4-1990

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to my committee chairman, Dr. Arnold Johnston, for his encouragement, assistance, support, and nagging throughout my course of study, and to my committee members, Dr. Clare Goldfarb and Mr. Stuart Dybek.

I would also like to thank my teachers and friends for their help, especially Ms. Jaimie Gordon, Ms. Deborah Percy and Mr. George Lyles for their time and advice, which were extremely helpful.

Last, but not least, I would like to extend my appreciation to my parents for their support, my brother for his long distance encouragement, and of course, to Elaine, for her love and for putting up with this last year.

Franklin T. Young
THE SMALL CRIMES OF ARTHUR PAYNE

I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.
--Walt Whitman
People ask how I could love a man like Arthur Payne. They say he was cruel, he sold out, he never loved me, that he thought no more of killing a man than a housefly. They're right. All Arthur cared about was the message he was created to deliver. Our shared days—the September afternoons we walked alone the shore at Cape Ann with our pants rolled up, and the fringe of the Atlantic foamed between our bare toes, or the city hours when Arthur followed me as I took pictures of black kids in scuffed British Knights trying to outleap one another for a dirty brown basketball—were simply Arthur's way of marking time. What people fail to realize is that their question contains the false assumption that Arthur Payne was a man. He was an avatar, as different from the human animal as an elephant or a grasshopper.

Once, vacationing in the Serengeti, Arthur led me to a cheetah. Alone in the wiry brown grass, seated on its tiny cat's rump with its back to me, the cheetah turned its head ninety degrees and showed a faintly bored, arrogant profile. It knew I was
there, loaded down with cameras strung from my neck, rattling as I advanced. Beside me, Arthur moved like part of the landscape, not even stirring the dust. (Arthur could have made Nijinsky feel clumsy.) I raised the camera. The cat's coat was white with black freckles, except on the top of the head and the back, where the fur was shaggy and the same pale brown as the prairie grass. Except for the back legs, ridged with muscle, the cheetah was thin and elongated, with a line of black fur that grew from the inner corner of the eye to just above the top lip. Convex in the middle, the stripe looked like the path of a bitter tear. (If he were still around, Arthur would snort here and say, "What is this, Heather, a Disney cheetah? The stripe's for camouflage.") I took a dozen pictures while it ignored the clicking shutter. Finally it rose. "God, he's beautiful," I whispered.

"It's a she," Arthur growled. I took his word for it; he was the expert on the intricacies of life.

Twenty minutes later, the cheetah stopped about sixty yards from a herd of Thomson's gazelles. Stiffening, she slowly lowered herself to the dirt, crouching with her spotted tail twitching side to side. My sympathy was with the gazelles, brown and white with a bold diagonal slash of black along the ribs. They wove among one another, lowering their necks with effeminate grace to nibble at the dry grass. I turned away. I couldn't stand to watch the doomed gazelles, eating with the stupid innocence of herbivores.
After a minute, I looked back to see the undisturbed herd, the cat still winding up in the short grass. "Why doesn't he get it over with?"

"I already told you. It's a female." He turned to me, serious about the art of killing. "She's choosing. She has to take her time to prepare so the killing will be easier."

There was a cough of dust, and she was gone. The herd scattered as if there had been an explosion in the middle of it. With a fluid violence that made me dizzy, the cat headed straight for a slender young buck. She was so fast she looked more like an arrow than an animal. The buck was one of the last to break, so she was on him before he could accelerate. It was better that way, sparing the fear and effort of a prolonged chase, the gazelle zig-zagging as the cheetah chased him further from the safety of the herd. She sprang on him, teeth piercing his neck. They tumbled together, bouncing and skittering in a screen of dust.

Violence only looks real in the movies, when you're seated comfortably in the dark with a Coke in hand, a bucket of popcorn pressed between your thighs, staring at the flickering screen; out in the sun and dust of the veldt, it was too overwhelming to take in. It all had the slow, foggy confusion of watching something in a dream. While the gazelle lay on his side, legs still pumping as if he didn't realize the ground was no longer under his hooves, the cheetah unfurled from the dust. She stared
calmly at her kill while his legs wavered in the air, then went stiff for a moment and dropped to the ground. Even in the role of killer, the cheetah retained the easy grace of a long jumper. Even if my sympathies were with the dead gazelle, I felt a reluctant admiration for the cat. She couldn't live by human rules; she could only be a cheetah, and part of that role entailed hunting lovely, innocent gazelles. To ignore them would have been a violation of her nature. People have been unfair in judging Arthur Payne by human standards. He wasn't a man.

I knew Arthur Payne for six years, from the first day of his quixotic journey to New York in a white 1979 Eldorado until he died after the Life Festival. I was twenty-two when we met.

I was hitchhiking when I first encountered Arthur on I-79, five miles northeast of Fairmont, West Virginia. I was at the start of a crazy, dangerous idea to travel wherever my thumb and the summer would take me. I wore a pillow, strapped to my stomach by a knit belt, to counterfeit pregnancy. Strangely, I thought that would protect me, figuring a borderline weirdo would balk at harming an unborn child; if I ran into a real psychotic, it might only serve to provoke him, but pregnant or not, I was fucked if that happened anyway.

It was raining when Arthur and I met. Rain is a bad sign when you're hitchhiking. People never stop when you're drenched
and desperate. It's only on sunny days, when you're warm and comfortable and as interested in your tan as your progress that everyone wants to give you a lift. I felt like a river. My clothes were heavy with water, and every time I adjusted the soaked, sagging pillow, more water poured down my belly into my underwear. My hair was saturated, glued to the sides of my face, dripping into my eyes and ears.

Then I saw the car. It was white, another bad sign. People who buy cars the color of a wedding dress don't want it sullied by strangers. Unable to pass up a chance, no matter how remote, I stuck out my thumb. When the car passed, I stomped my foot in a cold puddle and considered giving them the finger. Then the brake lights reddened, and it swung over to the shoulder a hundred feet away.

I wanted to run, but pregnant woman aren't much given to sprinting, so I waddled, hoping my benefactors wouldn't tire of waiting for me. The car had blue and white Kentucky plates and a loose, rattling muffler. "Thank you." I sloshed into the back seat. "I thought I was going to drown out there."

The driver turned and smiled. He was a broad man with thin gray hair and a pale, tired face. "Once I saw your condition, I didn't have much choice but--"

"Aw, bullshit," the other man said sourly. He had long wiry black hair and a kinky beard that grew in about eight different directions and tangled so densely I expected to see a speckled
egg in the middle. His teeth were a little too long for his jaw, as if he were wearing dentures made for a dog. With a comb and razor, he could've almost looked human. "I told Preacher to pick you up."

"Once I saw she was pregnant, I would've stopped."

"I'm Arthur Payne," the odd looking one said, extending a hand over the seat. His nails were a waxy yellow, more like claws. I wondered if he was one of those genetic defectives Kentucky was famous for.

He shook my hand solemnly. "I'm Heather McGuire." I wiped my hand on my wet jeans.

"Well, Heather, Preacher here is our chauffeur, and that's the Apostle Fido next to you."

There was a large black dog to my left, sleeping with his butt pointed at me. I patted him.

"Would you stop calling him that?" Preacher said.

"It's his name," Arthur replied with an air of flustered innocence.

There was a moment of resigned silence between them. Then Preacher asked, "Where are you headed, Mrs. McGuire?"

I liked him. He wasn't dense, so he had to realize no married woman would spend an afternoon hitchhiking in the rain on a freeway. He was trying to spare my feelings. "Pittsburgh," I said. That was one of the last places I wanted to go, but it was always safest to state a destination, and Pittsburgh was the closest
big city.

"We're going to New York, but we could drop you off in Pittsburgh," Preacher said. "It wouldn't be that much out of the way."

Still turned in his seat, Arthur stared at my stomach. I folded my arms across the pillow, wondering what he and someone like Preacher could possibly have in common. "I don't want to be an inconvenience."

"You wouldn't be," Preacher said. "Besides, I can't very well drop a woman in your condition off in the middle of nowhere." He glanced back quickly. "You hoping for a boy or a girl?"

Arthur laughed, sounding like dice rattling in a cup. "You just want a bouncing baby pillow, right?"

He watched with a lopsided, toothy smirk as I fumbled under my loose blouse to get rid of my padded baby. I wanted to chuck the pillow at him, but this ride was too strange to take chances.

"How'd you know?"

"I only felt one life instead of two."

My mouth suddenly became the only dry part of me. All I could manage was a nervous, coughing laugh.

"Oh, Arthur," Preacher moaned.

"What'd I do this time?"

"You scared her."

Arthur frowned, stung by the accusation. "Did I?" he asked softly.
I felt sorry for him. With those looks, he couldn't help but be menacing. "Yes."

He turned and looked out his window at the gray afternoon surrounding us. Later, when I came to know, and at times almost understand him, I would learn to recognize this silence as the percolating frustration of a creature totally alone in the world, always having to approximate his effect on people. "Shit," Arthur mumbled. "I'm never going to get the hang of this."

I was with him at the end, following him into the woods after the Life Festival. Had it been anyone but Arthur, I might have felt guilty tailing him, but I could be sure—even if he didn't acknowledge me—that he knew I was there. If he wanted to be alone, Arthur would let me know in no uncertain terms. I considered bending branches to mark my way back in case he ordered me away, but that would only lead the police to him. Not realizing the life we'd led for the last six years was over, I still worried about the cops. I thought Arthur had plunged into the woods to escape, to give himself the time and the environment he needed to recuperate and to think.

We walked in almost perfect silence for hours. Except for the birds and the wind, the only noises were my feet dragging through the first fallen leaves and the sound of my breath turning ragged and heavy as I struggled to keep up. Finally he stopped.
Overtaxed and sweaty, I dropped where I stood. Arthur leaned against the trunk of a poplar and looked up into the small gold leaves. "What is it?" I asked, pushing myself off the ground.

He was handsome by then. The people who'd backed Arthur had polished him. The kinky black hair was brushed back and curled slightly, the unruly beard groomed, his teeth fixed. Now he looked human and refined. He was still wild inside, though. He glanced at me quickly with the look of sick fear you see on an animal that's just realized it's in a corner. Then Arthur tore at the trunk of the tree, forgetting he'd relinquished his claws with his ugliness. He dug at the tree until his fingers bled, but he couldn't rip a hold in the ridged bark. He slapped the tree in a frenzy and jumped as high as he could, wrapping his arms around the trunk. Arthur's head smacked against the tree and snapped back. With a soft, almost indifferent whine, he slid back down. His legs folded as his feet touched the ground, crumpling as if he had turned liquid.

I waited, expecting him to bounce up laughing and rubbing his hands with animal enthusiasm. We might stop here for a meal, or walk on until dark and sleep holding one another on a bed of humus and moss. The law would search for us, but that didn't matter. After a lifetime of air conditioning and central heating, offices with a metal desk and vinyl chair, driving to the party store two blocks away for a pack of cigarettes, they were no match for Arthur here in the woods. If need be, he could keep
out of sight for years. I was sure of it.

Except he didn't get up. After a few minutes, I rolled him away from the tree. It was no easy task; he was about as helpful as the dead. The tree had torn his fingertips, splintered his nails, and there was a small, rough edged cut on his forehead. I wiped the blood from the forehead with a silk handkerchief, but more blood welled up in the cut.

That's when I realized it was over. Arthur could recover from anything. The fact that a little cut continued to bleed meant he was giving himself over to death. "Oh no!" I hissed, shaking him. "God damn you, Arthur, you're not leaving me." He focused on me for the first time since he had fallen and put a finger to my lips.

I was there for the night, crying and squeezing him ferociously, as if I could trap the life inside him with my skinny arms. Resigned, Arthur brushed my hair back from my face with his torn fingers. As he ran his fingers through my hair and kneaded my scalp, I slowly lost myself. I felt my body desert me. For a moment, I felt myself floating to the trees. Below me, a pair of bodies lay on the forest floor, clinging to one another like ivy.

Then I was Arthur Payne. I traveled back to when he started, encased in the womb, floating in tepid amniotic fluid, growing in rhythm with the drum of his mother's heart. Even then, gilled and no larger than a paperback, he knew he was unique, created
for the sole purpose of reining humanity back to God. I watched as Arthur sped through an abbreviated childhood, studying the strange animal who raised him. In time, I saw myself and realized that even though we spent six years together, my actions seemed as arbitrary and mysterious to Arthur as every other person he met. I felt his confusion as he moved from obscurity to fame, woods to mansions, as people who knew nothing about him but his name and reputation offered their bodies, their nights, and their love.

For the first time, I found out that he spotted and recognized his assassin on that night in Philadelphia, and then chose to do nothing as he stared into the barrel of the rifle up in the catwalk. I felt Arthur die on the stage, his legs splayed in front of him, vomiting blood and flesh, only to come back to life two days later. He died more than once. God had constructed him so that death was nothing more than a short vacation, so he could come back to teach again, to spread a message to people who had no interest in what he was saying. Despite their reluctance to follow his teachings, Arthur always harvested converts when he came back from the dead. They may not have liked him, but they loved the miracles.

During the long night by the poplar, I learned that I was Arthur's final miracle. He had come to the end of his usefulness as Arthur Payne and still hadn't accomplished his mission, but he couldn't give up. He had no choice but to hold me and transfer
everything he knew, all he had learned and experienced, so I could carry on his work and tell his story. Maybe a human who's been given the memories of a messiah can explain things better than he could. He doubted it, and I doubt it, but no matter how gloriously Arthur fucked up, it wasn't in his nature to stop trying.

Sometimes, when I'm hanging between waking and sleep, or on that first true day of spring when the moist breeze holds the promise of warmth and rebirth, I can feel him blossom inside me, and I wonder how much of me is Arthur Payne and how much Heather. It's not always pleasant. I have enough trouble being myself without carrying the extra baggage of a shamed messiah. Still, when you lose someone you love, you're usually left with nothing but mementos: clothes stuffed in closets and dressers, old photos holding an image that can never be coaxed back to life, memories that will eventually warp and crumble no matter how hard you try to preserve them. He doesn't walk beside me anymore, but I still have a part of Arthur with me. I don't think I'd give him up.

The morning after the Life Festival, the law found me alone in the forest and woke me. Sitting there groggy, I wasn't even sure who I was, but that didn't stop them from peppering me with questions. I stared at my feet while the voices buzzed around
me. I couldn't understand a word they said, any more than I could translate the random noises of a factory into human speech. My brain still vibrated from all the new information.

Eventually they realized it was hopeless, that they could get as much information from a stone. Someone decided to take me to a doctor. A pair of FBI agents yanked me to my feet, propping me up as I wobbled between them. Dizzy, I looked down. Next to the poplar, in the shape of a man on his side, was a fresh growth of mushrooms.
I love to see that Nature is so rife with life that myriads can be afforded to be sacrificed and suffered to prey on one another; that tender organisations can be so serenely squashed out of existence like pulp—tadpoles which herons gobble up, and tortoises and toads run over in the road; and that sometimes it has rained flesh and blood! With the liability to accident, we must see how little account is to be made of it. The impression made on a wise man is that of universal innocence.

Henry David Thoreau
Arthur loved to brag about his family tree. He traced his ancestry back to a chain of amino acids a few miles east of Somalia before the continents separated. More than once, I tried to listen to the whole story. I really did, but I always dozed off around the time Arthur's billion billionth great-grand algae heroically gave off oxygen to replace the ammonia in the atmosphere. Sometimes, he'd be too absorbed in telling his story to notice I was asleep, and I'd wake at three in the morning to the tale of the nocturnal shrew stealing an egg from a sleeping dinosaur. Other times, Arthur would shake me awake. "I don't think you appreciate the importance of all this," he'd say with an air of matronly disapproval. "Without that algae, you'd probably be some ammonia snorting slug." Nodding, I'd mumble an apology and go back to sleep. Disciple or not, I wasn't about to stay up all night listening to Arthur sing the praises of pond scum.

One of his ancestors whom I do admire is Maggie Payne, Arthur's grandmother. Even though I never met the woman, knowing her only through my imagination and the distorted filter of Arthur's perceptions of the thin, sharp featured woman who tried to ride
herd over his wild childhood, I've always felt a special kinship with Maggie. After all, I spent most of six years with her grandson. Arthur never loved anyone, but I could always sense a rough fondness for Maggie when he spoke about her, especially when he laughed and told me, "She couldn't have died if her life depended on it."

It certainly wasn't for lack of trying. When age and cataracts began to steal her eyesight, she spent the final hour of each night preparing for death. Thirty minutes went into a hot bath, designed to loosen the spirit the way a child hurries the loss of a milk tooth by wiggling it back and forth with a finger. Maggie was grateful for her failing sight in the bath. One of aging's greatest pains had been watching a body hard and supple as a boy's decay until it was little more than loose flesh tacked to bone. After the bath, she put on a flannel nightgown and shuffled to her room with her hand on the wall. In the bedroom, she brushed her thin hair, caulked her wrinkles with white powdered clay, rouged her cheeks and smeared lipstick around her mouth. She knew she probably looked like a kewpie doll, but it was the best she could do with shaky fingers and eyes that lost her reflection in a creamy haze on the mirror. Maggie could only hope Death would appreciate the effort. Before sleeping, she knelt painfully by the bed, balancing herself by pressing her elbows into the mattress, and asked God to let her die, to take her in her sleep like an inconsiderate husband.
He never answered her prayers. Maggie always woke around dawn to a room full of cloudy blue light. She patted her legs under the blanket to make sure she was still an old woman in her bedroom in Florida, then groaned. In a world where cars collided, people shot each other and even the very earth shook from time to time, dying didn't seem much to ask for. Cursing, Maggie threw her pillow across the room. Her only consolation was the sound of glass shattering and then rattling across the floor. She heard the door open; it was her daughter, Jackie, come in to comfort the living.

Jackie was always awake by then. She suffered from nightmares and slept only a few hours each night. Never able to sleep after the nightmares, she killed the hours by playing solitaire with a faded deck of cards worn and nicked by years of shuffling. Her game never improved, and she had no idea how often she won, because she played for the comfort of rote movement. A few minutes before dawn, the birds woke and sang in the dark outside her window. That was her cue. Methodically, she gathered up her cards, bound them with a thick rubber band and waited for Maggie to wake. I think Jackie only existed when there was another person to give her life. Alone, she was dull and sluggish as a snake in winter.

