked them with his lips, then swatted them to the ground, chasing me into the night.

Others have said it. On TV the bombardment of Baghdad looked like a cheap video game. Green screen, green flares from missile hits, green streaks. Then in glaring daylight, mechanized caravans raced over empty desert, jouncing, the embedded reporters jabbering, faces amorously flushed.

Salcedo and I hugged on the couch. I couldn't control my tears. They just ran out of me. It was as though I wasn't even there.

"You're walking down the street under a clear sky and the next thing, the building next to you explodes," I said. "Or the building you're in. Terror every second. I can't imagine it. And those young men in the Humvees, they're going to be gassed." Torn bodies, stained concrete. Bodies in the sand, Saddam's poison kicking inside them, so their bodies' functions were no longer their own. It was unbearable. I couldn't stand it.

"My cousins say they're going to enlist. They're going to be over there," Salcedo said.

I couldn't eat. My insides were clenched. The green gas of the war pervaded everything.

Mrs. Salcedo's calls grew more frantic, her voice shrilling over pancake remnants at IHOP, Tío Victor's couch. "*La güera*? Is it her?" We couldn't hide from her, so we couldn't hide from anybody. Ordinary people in the street were out to get us; I looked behind me when I passed them.

Yet I felt strangely bonded to Mrs. Salcedo, in fear. Even if it wasn't the same fear. She would never know it, but my hand was reaching toward hers, across the cellular band.

I was making a fetish of my grief, I scolded myself. I kept welling up, without

warning. Fracas handed me exactly that gold chain he'd described to me, in a black velvet box. "Oh, Fracas, please don't," I blubbered. My voice broke and cracked. "You know I can't accept this from you. It's a beautiful, beautiful thing. I can't keep it." I forced it down his shirt pocket.

"I'll give you what you really want, then. You know how you missed those Chinese acrobats? How about being one?" He gave me that blue eyeful. "Skydiving. Falling through space, nothing around you, the world below. I bought you a session for your eighteenth birthday. Train and drop."

"But that's months away."

"Don't you know about anticipation?"

I did feel it, the rush of the blue. You jumped, and the will dissolved into formlessness, you fell, but the will survived the fall, was still there. "I can't accept that from you," I repeated.

"Tell your boyfriend you want to mate like eagles," he said.

Obviously, it was beside the pointless to throw our little grit into the war machine. But we all dressed out one last time. It was personal.

A construction crew was scraping for a subdivision, on a patch of desert where Salcedo and Fracas had played as boys.

"We practiced with slings," Fracas said. "Not slingshots. That would be too easy for Brainiac here."

"Authentic Biblical slings, in the style of David," Salcedo said. "We made them out of rawhide."

"You whirl them around and let the rock go. Somewhere. Goliath could have had five heads, and we wouldn't have hit any of them."

"You never believed." Salcedo shook his head sadly.

"Anyway, we're going to fuck them up," Fracas said.

"Well," Salecedo said.

They'd had the site under surveillance, knew when the night shift knocked off. As they laced up their Army boots, bent head to head, I thought I finally understood their mismatched friendship. Action was their heart to heart.

We parked on bare ground beside piles of brush and cactus. The half-framed buildings rose spindly and pale in the moonglow. Hulking earthmovers looked like holes in the light. It was clear Salcedo didn't know what to do. He roamed among the two-by-fours, looking askance. He nudged them with his palm as if not quite believing they were there. Fracas straightarmed one contemptuously, splitting it. "Cheapshit outfit." He'd worked construction one summer. Salcedo shook them like a prisoner behind bars.

Inside a tin shed, unlocked, blueprints were spread across a table. Salcedo riffled them through his fingers, let them fall to the floor. Fracas picked one up, flicked his lighter, and flamed it to a crisp. "Oh, God," Salcedo said. Trancelike, he followed Fracas through the cubicle, sweeping sheaves onto the floor and grinding them with his heel. He tore them into strips and these into smaller strips, which he wadded in his hands. Leading us outside, he flung the bits into the breeze.

A big Cat loomed over us, and Fracas vaulted into the open cab. We scrambled beside him. "They leave the keys. Duh," Fracas said. An earsplitting roar shook us, and the huge black treads began to turn. We heaved forward toward the nearest stick building. Rarely has there been a slower charge. We vibrated amid the dust. I anticipated the whole splintering, sickening, slow-motion crash. "Stop," I shouted, grabbing Fracas' hands on the stick. Fracas turned to take my entire ear in his mouth. Though the night was warm, the soft wetness shot a chill down my spine. The Cat veered left, away from the target. I shoved Fracas, upending him, he was gone—under the wheels? Jesus! I jumped after.

In that moment the site flared into whiteness. Fracas grinned beside me, lip bloodied. The Cat spun in slow, ponderous circles, Salcedo's lovely burr hair spiky in the glare. It was security, two vehicles, floodlights. Silhouettes darted forward, ordering us to halt.

"Come on," Fracas yelled. Salcedo seemed transfixed, frozen to the wheel. Fracas and I leaped back aboard. He killed the engine while I dragged Salcedo by the arm. "*No importa, no importa*," he muttered. We stumbled him to the car. Fracas dug out his keys. We slammed out of there through brush and cactus, the glow pursuing us like a weirdly local moonlight. Swerving onto a dirt road, Fracas opened up distance, then jumped the shoulder, ploughing us into a dense mesquite thicket. We watched the cruisers slew past.

Fracas cradled Salcedo's shoulder. "What is with you?" he meant to say, only the words came out, "What is you?" We all paused in confusion. "With you," Fracas added.

"I have something to tell you," Salcedo said. At last. A tension I hadn't known I carried slumped out of me.

"I've joined up. Marines," Salcedo said. "I'll be leaving for Camp Pendleton."

"What!" I screamed.

"I've thought it through. It's not an impulsive decision. It's my family duty. It's my American duty."

"Are you out of your mind? Can't you stand by your own beliefs? You hate the war. You're going to drop out of school for this?" I heard myself raving. I tugged his collar back and forth, shaking him. The air went out of me. "What if you're killed."

"April Fool's. Got you," Salcedo said miserably. It was twenty past midnight, April 1.

"You bastard. You shithead," I said, laughing despite myself, enraged.

"It *is* you," Fracas moaned, staring at Salcedo, at both of us.

Fracas enlisted.

From Basic he emailed reports of drinking binges and officers' wives fucked, in detail.

After I began my senior year in high school, he shipped out. Against my will I read his rare battlefield messages over and over. "Cleared a building of fedayeen

irregulars. Another patch of ground gained." "I believe we have been called here. These people are a clean slate. It's up to us to write their new lives on it. We have that power." "There have been one or two times when I thought I was going to cease to exist. And when that's over, you almost gloat over the idea that you get to exist for a long time."

Salcedo has shaved his head and quit everything. He just lies around in the dark. When he's at Tío Victor's I lie with him, when I can. The cell phone goes off like a casino. I'm terrified to leave his side, that he'll jump down to the recruitment office. At night I massage his feet with force as if I can rub some of myself into him, to keep him safe. It's a desultory life.

Last weekend Salcedo was singing in his sleep, and I felt him getting hard against my femur, whether for Fracas or me I wouldn't know. In the morning he covered my face with kisses. He cooked me French toast with secret spices. It was nice. I don't know where he's going.

We're waiting for something.

I wanted Fracas to know I'd used his gift, so months after my birthday I cashed in the skydiving certificate. Tandem offered the longest freefall. When I launched, the rider on my back, the weightless weight, was Fracas. I saw him spreadeagled naked across the blue.

The soldiers march naked, gleaming between the blue arching sky and the baked ground. Their slender haunches dimple with their strides while sand and stones scorch their feet. Their chests heave with breath, their heads swivel with the turrets of tanks beside them. Orange shellbursts blossom around them. Their scrotums jog against their thighs, their penises point delicately. Metal tears past, bullets and jagged shrapnel.
I hold my breath at the tenderness of the war.

G-2

"Any calamities?" Supervisor Barbara Henley asked.

"No." Ross finished his last entry in Ward G-2's daily notes, slid the brown notebook across to her, and lit a cigarette. Henley began copying into the master log.

"Divinity epidemic," she read aloud, and gave one of her rare laughs. "Dispute between *Viggiano, C.,* and *Loftus, T.*, each claiming to be God.

"*Znodek, H.* agitated, punching the air. Described seeing the 'bad, green-haired Michael Jackson kicking the crap out of the Michael Jackson with the normal hair.' Conditionally assume patient hallucinating." Henley nodded. "That's right," she said, "leave the tough diagnoses to the supervisors. Well." She smiled wanly. "The moving finger writes, and having writ, moves on."

Tucking the log under her arm, she walked past him toward the women's unit.

Ross stared at a gray fog forming on the windows. He was thinking about a drink, and then bed, though as always by the end of the shift he wasn't sure he could move. The clouded window panes meant the temperature had dropped sharply since he'd come on

that afternoon. Autumn was beginning.

"Nigh agh," said the regular insomniac, an old man with a speech impediment.

Ross looked over his shoulder, but Henley was gone. She did have a nice ass, incongruously enough, he thought. Tonight she wore tight, mustard-colored slacks. Her hair, clipped short, was gray at the tips. Though she was only in her late thirties, he guessed, there was something faded and sexless about her. According to hospital rumors she was gay. All Ross knew about her personally was that she lived alone with two Labradors.

He would rather she didn't make the big production about the notes. He wrote them for himself. The observations were precise because they were important to the job. The jokes were for his own entertainment. He liked fooling with hospital jargon the same as he had toyed with legalese at the law clinic before he was fired. The first time he'd noticed the similarity in language he'd rammed the penpoint halfway through the notebook. When Henley made her rounds that night he considered blaming the damage on an unknown patient, but he said, "Oh, I did that." He was entitled to his oddnesses, he supposed.

His cigarette had burned to ash on the tray. He lit another. The ward was dim, only the desk lamp illuminating the white, cement-block walls. Ross held his hands under the light, inspecting the cuffs for stains or fraying. A large young man with pink cheeks and untidy hair, he'd dressed expensively in dark slacks and bright, solid-color shirts since being hired a few months before. His presenting an exemplary image made the patients feel better, he believed. Afternoons he might spend twenty minutes choosing exactly the right shirt. On the other hand, he once brought in his flute to play jazz, though he yielded when the patients demanded "Danny Boy" and "Santa Lucia." His exaggerated reluctance made them laugh.

The phone rang. "We need a man on F-2 right away," Henley said, out of breath.

"Whoops," Ross said to the insomniac. "Probably the window-breaker again." He

jogged down the corridor to the glass-and-wire-mesh door separating G-2 and F-2 and opened it with one of the skeleton keys in his pocket.

Henley stood at the entrance to the dormitory wing, opening and closing her hands. Her fingers splayed out at curious angles, like the toes of an injured bird.

"Pat Croswell's stuck in the toilet stall, and I sure as hell can't pull her out," she said.

"Jesus, I guess not. I'm not sure both of us together can." Pat Croswell was listed at 5-10 and 265 pounds. Her favorite shirt was a football jersey from a batch donated by the New England Patriots. None of the other patients could wear them; the rest had been made into seat covers.

When Ross and Henley stepped into the bathroom, one stall was filled with the woman's huge, pale buttocks. Standing over her, Ross could see that she was kneeling, her shoulders wedged between the toilet and the metal partition, her face against the floor.

"This isn't so good," Ross said. "She could smother this way, couldn't she?" He hooked both hands under her right shoulder, Henley seized the left, and they lifted, grunting. There was no give.

"It's O.K., Pat, we're going to get you out," Ross said. "Try to give us a hand." He patted her upper back where the pink nylon nightgown had ridden up, collecting in pleats. They pulled again. Ross's fingers dug into her flesh. He was surprised how firm she was for such a fat woman. He and Henley heaved until they were out of breath, but the space was too cramped for leverage.

"Do you think she's had a seizure?" Ross asked.

"It's possible."

"If we had a sheet we could make a sling."

Alone, Ross futilely attempted turning the woman's face to one side. Draped over her he had no way of bracing himself. He did a couple of back bends and wiped the sweat

from his face. “You’ll be all right in a minute,” he said, touching the pink material again.

He’d first seen Pat Croswell at Wednesday movies, his second week on the job. She’d been crying, lightly cuffing her cheeks with both hands. When he asked what was wrong she pointed to Clark Gable on the screen, laid her head on Ross’s shoulder in a stiff, almost stylized way for a few seconds, and resumed slapping her cheeks.

After, when he passed through F-2 she would charge up from her chair by the coffee machine and squeeze tightly around him, saying “eeeee” from back in her throat. He had to tell her, as gently as he could, that he wasn’t allowed to do that kind of thing with the patients.

Henley appeared, sheet neatly folded over her arm. She handed Ross a corner. Her supervisorial manner, cool and removed, had returned.

“Around her chest if we can, I guess,” Ross said. Pat Croswell’s arms were pinned beneath her body, but with Henley’s help he forced the sheet under her armpits and across her breasts. He wrapped one end around his wrist, Henley imitating him. Planting their feet, they pulled until the woman was kneeling upright, then crouched to catch her before momentum toppled her backward. As they lowered the woman onto her back, Ross saw her face was blue and contorted, with red and yellow streaks, and crumbs of vomit pressed into the skin. Her eyes were fixed on the ceiling. For the first time she felt cold to him.

“Well,” Henley said. “That’s that. Have you ever seen a dead person before?”

Ross shook his head.

Henley looked at her watch and wrote on a notepad. She would get the doctor, she said. They spread the sheet over the body and then Ross was alone again.

He’d known only one person who had died. His friend Lisa had become exhausted hiking in the mountains, and froze while her companion went for help. It was incredible to Ross, robust Lisa, YWCA camp director, dying of the elements. Always, she’d goaded him to ride the canyons with her, surf, lock up for a weekend of massage, or

read her favorites—Japanese pillow books, The Story of O. She hadn't been born, he said to her; the collective libido of all California had yearned her into existence.

