

“It Takes One to Know One.”

**It Takes One to Know One
and Other Stories**

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Columbia: “The Rescue”

It Takes One To Know One

Madame Sophia's midget boyfriend showed up regularly the first weekend of the month. Although the other tenants in the Orpheus Arms Apartments had a way of avoiding the Madame during his visits, by Thursday I was wholly preoccupied with Alfred's coming, and spent long Friday nights loitering on a warm curbside or hanging my head out an upstairs window, watching for him. The instant his sleek car pulled up, I shouted for my mother to hurry with dinner or to get out of my way as I fled past her down the stairs. Aloud, she interpreted my fits as adolescent car enthusiasm. "It's people's *eyes* you judge by, not their *cars*. That man and Sophie do strange things. He sweet talks her for a few days, takes her cash and he's gone," she snapped her fingers, "like *that*. You stay away from him, hear?"

"He doesn't know I exist," I said.

"Well, leave it that way," she said. "Little as he is, he has power."

"He's my size, Mama," I said. "Exactly. Take a look."

My mother peered down; she saw what she wanted to see. "You are a normal boy," she said. "He is a midget."

Accustomed to her myopic view of me, I said nothing. She went ardently on. "Something necrophilious about him. He is an old man and a strange one."

By Monday or Tuesday I would hear her stopping in the hall with Mrs. Greenstein, one of the Madame's resident customers. Mrs. Greenstein was spending her widowhood here in Florida searching in the Madame's dim livingroom for a sign from her son Charles, killed at eighteen in a college dormitory fire. We both liked Mrs. Greenstein, a large New York woman with dark eyes and an alluring sadness that became a kind of knowledge in everything. On days when they

“contacted” Charles, Mrs. Greenstein sent me to the Rexall for tranquilizers, and I rejoiced for her, for on those days she became an extravagant tipper.

Mrs. Greenstein agreed. Alfred had been the start of the changes. “Now all those unnatural looking men are at Madame’s door. All blind and crippled. I don’t know when it happened but the others have stopped coming. You know, the nice tourists in their shorts and print dresses, the ones needing a little comfort on their way.”

My mother nodded. “It’s as if they had all been told.”

“Well,” Mrs. Greenstein said, “I bet they *had*. He’s the one who spread the word, with those little satin shirts and charming ways. He *knows* people. Madame says he has brought her her true work.”

“Whatever *that* means,” my mother said dubiously.

“Virginia,” the other woman confided, “it may be a fact. The Madame has been extraordinary lately.”

Alfred was my height exactly. Therein lay my fascination with him. Although Mother had a way of blocking from her mind the obvious shortcomings of my stature, I squarely recognized that in the last four years, from the time I was eleven, I had not grown a full inch. Three-quarters of an inch in those important “growing years,” when other boys outgrow everything they own, when they stretch like rubber bands into tall lanky beings. I was a dwarfish fifth grader among tenth grade lions. Under Mrs. Greenstein’s bitter-sweet encouragement I began to work at a style. Having a style would help, she had said. Hadn’t her son Charles suddenly shot upward in the last year of his life? She guided me and groomed me into another Charles. I grew my hair long and affected a romantic manner of dress. I wore scarves. I wore a cape. I even carried an earring which I concealed in my pocket until I was among strangers.

Then turning my back on the group, I screwed on my golden circle, reappearing with all the confidence of a pygmy witch doctor, muttering outlandish, scandalous stories. Once, with my earring dangling from my left ear I shifted my destiny at a school dance. Things had been at their worst for me when I set to work on one girl whom I had secretly admired in the corridors of Wakulla High School, a long beauty at least five-nine or -ten, given to a sexy lean and a kind of sad flirting with the boys. I talked on and on, about lips and the magic love arts of the woodland dwarfs, until in the end she pronounced with joy that we must kiss. I will never forget the terror of that sudden blonde hair descending on me, as though an eighteen foot statue of Venus were hurtling toward me and I needed to protect myself. I had no other choice but to let her come on down, amid the monstrous cheers of the group. She slithered above me; she shone. “You are weird,” she sang out at last, throwing her fair, sweaty head to one side for the long diligent kiss. When it was over, I fled. I pulled my golden earring off and pocketed it, staggered by life and the enormity of it, and I wandered home under an empty sky.

The trouble is that time lays a trap for growth, that if you don't grow during the time of the trap, you are caught in it, and no amount of trying will set you free. A short adolescent is dismissed as a wriggling child until the years run out and he gets to be a midget. Oh my brain, my central nervous system flourished, but somewhere at around ten or eleven my tissues quit utilizing my protein. Every day I was misjudged. Each episode left me in gruesome expectancy of the next. How I suffered, my extravagant yearnings taking a toll in nights of vomiting and fear, my mother diagnosing one dread disease after another. Urges rippled everywhere but the world overlooks the undersized boy. He is bunched with eight year olds. He is cooled with ice cream cones on a hot night while other fellows, eager to take an early lead, lie about their age to bartenders and prostitutes. Yet my history of sporadic skirmishes filled me with possibilities;

life, after all, was out there. A kiss of demonstration, a squeeze behind my unfurled cape, and I had the endurance to leap again into the world of giants.

On the Saturday Alfred arrived for what became his final visit with the Madame, I happened to be out under the streetlights watching the big out-of-state cars go by, checking also the foreign jobs with those long-haired society girls in the front seat. I dreamed unruly dreams of Fiats driven by glistening little birds, and myself, beaky and grandly feathered, leading them north. For I knew that I had to leave Florida, leave Mother and go north. I had to take my mysterious doom and find a way to live. It is not that Mother had refused to admit I am small. About two years ago she took me to a growth specialist in Tampa, a man barely five feet tall who, on tiptoes, pointed to charts of the normal range for American males. He gave me hormone injections, material taken from human pituitary, which cost a fortune. At first we saw signs and were hopeful. But the doctor's size began to depress me. Mother made great show of lengthening my pants and stopping to look in the shop windows at the newest Italian fashions for men, but the truth is my Sunday church pants from the time I was nine never stopped fitting me. About then I renounced God entirely, so desperate was I to be free of those pants.

Ever since the departure of my father, whose disappointed bloodshot eyes are always before me, Mother and I had taken up the slack right in stride. She worked mornings at the hospital; and with her serving dinners at Mme. Sophia's and my running to the Rexall for the tenants, we kept things going. Of course, Mama also collected her Monday money down at City Hall, entertained a few generous men friends and was all in all a cheerful woman. She has a fair singing voice and has always encouraged me to dance and leap around a bit. We do an act in which I am Porgy to her Bess and I know I am a heartbreaker. She makes me feel the part. The fact is I believe she threw my old man out for his tedium; perhaps my dented life sought some

repair in the little fatherly figure of Mme. Sophia's Alfred.

In any case, I am standing there, leaning against the lamp-post, having had nothing for supper because Saturday nights Mother is busy at the Madame's, and feeling my hunger too large for my body. I eat heartily but my body disposes of the food, utilizing little; there are times when I cease eating to spite my body in the hope that I will shrivel and disappear. A pale blue Impala with Jersey plates pulls up and I forget about my hunger as I watch its headlamps disappear into the smooth-nosed fenders. I even smell it as Sophie's Alfred hops out and the cushion he has been sitting on slides out behind him. He whooshes it back in the car and carefully closes the door. Whenever I see his tight little body, a ghost enters my being and I shiver.

"Hey, kid," he hollers, and then veering towards me, "keep an eye on her for me," and he flings me a half dollar. In the yellow lamplight, eye to eye, he suddenly sees me. "You're the kid next door, aren't you?" he says. "You're Virginia's boy."

I nod.

"She's all right, your mother," he says. "Great sense of humor." The midget, staring, pulling inwardly as if to thrust his body upward, is as tall as he can be. Up close, the tightness of the man's face sags. "Say, how old *are* you?" he asks sharply.

I thrust my hands in my pockets and my index finger traces the loop of earring among my change. "Twenty."

The midget's eyelids quiver. "You twenty years old?" he asks. "You sure you're twenty, kid?" he repeats.

I hold on. "Yeah," I lie. The night is sultry. The midget, arrayed in a golden shirt and paisley ascot, sweats profusely. I cannot enjoy his stare but I cannot miss the melancholy

significance of it either. I remembered, as I looked at him, the histories of famous dwarfs I had read, retainers to kings, favorites at European courts, advisers to noblemen, and wielders of power. My favorites were the mischievous Copperrin of eighteenth century England and the all American Charles Stratton, my own hero, General Tom Thumb. He bent his face toward me with an air of pity and disappeared into the building.

At the same time Mrs. Greenstein emerged in the company of a large ponderous woman in pants. They lumbered by; the seat of the unknown woman's pants shone as if from attrition. They were both oversized and I was radiantly aware that the dinosaurs would not survive. Nerve impulses needed to travel too far; too much exposed and trembling flesh. Mrs. Greenstein and her friend would wear themselves away. The snug power of the Alfreds, the tight small grace of the Alfreds will emerge. Natural selection will remove the giants. The age of the dwarf was ahead of us.

In front, out of a grey Buick with Georgia plates, a cripple stepped, and in hard even strides swayed into the building on crutches. I knew Alfred would be down soon, for this was one of Madame Sophia's regular customers arriving for his appointment. Zealously I guarded the car, in touch with my own perfection, the absolute immortality of my kind.

Within minutes, Alfred emerged carrying a box. "Hey," he said, handing me the car keys, "open 'er up for me." I ran to unlock the door. On the back seat Alfred unloaded the box within which, as he put it down, something slid from side to side. "Get in," he said to me and his lip crept happily up his front teeth. "Let's get a beer," he burst out, "let's go get a beer."

I climbed in. The smell of the new car intoxicated me. I sat in close to the windshield. Behind, the cool leathery seat curved grandly. In front, the black glass gleamed. Alfred sat on a cushion all right but when I observed the childish wooden blocks bound to the gas and brake

pedals I could not help myself: the age of the dwarfs seemed an unreachable distance.

“You 4F?” he suddenly inquired across the front seat.

The question startled me, although the midget’s tone was only mildly curious. “Yes,” I said, a touch too hurriedly, so I added, “no need for *us* in the army,” and I raised my fist as if to strike the glove compartment.

“Take it easy, kid,” he snapped.

A neon sign streamed into the darkness: *Optimistic Cafe*.

“C’mon, I’ll buy you a beer.”

That was more like it. I would enjoy that. I loved beer but more than the chill bitter taste I anticipated the high bliss of walking into a bar, in the company of a friend, our eyes at a level, our heads steady. In we would stride, together resisting the onslaught of eyes, maybe because we would be saying things to each other, quiet things, man to man. We parked, got out, and Alfred locked the car. Shoulders brushing, we strode up to the front door, Alfred swung it open and we were inside. The roomful of eyes traveled over us. A hush flew by as I kept pace with Alfred, following close behind him to a table. A lady at the bar suddenly laughed. “Well, for God’s sake,” she squealed, “two midgets.”

The man next to her said, “Quit it, Edna. Leave them alone.”

“Why, they’re kind of cute. Hey, you two.” She reached out and patted Alfred’s head as we passed her on the way to a table. “Come sit with me. Freaks are lucky.” When her hand came out to touch me, I ducked sharply. Her tongue, brick red, flashed at me.

Alfred stood his ground. “Some other time, lady,” he said, situating himself between me and the lady. Then he peered directly into her eyes, and added, gloriously, “I think you’re kind of cute, too.”

The lady shook with laughter, but the man next to her wrapped his hand on her throat and propelled her to the bar. “What the hell do you want to mess around with them for, Edna? Finish your drink and let’s get out of here.”

As we settled ourselves at a table, I felt unexpectedly that instead of making my situation lighter, I had been sucked down deeper and deeper into the heart of another way of life, and when I looked up at Alfred, I judged the inevitability of it. Smiling like a jackal, he was absolutely controlled; in spite of the woman’s aggressive eyes shooting in his direction, he was controlled. His manicured hands drummed evenly on the table and to the waitress who brought out beers and hamburgers he said, “You remind me of an old friend.” The waitress, a wide-hipped woman with lively eyes, smiled at us as she tucked his napkin under his chin, and for long minutes afterward, her perfume filled my nostrils. A friend, a beer, and now a full-bodied woman flirting, offering us her perfume, coming perilously close. My blood raced with affirmation. If we could appeal to women like her, I reasoned, in whatever freaky way, there might be broads waiting for us everywhere. All over America, north, south, in all the capitals of Europe. Oh, with Alfred I would go anywhere. He was my master, my brother. The things I would learn from him! Dear Christ, I had a teacher at last.

Just then as Edna and her friend prepared to leave, she called across to Alfred, “Hey, Johnny, you come by here often?”

Alfred, with dignity, replied, “Once a month or so.”

“You two are as cute as a couple of bugs,” she said stepping toward us.

The man grasped her thin waist swiftly, but twisting free, she made her way to our table. Under her teased black hair, she seemed liberated; her eyes blazed and as she brushed her mouth to my cheek, a fright seized me.

The man rushed at her and yanked her arm.

“Oooh,” she cried. “Let go, you bastard. You’re the one who’s the freak. You’d make anyone feel like a freak, you weirdo. Let go of my arm before my friends here let you have it.” And then, finding the bizarre joke in what she had said, she doubled over in laughter. “Let *go*,” she wailed, “before my heroes get you.” The two of them, their dark beery mouths twisting, hung their heads over Alfred as if to inspect the hero, who sat perfectly still, wretched I thought, utterly wretched with helplessness. I could bear it no longer. I whipped up my napkin and flung it in their faces.

Struck in the eye, the man bellowed, “You little queer,” and he lifted me blindly out of my bench and stood me on the table. The room reeled. Lights and bodiless voices stunned my senses. I felt as though I were high in the Alps in a storm. My muscles froze. Then, from far below, I heard Alfred’s voice pitched dangerously high, “Let the kid alone, you fucks, or I’ll stab you.” He had grabbed his knife and his womanish voice shrieked.

It was the bartender who intervened. He pushed Edna and her friend hard against the bar where they argued, enraged. I descended from the table and slid into the corner of my bench. Opposite me, Alfred’s soul glittered in his eyes. But he was calm; the knife lay there, in the open palm of his hand. Finally when Edna and her friend had left, he said, “You were terrific, kid.”

“You weren’t bad yourself,” I said.

I tried to hang on to the floor with the flat of my shoe, but it seemed to slope toward me. What a scene, I thought, and we had played it magnificently.

The midget drank his beer and I drank mine, each gulp crashing down my throat. He smiled benevolently at me; I expected waves of approval. But he said, “You’re okay, kid, only there are times when you’ve got to take it from straight people.”

I was astounded. “You mean you take that kind of shit?”

“Sometimes.”

I fell silent.

“They would’ve gone without all that scene. But you’re dynamite, kid. I mean I could use you.”

“It’s shit for shit,” I said, “an eye for an eye.”

“Na-a-a. You need other ways to let off steam. That’s why I come down to see Sophie. I used to come pretty damn often you know. She’d keep me level, made me feel like an ordinary citizen. Sometimes she’d hoist me on her shoulders, take me around her living room like that, so’s I got the feeling of size. It stays with you, that feeling.”

“You let Sophie do that?”

“Yeah. We had our fun. But she’s getting mighty strange lately, mighty strange. Our friendship’s about over.”

The midget mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. It was full-sized and in his little hand it seemed like a flag. “Gettin’ warm again.”

His face was lustrous. I wondered how often a real midget had to shave; I thought about his manliness, and mine, and I wondered about his affair with the buxom, round-bellied Madame. I wished I had seen them at it: the whole thing was hard to believe.

“Say, kid.”

Had he guessed what I was thinking?

“Come north with me.”

“North? Christ man, are you kidding?”

“Na-a-a. I like you, kid. I need you to replace me coming back and forth to Florida. My

friends and I have been kind of investing Sophie's money for her. But now that we're splitting up our friendship, I need a runner. I think you're my man." The waitress came by. He stopped abruptly. "Let's get some air," he said.

In the car, he turned on the ignition and confronted me. "You interested, kid?"

I eyed him the way my mother had taught me, riveting eyeball to eyeball. There was no squirming. His gaze never shimmered.

"Every now and then you get to see your Ma, you make a pile of dough, and you're with guys like us. You know."

I held to his gaze which was steady as a tree. What an offer. I envisioned lines and lines of tourist cars cruising out of Jackson Street, past Culpepper's Barber Shop and McMahon's pool hall, past all the guys I despised who hung out there flirting with the girls. They'd all be standing and spitting into the gutter when Alfred and I rode out of town, shoulder to shoulder, and I thought it was pretty damn lucky Mom had taught me to drive, even though I might never get a permit because of my size. Sure I could do it, what with the wood blocks and the cushion, I'd edge the Carolina coast, stop overnight at a Myrtle Beach motel, roll in and take Mom to the Seven Seas for dinner, and pick up another box of whatever the hell was on the back seat. Christ, my sorrowful years were over. He believed me! The midget believed me! Slowly, as the impressive belief nourished my hopes, a new and terrible truth inched forward. If *he* believed me, then I must really be turning into a midget. It takes one to know one, I thought. Shit, it takes one to know one.

"Well, kid?" he asked. "What do you *say*?"

"Christ," I said. "You knocked the wind out of me."

"Take your time," he said. "Let's drive over to the lake and drop off that box. The other

fellows may want to meet you. I think you'll come around soon enough. All of us guys have a lot in common."

That's when I faltered, hearing his cool offer of midget fellowship.

"So," I offered finally, "guys like us should stick together."

"We're not exactly a holy priesthood, kid. But it helps to be with your own kind." The midget spat through the window into the darkness.

"Hell, Trenton's not a bad town and there's a Lilliput Society in Philly where you can meet some good lookin' girls, just the right size."

"Then how come you've been visiting Sophie?"

"Don't ask questions, kid. I told you, we're finished. Now I got somebody waiting for me in Philly. One day I'll introduce you to some chicks. You might be a rich man soon."

On the southwest side of town houses were sparse. Tobacco grew in dark covered fields. The great moon was far away. I wondered about Madame Sophia and all the crippled men who came such distances to consult with her. What greater distances did they traverse together? Into what beyond? Where had Alfred *gone* atop Sophie's shoulders? What had he learned? I knew that the life expectancy of a midget is, after all, less than average. In the still, swampy night, death seemed closer than my nearest relative. "I listened through the walls to what Sophie tells her customers," I told him, "and it's always about death. Then they get so happy they start sobbing like babies. I guess it's because they are alive."

"It's the lonely ones, they're the suckers. She's giving up everybody else, just concentrating on the loneliest now," he said. Then a hot eye flashed at me. "I call that perverted," he cried, "perverted. But they pay all kinds of money. There's a lot of rich cripples around, I'll tell you. And after them, we'll find others, we'll find *all* the misfits. 'Course you've

got to admit Sophie's always been a tolerant woman. Only lately, her powers are getting the best of her."

We were approaching Lake Machopee. He pulled up in front of two palm trees. An old house stood close to the lake shore. I could hear the frogs creaking in the night. And I couldn't help but behold the green body of Brady Jackson floating to the surface of Lake Machopee where he had drowned back in fifth grade. Oh what a dangerous universe it was, full of black and heavy waters.

"Be right back," the midget said. He passed me a paternal smile and I settled back to wait, but the sight of his stunted figure with the short square trousers reminded me of poor drowned Brady Jackson in his final school play, dressed in the absurd portrayal of the father he would never be. At the windows of the house, lights hummed; the voices of the frogs drifted over. Alfred rang the bell. When the door opened, a creature, that's all I can call him, poor soul, stood in the half-light of the door.

Alfred had to reach down, so small was this new personage, to shake the creature's hand. The new fellow hobbled as he walked and suddenly another figure was at the door, taller and humpbacked, and then a wide barrel of a man, who rocked from foot to foot. The fat man and the humpback accompanied Alfred to the car.

"This here's Johnny," the midget told the men. I did not mind being introduced as Johnny but I was not prepared for their bewildering ugliness to fall upon me. I would not, could not shake their hands. They were phenomena; I was a being of another order. They glittered at me through the car window. My hands held tight to the door handles.

"Welcome," said the long bony humpback. "Alf says you're maybe going to be one of us, my little friend. But hey, man, who's bigger, you or Alf?" He removed the box and the fat

man slammed the back door. They were joyous. “The cash goes to Mongrel,” I heard the fat one say, indicating the ugly creature on the porch.

“That’s all of it and it’s a load,” Alfred hollered to him. “It’ll take care of the new bowling alley in Atlanta. Even got a few gold watches in there.”

A cry I could not interpret went up from the porch and Alfred sprinted behind the two other men, the one laboring under the box, the other his own beast of burden.

In the car, I laid my face against the glass and awaited Alfred’s return. It was a part of town I had not frequented since Brady Jackson drowned. The odd thing had been that Madame Sophia had predicted a drowning some weeks before it happened. The whole ghastly scene had been vividly told. Mother said that despite her inaccurate timing, the Madame was a good medium. Hadn’t she told my mother and Mrs. Greenstein often enough how Brady Jackson’s calamity had started her in business? In fact, as I combed and recombbed my hair in the rear view mirror, I recalled that just this week Madame Sophia had described to my mother how she saw me riding in a bus through a snow storm on some northern city boulevard. Then it was her suggestion that Mother take me north where I could have better medical help but Mother said no, the doctors in Tampa had retired there from Boston and had been specialists. Besides, nothing would grow in that cold, she told her, nothing would grow in that polluted air. Bones need a Florida sun. And didn’t she see I was only fifteen and still had a chance to grow? Doctors say kids spurt forward astonishingly between thirteen and sixteen, the late Charles Greenstein a case in point. Even seventeen. Madame herself replied that sometimes the life force makes a move when you are least expecting it.

I dug the comb back into my pocket. My fingers, stumbling on my earring, pulled it out. With it screwed to my left ear as tightly as I could bear it, I opened the car door, slid out in

silence and shut it gently so that the light would flick off soundlessly, and I ran faster than I had ever run, as though there had never before existed anything to run away from, and now there was everything and only my self to save. The moon, reappearing across the water, ran ahead of me, like another fleeing soul, growing smaller and smaller as I tried to keep up with it. At the boat basin I turned north and lit off for the woods. Branches of trees, tangles of hanging moss impeded me; beneath them, through them, stamping into them in the damp night, I ran on, gaining on the moon. At the time I emerged near Culpepper's darkened barbershop, a couple of out-of-state cars roared up. I put out my thumb but nobody stopped. Madame Sophia might be wrong about the trip north, or at least her timing might be wrong. Surely I had another good year. Surely the cold northern cities would be there, snowy and friendless as ever in another year. And in another year, think of the inches I would grow. I ran all the way down the highway to the Orpheus Arms and slipped, quivering with exhaustion, under the shadow of the front awning, hastily checking the cars at the curb for a blue Impala. The only car I recognized was the same grey Buick with Georgia plates, and at the wheel I could see the same crippled man, his crutches extended on the seat next to him, just now peacefully wiping his eyes, just now pulling off into the night.

Head-Phones

“Stay,” said Joanne, sweeping a protective look beyond the makeshift bar at her retreating guests. “I feel responsible, you know. You all look a little too buzzed to drive.”

And so it was decided. Conrad settled back into the immense oatmeal couch near the stereo. A Charlie Parker record was ending, and so was the party. His eyes ached. There had been times, even after more bloody marys than he had consumed tonight, when he’d gotten into his car and simply driven off, but lately he felt like one of the company’s newly hired salespeople freshly assigned to his own department; here he was under the intense pressure of having to make a good impression on himself and, at the same time, train and supervise himself rigorously. So why attempt something foolish? Hence, the vaguest shiver of drunkenness, that slight tremble of his lips during the last tedious half hour of Joanne Siegel’s party was enough to signal him to accept her invitation (impossibly extended at two a.m. to all the guests) to sleep safely over until he was feeling better.

Of course, he felt a bit abused by the decision; for several weeks a sadness came over him when he privately made up his mind to *do* something, but he understood it as the natural aftereffect of orphaning mind and will. Making one’s own decisions, after all, carried unexpected elements of grief, and although he still lived in his parents’ house in Manhasset, he went out of his way not to mention his decisions to them for fear that conversation would make something reciprocal out of what he was at great pains to keep personal. Short of moving out, it was the best he could do; and he put up with the temporary disadvantages he was at, bringing his shirts to the laundry to avoid the questions of his mother’s astute cleaning woman, getting home later than necessary, eating alone. Conrad Horne would be thirty-one on his next birthday. His

parents had become emotional outsiders, a goddamn miraculous change, Conrad thought, remembering his well-managed adolescence and how unremarkable a fact of his life had been routinely accepting their recommendations on girls, telling them everything that had happened in school, even joining them for the regular Saturday afternoon adjustment on the leather trestle of the family chiropractor and all those high-school years of neighborhood Chinese dinners with his grandmother afterward. On the oatmeal couch, advising a departing Brooklyn woman with flashing red hair and her coat on that quitting her job with the city would certainly restore her self-respect, he suddenly understood he was the only guest who had agreed to remain, the Brooklyn woman already smiling wanly, kissing her hostess, and hurrying through the apartment door with the others.

Upon realizing she and Conrad were alone in the apartment, Joanne playfully exaggerated his drunkenness, or so Conrad thought, guiding him by both elbows to the linen closet to choose a sheet with which to cover the couch, then laughingly bending his legs forward at the knee, she behind him flexing her own, and placing him on the bright yellow sheet for sleep. This intimate little show of good humor enabled her to withdraw from her role as hostess without, Conrad thought, offending her guest. Conrad was on to her strategy, but he was not offended. About an hour earlier, someone had put a tango on the stereo. She had grabbed him as a partner. But she was so tiny, so resistless in his arms, her breasts too hard, shoulders and wrists too thin, too delicate for his taste. And since he interpreted her mysteriously watering brown eyes as sexual and intellectual interest--she had proclaimed herself a New York empiricist and he, then what was he? a suburban mystic? a dry-eyed subjectivist?--he was rather grateful to be allowed to bed down peaceably, sleep it off, and get on home. Besides, her voice was as persistent in the ear as hair spray in the eye: it burned and burned long after he was out of its

range.

The couch on which he stretched was directly beneath a window over upper Broadway in the 90s. Owing to the suffocating infusion of heat in the apartment, Joanne's windows were habitually open. In the living room it was at least eighty-five. Plants with enormous leaves lapped greedily at the air. He fumbled until he had found a reasonably comfortable position, rolling up his short sleeves, pushing his bare bony toes against the plush arm of the couch, wishing it was already morning. An argument broke loose on the street below. Every word rose clearly. Two men were speaking.