When the windows lightened, the sound of Maggie breaking things by throwing her pillow triggered Jackie. She walked briskly across the hall and sat on the edge of the bed. Jackie eased
her mother through the tears by clutching Maggie's tiny frame, running her fingers through the wispy curls on her head. It was a baby's hair. On these mornings, Maggie reminded her daughter of an infant, with her face puckered around a toothless mouth, hands clutching at the air, her head resting on Jackie's chest. Sometimes Jackie wondered if Maggie had missed her death and gone full circle until she was a baby again.

Eventually, Maggie's anguish faded to surly resignation. Releasing Jackie, she leaned back, then felt behind her for the pillow she had thrown. Maggie waited with an expression of martyred patience while Jackie retrieved it. Propped up, Maggie frowned and dropped her head. "Why can't I die?"

"I don't know. Maybe you're trying too hard."

Maggie turned away to sulk. "How can you try too hard to die?"

"Like I said, I don't know. Maybe if you just tried to relax, it'd--"

"I've tried to relax!" Maggie roared, bolting upright. "What do you think those goddamned useless hot baths are for? My health?"

"Mama, you're going to get yourself all worked up."

"Good. Maybe I'll have a heart attack." Disgusted, Maggie fell back and smacked her skull against the headboard. The room waltzed around her. Maggie thought this might be it. After all the vain preparation, she had destroyed her brain in a silly
accident. The room stopped dancing. Death turned out to be nothing more than a slight headache and a knot the size of an acorn on the back of her head.

Jackie leaned forward and touched Maggie's hand. "Are you all right?"

"What do you think?" Maggie said wearily.

"I hate to say this, Mama, but I don't think you're ready to die yet."

Maggie turned her face to the ceiling, dull eyes brightening with tears. "How much readier do you have to be?"

Maggie grew desperate. As time progressed, the ill defined shapes around her receded until she could only distinguish light and dark. She was cold all the time, could only shit every fourth day or so, strange pains leapt from bone to bone, food turned to sand in her mouth and rock in her guts. Still, she couldn't die. She decided to prod death. She took what she thought was a massive dose of arsenic and ended up with a belly full of baby powder. She dropped a razor blade on the floor and couldn't locate it. Finally, she went to the kitchen early one morning, blew out what she thought was the pilot light, turned on the oven and waited for her death. Within minutes, she was afloat in her own sweat. Jackie came in and tapped her on the shoulder. "Mother," she said with formal exasperation, "that's an electric
It became apparent to Maggie that her failing senses made suicide next to impossible. Haunted by her incompetence, she imagined trying to shoot herself in the head and gunning down some innocent in the street.

She deteriorated. In her eighty-five years, she had coped with everything life thrust at her. Born to a tobacco farmer in western Kentucky, she survived a childhood of poverty, watching her muscular brothers turning red faced and tortured under the yoke of their father's plow as they substituted for the horse their family could never afford. She escaped by marrying a wealthy businessman when she was fifteen, but less than a year later, she woke in the middle of the night to find him dead, his right arm still holding their bodies together. Not quite seventeen, she endured two and a half days of labor, slicing her palms with her nails and screaming at the ceiling of the bedroom as her muscles rippled and pushed Jackie through Maggie's narrow pelvis. Then, exhausted and little more than a child herself, she was responsible for the care of a helpless baby. None of that pain compared to the slow deterioration of old age. Maggie discovered the heaviest burden in life is unwanted survival.

Rarely leaving the bedroom, Maggie retreated from the world around her. Her blindness made it easier. Without the distraction of sight, she could imagine she was anywhere but in Lakeland, Florida, waiting for a death that always managed to escape her.
She spent most of her time in a state of intentional senility, lost in replaying her past. She didn't skip over even the most painful times, since they were better than the present she was trying to forget. Occasionally she would tinker with what had happened, imagine that Jackie had marched straight into the wooden schoolhouse on that disastrous beginning to first grade instead of crying and balling the hem of Maggie's skirt in her small fists to try avoiding the inevitable separation. Other times, Maggie would pretend her husband had survived until Jackie's birth and stood at the foot of the bed, squinting to watch Maggie nurse their daughter for the first time.

Maggie paid so little attention to the present that she eventually lost her hold on it. She began to drift through time without direction, moving through the events of her life almost at random. Sometimes she relived the same scene over and over for days at a time, repeating it like a scratched record until some neuron fired and moved her to another scene. All she managed to remember of the present was that she wanted to die.

One evening, during a moment of lucidity, Maggie grabbed Jackie's wrist when she brought in supper and asked her daughter to kill her.

"Stop fooling around, Mama."

"I'm serious. This is your chance. If my mama had asked me to kill her..." Maggie snapped her fingers. "I would've done it just like that."
"I couldn't kill you."

"Jackie." Maggie tilted her head and smiled sweetly. "Has it ever occurred to you what a terrible job I must have done raising you? I mean, look at you. You never married, you've never lived anywhere but with me, you've never accomplished a single, solitary thing. There's no reason for you. All you've ever done is take up food and air."

"It isn't going to work, Mama. I'm not going to kill you."

Jackie worried about her mother, but she had more pressing concerns. Her body was changing. She had trouble with her digestion; food refused to sit still. Four or five times a week, she sat on the bathroom floor and spat up even the lightest meals. Despite her inability to keep nourishment down, she was gaining weight. Even cooking nauseated her. She had to stop fixing Maggie a breakfast of bacon and eggs with toast and bitter black coffee. Fortunately, Maggie didn't even notice when Jackie substituted corn flakes and skim milk.

Her nights changed, too. Her nightmares worsened, intensifying their hold so she couldn't escape them. She would wake trembling, remain conscious just long enough to notice the familiar dark shape of her dresser and feel the pillow on her cheek before the darkness snatched her back and plunged her into the nightmares again. She could never get out of bed, wake up enough to escape
them. In her sleep, men climbed her like a mountain, jammed metal hooks in her shoulders and hauled themselves up on yellowed ropes. They were nasty men with flat white faces that held no eyes, no nose, no mouth; they violated her, stole her virginity while rasping obscenities in her ear; they called her a whore, a slut, a bitch and a cunt. Sometimes they dragged her to the woods and laid her naked on her back in the dirt and bugs, exposed to the single cruel eye of the sun. A lizard darted across her belly, stopped for a moment and flicked out a sharp pink tongue.

It wasn't until morning, when the sun lit her red drapes from behind and filled the room with colored light, that Jackie woke up long enough to escape the dreams. She threw on her housecoat and hurried out of the bedroom, as if the residue of the nightmares could still contaminate her. Fearful that she had lost control, Jackie made an appointment with the doctor.

At one time, Dr. Hiller had been fat. He used to be an OB/GYN in Oak Park, Illinois, but when the baby boom leveled off, he shed seventy pounds and his wife, then moved to Lakeland to care for the crop of the aging. His skin was loose, as if it expected the weight to return at any time. This gave him an unhealthy appearance that tended to reassure his patients, since a young, tanned physician couldn't be trusted to understand the humiliations of decay. Dr. Hiller reminded some people of a turtle, with long loose drapes of flesh hung from his chin, a sharp nose that protruded so far as to be a miracle of genetic
architecture.

Jackie told him her troubles. When she described the dreams, her face turned hot, and she found it easier to stare at the floor while she spoke. "Jackie," the doctor said softly. She looked up. "We all have dreams that seem immoral or embarrassing."

"But these are..." She paused, unable to think of a word powerful enough to convey her fear and disgust. "They're horrible."

"Dreams are nothing more than the brain's way of exercising," Dr. Hiller assured her. "Think of them as pushups."

She felt better until she changed into a pale green gown that tied loosely in the back. She was cold in the gown, feeling exposed, fragile and birdlike. Sensing her distress, Dr. Hiller patted her hand and asked after her mother. As he moved the stethoscope about her abdomen, eavesdropping on the workings of her digestive system, Dr. Hiller suddenly frowned, his eyebrows inching toward one another in an expression of puzzlement. "Is something wrong?" Jackie asked quickly, sitting up. The doctor smiled, shook his head and pushed her back down. Finally, he had a nurse take samples of her blood and urine and asked Jackie to return tomorrow. She did.

He was waiting in his study, smoking a pipe. Spread out on his desk before him were the test results. "Hello, Jackie. How are you today?"

She smiled, but her muscles were too rigid to allow her to stop. "Nervous."
"That's not unusual. We doctors do that to everyone." Hiller drew on his pipe, and curls of smoke leaked from the corners of his mouth. "I'm not quite sure how to explain this."

"What's wrong with me?"

"Jackie, I've been practicing medicine for close to thirty years now, and I've found that sometimes a wild hunch gets you further than sitting down and trying to reason things out. They thought I was crazy at the lab, but..." Hiller's face vanished along with his voice behind a fog of smoke. "Jackie, your symptoms and one of the tests I had them run say you're pregnant."

She glanced down at her belly with something close to awe. "You mean I'm going to have a baby?"

"That's what the paper here says."

Jackie suddenly remembered how babies were manufactured. "That's impossible. I never...I mean...I just haven't done any...I'm..."

"Celibate?"

Jackie looked down intently at her shoes. "A virgin."

"Oh." Dr. Hiller coughed politely. "You're also sixty-eight years old, and while there are many wonderful, exciting things a woman can do at that age, having a baby isn't one of them."

"If I'm not pregnant, then what am I?"

Dr. Hiller shrugged; Jackie burst into tears. Dancing around his study uncomfortably, the doctor searched for a handkerchief
or a tissue she could cry into. Desperate, he ripped pages from a back issue of *Reader's Digest*. After a few minutes, Jackie sniffed and summoned up all her courage. "How do we go about finding out what's wrong with me?"

"I think our best bet is exploratory surgery."

"You mean with knives?"

Dr. Hiller nodded. "That's the kind."

So the doctor sent her home, huddled as small and frightened as an injured bird, in the back seat of a taxi. What he didn't tell Jackie was that he suspected she had developed some exotic form of uterine cancer. The difference between a fetus and a tumor is slight. Both are foreign masses of tissue growing at a pace that puts our own cells to shame, exposing them for the dullards they are. Each is a parasite, leeching nourishment from the host for its own insatiable growth. The major difference between the two is that cancer eventually goes too far and kills the host, while a fetus senses a free ride, turns into an infant, passes itself off as lovable and proceeds to bleed the host dry for approximately twenty years, leaving behind a bewildered gray haired parent instead of a good honest corpse.

When Jackie returned from the doctor, Maggie lay silent on the bed, too exhausted and befuddled by life to do much else. Jackie burst into the bedroom and rushed to her mother. "Mama!"
she cried, kneeling at the bed and pressing Maggie's cool hand to her cheek. Her mother snatched the hand back. "Mama, I'm going to have an operation."

If Maggie heard, she gave no indication.

"Please, Mama," Jackie whined, crawling onto the bed. Maggie rolled toward her, but it wasn't the touch of a mother, just old bones gravitating to a depression in the mattress. "I went to Dr. Hiller, and he says he's going to operate. I'm afraid I'm going to die."

"What?" Maggie felt for her daughter's arm, ran her fingers up to the shoulder.

"I'm going to die."

"Die?" Maggie said softly. Her fingers slid up Jackie's neck to her face. "You can't die, Jackie."

"I can too," Jackie said, wiping at her tears. "He's going to cut me open and I might die while he's doing it."

"Don't your dare," Maggie whispered, pinching her daughter's lips together. Jackie squealed as Maggie pulled her down by the lips until their noses touched. "Don't you dare die on me. I don't care how old you get, you're never too big for an ass whipping."

Trying to protest, Jackie found it impossible to speak with her lips clamped and twisted.

"Nobody's dying here but me." Maggie yanked for emphasis. "You understand?"
"Mmmhmmm."

"Good." Maggie released her daughter. "Nobody dies around here before Maggie Payne."

Later that evening, Dr. Hiller phoned to tell Jackie that her surgery had been scheduled for two days from today. He tried to reassure her, telling her that the surgery was routine, that he would help find a private nurse for Maggie during Jackie's stay at the hospital. After about twenty minutes, he was able to convince her to check into the hospital the next afternoon.

Hanging up, he leaned back in his plush leather chair, kicked off his crepe soled shoes and lit his pipe. Dr. Hiller loved surgery; it was the only time he felt truly alive. Standing in the operating theater with the delicate machinery of life laid open before him, a nurse at his side and command, his smock freckled with blood, he felt the adrenalin sprint through him, stimulated by the knowledge that he held the life of another human in the fine touch of his left hand. He was in love with the hidden parts of the body, the secret arrangement of the organs, being able to reach deep inside another person and put his print on that most precious part of them. After knocking the ashes from his pipe, Hiller put Tristan und Isolde on the stereo, conducting with a scalpel for his baton. He drank his customary nightcap--two shots of Maker's Mark whiskey his daughter sent
down from Indiana—and retired for the evening. Climbing into bed, he smiled at the thought of the upcoming procedure on Jacqueline Payne. It promised to be simple, but interesting.

Though he didn't realize it at the time, Hiller was finishing the last happy night of his life. He had the misfortune of being the first person to cross Arthur Payne.

Just before she went to bed, Jackie heard Maggie call her name. Crossing the hallway, she stood uneasily in the doorway of Maggie's room. She expected an apology, but instead Maggie delivered a disjointed lecture about death. After mulling it over for the bulk of the evening, Maggie had come to the startling conclusion that death didn't exist. "It's a myth," she explained, "just like the Loch Ness Monster or the Boogeyman. It's just something somebody made up to scare little kids."

Jackie wasn't comforted. She was unable to go to sleep, lying in the dark crying, holding fiercely to her sheets and pillow, as if they could save her from death if she just gripped them tightly enough. Finally, a little after three in the morning, she managed to slip into a shallow, fitful kind of sleep that offered no rest. She had another one of her nightmares.

She was out on a stage, stretched on an operating table. Doctors in long white coats filled the theater, chatting to one another and occasionally glancing at her disinterestedly. When
Dr. Hiller entered from stage left, the audience greeted him with polite applause. While Hiller addressed his colleagues about this medical miracle—a virgin birth to a sixty-eight year old woman—one of the faceless men sneaked in from the wings.

Jackie sat up. "Dr. Hiller, he's not supposed to be here." Hiller turned around, his turtle's face gone, replaced by the flat white visage she knew so well. She couldn't explain it, but somehow she knew Dr. Hiller was smiling. He stepped toward her, a fork in his left hand. "What about the anesthetic?" Jackie asked.

Barking with laughter, Hiller turned to his colleagues. They were all faceless now, their white faces and coats blending together so the auditorium looked like a sloping wall the color of bone. "She wants to know about the anesthetic!" All the doctors laughed. Pirouetting, Hiller stabbed her in the stomach with the fork. Jackie raised her head, then smacked back against the operating table in the hope of knocking herself out. It didn't work. Producing a spoon the size of a snow shovel, Dr. Hiller dug into her as if she were a grapefruit. He brought the spoon from her body, staggering back under the load.

A baby sat crosslegged in the shallow bowl of the spoon. The theater rang with applause, whistles and cheers. Standing, the baby held his hands clenched above his head in a gesture of triumph. When the noise faded, he smiled at Jackie with the sharp teeth of a wolf. "Oh, Mommy!" he squealed in a cartoon
voice. "I could just eat you up."

Jackie woke shaking so violently that even when she lay on her side, the room jumped around her as if she were in an earthquake. When she finally calmed down, she felt weak and dizzy when she tried to get out of bed. She sank back on the bed, feeling as if something had sucked up all the feeble strength she had left.

The phone on the nightstand rang. "Hello," she sighed, struggling to sit up.

"Jackie. This is Dr. Hiller."

"Hello." Dizzy, she gave up trying to sit, laid back on the mattress. "Did you find the nurse?"

"I'm not calling about the nurse. I'm afraid I'm not going to be able to do your surgery."

"How come?"

"I hurt my hand."

"Oh," Jackie said, unable to stop a small smile. "I'm so sorry."

"Someone else will have to do it, but it's going to take a few days to get things lined up. I'll call you back when we have the new arrangements set."

"I don't have to go to the hospital?"

"Not today."
After the phone call, Jackie wobbled out to the kitchen in her bathrobe to fix breakfast for Maggie. She was still extremely weak, her legs wavering beneath her so badly she had to put her hands on the formica counter top to steady herself for a moment. While she poured milk over Maggie's cereal, something stirred inside her, and suddenly her uterus clenched tightly as a fist. She watched the milk carton drop from her hand to the floor, bursting as it hit. "Oh, my," she said meekly, sitting heavily in the milk.

With the exception of those brief moments in the woods before he died, I seldom saw Arthur frightened. It wasn't in his nature. Being a special breed, an avatar, he didn't have any need for fear. Even in an animal as complicated as a human, fear is rooted in the instinct to survive. Arthur never had to concern himself with survival; if he was hurt, he healed himself; if he died, he brought himself back to life with no more difficulty than you or I face getting out of bed on Sunday morning.

He was scared when Dr. Hiller mistook him for a tumor, though. For ten weeks, he had been secure and peaceful inside Jackie's womb, and then, without warning or experience in dealing with anything outside his limited environment, he was confronted with someone who wished to get rid of him. Arthur panicked. He lashed out at Hiller and accelerated his own growth. While Jackie suffered
through her nightmares, Arthur developed frantically, preparing to enter the world six months ahead of schedule. He doubled his size in fifteen minutes, pulling nutrients through the umbilical cord so quickly he nearly killed Jackie in her sleep. Still inexperienced, he lost control of the process more than once. There were times when his internal organs outstripped his muscles and skin so that he bulged like the eye on a potato. Arthur adjusted, though, and by the time Jackie prepared Maggie's breakfast, he was ready for birth, if still a trifle misshapen.

It didn't take Jackie long to realize the test was correct. She was pregnant. Lying on her back, she called out weakly to Maggie for help, but she knew that was hopeless. Something had drained her strength so she could barely raise her voice above a throaty whisper, and even if she could rouse Maggie, a blind, senile old woman who no longer believed in death wasn't going to be any help. Jackie thought about calling for an ambulance, but the nearest phone was in the living room, and she was too exhausted to move. All she could manage to do was suck her breath in sharply with each contraction, squeeze her eyes shut.

The only birth she had been present at was her own, which she didn't remember. She hadn't the slightest idea what to do. The only thing she could think of was that the father was supposed to hand out cigars to his friends in celebration of a birth. This occupied Jackie between pains, as she lay panting and slick with sweat and souring milk on the floor. She couldn't decide
who should buy the cigars in case of a virgin birth. Considering her present condition, she couldn't be expected to get up and walk half a mile to the party store for them. Besides, she didn't have any friends. Eventually Jackie came to the conclusion that in a situation like this, it was God's job to provide the cigars.