News of Lisa's death arrived a month after Ross lost his job, moved east, and started work at the hospital. In the week following his dismissal, Ross's mother had rearended a car stopped for a red light, and almost mowed her foot. She showed Ross the ripped toe of her slipper. Ross realized he must go, though he had always lived at home. He'd been convinced he and Lisa wouldn't have stayed together long, anyway. "You're kind of wacko, Ross," she'd told him. "You don't know much about being with a woman."

Ross's heart was pounding from the exertion. Though big, he didn't keep in shape. The incandescent light in the bathroom looked weak and watery. Half leaning, half sitting against the sink, he faced the long mound. It was faintly orange, like Kilimanjaro at sunset in the Geographic photo he'd taped to G-2's wall. It seemed warm and comfortable. He couldn't think of it as dead.

Ross was afraid he was losing his sharpness. Mussing his hair with his fingers he took a walk around the bathroom, then washed his hands and face in cold water, drying them vigorously on a dirty towel. He went to the open window and looked out.

When Henley returned she was followed by a stocky man with a medical bag, and an attendant from the short-term units named Larry, who carried a steel-framed stretcher under his arm. The doctor made a perfunctory check for vital signs. "Catch the state car down at the ramp," he said. "I'll meet you at the morgue."

"Police?" Ross asked Larry.

"The doctor doesn't bother them."

Ross and Larry rolled the body onto its side while Henley glided the stretcher underneath. Ross realigned the sheet. The men bent their knees to hoist the load.

"Whew, Jesus Christ," Larry said.

Henley led them down the hall to the elevator and turned her master key in the

slot.

"Did you try mouth-to-mouth?" Larry said.

"It was kind of late for that."

"You should always try."

"Fine. You can do it now if you want to."

They crowded into the steel elevator cage, Ross and Larry on a diagonal with the stretcher between them. Ross was boxed into a corner, unable to move. His arms ached.

Ross didn't like the other man. He had a superior attitude, while Ross believed there was no better attendant than himself. Ward G-2, with its thirty-eight patients, ran smoothly. Ross had organized softball games and crafts groups, and calmed hysterical new admissions without needing the LPN's injections. Not long before, a man had gone berserk in the cafeteria, attacking patients with a knife; Ross had been the one to disarm him.

Everyday ward business was the most wearing. The men paced, lay on the floor, rocked incessantly on the couch, argued over card games without rules in the first place. Above the shrieking and mumbling Ross would hear the radio skip from station to station, or blare static. The toothless thirty-year-old Italian mewed in Ross's ear, "Where's Daddy? Daddy's home. Where's Daddy? Daddy's home." If Ross didn't respond, he at cigarette butts or glass while men returning from the grounds pounded on the outside doors, shouting for entrance. Ross would gnaw on the rim of his coffee cup and remind himself: not everyone could do this job. He'd known that when he took it. A tour of the wards the day he applied had given him nightmares.

When he wrote home, though, his tone was deliberately matter-of-fact. Still it disappointed him that their replies were likewise. His mother hoped he wouldn't let himself get hurt.

No single error or failure had cost Ross his job at the clinic. He simply couldn't perform in court. Detached from his own voice, he listened skeptically as if he were the

judge or adversary lawyer. He would feel his belly or thigh swelling into a gruesome disfigurement. Formidably prepared, he lost connection with his data, the notes glaring foreign and impenetrable. Work was like clinging to a steep, crumbling embankment with fewer and fewer handholds. Yet coming from a family of lawyers, including a California Supreme Court Justice, he'd never questioned what he would do in his life.

"Boy, my shoulders are glad they've been doing their canoeing," Larry said.

Pushy, Ross thought. Larry was the hospital's social mover. He would say, "Let's soak up a couple of pitchers tonight. Who's got the weekend for sneaking away to the beach?" Ross didn't go.

It upset Ross that people knowing him while he was in his emotional slump would believe this was what he was really like.

The elevator hit bottom with a rattling crash. A cement ramp led to the open rear of the official station wagon. In the moonlight the car, navy blue by day, was a gleaming liquid gray. The two attendants staggered down the incline, digging in their heels. They needed the driver's help guiding the stretcher in. It was at least a foot too long. "You have to hold it," the driver said. Ross squatted in back with Larry and Henley, grasping the stretcher poles. Seeing Henley's fingers tighten he tensed for the initial lurch of the car.

When it came he had a vision of the stretcher flying away from them, tipping out the back, the body tumbling to the road, white sheet flapping. He thought of crawling into bed between his own sheets, then again of the white cloth suspended in the air, empty, fluttering against the background of the dark trees. Ross broke a sweat. Briefly he panicked, afraid he would do something disgraceful.

But the hump lay inert. Larry and Henley seemed to have noticed nothing amiss with him. His own hold on the pole remained secure. As the car wound downhill the lights of the hospital receded behind the trees. Branches scraped the roof. Though the driver hummed to himself, nobody talked. It was cold with the tailgate down.

At the base of the hill they coasted to a stop. Ross opened his hand and flexed his fingers. He'd seen this building often, assuming it was a garage. Now the heavy sheetmetal door was open. Inside, walls of stainless steel were studded with double rows of stainless steel handles. The doctor stood by the autopsy table.

"Set her down," the doctor said.

He produced a plastic sack from under the desk. The four men wrestled the body into the opening—a glimpse of protruding eyes, strands of gray hair plastering the cheek—and zipped it up. When the doctor pulled a set of handles, a metal tray slid out beside them. The men lifted the sack onto the tray and rolled it back into the wall. Only when Henley fixed a tag to the handle did Ross observe tags scattered over the walls.

A clammy, doughy feeling lingered on his hands. The sensation of heaving the sagging weight onto the tray remained in his muscles. Picking up the stretcher and sheet, Ross stepped outside.

Finished, he thought with relief. Now a suitably hard-boiled remark was in order—there's one for the cooler.

"Horrible," Henley said, surprising him with her vehemence. "This is one night I'll appreciate having those miserable, useless mutts." In the back seat Ross sat beside her. Larry climbed in front with the driver, who chatted as he started the car.

Ross leaned back and rested his arm along the top of the seat. When his hand made the slightest contact with Henley's shoulder, he didn't draw it away. While staring straight ahead, where the headlights panned across oak and maple trunks, he imagined his hand traveling to her breast. He saw himself turning the woman's slender body toward him, covering the small, bare breasts with his palms. Kissing just over each.

Ross made a face. Deprivation, he joked to himself. Working the evening shift he didn't meet women outside the hospital. Moments even in Pat Croswell's embrace he'd felt a response—an urge, then obsessive fear of the impulse. Similarly, serving the patients' juice a few days before, Ross had been certain he would continue pouring until

the paper cups overflowed, washed off the table, until the last juice ran down the cracks of the linoleum. These non-incidents were becoming more frequent, Ross believed. While he had his midnight drink he wrote them down. It seemed the best way of keeping a perspective on himself.

The part of his hand touching Henley was unnaturally warm. Ross didn't know if he could bear her nearness without putting his face in her lap. Rolling her onto the floor with him, he would push deep, fingers sinking into her buttocks.

Ross gazed forward, neck rigid. He remembered one of the last days with Lisa, at the beach, when they'd swum beyond the first line of waves. A steep crest caught them, spilling Ross headfirst into the gritty turbulence at the bottom. When he surfaced, pleasantly disoriented, Lisa was laughing beside him. A brown nipple poked over the top of her bikini. Ross stared as though seeing it for the first time.

"Hey," she said, "there's a sweet, contemplative look. Hot stuff, admiral." She reached behind her neck to jerk the string, letting the two triangles slip into the foam. As she treaded water, her big breasts bobbed one way and then the other as if pulled by opposing currents. Ross didn't know what to do. He wanted to touch. He knew she wanted him to touch. Tentatively, hand flat, he caressed the nipple with his palm; then he turned the gesture into a grab. Lisa rolled her eyes and her mouth pinched in at the corners. "God, Ross," she said. Fastening the top, she floated on her back a few yards away. Soon a plume of spray marked her kick into shore.

Yet in the airport waiting room the goodbye kiss had gone on and on. Her mouth would not let his go. They clutched, swaying. She drove him back against the railing until he'd had to lift her arms from his neck to board the plane.

What had she wanted from him, Ross wondered—a suety boy who spent nights exhaustively preparing his legal briefs, far beyond what was necessary, instead of with her. He would deliver gifts to her, floral arrangements, delicate blouses, handsome replicas of prehistoric pornography, and leave for the law library. He studied longer hours

after meeting her than before.

As the road made a quick bend, the hospital sat on top of a hill, yellow windows blazing. The car pulled up in front of the main entrance.

"A sad use for the old stretcher," Larry said, hauling it, bumping, over the tailgate. Ross waited for the invitation—get a coffee, drive to the river for a joint—but it didn't come. Dumfounded, he was left with Henley outside the rear of the station wagon, holding the empty sheet.

"Horrible," Henley said again. "Take it up for me, would you mind?"

Ross imagined Lisa sitting in the snow, alone, feeling the deceptive warmth beginning in her limbs. Until the airport boarding, he thought, no one could have guessed that Lisa even liked him. He couldn't have known. Refusing love, Ross thought—that would have been a terrible wrong. Ross felt a cool, refreshing vacancy, as though the inside of his body were a cloud, and he knew he was going to cry. He hadn't cried since long before leaving home, maybe not in years, but he knew it would happen now, or later, or tomorrow.

Henley's stride was firm leading Ross up the stairs, but in her office she sprawled in the swivel chair, looking worn. Ross stooped over the desk to sign out. He felt the pressure of her hand on his elbow.

"You did a good job tonight," she said. "I was glad you were there."

He looked into her blue eyes. She opened her purse.

She had lovers, whatever their sex, he told himself. A mistake now would embarrass him as long as they worked together.

No, he thought, she was alone, and old, besides. And if she refused him, well, perhaps she was gay.

"What we need now is a drink," he said. "Under the circumstances I think I'll prescribe it. PRN."

"What a wonderful idea. How very restorative, Ross."

"I know at least one place nearby that isn't all bumper pool and teenaged hoods."

"A night on the town. Ha." Then she sucked in her lower lip. "But the dogs. They go to pieces if I'm late."

O.K., Ross thought, her choice. He bent over the signout sheet. The important thing was to try, he told himself. Defiantly he pulled in his stomach, which had settled softly over his belt.

"So why don't you just follow me," she said. "It's a couple of miles off the main road. I'm probably as well-stocked as any three or four bars around, to be honest. If it's not too much out of your way."

She continued to fiddle with her handbag. Dropping her head brought out the fine wrinkles around her neck.

"No, that's good," he said. "Quieter. Just the four of us. What do the dogs drink? Oh, hair of the dog or whatever." He got a laugh.

But her pose and movement, her expression, were so brisk and noncommittal that Ross was offended, considered saying the hell with it, anyway, until he noticed she was only passing her car keys back and forth from one hand to the other.

Later, when he got under the covers beside her, Ross began very slowly. He kept himself detached, in control, until she was moaning beneath him, and her legs had begun to tremble. Only then did he let himself go, deeper, so that he lost himself completely with where he was. It seemed he was pushing himself through a tunnel of overgrown trees. There was a sweet, acid smell like ripening oranges. He nuzzled her face with his. At the same time he managed to work one foot free of the sheets. Ashamed, he willed the foot to withdraw under the bedclothes, but when she gave a drawn-out sigh and flung her legs around his back he was wiggling his toes in the chilly air. This was a habit he'd always had, in any bed.

ICELAND

CONTEMPT

NOTE: To avoid anachronism, the story uses terms for Native Americans common at the time. The Tohono O'odham Nation was known as "Papago" until the 1980s. Native people generally were referred to as "Indians," even among themselves.

By 1949 Zahl's Indian Arts had become a destination for tourists and connoisseurs, even from far beyond Arizona's borders. Behind the counter, Gene Zahl resembled a Saturday Evening Post cover, America's Shopkeeper. Tall, with a shock of dark brown hair and lean facial lines, he had the reserved handsomeness of a Gary Cooper. To complete the picture, he puffed aromatic tobacco from his pipe and favored a leather carpenter's apron. In manner he was courteous and patient with customers, answering for the thousandth time that yes, each article was authentic Indian hand-made.

Curt, three years old, would play at the foot of his father's stool. Once a customer apologized for dropping a quarter.

"It's only money," Curt said.

Startled, the man looked into the boy's regarding, hazel-eyed gaze. "A Utopian,"

he said.

"Curt is one of the most decent people I know," Gene said.

Curt was ten, he and Gene collecting Hohokam potsherds in Tres Arboles Canyon, then common as dirt. As Curt squatted, his probing fingers dislodged trickles of sand. To be absorbed independently in the same task pleased both him and his father. A pair of shell beads flowed into Curt's hands. Nonchalantly he strolled them over to Gene, who squinted and pronounced them "remarkable. Not a nick." Curt's poker face broke into a smile.

The two worked their way to the creek and its narrow linear forest of cottonwood, willow, and sycamore. Once they had found a perfect flint arrowhead washed down from higher elevations. Instead Gene pointed to the imprint of deer hooves in the rich silty mud. They decided to track it.

The landscape transformed itself into a three-dimensional puzzle, with bent grass and sudden bird flights the potential clues. Curt's alertness intensified each sensation, the modulations of green within a single sycamore leaf, the sheen of water curving over stones. The portent of scattered droppings shouted aloud. Where the signs petered out, they ascended a deer trail scarcely wider than their bootsoles, up the rocky canyon slope toward the overshadowing peaks. On a knoll they gulped water, took in the breeze and the view.

"What was it like in prison?" Curt said.

