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GENUFLECT, GENTLEMEN AND OTHER STORIES

by

Matt B. Mullins

**A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English**

**Western Michigan University
Kalamazoo, Michigan
December 1998**

GENUFLECT, GENTLEMEN AND OTHER STORIES

Matt B. Mullins, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University, 1998

Genuflect, Gentlemen is a novella-length work of fiction in which Dan Mooney, a recovering drug-addict and former rock star, has a religious awakening that inspires him to write a journal as an attempt to find meaning in his past. This journal, a soapbox for Dan's newly realized philosophies, focuses primarily in his troublesome experiences as a student at an all-boys Catholic boarding high school; it is essentially Dan's version of the "story" of those years just before his fame when music was replacing religion as the center of his spirituality. The ultimate conclusion Dan reaches through the reconsideration of that past and the influence it had on the course of his life becomes the central motivating force for his professed future plans. The accompanying short stories, though not directly related to *Genuflect, Gentlemen*, utilize similar themes of the spiritual quest, misdirected spirituality, violence, loss, and drug and alcohol abuse to contemplate the often inexpressible emotional complexities of the human condition.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

for my mother and father

Matt B. Mullins

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AMERIKA

The first time I heard my dad say fuck we were driving across America in a rented Winnebago, him, my mom, and me. We were doing this because they thought it was necessary that I understand America, that I experience for myself the homeland I'd read about in grade school and seen on the Television.

So we took our time driving three weeks from Detroit all the way to San Francisco where we would catch our plane home. Of course, there were many fantastic things I remember seeing on the way, awed at eleven up in the windowed sleeper above the cab with my comic books and the rock and roll on my walkman, the mighty rivers and vast plains flowing past; the muscular mountains staring back at me with faces carved in stone; the deep, green-black forests I saw breathing with wind; the rose colored desert rocks at dawn, and so much more, all the way to odd hills of Frisco—where I'd even get to stand alone inside the very Bird Man's cell at Alcatraz before I flew back to Michigan.

But the America I'm really talking about here, the one we don't drive through but live through, begins one day in Salt Lake City with a father stopped at a stoplight. He's trying to explain the religious subtleties of the Mormons to his bright, young son as four guys in the souped convertible one lane over lean out toward my mother in the passenger seat of our motor home and begin shouting, , "Hey, fuck you, lady. Bitch. What the fuck're you lookin at?"

We drove on for a long time after that happened, trying to get between somewhere and somewhere else. I don't remember the specifics of it, I was too caught up in trying to figure out why someone would talk to my mother that way—she hadn't even done anything—and I couldn't seem to get their ugly words out of my head.

Hours into darkness my mother and father started to squabble. "Francis, when are we going to stop, I need sleep," she complained.

"Teresa, just go in the back and lie down," he kept telling her. "It's a motor home, for God's sake." He'd had dangerous amounts of caffeine since leaving Salt Lake City that afternoon. The rudeness of those punks had made him drink it ruthlessly.

"You know I can't sleep while we're moving," she hissed at him.

They went back and forth this way for some time, she demanding that he stop, he telling her just a few more miles, an eternity of it for a child my age who'd never really heard them fight before. I could feel their angry voices beneath me, rising through my belly, heating the despair of my tears. Then she called him a stubborn ass, and I heard her walk toward the bed in the very back of the motor home, rip the curtain open then closed. "Okay, fine, I'll stop, just give me a few more miles," he called, "let me find a good place to pull over." She answered him with silence. "Fucking pain in my ass, goddammit," he mumbled, though I heard him perfectly, and I tried to hold in the noise of my crying as we drove on.

I'd never heard him talk that way before; it made me feel like something tremendous and irrevocable had gone wrong with all our lives—as if the foul-mouthed words spit into our open windows in Salt Lake City were somehow contagious, and something more than words. Why couldn't he just pull off the road like she'd asked? This didn't seem like my big, all-knowing father who was usually serious and often gone on business, but almost always kind when he was around. He had no idea what their annoyance with each other was doing to me; I'm sure he assumed I was sleeping, and if you'd asked him then what the problem was he'd've said, "Nothing." He'd've said, "Goddamn woman giving me grief for trying to make good time."

Finally, after his promise to stop in a few miles had come to mean three more

towns and another state, my mother's anguish called from her bed in the back became too much for him.

"Jesus, Francis, won't you please just stop driving?!" she groaned.

"Alright, fine!" he shouted. "Anything to get you off my fucking back!" And the motor home lurched as we pulled immediately off the dark, twisting, mostly deserted two-lane highway onto the silent shoulder not too far down the road from a small bar with a blood-red BUDWEISER sign flashing on and off in its window.

I lay still, barely breathing, my head turned toward the opened slide-window looking out at the dark road, my nose runny, my eyes swollen. I was afraid to move for fear that he'd know I was awake and listening. His heavy feet shook the motor home as he stamped toward the bed in the back where my mother lay in silence. I listened as he tore the curtain open and closed it behind himself, and I was afraid for what would happen between them next, though I had no idea what that might be.

I was almost asleep when the first motorcycles came around the curve spilling their angry engine noise ahead of them onto the road. And when the sound didn't fade away after two bikes, or five, or ten roared by, I propped myself up on an elbow and looked out through the same window that had already shown me so much of America. There seemed to be hundreds of them, no, thousands, bearded, long haired, wearing leathers with daggers and skullfaces and aces of spades and naked women painted on their backs, rolling into the parking lot of that bar on those chrome-glinting motorcycles, howling and revving their engines together into one charged animal noise that seemed to last forever. There were more of them than I could hope to count, yelling, swearing, doing wheelies back and forth, and a few women I noticed as well, hardened, sexy looking women in jeans and leathers, walking in and out of the bar with armloads of beer cans. It was the most wonderfully horrific and mysterious thing I'd ever seen: the kind of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness my parents had done so well

to keep from me until that day.

Then I heard my mother and father talking, quietly and urgently, as if despite the tremendous noise, they were actually worried they might wake me into some horrible dream merely by creeping toward the pilot seats of the motor home. The engine starting, "Well, *where* then," my father says under his breath. My mother: "I don't care *where*, Francis, just keep driving. Anywhere is better than this awful place."

I really don't remember too much else about that trip, just those foul-mouthed assholes in Salt Lake City and that miraculous night with the motorcycles—my last glimpse of those dark outlaws laughing and staggering through the dust swirled headlights of that bar's gravel parking lot has never left me. I even dreamed of them a few nights later when we crossed the border into California: they took me with them on some crazy ride through tunnels and above the clouds and under water, and I awakened terrified and excited at the same time.

The one other major thing I do recall from that trip is that our motor home was broken into somewhere in San Francisco and my father's 35mm camera and all his lenses and the twenty or so rolls of film he'd shot during our trip were stolen. No pictures of me looking down into the Grand Canyon. No pictures of me standing in the middle of the Bonneville Salt Flats with my arms out-stretched. No pictures of me pointing up the nose of Lincoln at Mt. Rushmore. And all the photos from the days after their fight were gone forever also; they're out there on their own somewhere, probably decomposing in some landfill, a prediction of my own lost future, images I imagine capturing a distant, roving look in my eyes, a dark, knowing flower of irony beginning to bloom at the corner of my two-faced smile.

MOON WITH PRINCESS

My old man was still a cub reporter for the Times when they sent him to interview the midget princess. We never talked much about it, me and my old man, because we don't talk too much. But a while back when I was visiting, I went digging through his stuff like a son is supposed to, and I found the black and white photograph of him down on one knee interviewing her, note pad on his thigh, pencil frozen mid-stroke. So I took it.

My old man is a big man, six foot something, and the midget princess was maybe three feet tall, tops, so it was a good photo opportunity—the jet-haired reporter in the angled fedora and tan trench coat leaning toward that tiny woman. And did I say she was an old, old woman, grand-motherly looking, except for the fact she was a midget? She was a symmetrical midget too, all her parts in proportion but smaller than normal. That makes for a stronger image, I think. Less grotesque. Better than if her head was all outsized or if her arms were stubby or her legs bowed like some midgets I've seen. Though I can't really know about her legs, because she has an evening dress on under her mink stole, and a diamond tiara in her hair, which makes me believe somehow her legs are straight even though you can't see them.

What I'm trying to get at is that there's a certain fairy tale balance to it, this medium shot of my big father crouched and listening carefully to the little old princess who has her head cocked and her mouth rounded O with whatever it is she's telling him. It's so good you could name it "Moon with Princess" and hang it in a gallery or put it in a magazine; it's that interesting to look at, and Moon is what the other reporters

called my old man in those days.

I've always wondered what he asked just before that photo's instant to set her talking like she is. From the look on her face I bet it was something she really had to think to answer. Back in the late 'fifties my old man still knew how to ask a good question. My three older sisters were only little kids then, same size as the princess, actually, which is something he may have considered when he saw her. Anyway, I don't think he'd yet been brought to the habitual terseness I knew by having to repeat dead-end questions like, "Why are you coming home at four in the morning when I said twelve?" or "How can someone so smart be so stupid?" Which were the things he'd end up asking me once I showed up years later.

After I found the picture, I remember wanting right away to ask him about it, or rather, having this odd feeling that not asking him about it might cause some important thing to pass unrecognized between us. But more than that, I remember the act of showing it to him as he sat on the couch in the TV room watching the Indy 500 in his old jeans and holey socks with his elbow propped on his belly and the tip of his pinky finger tucked into the corner of his mouth. It's the way I've always seen him sitting when he's relaxing alone, and the same way I've started to catch myself sitting lately, except I don't have the belly yet.

I'm sure he told me a lot about the picture and his life at that time, or enough about it anyway, but I can't really remember what he said. This was a few years back, during that time when I didn't have my head on right and was living in such a way that I don't recall too much of what anyone told me from those days. I can't, for example, tell you the photographer's name, or what country the midget princess came from, or her name, or what month of the year it was when I found her in a box in my father's closet—sometime in the spring unless I'm misremembering that Indy 500 stuff. I can't tell you where I was living right then either, or who my girlfriend was though I

could guess on those and probably be near right.

What I do know is that picture has my old man looking kind of stretched-out. It's a relic of that era when reporters used to drink their breakfasts and fight for the phone booth to call copy in to the desks like you see in the movies, an era where they would follow a story from the second it broke until it went cold, sometimes living in cheap hotels for weeks, washing their one pair of socks and undershorts in the sink then drying them on hissing radiators. And you can see that kind of living beginning to wear on my old man, with the loose skin on his neck already starting to wattle and those dark circles under his eyes. Sometimes after I've fallen off and been too hard on myself for too many nights in a row I'll see the same face in my bathroom mirror.

My old man was on the red-eye beat back then covering fires and murders and other things gone wrong in the middle of the night. He spent a lot of time with the police. My mother was at home alone with their three little girls, and it was hard for her to take sometimes, his being gone all night, or for days, only to have him come home and crash land after he'd banged out these sad stories of human wreckage downtown. But some editor must have given my old man a break this time, said, "Moon, take Flash here and head down to the airport and get the story on princess midget for the morning edition." And my old man took it and ran with it. He went with the photographer to watch her old but child-like body descend the stairs they'd wheeled up to that plane at such an odd, late hour, and to ask her questions almost as soon as her feet found the ground, something you can see is true because all around the two of them in the picture is nothing but runway and darkness.

I've imagined his coming home later that morning and talking with my mother about it while she served him dinner. He's eating chicken and mashed potatoes and peas as the sun tops the black lip of the horizon to push light through the kitchen windows. My sisters are still asleep upstairs. My mother is leaning against the white

sink, looking into his tired face, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. This is before I was even an idea. "Mary, her forearm is no thicker than this," he could have said, holding up a half-eaten drumstick.

My old man hadn't been a reporter for years by the time I came around. After the princess story ran they gave him a bunch of awards, and he had his choice of features off the Human Interest desk. Then the Times closed down, run out of town by the News and Free Press, the two rival papers who sucked up all their advertising accounts. But that didn't stop my old man. He moved on to a better job doing PR for the auto industry, moved on to more money and a connected life where people know who you are. As things went on, my mom wasn't bothered so much anymore that he was gone a lot, because she had me around to take care of now that my sisters were in college, and the money my old man was making traveling and handling business meant a better life for all of us, even though it also meant that I'd know less about who he is.

But it's not like me and the old man never hooked up. I mean, how many kids could brag about being driven around Daytona's race track in a NASCAR pace car at over 120 mph by a driver who takes his hands off the wheel when you're high up in the curve about to mess your pants? And my old man was right there with me, grinning, saying, "See, see, centrifugal force, we're not going anywhere." In reality, though, I've forgotten most of the things we did and most of what he told me when I was a little kid—the fatherly advice he gave and all. The way it's worked I've had to figure most things out myself, basically. And I've definitely made some wrong turns. But it's a hell of a different world than his I grew up in—he was almost my age when they first started coming out with television for god's sake; he caught the very end of the Second World War, saw Japs get flame-throwered out of their fortified island caves. How could I possibly explain the value of an acid trip to him, that I'd seen his dinner plate wither before my eyes when he and my mother came to visit me

unexpectedly at college? Sure, I could tell him, "I've been to the Other Side, I've seen a universe of cosmic vibration and connected energy, synchronicities revealed through the Truth of All." He'd just say I was a fool for frying my goddamn brain. And it's true, I have sacrificed people and places and parts of myself to learn this unnameable thing I've learned—this realization that there are tones of the world we keep forgetting to listen for. But I live on with no regrets, despite worrying sometimes that he might be right in what he'd say about wasting myself and my time.

Though some things don't change so much, I guess. I called my old man the other day and told him I got a job writing for the Gazette here in my town. Obits and wire re-writes, mostly, but it's a start, like he said. I'm just a cub reporter myself now, and maybe not ready for anything big. Still, I do my best to put the interesting angle on whatever they give me. I'm getting ready, working out my style, waiting for that one righteous story to break my way; I'm hungry to launch myself and run with it once the editor assigns me my own "Moon with Princess," so to speak. But I know there are no guarantees in this or anything. And I think maybe I should just learn how to start making my own luck. Like my old man.

Looking at the picture now, tacked up on my wall, its curling, yellowed edges and bent corners, I do remember one of the things my old man told me when I came up to him that day asking, "So, what's the story with this?" It's the one thing you'd think I couldn't help but remember, especially considering what I'm doing lately with the reporting and everything. He didn't give me an easy or obvious answer like, "She was the story that got me off the night-shift," or any of those things you might expect an older man reminiscing to say, though he got around to telling me those other things eventually. He took that picture out of my hand and stared into it for a while before giving it back with a finality that said it was mine to keep. Then he turned his face up to me the same way the midget princess has her face forever turned to him, the same way

I imagine his face looking away from his note pad to stare out of that picture toward me right now, and he told me something like this: "I may not always be so sure about you, but I am sure the real story is around the story. Not in the fire of the burning house itself but in the faces that fire illuminates. Not in the car wreck but in the place the people were coming from and the place they'll never get to. Not in the dead man's life but in the living wife and children he's left behind. A good story's never so much about what happened as it is about the consequences." That much I keep trying to remember.

MISSING

After it was over between the two of them he moved across the state and took a small apartment where the mail that came was usually not for him. She had never written him there, and being that he no knew no one in his new town he received no real mail there, only things addressed to previous tenants, junk mail marked Resident or Occupant, sheets of coupons, and small white cards with bluish inked faces of missing children stamped beneath the words "Have You Seen Me?"