When the sunlight burst through the kitchen window and fell across her face, she sighed and put her hands over her eyes. She must have passed out for awhile, since the window faced west, and the sun meant it was afternoon. The pain had stopped, though she could still feel the waves of tension and release in her uterus. She realized she didn't have the stamina to survive this. It was when she gave up any hopes of living through this strange birth that Jackie learned life's final lesson: death doesn't hurt. Pain is nothing but a nervous message for retreat, a mode of self-preservation, so that once death is certain, there's no longer any need for pain.

Free to ignore the tumult inside her, Jackie began to see the kitchen around her as she had never noticed it before. She suddenly saw a richness of color around her, the beauty of the smoke stained ceiling above the oven where the scent of every meal had finally rested. Since she and her mother had moved to Florida, Jackie had spent hours in this room every day, either picking at or preparing meals. She felt a vague regret for the way she had cooked, mechanically combining ingredients by rote, oblivious to the fragrance of her spaghetti sauce filtering past
her nose on the way to the rest of the house, or the satisfying crackle of bacon in the frying pan. She had eaten the same way, slowly pushing her way through the meal for the simple reason she wouldn't survive without eating.

As death approached, Jackie realized her lack of appetite had colored her life. She had forfeited her hunger for sex, people, comfort and eventually life itself. Her virginity troubled her. If she had another chance at life--she didn't, and had already passed the delusion that would be some reversal in her fortune--she would have used her sex. It wouldn't have mattered how, whether it was with a man or a woman, or even a billy goat, just as long as she joined with another life for a few minutes.

Jackie noticed the contractions had stopped. She looked down and saw a baby crawling toward her awkwardly, one leg trailing behind him, thin and spindly as a twig. "Lord," Jackie said. "You're a mess."

She watched with nothing more than curiosity. That surprised her. She had always assumed that a mother experienced a torrent of love at the first sight of her child, but Jackie felt nothing. When he grabbed the belt of her house coat with his minuscule hands and struggled, his face turning crimson as he tried to pull himself up on top of her, Jackie made no attempt to aid him. She was a little puzzled, never having known newborn babies were so mobile. As the boy crawled across her stomach, she peered down and saw it was a boy. He stopped and cocked his head.
"What?" Jackie asked, staring at his black eyes. Then she realized he must be hungry. She tugged at her bathrobe and nightgown to expose her right breast. "Sorry. I'm new at this." When Arthur Payne closed his mouth around the nipple, Jackie Payne died.
Maggie had the worst headache of her life. It started behind her eyes and extended all the way up her tingling scalp. She felt like there was a thunderstorm inside her. Jagged lines of pain burst across her forehead, then broke up and echoed until her head was filled by a low, rumbling throb. She yelled for Jackie to come in and get her some aspirin. After hollering herself hoarse, she threw back the covers, grumbling about her daughter's inattentiveness, stalked over to the dresser and found a plastic bottle of generic aspirin. Tossing four tablets into her mouth, she noticed her reflection in the mirror and leaned toward it, frowning. "My God," she mumbled with a mouth full of bitter pills. "When did I start looking so old?"

The realization she could see made her spit the aspirin out of her mouth like powdery white bullets. She stared at the perplexed old woman in the mirror, who looked back with green eyes and lines etched in her forehead. Maggie stuck out her tongue; so did her reflection. Giggling, she rumpled her hair into chaotic greasy curls, stuck her lips out as far as they'd stretch and grunted like an ape, inserted a finger into her right
nostril. Maggie put her front teeth over her lower lip and wrinkled her nose so that she looked like a rabid beaver. By now she was laughing so hard her stomach ached and she couldn't catch her breath. She had to stop looking at herself in the mirror.

Skipping out of the bedroom, she moved through the gloomy hallway. It was twilight, and the walls seemed to eat the light. "Hey!" she bellowed like a drunken sailor. "Let's get the goddamned lights on so a body can see." In the living room, she fumbled with a lamp, then recoiled, wincing when the light attacked her eyes. The headache, temporarily masked by joy and surprise, returned full force. Maggie had to stand there for a moment with her eyes squeezed shut and covered by her hands until the pain began to recede. She couldn't let the discomfort stop her for long, though. Soon she was roaming again, illuminating every room. The last room she entered was the kitchen. She stopped in the doorway.

That was when Maggie decided she hadn't realized the full extent of her senility. Even at her worst moments, when she'd replayed scenes from her life, unable to move onto something else, she'd managed to cling to the fact that she was living inside her own mind, that there was another world moving around outside of her. This latest fantasy, the waking dream that her vision had returned, fooled her. She'd believed it until she came upon Jackie lying motionless on the kitchen floor with a baby at her breast.
Leaning on the doorframe, Maggie closed her eyes, telling herself she was an addled old woman, blind and helpless in a bed with nothing to do but wait on death. When she opened her eyes again, she'd be back in her bedroom, surrounded by darkness, the familiar discomfort of the sticky nightgown clinging to her back, her neck stiff from hours of propping her head up with a pillow. It was necessary to remember all that, to claw her way back until she had some tenuous hold on reality again. Maggie opened her eyes.

In the twilight, everything in the kitchen had faded to the uniform color of slate except for Jackie's face and the baby. They were both a glowing translucent white, the color of ghosts. "What the hell is going on here?" Maggie said gruffly, snapping on the light.

She walked over to her daughter. Jackie's lips were waxy, parted slightly. Her eyes were open, but she didn't blink. "Jackie?" Maggie whispered. When there was no answer, she repeated her daughter's name, her voice rising on the last syllable the way it had sixty years ago when Maggie would step onto the front porch to call the girl in for dinner. Getting no response, Maggie took Jackie's wrist and felt for a pulse, but it was like trying to find movement in a piece of clay.

When she knew her daughter was dead, Maggie fell into a sort of paralysis. She sat on the floor beside the boy, holding Jackie's cold hand in her own. Jackie had lived in innocence
and solitude, and even if she had snuck in a December affair
during Maggie's withdrawal from the world, she was far too old
to become pregnant. It was all horribly unfair. Maggie couldn't
help but suspect her vision had returned simply so she'd have
to view her daughter stretched dead on the floor. The world
was a worse place than she'd imagined, and she wondered why her
luck was so bad she had to be the one who survived everything.
Even now, when sight made suicide possible, she had a baby to
care for.

The baby hadn't moved since she'd entered the kitchen, only
sucked noisily at what she assumed had to be a dry tit. Maggie
felt sorry for him. His luck wasn't much better than hers.
He had the misfortune to be a medical freak with no one in the
world to care for him but an eighty-five year old woman who was
sick with too much life. Maggie reached down and stroked the
dark matted fuzz on his head. He growled.

Startled, Maggie jumped and glanced at her hand, as if it
were somehow responsible for the noise. Wide eyed, she looked
back at him; babies weren't supposed to growl. Experimentally,
she reached out slowly, keeping her hand as steady as possible.
When her fingers brushed his back, the low rumble started up
in his throat again.

Maggie had a difficult time accepting that Jackie had died
in childbirth, but now she had to face the shame that daughter
had borne a monster. She wondered what the father was like.
Judging from the sound of the kid's warnings, probably a Pit Bull. Maggie took a deep breath. Even if the baby was a monster, she was bigger than him. "All right, fellow. Mess is closed." She grabbed him roughly around the ribs. With a high pitched snarl, he turned from the nipple for the first time and bit into his grandmother's hand.

"Jesus Christ!" Maggie yelped, shaking her hand to try and free herself. The baby clamped down and hung from her hand, his legs swinging out behind him. Maggie swatted at his head. "Let go, you little sonofabitch!" The pain swirled through her until her legs were rubbery and the room turned gray at the edges. She dropped heavily to her knees. Satisfied, the baby released her and crawled back to the breast.

Maggie stared at her hand, dotted with an oval of red punctures. There were a number of things she couldn't comprehend yet, such as why she could see again, how Jackie had managed to get pregnant, why the baby would fight so hard over a dead breast, but what puzzled her most was what a newborn was doing with razor sharp teeth. When her composure returned, she lowered herself until the side of her head rested on the floor and she could speak directly to the baby's placid face. "Now you listen to me, and you listen to me good, little mister. I'm not putting up with that kind of tomfoolery. Now you may think you can just breeze through life doing what you damn well please, but you're in for one hell of a surprise. Long as Maggie Payne is around,
you're going to behave yourself, you got that? There ain't no better time in the world to get that into your head than right now. You're going to show some respect for your grand. . ."

Stiffening, Maggie rose from the floor with stony dignity. She'd be damned if she was going to admit to being the little beast's grandmother. Besides, she felt foolish getting down on all fours to lecture a baby, even one who bit.

"In the beginning," Arthur told me years later, "my grandmother had a rather low opinion of me."

He was right, but the situation was actually more complicated than he realized. His relationship with Maggie was the first in a series of misunderstandings between avatar and human, a pattern that would eventually wreck Arthur's life. The problem was that he failed to appreciate the complexities of people, while they never realized how simple Arthur was. He was intelligent, but maddeningly single-minded. When Maggie picked him up, he was feeding. She couldn't know that interrupting him was like trying to pull a dog from its dish. An ordinary human baby would have cried, but as Maggie would come to learn, Arthur was no ordinary baby.

She was a mother. She knew babies were soft defenseless collections of flesh, made to hold, to rock, to coo at, to press to bosoms. They were made to be cleaned in tepid water, to be
fed, burped and diapered. They were dimpled asses, soft hair, balloon cheeks and weak, exploratory kicks. Best of all, they were blank pages the world hadn't defaced yet, ignorant in the fine arts of deceit, rage and hypocrisy, the battles of territory and the thousands of cruel lessons life had taught Maggie Payne so well. She knew the creature in her kitchen was no baby.

She sat up all night in the living room, trying to figure out what to do with him. Though she'd been involved in the solitary business of dying for years now, pieces of the outside world had filtered through to her. She knew that the world had grown progressively madder throughout her life, until men broke into churches to rape nuns, beat one another in alleys for less money than would buy lunch at McDonald's, constructed enough weapons to kill everyone off a dozen times over, built concentration camps, set fire to buildings full of people for the pleasure of the flames and stench. The last thing this crazy world needed was another monster. She couldn't allow it to live.

Since she'd had such bad luck dealing with him directly, Maggie decided to kill Arthur by neglect. After fortifying herself with two good slugs of brandy on an empty stomach, she tugged at Jackie's ankles and dragged the corpse out of the kitchen to the basement of her old home. Every time the back of Jackie's head slapped against a step, Maggie cringed. The baby bounced around, but he tightened his hold and managed to stay put. That disappointed Maggie. She would've liked nothing better than
to see him lose his hold and take a tumble to the floor.

She installed them in a corner of the basement, ten feet from the green tube of the water heater, then headed slowly to the stairs. Turning back to take a last look at Jackie, she found herself rushing over and kissing her daughter's slack face. "I'm sorry," Maggie whispered, starting to cry. She hurried back up the steps and locked the basement door.

Alone in the basement with his mother, Arthur Payne flourished. Jackie's milk kept flowing, her bulk transmuted to nourishment for Arthur so that he grew as she shrunk. By the end of the first week, he was twice the size he'd been at birth, and his growth had evened so he was no longer misshapen. Though he would occupy his mind with more important matters in the coming years, concerning himself with the relationship between humanity and the world they controlled, their blindness toward God, Arthur spent his infancy with his attention focused on the breast. That was his world. He didn't notice when Jackie withered like a doll made from dried apples.

Upstairs, Maggie had a more difficult time. No matter how hard she tried to forget the secret in the basement, there were always reminders. Every morning, when she left her bedroom, the first thing she saw was the closed door to Jackie's bedroom. She wanted to go in there, sort through her daughter's belongings
in search of something that would bring Jackie back to life in her mind for just a few seconds, but she couldn't allow herself to do that. She wanted to suppress the memory of what she had done to her daughter. She wished she could just wipe her mind clean for the next month, then go down to make sure the little monster was dead. After that, she could kill herself, but first she had to stay alive to ensure the baby's death. The world kept intruding, though. Occasionally there would be a piece of junk mail, announcing that Jacqueline Payne could qualify to win an exorbitant sum of cash simply by mailing back the enclosed entry. Maggie sat the kitchen table and wept, filling out the form and sending it back, since Jackie had to remain alive for the rest of the world. The worst moment was when Dr. Hiller called and asked to speak to Jackie.

Maggie gripped the phone so tightly she wondered why it didn't snap in her hand. "Jackie's not here," she said stiffly. "This is her mother."

"Do you have any idea when she'll be back?"

"No. I'm afraid I don't."

"Maybe I could leave a message for her call back."

Maggie glanced around the room, moistening her lips. She felt as if she were in a vise slowly closing in on her. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Mrs. Payne, this is rather important. Dr. Stone has agreed to do Jackie's surgery, and we need to set up a date."
A fuzzy memory of Jackie talking about an operation floated back to Maggie. She wished she could remember more than Jackie's untamed fear. "That's. . .that's the problem," Maggie said haltingly. "She got so scared about the operation that she left. I haven't seen her since."

"Damn!" There was a lengthy silence on the other end of the line as Maggie spread her hand on her chest in relief that he believed her. "That's the worst thing she could've done. Do you have any idea where she might've gone?"

"I don't know. I guess she could've gone back to Kentucky, maybe."

"Mrs. Payne, that surgery is very important. If Jackie doesn't have that operation, she'll be putting her health into danger." Maggie couldn't bring herself to say anything, and after a moment, Hiller continued mildly. "Mrs. Payne, your daughter wanted to get a nurse to look after you while she was in the hospital. Do you want me to get one for you until we can find Jackie?"

"No. I'm feeling much better now, thank you." She was finally getting an opportunity to tell the truth; she felt as strong now as she had in fifteen years.

"All right. I think you should call the police and report Jackie missing. It's very important that we find her."

To cover herself, she did call, and the detective was very reassuring. He discounted the theory that Jackie had headed
home to Kentucky, explaining to Maggie that the elderly seldom made long trips unless it was to visit relatives. He thought it more likely she'd checked into a motel somewhere in or around Lakeland. "I wouldn't fret too much if I were you," he said. "I'd be surprised if she went any further than Tampa."

"You're probably right," Maggie said softly. "She's probably somewhere in Lakeland."

Although it had only been three days since Jackie's death, and Maggie had decided to wait a month before entering the basement, she found herself at the door after speaking to Dr. Hiller and the police. She stood with her fingers curled around the doorknob, and forehead pressed against the wooden door. Just imagining what was down there made her nauseous. It was likely to be horrible. Although it was only March, the temperature had been in the seventies most of the time, rising to eighty-three one day. Having grown up on a farm, Maggie had no illusions about the durability of flesh. Her daughter would be starting to rot, and the baby would be dying. She backed away, took a long breath and opened the door. Stepping through, she quickly slammed it behind her.

The air was musty, but not foul. Frowning, Maggie slowly walked down the stairs, trembling and clutching the railing with both hands. She had the sense of entering another world and
time, the way an archaeologist must feel upon entering the tomb of an ancient Egyptian king. At the bottom of the steps, she looked across the basement and felt the sharp ache of old love as she saw the pink slippers she'd given Jackie two years ago for her birthday.

Maggie wasn't prepared for what she found. Having steeled herself against the stench and sight of decay, she wasn't ready to discover the baby twice as big as before, with Jackie caving in under him. Maggie turned away quickly and stared at the wall, unable to block out the boy's rhythmic sucking. Stopping her ears, she closed her eyes and tried to pretend she was somewhere else. She wasn't, though. Eventually she turned back and forced herself to watch was happening in the bottom of her home.

She was sure the boy noticed her, but chose to ignore her presence, too ravenous to turn his attention from Jackie for any length of time. Everything about him was hateful. There was something about the way he fed, the way he pawed at the breast with his growing hand—more like a clumsy teenager in the back seat of his father's Buick than an innocent baby—the narrow focused squint of his eyes, the tendons in his neck straining in bas relief, that made Maggie shudder with an anger that surpassed anything she'd felt before. Then there was Jackie, who was shriveling. Her skin sagged around her bones, as if there was nothing else left of her. The baby raised his head for a moment and burped.
Maggie jammed her fingers between Jackie's corpse and the baby's soft throat. She squeezed. She and the baby snarled together. Lifting him by the throat, Maggie clamped her hands so tightly around his larynx that her muscles sang with the effort, and his face turned red. That was when she discovered the little monster had claws, which he used to open long gouges in her forearms. The cuts in her arms only made her tighten her hold; she wasn't about to let go.

Just when it seemed she was going to succeed in choking the life from him, the boy kicked her in the solar plexus. Maggie deflated. Bent double, she dropped him. She stepped back, arms wrapped around an explosion of pain in her belly, wheezing and finding it hard to believe that something so small could kick so hard. Normal color returning to his face, the baby was on all fours a yard away, baring his teeth and growling. Maggie backed away, feeling like she was facing a rabid puppy.

She waited two days before she returned to the basement, but she spent the intervening time wisely. She planned. Although her strength was returning—there were even flecks of red in her hair again—Maggie still couldn't kill the monster without a weapon. There was no way to poison him, since he got all his food from one source. A gun was too fast and too noisy; she wanted to feel the life ebb out of him. After lengthy consideration, Maggie decided on stabbing him. Even then, she didn't go to the basement. Instead, she spread all her cutlery
on the kitchen table, hefting each of them carefully, checking them out by inflicting multiple wounds on a watermelon. She practiced feinting and thrusting, shifted the knife around until she found that part of the human hand best suited for murder.

Eventually, she settled on the boning knife. It was a slim blade of good steel with a fine grained wooden handle. She found it light and quick, felt the thrill of the assassin as she made it whistle through the air. Her plan was to sneak up behind him while he was feeding and plunge the knife into his back. That seemed easy enough. Even then, with her plan formulated and her weapon chosen, Maggie didn't go downstairs. Instead, she went to bed. She wanted a good night's sleep.

Next morning, she woke early and ate a light breakfast of toast, coffee and grapefruit with her left hand, the knife held in her right. Only the fear of rolling over the blade had kept her from sleeping with it. After breakfast she went into the living room and laid down on the worn red couch that dated back to Kentucky. Stretched on her back, a ruined spring prodding her in the kidney, she stared at the ceiling, rolling the handle of the knife in her fingers. Gazing at the ceiling was almost like being blind again. Without sight to distract her, it took about an hour to get ready, her mind clean, the knife feeling like a sixth finger. She rose. The basement door opened soundlessly. The steps didn't creak under her weight. Maggie slid her bare feet along the concrete floor, advancing on the
monster. He was feeding. It was just as she'd planned.