Socialist, pacifist, atheist, Gene had spent the last year of World War II in the federal pen for refusing induction. At home he had hung photos of grimy child coal miners, and Negro freedom marchers being mauled by dogs. The gallery in the hall included a mushroom cloud and the frozen corpses of Sioux massacred at Wounded Knee. At Christmas the Zahls' neighbors strove to outdo each other in lavish displays, a handpainted, lifesized crèche, galaxies of colored lights, Santa hitched to a prospector's buckboard. Gene

planted a sign titled “Jesus on Capitalism,” a grim Christ ripping down storefront Christmas decorations. For days the paper boy deliberately flung the Zahls’ copy into the hedge, which required switching over to the lousy evening rag, and after the next Christmas it started all over again.

Gene considered his son’s question. “I was sorry for the guards,” he said. “They seemed bored and frightened all the time. It must have been a drab, second-rate form of warfare for them.”

“But I mean for you, what was it like to be in prison?” Curt said.

“Not great. I missed Hildy. I was in because I didn’t believe in fighting, and so I fought every day.”

Curt nodded. Pretty, with a round freckled face, a habit of rolling her tongue tip over slightly overlapped front teeth, Curt’s mother Hildy had grown up on a ranch and enjoyed what her husband did, trail rides, punching the Jeep over a one-rut “road,” seeking a legendary weaver in the middle of nowhere. She’d converted to socialism. “Wealth is the savings of many in the hands of one,” she whispered to Curt, quoting Debs behind an ostentatious customer’s back.

Her deft, feminine movements stroking Curt’s fingers and hair would seem like sunshine filtering through curtains, warm and enveloping, not exactly indiscriminate but falling upon all. Curt was grateful when she made sense. Even as a child he’d be irritated if she seemed not quite smart, or at least not concentrating.

The deer trail was steep, with little traction. Yucca and Spanish bayonet gave way to scrub oak, and the footing in dried leaves became yet more slippery.

They clambered up a ledge of knurled shale.

“We didn’t pack water with a hike in mind,” Gene said.

“We can’t lose that deer,” Curt said.

“There’s water in the mountains,” his father acknowledged.

To prove his stamina, Curt took the lead. Where the track turned nearly vertical,

he grabbed the purplish trunk of a manzanita shrub for a handhold. Clear of the canyon, they now clung to the mountain slope. Perspiration blurred Curt's vision, and at first he wondered what the dark, bulky steer was doing at such high altitude, parked across the trail above them.

"Black bear," Gene said loudly, and they halted. Pebbles rolled down onto them. The bear oblivious or uncaring, its claws tore into a felled juniper. Gripping Curt's arm, Gene bushwhacked a detour, looping far downwind of the animal. So transfixed was Curt by the shaggy hindquarters—a *bear*, he kept thinking—that his feet skidded on the talus. Suddenly he was exhausted. Without even the toehold of the deer path, the climb became seriously arduous; each step required thinking through. Still Curt kept the bear in view until it was the size of a bumblebee's rear, then a seed, then gone.

Branching off to the left, a draw promised easier terrain. Curt drank the last of his water under a juniper. Crumbling the scaly, pungent needles under his nose revived him.

"O.K., time to turn around," Gene said.

Curt protested.

Gene sat and fanned them with his broad-brimmed hat. "I'm a moron," he said. "I'm insane to have brought you here. As of now, we don't know where we are, but we still aren't lost. Any one of these seams in the mountainside is a waterway. Follow it, it becomes a streambed, it all leads to Tres Arboles Canyon."

Instead Curt bolted up, and his father panted behind. The ridge loomed a good half-mile overhead. They charged as if taking it by storm, running nearly upright, then scrambling on hands and knees. Curt smelled pines. The final ascent was strewn with fallen needles, and Curt's feet flew out from under him, his knees banging into the slope, needles pricking his hands. Not so much concerned as exasperated, he dug his fingers through the deadfall into the sandy loam, and hauled himself over the crest.

They found themselves among rhyolite pinnacles eroded into fantastical shapes, an old lady hunched under her umbrella, a duck. The valley below, sweeping to distant

mountains, was criss-crossed with riverbeds creeping like centipedes across the desert floor. The wind chilled the sweat against Curt's body. His skin was clammy, mouth and throat parched, his tongue a swollen impediment. Gene's face was like raw beef. "Now the job is to find water," he said.

Curt nodded, unable to speak. His vision zoomed and his head pounded.

"Breathe through your nose," his father said. "You lose less moisture that way." The regular breathing soothed Curt. "If there's anything we're going to find in a geologic setup like this, it's water."

They began walking, the saddle grassy, even, strewn with large stones among the ponderosa pines. "Take it easy, and listen," Gene said. Curt didn't say how thirsty he was. It didn't matter, because soon they would have water. Shadows of tall trunks strobed past, and needle clusters bent sunlight into jumpy colored bands. As they walked, Gene placed a hand on Curt's shoulder, which completed his happiness while inhibiting the swinging of his arms.

"Hear that?" Gene said, a mad twittering of birds. They aimed toward the sound. From the base of a granite wall a spring seeped, staining the rock with minerals and algae before collecting in a pool. The alcove was bearded with waist-high ferns, moss, and summer holdouts—scarlet penstemon and yellow columbine. Birds hopped and pecked. Cupping their hands, they drank, sparingly at first. The water welled up inside Curt, filling him to his extremities until he felt ripened and green. "I'm a plant," he said, but Gene either didn't hear or understand.

Gene pointed out a stream draining from the far end of the pool, its course a shallow trough in the gray stone. "Drops right off the edge there," he said, "and straight down into Tres Arboles. We probably could slide ride into the Jeep and home to Hildy."

They lay back in the grass to rest. A saw-tooth maple overhung the pool, its leaves weathered, leathery, only slightly tinged by autumnal red and gold. From its lowest branch a black-and-white phoebe launched itself repeatedly, skimming the pond in

a circle and returning, sounding its rising and descending note. The recurring motion lulled Curt, and when a pair of whitetail deer materialized from the ponderosas, standing chest to chest by the water, and turned their heads to present their flicking ears and solemn black eyes and muzzles before bending to drink, Curt thought he was dreaming. Where the ponderosa trunks reached up, a raptor hung motionless on the thermals, outlined against the sky.

On the whitewashed wall of a tiny village chapel, in the far west of the Papago reservation, a tribal artist had painted *Waw Giwulk*, the sacred peak. Below its knobbed summit, skirted with cloud, a runoff stream gushed through a wooded glade, over boulders whose lumpy contours suggested blunt animal heads. Tumbling further downhill, the spillway watered saguaros depicted in progressing seasons, creamy white flowers at their tips giving way to red fruit that fell in heaps, and in the foreground, fields of corn, squash, and beans. A pair of deer gazed outward, and against a cloud a hawk unfurled its pinions. The artist had poured glitter over the water. Hovering in the sky, a black silhouette, the Papago Man in the Maze, I'itoi, Elder Brother and everyman, watched over all.

The spirit of the mural had come to life on the mountainside. "It's a blessing," Curt whispered. Staunch atheist, Gene held quiet, frustrating Curt. A good man, he wouldn't even accept his own blessing.

Curt almost had one friend. A teammate on the high school JV basketball team, whom Curt admired for his consistency and toughness, turned out to be Mormon. If he wanted to make varsity, Curt knew he needed to learn the Mormons' discipline. Lunging into the lane for an off-balance scoop shot, he felt like a clumsy animal. Even in pickup games on weedy, cracked playground courts, the Mormons set picks, cut to the back door, made the extra pass.

Gene shook his head. To him each religion was only a metaphor for man's

incompleteness, his resignation to deficiencies in his own character and good fortune, an impediment to human progress.

But Curt retorted, “The Mormon genius is community.” An essentially isolated person, he could exaggerate others’ virtues. The Mormons lined the banks of willow-hung rivers, crafted quilts, set picnic tables groaning with vast arrays of home-cooked food, and filled fields and byways with their communal games. Practicing free throws, his friend chased down their misses, crashing into the chain-link fence. Once when a spiky wire popped their ball, he loped home a mile in July heat to retrieve another one. For hours they scrutinized, dissected each other’s technique. “The flight of the ball leaving the angle of your wrist over and over, that’s become a standard of beauty,” Curt said, not caring if it sounded faggy. Grinning, his friend held the follow-through pose as the shot clanked off the rim. “Psyche-out,” Curt laughed.

But watching the ‘63 NCAA championship on TV, the Mormon slurred Chicago Loyola’s black star, Jerry Harkness. “Watch. Harkness will start out quick because of his natural reflexes, but the mental discipline will wear him down. He thinks with his black butt.”

Curt challenged him. “Harkness loses, I take you to the next cracker hoedown blows through this tumbleweed town. Harkness wins, you treat me to some rhythm and blues.”

Curt mourned his friend’s lapse from goodness. When you let goodness slip away, could you ever retrieve it? Could you ever say about someone, “He’s a good person, except he’s a racist?” Who was the good Nazi? Curt couldn’t look at the Mormon, as if he had a crooked deformity.

Curt punished his friend a few weeks later with the first-ever Arizona appearance of James Brown and his Famous Flames.

Tailored in dark blue, his passenger sat stiffly in the Zahls’ Jeep. “I’ve never lied to my parents before. They think I’m going to the Saturday Evening Forum.” Tears welled in

his eyes. “Here.” Pulling out his wallet, he extended a ten. “Take a date. Drop me at the Forum.”

“You don’t have to be scared of Negroes,” Curt said.

“That’s a bunch of puckey.” Eyes clearing, he stared ahead, stonily resigned.

Big old sweeping sedans humped in the parking lot of the southside ballroom.

“I’ve got to pee something awful,” his friend whispered.

“Ask.”

“I can’t pee in a Negro bathroom.”

“Going to be holding it a long time, then.” At the door, squashed forward by the throng, Curt barely felt his feet touch the floor, as if he were on an escalator. They found two folding chairs. The ceiling lights dimly outlined the surrounding heads through the fog of cigarette smoke. The Famous Flames bobbed and twirled in unison, grinning in identical suits, but their horn yells tore loose and ripped the room. Together, all the loud calls around him were only one drawn-out sigh. The world was proving itself to him, Curt thought.

The horns subsiding to an awestruck stammer, the MC hulked over the mike. “Ladies and Gentlemen, he has performed for you ‘I’ll Go Crazy,’ ‘Lost Someone,’ and ‘Night Train.’ He has taken his music to the Apollo Theater, to Paris, France, and the North Pole. Let me introduce to you the hardest-working man in show business, Mr. ‘Please, Please, Please’”—as one, the audience rose, Curt’s stomach with them, as James Brown bounded onto the stage, blazing gold lamé behind him. The crowd’s hollering kneaded Curt’s head, his hot breath merging with the olfactory cocktail of unfamiliar hair products. A rush whooshed from his feet to his scalp. But it was his friend who pitched onto the floor.

Curt dropped to his knees. The boy’s fingers twitched, his face pallid. Curt started to lift him in his arms. Two teenagers grabbed the feet, and together they rushed him outside. They leaned him against the wall, legs stretched onto the sidewalk like a

derelict's. Curt felt for his pulse. A woman dabbed perfume on his forehead, sprayed under his nose. He squinted his eyes open. "There you go, honey," she said. "Excitement's too much for his little heart."

"I'll wait in the car," his friend said.

"The hell you say. I brought you." Through the open door Brown was wailing, the horns punching and keening. Dancers shimmied silver. Installing the boy in the Jeep's front seat, Curt said, "You going to puke?"

He waggled his hand, maybe yes-maybe no. For the ride home he hung his head out the window. As they neared his driveway, he admitted, "There is a child of God in them." Curt never saw him again outside class or off the basketball court.

By Curt's junior year in high school, the communists were attacking in Vietnam, in Laos on the Plain of Jars. American advisers were dying in Southeast Asia. Castro and the Russians had trained nuclear missiles on America. East Germany had built a wall to keep its own citizens in, and shot them when they tried to escape. In a newspaper photo Laotian villagers fled their burning homes. Hurrying, their shirts flattened against their chests and fluttering behind, their expressions were not panicked but inward and purposeful, intent on the task at hand, survival. One looked back, silhouetted against the pyre. Half a woman's face was covered by a crab-shaped discoloration, blood. The photograph filled Curt with rage, and he considered for the first time that a war could be just. He taped the picture to his wall, across the hall from Wounded Knee and Hiroshima.

"They shouldn't get away with it," he told his father.

"It's the tragic legacy of colonialism," Gene said. "As long as there is no freedom and justice in these nations, communism gains a foothold."

"This isn't John D. Rockefeller or Coca-Cola, these are people getting up every day to pull rice out of the ground. It's b.s."

His father underestimated communism, Curt thought. Gene's misjudgment gave

Curt a strange flourish of triumph. Openly, sitting at the breakfast table, he studied the newspaper's body counts from Vietnam.

From then the conclusion was inescapable: if he believed people should be killing the Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong, then he should be killing the Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong. When Curt, during his senior year, told his father he was enlisting, Gene said, "I've seen this coming." Then he passed his hand over his forehead and sat down quickly. He composed his face as if about to comment dryly or wisely, but he couldn't speak. He looked up at Curt with his calm, level gaze, but it was only a reflex because he could find no words. He clasped his hands behind his neck, the fingers working together.

Seeing his anguish, Curt wanted to retract what he had said, but could not.

The shock seemed to affect Gene's speech, like a stroke. Characteristically terse, his arguments become verbose and desultory. "There's no justification for taking a human life," Gene lectured. "To capitalism these lives, these irreplaceable lives, Vietnamese and American, are only grist for the mill. Grist for the mill."

He wasn't a jingoist, Curt assured his father. No one could grow up among Indian people and swallow America whole, without gagging. But even among Indians, no powwow began without honoring Korea and World War Two vets. Already Gene's young silversmiths and painters were signing up for Nam.

"The most cynical con of all," the soft-spoken Gene ranted, shouting. "Recruiting the survivors of holocaust to kill and die for their exterminators."