The cards disturbed him the most. The pictures made him wonder what the children were like and how they were doing, if they had been kidnapped, murdered, or if they'd run away. He'd considered the impossible odds the parents and all who cared were playing against: the chance that someone might actually make a connection between one of those stiff, school picture smiles and the reality of a kid looking lost or drugged or afraid, being silenced and arm yanked in a cruel way. The odds were slim at best. Most people were too self-absorbed to notice anything not directly connected to themselves, and he knew he was no better; his concern for those portraits of the missing didn't last much longer than the time it took to look them over between the mailbox and the trash.

But most of the time he thought of Maura. She'd been on his mind constantly since the move months ago. They'd tried living together for three years before they finally admitted they'd done too much damage to ever have anything that could last. He had not spoken to her since he moved away, and lately he'd begun to feel an odd mixture of longing and dread at the thought that she might write or call. He knew he was supposed to be "getting over it," that time should deaden what he felt for her, but the ache of their failure and the habit of their life together would not die easily for him. He

found himself distracted by her memory and left unwhole somehow by the loss of what they were not meant to have.

The last time he saw Maura she was leaving to spend the weekend at her mother's while he moved out of their Detroit apartment. They said their goodbyes in the living room, hugging, blurry-eyed, his things packed in boxes all around them. After she left he got down on his knees and started boxing his records. He thought about the plans they'd made in that room, the sex they'd had on that living room floor. He also thought about their howled, wounding arguments, the things they'd broken, the ugliness. Now he was free to be alone and also free to meet someone he wouldn't fight with so often and so passionately. The possibility of a fresh start excited him. He imagined scenarios of a new life with new women until he came across the Tom Waits album she'd given him for his birthday the year before. She'd made him a special dinner that night and they listened to the record while they ate. She put it on again when they went to bed. He remembered the graveled whispering of Tom Wait's voice following him into sleep after they made love and, later, awakening sometime in the night to silence then the sound of the stylus clicking back in autoplay and setting itself down on the first song. The permanent truth of her absence began to fill him in a nauseous wave. He tucked the record in with the rest of hers and went to the kitchen to get something to drink. In the end he left some of his shirts he knew she liked to wear, a few of his books and the record. He put his key on the kitchen table, wrote out his name, new number and address on the back of a grocery receipt and taped it to the window above the kitchen sink where he knew she would see it. That was months ago. She still had not called or written and the mail that came came with unfamiliar names to his new address.

By now he was getting used to handling certain people's mail. A bright orange, card-sized envelope, its tight black script hand-printed for Johnny Lee

Devers, was waiting in the box the day he moved in. Soon after came chef's catalogues for A. Molt filled with endless photographs of the sharpest knives. Three issues each of *Martial Artist* and *Fitness* magazine for H. Akashi. Hospital bills and insurance company bills for Rita Bauman—enough that he thought of opening the envelopes just to see what had gone wrong with her.

After the first few pieces of mail came he took them to Steinagel, his landlord, and found out none of the previous tenants had left forwarding addresses. Steinagel was a big-gutted, nervously tempermental man with a thick German accent. He did the maintenance and trusted no one. His wife was an ancient, makeup spackled, red-wigged shrew who kept the office. "Zey don't tell me vare zey are go ink, und I don't ask," Steinagel had said when he took the mail to him. "Some of zese names I don't even recooknize. You throw zem a-vay." But he didn't believe in throwing out other people's mail. And as more of it came he said nothing to Steinagel who was also incredibly nose-y and had lately been coming into the apartment unannounced on flimsy excuse. The magazines and catalogues and bills he began to keep in a milk crate in the hall. He tried taping a few of the "Have You Seen Me?" cards onto his hallway wall, but after a while it got so he couldn't stand to consider the possibilities of the children's bluish, suffocating faces any longer, and he took them down. From then on he tossed out with the junk mail whenever they came.

The orange envelope for Johnny Lee Devers, the first piece of mail he ever found in his mailbox, he took from the crate in the hall and began to keep by the phone. Every few days when he felt an intense and irrational desire to hear Maura's voice he'd sit in the chair by the phone and take up the envelope, holding the unknown but now familiar name up to the lamplight like he could get a fix on where the sender or receiver was by seeing the dark outline of what had been written inside. He'd try to imagine the lives of Johnny Lee Devers and the others who'd lived in his apartment, the place

where this much went right for them, that much wrong. He'd think about arguments and kind words traveling between people he'd never know, about the solitudes of those who had lived there alone waiting for a letter like the one he held. Finally, he'd come back to himself and notice his own ghost reflected in the window glass, smiling a twisted smile and clutching a message meant for someone else. Usually this was enough to keep him from calling her, though more than once he'd been weak and called just to hear her say "Hello, hello, hello?" before he hung up the phone ashamed.

The new job, which he'd found right away, was free-lancing reviews for the arts and entertainment section of the Gazette. Because he spent a lot of his time alone trying to write he thought of her more often than he wanted to, eventually forgetting about the true conflicts which had driven them apart while he idealized their sex and their tender moments. He remembered how she'd dragged him into a closet to make love at a Christmas party after they'd just had an incredibly loud and stupid argument. He remembered nights downtown when they'd wandered from bar to bar arm in arm drunk and laughing through the light-slick streets. He remembered the humid night one summer when they took the sheets off their bed to sleep under the shedding magnolia in the backyard. He remembered and imagined and dreamed of her until he began to disgust himself with his longing.

Soon after his moving the nights became very hot and he was forced to open his windows and listen to the people having sex in the apartment across the narrow alleyway from his own. He'd seen both the woman and the man entering and leaving during the day. They were young, near his age, and she was dark haired and pretty. But at night they became monstrous reminders, their grunts quickening in the heat. He would freeze beneath the sheet of his mattress on the floor, tapping their time on his chest with a finger, listening and remembering until the blank screen of his dark ceiling dissolved into sex-meat then the face of the one he'd left behind. A dream face,

Maura's face, a familiar thing unchanged and changed completely by a dissolving wake of distance and time.

When they were finished next door, when he was lying in the after-silence listening to traffic hiss down the street and to the neighborhood wino announcing again to the night, "I am the Godfather and I run this town," he'd ridicule his own maudlin sadness. Because suddenly being alone at that moment, being lonely, seemed exactly right somehow, and he felt he understood something about how a person could turn a things like absence and solitude into the absolute holy center of their life.

One morning after a night when he'd heard the neighbors screwing and had drank heavily and cranked his stereo in order to tolerate them, he stepped dripping naked from his shower into the bedroom for a towel and saw Steinagel in his hallway digging through the box of mail.

"I thought I heard your smoke detector," Steinagel said, waving an issue of *Martial Artist* vaguely at the alarm on the ceiling.

Wrapped up in a towel, he walked over to Steinagel and snatched the magazine away. "Nothing is on fire here." he said, "Call next time before you let yourself in. It's the law."

"You really should throw all that stuff away," Steinagel told him, "No one knows where those people are anymore."

He stood in wet silence with his arms crossed until Steinagel got the hint to leave. He followed him to the door and put on the chain after closing it.

Even though he was upset about Steinagel's invasion he did his best to let it go because he had a couple film reviews to write and that meant some money coming in. He worked hard all morning and into the afternoon on the reviews and was pleased with how well things went and so headed out to a bar he liked where he could sit outside in the beer garden in the shade of the maples with a drink. He walked to the bar

enjoying the late afternoon which was warm and sunny with high contrasts in light that made things seem painterly but also startlingly sharp and real. In the beer garden he sat drinking alone until a woman came up to his table and asked if he'd mind if she sat down. It had been a long time since a woman was so forward with him and as she pulled up a chair he felt both lucky and nervous at once. She had a fine, thin face and long red hair and very pale skin and a silver hoop through her right eyebrow. He thought he recognized her from somewhere.

"I see you in the library all the time," she told him as an introduction. "I work in circulation."

That was enough to make him remember her pushing a cart full of books along the aisles. He remembered now the first time he saw her and how he'd followed her briefly, checking her out, pretending he was looking for a particular title in the same aisle where she was putting books back onto the shelves.

They introduced themselves and began to talk. Over the next few hours he bought her a few drinks and had a few more himself. He found her easy to be around and they were having an excellent time joking and talking about books and the good places to go in town when he made a crack about the squealing fags at the next table and saw the change in her face.

"I don't think it's fair to judge people," she said.

"I have nothing against gays." he said, "Some of my friends are gay. I just don't like queens is all. I don't like people who need to make a show of their sexuality."

She leaned back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest, "Maybe he's trying to celebrate his homosexuality by inverting and over-acting the false gender roles society shoves down our throats."

"You can make excuses for the guy if you want, I just don't like screaming

flamers or screaming women or anyone who insists on acting like a fool in public."

"I see. Sure there aren't a few things you need to admit to yourself."

"What are you talking about?" he said.

"People irrationally hate only when they see part of themselves in the object of their hatred."

"What ridiculous book did you get that from?" "I'm not gay," he said, "or I wouldn't be so glad you wanted to sit with me."

"So you're a fool, then?" she asked, giving him a smile he couldn't read.

"Well, maybe fool enough to buy you another drink and try to change the subject."

"No thanks," she said, "I've had too many already," and he knew then that he'd blown it with her and that all his attempts to make things light again would fail.

The energy that had carried them along from the start was quickly fading. Soon she said she had to go so he said he had to go also. As they were walking toward the door he apologized for what he had said and told her not to misunderstand him, he was actually a very open-minded person and he hoped they could get together again sometime to talk. Out on the street, he asked for her phone number. She said she didn't give her number to people she really didn't know, but she took down his and said she'd give him a call sometime. He walked home certain she would never call him and hating his pointless mouth that seemed sometimes to spew nonsense without consulting his mind. He imagined showing up at the library with a flower, sneaking up to put it on a shelf where she was stacking books, but he knew that would be too much. Not ready to end his day in such a bad way, he decided to stop at a few other bars he knew on the way home.

When he keyed open his door he noticed a strange sour smell in his apartment and understood right away that something was wrong. He went into the kitchen. On

the table was the nearly full gallon of milk he must have left out at breakfast. He remembered eating breakfast and was absolutely certain he'd put the milk back in the refrigerator; he even had an image of himself doing so. Holding his nose, he dumped the soured milk down the drain, actually considering the idea that his landlord had come in again and put the milk out just to piss him off.

He stepped into the darkened living room where the summer moon cast its weak bluish light through the windows. The message indicator was flashing on his answering machine. He sat down in the chair next to the phone without turning on the lamp and hit the play button: "Hi, it's me," she purred. "Give me a call as soon as you get home, ok? I really need to talk to you. Bye. Oh. 545-6751 is the number in case you don't have it anymore. Talk to you soon."

He had not heard Maura's voice in a long time; it sounded gentler than he remembered it, sexier. He wondered what she wanted. Just to talk? Maybe to work things out? She'd always come back to him when they'd broken up before, though they'd never taken things this far. He listened to the message again to try and gauge her mood. She sounded cheerful enough, but also a bit sad, like she missed him. He had the feeling there was something good she wanted to tell him. But would he go back to her if she wanted him? It seemed impossible not to go back after what he'd been feeling, after how badly he'd missed her. Still, all he'd wanted during their last year together was to be free, and he knew it was stupid to believe his longing for her had really changed anything. A few months after they got back together it would be the arguments and all the rest of it all over again.

An electric nervousness began working through his guts. He could not decide if he should call her back right then or not, though he knew he had no real choice in the matter. He sat there trying to think of what he should say. He needed to sound like he missed her a lot but not too much; he wanted to make it clear that he was glad to hear

from her, but he could not be the first to say I miss you or I love you. More than anything he had to try and sound happy and calm, like things were going well enough for him without her. He decided to tell her he needed more time if she asked him to come back.

It was almost midnight now and too late to call but he'd drunk enough that he called her anyway. She seemed distracted when she answered, still coming slowly into the realization of who he was when he thought he heard a man's cough in the background.

"I'm sorry, did I interrupt something?" he asked.

"How could you even ask such a thing?" she snapped.

Why she had called was not to tell him she wanted him back but to tell him that she was moving to the west coast. She'd been hired to write a book for a non-profit organization that tried to grant dying children their life-long wish. As he understood it she was supposed to follow a few of the kids through their special day—a helicopter ride, meeting a sports hero, a shopping spree, Disney World, whatever—then write up the event and the particular kid's history and the good the whole thing was doing the kid and the family. She said she was moving in a few days to start work and barring coincidence this would probably be the last time they'd ever speak. They made small talk for a while, asking each other about their families and mutual friends. Then he began to feel sentimental and started to apologize for all the pain he'd caused her and for all the troubles they'd had and for how badly things had come out between them. She forgave him, admitting that some of it had been her fault, but she also said that was all in the past now and they had to move on with their lives.

After they said their last soft goodbye's and he heard the receiver click down on her end, he waited there, listening to the absence of her voice, listening to the dead air, until the receiver clicked over to the dial tone. He hung up the phone. He knew she

was right. they had to move on. She obviously had, but he still felt as if something hadn't been said that should have been said, that they hadn't closed all the doors behind them. He knew that for a long time whenever he thought about her he would feel like he was missing something, like there was always someplace better to be than where he was. Next to the phone was the envelope addressed to Johnny Lee Devers, and he picked it up. He decided not to think about how things were with her—that he was jealous she was going somewhere in life while he was seemingly going nowhere, that he still loved her even though they couldn't get along. He held the envelope up to the light and forced himself to wonder instead how things were with Johnny Lee.

The return address on the envelope said the letter was from Birdie M. of LaPonte, Arkansas, and he'd always been curious about that. He imagined her at the kitchen table in LaPonte, flies swinging around the ceiling light as she set down her love to Johnny Lee, telling him everything's going to be all right, she didn't mind if he's gaining weight, drinking too much from being sad and confused over their being apart; she didn't mind if his hair was too long and hung in his handsome face, if he wanted to hide behind a beard because he felt less alone that way. He imagined she'd written to say that she missed Johnny Lee up close against her, breathing on her skin; she'd written to say she remembered his hands down low on her spine rubbing the beginning of the curve of her behind—written to say don't worry, we'll be together soon.

He played Maura's message again, this time noticing something in her voice he hadn't noticed before. He remembered one of the first true arguments they'd ever had right after they moved in together. "You're not listening to me," she'd finally said to him, "You never listen to me. You think you listen, you act like you do, but you only hear what you want. You only see what you want." As he started to thumb open the envelope he realized it was something she'd said to him more than once during their

time together.

The words "For You Son With Our Love," were arched in cursive gold across the top of the card. Right below them were two boats, one with its sails up and filled with wind, the mast stabbing through the orange sun that squatted on the hills above a caricatured village; the other boat was moored in still water, sails furled, waiting. Inside the card were two wrinkled dollar bills and a Hallmark style poem that read:

Sometimes life
gets so busy
That we don't say this
as often as you deserve
to hear it—
You are a very special son
And we love you very much

And Birdie M. had signed it, "Happy Birthday, from Mother. I love you."

He wondered what had happened to Johnny Lee Devers, why his mother didn't know his new address, wherever that was. Maybe he'd gone back home to Arkansas and was with her right now. Or maybe he was somewhere else with another woman, both of them looking out across the flat land toward the pasts they'd purposefully left behind. Maybe it was as straightforward as a man gone missing or dead. He thought about Birdie M., the kind of woman who'd send her grown son two dollars like it was candy money. He thought about writing back, telling her for Johnny Lee, "I'm doing fine, mom. Thanks for the card and the money, I love you." But he knew a thing like that would never work, and he had no idea if Johnny Lee was doing fine or not; he had no idea why he's never written or called to tell her where he's gone.