"I'll get a cab. We'll be there in no time."

"Not for me."

"How can you *not* go?"

"She wants it that way. She wants me *never* to go. You heard her yourself. She said she would die before anybody would find me in her hallway again." The man laughed. "Like dry-cleaning. Don't you remember? It was your birthday."

"For God's sake, don't laugh."

"Your mother's dying. But nothing else is different. It's exactly the same. I'm going to get the Sunday papers same as I do every Saturday night after I close up. Do what you like."

The younger man's voice suddenly dropped to a whisper. But to Conrad's amazement, he was able to hear every word. "Dad, *I don't want to be alone with her as she dies.*"

The father said he couldn't hear. The son said he would repeat it. "*I don't want you to phone me about her lies.*"

Confused, Conrad tiptoed over to the opened window, reaching through the broad green leaves of an overgrown plant, to close it. But he could not resist peering out. A cab pulled over

to the curb. No one got in. The cab left. Conrad shut the window and went back to his couch without having seen the two men at all.

In a few minutes, the roller-coaster blast of a police emergency car split open the night. He pressed his hands to his ears; the sound increased until the innermost center of his ears could not contain the noise, and for the instant that the full intensity of the blast endured, the back of his head and neck were numbed. Suddenly the wail broke off; and vanished. Ambulances, police sirens, a fire truck. Cats. The night went on. A woman shrieked to Jesus to get the hell out of her life. The footsteps of a policeman's horse repeated a short tattoo back and forth, back and forth, on the sidewalk below. Again he got up to close the window. Had he opened it as the heat in the apartment enveloped him? The collar and sleeves of his shirt were wet. His hair felt sleek and dark. But the window was shut tight. He could scarcely breathe. Out the window, far below, he saw the policeman mounted high on a large brown horse whose stomping about on the concrete drummed heavily in his ears. A girl in a raincoat, smoking a cigarette, was standing nearby. He tested his ears, cupping and uncupping them, intermittently letting in the sound of the horse, then shutting it away. Now as he opened the window, the sound of the horse twelve stories below rushed into the room, startling Conrad in its loudness, and, despite the stifling heat and Joanne sleeping in the next room, he banged the window shut; and feeling a bit unsteady, carefully lay down on the couch.

Sounds of eating materialized out of nowhere. The eaters might have been on the two chairs opposite him. He opened his eyes but the chairs stood empty, their arms-up, in the fading light. Try though he did to detect an odor, no loud smells seeped out to accompany the loud noises of masticating and swallowing. Then an animal, seeming to be confined just beneath his couch, scratched softly for freedom. His hand slid underneath. Dust. Conrad had to remove his

watch and bury it under the oatmeal cushions of the couch, so loud had the ticking become at the end of his arm. And from the next room, at first barely audibly, the pattern of Joanne's breathing moved steadily into such conflict with his own that the very naturalness of his own breathing was put into jeopardy as he had to focus attention on sorting out which breath was his and which hers.

By five a.m. Conrad pulled on his trousers, stuck his feet back into sox and shoes, slipped on his new linen jacket, scribbled a note of apology to Joanne--something about an earache--and propped it on the kitchen table between two salt shakers. Just as he was letting himself out the door, Joanne, in oversized eyeglasses, appeared in the doorway to the living room, pulling a robe over one shoulder.

“What time is it?” she asked.

“I have to go,” Conrad muttered.

“Oh,” Joanne suddenly came up closer to him, “you look like vanilla ice cream. Are you all right?”

“Not exactly,” Conrad began. “You see all night long—”

“Why don't we sit in the living room? I'll put on a record. You don't want to drive like that.”

“All night I kept hearing everything outside.”

“I know. You close your eyes and the city is a tunnel of horrors.” He glanced up sharply, sabotaged by her good will. “Even the carpeting gives off noise, \$16.00 a square acoustical yard. And the ambulances, the evangelists...” She put her arm through his, the beige robe soft against his wrist. “I'm used to it. You get used to it,” she said.

Conrad wanted to leave. Why was she so understanding at five a.m.? What did she want

at five a.m.? Could he have her on the couch, in her nightgown, softened at five a.m.? How would it feel?

“But you don’t understand,” Conrad said. “I heard *everything* out there, not just ambulances. I heard people whispering to each other. I heard a horse’s footsteps on the sidewalk twelve stories down. I heard an eraser erasing a suicide note. Somebody changing his goddamn mind, and I heard it!” Joanne giggled. The last confession startled him. Where had it come from? Had he dreamed it? He freed his arm, instantly saddened that he could not reciprocate this briefly blossoming interest of hers. “I’d better split, Joanne.” He stood at the door awkwardly.

She kissed him on the mouth. Afterwards, he waited the extra seconds that would have permitted him to change his mind, to flow back into the living room, take off his linen jacket and smoothly unload the things that burdened his heart: the insanity of the city, the acuteness of his hearing, the apartment he would have to locate by himself and occupy by himself, a new chiropractor. But he did not know how to begin. He squeezed her through the softness of her bathrobe, unexpectedly comforted by the momentary expertise of that face close to his. Then he was in the elevator; and out in the street.

He found his car. It was unticketed, five blocks away where he had left it in an “Except Sundays” zone on West End Avenue, and he headed back to Long Island across the Triborough Bridge. 125th Street was locked up. A cold light was breaking through the sky.

Somewhere over the North River, he reached to turn on his car radio; and discovered it was already on. After a bewildering moment--who could say how long?--he noticed the impatient faces of the other drivers. Were they honking their horns? How could he tell? He drove on, hearing, in fact, nothing beyond the rim of his car, nothing within the car--no whistle

of tires, no squeaking at the loosened rearview mirror; yet lines of cars accompanied him to the tollbooth. He looked to the right. A silent river was far below. What he heard was the whirr and slogging of a calm, regular ocean locked within the contours of his own skin.

By the time he reached Manhasset, his hearing was entirely normal. He thought surely he had been working too hard, the extra sales region just one goddamn temptation too much; nor had he slept; and he was taking far too seriously his own self-governance and all the indecision. For one thing, so what if he had hesitated to find an apartment until he was into the new region? Where would he move? The question kept creeping back, cooling him, for at any moment, the noises of the city might again be amplified to a degree of unbearable acuteness; then vanish. Was it warning him, “Don’t move here. The city’s not for you?” Had Joanne really become used to *that*? Where, where could he live? Take an apartment somewhere else on Long Island? in Westchester? or further up, where it still looked like country, take a room with a man and a woman who had kids and real domestic woes, catch a six a.m. train every morning? No. The salesmen gathered at eight a.m. every day, pounding the table with their eyes closed. “Hughes Screws. Use Hughes.” It would be a relief to shorten the commute, not lengthen it. But now, as he confronted the idea of himself moving in to the city, the night he had just passed clanked across his mind like a Roman legion, splitting his brain open, yowling. He remembered the son’s horror of his dying mother, and the girl with the cigarette in the wee hours of the morning looking misplaced next to the horse on the sidewalk. He determined to go to Dr. Chinjabi, a homeopath, and ask how these oddities had occurred, what infractions of the electromagnetic code had brought them on? Seconds later he doubted that they had occurred at all. The mysterious eraser? a suicide in the night? Hysteria! he announced to himself. An open and

shut case.

Warily, he entered his parents' house. One of the recent changes of which he had become aware was that he no longer thought of this stone and stucco fortress as his, but theirs. Yet he had a key; and used it. He paused at the entrance to the living room, steeling himself to avoid breathing; and listened. Through the windows, tops of the hawthorn swayed in the breeze. The windows were sealed. The motion was silent. Only the oil burner rumbled in the basement, and he was keenly aware that outside, the wind went on blowing, and he, so long as he remained inside, would hear none of it. For a moment, he had an urge to duck his head out the front door to verify the usual sounds of trees whipping against telephone poles and huseroofs. But sensibly he shook himself free of the urge and walked up the steps.

His parents were still in bed. He could hear them stirring. From behind closed doors came the sound of his mother's voice.

"Conrad?"

"Yes."

"I thought you weren't at all interested in the woman who gave the party."

"I fell asleep."

"What's her name?"

"What's the difference what her name is."

"I'll get you some breakfast."

"I'm not staying."

Conrad was surprised by this statement because he had no plans whatever.

"Suit yourself."

But the door opened a crack and his mother's rose nightgown showed. She was a large

woman. Now in the early morning, her face was puffy, her lips compressed into a slit. The slit opened. “Conrad. Conrad, are you feeling all right?”

“I just need a few things from my room.”

“It’s barely six o’clock.”

“I know what time it is.”

The door closed. Try as he would, he could not hear what his mother was saying to his father. “Fuck it,” he said as he entered his bedroom, kicking the leg of his bed.

He turned on the radio near his bed. The room reeled with country music. He shut it off. What could he take from his drawers? Where could he go? He stood fixed in the middle of his room, the quiet of the morning gripping him. Tomorrow he would have to show up at eight a.m., he thought, in the planning room, in front of the chalkboard with a scheme of his new territory. But today--At last he felt his thighs loosen, his knees bend, as if again someone were folding his legs carefully in preparation for sleep. A vague feeling of vertigo passed through his eyes. He inched closer to the bed and fell on it; and lay there.

The silence that enveloped him increased his inertia. Only his brain turned with activity. He recalled Joanne’s voice and the odd presentiment it carried of some sinister germ of peril, as though Joanne was a breather of dangerous bacteria which would afflict the next person she spoke to. So much the greater had been his risk in sleeping there, in allowing her to pretend to put him to bed, “There, there,” she had said, breathing on him, kissing him. It wasn’t simply her frailness that induced in him that finicky regret. Now that he could refocus his attentions on her, and at this safe distance it was easier, his palms grew cold with the narrowness of his escape from her pestilence. Her voice had been a clear signal, and then her breath, her lips. At the least, he reasoned, she has a middle-ear disease which I caught. That would account both for my

hearing difficulties and for that illusion of drunkenness on unwarrantable circumstances. I had no more than three bloody marys all night unless they brought me double vodkas in each. Even so, he said. Even so. But now I am sick, damn it; it was Joanne who infected me. He closed his eyes, hoping to sleep away the shape of her intent, confident face. But the sound of the sea returned, gently lapping against unseen coasts, the tide ever so perceptibly increasing within his chest and ears, until the regularity of his own blood splashing softly in its passageways put him to sleep.

When he awoke, the door to his room was ajar. He turned his head and found his father sitting in the easy chair against the windowed hall.

“I brought you something to eat.” A tray sat on the table next to the chair.

“You and Mother believe I am sick.”

“Tea, toast, and three-fruit marmalade.” The father removed the tea towel from the tray and calmly pulled the table closer to the bed. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt, open at the neck, though it was November; his arms were powerful. He smiled carefully at his son.

“Please get out.”

“You’ve been through something, Conrad. Who is this woman you spent the night with?”

“You wish.”

“I’ll tell Mother you’re coming back to yourself.”

“I don’t care what you do.”

“You were lying here with your hands pressing into your eardrums. Did you have another one of your nightmares?”

Suddenly Conrad grabbed his crotch--the father gasped--then he flung himself off the bed

and stood impatiently near the door. The father left.

Conrad steadied himself. His erection subsided. He had no idea of the time. The aroma of the toast told him he was hungry. In the chair his father had vacated, he sat down, lifting the plate of toast off the tray as he passed. He folded one slice in half and stuffed it into his mouth. Then he poured tea into the familiar blue china cup that matched the tray. The tea was pleasantly warm. He drank it in several gulps, feeling the warmth spread to his belly and groin. Scarcely an enjoyable breakfast, but now that he had wolfed down some food he knew how hungry he had been. The sun, opposite his window, glittered on the knife and spoon that lay side-by-side on his breakfast tray; he was reminded by the knife and spoon of the orderliness in this house. Today is Sunday, he thought again. Tomorrow I officially take over the new region. This week I shall work late every night. By next Sunday I will be out looking at apartments. The Sunday papers are full of rentals. The ads are easy to find. Each column is clearly headed. For the moment he lost himself pleasantly in the excitement of the hunt, a wild goose chase uptown, an eccentric landlady in a newspaper-filled flat on the West Side, hall toilets downtown, an East Side studio apartment, and he in a fever of happiness, chic in his green turtleneck and linen jacket, perhaps young women confiding in him outside of elevators, perhaps asking someone to have a drink in a local bar. It's not that I can't afford the change. My increase went into effect a month ago. But how will I manage it, he thought, after all this time? And what if *that* happens again, if night after night I go on hearing the secrets of the city, the confessions of those condemned to confess to anybody with the power to hear? What chance is there of turning them off? Cruelties. Sarcasm. S and M. Ears are not like eyes. You cannot draw on silence as you draw on darkness. No light switches. No rheostats. No closed lids. Only distance. Walls. Substances that do not conduct sound. He would need to install floating panels such as they erected in

Avery Fisher Hall, but in reverse, to turn the huge tide of sound away from him. He sank back in his chair, resisting for the moment a wild impulse to call back his father and recount the very real basis for his present weakness. His father would understand, down-to-earth, hard-of-nose, plain-of-speech, having missed only one day of work in a lifetime and that one owing to a stomach virus only six months ago, an ailment, his father swore, unheard of in days when people's habits included Lifebuoy soap, quiet sleep, and Long Island potatoes. No fault of his that he was strong, that he was dependable. Conrad knew his father respected facts--wouldn't he and Joanne hit it off, he thought--though he could not remember any previous set of facts that had awakened any warm feeling between them. Perhaps I should call Joanne, tell her what happened, force her to understand what had happened. Of course there are two or three other friends with apartments in Manhattan, but Joanne seems concerned for me. I could pass the better part of the week there, he thought, with a slight quiver of shame at having to resort to so intimate an arrangement involving a woman with whom he felt at such odds. Still, Joanne was quick-witted. In his heart he felt she had the intelligence for compassion. All of these thoughts soon weighed on him. His stomach was leaden. He regretted having eaten so hurriedly. The memory of another gobbled meal, three hot dogs and a beer, once eaten at a Yankee game, now returned to assault him with a recollection of its aftermath--severe stomach pains, the tormenting relief high in a flooded Yankee stadium bathroom, and stepping hesitantly out onto the quaking stands to see bedlam on the field below, the Yanks dizzyingly giving it away to the Red Sox in the ninth inning, everyone booing, and his friends grabbing him, shaking him, demanding to know where he had been when the team needed him most. Cramps and churning bowels for days, months, afterward. The taste of those hot dogs was always waiting somewhere in his mouth. Oh my God, he thought, I'm becoming a basket case. He waited, hands clasped across

his stomach, for the worst.

But what began, instantly engaged his interest so entirely that he lost his sense of foreboding. Instead, he began to hear, ever so faintly, the emission of juices, tiny spurts at first, then tributaries of gastric juices flowing into the stomach to meet the arrival of his toast and tea. He could hear--was he actually hearing this or remembering the sequence of events from an introductory biology course he had taken as a sophomore at Cornell?--no, it was *not* in his memory, though for years he had blocked everything about those premed days at Ithaca. These events were happening, and they were happening precisely now. He was witnessing digestion, by way of sound transmitted through the secretions of the gastrointestinal network into his ear canal. He dared not stir the head. He kept the body under strict control. A vague sloshing of juices reinforced the gradual addition of several other juices, each one giving off a faint spilling noise; he heard them grow louder as if he were a tourist approaching a booming geyser from the parking lot, and he wrung from his memory the names pepsin, rennin, lipase. Immediately, rennin had to be eliminated since he clearly remembered Professor Gabor, a cocky young man in denims associating it with the digestion of milk (how snidely Gabor had reminded the entire lecture hall that they had consumed rennet custard only a few years before as babies). Conrad smiled to think of himself as a baby swallowing custard from a spoon. Tears came to his eyes over Professor Gabor and that A. Despite all the A's, Conrad would never be a doctor. Most of his remembrances of Cornell were accompanied by the same tight paranoia as this fleeting reminiscence of how he had panicked before the self-assured scientist in denims. But his recollection gave way to attentiveness as he returned to what was transpiring in his body. Tensely, he held himself in check; and listened. The pepsin was at work, he told himself; the liquids slipped around the toast in his stomach; a shipwreck; and buttressing the freshly secreted

enzymes. What would Joanne think of those facts? but he dared not budge. He had read that the secretion of juices was psychical and could be induced, if not always at will, then by the introduction of certain tempting aromas of food. He raised the remaining piece of toast to his nostrils and sniffed; then listened. No other juices splashed forth. The steady slogging of the digestive enzymes went on, until suddenly he was aware that the center of activity had shifted further along in the intestinal track to the duodenum. Now there were certain changes in atmosphere, a biliousness recording itself as a hushed steaming sound, a low hissing as it were, probably the combined interaction of bile with several other native secretions, and though he could not remember what they were (the pancreas, he reminded himself with a rush of anxiety, as if he were being tested, and it was imperative to produce the old name of a modern country in Africa), he could hear them, simultaneously attacking the toast. Then he could hear the starch being split up into sugars, a dull work-a-day thud-thud-thud grinding away, and the gentlest sliding into place of feces in his bowel. How would he put in a full day's work under the stress of such distractions, the rare opera of digestion, the sweeping sea epic of the blood stream? He stormed from his room in an effort to keep himself from the immensity of these new problems. Downstairs, the house was empty. A note from his mother said they had gone to visit his grandmother; if he needed them not to hesitate to call them at her club; if he cared to, he might join them there for dinner; and not to forget a tie. He crumpled the slip of paper and dropped it into the sink.

Then he went to the phone to call Joanne. But when she answered, he could not bring himself to reveal the truth of his circumstances. His common sense bested him, told him this woman was after all a casual acquaintance (“Oh, Conrad, you sound much more together”), no one he could count on in case his week as her guest produced some truly vast disturbance, in the

event that a recital of the citizens' affairs he was sure to overhear would be so lifelike as to sicken her. And how could he be expected to keep it all to himself? ("Of course you can stay here. No sweat.") Still, if he spared her the true reasons, wouldn't he need to expend every ounce of his energy to keep the monstrosity of his eavesdropping from her, from everyone? and pitied himself, at last, pitied himself for the predicament he now found himself in, alone in the universe with his freakish secret. ("Come Tuesday. Mondays I take my assertiveness class. A year ago I was jelly.") Well, there was always medical help, he reminded himself. Yes, you pay a doctor so that the earth is not bereft of listeners. He was not indifferent to the irony that he, Conrad Horne, who now could hear within his body and outside of his body the minutest sounds and noises in New York, himself had no listener, no one to assert to, no one to relieve him of the general tension now reining him in.

On Monday he did not go to work. He got up at the usual time, after passing a ceaseless night overhearing his central nervous system perform its orderly synapses and other connections--soft, delicate sounds as of a series of doors being gently closed--and then imagining the remotest hints of change to be signs of dysfunction--dust on the needle amplified a hundred times in stereo--encephalitis, lockjaw, even rabies, contracted mysteriously through Joanne Siegel's propensities as a carrier, perhaps some factor of Jewish inbreeding. But he felt better in the morning, strong and free of symptoms, eager to tell someone that he was taking hold of his life. He thought of Joanne in her big eyeglasses and suddenly realized that her watering eyes meant only that she had her contacts on. Agitated, he admonished himself for those racial thoughts about her.

What prevented him then from leaving for work? The night had brought its hardships. The train ride into Manhattan might prove deafening. He had no way of estimating the volume

of noise he would encounter upon his arrival at the Manhasset station of the Long Island Railroad. What had been a belch in the middle of the night (his own?) had awakened Conrad as though the Queen Elizabeth II were passing sedately through his bedroom and sounding her fog horns. Had he screamed? Both his parents were at his bedside, a familiar pair, hanging their heads like tulips as he opened his eyes. And he was past thirty! He gave them not a clue, greeted their worried drooping faces with the serious news that he intended to move out within two weeks, allowing himself, quite sensibly he thought, the orderliness of another week to avoid the pressure of accepting an apartment with which he was not wholly satisfied. He felt so much better having offered this announcement, so relieved, that for the first time in days he allowed his mother to clasp his hand. At that moment, he wanted urgently to throw his arms about her and reassure her that they would one day soon again prepare Caesar salad together at the kitchen counter and pick up their ties with the utmost civility and, at least insofar as mother and son were concerned, affection. But neither mother nor son was at ease. She held Conrad's hand in the manner of a veterinarian restraining a small dog.

At about ten a.m. he telephoned his office, said he had been delayed, and would be driving in. He advised Rosalie, his secretary, to dispatch the salesmen to the new region so as to enable them to make their first contacts in Columbia County by early afternoon. Rosalie said he had already had a few calls.

He told her he was on his way, and she would do well to be ready for him with draft copies of letters to each of the corporations in Columbia they were now wooing.

Rosalie confided, "You promised you wouldn't work so hard. I know why you're late. We both get headaches when we have to do something new. I heard you taking aspirin in the Xerox room the other day, Conrad."

“You have incredible ears,” Conrad told her, privately amused at the naturalness of her calling him Conrad instead of Mr. Horne, regretting that she already had taken a lover, wondering if he was the genius she claimed. Her husband, a badly-shaven driver for Boar’s Head Provisions (he had once seen a snapshot of him at the wheel of his meat truck) had been killed in a traffic accident two years ago. The insurance permitted Rosalie to study voice and move into a sleek apartment near Lincoln Center. In the office Rosalie bought Excedrin for Conrad and at home for her concert pianist lover a Steinway.

As he was preparing to leave the house, his mother followed him to the door.

“I wanted you to know I have no hard feelings. In fact, I was trying to suggest it, but it’s hard for a parent to ask a child to get out. No mother wants that on her conscience.”

Conrad smiled feebly in the doorway. “Let’s not go into consciences.”

“As if anyone could.”

“It’s nobody’s business.”

“It isn’t if you don’t want it to be.”

“Your arthritis is my business. Your phlebitis is my business, but for God’s sake, Mother,” Conrad raised his voice, “not your conscience.”

“Why can’t we exchange two sentences without raising our voices? Conrad, I’ll say what I’ve been preparing to say to you for a long time. Move out. Pack your things and get a nice place of your own. I can’t live this way anymore, with a grown son in my house who has something wrong that nobody talks about. Either talk about it or get out.” She was not looking directly at him and she spoke quietly; her eyes glistened but inexpressively, and they came to rest finally just to the right of him, outside, on the roof of his car in the driveway.

“Mother, I am standing here imagining that the only sentence I can say to you, out of

kindness, is ‘Don’t worry, Mom old girl, I am not really your son.’ Isn’t that a winner? Me telling you I am not your son.”

The mother lost control. “Conrad, if . . . if you’re afraid of the city, or of anything, maybe the women in the city, get help for yourself. Go to a doctor. Talk to somebody.”

“I hear you, Mother, don’t think I do not. But let me tell you what else I hear. You’re an intelligent woman, Mother, educated, willful, and all that. Well, you know what testosterone is, okay? For the first time, today, I can literally hear my sex glands feverishly producing testosterone. I don’t feel it, okay? although I expect I will within a matter of days, hours maybe, but I hear it. Can you imagine that? Press your hands to your ears and listen.”

A look of mystification had come over her face. She seemed to be grappling with an enigma.

“Go on,” he said, and he clasped her hands and held them firmly over her ears. She made no attempt to withdraw.

“Hear anything?” He pressed harder. “Your pulse? That faint, distant sound of internal coursing? Multiply that by a thousand, by fifteen hundred times the force and imagine it coming from somewhere unspeakable at the sexiest, juiciest notch of your body and you have some sense of what I am listening to. A current lapping along, a melody, rushing along to every room of my house, no, not just flowing away from the sex organ. I know what you’re thinking, but I’m not gay. I can hear the testosterone approaching muscle tissue, even bone. I hear it higher up, flowing into the cartilage in the larynx,” he let his voice boom out at her, “so that, okay? I have a *man’s* voice--like this. My hair,” he grabbed her hand and pressed it to his chin. “Feel that? I know you don’t believe me, but I swear to you that I hear the noise of my beard growing, fed by this hormone swishing its way along my body, now into the follicles on my face and on my

chest.”

“Perhaps there’s an apartment in the building where your friend lives,” his mother said, her voice faint and incomplete.

As Conrad studied her for a moment, her blankness, her remote misery, it dawned on him that he had not said any of those things to her, not a word about testosterone and hair follicles and larynx, not a syllable about the juiciest place in her body or not being gay, that he had only heard these thoughts as they were surfacing in his brain. He stared at her, suffering with disbelief and confusion. “I’m leaving now,” he said, bending to her, speaking distinctly in her stricken face; and fled down the steps into his car; and away.

That night before they got into bed, Joanne tuned in her stereo system. Somewhere a siren flew up from Broadway like an arrow into Conrad’s ear. To ease the pain she offered him a pair of head-phones for a while, placing them gently across his head and over his ears. They were light-weight and had yellow foam rubber ear pieces. He smiled. A plate of half-eaten chicken sat near him on the arm of the oatmeal couch. Under the head-phones, immersed in a pool of piano music pleasantly giving out Ravel or Debussy, he wasn’t sure which, Conrad held Joanne on his lap, his hand huddled over her tiny left breast, feeling the quiet assertion of her heart, his index finger on the slope of her neck keeping time to the music. The piano seemed now to come to him secretly, from an inner organ of his body whose name he had forgotten, like the name of a country in Africa long since liberated, an old colonial name he had scarcely any need to remember.

Hawks

All night they argued about his child, he, flung across the bed in work clothes, smelling of gasoline and tobacco, the heel of his boot teasing brutally at her bare leg, she, wrapped in a tiger-cloth duster, writhing. The music kept coming out of his transistor radio, and when that quit he reached over and clicked a quarter in the TV. It was an old Elvis Presley movie and she stretched past him to black it out because they needed only the sound to lull the fitful child back to sleep. The girl, curled on an aluminum lounge chair they had set up opposite the bed, stirred.

“Somebody in here’s talking too much,” she said. “I can’t sleep.”

They were still, letting the TV drone at her until her head fell back into the damp crescent on her pillow. The lounge scraped against the floor.

Doris spoke. “I don’t see why we can’t leave her right here. If we slip out now, she’ll wake up later and run into the motel office looking for us. Some freak always takes care of lost kids.”

“Forget it,” Owen said. “That manager would put the pigs onto us. He’s had his eye on us since Debbie and me got here. Especially with the bikes up front.”