Moments before tipping off the divisional basketball tournament, Curt's varsity team huddled. They were pink, already dewy with sweat. Curt's heart beat madly with excitement. Across the huddle the senior forward's neck cords tensed. Zit faces, sparse mustaches, slap hands. Curt understood that nothing like this moment ever would be repeated in his life.

He enlisted a week after graduation, in June 1965.

"You'll see through the insanity before it's too late," Gene said. "Get out any way you can. Dishonorable discharge, who cares. Medical. Psychiatric. Moral turpitude. The shop is waiting for you whenever and however long you need it, and nothing the military tries to do to you means a rat's behind."

Hildy's parting words were, "I've thought of shooting your foot off. I know I'm going to curse myself because I didn't."

Allowed one final visit home after getting his orders for Nam, Curt spent the evening with Rosanna Juan, who helped Gene with odd jobs at the shop in return for his customary inflated wages.

Curt had a long, muscled body like freckled ivory, his spiky crew cut sandy blond. The mouth wide and thin, a fuller nether lip suggested desire. Girls were attracted, but he disappointed them by refusing to tease. That art, he believed, debased the woman for the sake of the joke. He had lost his virginity in a whorehouse where at least, he said, the terms were clear.

He and Rosanna had played pinball together. Any attempt to open his locker would occasion a shoving match, elbows and shoulders sending books flying. She liked to be tickled until her screaming face was flushed and teary. If he wasn't on guard, she'd flick the base of his milkshake cup, splattering him with chocolate globs.

Fellow misfit, the solitary Papago in a high school of two thousand, Rosanna also was a virgin. Her generous mouth, mushing hot against his, went stiff when he touched her ass. She mumbled against lust. Her household surged with the Pentecostal elation of her extended family day and night. Rosanna moaned in her sleep during seventh period English. After Curt took her hiking, mountain trails became her refuge. Even in the wilderness she wore long, floral-printed dresses, which she'd arrange decorously around a fallen log while she sat singing a morning song, her face placid and sad. Her eyes looked faraway above her broad, copper cheekbones, and her lips scarcely moved with the thin, lilting melody.

At home she'd played for him a record of traditional Papago music, compiled by a folklorist. They lay head to head on her bed, even alone in the house, because she trusted him. The drum had a sharp, boxy resonance unlike the cavernous echoing of a powwow drum. Accompanying it, the gourd rattle crackled at a higher, drier pitch. Together they sounded like a big brother and a little brother walking hand in hand, wearing plain clothes. The singers' voices rose and fell like the path over the hills, through the tall stands of saguaro, toward the distant mountains. The touch of Rosanna's head sent a smoky smell through Curt's nose, down his chest, and into his balls, where it expanded quietly like a lake. As they lay still, he was rocking her on this surface.

Swimming in a mountain lake, Rosanna had gleamed brown through her thin underwear. He'd embraced the clinging nylon and kissed her navel while she shuddered and wept. "You're beautiful, like a country-western singer," she said. He'd wanted—had to—rip the flimsy material from her body, but her solidity in his hands prevented him—she had her right to be a crazy celibate with water streaming down her belly into her pubic moss, goosefleshed breasts bound in the dripping bra. He'd gripped her wet hips. Turning their backs to each other, they'd stripped their sodden underclothes and dressed.

Now, facing him on her front porch, the night before his departure, they talked low, reminiscing. Later, after her parents had fallen asleep, she sneaked him in her bedroom window and lifted off her nightgown, her sturdy curves outlined by the porch light. She touched the tip of his cock—finally—where it pushed out his jeans.

"My dear," he said into her brimming face. He savored the rush of his body toward her. But instead a weight in his chest blocked him, pushed him back just as tenderly. "Keep your virtue," he said. "I'll be gone and you'll still have it."

In January of '66 Curt was shipped from Fort Riley to join the First Infantry, the Big Red One, quartered just north of Saigon. Suspicious that a high score might place him among the medics, clerks, or some other exalted status, he deliberately had flubbed

the aptitude test, and had been designated a rifleman. After Basic Curt felt engineered for the job, clean-honed with his spare, muscled body and shorn cranium.

Camp—shallow trenches and pits indented the flat earth, reinforced by sandbags and straggly, rusted barbed wire. For a few dozen yards beyond, the ground had been scraped bare for a field of fire, which ended abruptly in rice paddies. Pressing in on all sides, the rubber trees and dark jungle fringe hid the movements of unknown numbers of the enemy.

The men sprawled in their emplacements, a few looking out past the perimeter. A couple of punctured sandbags leaked red dirt. Each soldier had adopted his own style of battle dress, the headgear alone ranging from helmets to bush hats to kerchiefs. Their stares toward Curt, the Fucking New Guy, expressed amused indifference but were nonetheless penetrating; they locked on. With a half-smile, flashing an ironic V for victory, Curt slung his gear beside them.

Once Curt divulged his background, he became "Injun," "Geronimo," or "Chief." The grunts broke up days of tense idleness with rueful tales. Another Arizona boy, from Parker along the Colorado River, had played "fu'ball." A wide receiver, he once had caught a pass upside-down. The ball was underthrown, and looking over his shoulder had jerked him off-balance so that he fell backward, feet flying up. The ball hit him in the chin strap, but his hands wrapped it up. "Made the catch standing on my head. 'Course we lost 44-6."

Curt contributed his unconsummated romance with Rosanna. "I fucked an Indian once," someone responded. Name Richard Ring. "On my way back from the draft physical, in fact, going to my grandpa's. Trailways bus comes into Indio—Indians in Indio!—about midnight. I'm half asleep, mind's eaten up with things, don't know where the fuck I am. Need to switch buses, step down, station lighting is sick, all the people on benches look like they're being shipped off to hell. Skinny girl comes up to me, hand in the back pocket of her jeans. She's talking, I talk back, we play the shuffleboard game. Does she want to drink some wine? She tells me she's Apache, eighteen. I figure maybe fifteen.

But her eyelids make her look like a woman. They're kind of veiled, sad, sexy, I don't know how to describe it. Long black hair. We find a liquor store, he sells me the pint of muscatel. It's like even after the physical, suddenly everything's going perfect. We scoot down under an oleander hedge and start drinking the pint. Meanwhile I've missed my bus. She lets me strip her naked and we fuck right there in the dry leaves. She's hard and skinny and she really moves around. She kisses me and bites me. Then a flashlight is coming, a cop! We get her dressed just in time. The cop buys the whole story, we're just waiting for a bus, took a walk. It's still holding perfect. Walking back to the station, I take hold of her hand. She's so little I could pick her up. Her bus is about ready to go so I see this movie-type ending, the big clutching hug, sad music building because we'll never see each other again. I'm trying to think of the right thing to say, something she'll remember. She gives me a wave—not even a kiss, a wave, for half a second, like I've just carried her bag for her maybe—and hops up the steps, gone."

"To be as fucked up as everybody around here, you got to be fucked up to begin with, so fuck everybody," the Parker grunt said fraternally.

The first death Curt witnessed was from heatstroke. Others were saved, men who had dropped in their tracks, eyes going back in their heads. The grunts thought nothing of flooding a felled buddy with water from their own canteens, even if that meant completing the patrol dry themselves. During one of his rounds the platoon lieutenant inspected each man's feet, pausing to dig and clip ingrown nails, examine the red pustules of rot without the least show of embarrassment or distaste. With his superiors Curt had maintained an impeccable compliance bordering on contempt. But he succumbed to this intimacy, reclining with an unself-conscious sigh, muscles passing from knotted tautness into a weightless blackness like sleep.

VC walked mortar fire through camp one morning, puffs of red dirt blooming in rows. Curt dove into a pit on top of Parker. With nowhere to put their hands, they gripped the loose folds of each other's fatigues. A close hit spilled grit over them. Curt thought his

eardrums would burst. A trickle of tobacco juice spread over the stubble on Parker's jaw. Curt felt the warmth on his neck. Parker shoved a stick of gum between Curt's chattering teeth.

Knowing he might have died without even having engaged an enemy was a special crumminess, like a dirty old metal plug lodged in him.

Curt's number one bud—his "corn," in the squad's inexplicable argot—was the wiry Pfc. Madison, a self-proclaimed adrenaline junkie. The squad pinned flat by sniper fire, he wriggled from one man to the next with tensile gusto, delivering the sergeant's orders. Days of tedium could not dispel his optimism that combat was imminent. He welcomed walking point; Curt could feel the excitement in his posture, like an electrical wave: he was going to engage, something was going to happen.

Mealtimes Madison parodied the unctuous attentions of a waiter. While the squad masticated their C-ration ham and limas, he bobbed among them murmuring doublespeak French, evoking the heavenly savor and aroma of their cuisine. His black eyebrows met when he smiled, forming a second fierce grin, a negative of his curved, feral white teeth. Even his bodily movements held the tense curve of a smile.

"I see better on point," Curt said. They were drinking coffee like puddle-water.

"I just want it to be me," Madison said. "Whatever I'm doing, I think I should be the guy. Arrogant fuck."

"I like being the guy, too," Curt realized, embarrassed that it would be so.

Madison's glacial eyes flashed on like headlights, with his laugh. "We can both be the guy," he said.

He was the neighbor friend you never would have made otherwise. Apropos of nothing, he would spill disclosures: "In high school, I dug potatoes three summers in a row, on Long Island." "Yeah, I could rape." Wantonly, in seeming fits of divestiture, he gave away his C-rat peaches, poncho lining, Bowie knife.

Each was a human essence, Curt decided, Madison's cold flame, constancy,

Ring's big-fleshed embarrassment, Parker's crafty underlook, eternal qualities like the expressions in Renaissance painting.

Friendship in Vietnam required no special talent, but only to be shot at together, to share terror, filth, and misery without letting each other down. What failed Curt was expressing it. He fantasized ridiculous exploits, bellyflopping on a live grenade to save the squad.

He yielded to the diminishing and enlarging effects of dependence on others. In the jungle he felt himself extended before and behind. Asleep, he knew he was still vigilant. Standing guard, he slept in others' dreams. The worst hardship of point was not exposure, fear—an ambush could hit the middle of the column as well as the head—but loneliness. Instead of a fatigue-clad back trudging ahead, there was only the jungle canopy, perpetual dusk, trapping the stultifying heat, its rustles and slitherings the backdrop against the rhythmic plopping of his footsteps and his abruptly banging heartbeat.

When the villagers they defended against the Communists were the Communists themselves, torching a VC hamlet could not carry the cruel exhilaration of scourging an enemy. It was more like lancing a boil on one's own body, or worse, amputating one's own gangrenous hand.

Curt wished his family could appreciate what he was doing. He liked to think of them horseback riding through wide-open Navajo country, visibility forty miles in every treeless direction. The occasional juniper would provide its green counterpoint to the vermilion sandstone, but no cover for anything larger than a ground squirrel. Curt admired Gene's treatment of the horses, his never goading them into a forced pace, his carrying extra water for them. Miles from the stable a mare had pulled up lame, and Gene walked her all the way back. Curt remembered her slumped, syncopated lurching beside the others' steady plodding. Head down, she looked mortified.

"My back is fucking me over, Jesus," Curt told Madison, on patrol. He shrugged

in the pack harness and the accompanying cloud of mosquitoes shifted to follow the jerk of his face, like electrons. “I don’t care if they’re fucking Cong,” he said. “I don’t care if they’re Swedish acrobats. Just step the fuck out where I can see you. Just in the road.” He swiveled the M-16 from the hip. He could almost feel the hot charge of the gun jumping through his hands. Bodies flying backward, and his body rocking.

Madison dug it. “Swedish acrobats,” he said. “English fox hunters.”

Curt kept up the chant through supper of C-rats.

“I don’t care if they’re fucking Cong.

I don’t care if they’re Commu-nist.

I don’t care if they’re Belgian dwarves.

Just give me some of your love, babe.

Please give me some of your love, child.”

“I don’t care if they’re fuck the fuck,” someone sang. “I don’t care if they’re fuck the shit.”

“I don’t care if they’re Mack the Knife.”

The sergeant ordered them to shut up.

How they could yell and bang on things, and then flop over asleep.

In late spring the First’s orders changed. Instead of lolling in firepits, they humped over roads and through marshes, sweeping hamlets and jungle, never sleeping in the same place two nights running. The rains had come, turning the ground into slop, caving in trenches and foxholes. Sodden feet, fiery with lesions, exuded a distillation of stench. A sniper’s bullet knocked a chip off of one guy’s elbow and buried it in another guy’s shoulder. Search-and-destroy was capture-the-flag with no flag, no object but killing. The platoon would secure a piece of ground, move on, and within days the enemy would return in full force, like freeloading relatives. A pile of VC dead, collected for counting, was startling and gruesome, like a horrible, inexplicable accident.

Dusk patrol, Curt's bowels gurgled. The line halted while he squatted, spurting diarrhea in the grass. Rubbing the sweat from his eyes, he stared through the vines at a narrow trough of trodden leaves not two yards off their path. He motioned to the sergeant. Gingerly, almost tiptoeing, the squad fanned out along the VC trail. "Less than an hour. I'd say five or six of them," Madison whispered. Parker rigged a claymore in the dense brush, where detonation would rake the trail chest-high. Ring unfolded the bipod from his M-60 barrel and sighted the machine gun down the longest visible stretch, the squad taking up positions on either side of him.

Ring wanged his helmet on a branch. "Damn," he said, then, "Oh, shit."

"What?" Madison hissed.

"I'm caught."

Wriggling, Madison and Curt converged on him. Twisted awkwardly, Ring was trying to hold absolutely still, his face white and quivering. He pointed toward his left ankle. Snagged on the pant leg was a crude metal hook, attached to a taut wire, fine as a spider web, that disappeared into the bush.

"Don't move it!" Ring panted.