ERRAND

Early Monday morning Dan's grandmother is at the counter rolling pie crusts when he walks into the kitchen picking sleep from his eyes. Floury hands latched to the rolling pin, she lifts her nose toward the money on the table. "Go to the grocery and get me a bag of Red Delicious," she says, "I'll have breakfast for you when you get back." She turns away and leans into the rolling pin again, her bony shoulder blades working beneath her patterned housedress like a set of cotton covered wings.

Not even eight o'clock yet, and Dan has been listening to her clank pots and dishes around the kitchen since she came back from mass an hour ago. He tries to palm the basketball he's been holding, stretching his fingers across the scuffed leather. His hand is barely big enough, but the ball sticks, and Dan flashes on himself leaping up, floating across the paint toward the hoop for the one-handed slam—Whump! Suddenly he feels his grip slipping, and before he can put out his other hand to keep the ball from falling, it drops, bouncing off the rubber toe of his canvas sneaker and skipping away across the linoleum floor until he catches up to grab it. "Well, what are you waiting for, boy," his grandmother snaps, "the Saints' invitation?"

Dan takes the money off the kitchen table, wads it into his cut-off's and stalks out of the kitchen: his first morning at her house in Detroit and already he wants to tell her she's not the only one who's crabby about his having to stay there while his parents spend the week in Las Vegas.

"And don't be bouncing that ball inside the grocery," she calls after him. But he's already through the screen door and out of ear-shot, grumbling down the front porch steps, wondering if it's some kind of holy day or whatever and she's mad because he didn't get up to go with her to mass. Basketball slung under his arm, he

gives the front of her tidy, blue house a final glare. He shakes his head, then hawks a loogie on the sidewalk and jogs off, dribbling.

Morning sun stretches Dan's shadow long and liquid on the pavement as he runs toward Essa's Grocery. Moving fast and dribbling is making him feel a little better about things; if nothing else, he can probably get a lot of practice in this week. He keeps pushing the ball down into his own dark outline, and it leaps up from the grey sidewalk into his hand with a steady ping—a ping.

By the end of the block he's working his own shadow like a defender, threading the ball between his legs, doing the cut and spin as if the right juke could tear him loose and leave that dark part of him behind, burned flat and motionless onto the hot cement. Practice hard enough this summer, get his moves down right, and he might even be able to make captain of the eighth grade team at St. Paul's next fall. He imagines the C next to his name on the roster and tries to concentrate harder on his foot speed and his weak dribbling hand.

Breathing hard and sweating, he eventually comes to the alley short cut, something he'd discovered over the last winter when he'd stayed the weekend with his grandmother while his folks were in Miami. "These hands will be the death of me," she'd said to him that time, "I just can't seem to get a good hold on anything anymore." Then she sent him off into the early winter darkness, up to Essa's for Ben Gay and cold cream. It was just starting to snow when he walked out of the grocery's back entrance and into the empty alley, brown bag of her stuff clutched in his fist. He'd turned his face up to stare through the flood-lights into the first thick, illuminated flakes of snow drifting down with impossible slowness. He'd put out his tongue, felt a flake stick then sizzle and melt to warm water before swallowing it.

The alley looks completely different now in the bright morning sunlight, but also darker somehow: a narrow, garbage strewn path edged with tall, brick apartment

buildings that seemed to close out the sky. And the back entrance to Essa's Grocery at the far, far end of it. Squeezing the ball tightly between in his hands, Dan squints through the gloom then steps into the alley's mouth. The sour smell of hot urine and rotten garbage rolls over him. His shadow heels in the thinning light, pulling closer, crawling up against him to wrap his legs in a shaky pool of darkness. Ears tuned in for rats or mad dogs or crazy homeless people, he carefully picks his way between the dumpsters until he hears something: the warped, doppelering gasp of someone falling toward him from high above.

He turns quickly enough to see the man smack the ground chest first and bounce once, at least a foot high, like a rubbery cartoon villain who will stagger up to swat at the circling cartoon birds. It's a dummy, Dan is trying to convince himself, a gag made up of somebody's father's clothes stuffed with paint balloons and old underwear. He looks up quickly for the kids crouched above him somewhere on a roof-top, pointing down and giggling over how high he jumped in his fright or what a pussy he is. But no laughing faces lean over the edges of the buildings that line the alley. There is only the ruined body's proof, a putrid metallic smell, and the blood beginning to spider along the dirty pavement's cracks. And the site of it all causes him to piss himself, the urine soaking his crotch then hot down his leg and into his shoe.

A hand clamped over his mouth to hold back the sickness, he stumbles out onto the street. The thumping of the dropped ball echoes off the walls behind him, a sound like hard fruit spilled across a kitchen table. Running is all he can think to do, but his legs argue with moving, and the tarmac seems to clutch at his sneakers, holding him there on a dream-runner's treadmill. Suddenly, his grip comes back the way teeth sink in, and he's moving fast through the deflated hiss of the city's workday morning traffic, not caring at all where he's going, the smacking of his sneakers pounding him past the reaching shadows of all the people on the sidewalk.

Sometime later his grandmother hears the sound of running water and comes outside to find Dan in just his shorts hosing himself down in the backyard.

"Where's my grocery?" she wants to know. "Where have you been? You were gone almost two hours."

But Dan doesn't answer her. He's splashing water all over his body, rubbing himself with his free hand as if he's trying to wash off a stain she can't see, as if he's afraid he has somehow dragged a part of the alley's darkness along with him, tacked to his heels like torn black tissue paper.

"You had me worried to death," she says tautly. "I was about to call the police and the hospital looking for you. I was about to call your parents in Las Vegas. Do you know that? Are you listening to me? You just can't decide to go off on a tear somewhere and expect me to call all over town looking for you."

He gives her a blank look that she can't read then sticks his head underneath the cold flow again, shivers as it runs over his skin; but he still feels unclean. "It doesn't matter." He spits the words at her through the veil of water. "It's too late to call anybody now."

THIS SHIMMERING, BLUE DIVORCE (A BEDTIME STORY)

After the bad king ran off with the wicked witch, the good queen and her three children left the castle and took up residence in a little cottage in the woods near a shimmering, blue pond. There they began to sort through heartbreak and confusion in order to put their lives back together again.

Though they were sad at having to sell the castle and hock much of its finery in order to continue eating, they gradually grew to love the small cottage in the woods near the shimmering blue pond. The weather in the kingdom was usually quite fine, and often they would have their meager dinner in the little meadow behind the cottage looking out across the still water. "You know," the good queen would say to her children as they chewed, "Now that I think about it, that castle was an awful lonely, dusty, drafty sort of place." And her children would smile tight smiles but keep silent, because up until that time the castle was the only place they'd known.

So the good queen tried her best to make ends meet at the small cottage in the woods near the shimmering blue pond. But things were tough going. The bad king was very, very greedy with his gold; and, try as she may, the good queen could not convince him to help her as he should in supporting their children—especially now that the bad king and the wicked witch had a few children of their own. "What do you expect from me," the bad king kept telling her over the phone, "You think I'm a god-damn Midas or something? I got problems of my own." And he'd hang up on her, leaving her brow knit and her stomach turning with worry over how she'd ever manage to make ends meet.

But the deepest sorrow for the good queen was the fact that the small cottage in the woods near the shimmering blue pond was not their own. It belonged to an old,

old woman who'd lost her mind and had been taken away to live in a special home.

This meant the good queen had only been able to rent the cottage from the old woman's son. He was giving them the place for a steal, which was kind of him, and all the good queen could afford anyway, but he'd made it very clear to them that the instant his crazy old mother died he'd be bulldozing the small cottage and selling the lot for cash. This more than anything else worked black bile into the good queen's heart, because the old, old woman could die at any moment, and that would leave her and the children with no place else to go.

Many an afternoon after she'd returned from her job (the good queen had to work now, something she hadn't had to do since before her children were born), the good queen would be lacing up her jogging shoes on the back porch (she'd also taken to running marathons since the bad king went off with the wicked witch), and worrying about how she would ever find a way out of this horrible, complicated mess, only to have young prince Andrew walk past her with his fishing pole and a can of worms. "Don't worry mamma," young prince Andrew would say, for though he was young, he was very brave, despite the fact that his own worry had caused him to tear a bald spot into his hair, "I'll catch us something for dinner." And off he'd go down the shady, tree-lined path to the shimmering blue pond where he never caught much more than a few sunfish. "My son may be halved by rotten blood," the good queen would tell herself, "But he'll grow into a fine man despite his father." Then she'd finish with her leg stretches and hit the pavement—so often and so hard she eventually developed a bone spur in her heel.

One day, after a few years of living peacefully, but anxiously, a letter from the bad king's lawyer came to the small cottage in the woods by the blue, shimmering pond. The good queen, tired and just home from work, took the unopened letter down the path and through the meadow to the pond's edge where she found little princess

Leslie staring at her reflection in the mirror— surface of the still water and singing this song to herself: "Tra la la la la, I'm a pretty little princess, tra la la la la what I do is my own business."

"Leslie, go up to the house and help your sister with dinner," the good queen said; she was very tired, the good queen, especially on this particular day, a day where she had just found out she'd been passed over for that new, better salaried position at her job; and now she wanted only to read bad king's lawyer's letter in privacy.

But princess Leslie was the bad king's precious darling, though not so much now that he'd had his children by the wicked witch. Still, he spoiled princess Leslie with toys and pretty clothes whenever she came for weekend visit at his new castle. He also told her lies about her mother, the good queen. And because of this, little princess Leslie was at times a willful child.

"Mamma, when are we going to go to Disneyland like you promised?" little princess Leslie asked.

"I don't know, Leslie," the good queen said, "soon I hope. Let's talk about this some other time, okay?"

"But you *promised*," little princess Leslie said.

"Some promises are harder to keep than others," the good queen said, trying to stop herself from raising her voice and sounding as angry as she was. "Now please Leslie, go up to the house and help Jessica with dinner."

"Daddy said he'd take us to Disneyland if you won't," princess Leslie said then, "He even promised me a ballerina outfit for my birthday. You never give me anything."

A great sadness welled up inside the good queen at these words. "Leslie, you know that's not true," she said.

"Yes it is. It is so true," princess Leslie said. "I hate you." and she took off

running up the path toward the cottage, stones spitting out from beneath her shoes as she ran.

The good queen sat there for some time, trying to steady her breathing, the letter from the bad king's lawyer still unopened in her lap. She knew that princess Leslie didn't mean what she'd said; she was only a child and barely understood what was happening to them, though that didn't make the good queen feel any better about not being able to give her children all the things she wanted them to have.

The good queen looked out over the blue, shimmering pond and thought about the bad king and how he hadn't always seemed so bad at all. She thought about the way he'd looked when she first met him—his dark, dark hair, so shiny and carefully combed; his white, white teeth. He was very handsome, and always flossing in those days, the bad king, though he wasn't a bad king or even any kind of king then—flossing, flossing and combing, combing, looking at himself in mirrors and windows while promising her if she'd just come away with him they'd start their own kingdom and he'd take care of everything. He told her he loved her (or rather, his reflection in the mirror told her he loved her—she was looking at the back of his head when he said it, those shiny, shiny curls!), and that he would always love her, for ever and ever and ever. Because her own father and mother were a very kind and wise king and queen, though perhaps over-protective, and had taught her that most people aren't kidding around when they make such promises, she believed everything the not-yet-king said. So she went away to live with him in a new land in the castle he bought for them there.

Then everything seemed wonderful for such a long, long time; the bad king bought an even bigger castle with more things inside—great carpets and curtains and couches and chairs; it didn't worry her so much when the bad king gradually stopped kissing her and touching her and telling her she was the most beautiful good queen in the whole world. He was a king, after all, and very busy doing those things a king

must do to keep the kingdom running smoothly. Besides, she had one, then two, then three children to attend to, and the extra love the king didn't seem to want from her she gave to them.

Then one day, with no warning at all it seemed (though there were probably many signs she'd missed), the bad king came to the good queen and said, "I don't care if I once said our love was forever, I don't love you anymore," and he walked out of the castle with as many bags of gold as he could carry and went off to live with the wicked witch who'd poisoned his heart with her spell, leaving the good queen in despair and their children crying, clinging to her gown in their fear of this sudden change. "What kingdom for these children without a king!?" the good queen might have asked herself, "Even a bad one."

The good queen watched a gentle breeze ripple the shimmer of the shimmering blue pond and wondered at what strange fates life brings to people. Even as a little girl playing in her father's castle with her princess sisters she'd understood without being told that one day she was expected to marry a good king with a castle of his own. Now she was forty-three and for all real purposes alone in the labor of raising her children. Her king had abandoned her to the winds, and worse than this, he had turned into a bad king with a heart of stone.

Meanwhile, back in the kitchen of the small cottage in the woods near the shimmering, blue pond, young prince Andrew and little princess Leslie were helping the good queen's oldest daughter, the lovely princess Jessica, prepare the family's dinner.

"Why do we always have to eat Mexican food?" little princess Leslie asked as she absently pulled at a head of iceberg lettuce. "I'm tired of tacos and nachos and stuff."

The lovely princess Jessica sighed and finished cranking the can opener around a can of La Preferda refried beans. Once the can was open she put the can opener

down, looked at her little sister and said, "You know, Leslie, you shouldn't complain, some people don't have anything to eat at all."

Princess Leslie shook her head and made a face. "We never had to help make dinner and do the dishes and clean all the time when daddy lived with us."

"Well, daddy doesn't live with us anymore, does he?" the lovely princess Jessica said. "And we used to have a dishwasher and Rosalee who came to clean once a week. Mom has to work now, Leslie, she doesn't have time to cook and clean anymore, she needs our help, OK?"

"Yeah, dad doesn't live with us anymore, and mom needs our help," young prince Andrew said as he stabbed his knife into a tomato they'd grown in their tiny garden then began to cut. Of all the good queen's children, he was the angriest about what had happened to them. He'd seen the way his father had abandoned them and made his mother cry and cry, and though no one had ever said anything about it to him directly, the idea that his father, who he'd always thought was a good king, might actually be a bad king disturbed him very much. His father had taught him so many things, like how to throw a baseball, and that the Dallas Cowboys were God's team. And that Texas was the greatest country in the whole world. His father had even taken him to the amazing stadium filled with screaming people and let him sip from his wax paper cup of magic beer—as long as he promised not to tell his mother, the good queen, who his father said wouldn't understand. So, like any young prince, Andrew wanted to believe his father was a good king—because what awful thing did that make you if your father was a bad one? But, when he went with his sisters every other weekend to visit his father in his new, bigger castle where he lived with the wicked witch (who was always either yelling at young prince Andrew or trying to be too nice, hugging him and kissing his cheek wetly), his father, instead of staying with them to talk and play games, went out with this new weird queen of his, leaving the lovely princess

Jessica to babysit his new babies. And that didn't seem like something a good king would do.

All of this was making the brave, young prince Andrew very confused. He was the only "man" left in the house, and he felt like he didn't have anyone to talk to about the ways a good king should act. Like his sisters, he loved his father, and hated him, too, but now, on top of all the other problems they were having, he had the added worry of wondering if he might also one day become a bad king, just like his father. Because that's what he'd always believed a good prince was supposed to do. Become something like his father, the king. Now he wasn't so sure what to become anymore.