"I have the gift of miracles and can do many spectacular things," Arthur Payne loved to boast when he was full grown, "but I performed my most subtle and delicate miracle when I was less than a week old."

He fell off the breast and cried.

Maggie stopped. After a week of considering him a monster, she didn't know what to do when he suddenly transformed into a crying baby. His face wrinkled with tears, his hands clutched at nothing, his legs waved feebly in the air. Shutting her eyes, Maggie tried to pretend she was still a young mother and that the bawling was coming from Jackie, the daughter this boy had stolen. She tried to recall the perfect rage and courage she'd summoned to kill him, but she couldn't concentrate for his cries. Maggie opened her eyes and looked down at the baby helplessly. "Hush up," she said softly, bending to pick him up. She rubbed his back. "Shh. You're going to be all right." She laid him back on Jackie's belly.

There was still the knife. If she lacked the strength to rid the world of a monster, she could still get rid of an old woman who wished to die. Unbuttoning her blouse, she knelt on the floor beside Jackie. She rubbed the target of her chest, then held the knife away from her at arm's length with both hands.
Wincing, she hugged the blade. There was no pain. Surprised at how clearly she was thinking, Maggie carefully withdrew the knife so she could bleed. The wound healed as soon as the steel left her. "No," she said. She stabbed herself again and again, but the result was always the same: her flesh parted, held the knife, then expelled it and sealed over as if nothing had happened.

The knife bounced across the cement floor when Maggie threw it away. She put her forehead to the cool floor and sobbed the way she had so many years before when she watched her husband's coffin being lowered to the earth. She wasn't sure how long she cried, but when she finally managed to stop and sniffle, wipe her eyes with the back of her hand, she noticed the baby. He sat on Jackie's stomach, facing Maggie and peering at her with puzzled black eyes. "Looks like I'm going to be around awhile, doesn't it, kid?" she said. He turned back to suck.
I've learned that our feelings toward one another are frequently constructed in the same manner as pearls. This was the case in respect to Maggie's love for Arthur. At first, she thought of him as the little cannibal in the basement who deserved nothing better than a hasty, but painful death. Her feelings toward the boy would grow complicated, but that hatred would always remain at the core, the irritation the pearl grew around. As the two of them shared houses and sections of their lives, layers of emotion would overlay one another. Maggie gave the boy one of the names she and her husband had whispered about on those long, excited nights during her pregnancy. She tried to move him upstairs, but he was reluctant to leave the basement, so she let him be, though she steeled herself every day to make the trip down to the basement and talk to him. Arthur became her grandson, her closest living relation, her ward, friend, provider—and when the time arrived—the instrument of Maggie's tardy death. If she never quite forgave him for what happened to Jackie, it wasn't out of malice. That was simply the starting point for her other feelings. Besides, as Arthur explained to
me, Maggie had the duty to nurture that kernel of hatred; pardoning him would have been a betrayal of her child, an abdication of motherhood. By clinging to the vestiges of her hatred, Maggie kept Jackie alive in her memory.

For his part, Arthur saw no need to remember his mother. If his love for the varieties of life was boundless and always given freely, I had the misfortune to learn it was never specific. God's curse is to love everything and no one. It made no difference to Arthur that the corpse in the basement was his mother, or that she'd died so he could exist. Instead, he thought of her the way we think of the cow when we sit down to a steak dinner: not at all. When Jackie finally dried up and collapsed in on herself until she was nothing more than a collection of bones, Arthur lost all interest in her. She'd served her purpose, which was to bear and nurse him.

After a month, he was the size of a two year old and ready to explore. The miracle child still had to face the basement stairs, though. He lifted a squat leg and managed to place it on the first step, but when he tried to get the other one up, he swayed for a moment, windmilling his short arms before he toppled backwards. Arthur beat his fists on the floor. Childhood was a difficult time for him. Already possessing the ability to transform his dead mother to milk, he found himself frustrated by something as mundane as stairs. After a series of failures, he crawled up, fumbled with the doorknob.
Maggie was in the kitchen, nursing her morning coffee when the basement door creaked, and Arthur fell head first onto the floor. She choked on her coffee and coughed while the boy wandered through the kitchen, glancing around. Still coughing, Maggie trailed him into the living room, where he stuck his face inches from the television and stared at his reflection. He crept behind the set, wedging himself up against the wall in search of a second Arthur. When he frowned and stooped to look under the TV, Maggie turned it on. Crawling out, Arthur discovered an early morning news show had replaced his own face. His head swiveled between the TV and Maggie. Eventually, the tour continued.

In the bathroom, he was interested in the tub, tumbling over the edge. Taking an experimental nibble on a bar of Ivory, he grimaced and threw it down. He peered at the silver knobs at the front of the tub, dotted with corroded black spots. He turned the one on the right, giggling as the pipes gurgled. Arthur yelped and jumped back as the water poured out at his feet. Maggie laughed as he scrambled over the edge, plopping on the bathroom floor and scurrying between her legs on the way out.

She found him lying on his back on her bed. Half her quilt had spilled onto the floor as he'd pulled himself up. Maggie sat beside him. "You like this?"

Arthur smiled, rubbed his cheek on the sheet.

"Don't get too comfortable," she said, reaching for him.
Arthur showed his teeth and growled.

"Quit that!" Maggie snapped. "You growl at me one more time, and I'll put a goddamned muzzle on you."

Arthur closed his eyes.

"Not on my bed, you don't." She looked down at the dirty naked boy with something close to pity. She couldn't very well expect him to spend his entire life in the basement. "Would you like a bed of your own?"

Eyes snapping open, Arthur sat up. Maggie suspected she'd just been conned.

"Come on." Taking him by the hand, she led him across the hall. "This was your mama's room." She swung the door open for the first time since Jackie's death.

Arthur darted in, bouncing on the unmade bed. "Me?"

"Yeah, it's yours." He jumped on the bed, the springs singing beneath him. Maggie strode over and caught him under the armpits at the zenith of a bounce. The boy squirmed, but this was nothing like the violent struggles of the past. "No bouncing on the bed. You behave yourself, or I'm going to build a doghouse in the back yard for you to live in."

They settled into something like a domestic routine. Arthur slept most of the time, shedding the ill fitting clothes Maggie bought for him at Korvette's. Occasionally she leaned in the doorway of Jackie's room--she still found herself unable to think
of it as anything else—and watched him. Twisted at angles only
a contortionist could manage, Arthur never moved except for the
gentle expansion of his chest when he inhaled. His motionless,
curled form on the bed made her think of ivy.

Maggie felt lucky he slept so often. It had been so long
since Jackie's childhood that she'd forgotten the way children
sucked the marrow from adults, operating on stolen energy. When
Maggie thought about it, she was surprised she managed to cope
with Arthur's manic bursts at her age. Her new stamina puzzled
her.

She was growing younger. At first, she'd thought she was
deluding herself. She knew from long experience that aging never
stopped, much less reversed itself. There was the evidence in
the mirror, though, the fact she could even see her reflection
after her blindness, the reappearance of patches of red in her
hair, the fading liver spot on her jaw line. She was a younger
woman than before Arthur's birth, and she would have to adjust
to living in a house ruled by miracles.

Despite the fact she kept the doors locked and windows shut
to let the air conditioner battle the Florida heat, animals kept
appearing. She'd be watching the six o'clock news when she'd
discover a languid snake curled beside her on the couch, sunning
itself in the feeble warmth of the table lamp. Chipmunks raced
nervously across the kitchen floor while she ate lunch. Arthur
staggered filthy and yawning from the bedroom, dropping to the
living room carpet, where an earthworm squirmed across his bare thigh. "Arthur," Maggie said slowly, staring firmly at the boy. "Are you letting animals into my house?"

"Uh uh."

"Tell the truth."

"Me am."

"I. I am," Maggie corrected. She was still amazed at how quickly he picked up speech, but she was still determined to improve it. "Arthur, animals didn't start getting in until you moved up here."

"Dey keep me comp'ny."

"Oh Lord." Maggie sank toward the couch.

"No!" Arthur yelled, hurrying over, waving his hands. He pulled a cushion from the couch and gathered up a small mole, turning slowly from the light in his dark hands. He glared at Maggie accusingly.

"Arthur, this has got to stop. I am not going to have my house turned into a goddamned zoo." Sitting heavily, she rubbed her face until she was sure she wouldn't yell. "Arthur, I'm an old lady. I'm set in my ways. It damn near gives me a heart attack to turn around and see a snake in my house."

Frowning, Arthur glanced at the door and showed his sharp teeth; the doorbell pealed.

"Oh, shit," Maggie groaned. "What now?"

Arthur let the mole fall from his hands to the floor and
walked slowly toward the doorway. "Oh, no," Maggie said, grabbing him by the arm and pulling him to his bedroom. "You stay in here and don't make a sound."

Arthur snarled at the door.

"I mean it," Maggie said, shaking her finger in the boy's face. "I'll staple a goddamned pillow to your face if you don't shut up." She gave Arthur a final shove and slammed the bedroom door and turned to scurry back to the living room.

A tall gaunt man in a London Fog raincoat stood in the sunlight on her porch. "Hello. I'm looking for Maggie Payne."

"I'm Maggie."

He stooped, leaning closer to her. "You're Jacqueline Payne's mother?"

"That's right," Maggie said coolly. "Now who are you?"

"I'm sorry. I should've introduced myself immediately. I'm Dr. Hiller. We've spoken over the phone." When Maggie didn't react, Hiller smiled bent further at the waist. "I was wondering if I could come in."

"Oh." Glancing back quickly, Maggie saw Arthur was still safely behind his door. "Of course."

Hands thrust into the pockets of his coat, Dr. Hiller stepped inside and wandered through the living room, looking around at the dusty furniture and cheap pastel oil paintings Jackie had purchased years ago. Maggie stayed at the door, her heart fluttering in her ribs. "It's odd," the doctor said, pivoting
and smirking faintly. "This is the first time I've been in a patient's home for at least twenty years."

"I guess you're not the doctor to call if I want a house call."

"No, I guess not. May I?" Hiller asked, pointing to a high backed wooden chair. He had an elastic bandage wound around his left hand.

"I'm sorry. I forgot my manners. Can I take your coat, too?"

"I'd prefer to keep it on." He quickly slid the bandaged hand back into his coat pocket. "I'm making a house call because Jackie's such an unusual case."

"Because she ran away?" Maggie asked, sitting gingerly on the couch, half expecting to feel an animal trapped beneath her.

"That's unusual in itself, but there are other things. For instance, she obviously exaggerated your health problems."

"She's always been a worrier."

"That would explain her running away." Hiller frowned, his forehead a sudden map of wrinkles. "Did Jacqueline go into any detail about her case?"

"All she told me was that you were going to do some kind of surgery."

"Exploratory." Hiller leaned back in his chair and pursed his lips with the air of an actor who's forgotten his lines.

"Mrs. Payne, this is the strangest case I've ever been involved
with. I was hoping you might be able to help me a bit."

"I'll do what I can."

"I believe Jacqueline had a form of uterine cancer," he said, taking his hands from his pockets and starting to unwind the elastic bandage. "The odd thing is that one of the tests indicated she was pregnant."

Maggie snorted with surprising conviction. "That's ridiculous."

"I'm well aware of that," he said sourly. To take up the slack, Hiller wound the bandage around his right hand as he talked, working his way through layer after layer. Maggie stared uneasily at the process, wondering what surprise lay hidden beneath the bland beige fabric. The hand might be burned, disfigured, missing a finger. "The morning I was supposed to operate on your daughter, I woke up to find my hand like this."

Arthur barked from the bedroom.

Both Maggie and Hiller started, but she noticed Arthur's behavior had unsettled the doctor more than her. Hiller moved forward on the chair, his face white as cigarette paper. "What was that?"

"The dog," Maggie said weakly. "He gets all excited around strangers so I keep him shut up. Hush up, Arthur!"

Judging from the expression on Hiller's face, the situation had suddenly jumped from her control. Maggie turned and saw the boy coming from the bedroom, sliding his dirty, blackened
feet on the carpet. Every few steps, he stopped for a moment, cocked his head with his gaze frozen on Hiller. The doctor sat erect in the chair, his bandaged hand pulled to his chest as if he were a mother comforting a sick child. Maggie thought she should get up and stop Arthur, but there was something about the boy's flat, cold stare that kept her pinned to the couch. Reaching Hiller, Arthur reached out quickly and yanked on the bandage. "Go way," he said quietly, tugging until the wrap broke free from Hiller's hand and hung between the boy and the doctor for just a fraction of a second before billowing slightly and dropping to the floor.

Dr. Hiller's left hand, once used for writing, for eating, for repairing the human form, had turned into a paw. Maggie covered her mouth at the sight of the black fur, the four poorly separated toes with curled yellowish claws. "What happened to you?"

Shaking his head, Hiller jammed the paw into his pocket. "That's what I came here to find out."

"Go way," Arthur whispered.

"Who is this?" Hiller asked, leaning away from the advancing boy and holding his legs out before him for protection.

"That's my grandson."

"No." Hiller shook his head, but then he laughed sharply. "I get it. The surgery would've killed the little freak, so he managed to do this somehow."
"You'd better go," Maggie said. "It's not a good thing to get him riled."

"How do you live with that thing here?"

Maggie rose abruptly and strode toward the doctor. "Same as you live with anybody else. We're just the way we're born to be. Now, I think it's best for all us if you leave."

"Not until I get my hand back."

Arthur extended a loose fist, uncurled his fingers one by one as if he were counting, showing his own sharp claws. "Me do worse," he said softly, grinning at Hiller.

That night, sprawled on his oversized bed, Arthur woke suddenly. Across the hall, Maggie had slipped out of her room, shutting the door softly behind her. Arthur rolled off his bed and tracked Maggie through the blackened house with the stealth of a young thief. (Years later, a team of doctors at Mount Pharmaceutical would examine Arthur painstakingly and catalog all the ways he was different from a human being. One of those differences was the ability to see light in a broader spectrum than the rest of us.)

Tracing her way with a finger on the wall, Maggie had trouble with the dark. Recovering her sight had robbed her of her sense of the house. She banged her shins on a coffee table, whispered a fierce curse, and finally knocked a vase onto the floor, where
it shattered. "Shh," she hissed. Confused, Arthur stopped. He hadn't said anything. Then he realized his grandmother wasn't speaking to him, but the vase. That only confused him more.

He trailed her to the basement stairs, where Maggie clung to the wooden railing, tentatively searching out each step with her foot. One of the steps let out a low groan like a person. Maggie stood motionless. Only then, when he was no longer concentrating on the rustle of her housecoat and the rub of her hand on the railing, did Arthur realize Maggie was crying softly.

She walked to the corner of the basement where Jackie's skeleton sat propped against the wall, the arms folded over where her stomach had been. Arthur now understood the tears were for Maggie's daughter, but it puzzled him when his grandmother gathered the bones in her arms. She crept across the basement with the loose pieces of the skeleton piled in her bony arms, the naked shinbone swinging in and out of the moonlight bleeding through the window. Waiting at the top of the stairs, Arthur wondered if Maggie had been so quiet for fear of waking Jackie. Was his grandmother really that stupid? Was she about to give his room to the skeleton? He didn't like that idea and nearly growled at the two of them. Was she going to put Jackie out for the garbage truck?

In the years that followed, I lost count of all the bizarre questions we had to answer from Arthur. Sometimes he asked questions to jerk our world out of focus, force us to examine
life from a different angle. Other times, he knew his questions were ridiculous and asked them for the ornery joy of befuddling his followers. Then there were the questions that arose from genuine confusion, his burden of trying to understand human beings. That night in the basement, the confusion swelled until he couldn't contain all his questions. "What you doin'?"

Maggie shrieked. Jacqueline flew from her arms, pieces of her crashing and bouncing down the steps. "You little shit!" Maggie bellowed. Catching herself, she lowered her voice and searched for Arthur in the dark with her hands. "Where are you? Just you wait till I get my hands on you!"

There was no chance of that. Ducking, Arthur nimbly scrambled past her and jumped down the stairs for a good look at the bones. Some of the ribs were cracked, and the skull had fragmented where the bones had once knit together. Arthur watched his grandmother thrash at the air. "She busted," he said.

Maggie let out a prolonged groan, sank to the steps and cried. Rocking back and forth, she covered her face and sobbed, the tears spilling between her fingers and sliding down the backs of her hands. After a couple of minutes, she raised her head and sniffled. "She deserves better than this."

Arthur shrugged. "She don't care."

"What're you doing up this time of night?" Maggie demanded. Arthur saw no need to answer. "Go back to bed."

Even at the age of six weeks, Arthur knew his destiny.
There would come a day when he'd explain the workings of life and God to all humanity. An avatar didn't need a bedtime. "What you doin'?"

"I'm going to bury your mother."

"Kin me see?"

Maggie sighed loudly. "Why do you even bother to ask? We both know you're just going to do what you damn well please, anyway."

He stood by as she gathered up the bones from the floor. A piece of the left arm dropped from her hold and rattled away. This meant Arthur got to help, proudly bearing the bones up the stairs, banging the ulna on the wooden railing for the sheer joy of the noise.

Maggie whirled, spitting words into the dark. She explained that they had to be quiet since the funeral was a secret. After calling the police and reporting Jackie missing, the funeral was a gamble. Should someone see them, she'd be accused of murdering her daughter. "You wouldn't want that to happen, would you? You'd be in dire straits if they took your grandma away."

"Me do okay," Arthur said indifferently.

"Jesus," Maggie whispered. "You're such a sweet child."

Under the half-moon, Maggie dug her daughter's grave while Arthur watched. Her health had continued to improve since Arthur's arrival, and after a few minutes of digging, she began to feel like some indestructible machine. Her mind cleansed itself while
she worked, emptying until all that was left was rhythm, the humming muscles in her arms, the sweet pain in the arch of her foot when she pushed the shovel deeper. For a little while, she even forgot she was digging a grave for Jackie. When she tired, the purpose of her work came back, and she looked at the bones scattered in the grass. Arthur sat crosslegged, idly tossing a bone high in the air, then snatching it out of the air with a casual backhanded flip of his wrist. Maggie started to cry again. All her strength seeped out with her tears. Ready to collapse, she put her forehead on the hard handle of the shovel.

"Kin me help?" Arthur asked.