“Listen, Owen, I’ve been into charts for weeks looking for the best night. I even asked Bienster. We have to get out now. It could be months before a good Mercury hits the ninth again.” She turned away, hampered by her own obstinacy. “Anyway,” she said quietly, “I know it’s perfect tonight. I walked out on Mr. Bienster before the last show. He had a packed house but I told him he’d have to get somebody else, the lights were giving me a headache. We’re all set. I’m showered, Owen, the kid’s had a bath. All I have to do is climb into my bike clothes and we can take her to Mike and Laura’s with the money. Did you put the three hundred I gave

you into traveler's checks?"

The girl's sharp scold came again.

Doris lunged for a wad of nail polish cotton on the hat box. "I'll stuff her ears if she's going to bother us now. We have to decide this. Just you and me."

One thrust of his arm and Doris dropped back on the bed. She slumped away from him, clenched.

"Then tell me if you sold the car," she said. "Your brother said for half the money he and Laura'd take the kid." Her eyes implored. "And we'll send more. Please, just *tell* me one way or the other. Is it tonight? For weeks you've been saying today, tonight, and then you turn around and breeze into another job. Three or four days. A week. A month. Three months. I spent every cent on this goddam motel room, thinking tonight, tomorrow. Well, you can't beat the indications for tonight. Travel, exploring, willingness to take a chance--the new moon gives versatility tonight, Owen. I want to go tonight!"

Since July, with all her cool capacity she tried to hold on to him, giving him what he wanted, sweetly. He and the child moved into her place, she worked nights at the star-show, he, days at the gas station and in her room they got near each other, or they lay on the beach and plans washed out like the tide. They ate nineteen-cent hamburgers and, after Debbie fell asleep, when the rowdy beer drinkers went to drag on the Bay strip, they made love on a blanket under dazzling skies, stranded in each other's arms as if their jobs, their bosses, their separately abandoned friends, in a single moment had ceased to exist. But Debbie was there, rolled in a bath towel. Sudden headlights made her cry. "I want to go ho-o-me." Eventually, because of Debbie, because when his brother didn't take her he took her along, they came out of the beach still beating for more, pulled back to the room to finish or to begin again. They were so good

together that the trip west became an obsession for her as well as for him. She fathomed his need for the money it would cost and she gave him her car. His goals, clear as meteors shooting out of his body, cleft his horoscope: himself, his motorcycle; fame, freedom; and at mid-heaven she insinuated herself into the comet's nocturnal tail. People stared after them wherever they went, she knew that, and it was the thing she wanted, to be somebody, to belong to a man who stunned as he walked. Together they were smashing, age of Aquarius, riding out of the sand pits, strolling downtown, picking up strangers; eyes followed them, envying; they were, without words, a solid jet of power on a raw, break-away jump. She felt like a bird with Owen: she was smart and she knew he gave her the wingspan she needed. Like hawks, they could soar.

Soon his face thawed; color was crawling into show, beneath his dusty hair, into his hard stubborn cheeks. He body-rolled off the bed. "Are you ready, baby?" he asked. "Are you ready like you say you are?"

She waited.

"Okay," he said. "Today I quit. No more three or four day traps. Good-bye to double X Exxon. Goodbye old credit card crap." He reached into his pants pocket and wiggled out a fortune. On the bed he laid it like a deck of cards. "This is all of it."

Her eyes flew faster than her fingers. "Eight hundred dollars!"

His laughing blonde head fell back, triumphant. "How's that for a nest egg? Eight bills. Touch 'em." He scooped them up and pressed her hand to them.

She held them against her cheek. "Your brother's friend came through."

"Sweet, hah?"

"What about your brother?" Across the bed her body wandered close to him, entreating in a sudden curve of the neck.

He whistled. “Man, you really are ready aren’t you?” he said, slipping his fingers along her neck.

“Owen, tell me.”

“Will you leave the kid alone if I tell you?”

“I never touch her--”

“The cursing--”

“That won’t kill her. I never laid a finger on her.”

“You better not, Doris.”

“Okay. Now tell me.”

But he dropped his hand, ending the caress at once. At the closet, he pulled on the only garment left hanging, a grey sweater, forcing long ropy arms through the sleeves, the wool bulk creeping down his torso. “Get dressed, baby. Like the lady says, tonight’s the night.”

She leaped off the bed and ran to hug him, bent her head back so that the hairs of his beard tickled her neck. “I love you,” she sang. “California here I come!” He helped her undo the flashing buttons of her robe and she let it fall around her, a cloud of fragrance moving in on him. He went for her, kneeling quickly, but she skirted him and escaped laughing into the bathroom for her clothes. “You didn’t tell me what your brother said,” she called out over the sound of the TV.

Shutting the set off, he set to work buffing his boots with a towel, dragging the cloth back and forth until a bright light shone in the toe of each boot.

“Did you have the starter on the bike looked at?”

“Yeah,” he said still polishing. “Chappie says we’re in good shape for a long ride. The names of the Road Runners, the maps--they’re all in the saddle bag. And baby, we got puh-lenty

of dough.” When he was satisfied with the shine, he stamped over to the sleeping little girl and tickled her under the chin. “C’mon Debbie. Wake up, sweetheart. We’re going bye-bye. Let Daddy put your clothes on.” He fumbled in the suitcase near the child’s make-shift bed. “Say, Doris, you got any light colored overalls for her?”

“Oh, somewhere.”

Through the neatly packed clothes he rummaged, trying to hold on to the neatness.

“Anything in yellow? or pink?”

“For God’s sake. Are you going to be picky *now*?”

But he found a pair in a brilliant yellow-green. He pulled out a red sweater, underwear, socks, an extra pair of socks, an extra white sweater and her sneakers. Then he replaced her sneakers and drew out her saddle shoes. “C’mon sweetheart, let Daddy dress you up real pretty.”

The child woke up wearily, rubbing her eyes and longing to hurl herself back down on the lounge. Like a little forest creature she groveled into the pillow until he shook her with a violent twist and she finally sat up, allowing her socks to be pulled over the warm soles of her feet. When he started pulling the second pair over the first, she complained, “You just did that.” He hushed her with his hand over her lips, gently. “It got very cold tonight, Deb. I want you to do what Daddy says so your feet stay nice and warm.”

“Are we wearing two of everything, Daddy, two sweaters? and two pants? and two shoes?”

“You’re wearing two shoes all right, baby,” and they both laughed.

“What’s so funny, you two?” Doris came out in a black turtleneck and a pair of bell-bottom jeans, her long hair phosphorescent over her dark breasts. She drew up a pair of thick black ski pants, her regular uniform for long cycle trips, and swung the bathroom door.

Suspended on its back were the two shiny black leather coats, hanging together like lovers. She took them down and eagerly set about checking the long diagonal zippers, rubbing a manicured fingernail along the metal edges. With the point of a lead pencil she traced the teeth, lubricating them, and then pulled the zipper open and closed. There would be no more trouble from zippers. At the shoulders, gleaming buttons studded the epaulets with silver hawks, birds she was proud of, her own touch, in spite of the lacerated fingernail the heavy sewing had cost. She threw a few lotion bottles into her hatbox, tossed in her tiger duster, a science fiction magazine, her graph paper and charts, and zipped the box around. Owen's things--shirt, socks, jockey shorts--were already inside. The girl's things were in the little flowered suitcase to go with her to Owen's brother's.

California! Doris might be going to Pluto, to the moon. Anywhere! She fancied herself a Barbarella and fleshed the shapely words of the science fiction stories with her own likeness, flame hair, green eyes, long impeccable silver fingernails. Supple vinyls molded her and on her head a leather hat with goggles fit for a rocket, for a woman in space. She devoured science fiction, *Galaxy*, *Amazing Stories*, *Fantastic Stories*, quality and rot. She pondered the moral issues of strange universes and believed in the expansion of consciousness on other planets. Glory trailed after their motorcycle, their plastic helmets glimmering in the blue heat of the day. How she squeezed her man who would one day take her wherever it was at, man, wherever! up, out, beyond, away. The galaxies, in perfect glorious conjunction, were her destiny.

She opened her mouth and the beautiful places came out. "Big Sur, Carmel, the beaches at Monterey, San Francisco, Haight, hey--do you think we'll ever get up to Seattle?" She had a friend up there, a really harmonious kid, married a pilot. Those two had been everywhere. Now they were climbing cliffs, scaling the Rockies. God, how she loved mountains! On a clear night,

high in the western sky, the constellations could speak, Mercury to Saturn, universal conversations whose language she mapped and charted daily. She thought of the northwest and the salmon leaping upstream, into the vortex of sky, back to the sheltering sea of the Mother of mothers. Perhaps they'd settle in Oregon or even Alaska, it didn't much matter as long as they moved together, the two of them, up the blue Pacific coast, smooth as a wheel. She'd take a little job, hustle some grass maybe, and find a room in a good house, keep enough cash to roam about on, free of the same gloomy walls. They'd swim into the great parks of the *National Geographics*. Through the redwoods they'd ride like twin torches through the gates of hell, into the belly of the desert under the ascending command of her beloved mountains. She was working on the crash helmets now, shining them up with a rag until their white domes shone like mirrors, purple leather straps hooked securely into place. In her pocket she had big crazy chrome sunglasses for the days and a long pull of lavender chiffon to tie around her neck and let stream into the air.

Ah! Her body eased as if she were performing the wisdom dances, rocking and twisting in the secret rhythms of Minerva. Under her arms that wrapped about his waist, the feel of him as they tore along the open highways of America was like holding the planet Mars in her arms, a dream better than her secret knowledge that God was a woman, a planet-mother, truer than her fantasy that she would be discovered in a discotheque, dancing in the nude with the man who had climbed the Wall of Death and lived.

"Owe," she called him, "how much did he give you for the car? The whole thousand, the way you said? You said that Buick was worth at least that, didn't you honey? Your brother must be loaded. Doesn't it surprise you that he took his five hundred, the cheap bastard? The kid couldn't eat five hundred dollars worth in just a few months--" And then she shut her mouth.

Perhaps he was never going to come back for her. Ooooh, what a silky idea, slippery and cool, it fit her whole being. Just the two of them after all, and none of that Marion's miniature around, none of that hot Marion's looks to remind him of the old days before DORIS. She thought of herself in huge letters, billboard size, helmet on, blotting out all other females in Owen's twenty-three years. Where the hell was Marion? Leaving her baby like that and skipping off with a housepainter. God is a woman, DORIS knows. The planet-mother takes care of us all, especially those of us with unnatural mothers, those of us abandoned, mother-screaming orphans. Whoopee, my man and me and the Harley makes three.

Debbie sat as she was told while they all got dressed. Her Daddy zipped up his jacket and pulled on his black leather gloves. Doris put on her helmet, her scarf, picked up her hatbox and slipped on her black leather gloves. She took the child's red woollen hand and the three of them stood in the doorway of the motel room for last looks. Doris took a final festive bounce on the bed, rump first, then landed upright on her white boots. Owen hung a cigarette on his lip and hurried them roughly through the door. They were out. At the curb, the bike gleamed under passing stars....

The roar of the motor sang between his legs as they zoomed along, looping the town, dipping into 84 that would ribbon by his brother's house and on on on to the Pennsy Turnpike, on through Ohio. They would follow the bones of America, sleeping in fields and waking in towns with unforgettable names in the greatest autumn of them all, when Doris and Owen bombed clear, made the break, the get-on-with-your-living he'd been waiting for since Marion. To hell with Marion. Doris was a brainy chick, if a little nutty about her planetary life. She was a hard worker and good looking and knew how to stay out of his way even if she was too damn clean, always scrubbing away at herself like that with those French soaps. He had to admit

Debbie was in good shape even if she and Doris hollered half the day. Hadn't she fed the kid good food and taught her to read street signs and seen that Debbie had all her shots up to date at the hospital? He was sure the kid would make it through. She had his blood, after all, like good warm wine, readying her for anything. Under the gauzy sky, he could feel Debbie's little hard hands squeezing into him and Doris hugging beyond and over her like a female sandwich in and around his sweating stomach. Into the sting of wind, into the luminous rear mirror, he almost prayed he could take the kid along, wished the magic night would change them into a family, a mother, a father and a changeling kind of kid who could somersault off the handlebars and disappear on command. Then he thought they might become a sandwich like this, careening along from then on. But kids were a pain in the ass for a guy like him. Guys like him should never have kids. They ought to have a kind of gadget attached to motorcycles that took care of that, painlessly. Helpless, straddling the living metal, his thigh muscles twitched at the thought.

When the bike roared past his brother's street, a shriek lit into the wind and he was pinched and rubbed and stabbed with a chin. "Y-O-U L-Y-I-N-G B-A-S-T-A-R-D." Her voice shrilled into the wind and attacked his ears like the music of the band heralding the Wall of Death. Straight up the bikes screamed, straight up the concrete curve, flaring skyward on the jet speed, the roar of the band, the boom of the crowd, beyond earth, beyond steel and burning death and the inner silence under your ribs that mushroomed without end.

He shouted out sideways so that she could catch his words, "N-O-T T-O M-I-K-E-'S. H-E W-O-N-'T K-E-E-P H-E-R."

She pummeled his shoulder with her helmeted head, banging him on the back in her despair, the child screaming out between them, "I'm, squeezed! I'm squeezed!" The moon rode ahead through the clouds, a mute, unwilling leader.

“You promised!” Doris shrieked into his ear. “You liar, you promised.”

They stopped for a traffic light and Owen swung around fiercely. “Mike would have taken the kid. It was Laura. She changed her mind on the whole deal.”

“That bitch. She swore she’d take the kid for half the car money.”

“Well, she copped out.”

“The stinking cheat. What happens now!”

“I sold the car to a used car dealer. He gave me five hundred. I kept it all and with your three hundred we got the eight we need.”

“I don’t give a damn about the car, but only five hundred?”

He tore down on the gas again and in a flare of speed they streaked into the open road, shouting again. She whipped out her curses separately and icily, like frozen clothing blinking on a line, pinning herself to the little girl as they raced along highway 84. Houses were left behind. The terrain, sparse and scrabbly around old farm houses, changed suddenly. Wetness glistened in the moonlight. The edges of the road dropped off into swamps, flooded cellars of the earth. Stumps of trees stood around like old furniture. An area of marshes had been newly fenced off by the state road department, wide shoulders running along the new chain fence. Behind the fence, giant telephone poles marched through the swamps. Mercury lamps lit the fenced lowland at intervals like votive candles. Over all, the stars let out a flow upon the night.

He was coasting to the right, along this fence, and suddenly, veering off the hard surface of the road, dust swirling up in an envelope around them, he stopped the bike on the shoulder. They all jumped off. Doris’ scarf, snagged around the chrome of her helmet, gave her a nun’s cupola in the eerie light. She ran off alone to the far side of the clearing. In the warm motionless air, Owen’s headlamp glowed like the barrel of a gun.

He called his daughter over to the back of the clearing closest to the highway department's fence and bent over her. Out of his pocket he pulled one of the eight hundred-dollar bills and stuffed it into the pocket of her overalls. "That's a whole lot of money, baby, so don't lose it. Now you tell me a few things. Let's see how smart you are."

The child said, "I'm hungry."

He went over to the saddle bag and returned with a chocolate bar and a plastic bag of candy which he planted in her fist. "All right now, eat your candy and answer my questions. What's your name?"

The child answered willingly: "Debbie."

"Debbie what?"

"Debbie Allison."

"How old are you?"

She held up four fingers.

"Good. That's just fine."

"What's your mother's name?"

"Who do you mean, Marion or Doris?"

"It doesn't matter, honey. That's fine. Now, what's Daddy's name?"

"Daddy."

"No. What's his *name*? What do Doris and Marion call him?"

"Owe. They call him Owe."

"Good. Owe. Remember that. And now, the last question, where do you live?"

"Which place do you mean?"

"Okay. Now hold on to this fence, honey, until Doris and I come back for you. Keep

your gloves on and if you get hungry you got more candy bars in there. And don't go near the road for anything. Always hold on to the fence here with one hand. Don't let go. Let's see you do that."

She held on, her red woollen fingers wrapped tightly through the holes of the fence.

"Good. Now you're nice and bright in those yellow pants. Your suitcase is right here next to you. You can sit on it but you stay right here. Promise me you won't leave this fence."

"I promise, Daddy. When are you coming?"

He grabbed her against his chest and buried his cheek in her woollen hat. "Soon, baby. Hold on to the fence. We're going to look for a gas station. Bye, sweet. See you."

He whistled an aborted signal for Doris who was watching across the brimming distance. "C'mon! Let's go!"

Doris hurled her twisted face toward the road as she ran, vaulted to her seat behind him, and tested the roped down hatbox. Then she wrapped her arms around him.

He leaned back. "Well, you going to say anything to her?"

Under the white helmet Doris' lavender scarf billowed. "I can't," she hissed. "Mother of mothers, let's get the hell out of here."

As the smoke poured into the wide starlit path of highway 84, he waved a high leather hand in farewell.

The Rescue

All the way to the pier, Florencio checked to see that Isabela unerringly followed. And follow she did, clutching the hem of her wedding gown, her body bent and troubled by the brown dust she was raising. Celebrating the very sight of her, Florencio hurried forward. He had insisted she travel with him to the church, within arm's reach, for even at the final moment her mother might be up to some craziness and swindle him out of his wedding. Now as his glance passed again to Isabela, he winked in happiness, but her eyes were slippery and would not hold.

Further behind, sleek as fish in their sunlit robes, walked the two altar boys. For thirty years Florencio dreamed of the tender bride he would lead to the altar of marriage. And if she *was* more than twenty-eight, and *had* a certain shuffle about her, his triumph was not to be diminished, for he regarded her as unfailing and sweet as a ripened melon. He himself, despite his riches, was no longer a prize. He had had to elicit his women as though they were glasses of rare wine, and in the last few years he had become a sampler, getting an expensive taste of each and no more. Fathers hastened to marry off their daughters even to the boisterous cane cutters of the island, for it was rumored that Florencio impregnated every virgin he visited; indeed, how to say *no* on Florencio's island? In the years since independence, the illegitimate births of the island had climbed steeply, and Florencio, in spite of being blamed for gaunt horses and stony land, was also held responsible for the surging human fertility. It was further said that under a sky spread with stars, he did not care which fragile beauty he plundered at his side. As for Florencio, how he wished it were so. Near fifty, he had grown a bit stooped and the oldest islanders had begun to whisper remembrances of his gnomish father's sexual vigor. Now both land and legend were Florencio's, and how could a lonely middle-aged bachelor cope with such

a lusty inheritance?

At the dock, Florencio assisted his bride into the motorboat. The two boys placed themselves side by side in the prow and Florencio climbed aboard. In forty minutes the wedding would begin. As his fist pulled at the cord, he could still feel the pain of Isabela's teeth on his knuckles where, the night before last at the edge of his private beach exactly as he was on the verge of winning her, her teeth abruptly clenched his soliciting hand: her eyes flashed in terror, her limbs stiffened, she stammered incoherently, and he had to put aside his passion to offer comfort, all the while piecing together bits of a strange confession, that she was illegitimate, and therefore cursed. Her father had been a nationalist taxi-driver from Luzon and, from her infancy, a self-righteous anti-nationalist grandmother had warned that illegitimate children grew up insane. Florencio had withstood the revelation as fresh disappointment shriveled his heart; still, Isabela's eyes went as clear as the sea next to them, and in the end, even though she reached over to button the shirt over his belly, he had never felt more certain about his bride. The assurance, however, did not endure, for on the following day, Isabela's mother had telephoned to say she needed 30,000 pesos to pay the hotel bill on Mindanao, and threatened, if he didn't pay, that she would have her daughter's head examined, for wasn't that evidence of a girl's not being right, to want to marry an old dwarf like him?

At last, with a final pull on the cord, Florencio revved the motor. It sputtered briefly, then thundered. The small boat eased into the canal.

Across the strait, skies gleamed in emptiness. Ramon and Sergio waved their black altar hats to the workers, Florencio criss-crossed both arms in farewell. Only Isabela sat in brimming control, watching the others out of the wet corner of an eye. When Florencio patted her thigh she released a faint-hearted smile, then touched her forehead in so swift a motion that Florencio

withdrew his hand.

“What? A headache?” he asked.

“Ever since yesterday,” she said, her eyes thrust downward.

“In forty minutes, the wedding ceremony will take place, and after that we shall feast, and then your doubts will spill away like coconut milk.”

“You have none?” she asked quietly. “You are absolutely sure?”

Florencio swung the tiller sharply. Water sprang up on either side as the little craft sped into the blue narrows. “I am sure,” he answered, “I am sure.”

The boat cruised pleasantly. Sergio began to sing “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring,” and Ramon hummed along. Their delicate voices brought a smile to Isabela’s lips, but as her thoughts traveled to the church in the harbor and the ceremony to be performed, she grew heavy-hearted. She ought not to have seen the groom until the service. Hadn’t her grandmother told her it would bring bad luck? It was her mother who, slyly, had advised her to do Florencio’s bidding and go with him even though it blemished Isabela’s passion for a traditional wedding. So when Florencio began to hum, she insulted him. “Your voice is unbearable,” she said, looking away, and he stopped.

Wind flew in their faces and against their mouths. Isabela’s veil clung flat to the sequined band on her head. She had to turn to allow it to stream behind her. Florencio, whose eyes pursued her intently, told her she was beautiful. Still cross, she scoffed, but secretly her heart warmed for she too felt she had never been more beautiful. Hadn’t she worked on her wedding gown for three months, fitting and sewing late into the night after a full day at the embroidery factory? He was so rich that, despite her cool and sensible view of this marriage, she sought to please him and make him proud. She would be a wealthy woman and she must begin

by looking her best. Yet there were times when she wished it might have been otherwise, that somewhere she had taken another turn, thrown other glances, spoken other words and found herself a young and handsome husband. Even her mother still went in for tall, powerful men. But Isabela's fate had somehow bested her and now, outwitted by her flirtatious mother, oppressed by lonely nights, she accepted Florencio who, she had to admit, had never looked quite so acceptable. His satin lapels glittered in the sun and the wings of his white collar set off his round bronze face perfectly. Oh, she had such trouble waiting, to be in charge of a man's laundry, to keep a man's bedlinen, to lie in a man's bed, but the time was very close. She would not be like her mother. She would prove herself and wait.

As Isabela swayed in the stern of the speeding boat, she raised her arms high to grab hold of her billowing veil. To Florencio, the swell of her bosom was so compelling that in a pretense of grasping Isabela's veil for her, he brushed her breasts with his palms and fondled their roundness. She slapped wildly at his hands and from the front of the boat the boys tittered. When she finally adjusted her veil, her breast was heaving. Florencio laughed appreciatively, and pressed palms in joy. He might be a young man of twenty-two with a bride as spirited as this one. He leaned over and whispered to her, "Tonight my lovely work of art, I shall unveil you." Blood rushed to her face, she clung to her veil in the breeze.

Florencio cut the motor down slightly and squinted into the rushing air. The sea sped backwards. The moment was radiant. He felt that he and Isabela and the two boys must be alone on the whirling sea, that the awareness of every other man and woman in the universe had suddenly been interrupted so that he alone might feel this exquisite interval of his life. His eyes had fastened to a dizzying far off whiteness as to his own happiness. His long search was ending. He leaned against the side of the boat in unguarded bliss, allowing his gaze to move to

the two altar boys who sat together in the prow, the one pale-cheeked and thin, the other dark with glowing teeth. They ought to be his, he thought, and he wished he were already fifteen years married to Isabela and this was their family and he would not have to struggle through another awkward span of years with her before reaching this moment, which he had netted now, unforgettably, as his own. He looked fondly on their small childish faces and shouted suddenly, “Do you boys have bicycles?”

The dark Ramon was the first to speak up: “I have to share my brother’s, and Sergio rides a girl’s bike, his cousin Maria’s.” Ah, thought Florencio, that Ramon is a cut above the other, he already knows what I have in my mind. Florencio’s squinting eyes sparkled and they all laughed. Even Isabela called out, “You can bring us the Manila papers on your new bicycles.” She had to shout to be heard. At her exuberance, Florencio immediately became impatient for her. He sharply increased the speed of the boat. At this the motor sputtered briefly and then fell silent. Isabela and the boys leaned toward Florencio and waited.

“There are two cans wired under the seat,” offered Ramon.

“Can’t you be quiet?” shouted Florencio, who tried again and again to stir the motor. The others watched.

At last he nodded to Ramon. “All right,” he said, “undo them.”

The boys knelt and unwired the cans. With the oil from one can he lubricated the engine; the gas from the other he began to pour into the tank, but instantly it was flooded, spilling a small iridescent pool on his spotless black trousers. “Saintly mother,” Florencio muttered at the boys, “it is not the gas.”

The boys sank back. They were frightened and small.

Under his breath Sergio moaned, “My mother, she said this wedding will never happen.

She said it will never.”

“*I* said shut up!” Florencio shouted and he raised his hand as if to strike the child.

Isabela’s cheeks flared. Sergio began to cry but Florencio, in a gruff remorse, only touched his small robed shoulder. “Must you panic? It will be only a few minutes,” he told the child, “wait and see.”

Hot-eyed now, his hair scattered, Florencio fiddled with wires, pulled, tugged at the cord, opened and closed the fuel tank, cranked the engine, swung the tiller. His round chest wheezed as he tried five, six times but the only other sound was the sterile rasp of an unwilling motor. He kicked it with his toe, then dropped his sweating head into his hands. “Maybe she is flooded. May we’ll try later,” he whispered.

Isabela gripped the sides of the boat. Now the wind was calm and her veil hung quietly. The boat drifted in a velvet mist, the boys’ robes perfectly still as they moved. Gradually, the current began to carry them in the opposite direction and the grey shore of Mindanao receded in the distance. The boat faced the open sea.

They drifted for hours, scarcely talking. Florencio came to Isabela and put his arm around her. Weakly, she rested against his arm; when it tightened suddenly and she felt his warm lips brushing her ear, she flung all sorts of accusations at him, that he had not checked the boat, that he had deliberately planned to kidnap her so that he could impregnate her. Nodding toward the boys, he cautioned her that he could hear very well in the deathly stillness of the boat and there was no need to shout. A private solitude enveloped each as they moved in the feathery water. Isabela thought of her soft quilt and the safety of her iron bed. Then the sun sank.

In the twilight Ramon said, “I’m so hungry. I never eat before I go to mass.”

Florencio thought of the feast he was paying for, the chickens and pineapples, the roasted

lamb and the melons even now arrayed on the tables in the hotel courtyard. He could hear his own stomach thundering. The boys leaned solemnly against each other.