"Andrew, you're making a mess," the lovely Princess Jessica said gently. She always tried to be gentle with her younger brother because his hair was just now growing back in that place on the top of his head where he'd torn it all away.

The young Prince Andrew looked down and realized his sister was right, he had indeed chopped the tomato into pulp without even noticing. He stared at the ruined tomato and felt sadness pulling on the corners of his mouth. He felt like he was going to cry, and that made him even angrier, because he felt he was too big to cry anymore. But so many things that never made him want to cry before made him want to cry these days.

"I'll go get another one," he said, and swallowing the lump in his throat, he got up from the table and left the kitchen.

The lovely princess Jessica spooned the refried beans from the can into a pan on the stove then looked over her shoulder at little princess Leslie sitting at the table. She had finished tearing the head of lettuce into little shreds with her little hands and was now kicking her little feet back and forth, back and forth, humming a little girl's song in her little voice.

The lovely princess Jessica went to her sister and knelt next to the chair. "Here,

Leslie," she said, taking a Hershey's chocolate kiss from the pocket of her apron (the good queen's apron, actually) and pressing it into little princess Leslie's little palm. She put her hands on her little sister's knees to still her kicking legs then looked her in the eyes. "We'll be OK," she said, "You know everything's going to be OK, don't you?"

Little Princess Leslie nodded seriously, far too seriously for a child her age, but she didn't say a word.

"Go down to the pond and tell mom dinner'll be ready soon," the lovely princess Jessica said, and she shoo-shoed her sister toward the door with her apron.

The lovely Princess Jessica went to the sink and filled it with hot water then dumped in plastic wrapped pound of frozen ground beef to thaw. Then she stood there, steam rising about her face, absently staring out the window down the long, tree-lined driveway of the small cottage in the woods by the shimmering, blue pond. Suddenly, a car turned into the driveway from the street, and her heart lept up. Was that the handsome prince Raymond from her high school coming over for a visit? No, it wasn't handsome prince Raymond's silver convertible at all, only someone in a white car pulling into the driveway and quickly backing out again.

The lovely princess Jessica often thought of handsome prince Raymond and his beautiful silver convertible. They'd been out to dances and on dates, and though she'd never told her mother, they also parked sometimes at the dark end of a certain street with the top down. And that was why her heart lept up at the thought of handsome prince Raymond, because he knew how to hold her gently and kiss her and tell her things would work out fine. Then they'd lean their seats back and lie there looking up at the stars.

Sometimes the lovely Princess Jessica dreamed of handsome prince Raymond coming to take her away. She knew that, like her mother, she was also expected to

find a good king and marry him. But the world was changing. What was the point in finding a good king only to have him betray you. Life was confusing, and who was there to blame but yourself for being fooled? People were selfish; people failed at love. It was so easy for a good king to get lost and become a bad one; it was just as easy for a good queen to get lost and become a wicked witch. What did it matter who was right and who was wrong when things still ended up ruined either way. As much as she liked handsome prince Raymond (loved him, she even dared to think), princess Jessica wasn't sure if she wanted to be his good queen, or any prince's good queen. Maybe it would be better if they just drove and drove in his silver car, far, far away, to some place where she didn't have to worry about being lied to or betrayed. It was hard to know what was best anymore. But whatever her future held, the lovely princess Jessica understood that right now she needed to stay. Her mother, the good queen, had never lied to her, had always been kind. Regardless of what had happened between her mother and her father, regardless of the fact that her father was a bad king or maybe just a really confused one, the lovely Princess Jessica knew she needed to remain by her family to help them through their sorrows.

The young prince Andrew came back into the kitchen with his tomato. "This is the only ripe one I could find," he said morosely, "and it's got a worm hole."

"That's fine Andrew," the lovely princess Jessica said, "I can cut around it."

Down by the shimmering, blue pond the good queen was sitting in a folding lawn chair sobbing quietly into her hands. She'd just read the letter from the bad king's lawyer. It said he was suing her for a reduction of child support—the bad king who had just been given a raise, who had just bought a new Range Rover, who was having another castle built, one even bigger than the one he was living in right now. This meant counter-suing, having to take the time away from looking for a better job to endure the expense of getting a lawyer and itemizing all the bad king's earnings as well

her own. This meant going back to court and facing the bad king, seeing him there holding hands with the wicked witch, and thinking about them in their evil happiness as she went home to sleep in her big bed alone. Oh, why had she ever believed in love's fairytale in the first place?

The good queen felt a warm hand on her shoulder. She raised her head to see little princess Leslie standing next to her, sunlight playing in her long brown hair.

"Don't cry mommy," little princess Leslie said, looking as if she just might begin to cry as well. "I love you. Here," and she gave the good queen the Hershey's chocolate kiss she'd been planning on keeping for herself. This made the good queen cry even more, though now there was a touch of the salt of tenderness mixed in with her tears.

"Dinner's almost ready," little princess Leslie said to the good queen, and she stood there stroking the good queen's arm in that sincere but awkward way of a child's devotion.

"Well, we better go back to the house then" the good queen said as she pushed herself up from her chair. And they walked up the gravel path toward the small cottage holding hands.

Late that night after the children were tucked into their beds, the good queen found she could not sleep for her worries and so walked down to the blue, shimmering pond (which was shimmering silver-black now in the light of the full moon) and stood at its edge, looking at her face in the water. She stood there for some time, thinking. Then she noticed the night sounds of the woods rising up around her: the rustling of leaves beneath the careful feet of small animals; an owl's hooting; the flap of bats swooping down to snatch insects out of the clear, black sky above the pond; the springy bellowing of the bullfrogs somewhere at its center.

It was a beautiful, peaceful, healing home she had found for them all, and by

chance. But soon, before anyone realized it, the old, old woman would die and they would have to leave. Probably move into an apartment which would cost much more and be so much less than this place. And, as if that wasn't enough, there was the bad king always trying to take what little they had away. She got down on her knees at the water's edge and looked into the reflecting silver–black of its moon–lit surface. She leaned closer until she could see her face clearly. Worry lines that weren't there a few years before stitched out across her forehead and away from the corners of her eyes. She thought about how hard it would be at her age to meet someone else, another good king; the odds weren't in her favor, and she didn't like the idea of growing old alone. She put her fingers into the pond and splashed her reflection away, but she stayed there, watching as the water rippled. She dipped her hands into the shimmering pond again, put them to her face; the water was cool and soothing against her skin. She realized then that in their few year at the small cottage in the woods by the shimmering blue pond she'd never touched the water before. And as its surface slowly settled, settled just as the heart's pain slowly settles, she saw again her own face and heard the pond speaking to her, though not in words like we use. She listened carefully, a tiny smile beginning at the corners of her mouth as the pond began to tell her in its own way—which was a way of the spirit, not a way of the mind—that it made no difference if the world was filled with good kings or bad kings or good queens or wicked witches; she was the fairest queen of all, or fair enough anyway, and she would survive, because everything she'd been through had only made her stronger and more beautiful somehow.

VOODOO

They're finally through with shouting. Peg looks away from Hal, out the passenger window as the carcass of a mangled possum blurs by on the shoulder. She notices her ghost in the window glass, her puffy eyes, and wishes she and Hal could just quit this picking and be happy. Once, they were the kind of lovers who would have spent the last two hundred miles holding hands, massaging napes, and talking about all the things they've agreed to do when they get to New Orleans. Now, they cover the miles arguing. She watches the green-scummed drainage ditch stretching away from them like a clogged artery and thinks about how different he is from the Hal she used to know. The funny Hal, the considerate Hal. She wants that Hal back.

Six hours they've been in the car, fifteen to go at the very least, and already they've fought in circles about pointless things, ridiculous things, like what they're fighting about right now: the voodoo queen Marie Laveau and her tomb off the French Quarter in St. Louis Cemetery Number One.

"Let's just take a guided tour," she tells him. "It says right here in the triple A book that that place is really dangerous, and you shouldn't go there unless you're with a tour."

He gives a snort of disgust, "I've told you before, Peg. Guided tours are lame. You have to experience things for yourself. I'm sure it's perfectly safe there during the day." He starts shaking his head at her, scolding, "I knew you'd be afraid when you read that. I almost ripped out the page. It gets tiring, the way you're always afraid." He reaches out and turns up the tape deck too loud, making sure she understands he's done talking about this. Coltrane squeals a bleeding line of high notes. She finds she has to clench into herself to keep from snapping the music off and screaming, "I won't fight

you anymore!" if only just to take his precious last words away from him. She watches him bob his head seriously in time—as if the music is something worth more attention than what is going on between them. Why can't he just admit there's nothing wrong with following good advice? "St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 is dangerous. Don't go there unless you're with a guided tour during the day." There it is in black and white in the AAA tourbook, for god's sake. And he'd almost ripped out the page! It doesn't matter if he thinks there's nothing to worry about as long as they're careful. When does she get to be right, after he's been mugged and she's been raped? She's still fighting back the urge to snap the music off and confront him with everything when up ahead she sees a rest stop sign. "I have to go to the bathroom," she says above the music, and he nods, though it's more an exaggeration of the wagging his head is already doing than an acknowledgement.

When they blow past the rest stop exit she isn't sure if she is angry or justified by his obvious callousness.

"Why didn't you get off back there?" she asks, "I told you I had to go to the bathroom."

"What are you talking about?" he says, "You didn't say you had to go right now. How was I supposed to know you wanted me to get off right away. I can't read your mind, you know."

"I said I had to go. Isn't that enough?"

"Well, I didn't think it was so damn urgent. Sometimes you mean eventually when you say that"

"I wouldn't have said anything if I didn't mean right now. Why else would I point out the sign?"

"You didn't point out any sign. I didn't see any sign. Damn, I'm just driving along trying to enjoy this song and you start bitching at me because I couldn't read your

mind. I just can't win with you"

Peg shakes her head, does a breath, then looks away through the window at the seemingly endless line of pines blurring past. She isn't sure whether or not to believe his missing the rest stop was an accident. These days it's as if everything they say is loaded, as if turning up the radio or missing an exit has to mean something beyond what it normally means. They can't even have sex anymore without her feeling like he's trying to prove something. Two years ago he asked her to move in with him under the pretense that it would prepare them for marriage. Two years later and they're not even engaged, and with the way he's acting lately it doesn't look like he'll be asking anytime soon. She's not exactly sure when or how this plaque began to form inside their hearts, but she knows this trip is a strange mix of escapism and a last attempt to try and save things.

Hal lays a gentle hand on her thigh, strokes her leg through the denim of her jeans and she thinks how his touch never used to bother her. If they were home in their apartment in Detroit she could at least get away from him until she cooled off. She could close herself up in another room. Go for a walk and a cup of coffee. But he hates it when she needs time away from an argument, he'd rather they stayed toe to toe picking at each other until she came unglued and started crying. It wouldn't surprise her at all if he had missed that exit on purpose.

"Can't you hold it?" Hal finally asks, "There should be a gas station or something soon."

Peg folds her arms across her chest and closes her eyes. They'd been friends for a few years before they finally got together. The night they first kissed by the bonfire at that party she'd pulled away long enough to say, "It's about time." And it was true, she had waited, holding back her secret desire for him all the way through the ugly crash of his last relationship. She wants to work this out, she wants to believe

they're still in love, but she's had enough of his stubborn need to be right and all the stupid, childish risks he likes to take: almost thirty and still sneaking liquor into movie theaters, trespassing through fenced-off fields because he wants to show her a green-scummed frog pond or some abandoned building he's found; breaking into his old middle school's art room at three in the morning to steal the cow skull he remembered sketching in the seventh grade. It's not that she's against taking risks or that she doesn't like to drink and have a good time; she just hates the way he dismisses her concerns as weakness or fear. Why did doing something illegal or taking crazy risks have to be a requirement for a good time? Maybe it was exciting once, but there's no sign of him leaving those attitudes behind. She feels a twinge in her bladder. She puts her hand on top of his hand, "I'll just tell you to pull over if it gets too bad," she tells him.

Ahead, around a sweeping curve, dark birds peck at a heap of mangled flesh on the highway's shoulder. Peg sees the birds as if conjured—black dots blooming into crows. The birds rise on the displaced air as their green Toyota breezes by. It's a doe carcass, legs splayed wide, the head bent backwards toward the tail.

"Twenty seven," Hal says. He's been counting road kill when he remembers to. "Looked like that one had a broken spine."

"Twenty eight." she almost corrects him, then thinks better of it.

Hal keeps opening his eyes to watch Peg as she drives through the night, her tired face cast luminescent green in the glow of the dashboard. He has his seat leaned all the way back, his hands clasped across his stomach like a corpse. It's his turn to get some sleep, but rain thuds a metallic rhythm on the roof of the car, and beneath his feet he can feel the wheels' wet hissing as he rolls the word *hydroplaning* over and over in his mind.

Just past Memphis, right after Peg started driving they saw the wreckage of a

horrible accident and the body. They'd hit the scene before police or paramedics. At first, Hal thought the slowing traffic merging to the right shoulder and the waving flashlight in the near distance were not for an accident at all, but for one of those roadside checkpoints to search for drugs or drunk drivers. Then he noticed in the flickering light of the road-flares that the flashlight waver was a paunchy, middle-aged man in dress pants and a button down shirt. After they'd passed him, they saw a few cars pulled against the median wall, flashers on, their headlights making something solid out of the growing fog. And the wreck emerging: a pick-up on its side in the middle of the four lane highway, the bed and cab accorded from the truck's rolling. Beyond the truck, in the near distance, a few people stood helplessly around the body which, thrown clear, lay wrong in a twisted heap beside the shoulder. Slowly, the line of cars moving stop-start brought them up to the corpse, and Hal saw that the man lay uncovered, his arms flung out as if giving something up. Blood, black and reflecting the lights like spilled oil, had pooled around his obscenely dented head. Then the car jerked to a stop, throwing Hal forward into the dashboard.

"Dammit, Peg," He said, blinking into the red brake lights of the car they'd almost rear-ended, "Keep your eyes on the road. Last thing we need is a fucking accident."

"Sorry. God. Gimme me a break," she said and turned away to stare back out the window at the body.

"Don't look," Hal said. "You don't want to see this."

Peg shook her head, rolled her window down. "Is there any way we can help?" she asked the man nearest their car.

"No," he said, "Just keep driving, please."

"Tell them they should cover the body," Hal said, but Peg ignored him and locked her eyes on the brake lights of the car in front. Soon the line began to move

again, the bottleneck gradually widening, cars spreading across the lanes as they pushed their way back to speed. Hal twisted around in his seat to have a last look at the wreck as it shrank away behind them. He found it hard to believe they could see death that closely then leave it behind so quickly, guiltlessly back on their way to something so trivial as a vacation. "Jesus, they should've put a blanket over him or something," he said.

"You're always telling people what to do, Hal." Peg said. "People can make up their own minds, you know." He felt his anger flare—she was wrong, of course—he wasn't always telling people what to do, and he thought about asking her what, exactly, did she mean by that. Then he realized he was sick of correcting her. She was just uptight from seeing the body and having to drive through the dark with her bad eyes. Besides, there didn't seem to be much point in arguing after such a grisly reminder that life could come apart so easily and at any time. He wanted to say something at once true and kind to her, or at least something not untrue and unkind, something about life and getting along, but nothing came to him. "I'm gonna try and get some sleep," he said, easing his seat back into the silence rising between them.