Madison held up his palm. Curt braced himself against Ring, steadying him. Pulling his knife, Madison cut a half moon of cloth around the hook, which dropped to the ground. The three sighed. Madison's fluorescent grin. "Dumbass like me, they don't even need to bait the hook," Ring said. He moved the M-60 emplacement. Above the jungle canopy, pink and orange streaked the sky.

They heard the whusssh slapping toward them through the foliage, and the tree in front of them ignited like a Roman candle, a roaring thunderclap, then spitting and popping. Pain seared Curt's cheek, he smelled hot metal. It was as if the smell had burned him. Outlined by the flames, the squad flung themselves flat, shooting into the surrounding black.

"Out of the light," the sergeant yelled. Scuttling backwards, they jammed in fresh

clips, fired.

The only answering sound was the crackling tree. They lay waiting. They breathed like a heavy engine, thudding pistons. Twenty minutes passed, and total night had fallen. “RPG,” Ring said. Rocket-propelled grenade. “Tree saved our ass.” Now they would have to return in darkness. Behind them, the tree sizzled.

Madison ferreted out their own path, and half-stooped they groped forward. Curt was certain the VC would have cut off their retreat, either by ambush or booby trap. Under his hand the hard ground felt unbearably transient; at any instant it would erupt in flame or puncture him with a centipede bite. At a crashing through the underbrush the men stiffened, but it was too big, an animal. Seconds later an explosion threw them sideways. They waited, and crept on. Mosquitoes lanced Curt’s neck. He had the sensation that the men moved in unison, that with his every left step a dozen left feet touched the ground; as his right hand planted for balance a dozen palms flattened. They were a clumsy organism, an evolutionary throwback, the last of its kind.

Then whump, whump, 82 mm. mortar incoming, the laughing AK’s. Bullets whispered through the leaves like the first raindrops of the monsoon. The squad dove and scattered. For fear of hitting his own men, Curt held his fire. The noise melted away, including the sounds of his men. Creeping backward, Curt heard no one. When he paused, he had lost the trail, swallowed up in knife-edge grass.

Shut down, he told himself, take your bearings. The tree’s distant glow, discoloring the glimpses of sky like the lights of a small town, was still behind him. But then, it would have remained behind him no matter what direction he’d gone. Above and below him, all around, the jungle was close and black. Sit, he told himself. You are in control. You can run blindly through the black. You can backtrack to the tree and pick up the trail. You have water. You can lie down and wait for morning.

He chose the tree. The glow had no point source, but was suffused through the dense, dead air. Whatever direction he was going, it almost certainly was away from the

camp. He didn't like that feeling. He had to stop again and re-trace the plan: locate tree, find trail, return. Padding forward he squished with sweat, black, surrounded by shapeless trees, varying densities of black. He almost could believe the jungle was empty, or that he wasn't in the jungle but on the mountain slope above Tres Arboles Canyon, where every water course was lit by the moon. Like liquid silver the stream by his feet ran toward its fellows, a silver netting like the strands of a necklace converging on Tres Arboles Creek, pointing toward home.

Reaching out his hand, he felt the brush of a fern, or the cloth of a VC leg. Against the sky, treetops fuzzed, with no depth. The distant crump and pop might have been echoes in his own bones. The orange smear of sky was unchanged.

Scuffling through the brush, a moving shape—large, don't shoot—Parker. "I'm fucking lost," Parker said.

"We're fucking lost," Curt repeated.

But the glow was brighter. Curt and Parker kept low. They found a trail. At first they started hunched practically over their knees but then they walked upright, flatfooted, promenading. What the fuck difference, Curt thought. They might just as soon be singing. It was absurd. Because they had found each other, two lost dicks, they knew they couldn't be killed. Curt didn't recognize the trail.

The flash and roar came from their right, and almost immediately a grunt dashed past, ignoring them. For the few seconds he was visible he held a sprinter's form, chest high and arms pumping, before the blackness absorbed him. They came upon him sprawled across the trail. It was the Fucking New Guy, a replacement. Though alive, he had no left hand, and the blood flowed out his arm like rain from a gutter. "No wonder he was in such a hurry," Parker said. "Ran away from knowing his hand was gone." They lifted him, Curt pressing the stump tight against his ribs. The warm wetness seeped down his pants, one more fluid among the swampy dankness, the sweat and piss.

"In football—" Curt began.

"Handoff," they finished in unison, gasping with laughter.

It wasn't their trail. The path split, they bearing left, and this branch forked again. Other tracks crossed theirs, the jungle scarred with them. They intersected a road. The shocking openness distracting them, they trotted left onto the pale band, actively disbelieving it might be a field of fire, or mined with Bouncing Bettys.

"I think he's dead," Parker said.

"Not if it's just his hand," Curt maintained. "Maybe. Unless." The M-16's stock, squeezed against his bicep, jabbed his armpit, almost slipping to the dirt.

A motorized grinding sounded, halting them. Tearing toward them, an armored personnel carrier swayed, track crushing the brush at the road's edge. Lowering the guy, they waved their arms, and the APC stopped to accept him. They delivered the inert weight into the bowels of the armored vehicle, the troops' white eyes under domed helmets flinching from the unlucky burden. His other hand might have moved.

Reassured by the sheer mechanized bulk, they reversed direction, following, though soon the vehicle was out of sight. They trudged the road, stumbling into each other with fatigue, until dawn raised the darkness, leaving the jungle gray. The undulating shades seemed part of Curt's brain waves, as if they could be explained by dream. Mist clinging to the treetops, stagnant humidity enclosed them like amber.

"Fucknuts APC didn't know where it was going, either, hellbent for nowhere," Parker muttered.

Waves of sound slowly rose, the insects' whine, fugal counterpoint of chattering and twitters; in an undercurrent, the foliage swishing and rustling. Air and sound were dense as spider web.

Fighting ripped the veil, so close the ground heaved beneath them. Curt never had heard such a noise, the thuds and explosions, incessant chattering gunfire. His stomach clenched tight, his rectum spasmed, jerking him upright. But even as they ran forward, M-16's cradled, the battle itself, marked by oily black smoke churned up through the

trees, seemed increasingly, impossibly distant. Yet the din surrounded them, deafening, ricocheting off the trunks. The smell was of a rendering plant, the mixed organic and synthetic stench, almost tasty but gone wrong. Toasted, rancid-sweet.

They advanced, army of two. Flights of birds whirred against them, escaping, but the action was no nearer. Air too heavy to breathe, they slowed to a drag. By the time they approached the ambush, the enemy had dematerialized, the only assault the sledgehammer heat. Burned-out tanks and APC's slewed off the road. Corpses hung out of gaping holes in the metal. Tree trunks were shot in half, the tops hanging in splinters. Blood pooled in the dirt. Emerging from the stinking smoke cloud, medics draped a sling between them, a pair of bootsoles protruding, joggling limply. The armored column seemed to have spontaneously self-destructed. Curt stared unbelievingly at the impenetrable woods.

A series of flat cracks spat from a tree, and a windshield showered glass. Curt could see a blob of foliage trembling. Carelessly, without aim, as if play-acting, he squeezed the trigger of his M-16. The tree limbs bounced and spread, and a dark package fell to the ground. Curt and Parker ran to the spot. The black-clad body was broken, splayed. Under the bullet hole in the forehead, the open mouth exposed crooked teeth that seemed ready to take a bite. A few paces behind the VC lay a gelatinous, russet mound of tissue. Curt's bullet must have blown the brains out of his head instantly, before the body fell from its perch on the branch.

"Gosh," Parker said, impressed beyond profanity.

Curt didn't want to see it any more and turned away, but of course he saw nothing else in his mind's eye for a day or so. Then he put it aside.

In those first few hours, trudging back to camp through the inevitable downpour, he picked "lifeless" over "dead." "Lifeless" was the human form suddenly minus life, "dead" the condition it would occupy for eternity. "What a fuckin' mess," he said aloud, listening for the taint of sentimental remorse. When there was none, he repeated with hard relish,

“What a fuckin’ mess.” His swearing had begun in the army and would be a shock to his family when he returned. “‘Fuck this. Fuck that,’” his mother would say, bitterly but with a certain shy naughtiness.

Stretched out on the ground that night, the rain one long sustained hiss, streaming off his poncho and puddling under his head, Curt reflected that his father would not have been able to shoot the sniper, and others would have died. It made his father’s life seem over and done with.

Two weeks later his squad was running a recon patrol some one hundred yards from the main force strung out along Highway Thirteen. Cursing, the corporal had just lost radio contact. Almost retching in the heat, Curt was tipping back his head to swig from the canteen. Madison shouted from point. There was a dry rattle of automatic rifle fire from the brilliant green foliage, a helmet flying sideways, bullets punching into meat. The screaming was immediate and continuous, and individual. Though he’d never heard them this way, Curt recognized each man he had known as each lost what he had been and became an agonized frequency of noise. Tears stung Curt’s eyes. His leg went out from under him. Prone, blind with tears, he fired through a screen of elephant grass just beyond the muzzle of his M-16. Its roaring covered all other sounds, making him feel he was alive. He emptied his clip, reached for another but his backpack was gone.

The firing had stopped as if by a spell. He froze, willing it to return. His back arched with the tension of waiting, and a yell was trying to escape him. He heard only silence, separate from the screams that belonged to another sense, not sound. He could see the screams as thin twists of vapor.

Instead of his squad, small bareheaded figures in black, gunbarrels protruding, floated across the grass as if they had arisen from it. Curt kept them in his peripheral vision, staring straight ahead. The screams ended in short noisy bursts. He didn’t think of death. He waited as he’d waited at Basic, lined up for inspection while the sergeant

passed before and behind them. He'd anticipate the tap on the shoulder that meant fall out, pussy shit-licker, you fucked up, piece of shit asshole cunt-boy, and a hole would open in the ranks, and that hole was you.

It was that way. The grass rustled behind him, and a muzzle poked into his back, prodded harder. Fuck you, he thought, he wouldn't stand up for them to shoot him down. But there was a sharp voice, and the insistent digging of the metal, so much effort that he had a sudden hope—survive and kill them. As he tried to stand, his right leg collapsed and he fell forward. The next attempt he took the weight on his left, bracing with his arms, until he forced himself upright. The pain in his thigh was a black blot moving up his spine into his brain, taking his thoughts. He stumbled forward, the gun at his back hurrying him. Three more VC joined them, trotting alongside. They spoke low and not much.

Just within a wall of trees he was herded inside a hootch. Through a rent in the thatched roof the disk of sky was a distant blue. His VC pointed back the way they had come. "How many?" he shouted in a reedy voice. How many dead? Curt didn't know what he meant, but it didn't matter, he was still fighting, and he said nothing. As long as they wanted something, he was alive. Don't give it to them. If he could spring, grappling the VC's back toward the others' guns, his fingernails would claw eyes and skin, teeth meeting in the man's throat, ripping cartilage, blood and breath gushing into his mouth.

Curt's VC uppercut the gun butt into his jaw, knocking him over backward. The others picked him up, and the interrogator jabbed him in the stomach. "How many?" Curt closed his eyes. "How many?" The VC clubbed the side of Curt's head, and he fainted.

When he came to, the sky was blackening with the oncoming monsoon. Time seemed to have passed. The VC had tied a rag around Curt's thigh. He had forgotten he was going to kill them. He felt no fight in him, and he feared he would tell them whatever they asked. He was more afraid of acting badly than of dying, because he'd forgotten

why it was so important for him to live. Closing his eyes, he could join hands with his men, one on each side. That felt so good he wondered why they hadn't thought to do it before. They walked down a white-hot road, squinting into the underbrush. They all seemed to be chewing something, throats gulping and working. They spat out gouts of half-chewed meat. Curt couldn't keep up.

His VC sat against the wall, watching him. And then all hell broke loose. He heard the whir of choppers, explosions shook the ground, bullets tore through the thatch. The VC sprang up and ran in a crouch for the door. Turning, he pointed the AK-47 at Curt, long enough—two or three seconds—for Curt to grasp that his death had arrived. Sadness and chill closed around him. He was conscious of shaking hands with his father.

Then the VC disappeared out the splintered tunnel of light. Shouting his English words, Curt hobbled out after him.

His people didn't shoot him. Their hands took him.

The AK bullet had tumbled through the muscle of his thigh, and it would be two months in an Okinawa hospital before it would heal. Muffled by painkillers during the day, Curt's senses went on night alert. Patients screamed in the dark; the screech of aged plumbing and the gurneys' squealing wheels were like screaming.

Why were doctors bothering to make him walk, Curt thought. Everything was clean, with starched, white sheets and clean, limbless men in wheelchairs. Nurses chatted across his bed, reminiscing about department stores with escalators, and nightclubs whose neon-hued cocktails poofed into flame. They were exceptionally beautiful, these American women, their eyes worn with care and tiredness.

Gene flew to Okinawa, his face all broken open with concern. "We're getting you out," he said. "With disability," he added, voice shaky with anger at the sight of Curt's leg.

Curt sat straight up. "I don't want a discharge. What the hell is wrong with you?"

he shouted.

When Curt returned to the field, casualties had soared. With replacement more routine, the bond among the men seemed less tight than Curt remembered, for which he was grateful. A reliable team was what he needed, not intimacy.

In early November the entire First Division was dispatched to Tay Ninh Province, west of the Michelin rubber plantation, to join Operation Attleboro, which had evolved into a full-scale assault on four VC and North Vietnamese regiments.

Sweeping a clearing, the platoon was hit by machine-gun and mortar rounds from a copse. Curt flung himself onto the dirt road and sighted along his M-16. He could not fire the weapon. Eighty-two mm. shells raised geysers of dirt around him. Above the din he could hear regular bursts from the soldier to his right. In his own hands the M-16 was a cold, inert piece of plastic and metal. He had neither planned nor foreseen this. The foreign feel of the object panicked Curt, not because of the bullets snapping overhead, but the helplessness of inaction. He thought of dropping the gun and running down the road along which he'd come. But he had no desire for escape.