Florencio produced a roll of Lifesavers from his pocket and the two boys each sucked one. Later Isabela accepted one from the roll and half way through the night Florencio placed one on his tongue and sucked at it with a tragic weariness. By then, Sergio was thrashing about in his sleep and Isabela, herself quaking, inched over and wrapped her arms about him until both their bodies calmed. Ramon, glassy-eyed, knelt in the bottom of the boat and prayed aloud.

Meanwhile, alone in the darkness, Florencio sat with the wide-awake look of a man condemned. He occasionally struck a match and held it aloft but when Isabela kept scolding at him for wasting matches, he stretched angrily across and tore off a piece of her wedding skirt, scratching her knee.

“What are you *doing?*” she screamed.

“What do you think all that camouflage is *for?*” he replied, and dousing an end of the remnant in oil he struck a match to it. Then he waved his flare high and shouted curses across the sea.

She began to sob, deeply shaken by his unforeseen violence. She nestled the little boy and they trembled like birds. Eventually her shuddering and sobbing put him to sleep. “You are a crazy man,” she said through shut teeth, forcing herself against the sloping edge of the craft. And she offered a prayer of thanksgiving that her marriage had miraculously been obliterated. When the piece of skirt was consumed, they had only a blind moonlight between them. Soon Florencio fell asleep. The wind, the night, the sea dragged silently on and her heart clamored in her body so loudly that she could not sleep. She thought of pushing him into the deep black waters, but the slump of his unfamiliar body terrified her; she was too chilled to move. From his

place in the darkness emanated a dreadful noise. To think of spending a lifetime in a bed rocking with that noise: you had to be insane! and she shuddered with a fear not unmixed by the thrill of escape. How her implacable grandmother had cautioned her.

The next day her vision blurred. She heard a shrillness in her ears and she thought in truth her insanity was blooming like an eggplant in a garden of orchids. The boys lay in the bottom of the boat. Florencio rigged up a wire probe and penetrated the motor. When at last he got it to sputter once they all leaned sharply to that side almost capsizing the little boat, until the noise fell away, death came to the motor, and their eyes fell shut in grief. In his despair, Ramon's hand struck a bottle of water concealed under his seat; in confused elation, they each took a sweet and sparing draft.

Refreshed, Florencio said, "The boats must be on their way. Tonight they will see our flares." That night he waited for Isabela to offer a piece of her skirt; still she clung to it, again he reached over and tore it, more evenly this time, as if it had become part of a ceremony. Again she cringed and prayed mildly that this grasping little man would not be her husband. Through the night, as the flare bloomed, she prayed that they be found, or that they all drown in the fury of a sudden storm. At one point she called sharply to Florencio that she saw the lights of a magnificent ship approaching them, that she heard the sounds of bells in the distance. He comforted her and he pressed her head to his shoulder.

By the third night, in their exhaustion, Florencio sat in an icy dreaminess, waiting. At last, cursing the darkness, he tore off another piece of her skirt so that she sat now chiefly in her wedding sleeves and in her satin slip. From opposite ends of the boat they watched the makeshift torch gleam in the night. Before dawn he came close. "Please forgive me," he said, touching her face with a single finger, "I am sorry." She said nothing. They sat and listened to

the boys' moans. When she could no longer bear their sound, she shrieked and fell in great gulping noises to comfort the pitiful children. Florencio raised her and held her in his arms. He pressed her to him and soothed her body and soothed her veiled head and her beautiful white gowned arms, and he listed as she cried, "I must be losing my mind. She said not to go with you today. My grandmother said, 'Bad luck, Isa, bad luck.' And now the worst is happening, the worst. There is no hope for me. Please," and at this she plunged seaward, tearing the corner of her veil in Florencio's clutching fingers, "let me die!" Her body jerked uncontrollably as he struggled with her.

Florencio brought her down on the bench, removed his jacket and swore at his luck, covering her as she screamed, "Get away and don't touch me. Should I let you scratch at me the way you scratch at my skirts?" wailing over and over, "Don't touch me. Don't touch me."

Eventually she quieted, Florencio never left her side; through the darkness, he fingered and fingered the veil.

At dawn when she opened her eyes, they were bewildered. Was she alive? Had there been a wedding? And where was *he*? Dry, and warm as earth, she touched the jacket that covered her. It solaced her and brought back the evening's events with a shameful clarity. Had he held her and protected her through the long night? like a husband, risked his life to save her? With great care she folded his jacket. The sun was already merciless. Florencio was moistening the boys' lips with water, imploring that they must try to sit up, they must try to assist him. Then he raised the edge of torn veiling before Isabela's eyes.

All around, the sea foamed and the boat moved coarsely on. Isabela had difficulty focusing on the moment. The only point of interest was Florencio who had redeemed her from madness. If she had been insane last night, she was sane now, and warm and dry as earth. A

hand reached for hers and placed in it the piece of veiling.

“It is our only hope,” Florencio said.

She sat erect and composed. In fatigued movements he undid her veil which still descended from the sequined band on her head. He brought it around to her knees, exposed and sore under the slashes of her skirt. She smoothed the veil and then handed it to Florencio who waited at her side with the two wires. She held one wire, Ramon the other, as Florencio threaded the veiling on each end to form a net. Although Sergio had again lost consciousness, the other three kneeled and lowered the veil into the sea. The boat slipped along in the current. Side by side they grimaced as they bent their faces into the spray. Hours later, in the deepening afternoon, the veil leapt once in their hands, quivered, and leapt again. They clung to it, their hands cold and reddened. The veil vaulted against the emptiness of their bodies but Isabela’s strength quickened. Before their eyes the calm sea rippled and flashed. The fish were everywhere. Like the sea, she too teemed with a life that had been hidden. With all her strength she pulled. At her side, Florencio encouraged her, shouting praise. Together in the growing dark they pulled the veil aboard and exposed within it the glittering, leaping fish.

“A carp,” Ramon cried. “Sergio, we have a carp!”

Immediately, with a strip of her wedding slip Isabela lit a flare to illuminate Florencio’s preparations of the raw fish. They sat together as he worked, their thighs tremulous. With his bare hands he tore the shining flesh and slipped it into her mouth and into her fingers. Quickly she pressed some on the boys saving the head and the largest, pinkest chunks for Florencio. With her fingers she fed these neatly into his lips, then tossed the bones and the eyes overboard. At dusk there were four of them trolling the wedding veil in the dark southeastern waters. After they had again feasted on carp, the two altar boys slipped into a soundless sleep,

and the bride led the groom into the back of the boat.

An Accident

She did not hear the accident.

He had just come in from rehearsal and it was that time of day when she was most vulnerable. There, in the small, crowded kitchen that scarcely had room for them to sit down, they had come to dread the long pull through dinner, children's toys still scattered on the linoleum floor, the children themselves trooping downstairs, one after another, with their after-supper wrangling. Even the plain white china was a mistake, for a design seemed necessary, an imposed and coherent pattern to keep them from getting at each other.

“And where are you *going*?” one of them would shout, since no matter what tripped them up, no matter how they slipped onto the track that pulled them headlong into an argument, that was how they got out of it, one of them left, ran out of the house before the showdown accusation. Neither was up to truths and revelations which threatened marriage itself, for they were very much in love with their marriage.

Now when it was Earl who left, and she found herself bitter with disappointment, she turned, as she always did, to the stereo, ran to the living room, stacked the changer with records and sent the volume way up; and in spite of her wishing for another chance to explain, to make clear once and for *all* what she meant, she was at the same time humiliated that it was *she* who had caused still another vulgar scene to pass between them, that it was *she* who had raided his sensibilities. A pain in her back had foretold a volcano, and she hated herself for moving towards it with such automatic fury. She had reached a pitch this time: she would have staked her life on his inability to slice the beef. How a musician with such exquisite phrasing could be so indelicate, she could not understand. Was there no carry-over from art to life--none at all?

To begin with, the instant his face appeared slantwise at the door, his hands still clutching his French horn case and the brown bag of groceries, she had told him, “The roast beef you bought yesterday is a pot roast. Why didn’t you ask him what it was?”

“I *did* ask him.”

“Then he lied to you. This is not a roast beef.”

He sailed in past her, guarding his speech. He put down his bundles, removed his coat clumsily; the chocolate bars he loved were already tumbling out of the bag and he had to stoop to retrieve them.

“I can hardly slice it.”

“Then *you* buy the meat,” he said. “*You’re* the only one who claims to know about these things.”

“You’re missing the point. With four children, I can’t *do* that kind of running any more.”

He darted in to have a look at the roast. With a long-handled fork, he stabbed the round dripping meat and elevated it. “Then cook it some more,” he said. “Make stew out of it.”

“We can’t afford to make stew when we’ve *paid* for roast.” Miserably, she pushed his hand down because the beef was dripping onto his cuff. “Look at your sleeve,” she moaned.

He stood by the stove, looking at the mess on his cuff, but his hair was windblown and the old music-major look was still on him; he might be ready to fly into a scrap of song at any moment. The disheveled look would be there no matter how often she took his shirts and suits to the cleaner.

“I’ll buy you some steaks,” he said.

“Fat chance,” she replied, and then she was sorry. “I didn’t mean that,” she said, because she did not like to complain about money.

“Let *me* try,” he said at last, picking up the carving knife.

She went upstairs to answer Emily’s calls, to spoon out Claude’s allergy medicine, to set Matt on the toilet, and while there, she checked on the baby, who was contented and did not need any comforting. When she returned he was at it, shirtsleeves down, slicing the roast. It was a bad performance: he was tearing at it. She grabbed the knife from him and cried, “You’re ruining it.”

He picked up his coat and left. She heard him wheel a bicycle or two into the garage but by then she was already near the record player. She played a lot of Mozart these days because the disciplined melodic lines always shamed her out of her sulk, disparaging domestic breakdown. Soon she wiped up the counter, rinsed her hands, and poured herself a cup of tea, listening with her old professionalism to the flute parts, running the fingering her very bones remembered up and down along the table edge.

Tea, a slice of wheat bread smeared with thick grape preserves. It slid down her throat without sticking--eased down the way roast beef could never do. When she was tired she often gagged on a constriction in her throat. She had gone to HIP with it, praying that it might be *something* this time, something she could get rid of, and not just nerves. But it was nerves. Every Tuesday and Thursday, for her nerves, she went to an aerobics class, but her back was too frail and after a month she was ready to quit; with four children one had to be vigilant. She had given up meat entirely, became a vegetarian, eaten soya products, nuts and whole grains, but the effort of preparing two different dinners had proved to be a turmoil like being a violist and a trumpeter at the same time. With two babies in diapers, she scarcely had time to wash her hair. It was easier simply to stuff the meat down and swallow with the others.

But it made her feel a little smug now to be eating something wholly vegetarian, and

fattening besides--as if that weren't the least of her problems. And really the quality of meat was not the greatest of her problems either. She was so *tired* of it all, and the repetition of chores for four children doomed her to an ever-mounting isolation, so that by the time Earl came home. . .

When the first two were little, there had been stolen time for the flute. But now, with two more--she had been careless twice--days laid end-to-end with caring for these adorable, lovable, despicably helpless kids, she had had to lay aside her flute while he played and played on his horn. Listening now, she guessed there had to be room for both of them within its soft low thuds. She thought she was singling out the low low notes of the Mozart, but it was the door; someone was at the door, pounding to be heard above the music.

The slackness of their faces was impossible to read. Both the women at the door were good friends, neighbors now for five years. Their bright winter coats were out of tune with their hanging mouths--Dorothy Mellon and Vera Ablondi, both ashen. Dorothy stayed in the house with the children, and Vera threw her own coat over her shoulders, making a single shape out of the two of them. The wind drove at their backs. March was raw. She almost fell over Mattie's wagon, which Earl had missed--just like him; he'd moved the bikes, but missed the wagon--and the two women ran together toward the bottom of the hill.

"The police are just talking. They're not *doing* anything," Vera informed her, showing no emotion in her voice, gentle with her friend whose husband, instead of her own husband, had just run down the Gruber boy. Yes, yes, they were sure that's who it was, but she could not remember the face of a child called Kenny. She strained her memory. She went over every face on the street but Kenny Gruber's would not cohere; she could not make it hold together. She saw Vicki Gruber's athletic face and Marty Gruber's skeptical one, but their child's face eluded her. Yes, yes, they were sure it was serious; his head had been struck. But killed him? *No. No.*

not killed. The vision of Earl tearing at the roast beef spread into a bloodied and faceless boy. The burst of an ambulance bore down upon them, skirted them. Now they ran behind the ambulance, down the hill.

“Everyone says the boy just ran out,” Vera said. “Even Marty Gruber says so. The boy came out from behind his mother’s station wagon, for no reason--just shot out. And you know, this time of day is the worst.”

The mauve light hung false in the March sky, the same mauve light that had watched them, a hundred years ago, when they would walk together from rehearsal; that had heard them singing certain phrasings the same, she with her black flute case tucked smartly under the outside arm, he lugging the huge bell of his horn case, their inside hands clasped in this same light, gone from best to worst in eight years--this passionate six o’clock street shadowy now with mothers rushing home from work, the hiss of family arguments, six-year-olds shooting out from behind parked cars?

Careless. The word kept reciting itself. *Clumsy. Inattentive. Neglectful.* Over and over she blamed him for his unbuttoned shirt fronts, for allowing the children to be sweaterless when she left them in his care. If Earl took charge for a day, she had two children in bed with colds for a week. Broken garage windows, rattling car heaters, faint flashlights--it was a way of life. She did most of the fixing herself, had become the expert on running toilet tanks and blinking light fixtures. But of course he practiced on his horn for hours, and it was lovely--incredibly lovelier every year, his tone clear, elegant. And he played with the children--roughhoused, read to them, taught them to throw open their mouths and sing: he had a million tunes in him, always a good one for Matt and Emily with words that he pulled out of the air--rhymes about giraffes and swimming pools that suddenly became the only words possible to Brahms or Schubert. He sang

to his wife and sometimes she sang with him. He talked to her, talked about the recording studio and the latest in CDs, put something lacked inside the trivia of her days.

And he was an attentive lover and *that* was good except on bad days when she could barely make it through till six and she wanted to lean on someone who didn't wear a tight smile on his face--a smile that angered her because it appeared when she was obsessive with fatigue and it seemed to be saying nothing was his fault, even though he was equally responsible for all their children, more than they had ever planned for. He had said to her--so sweetly really--(she was thinking now of his kindness, with the insulting faces of the crowd already looking her way)--he had said to her, "better to have them and not need them, than need them and not have them."

Before she saw Earl, she beheld the shape of Vicki Gruber kneeling over her child; in an instant that sad silhouette darkened her life forever. The Mozart rondo sang itself with the words

too many for us

too few for

the Grubers

and her mouth could not be emptied of those words. An impossible dilemma presented itself, to choose one of her children to turn over to the Grubers. But which? *Which?* Go ahead--run back up the hill, call out a name, grab one up, only one--you still have three left, you fool, and plenty to do; that's the way--slip that child into the arms of Vicki Gruber and say, "Here, we're even." But she panicked; this debt was unpayable. She planned their departure tonight; they must wrap up the children and flee.

"The kid shot out from behind his mother's car."

"It was like all or nothing. I saw it," someone replied. "One second it was clear and the

next the kid was there.”

“Poor bastard. Look at him. I’m fucking glad I’m not in his shoes.”

And someone else said, “Never mind *him*, look at the mother and father.”

Vera steered her to the police car. The police were keeping the neighbors back, and the whiteness of the ambulance shone as they lifted the little form in, as the shape of Vicki Gruber climbed in supported by her husband, as the back door shut like a mouth. The ambulance sped off. The man who had seen it happen said, “He’s lucky he’s alive. If the car hadn’t swerved, he’d be a goner. The car swerved up onto the grass.”

Earl was shrinking against the rear fender of the police car, his body turned away, unable to watch. They were hauling out equipment, and as she approached, someone--it was John Krauss who lived on the next street where the bigger homes began--stepped forward out of nowhere and roughly pulled Earl aside. By this time she was there, taking hold of Earl’s hand.

She remembered now that Krauss was a lawyer. “You don’t have to take the breathalyzer. Listen Earl, be smart. Whatever you’ve had will show up. Don’t answer any questions. Let me represent you. I know how to handle it.”

Whatever he’s had will *not* show up, she thought. How do they test for an argument with your wife?

“He was not drinking.” She spoke up sharply. And Earl said, “It’s all right, John. I’ll take the test.”

On the spot they administered it. Earl blew into the mouthpiece; she knew it would be clear. Even the deference of the police showed they believed him innocent. Earl looked at her again, eyes brimming with the lights of the police car, the street lights that had just floated on, the porch lights that were snapping on up and down the street. Another neighbor, someone new

to the block, came out with a styrofoam cup of coffee, which Earl refused. The neighbor's face looked to the sky in pity.

One policeman took all the information down, in case there was a charge of vehicular homicide. "The kid might make it, the medic said his pulse was strong." He touched Earl on the shoulder and told him to go home, get a night's sleep; they would be in touch with him. "Any car would have hit him, mister," he said.

"I don't believe it," Earl said to her quietly, brushing the hair from his wet eyes, and as she soothed him, the roast was before her eyes, and his effort to slice it, and the juices spilling onto his cuff and her shriek, "You're ruining it." Out to the road he had fled while she, a derelict of self-pity, had stayed, settling herself into a stronghold. How safe, she had been when it happened--on duty at home, locating her sanity deep within the perfection of the music, while he had been alone.

She was still holding tightly to his hand as they walked, but Vera came running, insisting that she drive them back up the street. Wordlessly they climbed into the back seat and she put her arms around him, saying "How awful for you. How awful for you." She pulled down his coat sleeve to cover his cuff, to cover the secret blood of their carelessness.

The Cuff Link

Robert's finger pressed the doorbell in the way he remembered. Never able to make the bell sound the instant he touched it, and always refusing to wait, he had to cram his fingernail against it, cursing the fickle contact of unseen wires. With that bell his father had attempted to interest him in circuits, but the truth was Robert had been afraid of electricity, and his father, in a final moment of depression, had wordlessly walked away in the middle of a demonstration, leaving Robert to stare at the exposed tangle of wires and the unsightly hole. All the way cross country Robert had been thinking about this bell, imagining with what a sense of deprivation his father had fixed it, his thoughts settling then on this door and the shock of his parents the moment they opened it. Oh, that would be a bell-ringer all right, and he was satisfied that his thinking had taken no detours, had in fact been as one-directional as his Chevy on the last foggy lap of the Jersey Turnpike. Though at first the reduced speed limit had been unbearable, he'd finally yielded to it, taking solace in the elegant glide of the other cars, all placed in the fog like a fleet of luxury liners crossing the sea.

But his schedule had been off, and he was wary of arriving in the middle of the night. Since he no longer had a key to what once had been "home," and dreading the possibility of standing in the night ringing and ringing for admittance to that now strange house, he pulled into a secluded street about a block from his parents' house and slept, curled across the back seat of his car; and dreamed of a crazy U-turn he was forced to take when, in sight of the final toll booth, he found he couldn't manage the toll and was condemned to journeying back and forth between toll booths, a turnpike fugitive.

When he awoke, he recognized the limits of his old neighborhood and drove to his old

street. Once at the door, the fugitive feeling mounted, and he seriously wondered how much distance he would be entitled to and for what fee; and considered whether the price of entry might not be more than he could reasonably afford.

Still, he pushed the bell. Everything around him looked trim enough, though who mowed the grass was a mystery, and whoever tied the neat bundle of newspapers now waiting at the curb for the morning's pick-up had at least had the benefit of bought cord. In that, and the smart brass doorknocker he was reluctant to touch, he detected a new affluence at home. High class, he thought, vaguely irritated and a little expectant, recalling years past when there had never been quite enough money in the house, especially not for chores which heavily involved Robert--lawn mowers sputtered, bakery string snapped--nor for allowances. Not that he required any, for as a child he was never refused what he wanted, though a certain wheedling was the price of every nickel and dime exacted. To Robert his parents had been miserly and demanding, perfectionists in spite of their drive to make do. One thing at a time and that done well. A stitch in time. Twist the string to make it hold, his mother had said, the string cutting a painful flap of skin on his finger. His father, an engineer, had trained him to cut grass in concentric polygons of descending size, a labyrinth with Robert lost somewhere at the funneling center, a pattern that repeatedly entered and dominated his dream. What neighborhood kid had his father been able to convert to that secret geometric religion? Near the front door, the gum trees had grown out of adolescence and their leaves, bright autumn stars, now blew in adult bewilderment along the stems of the hedgerow. Further away lay a pile of debris: a broom tossed on the grass, colorful objects piled into the dust pan, an overturned wagon. The area where he stood had been swept clean.

The door opened. It took a moment for him to think how menacing he might look--the

long hair, the leather collar turned up to his jowls, bristling, fairly jolting with auburn whiskers, and bereft of all his ingenuous baby fat, forty pounds of it--but he collected himself and abandoned any notion of the shock he'd been planning. He said quietly, "Mom, it's me. How are you, Mom?"

She stood back, her chin and throat muscles silently engaged. "Robbie?"

He reached forward and drew her out, kissing her cheek. She withdrew. She stood back one more time and examined him with lustrous black eyes, replicas of his own which Perla had found so poetic.

"If you think I'm an imposter," Robert said, "look." He unbuckled his belt, twisted his torso, and reached back to lift his dark green sweater. She inspected his waist which he arched now for her convenience. "Remember the moles I had removed? And the proud flesh you said you'd get them to take off next because they made your baby's skin so ugly? Well the army agreed with you." He let fly a high, wild laugh. "Though they didn't make me into any Clark Gable for you. The scars interfered with my ammo belt."

He felt her fingers go briefly to the site of the scars.

"How do you like that for smooth?" He beamed at her, but she was impassive.

He adjusted his clothing; and paused. "Can't I come in?"

"Where are you coming from?" she said faintly, stepping aside to let him pass into the square neat hall.

"The Coast," he said, standing on the carpet with his heels together, glancing about. "I flew for free to St. Louis pretending to be the brother of a stewardess I know." His stance eased somewhat as he confided, "Great fantasy being her brother. Then I picked up a car and drove on up."

“Your father and I thought you’d gone to New Orleans after your discharge. Fred Mates came back from a business trip and said there was a Robert Holstein registered at his Holiday Inn. We called for a forwarding address, we had the police call, but he turned out to be an insurance salesman from Lake Placid.”

“The lucky bastard,” Robert said, grinning. “I’ve never been south of St. Louis.”

Hildreth Holstein was not laughing. Her teeth pinched her lower lip tightly. “That was two years ago.”

“Where’s Dad?” Robert asked.

“In Pittsburgh for a couple of days.”

“And Grandpa Alex?”

At this, her eyes went calm and she said nothing.

Robert watched and understood.

“The Red Cross tried to find you. It was a year ago July Fourth.”

“Was he sick?”

The mother shook her head. “A hit and run driver,” she said without emotion. “He went out to mail a letter--”

Robert didn’t take his eyes from her.

“--to you,” she said in a cool whisper.

Robert gently turned his eyes to the door and the door and the sky beyond. Clouds floated by like faces.

Hildreth Holstein quietly went into the kitchen, a clean, frankly used room, to get her son a beer. He followed her.

“It looks different in here,” Robert offered. “You’ve made some changes.”

“Mmm,” she agreed, glancing about. “What in particular do you notice?”

“The yellow’s new,” Robb said. “Didn’t it used to be pink?”

“You remember,” she said marveling, and for the first time pleasure quickened her voice.

“And you’ve put in an air conditioner.”

“Daddy insisted we cut into the side of the house. I hated to do that, cut out a piece like that.”

Robb bent over the installation. “Pretty clean surgery.”

“Yes. But I really detested cutting out a perfectly good wall like that. I felt as I did when the orthodontist pulled four of your perfectly good teeth to make room for the front ones.”

“Was it worth it?” Robb asked, moving his bearded face in close to hers and baring his teeth in a grin.

“When it’s time for changes,” she said, slipping away from his mouth, “you have to make them gracefully.”

“In Vietnam I had an impacted wisdom tooth and a Vietnamese dentist pulled it without giving me any novocaine.”

“It cools the whole downstairs,” she went on as if he had not spoken. “The entire metropolitan area had a beastly summer. We could scarcely breathe. Now we’re as good as we can be without central air. Our room’s cool, what used to be Grandpa’s room has the old Westinghouse in it, and the--”

“My room?” He interrupted her because he believed she was about to say “the guest room” and he could not bear to hear that.

Nodding, tossing her glistening brown bangs to one side of her face, she turned to take a bottle opener from a drawer. “Can I give you anything else?” she asked, her bracelets tinkling

and sliding gracefully onto her wrist as she placed the chilled bottle of Heineken's on the table before him.

"Thanks," Robert said softly. "If I want something I'll help myself," and a little thrill skipped through his voice as he added, "You look wonderful, Mom. It's hard to believe I've been away."

"Why didn't we hear from you? Only three weird post cards in three weird years, no return address, mailed from God knows where. You'll never believe how we examined them, analyzed them, stared for hours on end for clues to reveal themselves. Never in all those years could we figure out *why*."

Robb poured beer into the glass and waited for the foam to subside.

"It was nightmarish."

"It was nightmarish for me, too," Robb said. He drank his beer while she watched the long, difficult draughts he took.

The mother grew thoughtful, watching her son in his long hair, and interrupted a long silence with a sudden reminiscence. "There's a picture of you somewhere in one of the albums, drinking apple cider on the Schoenegan Farm. Your hair needed cutting that summer and you look like that now, Robbie. Do you remember all the people on the Farm?"

His attention was elsewhere and she had to touch him. "The Farm, Robbie? Do you remember the farm we used to go to? the iron beds? the wasps and Dr. Hans Schneider?" The black center of her eyes sparkled. "I haven't thought about him in years. Do you remember the jar of formaldehyde that had his dead daughter's woolen baby hat in it?"

Robert said he remembered only the smell.

"But how good the air was, Robert, and oh, I almost forgot the rhododendron. Do you

remember that walk up the road to the post office?”

“No,” Robert said dully. “I remember the formaldehyde. The only other thing I remember about the farm was that everybody else had a brother or a sister. Do you remember the Gebhardts? The ones with the biggest cabin behind the apple orchard? It had a broken porch and there were eight children and they watched each other so that no one fell through the porch floor. Until *I* came along. How old was I?”