It starts raining harder, the fat drops falling so fast and thick even the wipers on high can't show them how the road winds. Hal knows he needs rest if he's going to drive through the long, tiring hours that will come just before dawn, but since the wreck he's been too worried about their own accident to sleep. Peg's driving has always made him nervous, and now that the rain has picked up, he feels an agitation, an over sensitivity at every pass or slight swerve she makes. He listens to her swearing under her breath into the wet thundering of a high-balling semi that slaps the car unsteady with sheets of water as it passes. He puts his foot down on the phantom brake and thinks about asking her to pull over so he can drive. But he's been driving since they left this morning. She needs to carry some of the weight if they're going to road-

trip straight through. He imagines briefly the mangled horror of their own accident, sees the twisted wreck of their car from above as if disembodied, and Peg, bloody, crying, standing next to an ambulance throwing its arcs of siren light against the rain. A paramedic pulls a zipper up along his chest and face, and someone drapes a blanket over Peg's shoulders while leading her away. Then he's inside the complete darkness of the bodybag. "I'm not dead, I'm not dead," he keeps screaming, "don't leave me." But he can't seem to move his arms to pull the zipper down. He decides an accident is not what's meant for them, and that believing this is not what is meant for them is what keeps their accident from happening.

Hal starts thinking about Marie Laveau and what a stupid thing she was to fight about; it's not like he actually believes that stuff about putting your mark on her tomb to get your wish. But ever since they'd decided to take this trip he's been reading up on voodoo. Reading about people like Marie Laveau and the Chicken Man, and things like datura plants and the blowfish poison they use to make Zombies in Haiti. Its interesting enough, but he realizes he only has a callow white-man's understanding of the religion. He does feel a kind of kinship, though; he's kept an altar in the bedroom of every apartment he's lived in since college, long before he'd even read anything about voodoo, it was a natural instinct with him, but it's more an eclectic souvenir stand than a religious thing. Still, he's nostalgic enough to feel all the objects arranged there have power as a reminder of some good person or place he's known. Every now and then, when he's missing someone or thinking of his past, he might light a stick of incense and the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe candle and the Sacred Heart of Jesus candle then sit before the statuettes, animal bones, shells, and stones to think, but this is nothing like the reality of voodoo, he knows. The only reason he wanted to even go to Marie Laveau's tomb in the first place was because it seemed like something interesting to see, this place where all these believers butchered chickens and made dark wishes.

He'd heard the cemeteries in New Orleans with their mausoleums were something you wanted to see anyway. But Peg's saying no without even checking it out first, without even really knowing what she was talking about, just going blindly by some guide-book's warning meant only for idiots and old people—that, as much as anything, was the kind of thing pushing him to go there. "Are you sure it's ok?" "Maybe we shouldn't." "I'm not very comfortable doing this." Her habitual worrying was getting on his nerves more and more. He didn't remember her being like that when they first started dating.

Now Hal feels the sinking in his gut as they slip down a steep grade and then begin to rise. He no longer hears the rain on the car roof or the wheels' wet rolling and realizes he must have nodded off for a while, though he doesn't feel rested enough to have slept for very long. She's got the Grateful Dead low on the radio, probably to help her relax, but she knows he can't stand that band. That's probably what woke him up. Between her driving and the music how does she expect him to get any sleep? He levers his seat upright and puts on his glasses.

"Any good dreams?" Peg asks him.

"Huh? Oh. Nothing I remember. Where are we."

"About a hundred miles into Mississippi."

"How long was I asleep for?"

"Hour maybe."

"Sure doesn't feel like it."

"You were snoring there for a while."

"You're the one who snores," he tells her irritably. "Remember?"

"Whatever," Peg shrugs and edges up the volume. *Darkstar*, he thinks this one's called. The crowd starts cheering when the song ends and he wonders if she was at that show. Before they'd met she once spent a whole summer following the Dead in

a van full of her friends. He's seen the pictures of her in the print skirts and tie-dyes, close-ups of that big smile, those dilated pupils where he didn't see the fear of anything. But that was before they moved in together, before she cut her ass length hair to her shoulders for that new job at the Conflict Resolution Center, before she started getting on him about marriage and quitting the music store and using his college degree to get a *real* job.

Hal knows she wouldn't have given him so much grief over the tomb if she knew about the engagement ring in his backpack. He has everything planned. Before hitting the jazz festival they're driving to the end of Louisiana's Highway 1 to camp a few days at the state park on Grand Isle. And that's all she thinks they'll be doing there. But after they've set up the tent and slept off the long ride and made love a few times, he'll take her for a walk on the beach. Splashing through the tide pools, he'll bend as if picking up a shell he's found. "Oh, my god!" or "Hey, look at this!" he'll say and hold the ring up to the sunlight so it shines. Then he'll take her left hand and slide on the ring, which he's had sized to fit perfectly. "I can't believe this," he'll say, "Looks like we have to get married," and he'll get down on one knee right there in the ocean and swear he means it. Eventually he'll tell her the whole thing was a lover's scheme, but for a time he wants her to believe that their engagement was sealed by fate or chance. He wants her to accept spontaneity as a condition of their life together.

Through his slitted eyelids he sees Peg look over at him and he resists the urge to tell her to pay attention to her driving.

"My eyes are getting kind of blurry," she says, "I've pretty much driven this whole tank, you think you can drive soon?"

Hal lets out a sigh. Can't she tell he's tired? He's driven two and a half tanks to her one, and she knows how hard it is for him to sleep when she's driving. She's slept twice as long as he has, and now she'll be out and snoring ten minutes after he's

taken the wheel.

"Forget it if that's the way you're going to be about it," she is saying when suddenly the road goes ragged to the flashing of yellow lights and cement median walls collapsing around them like a cattle chute. The traffic heading north, separated from them before by a wide stand of trees, is suddenly right next to them, blowing past at seventy-five, eighty, headlights burning. The car shudders over pocked asphalt and Hal's afraid she's about to lose it. He reaches instinctively for the wheel, then stops himself and turns off the radio. "Jesus Peg," he says, "What the hell are you doing?" He sees her knuckles are white across the top of the wheel; she's leaning back, squinting against the on-coming lights. "All this construction just came at me out of nowhere," she says.

"Get off at the next exit," he tells her, reaching down into the darkness by his feet to feel for his shoes.

A few nights later Peg and Hal are wandering through crowded the French Quarter with the rest of the tourists and conventioners, go-cups in their hands. They pass the open door of a strip-joint on Bourbon Street and Peg can't help staring at a beautiful, if trashy-looking, woman leaning against the jamb in a halter top and pair of sequined microshorts. The woman catches Peg's stare, flips up her top and lets her breasts spill out, "Laissez les bons temps rouler," she says, her voice deep as a man's. Peg looks away, catches Hal oggling. "Wee wee," he says to Peg, laughing, elbowing her idiotically like she was his beer buddy. A mounted cop clomps by. Hal holds up his plastic cup of whiskey as if to toast him. The cop watches Hal slam the drink and toss the cup down among the rest of the litter in the street. The cop shakes his head but keeps on riding. Hal pulls his forearm across his wet lips, "Ahhhh," he says, "I love this town."

Peg hates it when he gets this way, dragging her from bar to bar, up and down

the streets, acting like he's twenty one and just let loose on the world. It's gotten old. But this time it's different, and she's getting worried. He's been drinking whiskey since they left Grand Isle that morning, since she said no to him on the beach. She couldn't believe it when he pulled a diamond engagement ring out of the ocean, but how was she supposed to know it was something he bought, not something he'd really found. As if she'd want to wear some poor woman's lost ring for the rest of her life, maybe even a drowned or murdered woman's ring at that. She could still see the hurt and confusion on his face as he tried to explain. It was the first time in a long time where he'd actually done something thoughtful for her, buying a ring, planning ahead, and he had to go and goof it up with some stupid little scene. Though that isn't what's bothering her at the moment. A few months ago she probably would have said yes once she understood, but the way they've been getting along these last couple months, and especially these last few days, she isn't sure she'd have said yes to him even if he'd asked her in the normal way. She still loves him—at least she wants to—and she told him so over and over while she struggled to keep up with him on his stiff walk back to the campground. But a wedding would only be a distraction from the things they need to work out, and she tried to make clear as gently as she could that she wants their wedding to be something other than a bandage.

Hal points a finger past her head, "Let's go there," he says, "I need another drink."

Through the open doorway of Jean Laffite's Peg can see the dark tables in candle-light, the ceiling lined with wooden beams. It could be such a romantic place, she thinks, if only. Hal heads directly to the counter and waits for a bartender. Peg hears what sounds like a live piano coming from somewhere. She walks around the corner and there it is, like she's only seen in the movies, a piano bar with people on stools around it. She smiles, walks over and takes a stool, pulls another near her for

Hal. The piano player, a smooth looking, older black man, splashes a few delicate chords as if in greeting then continues on with his song. She smiles at him, takes a cigarette out of her purse and lights up. He gives her a friendly wink and a nod.

Hal walks up with a Jim Beam on the rocks and a bottle of dark beer. He sits down heavily on the stool next to hers. "Thought you might like to try this," he says sliding the bottle of Blackened Voodoo toward her, "They brew it here in town."

"You know I don't like dark beer," she says.

"Fine," he says, "I'll drink it then."

They sit at the piano listening to the music in silence until a waitress comes by. Peg orders a Lemon Drop and a Dixie beer. She's tried to be fair with him, tried to be honest, but he won't listen. She didn't say she didn't want to marry him ever, just not now. Getting married won't solve anything. He knows that, but he's too freaked out over being rejected and the fact that she might actually be right to admit it.

The waitress brings the drinks and Peg sees Hal checking out her ass as she walks away. It's nothing new, just one more thing about him that she dislikes but has tried to accept. She doesn't think he's ever cheated on her, though she wonders sometimes.

"Cemetery's only a couple blocks away, you know."

"Don't start, Hal."

"We should go check it out," Hal says. "We could make a wish together." He finishes off his whiskey, chases it with a big swallow of beer, then belches into his fist. He grins an ugly grin, "We could wish you loved me enough to marry me."

"That's a mean thing to say."

"It was a mean thing you said to me on the beach."

"I was being honest. There's nothing mean about that."

The song ends, there is light applause, then Hal's voice too loud in the pause,

"You've got us divorced before we've even had a chance to try."

Peg knows everyone at the piano bar has heard him and she begins slip into that confusing place where she can't explain herself because of the force of what she feels. The piano player breaks the silence by saying something about welcome to the Big Easy before starting into the next song.

Hal gives her a stare she can't read, a look somewhere between pity and disgust. He makes a show of slamming his beer, setting the empty bottle down loudly on the piano's bartop. He takes forty bucks out of his wallet and drops it next to her cigarettes. "I'm going," he says, "I'll be back in an hour."

"Don't be surprised if I'm not here."

He stands there, considering. "Whatever," he says, then she watches him walk off, bumping his way through the crowded, smokey darkness of the bar.

Hal threads the crowd down Bourbon to Beinville then makes a right turn toward St. Louis Cemetery Number One. After a few blocks the sidewalks become dark and empty, the nightcrowd and lights left behind. He's lost her. She can say we need more time to work things out or whatever, but her saying no means it's over. Why else would she say it? She's the one always bringing up marriage in the first place. He still isn't sure exactly what her problem with their relationship is. If he's critical it's only because he loves her and wants to stop her constant second-guessing and worrying from killing the flow of a good time. He isn't sure what his next move with her should be. They'll probably make up tomorrow, finish out the vacation, maybe even live together for little while longer, but he knows now that she will come to him one day soon enough and say she's leaving, that she's sorry they can't seem to, "work things out."

There is a full moon directly above when Hal arrives at the open cemetery gate, and the moonlight makes the mausoleums glow like lye. From what he's read, Marie

Laveau's tomb is near the main path and impossible to miss, covered the way it is with the scratched X's of tourists and believers. He starts into the maze of above ground tombs. Soon the gate is lost behind him, and he can't decide if he's gone too far or hasn't gone far enough. He considers turning around and finding his way back to the bar, but going on is something he feels he has to do now, especially since she told him not to.

When he finally turns a blind corner and finds the tomb, X'd all over, the sadness of his situation fills him in waves. He's tired of love's falling apart, tired of trying to find a woman like himself; he just doesn't think he has the energy to start over again with someone else. But all that explaining Peg tried to do on the beach, her talk about how he's changed, how critical and selfish he's become—it sounded just like what his last girlfriend said before they'd split up for good. Maybe they were telling the truth; maybe he was just a selfish asshole who'd brought this on himself. Whoever's right, it's too late now.

He walks to the tomb and touches the cold mortar, places his palms over a few of the marks scratched onto its side. Inches from his hand a crack stitches its way along the surface. Out of the crack grows a scraggly vine, what kind Hal isn't sure. He snaps off a small leafed branch and sticks it in his pocket—another souvenir for his altar. Suddenly he remembers the stuff about the wish snorts a laughs, trying to think of what to wish for. He knows it doesn't matter because that kind of bullshit isn't real and even if it was he didn't know the prayers or whatever else you probably had to know make it work. Still, after all that's happened, her turning him down, their fight a few days ago over this stupid tomb, it seems important somehow to make the right wish. Going through his pockets, feeling for something to etch his mark with, his fingers touch the car keys, then the small, velvet ring box. For a second he considers using the diamond to make the mark. He imagines the sound of the diamond scratching

against the stone, then decides against using it and pulls out his car keys. He holds the Toyota's ignition key ready like he is about to unlock the door, but he still has no idea he wants to wish for, and he knows he'll never be able to decide. Thinking vaguely that he just wants all this mess resolved somehow, he scratches his X onto the tomb.

Once he's through he hears a shoe scrape against the grit of the walkway right behind him and he turns in time to see the blur of pipe coming down against the side of his head. He drops to his knees, arms loose, his keys jangling against the cement as he keels over onto the ground. He hears the keys being taken up again then feels fingers in his pockets pulling first the ring box then his wallet with their hotel key card out of his jeans. He tries to say something, he tries to sit up, but feels himself being sucked back down into unconsciousness—the last sound he hears before passing out the sharp little creak of the ring box opening.

When Hal comes to he is alone. He sits up confused, wondering at first what's happened; where's Peg? Have they had a car accident? Then he realizes where he is. How long has he been unconscious? What if that son of a bitch figures out where they're staying? He might already be back at the hotel room waiting for Peg. And the guy has Hal's wallet with his license in it. The keys to their car, their apartment back in Michigan, even the music store. There's no telling what could happen now. Hal stands and staggers back to lean against Marie Laveau's tomb and waits for the world to quit spinning. The goose egg on his head accelerates its throbbing. He touches it gingerly, feeling it squish beneath his fingers before he pulls his hand away. No blood—at least there's that going for him. She was right, he thinks, I should have listened. Through the mist in his brain he begins to understand what's been the matter between them: he's guilty of judging her according to who he thinks she should be instead of simply loving her for who she is. He's been wrong. To her. About her. About everything. He retches, starts to slide down the wall of the tomb toward the

ground. There is a heaviness taking him over. He wants to sleep, just sleep for a little while.