"Fuckin' piss jammed?" yelled the nearby soldier. In response Curt sent a volley into the treetops, a sham. His failure to cover his field of fire threatened the soldier's life, the lives of all those around him.

Unable to remain or retreat, Curt stood and walked forward, M-16 at his side. The ground was even, the slicing grasses flattened and shredded by repeated attacks and counterattacks over the weeks. There was even the ghost of a breeze playing at his temples. His peripheral vision was magnificent, affording a panorama of the two lines of men slowly writhing toward each other through smoke and flame, leaves raining down like cinders. Men stood and fell, explosions tore holes in the patterns. Curt walked in the gift of knowing the exact and simple right thing to do. When he arrived at the copse, the fragile trunks blistered and bleeding, the VC were gone, even their dead.

Remarkably, a sympathetic CO took notice of the incident and cut short his tour. By then the euphoria of Attleboro had passed, and he believed he had washed out of the war.

As the weather warmed, he swam in a motel pool near his home. Weekday mornings it was empty. Floating on his back, he would grab his knees and exhale, the plummet ending with his spine bumping against the gunnite floor. Inert, he would lie on the bottom for what seemed a long time, though not long enough. Beneath the surface the liquid absorbed sound. He wished he could breathe that stillness into his lungs, become it. Traces of light zipped around him, warped and fluttering.

Gene sent him on a purchasing trip to Acoma mesa, where Zahl's had traded for twenty years with a family of potters. Feasts must be eaten, new babies lifted into Curt's arms. He examined the wares, their geometric designs like the buttes, gullies, and distant peaks viewed from that high place. To glance from a pot to the jumbled landscape below was like jumping from one world to the next.

The World War II and Korea vets drove Curt over the rez line for a hellacious drunk. He told everything, from forests leveled by bombs and napalm to an old mama-san caught stringing claymores along Highway 13; she was shot dead. As he related killing the sniper—"he fell out of the tree like a crow"—some listeners nodded vehemently, others shaking their heads.

"You'll need to purify yourself," one said.

But when Curt described his conduct at Attleboro, they treated him not as a madman, coward, traitor—nor hero—but a clown. They imitated him walking toward the enemy, mincing ethereally with their index and middle fingers splayed in the peace sign, pantomiming his astonishment at the absence of VC. "I peaced them away," said one.

"I am Curt, soldier of peace," joined another.

"Hallelujah." They were laughing so hard their eyes squinted shut, and Curt laughed, too, falling sideways out of his chair, climbing back to laugh more.

He told how his men had died. As the Indians' eyes teared, Curt fought himself slipping through the yellow light of the bar into some maudlin drunken exercise, an excuse for generalized cursing and weeping ending in mayhem, but it was too late, his head lying in his arms on the table as he sobbed. Afterward he was sorry for having doubted the Acoma men, there in the Indian bar, temple of grief. They helped him into a pickup bed. Mist drizzled. The truck ground noisily up the steep, rutted dirt track, zigzagging away from the desert floor. Curt's arms and head hung slack, feet tilting up. Moisture rinsed his face.

His laughter intimated to Curt that the worst, the sense of being too many outsized, jarring pieces ever to fit together, was over.

Between the GI Bill and loans, he was able to enroll at the state university, in archaeology, as he'd always planned since finding his first potsherd, and reading about Schliemann at Troy and Mycenae, and Haury uncovering Snaketown. Renting an apartment freed him from the everyday weight of his father's oppressive kindness and tact. For the first time since he was a toddler, he grew his hair out past a crew cut, along with an untrimmed, shapeless beard.

He went for drinks with a classmate, at a neighborhood bar not picky about I.D. The student was into chicks, foxes. Every woman who came in looked good to him.

Curt had a thirst, and the Rusty Nails he ordered were keenly, keenly delicious. They sliced through the scene, with its smoke and old men and pinball players, like a knife through a sheet. Curt fit perfectly inside that rip, wide enough only for the sweet acrid taste and pebbles of ice on his tongue. Each cold drink was a miraculous pleasure.

He and his companion shot pool with two women, late 20's. Unable to explain how the war might have enhanced his charm, Curt no longer felt any challenge in chatting up women. The student would tell Curt a couple of days later that the women had kissed them in the parking lot and made out with them in their convertible. "You had

her top up and her bra down," he said.

After a dozen Rusty Nails, however, Curt was blacked out on his feet, and for what happened next he had only the other's story: After the women went home they drove into the desert, where the garish main drag, four lanes greased by neon and fast food, dwindled to a country lane before deadending in mesquite bosque. Under moonlight the ground was itself lunar.

Didn't the tree shapes look a little ominous, Curt asked.

A gray box, a VW van, was parked a couple of dozen yards back towards the city, on the other side of the road. More precisely, it yawed halfway into a runoff ditch.

"Shit, let's push it back," Curt said.

Too precarious, too dangerous, the other said.

Curt was urgent, agitated, the student would tell him. "Can't let it go over," he said. The van was locked, in gear, with the brake on. "These don't weigh shit," Curt said. "If we pick it up a little, we can move it all the way onto the road." But no matter how he strained at the rear, his partner at the front, they could only rock the chassis. It teetered. Gasping, they stood flexing their hands.

"Fuck it," Curt said. Walking around to the driver's side, he shoved the VW toward the ditch. The metal creaked. Feet scrambling for traction, he lowered his shoulder and rammed. The van went over with a crash, wheels pointing up.

Of course Curt swore off drinking. Two days later he heard himself asking Janet Hamlin, a girl from archaeology, to celebrate his birthday by sharing his first legal pitcher. He hadn't spoken to her before outside the formalized exchanges of class discussion. She asked sharp questions, sharply, with her spiky blondish bangs, pointy nose and narrow ears, the forward thrust of her cleft chin. Her lips, though, were plump as snap beans, needing to be sucked and bitten.

Curt didn't know how much of this reading was apparent in his face. In any case,

Janet said yes without hesitation. She blushed, a rush of blood that subsided unevenly, leaving red patches. “Well all right,” Curt said, breaking into an impromptu dance step.

When he picked her up, she looked good in a loose red shirt with her longstemmed bluejean legs. He took her to dinner, Italian, a splurge on his budget. Slightly older than he, she was about to graduate in pre-med, archaeology a lark, a final elective. They progressed to a bar, immersing themselves in golden pitchers. With her hair brushed back Janet’s high cheekbones gave her an abstract beauty. As they danced to the jukebox, she inventoried Curt’s entire skeleton, bone by bone. She was encyclopedic about infarcts, and pituitary gland disorders, the cheery domain of gigantism and dwarfism.

“You get pedantic when you’re drunk,” Curt said.

“Oh, I do,” she said. “I don’t like myself, drinking. Let’s go home before that happens.”

Once in the truck she flamed a joint for them.

The bedroom in her tiny 1940’s stucco bungalow was wallpapered with posters, several by Dürer, including a hare in the snow and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. From the north and south ends, respectively, a marijuana leaf and a peace symbol faced each other. After a few drags they began to revolve annoyingly.

“You were in Nam, weren’t you,” she said.

Curt ignored her, and she let it go. She put on Country Joe and the Fish, and during a long instrumental they undressed. Naked, her body first looked aloof, the trim dart of pubic hair an arrow, an ironic joke. But her skinniness accentuated her wide hips. She was all pelvis, all fragrant pussy. They fucked as if flaying each other, an all-night pounding of the bed, his head against her head, her shoulder, the pillow. At one moment he felt he would faint. He rested a moment in half-consciousness, a brown drowse. Then they started again.

He woke before dawn in near-light. A VC sat at the foot of the bed, glossy head bent, cleaning his AK-47, like a child patiently assembling a Tinker toy.

It was his VC. Since Curt's convalescence in Okinawa that face had come to him, the enemy poised at the door of the hootch in the moment he did not pull the trigger and end Curt's life. Brown and blank, the face was a chip of wood struck from a tree, suspended in that instant before flying into the beyond. His eyes glinted fierce black, but with what? Pity? Despair that he had lost? Or fear, that aiming and firing would cost the fatal split-second. The black forelock made him look like a boy.

Many ways Curt could have died. Sniper bullets had passed close enough to part the hair at his neck. The transport that had lifted him out of Tan Son Nhut Airbase might have lost altitude and vanished into the South China Sea. Like young men on the rez he might have wrapped his car around a telephone pole or poisoned himself chugging vodka. But only this death had a face, and it had not taken him. It didn't make sense. Curt had only to evoke that face—his savior—and be gutted with dread, hollowed out.

Curt sat bolt upright, which woke Janet. Strong grass, he told himself experimentally. Janet leaned over and kissed the crease between his thigh and lower belly. Her nose disappeared into his crotch and her lips nuzzled his balls. "I need to go," he said, trying to keep his voice even.

She raised her head. "My beautiful warrior," she said, face pained with empathy.

She called the next night. "I'm broke," Curt said. "You buying?"

"Trust fund."

"In God we trust," Curt said nonsensically. He could say anything to this woman. Despite her hard looks she was a simp, a squish.

They went to a different bar, where he introduced her to boilermakers.

"Just letting you know, I can't keep this up night after night," Janet said.

"Then don't," Curt said.

She tossed back another. Farting suddenly, she laughed uncontrollably.

"God," Curt said, waving away the possible odor with his hand.

Walking to the truck, wrapped around him, she slurred, "Don't hurt me. I hurt

easily." Marveling at her, Curt thought, what would she not let him do to her?

Not bothering to make dates, he'd call her after a half-bottle of tequila, or show up. Greeting him sleep-puffy and barefoot, she'd bustle into welcoming activity, straightening the couch, pouring him a drink, brushing her hair. He was grateful to her body for being what he desired so much and simply could have, the cool sleekness of her flesh under his hands, yet her solid heat pressed up all along him. He was crazed with the sensations of her, the licked shoulder, mathematical grind of her pubis, the fumy, damp box of the word "cunt" itself—"cunt"—her buttocks clenching, steely and puckered. He sucked her cunt until she cried from coming, then slept with his head on her haunch.

A few weeks after he'd gotten together with Janet, television news reported a protest march on the Pentagon. A swarm closed around the complex.

"Lynch mob," Curt said. The menace of the throng could have burst the TV screen. He felt nauseatingly stimulated. If he were in front of them, they would roll over him like a wave, trample him underfoot.

"But they're singing. It's like Martin Luther King all over again."

"The fuck it is," he said. "The.fuck.it.is." He was near striking her, his imagination danced with it. Retreating into her armchair, she didn't utter a word until they went to bed. Cutting through the fence, demonstrators rushed the building, and the cops knocked the hell out of them. Past nightfall, the closing shot zoomed back from the Pentagon, lit up like an iceberg surrounded by the oceanic dark masses.

"I think you'd feel better being there," Janet said in the darkness of her bedroom.

"This steals the heart out of the men."

"We were this close to the war making a martyr of me, too," Janet said.

Curt surprised her with grapes and a dry Riesling. Pouring the wine into goblets, he dropped grapes to the bottom. They sipped, rolling the cold globes in their mouths and

biting for a gush of sweetness. They made love slowly in front of the heater. His fingertips painted wine onto her body. Her nipples were the tenderest pink caps. With their fullness and droop they were expressively sad, like small independent people.

"I've set up sleeping bags in back of the truck," he said. "We could drive out to the desert, pull off someplace for the night."

She checked his flashlights, added pillows and wool hats and socks. She even remembered a towel for their sex mess. "We don't want to freeze in our own love," she said. As they rushed about in terse preparation, tranquility settled over Curt.

The highway empty ahead of them, heat rising from the truck's floorboards, he thought how good it was, an expedition into the night with a woman close beside him. In high school he'd pictured men and women together this way, traveling in the tight world of the steady, unblinking dashboard lights, never arriving but looking straight ahead, driving.

He turned onto a ranch access. Rather than the starry space he had imagined, the sky was murky, clouds pressing down. After a half mile he left the dirt track and cut the engine. They unzipped the bags, mouths expelling mists. The first snowflakes wafted down. Clinging to Janet's fair hair, they glowed faintly. "Where do they get their light? It's pitch black," Curt wondered. "Just a rhetorical question," he added as Janet began to speak.

"Don't worry, I'm sober. I don't even know that answer. I was going to say—I can't. It's awful. Too un-romantic." She started giggling.

"What?"

"I was thinking, I <u>can</u> tell him why dead fish shine."

"Now, that is love talk." He shrugged his arm around her shoulders.

Later the moon woke him, peeling back the clouds. Janet seemed to be having some sort of attack. Her lips kept smacking as she paced outside the truck bed, wrapped in her coat. "I know you love me," she said. "You couldn't make love to me the way you

do if you didn't love me." Her hair hung lank over her forehead, plastered with sweat. Curt thought she was spooky, darting around the fender. "Can't you even answer me?"

"I thought you were just expressing an opinion."

"Curt, I'm really flipping out over this. Over us. Do you have valium at your place?" she said.

"I don't take tranquilizers." Actually he kept a vial, scored from a student, in his medicine cabinet. The yellow pills cut the edge off those lightning-streaks of terror. "Sorry."

Her face was white, glistening, a measure of how far he'd gone along in the process of becoming unrecognizable to himself.

Curt started to feel contempt for his classes. He could drink all night, stumble in hung over, and still pass.

End of January, the first news of the Tet offensive came over the radio. Fear halted Curt in the middle of the road. He had the presence of mind to swing into a vacant lot. This was not the hot, hammering alarm of combat but a numbing dread, as if he were witnessing the end of the world. He went home to his portable black-and-white TV. A new satellite over the Pacific was relaying the first live coverage of the war, immediate, uncensored. Hue burned, streetfighting engulfed Saigon. Airbases all over Vietnam exploded into flameballs. The maimed and dead veered onto the screen.