“That summer?” she mused. “You couldn’t have been more than five that summer.”

“And not one of those brothers and sisters warned me. Not one said to me, ‘Look out for the floor,’ the way they said it to each other. I was such a victim. I was so powerless, so full of my aloneness. I was one pea in a pod. A freak. No one in the world was even a little bit like me.”

“But I came immediately.”

“You gave me bandages as a substitute, and for the rest of my life I felt those bandages on me and thought that was the reason anybody cared about me. In the army, a mine exploded and hurt my hand a bit.” He held up his palm to reassure his mother. “Nothing much, but it scared the shit out of me. My friend K.C. carried my weapon while my hand was bandaged. I felt that way about him, too, so last summer I went back to visit him in San Diego. Sure enough, there was old K.C. sitting around in front of his color TV about as indifferent as a pineapple.”

“Your father saved the lives of two army buddies. After the war, he never heard from them, not even once. They never missed him.”

“I’ll tell you what *I* missed. More than anything else, I missed my room. I’d wake up in a barracks and couldn’t orient myself for the longest time. I kept thinking of the old arrangement as if it were genetic for God’s sake, a permanent arrangement of chromosomes. You know what

I mean? One window always at the side, the maple chest of drawers always to the right of that, the blue flowers marching across the walls, and,” he said, pointing his hand like a gun, “my old Hopi mask, my old sinister brother, just about there, smack between the back windows, where you have that mobile hanging. Hey, when did you go in for primitive sculpture?” He dangled forth a wrist and spun the thing sharply. A kind of hammered silver fish darted by and he turned away. His old tank with its lone whiskered catfish always made him sad, but his father thought he should have one and study it. “The place was barren,” he went on, “nothing in it. It’s weird in the night, you know, to wake up out of an intensely personal dream, a dream that really comes up out of the bottom of you to find you are on intimate terms with nothing in that whole empty place, and you wonder where did that goddam dream come from? It got worse in Vietnam. Except out there I learned to compensate. I thought of a certain kind of jungle tree--the Moua Lya tree I called it after the kid who used to come and bring us the names of whores--those trees were my world and I’d find my eyes holding to the branches as though some goddam idiot were determined to tear them off the walls of my room and make my world vanish. The whole shit-bird forest was my room out there and I let everyone know it. Sometimes, when there was a good moon up, I could hear my old high school band playing “The Cotton King March” and I could feel my trumpet in my hands and my lips pressed hard to the mouthpiece. Or I’d dream I’d just come home from school and Dad said I had to mow the whole jungle. I’d almost, almost finish when Charlie’d come and the next night Dad would find me in the heart of the jungle and I’d have to begin again. The doc thought I had battle fatigue, but we could never figure out which battle had done it.” Robert paused. “Most of those dudes were in worse shape, hallucinating all over the fucking jungle--about roaches and spiders. They were too busy to bother about me and my trees.”

His mother was listening with a cautious intentness, as though she had caught his attention by the merest change.

Robert hesitated; and eagerly took up a cracker from the bowl his mother had put out. “*You* seem to have recovered quite fully,” he said at last and his enthusiasm caused his mother to cross her knees suddenly, the legs of her bright plaid pants to swish by in a bright blur of color. “I’ve had my diversions,” she said with a lift to her voice, absently twitching the crossed leg. “I made up my mind after Grandpa’s accident and after trying to locate you for the funeral, that I wasn’t going to become an old gold star mother just because you didn’t turn out the way I planned. I decided you were a bastard,” she said, her voice remaining absolutely level, “and I was not going to kill myself over you.”

“Hooray for Hildreth,” Robert shouted glamorously, like a guest on a talk show. “Is that your secret?”

At first Hildreth resisted his ironic show of support but as he chatted on with such good will she found her mood lightening. She laughed and smiled as if she’d been complimented on a new hairdo, said *thank you* and allowed herself to be kissed. “Are you really here?” she said at last, tenderly, and he passed an arm over her shoulder.

He congratulated himself on how companionable they had become. Had he really come home to find this good looking woman, youthful and affectionate, more like the sister he had never had than a mother? When they separated, they were both embarrassed.

“How’s Dad?”

“Fine,” she said. “He hasn’t changed.”

“Why don’t you share your secret with him?”

“Oh, I meant his not changing as a compliment.”

“Well, I think *you* ’ve changed for the better.”

She turned, strange eyes on her son which he examined searchingly. In a moment the excitement went out of them and only the tension remained. “He helped me to survive,” she said. “He gave in to my wishes.”

“I’m glad he’s not here. He was never one to give in to *mine*.”

“But you’re irresistible to him. All his dreams are about you. He has such ideas for you, your interest in genetics, his in electronics. Robbie, even now he thinks of machines to invent, of going into the biomedical field with you.”

“Plans! Nagging me about those transistors of his, never forgiving me for not liking the things he liked. Christ, why didn’t he get me a dog instead of a single rare fish locked in a bowl? Did he ever help with my morning glories or my begonias? Nothing I did was—“

“He’s been very successful,” the mother interrupted, “and very attentive.” Suddenly she got up and disappeared into the front hall, returning laden with furs on hangers. “Look at these, Robb, would you have believed it years ago?” And in turn she held up before herself a pale fur jacket, a long coat of a deep dark color he took to be mink, and another coat in a black and white pattern. She might be an actress, he thought, but abruptly she tossed them into the dining room on the table. The dark one slid to the floor and lay there.

“He must have gotten his partnership,” Robb said.

“And a lot of new contracts.”

“Is he gone often?”

She nodded.

“You’re bitter.”

“I believe you are mistaken. I have,” she said, staring at him with lowered eyes,

“everything I’ve ever wanted.”

Her quick rebuff, which years ago might have wounded him, now stirred him, and his heart knew something it had not known before about his mother and his father and their life together. Heartened, he said, “I’m not here because I want to be a son again, or need parents. I’m a great believer in heredity and I just wanted to check out my *people* as Perla used to say. I found I couldn’t replace you, though God knows I tried. I lived with a woman in San Francisco, Mom.” He hastily took a picture from his wallet and handed it to his mother, then paused to verify her reaction; vigilant, she gave no sign. The picture lay between them on the kitchen table.

“Perla was about your age,” he said clearly, looking at it, “forty-three. She has a daughter about my age, Saralinda. I met *her* first, a nutty kid freaked out on whole grains and Oriental men, but since I wasn’t Chinese, she couldn’t connect with me. When Saralinda’s mother began to notice me, I tried, but I couldn’t make her *my* mother. Perla wanted no goddam part of it. She loved *me*, my eyes, my body, my everything.” Robert’s mother’s lips tightened ever so vaguely, “in fact no part of her was motherly. Now I thought that was a failing. I think every woman should be motherly--or at least sisterly--if only 5%. What do you think, Mom? Do you think it’s stupid to expect 5%?”

Robert’s mother was sitting under the childish mobile in the corner of the yellow kitchen, stricken in an unnatural stiffness, as though quietly tolerating pain.

“What’s the matter with you? Why are you sitting like that?”

“I’m listening.”

“You look uncomfortable as hell,” Robb said, “in that little chair.” And without apparent reason, he let go a mocking little laugh. “Yellow is my goddamnedest worst color,” he admitted

impulsively, striking the table with one hand and picking up the snapshot of Perla in the other.

“Where’s that woman now?” His mother asked, paying no attention to his outburst.

Robb flourished it at her. “Why, would you like to meet her?”

Hildreth’s eyes glistened.

“She weighed about 220 pounds” Robb said, watching her. “I’m not putting you on,” Robb declared. “220 pounds. I sank right into her. And when she trembled--” Robb raised the photograph to his lips and kissed it obscenely.

The mother stood up to conceal a small uncontrolled gasp.

After a pause, he said insistently, “I told you. She didn’t work out. Maybe if it hadn’t been for the war--”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“I thought you were interested in catching up on *my* news.”

“*You came here.* How about catching up on my news?”

“I see it all in front of me. My Daddy’s rich and my Ma is good lookin’.” Robb added calmly, “Maybe that was what was wrong with Perla. She wasn’t good lookin’ enough to be *my* Ma.”

Mrs. Holstein’s hand passed delicately to her eyes. “Do you miss her?” she asked.

Robert made no answer.

“Well, why did you finally leave her? She avoided his glance and gazed off as if to miss an unpleasant truth that lay in his eyes.

“Aha. You are assuming that Perla was too obese to risk walking out on me. Well, you are wrong about that. She packed her things and I ran after her all the way to the bus station. This big fat woman clopping along Columbus Avenue in Swedish clogs and your young

beautiful son here running alongside like a maniac, begging her to come back, holding on to her shopping bag, tears in my eyes. But I couldn't be what she wanted me to be. She was going to take a bus to Juneau where there were more men. About a month later, Saralinda came by and said her mother was very happy there. Sara and I tried to be friends but I couldn't even make *that* with her. She was in the middle of an affair with a Chinese pharmacist." Robbie stopped and grinned. "He also sold health foods. Saralinda might have been your granddaughter."

"God!" the mother gasped.

"What's wrong with having a granddaughter? You're about that age, I guess."

"Stop it, Robbie!"

"The Chinese pharmacist was the nicest thing about Saralinda." When their glances met, Robb said sweetly, "You're one in a million," but a deep depression had already filled his eyes.

"I hope you haven't tried a million to replace me."

"How I loved those women in Saigon. One of them taught me such beautiful things, me and a thousand other guys," he said semi-tragically, holding her in strictest attention.

Hildreth's eyelids quivered. She rose and went into the dining room, gathered up the fallen furs in her arms and rehung them with care in the closet. While there, she fumbled for something and soon returned to the kitchen.

"I don't know how long you plan to stay, Robb, and I want to fulfill my duty. Grandpa Alex left this for you."

"Robb opened the envelope she handed him and found inside a diamond cuff link. It was set into a circlet of gold and had a pure blue-white stone. "I don't quite know who'll hear this, but thanks old man," Robert said softly, adding in amusement, "Only one? I mean I don't want to sound ungrateful but I'm his only grandchild and I never had an arm blown off."

“That plus four hundred shares of mining stock were left to you, Robb. The certificates are in here, though I’m sorry to say the stock is about worthless.”

Robb raised the cuff link to the light. “What do you do with one cuff link?”

“It has a good diamond, Robert. When you find the woman you love, you can give it to her.”

Robert tucked the cuff link back into the envelope, examined the stock certificates and then said, “Maybe I ought to give the diamond to you. Do you have the other one?”

“You know how he loved you,” Mrs. Holstein said clearly. “You might have kept in touch with *him*.”

“Is that why he cut me to one cuff link?”

“Stay for lunch,” the mother said.

“Will it be just the two of us?” Robert smiled, went over and snapped on the air conditioner. A whoosh of air entered the kitchen. He snapped it off. He picked up the envelope again and stuffed it into his leather pocket, zipping up his coat. Suddenly he unzipped it and threw the jacket onto a chair. “Damn it, I don’t know why I’m thinking of splitting. What have I got anywhere else? The air conditioning here is terrific. I see Dad’s do-it-yourself all around.”

Then Robb stood up and wandered out into the dining room where the stairway began, humming a tune he’d heard all night on the car radio, fingering the table, unobtrusively eyeing the steps. Abruptly he headed up them, two at a time. “Maybe I *won’t* leave,” he yelled, “hey, Mom, I think you ought to call Dad and tell him I’ve come back.” He yelled it happily, bounding upward toward his room and he could hear his mother’s voice rising behind him, “I’m coming up to tell you,” she was saying, “about the cuff link,” but she reached the door after he was already inside.

The blue flowers had been replaced by more yellow. Sunny, delicate walls really, on which hung the Hopi mask, *his* Hopi mask still blankly sinister and jealous at the opposite end of the room. Paler yellow curtains bordered with blue and red toy soldiers hung in the window to the right. He had to turn quite sharply to the right to find, where his maple chest of drawers had stood, the crib, and the silent, staring infant in soft blue overalls peering intently at him through the bars as out of an old photograph, his vivid black eyes just waking from sleep in familiar and abhorrent innocence.

The Voluntary Actions of Men

“So what if the Florida temperature drops into the sixties? You’d still be better off.”

The son had worn his father’s galoshes and stamped them now in emphasis, trickling dirty slush into the hospital corridor where they sat.

“What else should I do? He won’t consider it. He doesn’t hear what I say.”

“I can’t keep making these trips up north to the Bronx. I’m not made of money.”

“Then we’ll get him in a good mood and we’ll ask—”

“Ma!” The son was bitter at the hint of charity. A bulky man in his forties, he was cramped into the chair next to his mother in the corridor of the X-Ray Department; turning his fleshy body to confront her menaced her.

“What else do I have besides you?” she said, her voice loud out of habit, though she was clearly on her guard. Subtlety was not her way: the oversized lavender pantsuit, the glittery metallic knitting she worked at and worked at, one long silver strand running endlessly out of a shopping bag at her side, the smell of hairspray still authoritative despite the odor of antiseptic in the corridor.

The mother rested the neat length of a silvery sleeve on her knee. “I’m afraid to bring it up. He gets red in the face, and then his eyes flash.” As she habitually did when the subject of money came up, she glanced briefly about and made an effort to whisper. “You remember when he used to talk about North Carolina and the thirty-five thousand dollars?”

That’s what I have to deal with now. I only *say* the word *Florida*, his eyes are on fire!”

“Try saying *nursing home* to him.”

“Never!” the mother said.

“For God’s sake, you’d think we were ready to put him into the Riverside.”

The son stood up and strode the length of the corridor. The hospital was clean, though plaster was flaking off the walls, and people in grey hospital gowns, waiting their turn for X-rays, sat in a chain of chairs that further defaced the painted surface. On a hospital bed shoved against the wall out of the way, and barely discernible under the covering sheet was a tiny old woman, eyes stubbornly open, waiting. He peered into one of two open-examining rooms along the way, but by the time he turned, his mother was fumbling in her bag and gesturing.

“Stewart!” The mother pointed with a quarter to her watch.

Stewart pulled on his jacket, ignoring the coin. “Stubborn like his father, “ she muttered, slipping the 25 cents for the parking meter into her shopping bag. Floridians are never outfitted properly for the cold, the mother thought, noticing the thin, navy blue vinyl of the son’s windbreaker. Privately, she resolved to knit her son a heavy sweater, something solid that would stand for appreciation. But even in the act of her resolve, she was not certain he would be happy with the gift. She could not explain it: they were always on a see-saw, she and Stewart. A good match pound for pound, they ascended and struck bottom in turn, manipulated as they were by the thin, energetic father, who randomly subjected them to moments of absolute control and wild disregard. She might plan a sweater for Stewart, but any offhand remark about it by the father would turn Stewart against it, and reveal, as if by a bolt of lightning, how decisive he really was about preferring navy, or how tightly it fit across the shoulders, or that it buttoned, or that it did not button. Or that he was expected to fly North more often, which meant that he had been negligent, disrespectful, and, at the core, dissatisfied—but dissatisfied with what? She had never knitted so much as a mitten for his wife or children—Gloria being too plain to justify all that time—“you need someone with a build to show off needlework”—and he, still too bound by

pride to speak openly about the failed marriage, eighteen uncomfortable years that included one separation and the death of a child. The mother reached into her shopping bag for a knitting book. Passing pages of baby sweaters and carriage covers, remembering with a pang how she had avoided knitting for Gloria's ill-fated babies, passing pages of the long designer sweaters she promised to make herself next, she paused over the men's heavy cardigans and turned each picture slowly. The sight of those strong cable stitches made her happy. Here was one. The model even resembled Stewart! She turned down the corner of the page.

In chairs against the opposite wall, a cluster of five or six patients awaited. The mother was aware that the man directly across was watching her intently. Even in his grey hospital gown, which lent all those who wore them the unwilling gravity of prisoners, he looked cunning and deceitful. No, she didn't like his looks at all. His darting eyes lacked confidence, which a man ought to have. They kept making her uncomfortable, as if by coming to rest on her they had detected the very issue that meant life or death to her, and then as she lowered her eyes, he stared all the more greedily in her direction. When Stewart reappeared, snow on his shoulders and in his hair, she slightly to the side, out of the other man's hearing. "Pretend nothing has happened, but that man--look at him, he's like someone who works in Waldbaum's, a nothing--he is bothering me," she said, tilting her head. Aloud, she was full of her own importance. "You know how stubborn poor Daddy is. I'll bet they're having their hands full with him."

Stewart studied the man across the way, a pitiable fellow with wide frightened eyes and a shrunken face. Electing to ignore his mother's complaint, he said, "It would be easier, Mom, if the two of you could move South." And brushing the snow from his shoulders, he added, "And a helluva lot easier on me."

"He doesn't see it the way we see it. All day he sits in his bathrobe making deals on the

phone. All his connections are in New York.”

“Yeah. Like the Raleigh deal. He bought property without any plumbing.”

“Don’t make an ignoramus of your father, Stewart. Vandals cut the pipes right out of the ground. Who could have known? They sell the copper to buy drugs. A man has to try,” the mother said. She glanced up, mumbling something about the need to take chances, and threw the man opposite what she always called an ugly smile, a tilted, tight-lipped flash of teeth and tongue, then resumed her knitting.

In the same instant, the man was standing, jerking his head nervously in self-defense. “You’ve just insulted a dying man,” he yelled across the aisle, his little hospital gown clinging to his emaciated thighs. A few faces turned; eyes locked in gloom now lit up with interest. Stewart was flustered by the embarrassment and confusion in his heart: was his mother a helpless downtrodden woman, disabled by almost fifty years of a crazy, tyrannous marriage, or was she a shrewd Bronx woman who could outwit storekeepers and radiologists alike, and put a leering, even a dying, patient in his place? “My mother didn’t mean to insult you,” he said quietly to the man, and then aware of how the man hung on his every word, Stewart bit his lips in silence.

But his mother shook a finger at the man. “I’m dying, too!” she said. “We’re all dying. You could be in and out of this hallway for the next five years getting X-rayed, and I could be killed by a flowerpot this afternoon on Bainbridge Avenue.”

“Ma!” Stewart released the syllable through his teeth.

Slowly the mother resettled herself. In a few moments she found a continuing degree of comfort in her chair. “I tell Daddy we can afford a condominium with air conditioning and a health club, he starts to bang on the arm of the chair.” She went on as if no one had interrupted them.

“Ma. Why do you antagonize a stranger? Please,” Stewart hissed, “mind your own business.”

“We never told you exactly how much money that Raleigh deal cost. But it didn’t clean us out, in case you’re worried. Anyway, without North Carolina, he’d never have been in on the Concourse apartments. Stewart, that’s what pays our rent now, the apartments and Social Security.” Then she chuckled. “And the Bainbridge Avenue bus still gives out transfers, thank God.”

“I’ll bet it’s six months since you’ve been on a bus. You’re locked up inside for half the year, except for trips to the Emergency Room.”

“A man has a right to try.”

Even now, that was the son’s cue to sulk. Only partially absorbed by her knitting, Stewart’s mother was happily mindful that the man had attracted the attention of other patients to her as she sat. Stewart, however, was oblivious of the others in the hall; he was struggling to see her age, or her pride, or the toughness of her city smile, or remember her as a young woman when his Dad worked in the garment district and brought armloads of suits home to her on Friday nights. She was a full, tall size 14 then; and even as a boy, Stewart had shared a household pride in her elegant “suit” figure. All he saw now was his childhood, a tiny strand of life inextricably knotted into his parents’ lives--a frail dozen or so years tied to the lives of these two feisty people who loved him; he felt implicated in his parents’ lives until death.

Looking about him at those solemn, voracious eyes bound for the X-ray machines, he sensed his own bones, the skeleton within him that would survive even death. He did not feel young, did not feel more vigorous than those about him, privileged by health and weight and stamina. He did not feel that he could stand up in the corridor if a fire were to break out or a

patient became unruly and say, "Everything is OK. I'm in charge. I'm healthy." Other men in their middle forties looked a lot younger; they worked out with weights, showed off their physiques in tapered knitted shirts. Racing back and forth on the paddle ball courts, they called to mind his father's slim muscular body playing handball in the streets of the Bronx on summer evenings and the embarrassment of his own boyish fat as he sat on the curb, in a lump, watching. Other men in their forties took up with twenty-five year old women who had long flying hair, took on new assignments in frontier towns like Denver and Santa Fe. Life had hurtled by him. The astounding truth was he had missed the whole thunderous decade of the sixties, missed its tumultuousness, because for the first time in his life he had had a job and a few dollars in his pocket. He had bought his first car--a '62 Plymouth--and rebuilt the entire engine. Had he spent virtually a decade on that car? He had never grown his hair long, never talked to a hippie, never tried his luck on the open road. After his accident--the entire left side of his remarkable car flattened like a beer can--he did little more than look at TV for six months. What was the use? Finally, he took off for Florida. Gloria was as close to a flower child as he had come, she with her unmade face, her Louisiana speech, her faded jeans and deep, sympathetic eyes, like those of a household animal. Yes, she reminded him of Blackie, the dog he had been allowed to keep for three days as a child--ah! the exquisite fear of having a pet, a creature of one's own to tame and to please. She was Blackie come back as a wispy blonde bookkeeper in the Exxon station where they both worked. Against his parent's wishes, he married her. And when their lives together were rendered void by the death of one of their twins, the separation that followed left each in a life of such intolerable seriousness, such unrelieved anxiety that they gravitated toward each other as if preparing to face some greater struggle. When they resumed their marriage, his parents for the last time confirmed Gloria's total, irreversible wrongness; she had failed in her

commitments to make Stewart--and them--happy.

Still, his mother and father had the knack of getting over hard times, of turning their backs on tragedy! Once again they drifted into their mean little lives and were happy, knitting, yelling at bank managers on the phone, impressing their doctors, calling Stewart to come quick--stroke, heart failure, or fear of worse.

How he wished he had kept his reconciliation from them, kept Gloria from them--the marriage, the twins, kept his whole life from them! save those first dozen years, which descended on his memory now as a greater treasure than he had ever dared to realize. Now he simply could not go it alone, nor could Gloria, and so they were yoked together in front of their TV set, enervated by excessive courtesy and an apologetic demeanor. Gloria began to put on weight. She developed a certain indifference, which with the extra weight was taken by their few friends for imperiousness. Ever since the "little" twin's death to kidney failure (he had been his father's favorite, while the "big" twin could not be kept from bullying and taunting his frailer brother), ever since that calm July afternoon three years ago in a hospital corridor clean and rundown like this one, they had been fused in grief unavailable to any other human being. Ever since that warm bright afternoon, when grieving permanently replaced taking a walk, or enjoying a movie, or thanking a customer, he had been compromisingly attentive to his parents, rushing up to the Bronx whenever they needed him, leaving his garage in the care of his mechanics, as if unable to surrender any opportunity to lay a piece of his burden on his parents' shoulders, as if only they could teach him the ancient magic of forgetting. And the sight of both of them often did the trick, obliterating his years with Gloria, and returning him to the times when he was bound to them and to their unreasonable, unquestioning love. How they loved him! He had been dependent yet had never suffered, despite what he knew in his heart had been a colorless

and vulgarly lonely youth--the love of parents was not, after all, everything to a boy--he had not known suffering until the twins--his miraculous twins--had been severed. The one survivor annihilated that miracle of identity, the divine double, the one miracle that had singled out Stewart and set him apart from other men. He had been the father of twin sons, and then quite arbitrarily the miracle was withdrawn. Well might he have been blinded at 2:00 on that July afternoon. What a wonder had been in that *pair* of babies, in that double set of eyes, ears, twenty starlike fingers and four tiny, kicking feet. The sight of those babies had taken his breath away! In those first years, he and Gloria had relinquished their private lives and selfhood: no more night fishing; no outings at the jai alai; no crab rolls on the pier. At midnight, at four a.m., each one held a baby: they could not have imagined being busier, or happier.

The technician in white tunic and pants appeared at the door of the nearest examining room. "The family of Philip Singer."

Stewart uttered, "Yes."

"I guess he's ready," Stewart said.

"God only knows what's next," the mother said, stuffing her needles into the shopping bag.

Stewart's eyes swept toward the examining room. The insulted man in the grey hospital gown had vanished. Two signs on the wall were visible: "Without love, all the earth is a tomb" and "If you are pregnant, be sure to tell the technician."

"Oh, Stewart," the mother cried, without so much as a sideline glance in the direction of the father, "Does he look angry?"

The technician was pulling a wheelchair out of the examining room. When he turned it about, an old man was hidden there, flung into a corner of the chair, pale, paralyzed, leaning to

one side in a grey hospital gown, two thin hairy legs extended on the chair rests. One hand lay shiny and helpless across his thigh. In the other he clutched an eyeglass case, which he hammered against the arm of the wheelchair in a nerve-wracking way.

“Bring him over here,” the mother called. “I’m his wife.”

The technician wheeled him over gravely, taking long professional steps to the woman’s side.

“Dress Daddy, Stewart.” The mother had to shout above the clatter the old man was making, but neither wife nor son made any effort to quiet him. Stewart hung back, as if afraid of being struck. The insulted man, just returning from the men’s room to wait again in the chair, and exercising the greatest caution with every step, reached for the side of the wheelchair as he approached and clung to it. “Listen, mister,” he shouted. “Stop that banging. This is a hospital. There are sick people here.”

The only sign that the old man heard was the increased tempo of the banging. His hand fairly flew up and down, hammering harder and harder at the chair.

As if in phase with the noise, Stewart’s blood throbbed in his ears. He feared for the insulted man’s life. First attacked by his mother and now assaulted by his father, the stranger seemed dismayed by the punishing outburst, unable to withstand this moment, crammed as if was with parental anger. But, of course, these were not *his* parents; what could *he* know of the usual duties which disguised a son’s need to be loved? The insulted man was throwing his hands to his face, pressing his temples with his fingers. “Please. I can’t stand the noise,” and he slipped the eyeglass case out of the stroke victim’s one good hand and pushed it toward Stewart, who, still clutching it in the fingers of one hand, lifted his father out of the chair and carried him effortlessly into the men’s dressing room, where the lockers were.

Two Rolls

Josef Hiller was not exactly sure why he was at the theater at all. He had sat through the entire first act packed tightly between the hard, straight chair arms. Certainly he could never have known from its title, “Breakfast of Nails,” what the play was about. The fact that it concerned a night and a morning in the lives of two refugees from Austria, two simpering victims from a fictitious town near Vienna, should have been sufficient reason for him to have excused himself down the darkened aisle and left the theater. But he had not. He had stayed through the first act. And there, on the swimming stage, he had been forced to see two refugees transform their sewer of escape into memories of pre-Hitler happiness. Throughout the first act, he could not really have said where theater ended and memory began.