It's the fear of what will happen and the hope he may not be too late that gets him up and staggering back along the path toward the entrance. When he finally reaches the gate, his head is pounding so hard he has to stop. He's thinking about the ring and how he still owes two thousand dollars on it when fireworks start going off in the near distance. At first, he isn't sure if he's imagining them or not, but they keep exploding as he stands there trying to steady himself, one hand against his head, the other clinging to the gate.

More than an hour has passed and Hal is not back yet. Peg leans against the piano top, chin resting on her palm, empty shot glass at her elbow. Commander Pye Tasker, as he has introduced himself to the room, has been playing anything anyone calls out, mostly old jazz standards she's never heard of, but she still thinks they're wonderful.

"Play *When the Saints Come Marching in*" someone yells. She sees Commander Pye grimace slightly then fall an octave in the song he's playing before slipping into some weird, modal version of the tune. "That's not how it goes," the voice says. "Play it the regular way." But this time Pye cuts him off with a run of dissonant chords before rolling on. Peg looks up, catches Pye's glance, smiles at him, "No, leave it just how it is," she says, "it sounds good sad like that." Commander Pye nods. He is a handsome man, she thinks. Forty-five maybe fifty, a little silver in his tight, curly black hair. She's never heard anyone play the piano with this way, drinking and telling jokes and showing off and jumping from song to song the whole time. It seems like he knows how to play everything. Maybe later she'll throw him a curve and request a Dead tune like *Fire on the Mountain*.

She checks her watch again. Hal should've been back long ago. Why did he

have to be such a stubborn ass? Always right. Always pushing things. Always thinking of himself. "Everybody dreams alone," he liked to tell her. What a bunch of crap. He wasn't that way when they first started dating. He wasn't so reckless or judgmental or condescending. Or maybe he was—the longer this goes on the harder it is for her to remember the days when things were good between them.

Peg pulls her last cigarette out of the pack and fires it up. She takes a deep drag, jets the smoke out her nose. Nothing short of a big mistake will make Hal change. In her mind she sees him beat up or robbed and left for dead in some piss alley. She isn't sure if she'll be able to forgive herself if something horrible happens to him. She saw a news show on TV once about the vampires in this town. People who actually kidnap tourists and street people and keep them locked in a box in some back room so they can tap their blood and torture them. If that's for real, who knows what else is out there? Her eyes get watery as she thinks of what she could have done to make him stay. If only she would have told him yes on the beach, everything would be different. Maybe she should have played horny tonight and asked him to take her back to their hotel room; he probably needed some kind of sign from her to show that she still cares. And she does care, for the Hal she used to know, not this person he's turned into. She shakes her head against these thoughts then violently stubs out her cigarette in the ashtray. Screw him for making her feel like this. He was probably passed out drunk in some bar down the street. There's nothing she could have done. Hal does what he wants when he wants to, and if she says she doesn't like it, he shrugs and tells her he's never kept her from doing anything—she does that well enough herself.

After Commander Pye finishes his set he takes his drink from the top of his piano and walks over to Peg.

"How you doin'" he says, "Can I get you something?"

"Don't you have to play?"

"Naw, even The Commander gets to take a break. Lemon Drop, right?"

Peg is surprised he's noticed, "Yeah, Lemondrop. Thanks." She starts looking in her purse for her cigarettes then notices the empty, crumpled pack next to the ashtray on top of the piano. "Don't go anywhere," she tells him, "I'll be right back."

Peg is pulling the lever to get her Camel Lights and thinking she's been smoking way more than usual lately when she feels a sharp little shock in her fingertips like the machine is shorting out or something. Suddenly, a head-rush rolls over her and she feels a dizziness rising inside. She grabs the pack from the slot and hurries through the double doors next to the cigarette machine. There is a huge explosion as she steps onto the patio, and the sky erupts in green, then yellow, then blue light. She feels like she's falling, or more like the world is being sucked up around her, and she's afraid she's having a flashback, something she's never had before. Quickly as it came, the feeling passes, and she realizes the explosions are only fireworks, probably for the jazz festival which begins tomorrow. She takes a few deep breaths, then Commander Pye is there next to her, talking.

"Alright?" he asks, "I saw you wobblin'."

"Oh, I'm fine," she says, "Just needed a little space is all."

"I hear that," he hands her the shot, raises his glass. "Cheers."

"Laissez les bons temps rouler," Peg says, surprising herself with her memory of the stripper's French.

"Now you gettin' there," Commander Pye says, and they clink glasses, drinking them down as another volley of fireworks explodes, lighting their up-turned faces with shifting colors.

"First time they done this for the festival," he says.

"I've always loved fireworks," Peg tells him.

A young white man with a waxed handlebar moustache pokes his head out the patio doors, "Yep. Sure is fahreworks," he yells to someone inside before coming onto the patio to join them.

Soon the small patio is crowded with people drinking and making a joke of oohing and ahing, their faces turned toward the sky. Peg feels Commander Pye pushed against her backside in the crush and she doesn't try to move away.

After the fireworks most everyone goes back inside, but Peg and Commander Pye stay on the patio talking. Peg knows she is drunker than she should be. She leans up against the brick wall and listens to the sound of people talking—on the patio, inside the bar, the hum of their voices mixing into the street noise and music of the French Quarter. She shakes a smoke out of her pack, and Pye is there for her with a lit match, his long-fingered hand shaking slightly. Peg cups her hand around his, feels his skin warmer against the warm night. She looks at his face highlighted in the glow of the flame and wonders what it would be like to have sex with an older man, with a black man. Such a good musician. He's probably got perfect timing, she thinks, and laughs.

"Finally in the mood to party." Commander Pye grins, "Alright. No good seeing a pretty woman so sad." He takes a brown cigarette out of his suit coat pocket and fires it up. The sweet, heavy smell of cloves fills the air. "You feel like doin' something besides waiting on that grouchy man you came in with, you let me know. I know few folks got places down here in the quarter having after-hours parties."

"Sounds like fun." She exhales, drops her barely smoked cigarette onto the patio and crushes it with her shoe.

"Well, I got to get on through this last set 'fore it's payday. You think about what I'm saying. It'll be a good time." He turns to walk back into the bar, but Peg grabs him by the hand and pulls him back to her. She kisses him softly but quickly on

the mouth. "I'll think about it," she says as she lets go of him.

After Commander Pye is gone Peg sits down at one of the patio tables. Her heart is beating quickly and she can feel the tingle of adrenaline sobering her. Flirting is fine, but she never expected to surrender to the impulse of kissing a stranger, and she hadn't expected to like it. Hal is right about that much, she thinks, people should do what they want when they want to, long as they're honest about it and nobody gets hurt—maybe that's the part he hasn't figured out yet. She feels a burning in her stomach. Where is he? Should she call the hotel? Maybe she should just go back and wait for him. She checks her watch; he's almost an hour and a half late. She decides to wait another fifteen minutes before calling the room and then maybe the police, though she knows he'll never let her live that down if it turns out nothing's wrong.

She legs back her chair, walks over to the wrought iron patio gate and looks through to scan up and down Bourbon Street. Neon blinking everywhere; people stagger arm in arm, laughing, up-ending their plastic cups in the middle of the trashed street like it's the last party in the history of the world. Some vacation. She clenches her jaw, grips the bars. The whole city is carelessly bombed and she's getting an ulcer over a selfish little boy. Then, as if summoned by her anger, she sees Hal turning the corner onto Bourbon Street. At first she's so relieved she wants to scream his name and run after him. Until she notices how he's shuffling his feet, listing with a hand against his head, wandering like a goddamn drunken zombie back toward their hotel. Jesus Christ, she thinks, he must have stopped at every bar between Laffite's and the cemetery. Well, she certainly doesn't owe it to him to go back to the room to watch him puke. She'll deal with him later, whenever she gets back. Maybe she will go with Pye to check out a few of those parties; maybe she'll just stay out bar-hopping by herself for a while. Whatever, it doesn't matter anymore, with how drunk Hal looks he's the last person she wants to be with right now. He may not think so, but she

knows she can handle herself. She's been with plenty of men before him, had plenty of crazy times. She's just sensible enough to know when to let all that foolishness go and get on with more important things, like trying to make some kind of life for herself, or for the both of them. But it's her vacation, too, and if this is the way he wants to play it, she can show him a few things about what it means to get wild. Let him worry about where she is for a while, if he's even awake to worry at all.

Piano riffs roll onto the patio through the open windows of the bar. Pye is starting his last set with a torch song. "Darn that dream I dream each night, you say you love me and you hold me tight, but when I awake you're out of sight, darn that dream." Peg feels the music wrap itself around her and she lets go of the gate. She watches Hal shuffling along until he's swallowed by the crowd. He'll sleep like a dead man, she tells herself as she turns away. Tonight, at least, he'll never miss me.

RUNNING

Edgar pulled the handkerchief out of his front pocket and unwrapped the glass eye. He held the eye up, inspecting it before he blew two sharp breaths on each side, then he popped it in his mouth, wetting it before slipping it into his empty eye socket. The eye felt cold in his head at first, like an ice cream headache, but in a few seconds it warmed to him, and the ache faded away. Edgar stood there in the hot, spring Georgia sun at the backyard gate of his house, thinking of his mamma inside and adjusting the fit of the eye in his head by pressing his fingers against his eyelid. A couple of guys he knew from his middle school rode past on their bikes, and one yelled "How 'bout it 'Gar, you bad to cut the afternoon with us?" and they waved him after them, but Edgar didn't say anything back. He had other things on his mind, like how he was going to tell his mamma about what had happened that morning at school.

Edgar stood with his hand on the gate hating his glass eye that was the cause of all this troubles. The eye never felt right in his head; he couldn't ever seem to forget it was there and get on with living like he wanted to. Like they told him he'd be able to. In his mind it was always, "Everybody's looking at my eye, everybody can tell." He'd seen in the mirror how the eye hovered, fixed, and not-quite-the-same-blue as the blue eye he still had. But his mamma made sure he wore the eye whenever he left the house, and every time she caught him with it out of his head when he came home he got the same speech about how his daddy paid good money for the insurance that gave him the eye, and it looked more than fine in his face, better than the red socket, for certain. It only hurt him, she said, because he wasn't wearing it as often as he was supposed to. Edgar hated it when she talked about his Daddy like he still cared about them, like he was still a part of their lives; his father was gone forever, Edgar knew

that, though his mamma didn't seem to want to believe it, and her constant talk about him meant that Edagar's daddy was on his mind more than he wanted him to be. Like during those times when he was alone somewhere, working that eye out of his head then wrapping it in his handkerchief and pocketing it. just as he had done this afternoon walking home from school.

Edgar hated all the grief over his eye. The whole thing was tiresome, his mamma tight-mouthed, stabbing her fork toward his daddy's empty chair at the table during those mostly silent dinners when he mentioned wearing his patch to school or just outside to play, "Do you think your daddy raised you to go about like trash wearing some eye-patch?" she'd say in a way that answers itself. But Edgar knew his daddy wouldn't have cared if he wore a patch or not, because he'd have understood that an eleven year old boy who literally gets his eye taken out by the proverbial stick while playing at swords with his friends will feel the blackest most pirate seeming patch is his earned right. Instead all he had was his mom screaming, "What have you done? Why didn't you listen to me?" when he came home in tearful hysteria, a six inch piece of the branch tip jutting from between the bloody fingers he'd clasped to his face.

As if the eye wasn't bad enough, now he had to figure out a way to tell her about the green underwear and his fight over it in school today. And she'd be convinced that was all his fault too, even after he tried to explain what really happened.

The eye was still pinching some as Edgar came through the back door and crossed the empty kitchen. He could hear the vacuum (she was always running the vacuum these days) droning in the living room as he took the stairs three at a time up to his room where he sat on his bed, pulled off his shoes and pants and then the olive green briefs his mother had bought for him at the SaveMart. Standing there in only his shirt and socks with the underwear in his hand, the piss smell of the bathroom and the

gurgling of the urinals came back to him, the vision of a couple of his classmates muscling a third grader into a stall: "Stick his head innit before you flush." Then Pep Gerone was there next to him at the urinal, staring down.

"Hey, cyclops, somebody puke on your shorts. Hey, y'all, have a look here, cyclops got on puke-green underwear."

Edgar rubbed his red knuckle where Pep's front tooth had cut its last. Principal Giles said he wouldn't be getting a write-up since the accident was only last summer, and Pep had made the cyclops crack, but he was sending Edgar home for the rest of the day to think about the fact that there is a right way and a wrong way to react when people make fun of you. Edgar wadded the underwear into a tight ball and whipped it into the bottom of his closet. He put his pants back on and sat down on the bed again to tie on his sneakers. It seemed to him much harder than it should be to be an eleven year old.

A slim knife of pain flared up along the ends of the severed nerves behind the glass eye. Edgar pressed his fingers against his eyelid and decided to hide somewhere until his regular home-coming time. If Principal Giles didn't call, maybe he could fool his mamma into thinking nothing had gone wrong today.

Edgar walked quickly down the hall hearing the vacuum still droning in the dining room. "Orderly house means an orderly mind," his mother would tell him when he asked her why she had to do dust and vacuum every single day. He was at the back screen door, hand already on the metal lever, when the vacuum cut off. Turning the handle carefully, he opened the door a few inches, slipped through, and shut it gently before creeping off across the back yard.

In Jeff Davis park Edgar sat on a bench under a shade tree looking up at the bird-shit spackled statue of Jeff Davis metalgreenblack and on its granite pedestal. He

took the eye out of his pocket, unwrapped it and sniffed. It held the familiar musk of soggy flesh, the smell of a long-sucked thumb, a habit he'd just recently gotten over—one he knew he was way too old for. Edgar stuck the thumb in his mouth and tried to get a feel for the old groove. The pleasure of it seemed lost somehow. He wondered if there was another place a kid his age could go besides home. He knew he had at least a few hours to think about it.

A man in a yellow straw fedora carrying a leather suitcase suddenly emerged from Edgar's blind side. He stood staring at Edgar, and Edgar stared back at him making no effort to close his eyelid and hide the marbled red socket of his ruined eye. Though Edgar had seen people, especially kids, staring when he had his eye out, this man stared for longer than anyone else ever had. Edgar noticed the man's pants were flood-water and that his socks had bunched down around his ankles from walking; he was looking at the glass eye in Edgar's hand.

"Whaddya starin at Mister? I'm not studying you," Edgar said.

"I know you don't like wearing that eye," the man said. "Hurts to." He set his leather case down next to Edgar on the bench and opened it. There was nothing but an artificial leg inside. "Wunna sell?" he gave Edgar a simple, good-country smile. He didn't seem to be from town.

Edgar thought about it for a second. "What'll you give?"

"Well, let's talk about that," the man said, kneeling down on one knee in front of him.

A few minutes later Edgar looked up with his one good eye at the sun impaled upon Jeff Davis' head. He hefted the eye in his hand, felt the smooth weight of the glass, flattish and oddly curved. He imagined skipping it, iris down, across smooth water—what would that look like if his mind could see with an eye that didn't have to

stay in his face? With an eye like that, he'd never have to go home. he'd be famous, or a spy. But his glass eye didn't see on its own, it didn't see at all, and he had to go home in a few hours to tell his mother over his stupid fight because of the underwear.

"Hand it over, then, son." the man said.

Edgar wasn't sure if he really should, but he handed the eye over.

Like somebody just handed him a free piece of rock candy, the man immediately popped the eye into his mouth. Edgar felt a clammy chill wrap him in the warm afternoon air. "*Hey*, now," he said as the man pulled the eye out shiny-wet and held it up to the sunlight. He put it to his nose and inhaled deeply. "Where's my money?"