"No." This was her little girl, and Maggie would be be the one to put her in the ground. Arms burning, her legs wobbling, Maggie went back to work. The job took longer than she expected. She hadn't realized the shovel would gain weight as the night wore on, that her hands would grow blisters, or that her back would throb until she wondered if she'd ever stand straight again. As she dug, she panted, and when that no longer filled her lungs, she began to wheeze, the sound of each labored breath a little louder than the last. At least she'd stopped crying, her body no longer able to afford the luxury of tears. Her eyes still stung with sweat rolling from her hairline. Arthur offered his help again, but she refused, then noticed a few moments later that she was still shaking her head while she dug. Finally, a few minutes after the birds stirred and began their long songs,
the grave was ready. Leaning on the shovel, sweat dripping off
the end of her nose, Maggie stared down into the rectangle.
The easiest act in the world would be to fall in, but she'd lost
her taste for death.

She paused. Maggie wasn't sure when she was supposed to
pray. Now seemed like a good time, but it would be safer to
wait until she had Jackie hidden from sight in her grave. Moving
slowly, she gathered up the bones. Arthur held up a piece of
arm. "Mine."

"No." Maggie patiently held out her hand. "It's your mama's."

Arthur frowned, but relented silently, handing it over.
Maggie stood by the grave, all that was left of her daughter
loose in her arms and strewn about the grass. She knelt, placed
the bones in the hole in the earth. "Fuck this world."

After she'd hurriedly shoveled and pushed the dirt over
her girl and pounded the earth flat with the back of her shovel,
Maggie finally had a chance to pray for Jackie's soul. The dew
clung to her knees like something alive. Maggie interlaced her
fingers and squeezed her palms together, letting her back bow
until her chin touched her hands. Releasing all her dignity,
she begged and pleaded with God to allow Jackie into Heaven if
He hadn't already. She tried striking bargains, apologized for
the unchristian nature of the burial, asked forgiveness for--

"What you doin'?" Arthur asked casually.

"I'm praying."
"How come?"

Maggie turned angrily to her grandson. "I am praying," she said slowly and distinctly, "so God will let Jackie live in Heaven."

Arthur giggled.

"Now what the hell's so funny about that?"

"Cover," he said, pointing. "Den pray."

For just a moment, Maggie couldn't make any sense of his statement, but when she finally realized what he said, her stomach twisted violently. Right there in front of her was a precise rectangle of dark smooth dirt set in the grass, so obvious it would take a blind man to miss it. She'd let her tears swamp her intelligence; it was only a matter of time before someone discovered her. Maggie wondered how long she had to wait before the police arrived at the door to drive her to the station. She imagined herself in a smoky interrogation room, earnestly explaining that her daughter had actually died in childbirth, that she would've let them know sooner except she had to starve the baby in the basement. The cops would love that. Maggie felt a sudden nostalgia for the good old days when her biggest worry was her inability to die. Beside her, Arthur howled with laughter, gripping his rounded child's belly. "That's it," Maggie said to no one in particular. "They're going to fry me. I wonder if I'll be the oldest person ever executed?"

Still laughing, Arthur rolled over the grave. Maggie eyed
him disinterestedly. She had enough problems of her own without worrying about her grandson's behavior. Suddenly Arthur stopped laughing. His face drew in on itself, adding years within seconds. His nostrils flared the way they do on a winded horse, and a muscle danced in his pudgy jaw. His eyes were the worst, though. At first, they opened wide, then rotated until they looked like two pieces of ice set in his face. Arthur put his hands out with the palms up.

It seemed to Maggie that the air had grown too thick to breathe. Her chest ached, and she feared for a moment that she was about to have a heart attack. Arthur raised his hands. Snorting, he shook so hard she thought he was about to fly apart into a hundred pieces. Muscles jumped out in definition on his flabby arms. Then--while Maggie watched with fright, awe, amazement and relief--grass rose from the bare patch, thousands of blades pushing through the dirt, quivering as they followed Arthur's upraised hands.
"Well, we can't stay here, that's for sure," Maggie said irritably, folding a Winnie the Pooh T-shirt that Arthur would outgrow within a week and wouldn't wear anyway. She jammed the shirt into a cloth suitcase. "We just about wore out our welcome in this neck of the woods."

"Stay."

"Stay? Don't you think we're in enough trouble already?"

"Me like here."

"Yeah." Maggie balled up a pair of white shorts and threw them on the rest of the clothes. "Well, you can't always stay where you like. We got problems here, Arthur."

"What?"

"Well, for starters, I don't like the idea of having to explain how I'm the only person in the whole damn state of Florida who's getting any younger. We got your mama buried in the backyard, and we got some creep of a doctor who we ain't seen the last of, because you went and changed one of his hands into a rabbit's foot."

"Dog."
"Excuse me, a dog's foot." Pausing, Maggie grimaced, then slammed the suitcase shut and whirled toward Arthur, who sat naked at the head of the bed. "Why in the hell did you have to go and do that?"

"Bad man." Arthur hugged his knees to his chest. "He kill me."

"I know he was going to kill you." Maggie sighed. Despite the rough love she was developing for the boy, they would've all been better off had Arthur died under the knife of medical incompetence. She wondered if Hiller would have been able to kill the boy by accident. As hard as she'd tried, she hadn't been able to get rid of him. "Why couldn't you have just made him stupid or something? That way he wouldn't be a problem."

"Plans."

"Great." Maggie put her face in her hands and laughed bitterly. "Just what the world needs, a baby with plans."

She felt an old rage returning, one that had lived inside her--silent at times, sputtering or seething at others--since the summer afternoon when she suddenly understood her brothers' predicament. They had to pull a plow in front of their father, not because of their stupidity, but because they'd had the bad luck to be born to a sharecropper on a stony hill, instead of a some idle lady with hands the color of snow who handed them over to a servant, so she could recuperate from birth propped up on goose feather pillows while a black nanny fed them goat's
milk and burped them with a practiced hand. The rage only started then. Even after Maggie married money, the rage grew when her husband didn't live to see Jackie as anything but a swell in Maggie's tight belly. She'd seen so many people—good, bad or just surviving—trampled by life that she'd grown bitter and sick with the rage over her years. Now, thinking of her daughter's hidden bones twenty feet from the grapefruit tree in the back yard, the misplaced paw at the end of the doctor's wrist, the rage swelled again. She swept the suitcase from the bed; Arthur's useless clothes spilled and fluttered. "What are you?"

Arthur straightened, but he remained silent.

"I have to know," she said, leaning toward the boy. "You took my girl, you take a man's hand and leave him with something fit to bury bones with. Every time I turn around you've got a different animal in the house. You make grass grow out of nothing, you bite, you growl. I can't tell if you're a magician or a mutt, but you sure as shit ain't a little boy."

She waited for some reaction, but there was none. Arthur sat calmly, his face placid as Sunday afternoon.

"Look, I don't understand any of this. I know you and I are stuck together for some reason, whether we like it or not. Now I'm the one who's stuck doing the planning, and I don't know whether I'm coming or going." She slapped the mattress a few inches from his unmoving toes, but Arthur didn't seem to notice. "Arthur, you can't expect me to walk around not knowing a thing."
What are you?"

"God." He said it very softly, then slid off the bed and walked back to his own room.

Maggie sat on the bed and stared at the closed door across the hall. She picked up the suitcase and tucked the clothes back in with a nervous precision, sorted through her own wardrobe, heated and ate a TV dinner. Maggie placed her important belongings in cardboard boxes, arranging stocks, her wedding license, a letter from her husband that he'd written while visiting a failing business in Cleveland, all the paraphernalia she'd decided to keep. She sat and stared at a sepia photograph of Jackie at the age of five, squatting on the porch in a ruffled white taffeta dress, unsuccessfully trying to hold the head of Max, her collie pup, so he'd be looking at the camera, when Maggie suddenly realized she hadn't even thought to laugh at Arthur.

Her plan was to return to Kentucky. That was the only other place she knew. Had Jackie not wanted to move to Florida, Maggie would've lived and died in Marshall, Kentucky. She and Arthur could start over there, not having to worry about Hiller reappearing, which she knew he would. Besides, there was an irony that tickled Maggie: she looked so young she could pass herself off as her own granddaughter back home.

Here in Lakeland, her appearance was a problem, a constant
question. In order to get out of town comfortably, she needed to go to the bank and withdraw her money, but no one would believe that the slightly wrinkled redhead Maggie saw in the mirror was the eighty-five year old woman with the thousands tucked away. Arthur would have as good a chance of walking in and convincing them he was Maggie Payne. He could at least try intimidation, sitting there in the padded chair across from the manager, feet dangling, face poking over the top of the desk as he growled and bared his wolf's teeth.

The thought of Arthur in the bank gave her the solution to her problem. The next morning, Maggie tapped on his door, then pushed it open. As usual, Arthur was asleep on his bed, so she repeated his name until his eyes opened. "Arthur, can you make me the way I used to be?"

She suddenly stood in darkness, panicking, her heart ringing in her ears. "Arthur," she called, wondering if the boy were already gone. She'd forgotten how lonely blindness was. "Arthur, stop it, turn me back."

When the light exploded around her, Maggie sank to the bed, closing her eyes and shaking. After a moment, she reopened her eyes and laid her hands on her breast, laughing nervously. "Damn," she panted, staring down at the scuffed wooden floor. "That was scary."

Still on his back, Arthur grinned crookedly. "Why you make me do it?"
"No, you don't understand. I just want to look like an old lady. I don't want to be one. There isn't anything worse than being old."

"What you want me do?"

"I just want you to make me look old for awhile. Turn my hair gray, give me some more wrinkles. Just make me look like an ugly old hag, but keep me the same inside. I like feeling the way I do now."

"Okay," Arthur said.

"Wait a second!" Maggie yelped, thrusting out her hands to delay him. "Now I don't want to look like some old biddy forever. You realize that, don't you? I want to be able to look like I do now. You can change me back, can't you?"

Showing some enthusiasm, Arthur nodded eagerly. "Uh huh."

"I just want to make sure before I go through this. This is a pretty drastic step."

"You look old. Not be old, silly."

"You may think it's silly, but I just hope I'm around when you start getting old."

"Me no old."

Maggie snorted, wondering how many times she'd said something along the same lines during her childhood and adolescence. "At the rate you're going, I'm going to have to buy you a walker for your birthday."

"No," Arthur said calmly. "Me no live long."
The following day, Maggie took a taxi to the bank, where after much haggling with management—who claimed to have nothing but the security of an elderly, financially befuddled woman at heart—she left with sixty-five thousand in hundred dollar bills stuffed in a large oxblood purse.

During her next taxi ride, Maggie reflected on how much this move was costing her. There weren't many women riding around with over sixty grand on their persons, but that was just a fraction of what she actually had. The Depression ate up more than half of what Double A, her husband, had left her, but she and Jackie had still lived easily on what was left for fifty years. With all the stocks she held in businesses her husband had once started or purchased before she met him, a few investments of her own when she'd been bored, the money had always seemed inexhaustible. Starting over, she relinquished that comfort. To make sure Hiller didn't follow, she couldn't even put the house up for sale. Unclasping her purse, she reached down and secretly stroked the solid lump of bills. There was a thrill in touching all that cash, but the money was finite. If she began a new life with Arthur, this was all she had.

Maybe she was crazy. She couldn't imagine a sane woman giving up more than a million to return home as someone else
in the company of a wild boy who claimed he was God. Ever since
he'd told her that, she'd herded her thoughts from the subject.
She couldn't deny, dressed in the shell of an old woman like
a kid on Halloween, that he was something so different she had
to take his claim seriously. Whatever Arthur was, he'd spun
her clean out of the life she'd been finishing up into this one,
and she wasn't sure she liked her new life. She also wasn't
sure if she had a choice in the matter.

She had trouble at the car lot. She'd wanted a car that
would hold all their belongings in a mammoth trunk, but Maggie
had been isolated from the world for too long. Everything cost
more than she remembered. She had to settle on a charcoal gray
Reliant for a little over nine thousand.

When the dealer drove Maggie and the new car home late that
afternoon, she sat down to rest for a few minutes. Arthur teased
her, refusing to change her appearance. She jumped off the couch
and chased after him as he sprinted to his room and closed the
door behind him. Maggie tried to push her way in while Arthur
braced himself on the other side, laughing and crowing, "Old, old, old."

"Open the goddamned door."

"Old Maggie. Old lady Maggie."

"Arthur Payne, you have exactly ten seconds to open this
door and change me back before I go call the dogcatcher on you."
She stood with her arms folded, an eyebrow cocked high. "Arthur,
we've had our fun. Now it's time to get down to business. I'd like to get out of here before morning, so why don't you open up the door and--"

"Mirror," Arthur said, standing behind her in the hall.

"Jesus Christ!" Maggie yelped, her fingers tightening around the doorknob as if an electrical current held her there. "I think you enjoy doing things like that. You get a kick out of scaring the shit out of your poor old grandmother, don't you?"

"Uh huh."

"I think I'm beginning to understand what Job felt like," she muttered, walking across to her bedroom, where she found a woman somewhere in her forties in the mirror. "Thank you, Arthur."

She had him sit. He plopped on the floor Indian style, back straight as a fence post. "Arthur, I'm really going to need your help the next few days. Getting us to Marshall isn't going to be the easiest thing I've ever done."

"How come?"

"Just for starters, I don't even have a driver's license. The state has me registered as being blind, and I'd don't cotton to the idea of going in and explaining that a baby gave me my sight back. Also, it's just a long drive from here to Kentucky, and it's not going to be easy for me to drive all that way."

"You do okay."

"Thanks, but a vote of confidence from a seven week old
The small crimes of Arthur Payne 80

baby doesn't take a single mile off the trip."

"Me help."

"Like hell you will." Maggie leaned on the bureau and sighed. Everything was so difficult with the boy, but then raising Jackie had also been hard. Maybe he was more human than she'd thought.

"The cops would love seeing a little boy driving down the interstate. You can help out other ways, though."

"How?" he asked earnestly.

"Two rules," Maggie said, holding up fingers for emphasis, "and you're not going to like either of them. The first is no animals in the car."

"No fair," Arthur said indignantly. "Me take care of them."

"Did I say it was fair?" She went to the window and looked out, seeing a graceful freak of angle: the orange sun nestled in the upper fronds of a young palm tree. That meant they still had to wait a couple of hours before loading up the Reliant.

"I realize there's something special between you and the animals. I don't pretend to understand it, but I know you need one another. When we get to Kentucky, you can have all the animals you want so long as I don't wake up some morning with a wolf. I know you can control them, but I don't want another thing to worry about while we're moving, okay? Arthur, can you understand that?"

After a long hesitation, while Maggie wondered what she'd have to resort to in order to keep the car beast free, Arthur nodded. (I'll say one thing for the old lady. She could get
better behavior out of Arthur than anyone else ever did. No doubt he was a little more malleable at that age, since even God apparently needs time to grow, but to convince Arthur to give up his menagerie for a few days was a major accomplishment. I couldn't even get a reaction out of him the time I discovered myself sharing a bubble bath with a water moccasin.)

"Other rule?" he asked.

"You have to wear clothes."

"No." Arthur shook his head with the speed of a mongoose.

"No clothes."

"I'm not giving in, Arthur. You're not exposing yourself to the entire Southeast."

"Hate clothes."

"I don't care," Maggie said slowly, leaning down toward him. "I'm no prude, but we've got to travel inconspicuously as possible, and that means you wear clothes."

In the dark, dressed in a Smurf T-shirt and blue shorts drawn in with a safety pin, Arthur held a suitcase balanced on his head as he walked out toward the car. Despite their fierce and well-matched fights, Maggie was still shocked to see someone Arthur's size hauling luggage with no apparent effort. She was also pleased with his behavior. Except for an initial moment of pique—he'd pulled the T-shirt up to his face and eaten the
Smurf--he'd been totally cooperative, happy to use his muscle. He'd even surprised her by staying quiet, placing luggage in the trunk instead of throwing it without her having to tell him not to make noise.

When the time came, and she'd gone through the house one last time, making sure the faucets were off, the lights out, pausing to take a final look at every room so she could commit the details to memory, Maggie locked the front door and dropped her key in the mailbox. She expected to feel some attachment to the house, but it was like leaving a random pile of bricks now that Jackie no longer lived there.

She stopped at the fence to the back yard out of caution, unwilling to draw attention by going directly to Jackie's grave. Arms dangling over the fence, she could see where she'd buried her daughter as clearly as when it had been a patch of bare ground. Retrieving Arthur, she took him by the hand to the fence and nodded in the direction of the grave. "You should've known her."

At last, when they were ready to leave, trunk full, one suitcase flat on the back seat, three boxes laid on the floor below it. "Well kid, it's back home." Maggie started the car.

Arthur dove across the seat and grabbed onto her legs, claws piercing her. "Watch it," she said, wincing, and pulled the claws from her leg. Arthur held her leg more carefully this time, whimpering. "What's the matter?" Maggie asked.

He kept his face pressed to her.

"Oh, Arthur." She pulled him toward her and kissed the top of his head, scraping her lips on his wiry hair. "It's only a car. It can't do anything to you."

"Walk."

"It's too far to walk." Stroking his back, Maggie smiled at the boy and hugged him. "You just sit right here and hold on long as you want. Just remember, though, Maggie's right beside you, and she's not going to let anything happen to her grandson." After squeezing him tightly, Maggie turned on the ignition, flicked on the lights, put the car in drive, craned her neck to look behind her and drove the Reliant into the chain link fence surrounding the back yard.

The February before Arthur died, he made an appointment with a football player, a running back with a jagged scar on his chin and a neck the diameter of an Easter ham. While walking toward Arthur's office, the running back cleared his throat. "So, uh, you the big guy's main squeeze?"

Main squeeze? Big guy? "No," I said, smiling as sweetly as I could manage. "I just fuck him."

Arthur sat behind an oak desk big enough for an emergency
landing by a small plane. The running back explained that he'd "lost a step," and figured his team would draft a replacement for him. If Arthur could give back the speed he'd had when he came out of college, he was confident he could keep his starting job. "Let's put it this way. I know how to find the hole, but I'm having a tough time getting there. This guy they want to pick don't know to run. He's got his IQ on his jersey."

Tilting his head back so he could fix the football player with his right eye, Arthur rolled the left toward me. I shook my head, but Arthur smiled, turning back to the client. "Fifty thousand."

His lip curling into a weak, sick smile, the running back looked around as if someone was going to step in and help him. "That's a lot of money."