When the curtain fell, he observed in his *Playbill* that the second act took place wholly in the sewer. He decided to leave.

As Hiller eased himself out of his berth and pressed his way down the row into the aisle, the embarrassment of his size overtook him again. It was happening more and more frequently now. This feeling of something bizarre. Until lately, he had been ignorant of the eyes measuring him, the fingers pointing. He had never even noticed that children ran to their mother’s legs. Certainly before Dr. Richter put him on this nitwit diet he had craved his food, he had enjoyed it. To eat breakfast with an endless appetite and then limber up for the next event by thoughts of lunch. It was good to wield oneself through a miniature world without a notion of danger or penalty. Then he had enjoyed the feel of his body’s growth as does a woman in the middle months of pregnancy. The sheer expanse of him had been like a pledge fulfilled, but with more growth ahead. He would fill an emptiness inside of himself and an emptiness all around. He

could fold his arms across his immensity of stomach, look out on the puny world about him and be happy that the need for intimacy with it had never presented itself.

Now he followed the streaming audience out into the street for intermission. The warm night air was like a loaf taken from an oven. Hiller took himself away from the denser clusters of people and stood supporting himself against a postered wall. He thought for a moment how the play had exploited his emotions. How he hated titles like "Breakfast of Nails." Of what use were they? It would be far better to number an author's plays. You would get as much information out of Miller's Third as you got out of "Breakfast of Nails." Vaguely, he wished he had gone to a concert, but lately, even at small recitals, he fidgeted, shuffled his feet, rustled his program. And galleries made him moody, the wandering and the stopping to look, and seeing the groups of people, even couples with babies talking together earnestly; he would overhear the names Oskar Schlemmer and Balthus.

For a brief moment he was ready to leave now and spare himself further discomfort. But where would he go? To the starved elegance of his new nightly routine? Home to the quarter ounce of sherry that Richter had permitted, and the herb tea--it was more tolerable plain than with Sweet'n'Low--and of course the diuretic pills. And then to lay himself on the outsized bed and try not to try too diligently for sleep. And so it would be morning, with its chaste medium-cooked egg and more sugarless tea. How he longed for a good cup of coffee with half-and-half and several spoons of sugar, for the smell of coffee in the house.

Before, he had slept well. He had slept as he had dressed, as he had eaten: with a mindless dedication to himself. Now there were the wakeful nightmares, the unforgiving snatches of sleep, the loneliness that an invalid experiences in the sickroom when he hears nothing and everything, loud and resonant. His mind drifted back to the play and patches of

conversation from the first act were covering the holes in his thinking. “I remember the sunlight on the fountain water, and Herr Lindfried’s statue nodding in the haze. And the sunlight on the walnut trees, and on the roofs, and the brightness of Amstetten.” But, of course it wasn’t Amstetten, their town had a made-up name, he couldn’t remember it. “Amstetten,” he thought and murmured the name on his lips. And he could see the small crowded houses, the neat square rose gardens, the bridge and then his own house, large and airy, noisy with cousins and aunts and Grandfather Wohl. He played domino games in the kitchen and lessons on the old Dutch desk and set up a little perfume laboratory in the company room. And there was the decrepit puppet theater of the year before and the notebook of gemstones of the year before that.

Hiller felt cramped and stifled. He pulled at his collar and loosened his tie and walked a little further down W. 53rd Street.

Though he walked just a few paces, the lights and the fashion of the theater were left behind. But, as he had not been affected by any of this, neither did the dirt of the surrounding brownstones intrude upon him. He looked ahead of him vacantly and then stepped backwards several feet and leaned against the window of a store. He raised his massive hands and, with a little astonishment, recognized that they were his own, these puffy hands, all swollen especially around the indented gold on his left hand. He tried to twist the ring off, but it was too painful. He couldn’t remember when he had removed it last.

Grandfather Wohl had given it to him at graduation. It had been his wedding ring, a wide gold symbol of love and abundance, and Josef was to have it because Grandfather Wohl was getting old. So they looped a long wind of string around it when he was fourteen. Just a year later, the winter Josef was fifteen, Grandfather Wohl was shot, and Josef had found enough string around his ring to loop through his shoes and keep them on his feet during that entire

winter.

An unpleasant smile turned on his mouth at the thought of the hunger the doctor doles out to him each month when he weighed himself in under those practiced, solicitous eyes. How different had been the other, panicless hunger. He had starved for three years. He had traveled like a rat in sewers under Amstetten. He had stolen bread from refuse cans under cover of night. He had tied shoes with bits of string. But there had been no panic to it. He could have died, as did many others, simply died. But he had never thought of death, not even at Belsen where death was a commodity. For he defended himself by looking at other people's suffering as though it belonged to them, like an arm or a tooth. The truth is there had never been any others after he left Amstetten. The people who cared about him were gone.

How skillfully a stage designer converts history to myth, he thought. Stages revolve. Shadows rise out of the wings and a melody comes into the darkness out of nowhere. And there is the myth, incandescent, reverential.

During those lost years, Hiller let daydream drift into nightdream without interruption. At first there were only memories, the sweet taste of things, the sounds of morning in the house, the touch of a wool sweater and cap. But as the winter wore on and his stomach contracted, and the pain of hunger ached in his freezing ears, he took to dreaming of the future and would see himself as a baker, or a chef, preparing elegant delicacies. He would pass whole days and nights tasting exquisite little cakes, seven layers high, crowned with confectioner's icing and cherries and nuts, or squat little Napoleons, Bavarian cream oozing out between layers of flaky puff, or chocolate eclairs, or dishes of whole strawberries. He fed on them and was content because he knew and he believed that a time would come when he would be able to deny himself nothing. He would have whatever he wished, as nice as he wished. These years were a trial that he was

convinced he had imposed on himself. It was like one of those tests of strength he had often seen at carnivals when the barker would announce through a balloon that if he raised the great hammer high enough, it would fall with enough fury to ring the bell and you would win a prize. The bell would sound for him again if he could try hard enough. It would ring in a beautiful, lavish existence, and he would be at the center of the great gong. And though the loved ones of Amstetten would not be there to share it, they would be happy that Josef was as splendid and prominent as they had wished him to be.

Perhaps it had been delirium. Somehow when the shot had gone into Grandfather Wohl, Josef Hiller's childhood vanished. After that he was without an age, as an amnesiac is without a name.

“And for a while it was all as I had known it would be,” he went on thinking. “If you escape with life, the rest follows.” He picked a fleck of dust off his sleeve. Then his fingers found the gold ring and he again tried to loosen it but it would not move. “Is it luck that I wear custom shirts, my shoes are well soled, my house is well furnished and I starve? Luck is to compare yourself with others. For me there is no luck, as there are no others. I am a starving man with a gold ring that cannot come off.”

The groups of theater-goers were now extinguishing cigarettes and hurrying back inside. As he turned to glance at them, he noticed that the shop window he had been leaning against belonged to a bakery. It was not a fancy bake shop. There was hardly anything at all in the window. Of course it was night, and the bakery was closed. But was it? Hiller peered into the window and thought he saw lights on behind the store section. “It must be the bakers preparing for morning,” he thought. He gazed mutely into the window, and saw the window as it would be in the morning, full of fresh rolls of all shapes and sizes, long breads and twisted ones, coffee

cakes and cinnamon cakes and pies and pastries. He let himself settle into the images and presently he felt as comfortable as he had for three panic-free years in Amstetten. There was a trick to it. He remembered now how he had done it. The world and everything in it was created for him and for him alone and then the easy feeling came and he and the dream were one. He felt neither satiety nor hunger, just the numbness of his own identity. Hiller was beginning to feel pretty good.

At that moment, a light went on inside the little store. A man with a white baker's apron wrapped around his waist strode through the store behind the long empty counters. The man bent down behind one of the bins, and came up with several huge, square display pans on which rested a raspberry nutcake cut neatly into squares. Josef Hiller was suddenly aroused. His mouth fell open slightly and his tongue sought the crevices of his teeth where morsels of dinner were lodged. His fleshy chin shivered a little and his lips grew moist. "Probably just finished a batch," he whispered to himself and he hurried over to the door of the shop. As he followed the baker with his eyes, he rapped lightly on the door with his gold ring. The man inside turned, rested his pans against the counter and looked around them to see where the noise was coming from. He smiled faintly and gestured that the bakery was closed. Hiller persisted, knocked again, this time shaking the knob a little to show that he expected to be let in. The man finally set down his pans, and, wiping his hands on this apron, came over to my door. He undid the latch and smiled.

"We're closed y'know. Don't open 'til seven in the morning. Just doing our route work now."

"Oh, route work," Hiller repeated absently. But he had stepped across the threshold of the opened door. The room was redolent with cinnamon and freshly baked bread. His nostrils

drew in the mingled aromas indiscriminately.

“Do you have anything at all for sale? A roll, or a loaf of bread, or a small cake? I’ll take whatever you have.”

“Well, we never sell our route stuff over the counter.”

“I understand. Yes, I know that,” said Josef Hiller, “but can’t you make an exception this one time? I’ll take whatever you have.”

There was such an urgency in Hiller’s voice that it seemed he was actually crying. Frightened, he supported himself by catching on his own reflection in the glass showcase, the fine suit of clothes, the portly bearing.

“I’m from the theater,” he said hastily, in better control of his voice.

“Oh. You look a lot like Zero Mostel. Zero once played on this street in ‘Rhinoceros.’ Come on in here and let me close up this door again.” And as the baker let the latch fall into position he added, “First time any of the actors ever stopped in here for anything.”

The baker walked on toward the baking section at the rear, stealing sidelong glances at the unexpected celebrity in his store. Just before the doorway he turned to say, “All we have now are some seeded horns, but they’re still hot.”

“How many can you spare?” Hiller began; then thinking the question had a twinge of hysteria to it, he said, “Could you spare two of them, or even one?”

“Oh, sure, Mister, sure. Wait here.”

When the baker returned, Hiller asked what the cost would be. The man said they were forty cents apiece. Hiller paid him a dollar and refused change. He placed two of them in a bag and let his strange customer out the door.

Once back in the street, Hiller opened the little bag and looked inside at the horn-shaped

rolls. He could feel their warmth rising out of the paper. They smelled like the kitchen in Amstetten on Friday.

Clumsily, he removed one of the rolls from the bag. It was greasy but warm to his touch. He clutched it in one hand and then slipped it back into the bag, feeling for a moment the beloved gratification of the two rolls. The thought of eating them offered such pleasurable compensation, such relief. Then he turned and, distracted, hurried back into the theater and up the flight of stairs to the darkened balcony.

The play was already in progress. Protecting the bag of rolls on his stomach, Hiller descended silently along the steep steps of the side aisle. When he reached his row he chastised himself for having been so inattentive as to return to the theater after all. Still, there he was, and although he took a slight retreating step, several white faces had already turned on him.

“Sorry, sorry,” he whispered, pushing at last into the half-risen row of grey forms, some clutching at coats; his stomach brushed hard against the chair backs of the row in front. He gazed forward, eluding the flash of vexation in the upturned eyes. When this glance fell upon his own seat (he was two away from it now), he halted, feeling himself a great upright shadow in the blackened row, and looked down into a pile of coats heaped upon his seat.

“But there must be some mistake,” he said, groping to find his stub, the paper bag in his hand rustling in his shaking fingers. “Here is my ticket.”

From the other side of his seat, glassy eyes glinted across at him and a voice in front of him hissed, “Shhhhhh!” To the rear, a face flared upward as the coats were removed.

Still, he didn’t budge. His seat was now vacant, but he could not relinquish the image of those coats, carelessly, bitterly occupying his place. Motionless in the dark vaporous balcony, he felt himself disgusting, a flabby shadow denied the connection to body or place. A murmur of

sotto voce laughter moved across the audience. It frightened Hiller, who had forgotten there were actors appealing from a stage. *Don't laugh at me! Don't laugh at me!* he cried silently. Then he squeezed the paper bag in his hands and retreated down the row as he had come.

Forcing his way, Hiller lurched against the figure on the end and the bag of rolls slipped from his hands. He moved away from it, lumbering up the edge of that unmasked audience, searching across its face for the place that was his. Up those steep, lifeless stairs he moved slipping out of sight until, spotting the single eclipse in the outline of heads, he twisted the gold ring on his finger so cruelly that a cold sweat stood out on his forehead.

“You imbecile,” he muttered as he lifted himself along the corridor, “even if you have to starve....”

The Outing

Miss Waggoner's whistle hung on a cord around her neck. She extended her arms and at the crease of the swollen little wrists mechanically fluttered her hands. As was the custom at the home, the women arranged themselves behind the men, a line spinning itself slowly out in front of her. The men were shooting uncontrollable glances to the women at the rear, the women grasping for the hand of a friend with shouts of "Take *me!*" and "Let go! I got her first!" Ida, alone, folded herself over her belly and pretended to tie her shoelaces. Another outing, another pairing off ceremony, and her own hand hanging like the mateless white sock in the laundry bag. She had to put on one white and one yellow sock this morning, and here she was, glaring past them at the two blunt brown oxfords, which she despised even more than the mismatched socks; now that the weather was dry, she must have her black shoes back, the ones that shone by themselves. She undid the tied lace, raising her eyes fearfully, lest she encounter Miss Waggoner's accusation full in the face. But Miss Waggoner, after all, was far down the line, edging her little hips closer to Mr. Lasky, and scolding Virgil again. Ida tied carefully, the way she'd been taught, two loops, one around the other, the hole, yes! and through. Then she pulled the lace tight and inched her way backwards to the end of the line.

When it was time to go, Miss Waggoner tucked her silver whistle between her teeth and blew on it. "Boys sit on one side of the aisle, girls on the other. In less than an hour we'll be there. On the bus you may eat some of them cakes in your bags. And Virgil, you quit your moaning, hear? Or Albert ain't going to want to sit with you."

Ida's long grey hair swung out of line when she heard Albert whinny his approval. Whenever they went to the zoo Albert whinnied. This time, she had wangled a trade--her cake

for his bag of peanuts. For a moment she concentrated. She had to remember not to eat the promised cake, that was important, since Albert would twist her forearm in an Indian burn if she forgot. As the line advanced she came upon a little sign in the grass: *Do not pick the flowers* or *Do not eat the fuckin' cake* the sign must have said. Ida picked a flower anyway from the border near the bus stop, its petals cool velvet in her hand. She gently slipped it into the paper bag as her reminder.

On the long black cushion across the rear of the bus, one seat remained. She slid into it; all she was able to see were the blue and silver roofs flying like upside down V's above the parkway. Every now and then, glimpsing a whole house, she swung round to hold on to the sight through the rear window, but the houses fell speedily away. Once, a boy whizzed past on a two-wheeled bicycle. A long time ago on a cool street she used to call the tree tunnel, her mother let her ride up and down under the leaves. She wondered when she had gotten too fat to ride a bicycle.

For a long time now it had been May. Every morning the man on the loudspeaker shouted the month and the day, which Ida heard as if it were her own name and she would never forget. But Thursday always became Tuesday; she wished it would rain on Tuesdays, or lightning, so that she could keep them straight in her head, but today the sun was hot, and there wasn't a clue. When the bus lurched to a stop she remembered Albert and hurried to where his long legs sprawled in the aisle.

"Here's my cake. Swear to God I didn't touch the icing. It's all smooth," she whispered. "Now where's them nuts?"

Albert grinned. "You gonna eat 'em or feed 'em to the fuckin' elephants?"

Ida's bloated stomach pressed against Albert's knee. "What do you care?" she hissed.

He reached a lanky spotted finger out from under his folded jacket and jabbed Ida's stomach. "You gettin' fat, girl. You better move your ass and get down on day's work. I ain't seen you down in the office in a helluva long spell."

"Miss Waggoner says if I feel sick I don't need to go out."

"Don't your lady give you no aspirin?"

"After lunch I sneak over to play softball with the boys. I don't got a steady lady no more."

"You fat," Albert said, "but you strong."

Virgil swung across Albert's lap and patted Ida's stomach. Albert swatted Virgil's hand. "You quit shoving her, Virge, or I'm gonna tell Mr. Lasky you attacking her." Then Albert reached behind and took a hard pinch out of Ida's bottom.

Ida took the peanuts and ran back to her seat. The shadows falling in the aisle at Albert's seat were rocking back and forth, and Albert's legs were kicking and banging. She leaned back, confident that Albert would punch Virgil out. She hated Virgil, with his blonde mustache and scented hair. Albert liked to play clean-up with her, pretending they were apes at the zoo, he plucking thistles out of her hair, she scraping the dog shit off his shoes, rubbing his sore ankles, straightening the tops of his socks. But when Albert didn't want to play, his heavy-lidded eyes passed right over her, as if she were a tree or a metal post in the fence.

The line formed again the same way. They came often to the zoo. To most of the boys and girls a zoo day was a tolerable outing, not smelly and painful like a trip to the ocean. Such a hot long ride *that* was, with its whistled harangues of *Buddies!* and *Uses the toilets for a BM.* And Ida really loathed seeing everybody in bathing suits--they were hairy and ugly and smelled of urine--and the tight nylon bands of her suit cut into her armpits and burned around her thighs.

When she peeled the bathing suit off, the skin of her long breasts showed zig zag fiery red welts. She had to flatten the palms of her hands against her breasts to cool them.

At least at the zoo nothing pained her. She'd have liked to wear her green dress with the sash, but the brown pants with the elastic waist were baggy and comfortable, and each person had a bag of cake and chocolates and a meat loaf lunch to eat under a tree. The meat loaf was dry, of course, without any ketchup and no soup. Did the cafeteria smell of soup today, even when they weren't there? She imagined a loaded tray dropping on the disembodied hand of the girl in front, and the mirrory walls reflecting over and over again the angry face and the eyeglasses, and her hands unable to balance the tray, and somebody cursing Ida like a sailor. Had that really happened? Here everything smelled of grass and popcorn. Miss Waggoner and one of the boys usually went for sodas; she loved holding her own ice cold bottle of Orange Crush, and feeling the thin grass silking under her pants as she lay in the grass and looked at the clouds; but above all, she adored the monkeys. Regularly, the monkey house was the final treat of the afternoon. *This* was the time to be first on line. Now Ida hustled to drop her lunch wrappers and the last dry half of sandwich into the refuse can. But precisely at the head of the line, where Ida intended to be, fat Sylvia in her galoshes was pushing to be number one.

"That's *my* place," Ida wailed. "I saw you. You was pushing."

Sylvia was immovable; Ida stumbled backwards into an empty space near Queenie Famuletti, Queenie's red lipstick like an overgrown bow adrift on the middle of her mouth.

"Boy," Sylvia shouted between cupped hands, "I'd rather smell the elephants than old Ida." Ida's lips tasted bitter.

The lions lay in the sun snubbing the heckling boys, the air above them alive with gnats; the tigers snored. To raise a little cain among the outstretched bears, Virgil and Albert each

hurled an empty soda bottle into the bears' somnolent den and were immediately hauled off by Miss Waggoner to stand before her with hands on heads. The stricken bear loomed to his full height and lumbered forward, smiting the bars with his paws. Mr. Lasky, standing an inch from the bars, swore at the boys, "You freakin' bastards," and said to Miss Waggoner, "One of these days these two freaks are going to mean curtains for us. By Christ, blow your whistle and get 'em all back from the cages." His face was flushed; the sweat poured down it.

Miss Waggoner raised her silver whistle and blew on it. "Move back! Everybody take two steps back!" Then, pirouetting to Ida who, in the general retreat, had somehow drifted behind the others, she shrilled, "Oh no, you don't. None of you cows is gonna slip behind me." And she fluttered her stubby fingers from the wrist directly before Ida's eyes, until Ida tramped out in front. Then Mr. Lasky said to Miss Waggoner, "I'll stay. You go for one of the keepers to clean up that glass."

From her restored front position, Ida leaned toward the iron railing to have a close-up look at the mournful bear. He was throbbing and flailing. Whenever Rosalind, who slept in the next bed, woke Ida up in the night, Ida carried on like a wounded bear, whooping and hollering and wheeling curlers and bobby pins across at the sleepless Rosalind. The animal was tearing around its cage like a black wind; Ida's eyes and stomach shriveled, but the contempt of the bear became a current in her.

She turned to wink at Albert, standing with his elbows jutting out at his ears and his fingers pulling at his black hair, but Albert's attention was coping with the boys who egged him on to greater feats of daring. "G'wan, throw your shoe at him. Here's my Rebok. Let's see you throw it at him, Al." Throwing that bottle was what she feared in Albert. She lifted her brown pants leg and inspected the thick scar above her knee. Even now she remembered the blood and

the nasty little brother and the smashed milk bottle. She had a brother Leo who brought her decks of cards sometimes and tins of fish. But the *little* brother, was he still with her mother? or was he someplace nearby, on one of the little children's lines at the home? Her mother never visited any more. Just the other day, it was May already, Miss Waggoner had sat her down near the piano in the attendants' sitting room. Ida had been in there only once, when she was a child unable to sleep. Miss Waggoner put an arm around her and told her all about it.

Her mother had gotten very sick. She could no longer talk, and she had to sit in a wheelchair. Someone had to push her. Ida said why couldn't *she* push her, and Miss Waggoner said her mother was a very very old lady who would fall down if you blew on her. How did Miss Waggoner *know* all that? Where had Miss Waggoner *come* from with all that information for Ida? Ida tried to think of her mother as a very old lady, but Miss Waggoner's face floated free of her uniform and onto the top of her mother's blue flowered dress like a feather.

Ida coughed herself back to attention, a thread of phlegm dribbling on to her yellow shirt. As she looked down at the stain it made, Ida noticed that Miss Waggoner was no longer there. She was standing outside of the bears' den, smoking a cigarette. Ida dropped to her knees as if to search for something fallen, and, just as she expected, Sylvia's galoshes shuffled forward; at the same time, Ida was able to creep behind and slip away from the group.

Once outside, she waddled behind a cement overpass and lost sight of the bears, although she could still hear the laughter of her group now and then. The man selling balloons near the seal pavilion called after her: "Buy a souvenir of the zoo. Helium balloons!" She ran fast, away from the high pink balloons, until his voice thinned. Two ladies, their sweaters thrown over white uniforms the way Miss Waggoner did it, pushed baby carriages across the pavement; the chrome fittings glittered like jewelry in the sun. At the water fountain she came to a stop behind

a boy with wires plugged into his ears. The boy's head lolled rhythmically in the sunshine as he waited for his next. When he had finished drinking, he turned with a smile on his face, but the smile trembled, and he hurried away.

A wind came up. She drank less than she wanted. She had to get going before the monkey house closed. She knew they parked the bus in the road nearby because the boys and girls had to be herded out of the monkey house to get on board. The big brown monkey with the raw pink bottom was in the house before the orange and tans. She was very near now, though suddenly she wondered, Am I dreaming? Is this the zoo, and am I really all alone in it? She kept running, seeing more signs that probably said, *You are not dreaming. Run like hell!* Once she turned; everyone moved in the park like people walking in an ocean.

When she reached the monkey house, she pushed the door open and leaned against one of the cages to catch her breath, long strands of hair hanging over her eyes. The yellow shirt clung to her undershirted breasts, the pants flattened around her sweaty thighs. A shaft of sun fell across the inside of the cage. She looked up. The skylight was open above the wire cage.

A few school children stood about whistling at the animals. Ida thought they were school children, but there was no teacher with them. Now and then one clutched the cage and clambered part of the way up, shouting to his friends. Inside, the monkey with the pink bottom climbed, too. One boy sailed a wadded candy wrapper at him that skimmed Ida's head. The friends yelled, "Go, man!" and "Hey, Franz, you got a asshole like a monkey's."

Three men with towels draped on their heads came in; they tossed the animals some peanuts, said words to Ida she didn't understand, and left. Then the children raised each other by crossed hands until one of them was startingly high on the wire cage. Ida stepped back, thrilled.

The monkeys were as pleased as she was. The boys talked kindly to the animals, "Hey,

man, you gonna love your lady a little for us? You gonna pick her lice off for us, Hmmm?
C'mon man, I paid my last buck getting out here to look at you two lovers.”

Suddenly the boys whooshed out the doors. She was alone, and she let her paper bag fall to her toes. First she worked one foot into the wire meshwork of the cage and then the other. The mesh sagged a little, but she was doing it. The monkeys bounded behind the fence, screeching in delight, passing their ungainly hands across their faces. The skylight was not far. Her knee, grappling with its edges, caught a solid rim, and she hoisted herself onto the roof. The sun was going down; she had to move quickly. She arched her body around the scratchy surface of the roof and lowered it through the other side of the skylight, enabling her hands to reach a ladder the monkeys used for exercise. Holding on, both feet poised on a rung, she gasped as the ladder swung free. The animals loped back, moving their lips, showing their long smiling teeth. At last, as she scurried off, the largest of the three monkeys bobbed up and down in place, rippling his long loose arms in front of his chest, never taking his eyes from her. He let out a shriek of excitement and swayed towards her, swiping her cheek. She pulled away, holding on to her bleeding cheek with one hand, fending off the wobbly approach of the baby monkey with the other. But the little fellow, in a sudden change of heart, ran up one leg of the large animal and from there swung across to the ladder, trapezing next onto the meshwork in a rapid high-pitched squeal of artistry. Ida followed the spectacle with awe until she caught sight of a perfect place to hide. In a dark corner alongside the tunnel through which the animals went out to their pavilion on pleasant days, she crouched low. Her cheek stung. She was hungry, but where were the nuts now? If the boys and girls arrived soon, they would hurl in more nuts, and she could stay up as late as she liked eating her fill. She thought she might be seeing her friends again soon and patted her bloody cheek tenderly. Or would it be summer tomorrow? Would

they all be heading to the beach without her?

At last the group shuffled in, Miss Waggoner and Mr. Lasky near the door, menacing them inside with a newspaper, tittering at their private jokes. Unseen, she hung back in the shadows. Albert was there and so was Virgil. She wished she could share her secret with Albert, but why was his arm moving around Queenie's satin shoulder? She could hear him yelling curses like all the other boys. Loud guffaws when the smallest monkey jumped on the middle sized one's back and peed. Giggling. Ida cried out when smelly Queenie's foot squashed a dropped bag of peanuts, but Queenie was so taken up with Albert, Ida knew she did not hear.