"One hundred dollars, as agreed" the man said, cash appearing suddenly in his hand. It was more cash money than Edgar had ever seen in his life. He took the money, and before he even fully understood what he'd done, the man and his glass eye were gone.

Edgar decided to go home immediately and tell his mother about the fight with Pep and that he'd lost the eye when it fell out of his head then rolled into the sewer on his upset run home from school; he was late because he'd been trying to figure out a way to get it. It gave him some satisfaction that his was a lie she would immediately recognize but could never prove—unless she found his money, which she would not find, because he was going to hide the money and maybe even get some kind of job delivering papers or sacking groceries until he'd saved enough to leave and live on his own like he wanted to and knew he would do as soon as he was older. She had pushed him into doing enough he disliked already, as well as giving him a stupid name. Another thing he'd change once he got older. Maybe to something with some original kick to it, like Manley.

Edgar put his hand in his pocket and felt the wad of cash wrapped in his handkerchief—the man had paid him mostly in fives and a few tens, and it was all there, Edgar had watched him count it. He wondered what the guy wanted the eye for. Maybe he was some kind of salesman who went door to door selling parts, and he was out of eyes or something. He couldn't imagine what else the man would want it for. His eyes were brown and both of them looked real. He saw again the image of the man sucking the glass eye, working his lips and cheeks over *his* glass eye, the eye that had been in his head right next to his brain, and he shivered—the very idea that the man could now do that any time he felt like it was bothersome. Or the strange thing he'd said to Edgar as he'd counted out the last of the money: "I Tell you how it is with people like you and me, son," he was saying, leaning down into Edgar's face, talking directly into the empty socket half covered by the sunken lid as Edgar tried to lean away. "You and me, we been seeing through to nothing a long time. You spend this whole life selling parts of yourself, believe you me." It was a crazy thing to say, and Edgar didn't claim to understand it; he didn't have any more parts of himself to sell, though he still worked the words over for meaning as he went along the path that cut through the scrub woods behind his neighborhood looking for the best place to hide his cash.

When Edgar came to the back gate his mamma was already standing on the porch with her fists on her hips. "Principal Giles just called," she said. "Get inside you." Then, "Where's your eye, Edgar?" But Edgar just stood there at the gate, putting his palm over his good eye and taking it away again, swapping the world between day and black, making his mother, who was now walking quickly across the lawn toward him, disappear then re-appear again, until, finally, he let his hand rest over his good eye and stood fully in the darkness of the afternoon. "Where is your eye, Edgar?" he

heard her say. But only Edgar knew the secret place where his money was hidden.

Only Edgar knew the last things his missing eye had seen: his friend's smirk, the green grass, the hawk circling, the stick's sharp tip...and when her open hand stung his cheek, and he wondered how she'd found him in his darkness.

GUILTY

Jed was down in the basement, smoking a joint and cleaning up the band's rehearsal space when he thought he heard someone knocking at the front door. He paused, listened, and hearing nothing, he went on unwinding the spaghetti of mic cords and instrument cables in the middle of the floor. Clubfoot, the band Jed played guitar in, had a gig that night at the Snob Room, a local bar, but there was a whole afternoon to kill before he needed to be there for sound-check. So Jed decided to get stoned and clean up, box the gear and get everything ready for later; then it would be a quick roadie out the door when the Felix the drummer came over with the van to take the PA. He puffed away on the joint, holding the smoke in briefly then jetting it out through his nostrils as he deftly unwound a cable from the black tangle and dropped it neatly coiled into the milk crate. He'd already forgotten about the knocking and was working a riff in his head, thinking in guitar-sounds, when he heard the knocking again, much louder this time. He stubbed out the roach and went upstairs to find out who it was.

Jed opened the door, and there was the Orkin Man, his smokey breath visible in the mid-winter air.

"Hey there, buddy," the Orkin Man puffed, rubbing his hands together. His face flushed with cold above his tan Orkin coveralls and jacket, which was unzipped and had the name Ed stitched in red cursive on the left breast. He was a tall, robust looking middle-aged Orkin Man, maybe fifteen years older than Jed. "I was just wondering if I could do your service today," he said.

Jed rubbed his stubbly cheek and ran a hand through his messy, shoulder-length hair. It was four in the afternoon, and he had yet to shower. Suddenly, he realized just how stoned he was, and a wave of paranoia swept over him. How red

were his eyes? Did his breath reek? His clothes? Had the smell made it all the way up from the basement yet? After all, it was the skunk-bud.

Fantastic, sinister thoughts began to flash rapid-fire through his mind. What if the exterminator was a cop? Recently, a friend of a friend let a cable guy into her house, then stupidly went out, leaving the cable guy to discover her basement full of pot plants. It was incredible how stupid she was, and how unlucky. It turned out this cable guy wasn't just someone who'd steal her dope: he was up on possession charges. He rolled over on the girl in exchange for a walk away. thirty some plants she had going in that basement. Mostly just to share with friends and smoke herself. Now she was doing five to fifteen in some women's facility upstate for manufacturing with the intent to deliver. Jed had seen her at the bar a few times before her bust, a shaggy, sexy-looking girl with henna-colored hair and a tongue-bolt. He'd talked with her once or twice. She'd complimented his guitar playing. She was in for the bad shit now.

Jed was not so stupid as to leave anyone in his house alone, not with thousands of dollars of music equipment in his basement; but what if this guy was a cop, or was hooked to the cops somehow? With the Zero-Tolerance laws the way they were, that wet stub of pot sitting in the ashtray on top of his amp downstairs meant Uncle George and Co. could clean him out, take all his equipment. That's what they'd done to the girl, taken every single thing she owned right down to her mattress.

But Jed wasn't dealing or growing; he never had, so why would anyone be watching him. Maybe they were onto his dealer, and he was guilty of going over there every few weeks to score. They could have easily noticed his car, his short visits, then ran his plate to get his address. It wasn't that big of a stretch. Weird things had been going on with his phone, lots of hang-up calls, single rings then nothing. Sometimes he'd even pick up the receiver after a ring only to get a strange computerized beeping

static. And a few of his friends had openly asked him over the line to get bags for them, though he'd thought nothing of it at the time. Now all those hang-ups and strange noises and iffy conversations came crashing back down on him as he stood there staring at the Orkin Man, Ed. For all he knew this was some kind of set-up—he'd seen more outrageous breaches of people's rights on those Cops style TV shows. Anything was possible. Maybe he should just say no. Tell the guy he was busy, or heading out right now, do the spraying some other time. They couldn't bust him if he didn't let them in. At least not until they came with a warrant—unless this guy had one and was bluffing, testing him for some reason—but why would he bluff if he had a warrant?

But it was pointless anyway, their sweating him to get to his dealer. He knew less about Ron than they did. Ron was just a friend of a friend, a guy Felix had set him up with. He didn't know anything important about Ron; the only time he really even talked to Ron was when he went over his house to buy, though he did rap with him at the bars occasionally when the band was playing out. And what else could the cops possibly want of him if it wasn't a line into Ron? Jed himself certainly wasn't news; they'd get maybe a few gram's worth of weed off him, some pipes, his bong. They'd never waste the money and time on such a low-profile thing. Would they? No, this guy was probably just Ed, the Orkin Man, an exterminator.

Ed seemed to find this long, silent pause strange. He shifted back and forth on his feet. "Well, I can come back later if there's a problem, I guess," He said.

"No, it's alright," Jed told him, snapping to. "How long will it take?"

Ed shrugged, made a face that suggested this wasn't the kind of question he usually had to answer. "Heck, about twenty minutes, I guess."

"Okay, Jed said noticing the man was looking beyond him, surveying the living room, which was more or less already clean.

"That oak paneling you got there," Ed nodded past him.

"Yeah, I think so," Jed said, but he had no idea what kind of paneling it was or how to tell the difference between one kind of wood and another.

"Um hmm," Ed said, nodding his head. Then he just stood there, looking at Jed as if expecting something. "Well," he said finally, "if you'll let me through I'll get to it."

"Oh, yeah, sure thing," Jed said, stepping aside, "I thought you had to go and get the spray tank and all that."

"Nope, I got everything I need right here," Ed said as he reached into his jacket and pulled out a spray can with a four or five inch long straw-like nozzle attached to it. He walked past Jed into the living room and immediately began looking in the corners of the ceiling.

Jed decided that now would be a good time make a sweep of the rest of the house just to be sure everything was properly stashed. "Okay, I'll leave you to it," he said, and hurried off down the hallway toward the bedroom. At first he noticed nothing more incriminating than a scattering of his live-in girlfriend Heather's underwear, which he picked up with annoyance. Then he saw his three foot water bong standing in the corner next to the dresser, not obviously out in the open or anything, but certainly there for someone to see if they knew what they were looking for. He grabbed the bong and shoved it behind some clothes in the bedroom closet, hoping Ed had no reason to go in there, then he scanned the spare bedroom and found nothing. He went into the bathroom, grabbed the air-freshener spray from under the sink and headed toward the kitchen. When he got there, he was surprised to see Ed already there, down on his knees by the cupboards holding the spray can.

"You seen much action around here lately?" he asked Jed before eying the air-freshener and looking down to his work. He pressed the nozzle on the spray can's

top and squeezed a clear line of some chemical into the cracks between the cupboard's base and the tile floor. Jed noticed Ed's thick hands; the fine lines of dirt worked into the wrinkles of his fingers and under his nails were so dark they looked tattooed onto his skin. They didn't seem like the hands of a cop.

"No. Just the occasional ant," Jed said, thinking about the roach on top of his amp downstairs. "Hey, I'll be down in the basement if you need me," he added suddenly.

"Alright, then," Ed said.

But as Jed turned to go, he caught sight of the small silver pipe right next to the microwave on the kitchen counter, and a tingly shock of fear shot through him. He nonchalantly grabbed a dishrag and ran it across the countertop, palming the pipe as the rag covered it. He looked up and noticed Ed watching him.

"Always trying to keep ahead of the dirt," Jed said.

The exterminator glanced around the kitchen, which was also essentially clean, no dishes in the sink or on the counter. "Yeah, it's amazing how things can pile up on you without your realizing it," he said.

Jed nodded and smiled. "Isn't that the truth," he said. Just act normal was all he could think. Still holding the rag wadded in one hand, he went to the basement door. With both hands full he was forced to tuck the air-freshener under his arm before he could grab the knob. "What did he mean by that?" he was thinking as he cracked the door, stepped through and quickly closed it behind himself.

Jed sprayed a trail of air-freshener from the foot of the basement stairs all the way into the rehearsal space the band had sectioned off from the rest of the basement by hanging up blankets and strips of eggshell foam. He sprayed around inside the enclosure then set the can down next to his amp. His heart was sending nervous thunks through his chest. He scanned the space for anything else that could get him nailed,

then picked the roach from the ashtray and ate it. "Just the exterminator," he kept mumbling, "guy doesn't give a shit." He took a few deep breaths to steady his breathing and told himself everything was cool. Everything was fine, but he could still smell the weed beneath the air freshener's "mandarin orange" scent. He wished he had a cigarette.

Jed stuck the pipe inside his guitar case, sprayed another round of air freshener and tried to concentrate once again on untangling the wad of instrument cables and microphone cords in the middle of the rehearsal space. He tried not to think about it, but the exterminator-cop thing wouldn't quit running through his head—had the guy seen the pipe before he picked it up? What did it matter if he had? Was he in the middle of getting busted, or was that just Ed the Orkin Man, spraying his kitchen for bugs? Jed had an elaborate vision of Ed coming into the basement to tell him the game was over, he was busted, and how he'd fight Ed, knock him out, tie his legs and arms with guitar cables then run back up the stairs and jump into the Orkin truck and try to drive off, only to find cops blockading his street, cops springing out from behind trees in black ski masks and flack jackets with big white DEA letters painted on the backs, cops with shotguns who screamed "Freeze, Fuckers," before they pumped him full of bullets because he hadn't put his hands up fast enough. Jed shook the scenario off and threw down the tangle of cables in frustration.

All this worry had totally destroyed his buzz. This was all Heather's fault, she'd been the last one to use that pipe, he was certain. What the hell was she doing smoking pot in the kitchen for anyway. The kitchen was where you went after you were stoned. Queen of the Floor Hooks, Jed called her for the way she'd wear something once then throw it down anywhere. Why couldn't she learn to put something back where she'd found it when she was through? That pipe belonged in the stash box underneath the couch.

The basement door opened and Jed heard the exterminator clomping down in his work boots. He stood frozen behind the wall of blankets, his breathing short, as if caught at something. He shook the feeling off angrily and pushed the hanging blankets aside.

"Well, I've finished servicing the upstairs," Ed said, "kitchen, living room, your bedroom closet."

Jed felt his stomach turn. Why would he specifically bring up the bedroom closet? What the hell was this guy up to? Why didn't he just bust him if that's what this was all about? "So what if I like a to smoke a little pot?" he felt like screaming. "What about your goddamn beer, man? What's the difference? But Jed didn't say that. He knew he had to ride this one out, whatever it brought. Just play it cool. "Great," he said, "Anything else you need to do?"

Ed didn't appear to be listening. Or maybe he was ignoring Jed on purpose, Jed couldn't tell. He watched as Ed sniffed the air deeply a few times then started walking the basement's perimeter, stooping or stretching now and then to spray a line of chemicals into the crease where the walls met the floor or up toward the exposed beams of ceiling. But it all seemed so haphazard, less like Ed was spraying for insects and more like he was looking for something.

"Smells like you got a mold problem going on down here," Ed said after he'd made a circuit of the walls. "Termites love that moisture. They'll eat your joists out, send your whole world crashing down on you. "

"Well, I wouldn't really know," Jed said, "My girlfriend and I just moved here in December. I only rent this place."

"Hey, what you got going on in there," Ed said, walking over to the blankets and sweeping one aside with an arm. "Whew, look at all that gear. You a musician or something, buddy."

"Yeah, I'm in a band, we play around the area. Rock and roll."

"Man, must be nice not having to do the daily grind. Bet you get laid a lot."

"It's not really like that," Jed said, feeling embarrassment and a kind of shame heat his face, "It's a lot of work actually, practicing, promoting, booking shows, driving there and back to out of town gigs, loading in and loading out. The time you spend playing's probably the only good thing about it. It's not like were famous or anything. We all have day jobs. At least for now."

"I see," Ed said, looking Jed up and down, "hard work, huh. Hey, you guys do any Hank."

"Who?"

"Hank. Hank Williams senior, the greatest country musician of all time. Least I think so."

"Well, no, we don't play any country music."

"Oh, that's right," Ed said, "You said you boys play that rock and roll." And despite the situation, Jed actually felt a little twinge of hurt at the way he'd obviously just gone down a few notches in the man's opinion.

"You know you might wanna try learning some Hank. Goes over big in every bar I ever been in."

Jed was still nervous about the pipe, and the closet, but he doubted now that the exterminator was an informer, or a cop, or anything like that; he seemed too genuine; and again, why? Why would they waste time trying to bust him when he was no one? Obviously he was just being paranoid. This Ed seemed to be a good enough guy with his stocky build and hair greying at the temples, with his boots and his bulky tan uniform. He was probably just like most guys Jed knew, working his job, trying to make ends meet, though maybe wondering why Jed wasn't at work himself, since he'd just said he had a day job, which had been true until a few months ago when he'd quit

Dillon's Music World to live off unemployment checks and undeclared gig money while he concentrated on booking and promoting the band.