"Not when you think about it. You're going to want what I do kept secret, so I don't get any publicity out of it. Besides, there's a lot of money to be made if you can combine your experience with your old speed."

"I'll get the bucks together somehow."

"As soon as the check clears, you've got twenty-two year old legs." Leaning back in his chair, Arthur pointed casually. "I'll even take care of the scar for you if you want."

"Naw." The running back turned to leer at me. "The ladies think it's sexy."

Fortunately, no one has ever accused me of being a lady.
When the football player left, I walked up to Arthur. "You're going to help out a dick like that?"

"We need the money for the Life Festival," he said, staring at the door. Then he looked at me and shrugged. "Even I can't make money grow on trees."

That July, the running back shocked the entire training camp on the first day by running the forty-yard dash in 4.37 seconds. He sprawled at the start of his second attempt, a cruciate ligament in his left knee exploding and snapping off at the bone.

Arthur could do anything he pleased with the human form, which explains how they managed to survive Maggie's driving. Terrified and whimpering, clutching her tighter when the lights of an approaching car illuminated the Reliant's interior, Arthur worked on Maggie. He honed her until she had the reflexes, coordination and concentration of a house cat tossed in the air. When the fatigue toxins slipped into her bloodstream, he broke them down immediately.

Oblivious to the boy's workings, Maggie was proud of herself. Leaning back in her seat, right hand loose on the top of the wheel, she kept the car at a constant fifty-five so she wouldn't attract any attention. "You don't have to be scared, Arthur. I'm doing fine." She rumpled his hair playfully.

"Road," Arthur spoke into her leg. "Look at the road."

"Show some backbone. I was worried at first, I'll admit, after that start we got off to. I thought I'd have trouble,
but it's come back just like that." She took her hand from the
steering wheel and snapped her finger. "I guess it's like riding
a bicycle."

Arthur took no comfort in Maggie's confidence. He never
overcame the irrational fear of traveling in machines. In cars,
he always fidgeted and babbled nervously; when we took a plane,
he squeezed my hand so tightly during the pressure of takeoff
that I would still hold the tattoo of his nails when the stewardess
wheeled up with champagne.

About three miles south of Macon, the right front tire went
flat. Maggie knelt on the shoulder of I-75 a few minutes after
dawn, pointing to the tire. "It's right there, a little puncture."
She didn't think about how she managed to spot something that
small without a flashlight in the faint blue light. She remained
ignorant of Arthur's subtle help during the move.

"Air come out," Arthur said laughing, sticking his face
down by the puncture.

"Fix it." Maggie rose, slapping her knees to clean herself.
"We need to get rolling again."

Arthur looked between his grandmother and the flat, his
perplexed face wrinkling.

"Arthur," Maggie said harshly. "Fix the goddamned tire."
"How?"

Folding her arms, Maggie leaned on the warm hood of the
car. "This isn't the time to be joking around. I don't know
how you pull these things off. Just fix the flat."

Arthur twisted the bottom edge of his shirt in his hands.
"Me can't."

"After everything I've seen you do, you can't tell me you just can't fill that thing up with air and seal the hole."

"Machine," he said, kicking the tire absently with his bare foot. He sorted through his vocabulary to try and explain.
"Me...me do live things."

"You do live things?" Maggie felt like she was learning some new card game, and every hand she found out about another rule. "Are you trying to tell me you can only do miracles with things that are alive?"

"Or dead now."

"You can't do anything to the tire?"

"Me can make it rubber tree."

"I thought God could do anything."

Arthur shrugged. "You wrong."

They waited, sullen and quiet on the trunk for nearly half an hour as the sunlight climbed the scrubby trees by the expressway. A couple of cars passed, as Maggie shouted and waved, then went back to sulk beside the boy. When a car finally slowed, Arthur sprinted from vision of the headlights into the trees. Maggie fumed. He was probably naked by now, rolling in Georgia clay until he looked like a Cherokee.

The car rolled to a stop about twenty feet from Maggie.
A short, bony man got out and smiled across the morning. "Trouble?"

"I've got a flat."

"Shouldn't be much of a problem." He ambled toward her, dressed in a black T-shirt, stiff jeans and sneakers.

"You don't know me. I could fly to the moon before I could change a flat."

"Well, the first thing you need to do is turn on your flashers."

"My what?"

The stranger chuckled. "Don't get out much, do we? Your flashers. There's a button to pull out on your steering column that'll make your tail lights blink and let folks know you're having trouble and not about to pull out."

Maggie slid into the front seat and bent to try to find the button for the flashers. Suddenly she felt a warm circle pressed behind her left ear. "I don't think you need the flashers after all," the man said. "Hand me that purse."

"Go to hell."

He shoved the pistol harder against her head, pushing her cheek into the dashboard by the radio. "Give me the fucking purse."

As long as the barrel of the gun rested on her head, she was helpless. There wasn't enough time to do anything without getting herself killed. "Move over," the thief said harshly. "Fast." Maggie ended up near the middle of the seat, breathing
in little pants. Her left eye closed in a constant wince. The thief propped the purse on the steering wheel and ransacked it with one hand. "You better not be one of these credit card people."

"All I carry."

"Jesus fucking Christ! What is this, thirty, forty grand?"

Maggie opened her mouth, but she couldn't force any sound out.

"Lady, you're a gift from God."

She forced a whisper out of her tight throat. "You can afford to be generous."

"What?"

Maggie struggled to take a breath and raise her shaking voice. "You can afford to be generous. Leave me five thousand. It's all the money I've got in the world."

The man ignited. "Don't lie to me!" he screamed, grasping her face in his hand and squeezing her jaw until tears sprang to her eyes. The purse fell unnoticed onto his lap as he brought his face inches from hers. "Don't fucking lie to me, you greedy cunt! You got a brand-new car. You got more money."

When Maggie heard the thunder above her, she immediately thought he'd shot her in his rage. That made no sense. She didn't feel anything. The thief's hand slid from her face as he toppled backwards, his foot kicking her arm. Outside the door, Maggie glimpsed black hair. Suddenly Arthur stood up, wiping his claws on his shorts. The thief raised up for a moment,
his hands pressed to his throat. Blood squirted between his fingers, and his mouth hung open. There was no reason to watch this, so Maggie pulled her head away, closing her eyes to make sure she didn't get an accidental reflection in the window or the rear-view mirror. She waited, burying her face in the cloth seat. Behind her, Arthur calmly said, "Dead."

"Oh, Jesus." She closed her eyes tighter, but she could still hear the thief screaming at her for lying. "Where the hell did you take off to?" she demanded, turning to Arthur.

"Bad man coming."

A moment later, after she'd struggled out of the car, she pulled her hair back from her forehead until her scalp stung. "I have to think." She looked down the road, expecting to see a truck appear on the horizon any moment. "We've got to get rid of the body, and we're going to have to take his car. At least it's running."

Clenching her jaw, Maggie pulled the keys to the Reliant from the dead man's grip and searched his pockets for his own car keys. "I'm getting rid of the body." Bending, she grabbed him by the warm ankles and tugged. When she'd dragged him a few inches, she let the feet fall at her own. "Oh, Jesus, the blood. Somebody's going to drive by and see it before we get out of here."

"Me fix," Arthur said, turning to address the thief one last time. "Bad man."
"Yeah, maybe. Maybe just greedy."

Perhaps she was stronger now, but the corpse wasn't much heavier than Jackie had been. Maggie would've liked to stop and shut those wide puzzled eyes, but her life had twisted and jumped so that she no longer had the time for any delicacy. She concentrated on looking behind her so she wouldn't stumble on a rise or an obstinate, unattached root sticking up above the ground. Finally she found a depression deep enough to swallow a body. She rolled the thief in face down, swirls and small chunks of clay on the back of his dark shirt. "You poor sonofabitch," Maggie said. "You just didn't know what you were tangling with."

Walking back, she saw Arthur on his hands and knees, lapping at the blood the way a kitten pounces on spilled milk.

There was work to be done before they could travel again, much less move to Marshall. Arthur took their belongings from one car to another while Maggie cleaned out the glove compartment of the Reliant and put her Florida plates on the stranger's car. She kept looking over her shoulder, waiting to be discovered, but the only car that passed was full of drunken teenagers after a night's binge. The car wove a bit, and a tired boy halfheartedly tossed a beer bottle in her direction while Maggie unscrewed the old Georgia plates on the thief's car.
His old lime green Duster was balky and stalled out when she shifted to drive and tried to pull onto the freeway. Finally, after she'd gotten the car moving and put a few miles between herself and death, she pulled a random cassette from a cracked plastic box and fumbled with the controls. Just when she decided she'd never get it to work, guitars suddenly sang and George Jones rumbled.

This never was one of those great romances,
But I thought you'd always have those young girl's eyes,
But now they look in tight and bitter glances,
At the ghost of the man who walks round in my disguise.

Fingers tightening on the wheel, Maggie realized she couldn't listen to the dead man's music; they'd already taken too much from him.

I get the feeling that I don't belong here,
But there's no welcome in the window anyway.

"Me like it," Arthur protested as Maggie leaned over to study the controls again.

And I look down for a number on my keychain,
'Cause it feels more like a hotel everyday.
"How do you shut this goddamned thing off?"

There's a stranger in the house--
Punching the eject button by blind luck, Maggie cranked the reluctant window down and threw the cassette from the moving car. She watched it in the rearview mirror as the music bounced
and broke apart on the pavement.

"There's a stranger in the house," Arthur echoed, thrilled with the discovery that humans, like birds and crickets, sang.

"Shut up!" Maggie snapped. The window wouldn't roll back up. She turned to Arthur and slapped at him, but only managed to smack the dashboard. "Just shut up. I don't want to hear it."

North of Atlanta—when her sense of immediate danger began to fade—Maggie left the freeway and found the rocky circular drive of the Dixie Dog Motel. On the sign, a white dog wearing a rebel cap sat below the name. Maggie parked, turned the ignition off and sat there for a few moments, warming the keys in her hand and staring sightlessly in front of her.

"Marshall?" Arthur asked, stirring beside her.

He had to repeat himself before she shook her head. "I just need to sleep for a little while."

"You not tired."

"Sometimes people need to drink to forget, but I'd get us both killed, so I'm going to sleep to forget." She snatched up her purse. "Stay put. I'll be back in a minute."

When she returned with a key attached to an orange plastic tag, she found Arthur at the sign, standing on his tiptoes. He moved his head back and forth to change his angle of vision, squinted. "I thought I told you to stay in the car."

"Wrong," he said, pointing to the dog's crotch. "Not boy,
not girl. Can't make puppies."

Despite everything, Arthur's search for genitalia on the Dixie Dog amused Maggie. "New breed," she said, taking his arm. "They wear one another's cap to make puppies."

There were so many times when Arthur knew what people were feeling, but missed the reason for those feelings. That morning, as Maggie stretched fully clothed on the soft, noisy bed in the paint flecked room, and Arthur protected her from nightmares. He knew she was upset about the thief's death and the sight of Arthur drinking the blood, but he couldn't understand. He thought she realized he'd killed the man for their protection, but it still bothered her, and she was both disgusted and confused by the way he'd disposed of the blood. Arthur was never close enough to us to interpret the subtlety of our feelings.

He didn't realize that this particular death upset Maggie in a different way than the others. She'd seen relatives--her mother, Double A, Jackie--die before, and the force of her grief shielded her from the actual death itself. Maggie's horror at seeing him drink the thief's blood was a case of her misunderstanding the messiah. Arthur considered it regrettable that he'd had to kill the thief for their safety, but it would have been a sacrilege, a total waste of life to let the blood dry, wipe it up with his shirt, or simply make it disappear. (Poor Preacher had to tolerate Arthur fuming for a week when he found out that embalmers let a body's blood run down the drain.)
Arthur saw it as his duty to drop to all fours and lick the blood from the concrete. That way, a part of the man remained alive in Arthur.

Arthur didn't concern himself much with Maggie's mood. Too excited to sleep himself, he roamed the motel room until he discovered a group of cockroaches. As they gathered around him, he kept his voice low so the old woman could sleep as long as she wanted, while he shared his discovery with them: the magic of human song.
Except for a stop in a small town in northern Tennessee, where a mechanic removed a jammed thermostat from the radiator, they made good time to Marshall after Maggie woke. As they approached town, Maggie shook her head. "You know, I think they've even put up more billboards to block the trees since I left." As soon as she spoke, a billboard advertising a used car lot split and tumbled to the ground. "You did that," she said accusingly, turning to glare at Arthur.

Putting a hand to his mouth, he couldn't cover a smile.

"Arthur, you don't do things like that."

"You not like?"

"Yeah, I know, but just because I don't like something doesn't mean you can destroy it." She rubbed at the vague headache blossoming in her forehead. "When we get settled down, you and I are going to have a talk about a few things, including private property."

When they reached Marshall, Maggie took a right turn and let the Duster coast down a hill to the corner, where the downslope ended. She parked the car across the street from a two story
white house with three marble pillars on the front porch. There was an old white Eldorado parked in the driveway. "Home," Arthur said hopefully, already opening the door.

"Hold your horses," Maggie said, leaning and getting ahold of the boy by the elastic waist of his shorts. "That used to be my house. That's where your mama was born."

Arthur grunted, bored. "Go."

Maggie didn't hear him, concerned with the sight of the house and her memories. She'd spent twenty-six years in that house. Her husband, Double A, had it built for their marriage. She remembered coming to the house for the first time, a nervous fifteen year old reeling from the excitement of a wedding and a reception that afternoon. Double A had never let her see the interior of the house, and when they stepped up on the porch, he produced a black silk handkerchief and blindfolded her, insisting on drama. He pushed her through the house with his hands on her hips. Maggie, laughing and still a little naive, kept repeating, "Aren't we in the living room, yet?" When he finally removed the blindfold, Double A stood naked before her. They were in the bedroom, next to a bed big enough to sleep her whole family. Maggie laughed at her memory. Not a total innocent, she had tailed her brothers to the barn more than once to watch them masturbate. Still, a few years before her marriage, she had retained the odd belief that a man couldn't get a hardon without a milk cow in the room.
"Less go!" Arthur said irritably.

"Just hang on." For a moment, she had forgotten the boy was there. Even if her body was younger, the bulk of her memories still outweighed the present occasionally. "The best parts of my life are in that house."

"Move in."

"Somebody else lives there now, Arthur."

"Take it."

"It's their house now. After I went to Lakeland, somebody bought it. We have to go somewhere else."

"Where?"

"I got a hunch," Maggie said, turning the ignition and taking a long look at where she'd been happiest.

She drove through Marshall, pointing out the landmarks to Arthur: where the Baptist church she'd married in was before the congregation emptied their pockets and built a bigger one near her old house (Payne Realty, one of the companies she'd inherited from Double A, razed the old church and built an IGA), the Ben Franklin Five and Dime, where she purchased most of Jackie's clothes so she'd look like the other children instead of a rich widow's daughter, the brick schoolhouse near the woods at the edge of town. A teenage couple was in the playground. They twined two rusty swings together to kiss, the boy touching her breast with a cautious hunger, as if he was afraid she was made of porcelain, or the world would spin away if he ever let go.
Three miles outside the city limits, Maggie turned left onto a road of mud and stones. Throwing the Duster into low, she bounced them up the hill as she stood on the accelerator. Arthur rolled down his window and watched the animals scatter through the trees, running from the noise. Halfway up the hill, Maggie found what she was looking for.

The barn had collapsed, the roof a tarpaper mulch, a random board of jagged wood still poking up in two or three places. In front of her father's cockeyed house, the clearing was full of shoulder high weeds and tough little trees. Maggie stopped the car, and they both got out, Arthur bounding toward the woods. She walked on to the house. The rotting door was off its hinges, lying on the floor. Someone had broken the windows, and no one had even bothered to board them up. A tattered, curtain hung from one like a bleached green and white flag. Maggie put her hand to the frame her father built. The house had taken too many seasons of rain, and she knew it had been years since anything but termites had lived here, but she suspected Arthur would get along with them just fine.

That night, they slept on the damp wooden floor in sleeping bags Maggie picked up at the Ben Franklin. Now that the trip was over and they'd found some sort of home, Arthur had reverted to his usual recalcitrant self. He crawled headfirst into the
bag out of sheer obstinacy and by the time Maggie had reached in and took hold of his feet, he had a firm grip on the inside. She had to haul him out like a midwife handling a breech birth, and he held on so that the bag turned inside out. "Fine," she said. "Freeze your fanny off. See if I care."

"Not cold."

"This isn't Florida, you know. There's going to be some cold nights." Arthur shrugged nonchalantly. "We'll even have snow."

"What snow?"

"You'll find out soon enough."

Had she been lucky, they would have had a cool night, but then all of us who were involved with Arthur Payne have wondered about our luck. Most people would say that having Arthur touch your life was the worst luck possible, but I've already said he was misunderstood. That night, when the temperature stayed about eighty, Maggie stubbornly sweated in her sleeping bag, zipped to the neck and dozing fitfully. (One reason God chose her for his grandmother was that Arthur needed someone who could be as obstinate as he.) He slept naked, half on the twisted bag and half on the floor, breathing like a metronome. At sunrise, unable to sleep any longer because of the heat and her long nap the morning before, Maggie rolled over and slapped Arthur on the leg. "Come on kid, rise and shine. This is country life. You get up with the roosters."
"No rooster here," Arthur said. "Sleep."

"Use your imagination, then. There will be. We'll have roosters and hens, and we'll clear Daddy's old land and plant potatoes and corn and tomatoes and okra and--"

"No roosters today," Arthur said. "Sleep."

"Rise and shine, you lazy little shit. I'm not fooling. We got work to do."

"One," Arthur said irritably, grimacing as he rolled over and looked at his grandmother. "One rooster all you need."

Maggie's plan was to dress the boy, and for the two of them to drive downtown and eat breakfast in the first restaurant she found open. While she waited for the boy to get moving, she decided to check her mother's old dishes, the twisted plates she'd eaten off with a dull fork. Maggie made a mental note to purchase oil when she opened the cupboard and cringed as the hinges shrieked. Pulling out an old mug, she found at least two decades of dust piled inside. When she blew inside the cup, grit flew into her face.