Everyone booed when Miss Waggoner blew on her whistle. "Out the back door and on the bus. Sit with your same partner, and you may eat the chocolates if you have any left. Hey, what's your name, get those galoshes buckled before you fall on your ass." Mr. Lasky's arm slipped from Miss Waggoner's waist to her buttock. He was showing her something in the newspaper as they all trooped out of the building.

When Ida heard the bus sputter off, she stepped into the deepening shaft of sunlight and began collecting the nuts. The three monkeys hung huddled on the exercise ladder and watched.

Where Do They Put the Wipers On A Bus?

I signaled Phyllis with a ring so that she'd be outside waiting. You'd think that when *I'm* doing *her* the favor she'd be on time, though that isn't entirely true of course. It's for Calvin, really, this trip to look at Briarfield before everyone deposits poor Calvin into a class for disturbed children. Try a higher teacher-student ratio, I pleaded, a good private school with a good counseling program and some good art teachers. Out she comes, finally, screwing an earring in place and still combing her hair as she sweeps into the car with the most ingenuous apologies, as if anybody cared. Something about a long distance call (is *Larchmont* long distance?) and running to Friendly Corners for green pepper for Peter's lunch, and Calvin--isn't it always a set of keys that Calvin's locked up, a shaver that he's plugged in where it shouldn't be, somebody's cats that he's tormenting?

Of course my heart goes out to her with a boy like Calvin, but to Calvin? If he were mine, I'd talk reasonably with him, put him to bed at a decent hour. Who hasn't seen those two boys of hers wandering around their backyard with flashlights till all hours of the night, and no friends over, ever? Such a beautiful boy he is, though he never smiles, not even when he's with Cathie. Just yesterday I talked to Cathie about calling him Crazy Calvin. The truth is I told her that Phyllis may very well *make* Calvin appear eccentric, what with the clothes she buys for a 12-year-old boy. Not to mention the lab coat Gene Barthelmy wears around the house. "They're all whacko over there," Cathie said flatly last night, and I felt obliged, out of some deep-seated maternal need for correctness, to add that highly gifted people sometimes do unconventional things. Couldn't Calvin draw magnificently, *and* wasn't Phyllis a marvelous potter after all? "You call her stuff marvelous?" Cathie asked, "I think they're creepy with all those ears and

arms.”

Phyllis has let herself into the back seat and we are just about ready to drive off when I am aware that a school bus is inching its way down our street. Phyllis is bent over, buckling her little boots and I look over my shoulder to scan the children’s faces on the approaching bus to see if this is our kids’ bus back at this unusual hour of the morning. I think I make out Jimmy Salmons near a front window, he is so tall, and suddenly my blood lurches because the big yellow zeppelin bolts away from me up the road, and it is too late for me to verify that what I have seen is a child at the wheel, a child up front all by himself, a child’s shape, small and upright, at the wheel driving that bus.

“Phyllis,” I yell, “did you see that?”

“What?” she says, snapping the top of her hair into a white clip.

“I think one of the kids on that bus is driving it.”

As Phyllis leans forward, the bus is already turning out of sight, and I prepare to take off after it, when just ahead comes Sheila Callahan running out of her front door in her bathrobe following another woman, vaguely familiar, older and larger than we are, her heavy lipsticked mouth pulled down at the corners. The woman is running hard and her chest is moving up and down rapidly. Her mouth opens and shuts, her fist, clutching an unlit cigarette, is pumping as she runs. I nervously place her as the driver of Cathie’s bus.

Sheila is out of breath and her eyes are red. She and Phyllis have not been on speaking terms for three years, so she ducks at the driver’s window of my car and lowers her voice into my ear.

“I *knew* that boy was dangerous,” she says, “the things he tries. You’ve seen him with his feet up on his mini-bike, haven’t you, Gloria? They let him do anything,” she whispers,

“anything he wants.” She passes a sudden glance behind her and bends lower. “It’s *got* to be him,” she says flatly. “It happened right here. The driver stepped out of the bus to check the emergency door and somebody drove it off.”

Phyllis, who has overheard everything, opens the car door to holler to the bus driver. “Lots of kids know how to drive.” We three turn to stare at her and suddenly, to Sheila and me huddled over the steering wheel, she wails, “Gene *taught* him and he knows *how*.”

The switchboard at the school has me repeat what I am saying until I say very quietly that I must speak to the principal at once. When Dr. Fahey gets on, my news falters out of me though I am shrieking to her my sudden, final realization, “The bus turned *right* to the Expressway instead of *left* to the school.”

“Are you certain that Rose Giammino was *not* driving?”

“Just a minute,” I say, handing the phone to the driver.

“Dr. Fahey? It’s Rosie,” Rosie says weakly, “number 16. I’m very sorry, Dr. Fahey, very sorry.”

We get back into the car and drive to the school. The police who are in the corridors relieve us of Rosie, and Dr. Fahey, a stout efficient woman in a pants suit, is not happy to see us. “Assure yourselves that everything possible is being done to find the bus and bring it to a safe stop,” she says, “Mrs. Lorber, Mrs. Barthelmy, please go home now. We know the name of every child who normally rides 16. We’ll call you as soon as we have word. I *promise*.”

But Sheila Crane, who is still in her bathrobe, is crying openly, and since children are beginning to wander over to see what the ruckus is all about, Dr. Fahey takes me aside. “All right, Mrs. Lorber, if you’ll just lead the others upstairs into the Audio-Visual room. You can sit there to wait. I’ll see that the 6th grade filmstrip is cancelled.” Dr. Fahey disappears and in a

moment her voice is on the loudspeaker inviting the entire sixth grade (Cathie's and Calvin's grade) into the auditorium for a sing-along with Mr. Marmelstein, the music teacher. Teachers station themselves up and down the corridor, then leave their posts to talk to each other behind their hands. On our way to the Audio-Visual room, Phyllis is taken into the Principal's office by a police officer and Sheila and I in turn step into the school's phone booth to call our husbands. As we pass by we can hear Phyllis swearing aloud that Calvin is a better driver than she'll ever be. My heart, which has become a scrapbook full of Cathie, bullies me into remembering that Phyllis always finishes dressing herself while driving.

By the time Bob Crane and Gerald arrive, the A-V room is full of our neighbors, since thirty-five children all board the bus at Jerome Place. Sheila asks Bob to call Jack Ferucci at the office because Nina, who is an attorney, has a case in court today, and Tony is on that bus. I myself go in to call Sara Salmons at the school where she teaches. In ten minutes she arrives looking white-faced and taller than ever in her green gym skirt and sneakers, and leans against the window ledge, head in hands. Gerald asks a passing policeman if the parents might not be mobilized in cars to go out and search for the bus. The policeman assures him that road blocks have been erected everywhere and that a runaway yellow school bus with a twelve-year-old boy at the wheel is not exactly inconspicuous. But we are there forty minutes before word comes that they have spotted the bus.

We rush to the arriving police officer who smiles rather wanly as he explains, the boy insists on a chase. Two patrol cars are in pursuit. "How fast?" Bob Crane wants to know. The policeman leans over to him and I am certain he whispers *seventy*. Bob's wife throws an arm around him and leads him out to the playground. It is beginning to rain and I see through the window that they have gotten into their car and are huddled there.

The first one I think of when I know I'm not dreaming, and Crazy Calvin Barthelmy is actually screaming for us to shut up and sit down and is driving us all to school is Ms. Hagedorn and the parts for the play. I wanted so badly to try out for the part of Johnny Appleseed today because I didn't know girls could be Johnny, but Ms. Hagedorn said, just tell me why not? I know just the kind of twang I'll put into my voice and how to walk like a boy, but here I am instead, thrown out of my seat, black and blue and not even breathing. "Anybody says anything I'll drive this bus clear over the cliff," Calvin yells at us and the kids are all stuck where they've fallen, out in the aisle or three or four to a seat. No one says *boo*, not even Tony Ferucci who always smokes and calls the bus driver Rosie Fat Ass. I can see Tony's eyes big and black and his lips pressed together so he can't let out a peep. Jennifer Crane is next to me on the floor with her knee bleeding away and she's pressing a piece of notebook paper to it. Calvin keeps yelling as he's driving, "We're on our way, we're on our way," and then he dips past Greenwood Lake and back down Jerome and calls my name out: "Hey, Cathie, there's our houses again," but I don't look. Soon we're back up at the stop sign and Calvin turns the other way and yells out loud, "Let's hit the road today. No school. NO School," over and over again and by this time Tony and Darren Hollister and a tall 4th grade boy named Jimmy begin to loosen up a little. They smile and punch each other and pretty soon they're all laughing to beat the band, yelling at Jennifer and me, "We'll hit you right in the teeth if you say anything to Calvin. Just shut your stupid mouths. Today's a holiday," until Calvin yells back, "Tony, shove it. Leave the stupid girls alone. I want this whole bus quiet."

"Yeah?" Jimmy yells, standing and running to the front of the bus with his cheeks sweaty and his hands already in fists. Tony grabs him and pushes him down, hissing, "We'll all get

killed, Jimmy. What's the matter with you? Don't bother the driver."

"Yeah," Calvin says, "that's me. I'm the driver. We can go anywhere we want. We can go to Florida, to Marineland. Let's go pick up a dolphin for Greenwood Lake."

I remember when the Barthelmys came back from Florida, Calvin told me about the dolphins and how intelligent they are. For weeks he drew nothing but dolphins, dolphins turning somersaults, dolphins in scuba diving equipment, dolphins catching fish. He did them in grey charcoals, and they were good, like robots, efficient and wet-looking. I can never figure out whether Calvin is very stupid or very smart or what he will do if they put him into the special class. Now, maybe they'll put him in jail.

Suddenly the bus lurches sharply and Jennifer Callahan is thrown on my lap and our foreheads bump but we are too afraid to cry or say anything. Without Jennifer's head in the way I can see Calvin's little brother, Peter. Poor Peter looks as if he's fainting. There are tissues all over the floor near him and he's chewing his knuckles and his nose is white and his eyelids keep drooping and lifting, drooping and lifting. He's much stupider than Calvin will ever be, though Calvin is crazy.

It seems to me the bus is going pretty fast. I can't see the speedometer and maybe it just feels that way from my position down between these awful green seats but I suddenly feel a wave of nausea because I have what my mother calls an inclination to motion sickness and nothing else seems to matter to me any more, and I find myself praying to God not to let me, please God, don't let me do it, not here, not with Calvin driving and all the kids scared to death. Just then Calvin yells out to us, *OK everybody, time for a song. Remember what Mr. Marmelstein says, Sing from your stomach.* Calvin sounds an O and roars so hard with laughter the bus skids. My breakfast skids around inside my stomach and my mouth goes pasty and then

he starts: *Hi ho, hi ho, It's off to school we go, With hand grenades and razor blades, hi ho, hi ho hi ho hi ho. Come on you fatheads, SING or I'll stop so short you'll all go flying through the windshield.* I take a breath so deep down that nothing comes out. Everybody who can, starts to sing, not to make Calvin mad. Jennifer Callahan is singing so loud, her chin is shaking. Her knee is bleeding and it looks smeary. I hate it. I hate the way she shakes and wish she would stop singing so loud. Tony and Jimmy and Darren and all the other kids are hi-hoing away. Peter is picking up tissues from the floor and using them again and I am beginning to wonder where we are. I push my way up into a seat, leaving Jennifer alone on the floor next to Tony. She is whispering something into his ear. She pushes her skirt down and he starts to sidle over to her. Then he makes funny noises through his nose and she smacks him and he shuts up.

Outside, for a long while, I recognize nothing. The pine trees are blowing and a few raindrops are running backwards on the dirty windows, and then I see a sign that says Road Under Construction, Traffic Restricted next 2.5 miles. The bus is going very slow but suddenly lunges to the left, to the right, and to the left again. A blue car pulls over and a man who looks like my father runs out and up the road after us, but where did he get that red coat and why does he look so skinny and we have a white car now and he is soon out of sight and I stop looking. Tony lights up a cigarette and the smell is awful. Calvin Barthelmy is driving our school bus. I close my eyes and open them, but it is true. A light smoke is everywhere and Crazy Calvin is at the wheel. I keep wondering what my mother would say if she saw Calvin at the wheel. Oh God, why does she *like* him? Why doesn't she *believe* the things I tell her about him? I should have told her *everything*, even about the time his hands grabbed at the buttons on my blouse and Ms. Hagedorn looked the other way, I swear she did. I am praying. The bus stops short, grinds up again. Mid-prayer I find myself switching, no longer pleading with God to hold my breakfast

down in my stomach. I am now saying over and over again, God Bless Calvin Barthelmy. Please God, bless Calvin and don't let him come near me; let him drive okay, anywhere, even to Disneyland, just let him drive safely, and even though he's in the lowest reading group let him read all the signs correctly, let him stay in his seat and keep his crummy hands on the wheel. Please take away all his craziness. Please let my mother be right, let there be something good about Calvin. Dear God, if you let Calvin drive safely I promise to marry him.

The accelerator is sticking and geez, I just want to move this crate out of here, out on the wide open road, moving along as free as a whale somewhere in the ocean, but I have to test out everything, the brakes, the gas, the wipers, say, where do they put the wipers on a bus? They gotta be somewhere, maybe near the ignition or around the lights, the sky is pretty bad and when the rain starts to come down I gotta be ready, the gas pedal is good now, you gotta use the whole foot on it, but now the wheel feels slippery, boy my hands are sweating like July and here it is only April and looking like rain. If I could only drive with one hand at a time, I could wipe my other hand on my pants, or get Cathie up here to help me wipe it, but this wheel is gigantic, better not let go, I got all these stupid kids back there and geez, Peter. Where *is* Peter? Mom'll kill me if anything happens to Peter. In the mirror I spot the fuck's stupid red hair, his head pressed against the seat, his finger stuck up his nose, and looking sick, that stupid kid, he's so helpless, why does Dad always take him along with us to Computerland, especially when he admits Peter is such a baby, when is he going to grow *up*? Look at me. Hell, LOOK AT ME, WILL YOU WORLD? I'm driving a bus, all right, and everything is okay. Just leave the driving to us. Daddy would be smirking if he could see me now, the way he always does when I catch on to what it is he's teaching me. I catch on okay, don't I Dad? Dad is fast, like a

Macintosh. What I can't stand is a lot of talking and all those ladies making me sit and sit and sit. At least if they'd let me doodle, but I gotta just sit and listen and do nothing. You really wonder why a smart person like Dr. Fahey doesn't see how terrific I am inside my head for learning to drive like this. Maybe they ought to give all the guys in the sixth grade a driving test and *then* decide who goes into the special class. Why am *I* the one to go to Ms. Schneider's for all those assinine tests, and her sitting there with her stopwatch saying, "Okay, kiddo, when I give you the signal, you begin," and then she gets to read *Newsday* while I have to read all those stupid questions and think up answers and Dr. Fahey telling Ms. Schneider *We never know what's next with Calvin* which is exactly what Ms. Hagedorn told Dr. Fahey an hour earlier.

The noise is a roar and I tell everybody on the bus to shut *up* and I mean *now*. Tony is behind me grabbing Jimmy and telling him to quit bothering the driver. I realize it's me they're fighting about, it's me who's making this crate move. "Yeah," I shout, "that's me. I'm the driver," and I go on for a while about Florida because I get a yen to go and see those dolphins again. Boy I love those dolphins. I love the way they smile. I'd love to own one and pet him and do his portrait a hundred different ways. I sometimes think they are the robots of the future, do you know what I mean? The drones who run the elevators and fly planes and appear on the 6 o'clock news. See those old fucks driving all around me, following me, creeping up alongside, never realizing it's only big old Calvin Barthelmy at the wheel? Well, a dolphin would sense things. He has a way of picking up data, ESP or something like that, so say if we were all in water now, and say we all took speedboats wherever we went, a dolphin would have guessed that this was a schoolboat with a kid at the wheel. I step down on the accelerator a little but now the silence is bugging me. We run through a chorus of "This Land is Your Land. This Land is My Land."

In fact I suddenly feel better than I have felt all day. I wish I had a short wave to send a message to Dad, he'd be so proud of me. Outside, the trees are dancing by and the air through the open window feels cool. When we get to the construction area, I gotta slow down to read the whole sign and I get a little nervous because by the time I'm through reading, a few drops are splattering on the windshield and I still can't locate the wipers, though I'm pushing and pulling everything up here and I'm not sure the workmen won't spot me, so I lurch along a little crazy as I'm trying for the wipers, and I see in my rear view mirror some guy in a hunting coat out there in the road, and then I spot the police cars. I step down as far as I can, glad for my sneakers which don't slide around, and as we take off through the construction, one worker guy nearly gets his ass caught. I'm getting scared because the back of my shoulder blade itches, and then the underside of my knee starts and then my can, but it's no use, my hands are glued to that son-of-a-bitch wheel and all my itching is about to drive me up the wall. I don't want to kill anyone, and those worker guys ought to quit fuckin' when a kid comes along driving a school bus. I scream for Cathie Lorber, she's so smart at everything. "Get your ass up here Cathie, and find the wipers." But Cathie won't come. I pull the emergency brake and get up to drag her to the front of the bus. But she's got her fist in her mouth and she's crying and moaning, "I don't know anything about buses. Ask Tony or Jimmy. Let me sit down. Please, Calvin. Let me sit down, I don't feel good. Please." My hands are so sweaty, I take them and wipe them on Cathie's skirt, feeling her giving way under my hands, her hips sliding through my fingers, the wool of her skirt the last to go as she sinks back into her seat. She looks so pitiful, flat as a dead gypsy, but I have to let her alone because the motor is still running. So I touch her skirt one last time and by now Tony is sitting in the driver's seat but the dope doesn't know how to release the emergency, and everybody is yelling, "Get up, Tony, Let Calvin do it. Let Calvin do it." And he

does.

Soon we're at the Mobil Station and Route 38 and I take it, sharply to the right. I think it's the road we take to Aunt Cynthia's but a couple of Huntington Station police cars follow right around after me. I wish they'd U-turn and go home. I'll take the bus in to Hernan's garage and let Mr. Hernan call the school if they'll only turn around and leave me alone. Meanwhile I think I hear some thunder but listening for it tires me out. I feel as if a crab is inside my head. Tony has lit another cigarette, making my eyes burn. They keep wanting to close, I force them open because when they close I see the faces of all those kids in the special class, how they all stared at me when I came in there with Ms. Schneider yesterday and oh, the noise in that room. Christ, how I hate a lot of talking. "Try your best, kiddo," she said. And she left me there, everybody giving me the evil eye.

"Please, everybody," I say, "Don't be mad at me for not taking you to Florida today, I didn't expect it to rain and I don't know where the wipers are." Through the shining on the windshield there's a blur of police cars blocking the road, and a few other cars and I think that's my mother and my Dad getting out with one of the cops and waving. I wish I could see their faces to make sure they're not angry but it's pouring sheets of water onto the windshield. I can hear my mother yelling, "Calvin, Calvin darling," and somebody saying something about *the brake and over to the right, over to the right, and all right, all right, he's doing it. Calvin Darling you're doing it, I knew you could do it*, but one of the cops has a gun in his hand.

Suddenly Jimmy Salmans is yelling out the window, "He hijacked us. He threatened to kill us," but this is not an airport and why is that shitty gun out and why is my mother running in front of him? Please you shithead point that gun at me but not at my mother. See, I've pulled over very nicely to the side, everybody, so please don't be mad that I'm getting sleepy now. I

can't help it. My eyes are closing. They're closing because they're so stupid.

Love and Happy New Year

Harold Schoolman, after days of impulsive searching, spotted his *mishuganeh* son Eddie behind the wheel of a pick-up truck a block away. He had been looking down his street, seized suddenly by its whispering and blowing beauty, when a truck skidded at the corner and continued straight ahead to avoid Willow's icy hill. Its driver was certainly Eddie: the swell of fat cheek, the recklessness of shirted elbow out into the snowy twilight, the furry white profile of his dog. Harold might have run in to warn Marilyn but his galoshes, already stiff with cold, were rooted as though in a grave. His boy was home, as true as his promise, before the year was out. Harold's body swayed.

Aloud, he cleared his throat, abruptly violating the night air. It was intended as a rendering, nothing more than acknowledgment--ahem, the boy is here--but the sounds struck an incidental target. "Crap." The word vexed him for it hinted his evening's destiny, perhaps his life's. He shifted his bundle of New Year delicacies in his trembling arm. With all the kid's liberation, he certainly had a disciplined sense of timing, Harold thought, glancing towards his house--pearly brick palace in the snow, would he never get over it?--vaguely expecting that by this time his wife had heard his oracular little curse and had armed herself with it. A light went on in an upstairs bathroom. That gratified him, placing her in the limitless house. And as he waited for Eddie to come the other way around the block, he appreciated as a rare pleasure the certainty of knowing both his wife's and son's whereabouts. On his own, clean of cues, the boy turned up like a cat on a window sill, as though to gaze briefly on his parents and see how they were getting on. Last year, he had said to his father: "One of these years I'll come home and I'll know you two have made it." Harold, threatened, had shaken a finger at him for that remark, but

Marilyn, deceptively unmotherly that week, had fallen in love.

It must be said that Marilyn had slipped into love after the ordinary fears--drowning, crippling, blinding--had been banished. The first year Eddie went away had been dark with foreboding. Marilyn was sure her son would become an outlaw, be abused by fierce Oregon women, suffer disease, vagrancy, outright disappearance, be shipwrecked for life on a sea of beer and they on a desert of despair. Eddie, bumlike but never a ne'er-do-well, always returned and softly presided over them: broad-shouldered, rosy-cheeked, holes gaping in his dungarees, disciplined to hear the whole scene repeated--school, scholarship monies, the deaths of two grandfathers, Bobby in Sweden who had never gotten a line of writing in his brother's own hand. For it wasn't as though Eddie couldn't write. He had a flair! Hadn't an English teacher sent his pollution essay to a national veterans' contest? and didn't he write rich twelve page letters to his mother twice a year. The letters came, one at Rosh Hashonah and one at her birthday, wishing her traditional greetings and running on with triumphant paragraphs of the train-hopping, gallery-shooting, dishwashing adventures of gypsying Ed Schoolman, only self-reliant Jewish graduate of Montgomery High.

Across the snowy street, Christmas light winked. Harold rattled his feet. It had been a long day and was now far from over: the doomed year had to be dragged before the firing squad. His plane wiped out, he'd stood feebly on the Metroliner out of New York, cruised for an hour in a taxi searching for his car in the airport parking lot, and waited among other debauched gourmets for his 'next' at the deli. He was still standing, his feet stinging cold in the mounting dread. Lovesick Romeo that he was, the glamour of a New Year's alone with his wife swiftly dulled, son and slush hopeless barriers to the romance he had planned. In the darkness, the lights across the street clamored mildly.

The neighbors had stopped inviting them to their New Year's parties for Harold and Marilyn never really got drunk enough. What, after all, was New Year's to them who had both been raised on the same ghetto block of the East Bronx if not the final rite of the long pagan merrying? His kids, however, had seen it all differently. He pondered Eddie's commitments, raised as he had been among the red and green glow of the neighbors' lights. As a young Jew in a gang of Oregon lumberjacks, had he lost something? converting a Mormon classmate, had he given something? what scrap of Judaism had he managed to keep for himself there on the Peruvian mountains, telephoning in the middle of the night from Lima, "Dad? I'm coming home." Six months later, by thumb, eyes bulging, he returned to Bethesda, slept for a week, pumped gas at the Chevron station to support himself and enrolled at the U. of Maryland for six months. In the basement of his parents' big house he occupied the linoleumed maid's room, coming and going beneath them as undramatically as a reliable servant, a professional in their amateur lives. Once, on the way to a basketball game, he brought home a plain Catholic girl to dinner, appalling his parents with his domineering style. He never mentioned her again. Indistinguishable friends came and went. Late into the nights he studied. Early in the mornings, with a mixture of seed he had carried from South America, he lured wild birds to their tame backyard, brilliant songy strangers. A vigilant and committed worker he was, who looked on the world as on a dense forest through which he required a thorough path. It would reach only as far as he wished to go on a certain day. There he would remain until one morning, at some powerful signal, the time would come to cut a little farther. Last February that day arrived. Across his bed lay a map of Montana with a note scrawled at the northwestern corner: "I'll be somewhere up here for a while."

Harold's gaze fluttered to the other end of the street as Eddie's truck flashed in the snow.

Of course, he was always relieved to see the boy come home, for Marilyn was not the only one with thoughts of Eddie dying in Montana. Harold conjured an image of a giant pine (one that revisited his dreams) pinning him with his son to the hard cold earth. Harold trembling, Eddie glittering on the sunny crucifix, arms and legs akimbo, his voice plaintive as liturgy in the forest, both men unable to live out whole dramas of their lives. And which would have had more living behind him and who would have been truer to his own manhood? An answer was not obvious: Harold had always felt himself to be his own man, barring moments of fate when one feels thrown to the lions. Lately there had been long nights--on a recent business trip he had admitted these to a young Swiss engineer--when the darkness of the forest flew passionately against Marilyn's lace-curtained windows and explosions of secretaries, graphs, contracts, like shooting stars, crazed the order of a man's brain. Such dreams chased after him, called to him in the night. By morning he was an antichrist: arboreal crucifixes were not for him. If Eddie had to submit to the Christian arrogance of nature, Harold himself preferred certain Jewish pleasures and pains. Via the Silver Springs deli and his wife Marilyn, he pursued them loyally.

He loved her, her unpredictable religiosity, her crude, bright eyes. Oh, he had loved his mother, too. Years ago, hadn't her protective face muttered at him as he lay in a Montmartre brothel beneath his first woman? Yes, he loved his mother for that dogged pursuit. On the contrary, Marilyn's eyes followed him nowhere, but stray as he would he could not smash that inviolable trust.

Eddie was like that. A loner. Like a Moses found among the bulrushes, returned after a long separation, he was an unknown. Who had raised him, using *their* hands and *their* love? Eddie imitated no one, peers no more than parents. No one's eyes pursued him, no one's arms could hold him. Not yet; nor, so Harold strongly feared, ever. Wherever he went, he moved

among strangers and their alien idolatries. His sacred image was the god of manual labor. Good works hid under his nails. The drug scene pained him, college students treated him like a father, and the hangers on at the filling station unspeakably bored him. All this Harold had heard from Eddie: "I'm fish on dry land. I have lost my element." Where would he go? What would become of him? Which *was* his element? In their old age, Harold's and Marilyn's, with one son adrift in Scandinavia, would Eddie also be denied them? Harold longed for three angels to come to his big house in Bethesda as long ago, in a desert tent, three angels had visited his forefather, Abraham. He would believe in angels. If they came, he would bend and wash their feet.