For two days Curt didn't leave the house, running between the TV and radio, flipping channels. Hue fell, and Kontum, Dalat, Quang Tri. It was here. VC stormed the US embassy in Saigon. A radio station reported Saigon in enemy hands. Bridges were blown, bunkers shattered. It was happening. The Viet Cong must number in the hundreds of thousands, a million. Everywhere they were overrunning outposts, camps, the smoking rubble of cities. Tens of divisions must have lain in wait in the tunnels, to burst forth at this moment. It was the end. Now cut off from cities, airfields, and base camps, the grunts

would be hunkering down in their isolated pockets, surrounded by the communist tide. They would fight for every second of survival, dispersed one by one into the jungle, where they would be hunted down like animals in the trees.

Curt crouched in front of the set. For the only time since his discharge he was whole, all the shit burned out of him, living in pure fear.

And then all over Vietnam the assault broke and receded. Cities were retaken in a carnage of VC dead. Even while the battle for Hue dragged on in house-to-house butchery, the Joint Chiefs and the President announced a great victory.

Spent, wasted, Curt sat at the local McDonald's and sipped a Coke. The caffeine jangled at him like a distant doorbell, and he realized he was hungry. The burger and cheese formed a nourishing paste in his mouth. In the booth behind him a couple of guys were talking.

"Shit, working at Pizza Hut sucks, man. You can't smoke or eat back there. The honcho catches me eating the pepperonis off the pizza last week and waxes my ass."

"Yeah, but the jukebox is far fuckin' out. Jimi, Janis. Byrds."

"Four Tops. Aretha."

"Hey, I got something for you, though."

(Ripping paper.) "The Esquires? Ah, shit, this is great! Thank you, man." (Sings a few falsetto bars.)

"Happy birthday." (Slapping of palms.)

"Thank <u>you</u>. Shit, this is fuckin' legendary. I'm buyin' you lunch. What you want? Get a shake. Get a <u>large</u>."

Curt sat smiling, so wide finally that he had to cover his face. He never turned to see the pair, wanting to leave them as voices. He stepped outside under the pathetic blue sky and was wracked with crying. He shook his head back and forth walking home blindly.

After a week he plugged the phone back in and returned to class. That night, Janet

welcomed him. She sat on his lap while on the screen a skinny girl in a bikini had messages drawn on her tummy. A few days earlier Westmoreland had issued a buttoned-down gloat about the tens of thousands of VC killed. His VC likely was dead, Curt thought. He might have been dead a long time.

The words swam into his head. "This war was a joke." He stood up, Janet sliding off. "Holy fuck!" He felt no one was with him, and something awful was happening. Walking through the rooms, he began cursing, repeating the words until they were a scream. He screamed curses in the kitchen, his fist broke through her table, and he didn't feel anything.

"Baby," Janet pleaded. "What?"

He leaned out the back door, yelling obscenities.

"The neighbors. The police," she said, trying to drag him in.

A squad car with lights flashing halted in front. Curt heard the conversation on the porch.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

"I'm perfectly fine. He was in Nam. It was unspeakable, things just come over him."

"I need to see him."

Obediently Curt emerged from the kitchen. With his bulgy uniform, the cop revived the joke. "Yes?" Curt drew out the word insolently.

"You need to be a head case, find a place by yourself. Or we'll take you in. This lady promises she'll be responsible for you. Call yourself lucky."

After the cop left, Curt said, "You responsible? That's a laugh," and he went home.

She caught up with him after class. "You can sneer at me and think your worst," she said, holding both his hands in hers. "You said 'joke.' That's very important."

"I don't know what the fuck I meant," he said.

During a week-long drunk he was able to pick up another woman. Describing to Janet how other women's cunts differed from hers, Curt said, "She's like falling into a

bed of soft pillows. You, it's like fucking a PVC pipe." He clenched his fist to show how tight. "It's not preference," he mused, "just the variety."

Janet's face was a mess when she cried, all staring and gaping as if she were being sucked into quicksand. Her ugliness goaded him further, until one night when he looked in the cavities of her face, the running red eyes, and said, "I wish I was dead." He prostrated himself beside her, and when she lay next to him, the fool, he stroked her shoulders and neck. "Janet, my love," he said, the lie all he could give her aside from getting the fuck away from her. "Sweetie," he said.

At a party they sneaked off to the host's bedroom. Curt deep in her, they were hanging over the edge of the bed, she bent backward, hair fanned out to the floor. He noticed she'd gone limp. Her head lolled. He stopped. But she was breathing, in fact, snoring.

"Rise and shine," he said.

Her eyes focused gradually. She squirmed away from him and sat crosslegged on the bed. Her face and shoulders shone with perspiration. Her hair fell in relaxed wings. Closing her eyes, she smiled slowly. Her voluptuous lips trembled. "I really fell asleep? While you're ploughing away at me? I <u>am</u> done with you."

He feigned hurt, glad for her.

Curt's eyes stared back from the mirror with malign idiocy. It had taken just a few days of cutting classes, impulsive midnight runs through the neighborhood in his cheap tennis shoes, and swilling Italian Swiss Colony Chianti for half his beard to have matted into coarse spines while the other half puffed into a springy nimbus. His head looked like a porcupine fucking a poodle.

At the Zahl home Gene's eyes followed Curt like a dog's, waiting for Curt to show him the lead. Wait for this, Curt thought—a short right cross to the jaw, Gene's head snapping against the wall in a flurry of hair. Treating Curt as an invalid, Hildy

served him a breakfast tray as he lolled on the couch. Her freckled cheek curved like a ripe peach. Curt saw a machete springing through her neck. He didn't want to do these things but had lost confidence that he could stop himself.

Shopping the newly-opened mall for discount tennis shoes, he ran into Rosanna Juan. Almost stout, she was pushing a double stroller, but after a moment's quizzical recognition she shot him the old sidelong glance and rammed him into the tiled wall.

"What have you done to your face?" she said. "You look like Yosemite Sam."

Despite the year-and-a-half-old girl and the infant boy, she'd earned her GED and was attending junior college. Except on weekends, her grandmother took care of the children. "You should have made love to me," she said. "I wanted you so much I went with the next guy who came along." She pointed thumbs down, wrinkling her nose and laughing. She held up the baby for him.

If anything needed to tell him his infatuation with Indians was over, he thought, it was the sight of her. What a truck. Her T-shirt, straining across her torso, sported the Papago Man in the Maze, I'itoi, a small silhouette at the mouth of a labyrinth. Curt recoiled from the image of his Viet Cong, a blank cipher, the treachery of ambiguity. He tried to conceal his hands' trembling, the more so because of a paranoia that Rosanna knew, was baiting him. She had found the vulnerable spot and thrust home the knife.

In his thoughts the VC who had spared him and the sniper he had killed had become confused. The face his captor turned to him, fleeing the hut, was slack gray, the eyeballs dead jelly above the toothy grimace. The brainless corpse stared up at him, black eyes alive with urgency and indecision.

On TV the antstreams of men poured off transport planes, the pall of smoke churned out toward the sea like a thunderhead.

Curt volunteered two shifts a week as a draft counselor, serving hypocrites, cynics, philosophers and saints. All must be saved.

A youth sat across from him, wispy barbels depending from his pimply chin. “For his physical, a spade I know drank his own blood and puked it on the doc,” the boy said. He added, with an adenoidal giggle, “I’ll eat a bunch of acid.”

Curt wanted to quiet the boy’s nervously twiddling fingers with his own hand. The kid would wash out of Boot Camp in a week, if he survived that long. Inside the boy’s vest, his ribs made soft bumps under his bare skin. “How much do you weigh?” Curt said. “And how much could you lose before your physical?”

Though not a good person, Curt knew, in his work he was the semblance of a good person. Sometimes, as he yapped away, it seemed that the mouth of this fraud must stick open—yawk! yawk!—but he argued with himself that whatever he might be, his words were true. In speaking them he was honest just as river water is real even in its transitory flow over dead permanent stones.

He joined thousands in San Francisco marching against the war, up and down charmingly hilly streets past open bay windows blaring music. The air smelled like sex. Curt couldn’t remember seeing so much happiness in one place, the exception an old lady with white pipestem legs and two dogs, big Weimaraners who strained against her sinewy arms. “Bastards,” she screamed repeatedly at either the dogs or the government. At its termination the procession submitted itself cheerfully to sadistically hectoring speeches. The aftereffects of the demonstration were the same as from overeating cotton candy, sick exhilaration, headache, rage.

Local vets, Curt among them, threw away their medals in a desert wash. Caught by the sun, Curt’s Purple Heart winked blinding white. The ceremony was to be brief, but three motorcycle cops and a cruiser squealed into the clearing, roiling dust. The vets ignored them, speaking their brief pieces as the cops strolled among them.

“This used to mean to me the finest things I ever done,” one said.

“The people I killed, they were my mother, my brother, like my cousins. They gave me a medal for killing like my brothers and sisters.” The police said nothing,

miming exaggerated listening.

"The Devil is the State. Curse the State."

There were seven soldiers. Casually the police sprayed cans of Mace into their faces. Curt barely had time to register the trim, bluejawed visage before him when the hissing seared his eyes. He doubled over. Through the blurred stinging he saw fighting, nightsticks swinging. The police sprinted to their vehicles and drove off.

Curt sank into the afternoon, bourbon a malodorous stain in his mouth. Before and after him, the men strung out along the trail. He heard their rasping breath, the whump of shifting gear, the unavoidable clinks and tocks. They paused. Madison's furry eyebrows knitted quizzically. His flat hand gestured, and they moved on. Ring followed, face egg shaped, querulous, and Parker, smirking. Trying to be quiet, they were too fucking loud.

Hunting the bluejawed cop for three days, Curt spotted him at Dunkin Donuts, sipping coffee. Curt waited, deer rifle lodged behind the truck seat, until the cop popped the white helmet on his head and gunned the motorcycle. Curt followed several car lengths behind. The white bubble bobbed through traffic. The road ascended into the foothills, the desert lush, the magenta blossoms of rainbow cacti like fallen ribbons. Curt braked for a covey of quail. Beyond it the cycle's nose poked out from a palo verde, where the cop had laid a speed trap. Curt dawdled past a few hundred yards, then looped onto a dirt road, hiding the truck in a mesquite thicket. He circled downhill on foot, rifle close to his body. Through the brush he saw gleaming chrome, white dome. The landscape swam in the heat. He rested the rifle on a stone, sighted the plastic globe, the middle of the neck. The cop removed his helmet, set it on the motorcycle seat, ran his fingers through his wavy hair, shiny with sweat. Through the scope Curt could see perspiration forming on the earlobe. He flicked off the safety. The palo verde branches nodded with the wind of passing cars. At the last second Curt shifted from the naked head

to the gleaming helmet, squeezed the trigger. Chips exploded from the white surface, the bubble skittered onto the pavement. Feet scrambling on the gravel, the cop shoved his machine into the southbound lane, wobble-started, roared away.

Curt moved himself back home. In an attempt to tolerate Curt's beard, Gene grew one of his own, a tidy affair that lent him the cool of a '50's jazzman. But Curt's confession blanched his skin gray, his face like crushed newspaper.

Heading out of the Four Corners on Route 160, towards Tuba City, the camper shell packed with weavings, faces burnished by the setting sun, Gene and Curt were granted a phenomenon. As the inflamed red sunball spread across the western horizon, leaking its violent radiation into the sky, the moon floated up among the spires of Monument Valley behind them. Curt braked at the side of the road. The night breeze pushed aside the day's heat. They could feel the passage of both, first the fat warmth and then the shrinking cool, as if two lights had played over them, the red and then the blue. To see better they climbed a ridge.

Gene tugged his goatee, a new habit.

"I'm wrong about everything," Curt said bitterly.

"You're going to get through," Gene said. "I feel good about you." When Curt was able to look up, the blue twilight reminded him of a road. Gene brushed his own head and dropped. It was as if Curt had stooped and clubbed him with the smooth, red sandstone at their feet. Curt thought maybe he had, a moment's inattention that made it only seem that Gene had fallen untouched, Curt gaping over him, scrambling on his knees beside him. Weeks later he still would have this doubt, thought the doctor said Gene had died of a ruptured aneurysm.

Hildy wept continuously, shrieking and pounding. At night she paced, fighting Curt when he tried to put her to bed. She put the house on the market, announced she

would move home to her parents', in Colorado. "I had what I had," she said. "The places he took me, the ideas I've lived in, that never would have been offered to me." Her lips remained parted over her snaggle tooth, as if that, as much as her honey-toned, freckled flesh, and scent like baking bread, were the center of her womanliness. She waved her hand around the yard. "I have to go. I just have to go."

It fell to Curt to run the shop. Sorting through the kachinas mounting high on their wooden pedestals, rows of books collected over the years, basket displays, jewelry arranged by families of artists, was like picking at his father's corpse.

Peddlers materialized at the shop. A Maya woman barely as tall as the counter ledge carried road dust on her rebozo, which spread with her outstretched arms like the powdery wings of a moth. Splitting open her olive-drab duffel with a zipper, she revealed shirts and blouses whose heavily embroidered bodices were jeweled with color like plumage. They looked like the folded cadavers of marvelous, human sized macaws. Curt bought the lot.

Gradually Curt understood that salesmanship was the natural outgrowth of knowing and respecting the inventory, a feature of that climate as rain results from humidity and movement of air, practically an afterthought. He upgraded the shop's security system with wrought-iron gates. Other quiet improvements conserved display area.

The proprietor of Zahl's was in a position to make arrangements for people, to connect artists and industrial purchasers, to steer philanthropists toward effective charities promoting Indian health and education. At the weekly Chamber of Commerce breakfast, Curt organized relief for drought-stricken Papago ranchers, enlisting the rambunctious boosters of the local economy, eaters of Danish, wearers of snakeskin boots and bola ties.