Cursing, she put the mug down and rubbed the protective tears from her eyes. In front of her, steam rose from the mug, and when she peered into the cup through the mist of heat and tears, she found her morning's black coffee. So surprised she couldn't trust just one sense, Maggie wrapped her hands around the mug and touched the warmth. "You drink coffee in morning," Arthur said, wandering toward her. Maggie nodded. "Me make
Maggie would become something of a curiosity at the IGA, never buying food, only storage items like wax paper, plastic bags, mason jars. A rumor started that she and her creepy grandson were actually cannibals who sacrificed small children before eating their flesh and drinking their blood. Despite the fact that all the children in the area could be accounted for, the rumor persisted until Maggie died. Years later, when Arthur became Marshall's one and only famous son, people realized he'd been her provider the whole time.

Before she left the farm, giving Arthur a bowl of oatmeal that he shoveled into his mouth with his bare hands, Maggie counted her money and made a list of things she had to do. She still had fifty-six thousand in the purse, but there were so many things to be done here. She had to buy beds, furniture, pay a plumber to replace the pipes running from the well, an electrician to get the old generator working again, the one she'd purchased for her mother, and a carpenter to repair the house. All the labor would cost extra, since she'd have to pay to keep their mouths shut, too. Even if she'd eventually bought the land for her father, she was technically squatting on it. She couldn't prove who she was, and if she remembered correctly, her brothers had inherited equal portions when her mother died. As far as
she knew, the land belonged to her nieces and nephews, wherever they were.

There was also the Duster to worry about. The odds of the Georgia police tracking it to a small town in western Kentucky were even slimmer than Hiller appearing on their front doorstep, but she would feel safer disposing of it. That meant she needed a new form of transportation, perhaps a small truck. Maggie set her pencil down and rubbed her eyes. Across the room, Arthur munched on an orange, biting into it like an apple. She felt a deepening affection for the boy, for his differences, for the way he'd returned life to her, but he was an endless complication.

Suddenly he turned his attention from the orange to his grandmother. "Something wrong."

Maggie scrambled to her feet and hustled to the window, but saw nothing except undergrowth, road and trees. "Is somebody coming?"

"No. Something wrong with you."

Relaxing, she discovered she'd wrapped her fingers so tightly around the window sill that they were white and aching. "It's just this whole damn mess. There's so much to worry about."

"What?"

"Everything. That somebody's going to figure out we're living here, covering up our tracks, setting up a new place." Her voice faded, then burst from her like a gust of wind. "I love you boy, but sometimes I wonder if you're more trouble than
"Yeah," Arthur said, juice dribbling down his chin.

That's one of the reasons people have difficulty understanding how we could tolerate Arthur, much less love him. He took our love for granted, the same way he viewed breathing. I'm not about to deny that he used those of us who loved him, that he manipulated Maggie during his childhood, and after that he used Preacher, the Apostle Fido, Ian, me, and anyone he could lay his paws on as tools. He could be a bastard of the first order when it suited his purposes. It's sad, because even when he was alive, I could tell there was a part of Arthur that struggled to return that love, but he wasn't born to do that. There was that Saturday morning when we slept late and lay in bed, when he opened his hand and I watched a pair of thornless roses--red as fresh blood--blossom in his palm as a gift. Even then, he was only playing the part of a man in love; it was a gesture of imitation, not emotion. He could only care for us the way he loved any other life: a tree, a squirrel, the bacteria growing in our throats, a wasp, even mildew. The life of God, distributing love equally, is a lonely one.

My stated purpose in writing this is to explain Arthur's story to the world, to show him for what he was instead of just a villain, but if I'm honest, there's also a subtext. With all the knowledge I have, the perceptions of an avatar mixed with my own native intelligence, I still don't understand why we handed
over our love and our loyalty as freely as a Christmas present. There were the miracles, but no matter how impressive Arthur's powers were, all they inspired was awe. Maybe we loved him and tolerated his misbehavior because he expected it. No one's ever explained human love. There's something in us that's drawn to complete arrogance, the way a drone is dedicated to the queen bee.

Still, I wonder why we followed Arthur, and what made Maggie hop into the Duster that morning and hand over her dwindling cash to the plumber and the carpenter while Arthur frolicked carelessly in the woods, making friends with the squirrels, skittish deer, the insects, hopping from tree to tree with his staccato laugh. Maggie watched her roll of cash, all she had left in the world, shrink as she handed over hush money to men she couldn't trust. After she finished with them, she drove the Duster a couple of miles past the Ford dealer and walked back, her face crimson and her legs sore from the effort. She would have enough trouble getting a truck without trying to trade in a car registered under a dead man's name. She'd had money for too long. As a child, she had known every thief in Marshall through her brothers; she could have picked up at least a hundred from someone whose desire for parts exceeded his curiosity.

She managed to pick up a used apple colored Ranger at the dealership across from her old house. Though she knew it was silly, she sat in the truck and stared at white house, studying
it for some stirring of life. At least when she lived there, the place had been alive with the energy of a new marriage, a child, the lover she took after Double A's death. Maggie smiled briefly, remembering how their animal grunts and cries had covered the sound of the town lunch whistle. "I don't know who you are in there," she said sourly, "but that house is mine."

She was lucky the sheriff took an early afternoon nap, because her foul mood made her forget that she couldn't exceed the speed limit without a license, that she was doing her best to keep herself and her grandson a secret. Being blind and waiting to die in Florida had been horrible, but there were times she wondered if that wasn't better than this life. At least there she had constructed her own fate, and she had some material comfort. She had given that up for a secret existence on the run, protecting a murderous little mongrel, living in a crooked, weed choked farm that didn't belong to her, a place she'd been overjoyed to escape seventy-five years ago.

Bouncing up the rough path, the fillings in her teeth rattling with each jolt, she forgot herself and honked the horn to let Arthur know she back. She really didn't care if someone overheard, and they were discovered. After Maggie called him a few times, the boy appeared at the edge of the woods, naked, with long streaks of dirt painting his body. "Would you look at yourself?" Maggie groaned.

"Great place," he said happily.
She made him stand under the old red water pump while she pumped the stiff handle. Arthur stared quizzically at the spout as the water gurgled its way up, then suddenly burst into his face. Letting out a choking yelp, he jumped back, the water trickling from his face and hair, collecting in small puddles at his collarbones. "Cold."

"Get back under there."

"Cold."

"Don't be a baby," Maggie snapped. "If you're going to romp around in the woods and get filthy, then you're going to clean up afterwards."

Unhappy with the prospect of letting the freezing, rusty water splash over him again, Arthur backed away.

"I don't care if it's knocking you over the head with ice cubes," Maggie yelled, smacking the spout with her hand. "If we have to live in this shithole, the least you can do is look halfway human."

Edging toward the water, Arthur changed his body temperature slightly for protection. "You a bitch today."

"Somebody coming," Arthur said behind her.

Maggie came close to cutting off her hand with her sickle. For the last six days, she'd ignored Arthur's offer to clear the land by miracle. She liked the work, sitting here on her
aching knees, hacking at small trees and weeds with the tiny, dulling sickle she'd found in the remnants of the barn. The work cleared her head faster than her hands cleared the land.

"Stop sneaking up on me. Give me some kind of warning when you're around."

"Somebody coming."

"Of course somebody's coming. The plumber went home for lunch, and he's headed back now."

Arthur shook his head seriously. "Not the plumber. Car sounds different."

"Are you sure it's someone else?" Frowning, the boy nodded. Maggie waited, but he simply looked at her with that blank, maddening calm that frustrated so many of us. "Who is it?"

"I don't know."

"Shit." Maggie threw the sickle down, where it stuck, dark as the earth. "Let's get back in the woods."

He helped her up, and they ran off into the brush, Maggie cursing as the short branches and vines lashed her legs. "Be quiet," Arthur said.

"My legs aren't leather."

When they were well hidden, squinting through the mesh of a wild grapevine, they saw the white Eldorado that had been parked at Maggie's old house pull up the hill. The driver stopped beside the pickup, the body of his car rocking back and forth. A short, fat man in a lemon colored suit and straw hat eased his way out
of the front seat, lightly touched the hood of the Ranger. "Hello," he called. "Anybody home?"

Her legs sore from spending too much time in one position, Maggie shifted slightly, stirring the vines. Arthur put his hand on top of her head and shoved her back down. "Keep still."

"I'm the one who gives orders around here," Maggie whispered, knowing full well it wasn't true, but sounded reassuring.

The man went to the reconstructed door and rapped on it. He waited a moment, taking his straw hat from his balding head. "Hello," he said loudly, pirouetting. "My name is Brother Harris, and I'm pastor of the First Southern Baptist Church of Marshall."

"It's just a preacher," Maggie informed Arthur. "I'm going to go talk to him."

Arthur kept the pressure on her head. "I don't like him."

"You've never been known for your friendliness," she said, prying his hand off her. "Arthur, he's living in my old house. That's the same car we saw before."

"Beat him up."

"I told you, it's his house now. I just want to find out something about him."

"I stay here," Arthur said firmly.

"Did I say anything about you coming out?" she said, struggling to her feet as her knees cracked and hips flamed into pain. "You're too strong to pull out by the ears."

"Well hello," the minister boomed, walking toward her with
a hand outstretched as soon as he spotted Maggie coming out of the brush. "I don't know if you heard me before, but I'm--"

"Brother Harris, First Southern Baptist Church of Marshall."

"You heard."

"I didn't know there were two Baptist churches in Marshall."

Harris shrugged, a little abashed. "There isn't, but the congregation loves to call the place the first, and collection plate fills up faster if I soothe their egos."

Maggie laughed. "Makes sense."

"I didn't catch your name."

Hesitating, Maggie took a deep breath. This man might be old enough to remember her as the crazy widow in the big house. "Maggie Payne."

"Now there's a name that brings back memories. I had an aunt by that name."

"Of course. Harris. My grandmother was originally a Harris. I was named after her."

"You're Maggie Payne's granddaughter?" When Maggie nodded, Harris smiled and examined her. "You do look a bit like her at that age."

The conversation made her uneasy. She turned her head slightly to make sure Arthur heard her. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"I'd love one." He held the door open with a florid, showy motion, surprisingly light on his feet. "Best I can figure, we'd be second cousins."
Maggie had Brother Harris sit in one of the rickety old chairs that had wobbled back and forth on the floor when she was a child. To her surprise, she found two empty cups in the cupboard.

"What I can't figure out," Harris said, leaning back precariously in the chair, "is why your name is Payne."

She tried to look embarrassed. "My parents weren't married." Coming back under her own name had been a mistake. Maggie banged the balky window open with the heel of her hand and called toward the woods. "I think I'll just brew up a couple of cups of coffee."

"You know, it's really pretty funny to think about Jackie having a baby, especially one out of wedlock."

Since he was too sensitive to be out of earshot, Maggie assumed Arthur was off sulking. "It looks like I'm out of coffee."

"No problem. I remember my sister June was so jealous of Jackie. Your mother was quite a beauty. The boys used to send her flowers and gather on the back porch swing at night, smoking cigarettes and arguing about who'd she finally pay attention to. She wasn't any more interested in them than the mosquitoes out there. I remember there'd be butts all over the back yard every morning."

"She wasn't what you'd call your average mother."

"You know," Harris said, leaning on the table so that it tilted toward him. "There were nights I actually went to bed praying I'd wake up, and she wouldn't be my cousin anymore so
I could marry her. Not that it would've done me any good. I was a sickly little runt back then. She wouldn't even have looked at me."

Staring across the table at the full ruddy face, Maggie realized this was Jimmy, the frail, bone thin child whom they'd expected to expire every winter as he sat in front of the Franklin stove with a quilt wrapped around his shoulders while he coughed himself crimson and leaned closer to the heat. Sometimes the stove seemed his only thread to life. Maggie found it hard to believe he'd grown into this stout healthy man. You stuck a seed into the earth, watered it, let it leech nourishment from the dirt, and one day you had a tomato; you took a sickly boy who seemed to be nothing but sallow skin and a collection of rickety bones, fill his belly with food and his lungs with good air, and you sprouted a man. For a moment there—gazing across the scarred wooden table at her nephew—Maggie nearly appreciated the miracles of life as much as her grandson did.

"What say you come to my church on Sunday and have dinner at my house afterwards."

"I don't know about that."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't embarrass you by pointing you out. Besides, having some kin in the pews might keep me from getting so long winded that everybody's dinner burns up in their ovens."

"There's just so much to be done around here."
"I know that. I've let the place go to pot."

"It's your land?" Maggie said excitedly, thinking for the first time that her plans might work out, that perhaps she didn't have so much to fear.

"If you've got the courage to try and fix it up, then it's yours as far as I'm concerned. This place has never been worth a hill of beans." Somber, he brought his face closer to hers. "You may not believe this, but if you'll leave it alone on Sundays, the Lord will be a little easier on it."

"I'll think about it."

"Hi Preacher."

They turned to find Arthur, crushed grapes dotting his bare body. Harris looked over at Maggie, his eyebrows raised. "This is my grandson, Arthur. You know how kids his age love to shuck their clothes."

"I don't wear none," Arthur announced proudly.

"Well," Harris said uncomfortably, "even Adam didn't cover it up until Satan got to him."
By Saturday night, they had a toilet and an ancient clawfoot tub installed. Kneeling painfully, Maggie adjusted the faucets she'd cleaned with Bon-Ami and a toothbrush, tested the water with her elbow. When it was little hotter than lukewarm, she called to Arthur. He walked up and peered into the tub. "What's that?"

Wiping water from her elbow, Maggie smiled and patted him on the back with a damp hand. "Old Southern custom. It's called taking a bath on Saturday night before church."

"I don't need a bath."

"Like hell you don't," Maggie snorted. "Arthur, you've got enough dirt on you to pass for a nigger."

He dropped to the floor and bent at impossible angles, raising his right leg perpendicular to the floor and collapsing his back. He flicked his tongue between his toes. Maggie yanked his leg down. "No you don't."

"I get clean."

"Look, I may let you have animals in the house and run around naked like some goddamned savage in the woods, but you're going
to take a bath before you go to church like a normal human being."

(As an adult, he never took to baths, but licked himself clean like a cat every day, twisting at angles that made me rub my eyes and look again to see if he was really doing that. Once, when I commented that he spent an inordinate amount of time cleaning his crotch, he smiled slyly and said, "Wouldn't you?")

Arthur put his hand in the water and pulled it out quickly. "This dumb."

"Arthur, I guarantee you millions of people have survived this. You've got it lucky. When I was a girl, everybody in the family took their bath in a wooden tub with someone else on Saturday night. You couldn't even smell your supper after Thursday, and I had to share the tub with my brother Nate to save water until I was thirteen."

"How come you stop?"

Leaning against the edge of the tub, Maggie chuckled at the memory. "There were a couple of reasons. We were getting too big, and the tub was starting to be a pretty tight fit. The other was that I was growing breasts, and Nate started enjoying the baths just a little too much. He kept dropping the soap and asking me to find it, and then he started saying we should take more baths. Nate eventually ended up with eight or nine kids."

"He took lots of baths."

"Could be." She jerked her thumb toward the water. "Now
Groaning as she rose from her tender knees, Maggie fetched a new bar of soap and a blue washcloth. When she turned back to the tub, Arthur stood on the water, making his body so light that his feet acted as pontoons.

"I suppose you think that's funny."

Gradually sinking, Arthur nodded smugly.

"There was another man who could walk on water." She dipped a bowl into the bath and emptied it on Arthur's head.

"What you doin' to me?" he shouted, panicky and splashing his way to his feet.

"I'm washing you."

"I don't like this."

"For somebody who can walk on water, you're one hell of a sissy about it."

"That's why I walk on it."

Maggie wondered if the Virgin Mary had to tolerate these sorts of shenanigans. If she did, that explained why the poor girl looked so sad in all those pictures. "Just settle down, okay? I'll tell you about Jesus, the man who walked on water."

Arthur sat, only flinching a bit as Maggie washed his face.

"One night, Jesus and his disciples were out in a boat, crossing the Sea of Galilee. That's a long way from here."

"What's a disciple?"

"There were twelve men who followed Jesus around to learn
from him and help him because He was the son of God."

"Did he have a dog?" Arthur asked excitedly.

"A what?" Shaking her head, Maggie lathered Arthur's chest and round belly. "No, he didn't have a dog."

"How come?"

"How am I supposed to know why Jesus didn't have a dog? Maybe they weren't invented yet."

"Dogs wasn't invented," Arthur said with disgust. "They was evolved."

Before he could say anything else, Maggie jammed the washcloth into his mouth. "Are you going to let me tell this story or not?" Pulling the washcloth from his mouth, Arthur handed it back silently. "Then one of his disciples whose name was Peter," she said, dipping her hand below the water to wash the boy's genitals.

A frog leapt from between Arthur's legs to Maggie's arm, to the edge of the tub. Shrieking and dropping the washcloth, Maggie fell away, her heart sounding in her ears. As the frog bounded from the bathroom, she put her wet hand to her bosom, water soaking through the bodice of her dress as she managed to collect herself. Reaching back in, she found the washcloth as Arthur laughed raucously and stretched out in the water. Maggie wrapped the washcloth around his testicles and squeezed and scrubbed as hard as she could. "Aaah!" Arthur yelled, splashing and clawing at her hand until she stopped. He glared at her.
"That was mean."

Maggie let the blood from her hand mix with the bath water, wincing as the soap burned the scratch. "Damn right it was mean. You scared me."

"You be old if I not here."

Taking her hand from the water, she dried it off, watched the blood collect in the recesses of the scratch. "That may be true, but you've still got a lot to learn. You think that just because you're something special you can play with people like they're your toys. I'll admit you gave me back my life, but I got along for eighty-five years without Arthur Payne and I can do the same for however long I've got left."

Unimpressed, Arthur said, "You didn't finish the story about Jesus."

He woke her early the next morning, jumping on her bed as if it were a trampoline. Maggie felt slightly nauseated, shaken as she watched Arthur grow and shrink as he plummeted toward the bed, then rose away from her. Each bounce shook her further from future sleep. She slapped at his feet, trying to grab one. "Cut that out."

"Let's go to church."

"It's not time for church yet."

Arthur stopped jumping and frowned. Even as an adult, he
would have difficulty with the concept of time, refusing to believe in any clock except the one in his belly. "I go outside and play."

"Oh, no. Not after what I went through to clean you up, you aren't. You're staying in the house."

He amused himself by playing with a squirrel in Maggie's bedroom. She felt a little sorry for the boy. Up until now, his only company had been the animals and herself. It was only natural Arthur would want to go out and meet other people. Her sympathy faded along with any chance of going back to sleep when Arthur and the squirrel began to chase each other around the room. She was about to doze off when the squirrel leapt on her and launched itself off her shoulder for escape. Maggie rose just in time to stop Arthur from diving onto the bed in pursuit. "Do you think you and your friend could either calm down or take this to another room?"