Sometimes Harold thought he and Marilyn would come to a cabin on a mountain and be looked after by their hermit heir, drawer of water and hewer of wood; then, under a celibate sky, with a Siberian husky to do the death watch, Eddie would drive their bodies in a U-Haul-It to New Montefiore cemetery in Long Island for their final rest, there hiring a cloaked and bearded Jew to recite the Kaddish for them, once. Bobby, still drawing teak tables in Sweden, still sending the same picture postcards of Uppsala, might never know.

The truck eased down Willow's vaporous hill. They would be three for New Year's after all; he and Marilyn and Eddie. Throw in Guy Lombardo for *auld lang syne*. As the truck moved into the driveway, Harold's conscience surrendered. "Hey Eddie!" he called out, "welcome home!"

The father pulled open the door and embraced his son, immediately plagued by the ineptness of the hug, groceries, Persian lamb hat, thick tweed smothering the boy's bare vulnerability: shirt-sleeved, open-collared, bare-armed, he reached round and never rubbed, never touched the father's flesh at all.

The boy stepped briskly down, the great white husky leaping past him into the elusive

snow. “Hi, Dad,” he said, but the father scarcely heard for he was looking at his son’s beard.

The father looked at it for a long time, changing the boy’s embarrassment into a quivering mistrust.

“I like it,” Harold said, defensive at last, “but it takes some looking at. It makes you look, I think, wise.”

Eddie ran his hand through it. “Yes? Well, it’s coming off. I can’t stand it any longer. I don’t have the talent for a beard.”

Harold said, “Your mother will love you in it. She loves men with beards.”

“She does?”

“It’s one of those fixed preferences. You either like them or you don’t.”

The boy shrugged. “Well, it’s coming off. I had a lot of trouble because of it. People thought I was turned on. Christ, over a lousy beard. Then I wouldn’t shave it off out of principle. I’ve got to be rid of it though, before the itching drives me bananas.”

“You look fine, Ed. God any bags?” the father inquired.

“My duffel. A couple of tools.” Snow dampened Eddie’s shirt, glistened on his dark tumbling beard. He strode to the back end of the truck and soon hollered out for his father who made his way, still clutching his groceries, through the numbing snow.

The boy was raising the tarpaulin high over the arched top of the truck. He moved deftly, leaping up and looping the rope around a metal hook in a single motion, his grace an alien artistry to the father who huddled deeper into his overcoat.

“I want you to see my stock,” the boy said, “what’s left of it.”

The father looked. Inside the truck a dozen pine trees lay heaped in a pyramid.

The father was puzzled.

“It was a lousy season,” Eddie said. “You even need luck for selling Christmas trees.”

At last Harold nodded, slowly absorbing this latest *mishigas*, a son of his cutting Christmas trees in Montana and selling them cross-country, his son’s trees lighting up *goyische* living-rooms from Butte to Baltimore. In the bearded face opposite him, Harold caught a glimpse of a sainted grandfather he had never known. Somewhere there had been a photograph, brown, revered. The boy, in fact, bore his ancestral name, *Yisroel Yedidiah*: how in Christ’s name had it all worked out to Eddie?

“I thought I’d make enough for a little trip.”

“Oh,” the father said dully.

“Maybe my luck’s running out,” the boy said.

The father mused on his own melancholy *mazel*, like why did Eddie have to show up tonight? like why not tomorrow, or next week? or in the spring with dogwood branches? But he nibbled at the soft center of his lip and was silent. A smell of being lost in a pine forest suddenly tormented his nose.

Swiftly, the boy tucked the tarp behind the metal rim of the truck. A quiet worker, he seemed accustomed to the manipulation of his trade.

“You sold off the back of the truck?” the father asked.

Eddie nodded. “Except in Denver. I rented a lot near a shutdown Dairy Queen. Had the Rockies behind me.”

Harold grunted. “That must have been beautiful.”

“It was *beautiful*. I even had my transcripts forwarded to the U. of Denver. But I can’t go back. See Denver and you’ve had it, man. The town’s too personal. All that beauty could hurt a guy, if you know what I mean.”

Harold wasn't sure he knew, but he nodded.

At a shrill whistle the dog Sook bounded to the boy's side. Eddie raised the edge of the tarp and pulled through a duffel, then crammed the corner lap of covering back. As he did this, Harold's belly caught another deep draught of the woods. Involuntarily, he wheezed. Then each man, carrying his own bundle through the snow, entered the house on Willow Drive.

She heard them come in. At once girlish and motherly, Marilyn descended on her son. Harold removed his puddling galoshes and with his bundle drifted into the kitchen to allow the two a few moments alone. He knew he was unwilling to watch Marilyn's separate white teeth reach for a taste of that legendary boy in front of her. Oh, he could listen to their laughter and the queer display of her zeal which she allowed to fall upon the beard instead of entirely on the boy and he was not hateful when mother and son entered the kitchen arm in arm. What bothered him was not how good they looked together but how brilliant each was separately, how powerful the boy, how manly he had become. Once the father had imagined him in the style of Groton, of Harvard. And here he was, tender and stunning, in the style of a fully-bloomed tree. And Marilyn! how sleek she was, more charming than when he had married her, with long jet hair hanging down like an Indian's. Without his Marilyn he was nothing. And no little Marilyn coming along. *There* was a wound, to be daughterless! Never to catch your wife yielding to the approach of young beauty. This woman had to be everything--wife, lover, daughter--as if she were shrieking, 'NOW' in the streets with her bell-bottom pants and her innocent teeth and her arm linked with this tough working class kid. His own kid with his own wife. Would they never grow old? Secretly Harold took stock of himself: age was a grievous weakness.

They ate a late dinner, tersely, anything in the fridge, chicken, cucumbers, chocolate cake, and Eddie found a can of beer. Later, when they had finally laughed together over Aunt

Frieda's grimy millions, Marilyn put her arm around Eddie. "Are you ever homesick, darling?" she said, "I mean do you ever nearly die with loneliness?"

Eddie was matter of fact. "Being homesick isn't *too* terrible," he said. "To me it's like needing to touch home before you run around the bases again. And funny things make you homesick. Had a man come in for a tree in Denver, and man, none of my trees was good enough, or round enough, or whatever the hell it is. Why do I know about Christmas trees and stars and angels balancing up on top? So when I'd had my gut full, I says to this *schmuck*, "Sir, I am a Jew and I can tell you sure as there is one God in heaven that this tree looks a lot more religious just as it is than with all your stars and lights,' and he tells me I'd better be defending my ass and I says, 'Sir, I am defending God himself,' and the man backs out, Sook here booming after, him muttering in his teeth about getting the boys after the Jew-fuck selling Christmas trees. Well, *that* made me homesick, and on the trip back East I let out some hitch-hikers who were singing obscene lyrics to "Deck the Halls." When I backed up and threw 'em a ten dollar bill they yelled they would look for me in Bethlehem next year. I kept on driving under the stars, listening to carols all night, and thinking about going off to fight for Israel maybe. Funny. I mean the things that make you homesick."

Harold watched his son in fascination. The Prince of Egypt had come home. Never before and never again would he create something quite so aristocratic as this strange boy with the glittering wandering eyes.

After dinner, Harold and Eddie went into the family room to start a fire. It had been a long time since they'd had one, Harold said. Eddie disappeared and returned, dragging broken branches of unsold Christmas trees, his arms laden with smaller pines. He bent low and threw his cargo into the fire, stabbing at it with the iron poker. Harold watched as the fire roared. The

branches sputtered and snapped so loudly that Marilyn came in from the kitchen to watch. Flames filled the fireplace.

The sweating boy backed away from the blaze. Opposite him, in the red glow, his mother settled into the end of the sofa. Snow lay just behind her in the windows. In the room, Harold avoided the violent heat, pulled shut the firescreen and went to sit with his wife.

“It’s almost midnight,” she said, shifting her glance toward the windows. “Another year is out there all by itself, Eddie darling,” and although she was accusing her son, Eddie, Harold felt her eyes, bright with the luster of the fire, come round to him.

By the next morning, Eddie was gone. In the kitchen, a note near the toaster said, “Took Dad’s old electric shaver. I’ll bring it back next visit. Didn’t want to wake you. Love and Happy New Year. Ed.”

Late that New Year’s night, as the lights in the neighborhood floated off one by one, Harold Schoolman worked quickly. Up and down Willow Drive, in his Persian hat and tweed coat, he gathered from the snowy curbs of his neighbors their discarded Christmas trees, some still strung with shreds of tinsel, and hauled them through his front door. When he had collected half a dozen, he took an axe from his garage and whacked at them. Then branch by branch, in his spacious fireplace, he kindled them, and as his wife Marilyn slept alone upstairs in their rosewood bed, he hurled the trees into the fire that raged in the empty family room.

Hit and Run

Whether the policeman and Arthur at the Car Hospital have any partnership in this game of the out-dated inspection, I do not know. The local paper is full of scandals these days, which sicken me more than the muggings and the DWI arrests. Nowadays corruption begins early. Just last week at a christening I heard the parents talking of divorce as the ribboned little face of their infant awaited Father Prozinski, even as he misinterpreted its screams for holy zeal.

“No more today,” Arthur yells, crossing his arms in a flapping gesture *of no room all filled up*. Arthur has stepped out in front of a parked dumptruck with its dumper raised. He and I have had nothing to do with each other since one pink afternoon when Mr. Myers came to my rescue along the expressway. But Myers Auto Repair does not have the EPA emissions-test gadget and cannot do state inspections. Arthur, on the other hand, a lively fellow in his thirties, is the town’s premier mechanic. We all know him by his short dark beard and his Greek fisherman’s cap. He repeats “Not-a-today” as if in a Mediterranean accent. As I pull my Olds in front of his garage door, impatience flashes momentarily in his eyes--unexpectedly blue. “Damn,” he says. But I lean my head out. “My sticker has expired. Please.”

“Any minute now Jerry is due back with a collision that has to go upon the rack. Well, get out. Let’s put her up and have a fast look.”

“Thank *you*,” I say.

“If you need the heater--” Arthur calls out as he motions me into the office/waiting-room of the gas station.

The room is bare, but I find the chill bracing. The odor of gasoline mingles with the cold and makes my head swim a bit. I sit down on the decrepit brown-leather couch that lines one

cracked wall of the office. The leather is bitter cold, even through my down coat. The concrete floor is ice underfoot. I huddle my stockinged knees together. The kerosene heater stands mute on the floor opposite me; a Dr. Pepper machine is in the left corner and another machine, one I had not noticed, suddenly emits a silvery ping, then a ping-ping-pong pattern of electronic sounds. It is an electronic game called Mr. Kong, there for the entertainment of inconvenienced motorists. Its steady tuneful gonging becomes a metronome against the erratic clanks, explosions, and bells of the garage. The sign above Arthur's desk says "CAR HOSPITAL: LABOR RATE PER HOUR: \$25-\$45." By a quick calculation I figure they are making far more than I as a new--if no longer young--lawyer. I see my car already on the lift and hoisted. At those rates vigilant customers have taught them not to waste a minute.

I pull out my personal calendar from my briefcase. It is an aimless effort at self-respect, since I can always recite this week and next week's appointments--I have that kind of mind. Mr. Kong's intergalactic gonging pings its way into my fingers as I turn the pages. I am really not reading. Instead I am thinking about my son, Warren, gone from home since tenth grade. I fish into my bag to see if his letter is still there. It is not, though his announcement has worked its effect on me with some permanence. "You are not going to be a grandmother after all," he wrote, much as I used to say to him: "You are not going to play basketball today." He, suddenly capable of sentencing me, canceling my destiny as I had his. His unfamiliar authority troubles me, even at a distance of three thousand miles, and the vanishing prospect of my immortality stirs my blood into a new commotion here on the icy leather couch in the garage office.

Canceling one's grandchild is not done with a stroke on the calendar, nor is it a postponement of contract--who can say if it can be rescheduled?--nor is it a matter only for abortionists or the visceral grief of miscarriage. In Warren's case, as he wrote, "I didn't know,

though I suspected, that Katie was sleeping with someone else. Wes is not a bad sort, he writes a software column for a string of newspapers out here. Since his car accident he has no front teeth, but Katie doesn't seem to mind. He's cleverer than I am." Then I try to remember what Warren's letter says about his latest trucking job and what Warren's front teeth look like. When he left, his braces were still on. "Katie was six months pregnant, not four months like she said. It was no lie. Katie is *cheerful*, not *careful*. So, Mom, you're still young and single and you don't have to worry about my taking Katie into Sacramento to see a doctor. That's Wes's job now."

A shiver passes up my spine. Do I offer to become Wes's mother and retain kinship with the unborn, or do I relinquish my claim? In his new authority Warren has not granted me options. What a kid, that Warren, riding upstream and down like a salmon, spawning, and not spawning, almost at will. I can't help thinking what Warren's father would have had to say about all of this. Imagine! my being a grandparent for eight weeks and Raymond not at all. Serves him right, the shifty bastard. Both he and Warren would probably stand here for hours pumping quarters into Mr. Kong to celebrate Warren's brush with paternity. Just then Arthur bangs open the screen door between the office and the garage, two guys in greasy overalls behind him.

"Today is your lucky day," he shouts. "Up on the rack your ball joint fell out, plain fell out. Let me tell you I believe in luck, and you are a lucky lady today. You're not going to believe this. Fellows, is she going to believe this?" A new element is in the air.

The garage trio turn, and beckon me to follow.

There on the lift is my car. In my embarrassed ignorance of things automotive, I am flung at their mercy. Not at all certain where to look for a ball joint, I begin methodically at the

front left fender. Arthur doesn't give me a chance to be foolish: "Ball joint fell out soon as we got her up. One rut in the road and you'd 'a' been a goner. Damn thing fell right out in my hands."

My God in heaven, there it is, beyond Arthur's pointing finger, left front wheel hanging in mid-air, ball joint exposed. For a minute I think I am the victim of a conspiracy. First the cop sends me in for an inspection; then the mechanic makes it worth his time, or rips me off for having defected to the Myers camp. But Arthur's blue eyes are darting again, this time not with intemperance but with something fierce. The smell of gasoline stings my nostrils.

"Second time in my life I seen a case like this one," Arthur says, lifting the peak of his hat. "Mama Maria, you luck-ee," he says to me.

"Wow!" I say, and while *wow* is enough for the other two guys, who stand by, relaxed as lifeguards at the beach, it is not enough for Artie, who is rigid. "Wow-ee," I try again. "You saved my life."

"Not me," Arthur says. "*You're* the one who pulled in here of your own free will. Free will and luck--you can't beat 'em. I bet you think that's hard to do, to believe in both them things at the same time, but I do.

All three men are gazing at me as at an object of reverence, as though we are on the knife-edge of some remarkable event. And for a moment I feel a surge of inexpressible freedom: Has luck in truth revealed itself to me this day? Is it hovering just over my shoulder, here in the cavernous garage of Artie's Car Hospital, at about the height of my car itself, ready at any moment to come to rest on my shoulders like a laurel? If anything, the thought makes me gasp, but I soon laugh, seeing my susceptibility.

"What do I do now?" I ask.

“Now you make yourself comfortable out there while I call for parts. Take a half an hour for the parts to come, I figure another hour to do the labor, and you’re ready to go.”

We all troop back inside the waiting room, I to my place on the couch, the others to open boxes and find parts. I want to let my office know that I will be late for a closing, but behind his desk Arthur is already using the phone. It is a bright yellow Snoopy phone, the earpiece being one of Snoopy’s ears, long and, I suppose, lucky--or at least philosophical. There is something odd about hearing a serious business order placed on this cartoon of a phone. But at the last moment, Arthur says, “Damnedest thing. Ball joint fell out. Fell out as we got her car up. Gonna touch her for luck.” Then his eyes flying to me, he laughs wildly into the receiver, and hangs up.

I settle myself again on the leather sofa, but, despite the “touch her for luck” phrase, or maybe because of it, I call him back to turn on the kerosene heater. He fiddles with it. Soon it glows. The screen door bangs open as two German shepherds bound in and settle at my feet before the heater.

“Hey, Jerry. Damnedest thing. Ball joint falls out as I pick this chassis up.”

Jerry and the dogs are not alone. Another figure appears at the door, sideways as he lets the dogs in, one side of his face abruptly familiar to me. Arthur does not include him in the conversation. He is a local person I have seen about for years, recurring like someone in a dream you are on the brink of remembering. The attempt to recognize could haunt you for a lifetime. He wears a bright blue baseball cap with the peak backwards. He is a teenager, but as he calls the dogs, drops to his knees and roughs them up, the gesture strikes me as scarcely playful, since it is not a greeting after separation, both dogs having just arrived with him, nor is it an act of affection. The truth is he is *not* a youngster, but a man. His play becomes mean; he cuffs one of

the dogs, viciously pulling one ear. The dog yowls in pain. His face shows a deficiency, neither moronic nor imbecilic, but not quite all there, at the lowest verge of normal, probably low in intelligence, and in morality as well. Perhaps he was a classmate of Warren's, I think, trying to recall Warren's companions. But I am straining to remember someone other than his friend Vernon Kennedy who drowned when they were in tenth grade. It was shortly after Vernon's wake that Warren left for good. None of his friends seemed surprised. They told me that Warren couldn't cut it without Vernon.

An altercation arises when Arthur walks in and punches the fellow with the dogs. "Leave 'em alone, Billy. You're hurting them." He shoves a broom into Billy's hand. "Sweep the front," he says. "And when you're finished, get out of here. I don't want to see you around after that."

"I was only playin' with them."

"The hell you were. You'd 'a' pulled Maisie's ear off." He reaches for Billy's ear and twists it. "Like that? Huh, do you?"

But Billy only smiles, hoisting one shoulder to protect his ear.

Maisie and the other dog return to their spot in front of the heater, one of Maisie's paws consoling the painful ear. Billy goes off to the front of the station to sweep around the air pumps near the dump truck. He sweeps vigorously, the debris raising a cloud of dust before him. Arthur pauses for a moment, staring after him, snaring Jerry as he passes. "Was Billy okay on the trip?"

"What's the difference?" Jerry says. "You expect too much from him."

Arthur draws himself together after Jerry's remark. He resettles his cap low over his eyes and walks to the desk to look up something in a catalogue. I recognize the same pretended

search--the seconds to recompose--I often demand of my calendar.

“The dog’s all right,” I say, intending the detachment of an observer. But my voice is a quiver too intense. What kind of observers had Billy had? Or Warren? Arthur looks up. Embarrassed that I’ve been following the little scene, he says, “Your wipers need changing, but everything else looks A-okay. They don’t even require us to check ball joints, you know.”

I smile, having been returned to my place on the leather couch, put back into my box like a doll. So much for women and garages: I recall a day before Raymond left when a mechanic dismissed my diagnosis by asking me to bring a note from my husband. I cannot believe that I did it. Kong is in the middle of its chiming, ponging phase. Arthur kicks the bottom of Mr. Kong as he passes into the garage. “Today is your lucky day,” he says, conferring it on me, as though it were his to confer, then, under his breath, “though Jesus knows it ain’t everybody’s.” And so I allow myself to slip forward from grandmother to attorney, from loser to winner, from ancient to modern. And I slowly become accustomed to feeling lucky, as one’s eyes slowly accommodate to darkness and the change from apprehension to recognition. The three wise men from the garage have said it: *Today is my lucky day.*

Arthur’s luck--luck is a quantity we all have--is turning. I am not certain why it is turning. Where luck is abundant or unknown, his seems scientifically measured; the exchange about Billy has altered his attitude. He rattles open the screen door and disappears. Every few moments, the heater shakes like a train. Maisie whines and rolls her ear against the cold floor.

I have always thought of Warren as down on his luck. Did Warren himself go wrong--that is, did he have a shortage of lucky days, those given days that tell us life is a gift from a benevolent, indefatigable God whose presence in us shoots up like a green stem? Or was the map bad, simply hard to follow, sketched by an absent-minded God with a misguided sense

of direction? And was I complicit in allowing him to be out on the road alone at sixteen? But, oh, the obstacles to staying home. First a year of that dread stillness in the house every evening when Raymond and I did not speak; mute suppers; domestic neglect--smelly bags of refuse waiting in the kitchen for *his* attention, bathroom sinks full of *his* hair, sneakers and towels mouldering in the car, weeds up to the doorknob of the side door. Then the rush to rescue Warren from the spreading domestic paralysis--swimming lessons, painting his bedroom, playing the guitar, karate, each interest abandoned after two weeks, as if the paralysis had already taken hold of him; and the disappointing month in Savannah confirming it, his working in the harbor at the suggestion of my passing friend Michael Cozzi, an attorney for the longshoremen's union, who gently let me know that Warren was a malingerer. Then the trips to the high school for another chance, always one more chance with each teacher, begged with indiscriminate fervor by Warren himself, his hair now down to his shoulder blades and the tops of his boots unbuckled and flapping against his ankles as he walked, until he wearied of the repetition. Then Vernon's death and his refusal to go back to school. "Such a bored little boy," Mrs. Mehlenberg had once said after a day of "sitting," and now Warren almost a father, though perhaps after a dozen weeks of expectant fatherhood he had, quite routinely, lost interest.

Well, I am only forty-three and too young to be a grandmother. Talk about luck, today *is* my lucky day. My star is out there, I can feel it. The same sky looks down on me *and* on Warren--wherever he is--with renewed brightness. My eyes fill. I reach across and run my hands through Maisie's coat. She rolls over to be scratched. I give the other dog a good rub, too, blinking back tears.

Meanwhile the delivery truck comes with the parts for my car. Now that I know the parts are here, I ask permission to use the Snoopy telephone and call my office to say how late I will

be. I seem to recall that all of Snoopy's adventures begin "One dark and stormy night . . ." Yes, one dark and stormy night, I think, that is the way every story of the soul begins, but I say, "Stan, see if you can delay the Mernel Tucker closing for an hour. If not, call me at this number, 236-4880, and I'll get a cab."

Arthur returns to the office. "They're working on you," he says, "but listen, before you go, I want you to do something for me." He tears a sheet of white paper from a pad, places it in front of me, and hands me a pen. Then he leans across the counter and grips my arm. "I want you to write six numbers on here, any numbers between 1 and 40, one under the other. Go ahead. Do it." He leans one palm on the sheet of paper, reluctant to separate himself from me.

Arthur's face is sober and trusting. The date of the biopsy on my breast rushes to my mind and I put it down, 11/17. And the date I failed the bar, 10/29 (though I later passed it, the date of passing escapes me), and the date long ago when Raymond moved out, 12/31, New Year's Eve. I look up sheepishly, expecting to be caught for cheating on this test.

I am relieved to hear Arthur sing out, "Those are *good* numbers," as he reads the list carefully. "Now I am going to run across to Stein's and buy my lottery tickets. Whoopee. I'm-a-gonna-win," he says, reviving his Italian accent. "*Sancta Maria.*"

"Now wait just a *minute*," I say; but he reads my mind.

"Don't worry, I won't hold you responsible. Either way," he adds. "Relax," he says to me. "Do you think I'd do anything nutty? I got five kids--" And he is gone.

My blackest numbers drain out of me, my will, spent only a moment ago, slowly stiffens. I go over the six numbers in my mind. All three are late in the year, all dark and stormy nights.

I had an uncle who died one New Year's Eve when I was a child. I sat in my aunt's house and answered the telephone, embarrassing the well-wishes--friends who had called to say

Happy New Year--with the inappropriate news that my uncle was dead. After a few moments, my mother took me aside and taught me to say that I was sorry, I was sure they would be saddened to learn that my aunt could not come to the phone since my uncle had unexpectedly passed away that evening. I practiced and practiced the patient uncoiling of that grief. The night Raymond left linked my uncle's death with the end of my marriage, and I recited to myself as my mother had taught me: I am sorry, I am sure you will be saddened to learn that we cannot come to your New Year's Eve party because our marriage has unexpectedly died this evening. I drove into town passing townspeople I recognized but scarcely knew, to pick up eggnog with which Warren and I might toast the new year. It was a dark and stormy night. The wind shone. Snow swirled in the headlamps, sticking to the roads very quickly. As I came up Pine Hollow Road, passing Mr. Myers's station, the gas pumps now capped in snow and silhouetted against the night, a figure was directly in front of my car. I jammed on the brakes, peering dumbly out through the snow-tracked windshield, and there was a boy--difficult to tell how old, twelve or thirteen I thought--hugging his elbow as though he'd been struck, as though I'd hit him. Had I felt something? I pulled up the emergency brake and jumped out to see what had happened. Close up, the boy seemed older; there were signs of an unshaved face through the childlike, vacant look as he stood in the snow, hatless, hugging his elbow.

"Did I hit you?" I was shouting, standing in the white battlefield of the evening; had it been a lightning stroke? A single bullet? The boy did not answer. "Are you hurt?" I shouted again, and I distinctly remember that, although he recoiled, I did not ask for his address nor bend too close, confused as I was by discovering a man and not a boy. Suddenly he ducked back through the thickening snow, illumined by the headlights of my car. "Hit and run," I accused myself over and over again, far into that new year, and others.

When Billy brings the broom back I am only partially sure he is the fugitive I may have struck the night Raymond left us. The defective expression, the vaguely malicious eye, the deficit between a normal sense of right and wrong: tormenting a dog, walking into a car. Quickly my assurances seem exaggerated, and my tenderness fast becomes a reproach--a reproach against myself for contriving such heavy responsibilities. He throws the broom against the wall near the Kong machine. It falls to the floor and lies there. The Kong machine begins yet another gonging phase, although during the last hour I have ceased to notice it.

Sometimes in the last few minutes, Billy has slipped away. My car is ready in a half-hour instead of an hour. Four men have been working on it. Arthur does not return from Stein's. I pay by credit card and drive away. The intricacies of the Tucker closing, which lie ahead of me, loom attractively as the present takes over. At the same time I begin to compose a letter to Warren. I want to tell him about the role his letter has played on my lucky day, that I am freer than I have ever been, that I have said "Hit and run" to myself, perhaps for the last time, and "You are not going to be a grandmother." In fact, as I pull into the parking lot of my law firm, I know that the past, with its broken marriages, uncertain victims, and aborted grandchildren, is incomparably simpler than the present, with luck hanging over us like lightning and clients shrewdly arguing their contracts.