Across the glass counter of the shop Rosanna greeted him with words of sorrow for Gene. Curt was shocked at her appearance. Two silver hairs strayed at her forehead,

and her teeth had spread apart. She seemed to become a different person every couple of years, now middle-aged at twenty-four. Yet as she spoke, she was transformed again. A gravity had settled into the lines of her forehead and her solid chin, her smile no longer nervous, ingratiating, as he realized it had been. While giving up all claim to prettiness, she might be beautiful.

"You're the most powerful white man I know. Look at this." She encompassed the shop with a wave of her hands. "You've got more Indian stuff than Cortez."

She needed his help, Rosanna said. While her grandma took the kids, she was making all A's and B's at Arizona State.

"I went up there to Phoenix a couple of weekends ago," Curt interrupted. "That is, I woke up in a Greyhound with an empty Jim Beam bottle at my feet, and there was Phoenix. It was night. I fell in with some kids playing basketball in the middle of Seventh Avenue. Pretty exciting, hurdling an MG to catch a pass, dribbling up the hood of a taxi, rolling across the windshield, SLAMMING the ball in a trash barrel. I don't think I've ever played a better game of ball."

"So much to be proud of," she said sarcastically, scolding him like an elder. "But the landlord is kicking me out of my apartment in Tempe," she continued, suddenly vehement. The tribe's financial aid check for second semester was overdue. She had missed January rent, and now it was two weeks into February. She had raised over half the amount for one month, but the landlord wouldn't accept it. "It made me mad. I told the landlord, 'The money's coming. He's a Chinaman." She pulled her eyes slanted, surprising Curt.

"I'll see what I can do," he said.

Driving north to meet her the next week, Curt felt such sharp grief that he was spinning, nearly blinded, like someone having a migraine. Rosanna had petitioned him as others had his father. The request conferred on him qualities he didn't believe he possessed. He swore aloud.

Rosanna ushered him into her apartment with an ironical flourish. Nearly bare, the studio was decorated with a willow basket. A mattress occupied one corner of the floor, sheets tucked neatly, books stacked beside. Punctually the landlord appeared, small, restless. Curt decided to play height and stillness. From the center of the room, without a word, he surveyed the water-stained stucco, sagging ceiling tiles. Kneeling, he jiggled the electrical outlet dangling from the wall by frayed wires.

"Rosanna has paid every month before," Curt said. "Why do you think she won't pay now?"

"Everyone has their own reason not to pay me. Drugs, you know? So much drugs." His bald, furrowed forehead contracted. "And what about the horse?"

"What about it," Curt challenged calmly, not betraying he was taken aback.

"O.K., then, so you're two of a kind like her? You chase around Phoenix on your horse and tie it up on my palm tree?"

"I was very…mmpf," Rosanna said, squirming to illustrate. "I can't register; the professors are letting me sit in on classes but just day-to day. The resort lets me ride all I want, when I get off work there, for being their Indian girl. It was a good ride. I crossed the winter truck farms, and there was open land, so I kept going. The horse wanted to let it out, he was tired of the dinky corral. When I got to the campus, I felt good. The students walking along only had two legs. So then I got home. I pulled up in my driveway and parked. The lease doesn't say anything about animals outside."

"I wonder what would happen," Curt said, "if you borrowed that horse again and we told the TV stations. Lone journey of protest. Camera pans from rez student tethering horse to peeling exterior walls, follows upstairs. Count the code violations. Hunt for the fire extinguisher. Whoa, exposed electrical and no fire extinguisher?"

The landlord held up his hand. "The electrician lives in this place."

"That should tell you something," Curt said.

"No, I mean actually lives here. Building D. Why are we talking? If you're so

excited about her staying here, you pay."

"She told you. The rent money is coming. It's delayed. I will guarantee it."

"Write it down and sign it. I got no time for this."

Curt borrowed a pen and notebook from Rosanna.

"My White Knight. Stronger than dirt," Rosanna commended after. For old time's sake, she lowered her shoulder and slammed him into the door frame. He threw the blanket over her head.

He took her to dinner. What he felt, merging into freeway traffic, reminded him of the shop, the same detached repose, almost contentment. The good actions were themselves, as if he weren't part of them. They drove into the brassy winter sunset.

In the months since Gene's death Curt had dreamed of him insistently, waking from one dream into the next. Curt was driving Gene to the doctor for a serious hacking cough, concerned because Gene kept hiding his face in a coat. Gene's distant campfire streamed smoke into the sky. Curt watched from his own fire. In the dream he didn't question why he simply couldn't douse his site and strike out for his father's; that was a given. The two fires burned on in the dark. "It's like losing my mind," he told Rosanna. "I keep waking into another world."

"Gene is saying good-bye. He's lonely. This is a confusing time in a man's life."

Curt didn't know if that referred to himself, his father, or both. The suggestion of Gene contacting him left him gladdened and sick to his dull heart.

A week later Rosanna's thank-yous arrived, a basket big enough to hide in, and Vine Deloria's Custer Died for Your Sins.

Curt hired her to fill in as assistant during vacations and summer break.

Rosanna invited him to the desert for prayer. As the sun rose, she sang a Papago morning song, shaking the rattle. The simple cadences twined around them both, and the cactus.

"You can learn the song and pray whenever you want," she said.

Belief was a powerful thing, Curt thought, too beautiful for him. She was too beautiful.

Indian arts had its groupies. A frosted blonde would lean across the display case, breasts pressed to the glass, butt hiked up. Curt invited her for a drink at the courtyard bistro. Sitting across from her tony makeup and debutante drawl, he felt the clench of contempt. Apologizing, excusing himself, he paid the bill and left her under the blue parasol. He didn't know when he would dare be with a woman again.

The clapper clanged as the door opened, followed by the usual bellows-blast of heat, one-oh-five in late June. Rather than merely tall, an inch or two under Curt's six feet, the woman customer was stately, with erect bearing and fine placement of the hands, one at her waist, the other relaxed against her outer thigh. Despite the frizzy curls sweaty and flattened at her temples, she looked like a Gainsborough.

"A big hat is retiring," she said. "I'm in charge of the gift."

"You're overqualified," Curt ventured.

"I'm the only one in the department with taste."

"Then he'll hate whatever you buy."

"That's true." She laughed. "I might as well pick up any piece of shit."

Curt smiled.

"Oops," she said, laughing harder. "No, I see, everything is very nice. In fact, the other stores around here—" She made a bilious face.

"So it's self-respect. You don't want to buy a bum gift."

"No, I don't." She looked about, then appraisingly back at him. "Is this your usual sales pitch?"

His arm swept around the shop. "Who needs a sales pitch?"

"Very nice," she repeated.

Considering the sober cut of her ecru business suit, the neckline was scooped deep. But she didn't flirt, bend low, touch fingertips to cleavage. Her creamy bosom seemed displayed because she was pleased with it.

She rummaged through the bookshelves, resting her foot on the stool, propping the opened books on her knee. Curt felt himself leaning out from the counter like a captain from the prow of an old whaler, leaning across the expanse of floor space, over her shoulder and into her soft body, fragrant of talc and sweat.

From across the room she called, "Medicine men pulling stones from people's chests, and live animals from their mouths? Talking owls? Shape-changers? Do you believe in this?"

"It's true. Last year a ghost boat came out of a dry wash and touched five people in a Papago village. Two of them died. Eight people witnessed it, they all tell the same story. Indians inhabit a different physics. And no, I can't quite believe it."

He was aware of the pages turning, her pose unchanged, as he attended to a lunch-hour influx, salesgirls from the shopping plaza who browsed, munching pastries. After ten minutes she checked her watch, snapped the book shut. She bought a leaping marlin, carved from ironwood by the Seris. "Rising, uplift," she said. "Retirement as a beginning, not the end. And it's exactly what the staff can afford."

In her wake she left the arid, slaty joy of absolute competence.

The woman came in again, a cousin's birthday. Dry and unwrinkled though the afternoon topped a hundred ten, she must just have emerged from an air-conditioned car. Uncollapsed, her hairstyle swept up into a permed mass. Perversely unbecoming, balanced on her head like a loaf of bread, it yet gave her face a more pronounced beauty, her eyes big and gray under naturally pencil-thin brows. She inquired about the miniature Papago baskets, woven of horsehair.

Curt identified the different artists and their styles, explained the significance of

the designs.

"You're more a curator than a shopkeeper," she said.

Ten minutes before closing, Rosanna totaled the day's receipts, began tidying the workbench in the storeroom. Curt asked what the woman did.

Only twenty-three, she had worked a year already for the city water department, having begun as an intern in graduate school. "It's simple," she said. "When I'm not successful, I'm not Elinor-not-being-successful. There's no such person. I'm not there."

"Who is?"

"Some inchoate mess. Some impersonator. It's all I can do to manage that person responsibly. It's like babysitting an idiot bore."

She admired the silverwork. "Are you a jeweler yourself?"

Ruefully, he told of sandcasting a belt buckle, melting the silver in a crucible, the ceramic throbbing orange in the torch's flame, pouring it, releasing his design. "Sturdy. Relucent. Corny. I wear it on my cutoffs to weed the yard."

"So it wasn't that good," she said. "That's too bad."

"Right. I didn't suddenly produce enduring art on my first attempt."

"Have you done any more?"

"No."

"Well, then." She held his eyes locked for a second, then looked away, protruding her lips, blinking.

"I will, though. It's a concept: shitty jewelry for menial domestic tasks. Plastic turquoise rings for taking out the garbage. Kokopelli junk to scare away rats."

"He's done all right with the shop, considering he killed his father," Rosanna announced.

"I don't know what we can do to get Rosanna to speak up more, say what the hell is on her mind," Curt said.

"I sense a future conversation here," Elinor said.

He wanted her so much it was irrelevant whether or not he deserved her. He invited her for a drink.

“I can’t,” she said.

Curt was counseling an elderly aunt, shopping for her nephew’s anniversary, when Elinor stalked in, heading straight for the bookshelves. A summer monsoon rattled the windows, and the lights had flickered twice. Rain whacked the roof. It was late Saturday.

The aunt dithered between wildly diverse items, not a good sign. Elinor spread books in her lap. The aunt desperately weighed a Salish fishing spear in one hand, a Zia pot in the other, deposited new wares on the counter. “The poor boy lost his hearing over there in Vietnam,” she said. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can read faces. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“No, I was there.”

“Terrible, terrible. I poured pig blood on the Bank of America.”

“Everyone doing his part, that’s what’s going to get us out,” Curt said.

“What’s the purpose of this pot?”

“Basically, to sell to you. Originally, they would have stored food in it, but now they use Tupperware.”

“Not so romantic. This bola tie is pretty.”

“It’s a fine piece. It’s an anniversary, though, isn’t it? Don’t you want something for both?”

“They could wear it at the same time. Symbolic.” She made a hanged-man face, tongue protruding. She began another reconnoiter of the shop.

Elinor skidded a book onto the counter. “This isn’t too technical, is it? I’m just learning my man is barely literate.”

"Read the footnotes to him," he said brusquely.

"Better find one with mostly pictures," she said. She returned with a glossy tome on fetishes.

"Here's a fetish for you." He recounted how students at a BIA high school had fitted a Bugs Bunny finger puppet onto their sleeping principal's penis.

She laughed so hard her skin stretched taut and color rose in her cheeks. "Thanks for the tip, Dr. Kinsey. He might want to give it a try." She pulled out her checkbook. "Say, there's one I choked entirely. I never spotted you as a vet."

"How do you spot us?" The blaze-up was instinctive.

The bottom fell out of her face. "I misspoke myself," she said. "I've hurt you. I'm sorry."

"You're young, after all, every so often," he said.

Elinor's mouth twitched, but she didn't reply, wandering away, leaving the book and checkbook on the counter. Her stare at the Papago basket display was obviously staged, unfocused. Hands behind her back, a finger tapped her palm rhythmically. Curt's heart beat hard. He scarcely could attend to the aunt on her next two passes.

Finally Elinor approached, nudging her head conspiratorially close and murmuring, "How can you endure these people? By now I would have stuck that gourd rattle over there in her hand and said, 'Here, buy this, for Christ's sake.'"

"She doesn't have to buy anything."

"Can you learn to value people? I work with institutionalized hacks."

"Look," he said. "Put away your check. I'm giving you the book. Now let's go throw it in the river. Inscribe it to him, and we'll drop it in."

She smiled with a corner of her mouth. They looked at each other for a long time.

"What did your crony mean?" she said. "There is always a hole in the picture. Upright trader, smart, good for a laugh, unfortunately a parricide."

. "I joined the war," he said. "Out of vanity," he added irritably. "I'm a cannibal.

I'm the Undead. I survive everybody." Curt turned away, beside himself with impatience. He felt unable to continue the conversation.

"Is this a singles bar? Ring me up," said the aunt, who had opted for the fishing spear. He counted out her change.

"Let's get out of here," Curt said. He opened the book to the flyleaf.

Elinor took a pen from his pocket and wrote in a bold, sturdy hand.

Rain slashed the windshield of Curt's truck as they drove to the concreted river embankment.

"Are you attached?" Elinor said.

He parked. The river coursed past in wrinkled, stiff brown peaks, floating branches and a car door tossing. "Up 'til now I've tied women to the whipping post, pretty much."

"Don't say that!" Elinor punched both fists into his chest.

He trapped her in his arms. She was big and powerful moving against him, his hands up and down her back. For a second they jammed tight against the steering wheel. They slipped, locked, into the center of the seat. He shut off the key. She tongued him, forcing open his teeth, and her mouth slid across his face, tongue wetting his cheek.

They sat, mussed. "Let's lose the book," Curt said. They shoved open the doors against the downpour. The book was a hardback. The pages already were crinkling and buckling by the time they reached the bank. The ink inscription ran, fanning into a delta shape. "There's no harm in him," Elinor shouted. "Didn't measure up." She frisbeed the book over the railing; it keeled into the flood.

"I never could feel contempt for you," he said.

"I should think not," Elinor retorted sharply. "Count on it, I could never feel forgiveness toward you."