Arthur and the squirrel--she never would figure out his hold on animals--crept from the room. She realized within moments that sleep was impossible this morning, as Arthur crashed into the living room wall and swore loudly. Throwing the sheet off, Maggie kicked her way into her slippers and reminded herself that the boy was simply overexcited.

In an attempt to calm him down, she decided to dress him before doing anything else. Sipping on a cup of coffee he'd made for her, she yanked a brush through his kinky black hair.
It was hopeless; the hair was as recalcitrant as Arthur. She finally had to pick him up and douse his head in the sink to keep the springy fur tucked behind his ears. The ears made her shudder. They were probably the least human part of him. Pointed and supple, they looked as if they should have been on a wolf instead of a little boy, and when he heard something in the woods, they rotated back toward the sound. Maggie felt a sudden dizziness, stricken by that quick moment of vertigo people experience when something unexpected moves. Calming herself, she sat back and finished her coffee, then had him create another cup. They moved on to his bedroom where she dressed him in the cheap, shiny suit she'd purchased downtown earlier in the week. The suit hung on him the way Dr. Hiller's skin had sagged from his bones. Puzzled, Maggie studied the suit, drawing in the loose places with her hands. Arthur was smaller than she'd thought. Still, he looked nearly pleasant with his hair slicked back toward his head, dressed for once. She knew she'd never be able to do anything about the ears or his sharp teeth. "You look like a very nice boy."

"I don't like this," he growled, pulling the buttoned collar away from his throat with a finger.

"Tough. It's big as it is."

"Can we go now?"

Maggie glanced down at her new watch, seeing it was only eight-thirty. According to Harris, Sunday School started at
ten, but she preferred to skip that this morning. She wanted a little time before she allowed that. Arthur needed a few weeks of Christianity under his plastic belt before she'd let him out of her sight for an hour in public. "We have to wait for everyone else."

"That's dumb."

"Arthur, you can't have church all by yourself."

To pass the time, he and Maggie sat on the living room couch while she told him a brief sketch of the life of Jesus. "His mother was a virgin, just like yours." This pleased Arthur immensely. Looking at his rapt, pudgy face, Maggie realized that Jesus was a hero to Arthur in the same way a baseball player was to other boys. As she neared the end of the story, Arthur became uneasy, shifting on the couch, looking down. His chin seemed to recede into his face, and he glanced nervously around the room. "And then he floated up to Heaven to be with God," Maggie said.

"They killed him," Arthur whispered.

"He came back to life."

Arthur stared at his opened hands. She knew he was imagining what it felt like to have a nail driven through those tender palms. She stooped over and wrapped her arms around the shaking boy, patting his shoulders, pressing his face to her chest. "It's all right. It all happened a long time ago. Besides, He wanted to die, remember? If He didn't die, then no one could
go to Heaven. He wanted to help us."

Something bitter was working its way out of the boy. His mouth opened and closed silently in some kind of spasm of grief. Maggie felt unequal to the child's pain. She'd seen him upset before, confused, angry, even scared, but none of those moments compared to this. Finally it came out, the words in an uncertain, halting tone. "They...They..." He swallowed hard and looked away. "They kill me, too."

"No," she said, pressing his cheek. "Oh, no, nobody's going to hurt you." Still, it made her wonder. Joan of Arc ended up charcoal, Julius Caesar struggled under the weight of his wounds, Christ bore his entire weight on three nails, and Socrates bravely drank hemlock. Maggie had lived too long to dismiss what Arthur said. As a girl, she'd seen a group in Marshall—farmers and businessmen who tipped their hats to women and spent their Sundays in the wooden pews at church—emboldened simply by wearing white sheets. They took new rope, paid for at the general store, and strung a black man over a thick branch by his armpits, shot him in the legs until slivers of bone flew off in the night like white knives. Then they set him on fire, hurling buckets of water after they were sure he was dead to save the tree. She'd read about the Jews during World War II, seen the Cubans flood Florida after Batista fell, watched them rise no higher than waiters, taxi drivers and gardeners after twenty years. If being different wasn't always fatal, it was
dangerous, and in all her years, Maggie had yet to see anyone as different as Arthur Payne. Still, as his grandmother, she had the duty to comfort him. "Nobody's going to hurt you, Arthur."

"Uh uh," he said, nodding his head and pushing Maggie away from him. "You tell the truth, and people kill you."

Despite all the time, they were nearly late for church. While Maggie took a bath in lemon scented water, Arthur recovered from his fear and barged in. He walked directly to the tub and stared down at her. Maggie slid down, crossing her legs and wrapping her arms around her small breasts. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"Look."

"I can see that! What do you think this is, Playboy magazine?" Arthur made a spinning motion with his hand. "Turn over so I can see the other side."

"You go to hell! Now get out of here!"

"You see me naked."

"Who hasn't? Besides, I'm your grandmother."

Leaning over the tub, Arthur continued to stare. "I interested in people."

"That's very commendable." Maggie quickly uncovered a breast to shoo him away with her hand. "Go learn about people in somebody else's tub."
When he left, grumbling and slamming the door, Maggie kept her body beneath the water for a few minutes. She hadn't always been that modest. There had been the long afternoons with her lover, Jacob, when they faced one another in the huge bath Double A had built before his death. She and Jacob stared at each other. He would shake his head and twist his mouth in mock disgust. "Your breasts are filthy," he said, soaping them in shrinking circles. "And your nipples. Why can't you keep your nipples clean?" He leaned forward to lick them, flicking his tongue like a snake to tease her, biting or sucking until his lips pulled off of her with a loud smack. In the bedroom, where they kept the curtains open so he could study her in the afternoon light, she'd occasionally see a pair of boys with wrinkled foreheads, their chins propped on the window sill as they watched Jacob and Maggie play songs on one another's flesh. She'd only laugh, scaring the boys away. In those days, it wouldn't have mattered if the entire town had gathered to watch when she and Jacob angled themselves on the bed so Jacob's feet didn't dangle off, and Maggie could peer between her breasts to watch his hairline above her own red pubic hair, highlit by the sun. She'd loved her body then, more than she'd loved Jacob.

Rising from the bath, she wiped the steam from the mirror and looked at herself. Now that she was younger, she possessed the same body she'd taken so much pleasure in then, had loved to bare. Granted, her breasts were a little softer and her upper
arms looser. She still had that hollow at the bottom of her throat that Double A and Jacob had both licked, the sharp collarbones so distinct they seemed ready to break through her translucent skin. Maggie licked a finger and ran it lightly across a nipple that grew and hardened. Her body still reacted, but she felt none of the old heat or frustration. Maggie toweled off listlessly, slipped into a terrycloth robe and sat down on the toilet cover. Arthur might have stripped the years from her body, but even he couldn't perform every miracle; she was still an old woman in alien skin who'd been without a man for too long to get another.

Maggie dressed slowly, spreading out the soft cotton, flowered dress she'd chosen the night before. Despite the energy Arthur had fed her when he rejuvenated her form, she moved like a woman driven to exhaustion. Slipping her dull old pearls carefully over her damp hair, she realized the boy had been quiet for too long.

Maggie just assumed he'd disobeyed her, but as soon as she left the bedroom, she found his trail. Shoes, socks, coat, clip-on tie, shirts, pants, even his underwear led directly to a corner of the living room. Gathering up clothes as she walked, Maggie found him on all fours in the living room, wriggling noses and baring teeth with a rat. He protested as she threw his clothes back on him, squirming the entire time.
They found a parking place for the Ranger at the back of the lot. Hurrying through the loose stone lot, Maggie lost her balance on the heels she hadn't worn in a decade and fell against the side of a car. "Shit."

"I thought we hurry."

"We are," she said, pulling the heels off and handing them to Arthur. "It's just these damn things weren't made to walk in."

By the time she could stop him, he'd already put one shoe in his mouth and bitten the heel off, spitting it out triumphantly. There were times Arthur misunderstood human needs so badly that even his help was disastrous. Outside the church, Maggie slipped into her shoes and wobbled through the door. Harris saw them, smiled and came over. Maggie watched Arthur wander off to get into some unknown trouble. Maybe she should have come by herself the first time. "I thought you weren't going to make it," the minister said.

"I was wondering for a while myself. We were doing fine until Arthur decided to play Gypsy Rose Lee, and then... well, then I lost a heel in the parking lot."

"We have to get that thing paved, but I can't get it through their heads that they're losing as much money in shoes as they would on asphalt." He adjusted his tie. "How do I look?"

"You'll knock 'em dead."

"I hope not. It's considered bad form to kill off your
congregation with a sermon. Terrible thing for your career."

He looked around. "Where's Arthur?"

"Who knows? Probably standing headfirst in a toilet somewhere."

"I'll say one thing for him. He's got spunk." Harris started to open the double doors and make his way to the pulpit, but the stopped and turned back to Maggie. "Spunk or not, try to keep his trousers on, at least."

After she located Arthur, lying on his back beside the water fountain, spewing water into the air from his mouth, she chose a back pew for propriety. In case Arthur misbehaved, always likely, they could make a quick, nearly silent exit from where they were sitting. Despite Harris's obsession with more money, they were in the Bible Belt, and it was quickly apparent there was more than enough money for the church. It was cavernous, with a high, peaked ceiling crossed with thick beams of shiny blonde pine. High above Harris were eleven gold organ pipes, short on the sides and growing longer, until the one in the middle hovered above him like the point of a spear. The pews were the same smooth pine as the crossbeams, with thick, textured red cushions, a spongy carpet the color of blood covered the floor, and the stained glass windows were abstract mottles of yellow and turquoise. Arthur hung over the side of the pew into the aisle, fascinated by the large black cross that quartered the pulpit.
He behaved tolerably during the first part of the service, singing loudly—although always lagging a note behind—to "Holy, Holy, Holy," and "On Calvary." Maggie was ready for him the three or four times he tried to stand in the pew and simply hauled him down by the back of the pants. There wasn't a child yet who didn't try that a few times. When the congregation finished "How Great Thou Art," and the music director lowered his hand, Arthur held the last note for an extra ten seconds, but that only received a number of stares and a few smiles. Maggie put her arm around his shoulder. Even Jackie had fussed and squirmed in church as a little girl; the whole thing was going better than Maggie had hoped for. At that point, Harris stood at the pulpit, his slightly reedy voice gaining resonance from the size of the auditorium, and after chastising the congregation with the story of a visitor losing a heel in the rough parking lot, announced his daughter, Mrs. Robert Carter, would be singing, "Christ Above All For Me." Oddly, she looked nothing like Harris. Tall and thin, she had blonde hair and fair, milky skin. Maggie instantly disliked her. Even from the back, she could tell the woman was wearing so much makeup she'd have to scrape it off with a putty knife tonight before she went to bed. She did have a pure, ringing soprano, but Maggie had spoken to enough Southern sopranos before to cringe at the memory of their shrill twangs. Arthur was rapt, though. He sat motionless while she sang, his cheeks flushed, lips parted slightly. Maggie realized she was
bored, and even a little disappointed, with his good behavior. She elbowed him the ribs and whispered, "Hey, lover boy." Without taking his gaze from Mrs. Carter, Arthur curled his lip and bared his teeth; Maggie sat back, covering her grin with her hand.

During the offering, Arthur stood with the congregation and amazed his grandmother by catching up and singing "Up From the Grave He Arose" in time with everyone else. Near the chorus of the third verse, the usher reached them and handed the plate past Arthur to Maggie. On tiptoes, the boy stopped singing and pawed through the money until Maggie managed to yank it away from him. "Hungry," he explained.

"You're not eating the money."

"No food in a plate?" Arthur asked sullenly.

"Just hush. You'll eat at the preacher's house, and you can ask him there."

Harris began his sermon by opening his large black Bible and reading from Genesis. "And God said, 'Let us make Man in One image, after Our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth on the earth."

Glancing over, Maggie noticed Arthur showing his teeth, his face ugly and constricted. "So God created Man in His own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female created He them."
"And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth."

Furious, Arthur began to kick out time against the pew in front of him. Maggie took hold of his arms, pulled him off the seat and hustled him into the lobby. Behind them, Harris's voice bled through the glass doors. "What's with you?" Maggie exploded.

Arthur pointed back inside the church. "What he saying."

"I couldn't hear what he saying with you kicking like that. What about it?"

"Lies."

"Arthur, he was reading the word of God."

"Uh huh," Arthur grunted, pacing about the lobby with his fists clenched.

Despite her anger, Maggie saw the futility of arguing. Like the rest of us eventually would, she'd already learned there was nothing more intractable than a messiah, even at an early age. "Look. Either you behave yourself, or we go home. I really don't care which it is right now, so you make the choice." She folded her arms across her chest and let all expression drain from her face. "Which is it going to be, Arthur? Here or home?"

After a few minutes of obligatory frowning, pouting and foot stomping, the two of them settled into the back again, next to a trio of teenage girls cracking their gum, and across the
aisle from boys who nodded off in the warm church or amused themselves by drawing gigantic breasts in imagined detail on the program. Arthur was too interested to go home.

Maggie would have liked to think differently, but her nephew wasn't much of a preacher. She used to listen to the famous Randy Solomon on the radio—not out of any deep religious conviction, since she seldom paid any attention to what Solomon said—but simply for the sensual pleasure of hearing his voice thunder, as rich and deep as good chocolate. He rolled his r's, his voice seeming to swell inside him like a frog until the next word couldn't be contained any longer and had to be boomed into the silver microphone on the pulpit.

Despite the flattering acoustics, Harris's voice was too thin, too high. Maggie wasn't surprised his daughter was a soprano. He had to rely on a shrill enthusiasm, smacking the pulpit with his hand as if he were a hammer driving a nail into the wood, gesticulating with his hands thrust above him, pinwheeling his arms until his suit coat bunched up on his shoulders, exposing his thick hairless forearms. Maggie was disappointed to see how hard Harris had to work, his voice breaking at important points. Occasionally, he had to step back to pant and daub the sweat from his bare head with a handkerchief.

That morning, Harris spoke of the beast that lives in all of us, the base side of human nature that craves nothing but the physical pleasures. God meant for us to have dominion over
the beast within us, just as we have dominion over the beasts of the field. Maggie knew Arthur didn't appreciate this sermon, but he managed to stay calm, sitting back against the wood and staring sullenly at the front of the church.

Toward the end of the sermon, Arthur brightened and leaned forward when Harris mentioned Jesus. That quickly turned to anger and disappointment when the minister advised the congregation to call on Jesus for His help in subjugating their animal instincts, to moderate the pleasures of the flesh because excess led to damnation as surely as morning to night.

Arthur gripped the pew in front of him, his knuckles blanching. When the muscles in his face tightened and twitched, Maggie recognized it as the look he'd had just before he'd caused the grass to sprout from nothing. Slamming his back against the pew, she tried to break his concentration. It worked. She saw anger on his face, but not that frightening effort she associated with the spectacular miracles. "What're you doing?" she whispered harshly.

Arthur grinned crookedly. "You'll see."

"No I won't," she said, gathering him up and carrying him out of the church.

"Let me go!" Arthur yelled, raking a claw the length of her arm. "You let go of me!"
"Hello Jim," she said sheepishly, when Harris got out of his car on Monday. "I'm not sure where I start to apologize."

"None necessary. He's not the first kid that's had to be carted out of church, and he's not going to be the last." He pointed to her bandaged arm. "What happened to you?"

"He scratched my arm up pretty bad." They headed for the house. Actually, Maggie was surprised she still had to wear the bandage. Normally, Arthur healed even the smallest wound on her immediately, but he'd headed for the woods as soon as she truck stopped by the house, and she hadn't seen him since.

"I've noticed those nails on him. What was his father like?"

"I don't have the slightest idea. For that matter, I don't think his mother even knew."

"Where is his mother?"

"She died." Scuffing the ground with her foot, Maggie waited for the old pain to rear up again and pass through her. "Giving birth to Arthur."

"Poor creature. I'm sorry."

Smiling wistfully, Maggie shrugged. "I don't think it was your fault."

"What was her name?"

"Mary," Maggie said, thinking of the first name for a mother that sprung to mind. "Why don't you come in and sit down for awhile? I could use the company."

Inside the house, she smelled fresh coffee and frowned.
This didn't make sense. Arthur, who hated the minister and had left a gash on Maggie's arm wide enough that she should probably get it stitched up, was showing signs of hospitality. She took a quick sip of coffee to make sure it wasn't poisoned. "I do have that coffee now. You want a cup?"

"Sure." Harris sat at what had already become his place, while Maggie picked up the two cups. "You know Maggie, you've had an awfully hard life."

"Better that than no life at all."

"You want to see something strange?" He fumbled in his suit pocket and produced a four inch twig, feathered with green needles. "Near the end of the service, my typed sermon started to move. I found this underneath. Isn't that something? A pulpit that's been dead wood for fifteen years suddenly sprouts a branch?"

Maggie took the pine twig in her hand when Arthur suddenly walked up beside her. "You lucky Maggie stopped me, Preacher," the boy said. "She don't, and you be talking on top of a pine tree."

Inhaling sharply, Maggie realized what she'd stopped yesterday. It was certainly worth the mess the boy had made of her arm. Harris took a slow drink of coffee and set it down carefully. "You were turning my pulpit into a pine tree?"

"Uh huh."

"It's pretty obvious you're not a little boy, Arthur. Just
what are you?"

"What you think?"

Chuckling, Harris turned his cup around slowly, then looked straight at the boy. "What I think is that you're giving me my faith back. I wouldn't have said anything like this a week ago, but I believe you're an agent of the devil."

Arthur laughed, shaking his head. "You scared of me."

"That's right. Your existence is frightening."

"Preacher, you seen a miracle?"

"What?"

"You ever seen a miracle." Arthur planned to take Maggie's bandage off and heal the cut, proving to Harris he was capable of more than the mischief of growing a twig on a pulpit. "Maggie told me 'bout Jesus. He walked on water, he changed water to wine, he fed a lot of people with just a little fish and bread, he made a dead man live. You tell people that."

"That's my job."

"You ever seen a miracle?"

Smiling, Harris leaned back in his chair. "As a matter of fact, Arthur, I have seen a miracle."

Arthur was ready to remove Maggie's bandage, but the answer stopped him. "What miracle you seen?"

"I saw my son's birth. I watched my wife grow for nine months, then lie down and produce a life that was a piece of both of us and something new at the same time." Harris drained
his mug and set it down with a satisfied thud. "Thanks for the coffee, Maggie. I need to be going."