"Well, I'll talk to the guys in the band about it," Jed said, smiling, but Ed simply nodded.

Jed felt how awkward it was, the two of them standing there in his basement, just regular guys, looking for something to say to each other. Suddenly he wanted Ed to understand he was a straight-up person; he didn't want Ed thinking he was some lazy-ass, dope-smoking musician who laid around all day while real people were working. He'd spent almost ten years learning how to play the guitar. He'd worked hard to get this band up and going, spent hours on the phone promoting every day, and they were doing alright, pulling in four to six hundred a gig lately, gigging three-four nights a week. People were starting to notice. And maybe, if they kept at it long enough and worked hard and wrote good songs, they just might get signed. Maybe. It was a risk worth taking. But right now, for some reason, perhaps because of the weed and his up and down nerves over the whole situation, Jed wanted this exterminator, this regular guy, Ed, to know he'd done his share of man's work, of manual labor; he'd had his landscaping jobs and his janitor's job's and his assembly line jobs, et cetera. Jed wanted to say something to Ed, wanted him to know that even though he was a musician and a long-hair and had earrings he was still a good guy, an unpretentious guy anyone could talk to.

"So what's that stuff you were spraying," Jed said.

"FICAM-DUST," the exterminator said, looking at the can as if he needed to read the label. "Good stuff, takes care of spiders and ants."

Then Jed remembered the spider Heather had asked him to pluck off the kitchen ceiling just the night before. He'd held it gently in a tissue and carried it to the door to set it free into the cold night. After, he thought how the thing must have frozen solid

within a minute and how it probably would have been more humane to have flushed it down the toilet.

"Oh, yeah?" Jed said "Now that I think about it, I did catch a big spider on the kitchen ceiling a few nights ago, and a few weeks before that I saw a couple in the bathroom, and one in the bedroom."

"Thought you said it was just ants."

"I guess I forgot about the spiders until you mentioned them."

"I see. There a way into your garage from inside?"

"No," Jed said, "Just the garage door."

"You mind if I go in there to take a look around?"

"Let's go upstairs and I'll get the key."

Jed brought Ed back up into the kitchen, slipped on his boots, took his wad of keys off the hook and led Ed outside. The afternoon sun was bright on the snow, making Jed's eyes smart, and he could feel the illusion of warmth pushing through his flannel to his shoulders. As they crunched down the path toward the garage door, Jed began to wonder what the exterminator knew about insects. Jed loved to get stoned and watch those nature shows on cable, especially the ones about insects. "I think it was a wolf spider," Jed said as he unlocked door then slid it up on it's tracks.

"What?" Ed asked in a way that seemed almost angry.

"I said I think it was a wolf spider I saw on the kitchen ceiling last night."

"That's possible," Ed said, and he walked into the garage with his little container of FICAM. He seemed to want to get this over with now, working faster, crouching, stretching, hurrying to hit the corners and insect friendly spaces.

Jed stood there in the mouth of the garage feeling the sun on his shoulders, watching Ed move quickly through the dimness. "What other kinds of spiders like to get inside?" he asked.

Ed shrugged and made a curious face, "Well, any kind that wants to get away from the cold I suppose," he said.

Jed groaned inside himself for asking what he knew was a stupid question. The guy obviously wasn't a cop or an informant, but he'd probably seen that pipe and the bong. Jed didn't want Ed thinking he was some kind of burned-out half-wit. Maybe he did smoke pot almost every day, but his mind was still as sharp as anybody's; he just couldn't seem to think of anything interesting to say right now. He tried to concentrate and remember something interesting he'd heard about insects on one of those nature shows, but all he could feel was the beginnings of a come-down headache rising behind his eyes.

"I read somewhere Black Widow's like garages," Jed said, finally.

"Yep, and basements and attics, too, like most spiders. They like it in the corners."

"Well, that's sure where we've been seeing them," Jed said, eager to keep the talk going. "Man, just last night I'm in the basement working on a tune and I hear my woman upstairs screaming bloody murder, 'Oh, my god, there's a huge spider out here!' and I come running out of the basement into the kitchen and she's right, there's this big ol' spider all camped out in the corner of the ceiling. So I get a tissue and climb up on a chair and the thing starts jumping around like a goddamn rabbit before I can catch it and let it outside. It probably froze to death right away, I bet. The corners. Yep. You're absolutely right, man, that's where we've been seeing them, in the corners."

Jed was sure he'd only seen him spray one side and the back of the garage, but Ed abruptly stopped what he was doing and walked over to him, "Well, that about does it," he said, reaching inside his coat for something.

Once again Jed felt his blood quicken. This was it. How could he have been

so stupid; the guy was obviously connected, and on to him. Jed imagined himself jumping back—just like that wolf spider had done before he put the tissue to it—slamming down the garage door between them and keying the lock. But he stood there, frozen in his shock and fear.

Ed pulled out the pack of Winston's from inside his jacket and lipped one. With his free hand he stuck the can of FICAM into his jacket pocket then fished around in his overalls until he found his lighter. He lit up and held the pack out to Jed, "Like one," he said, and Jed just shook his head. Like the way they give a man his last one before shooting him, he thought.

"Yep, you're my last service for the day," Ed said, taking a drag and jetting it out through his nose, "Got to get on over to my daughter's and help her pack her stuff. She's going off to school at State. Damn, I'm so proud of that girl. She's really got her act together. Back when we divorced, her mother tried to suck me for every cent I had. Trailer trash. But I still managed to squirrel some away. I been putting some aside every check for three years now and just yesterday I put the payment down on a used Escort for my little girl. Now she'll be able to come and go like she wants. Won't have to take the bus to get to her part-time job. She busted her butt all through high school to better herself, get that scholarship. All her friends out partying devil may care, drinking and getting knocked up. Smoking that dope. Some people never learn what's important in life, you know what I'm saying?"

Jed nodded, met Ed's stare, then looked down at his own hands, not ingrained with dirt like Ed's, but long fingered and smooth with calloused finger tips, built for guitar playing. He noticed they were shaking. He stuffed them into the front pockets of his jeans.

"She's about the best a father could ask for, I'll tell you. Her mother though, phffff, who knows what the hell I was thinking there." Ed's voice trailed off as he

drifted back again into the wreckage of those days.

"Oh, yeah," he said suddenly, "Almost forgot." He reached inside his coat and pulled out a sheet of paper and a pen. He bent over, set the paper against his thigh and wrote briefly then stood again. "Sign here, please," he said.

Jed took the paper, signed against his own thigh and handed it back.

"Thanks buddy," Ed said. Folding the papers into his pocket, he gave what Jed thought was a very forced smile, then he walked a few steps out of the garage and turned back to face Jed again. He reached up a finger and pulled down the skin below his right eye. Jed saw the red, moist flesh beneath the eyeball before Ed let the skin snap up again. He cocked the finger like a gun at Jed. "You keep an eye out, now," he said, "Never know what's creeping around your house. I'll tell your landlord I've serviced you." And he walked down the driveway toward his truck.

Jed followed Ed for few feet then stopped and watched him go the rest of the way down driveway to his truck. He watched Ed peel the magnetic Orkin sign off his door and throw it into the truck's bed. He watched Ed take out his keys, open the door and get in without looking back. He had no idea how to take what Ed had just said; he wasn't sure if he'd offended him or if he was being warned—and what was that crazy shit with the eyeball? Jed wondered if it was the weed playing tricks on him, but when he searched himself for the buzz he couldn't find it. As Ed fired up his truck, Jed thought about how long he'd been smoking—more than ten years, since his freshman year of high school—and how, lately, it was nothing like the crazy, giggly buzz that had drawn him in. It was more like a confused rapid-firing of his thoughts these days, like a kind of schizophrenia, before he came down in an hour, then smoked some more to get the high back again. He watched the exterminator's truck slush down the driveway and out into the street; he had no idea who the guy was now. He fought down the ridiculous but almost uncontrollable urge to wave. Then Ed's truck slipped

out of sight behind the trees at the edge of the yard.

The sun went behind the clouds and Jed started shivering violently as he walked toward the house.. He was all wound up now. He needed to relax. Maybe he should smoke some more. Or maybe he should toss out that bong and those pipes and get it together before the cops came down on him like bad weather. He realized then that the roach he'd eaten earlier was the last of his bag. He'd have to go see Ron if he wanted more. He turned around and started heading down the walk to his car parked at the curb. He stopped after a few steps—he'd need his coat and wallet if he was going to Ron's to buy a bag. He turned around again and started walking back toward the house. He should start being more careful; the guys in the band would understand if he told them no more smoking pot in the house. He stopped again. Maybe he shouldn't go back inside. That's probably exactly what they were waiting for him to do, go inside so they could surround the house without his seeing, now that they had the visual evidence—what was that called, reasonable cause?. He could just split to the bar right now and call Heather at her job at Supercuts and tell her to throw out all the evidence the second she got home. But that was ridiculous, goddammit, Ed wasn't a cop or an informer. He was just a regular guy with a daughter and a greedy ex-wife. But maybe Ron would front him the bag, let him pay for it him later, he'd done it before. Jed turned around and started back down the walk toward his car. He could keep his weed and some papers stashed outside in a ziplock, under a rock or something. No more stuff in the house. That was it. A lesson to be learned here, the scare was good for something after all. Jed put the key in the car door and stood there without unlocking it—tough finding a good, safe stash spot, though, at least until the thaw, but he'd figure it out. He'd find a good place, not too far, but not too near. They'd never nail him that way.

RETREAT

Dad crunches down on his toast, bites in a half moon, and it's his grinding teeth, and the butter smell, and the little blob of red Jelly on his walrus-hairy lip that makes my bloated tummy cramp again. I push my cereal bowl away, check the time on the watch he gave me last month for my fourteenth birthday. A watch. Like I need a watch. Like I haven't spent enough time already staring at the stupid clock this first week at Refuge, waiting on three, waiting to get the hell away from those nuns and priests and out of that uniform skirt and into Ron's pool. Nope. I Need a watch. I need to carry every second I'm missing around on my wrist like some kind of punishment—even on a Saturday; I need to see the arms swinging exactly from seven twenty-nine and fifty-nine seconds into seven-thirty where they'll remind me I've only got ten more minutes to talk my way out of going on this stupid loser retreat.

"But I don't feel good, Dad," I say.

"Don't start with me again." Dad says and wipes his mouth on a white paper napkin.

"I got cramps," I tell him, and I hunch down and cross my arms over my stomach.

Dad wads the napkin, drops it onto his plate and pushes the plate away. He leans forward, thumps his elbows down on the table and starts to rub his temples with his fingers. "Well, what do you expect me to do? I don't know what to do. Didn't you talk to your mother about this when you stayed with her last weekend?"

I shake my head, he doesn't need to know what Mom said about "late awakenings" or my "friend" or the "curse" or any of the other names she called this bleeding I'm still waiting for; he doesn't need to know how she made me walk around

with a pad in my underwear all day Sunday just so I could get used to the feel of it. Besides, he wouldn't understand anyway; he's staring at me like I'm from another planet, and I'm sick of watching him chew like a cow.

"Jesus, dad, do you have to chew everything a million times?" I say.

His fingers snap closed and make two fists on either side of his face, and for a second his hard eyes make me think he's going to reach across the table and smack me, even though he's never hit me before.

"Don't swear," he says, and his hands drift down next to his plate as he settles back in his chair, "You pick up that kind of talk from your mother?"

"Since when have you ever cared if I swear?"

"I know you didn't pick up that kind of talk at school."

"Jesus, Jesus, I say it a million times a day at that place, dad. What'd you expect. I wouldn't be saying it so much if I was going to Lakeview with my friends like I wanted instead of to some stuck-up all girl's Catholic school like you wanted. I don't even know anybody there. And since when do you care so much about Jesus? You haven't been to church once since you and mom got divorced."

"Church isn't the point here, Jana," he says. "The point is for you to get the best education possible, and Redemption is a better high school than Lakeview—that's why it costs so much."

"What if I promise to get all A's at Lakeview? You can take me out and send me back to Refuge if I don't, I swear. C'mon, dad."

It bugs me so much my throat feels tight and suddenly I want to cry, but I know crying only makes him madder, so I hold it in, turn it into something angry instead, "I hate it there. All my friends are at Lakeview, being freshmen together was practically the only thing we talked about this summer. It's my life. I should be able to go to public school if I want."

He gets up and goes to rinse his plate in the sink to make sure I know we're done talking. The water hisses on, shuts off, he cups a few drips in his hand wipes down his mustache. "Believe me, Jana, this is for the best," he says on his way out of the kitchen.

Right. For the best. The point is. God, I hate him when he tries to make it sound like this is for my own good, something I should be glad about. I know what "for the best" means; I know what the real point is, and it's not how good my teachers are. The real point is to keep me away from Ron, his pool, his basement where his mother almost caught us before we could get our hands out from inside the front of each other's damp bathing suits. The real point is to sic the nuns on me, keep my head full of too much homework, and sad, perfect Jesus. It's for the best that I'm not a hassle to my single Dad, that I don't do anything but pray and stay the little girl he wishes I still was.

The bird-feeder right outside our kitchen window is covered with noisy cardinals. Their bright red feathers flash in the morning sunlight while they hop and flap and crack the seeds with their beaks. One seems to notice me and freeze. I can almost see myself in his shiny-black eye before he decides he doesn't care about me anymore and flies away.

Jupiter, Florida is hot enough at the end of August that we're both sweating before we even reach the car. I try for my door, but it's locked, and then I get another cramp, and I remember shoving the brand new box of Kotex Thins into my backpack. For a second I just want it to start and be over with, then I imagine what it would be like to canoe down a river with a pad moving around in my shorts, blood sneaking down my leg. "Bogue, oh, my god, she's bleeding," I can already hear one of those idiots making fun of me. Nice way to start a rep as a loser. Maybe I'll be lucky and it won't start until I come back on Sunday.

"Quit with the attitude, Jana," Dad says as he tosses my stuff in the trunk and clicks the door locks open with the little gizmo on his keychain, "You like canoeing. Why don't you just try to make the best of it? It'll do you good to get to know the girls in your class. You're not going to have the same friends your whole life, you know."

"All the friends I need are going to Lakeview," I say as I yank open my door.

We take the side streets to Redemption. The cramps are hitting me on and off all the way there, and I remember the naked, pregnant women from my dream last night. They were lying in a row, more than I could ever count, on the floor of a white room that never ends, and each one kept a tiny colored ball floating just above her lips like she could breathe out air forever and never need to breathe in. So beautiful, holding hands, looking relaxed with their feet planted and their knees bent and opened just a bit. Each one let go of the others and reached up to touch my legs as I went past; and I woke up feeling peaceful, until the uniform thrown over the back of my chair made me remember what day this is.

But now the dream is starting to slip away. Full bellies, swollen boobs, the steady hiss their breath made against those spinning, colored balls. I can see it and I can't, like a memory, except that's not what it is. I try to bring back the way their warm hands made me feel, what their eyes said. Dad turns the AC on high. The cool air makes my hot skin feel clammy, I rub my arms to kill the goose-bumps, point all my vents at him. The sprinklers in our suburb pop up and start to spit. We get hit with a couple fat drops then the world melts when a jet of water nails my window.

We drive past Laurie's. She's probably sleeping in—just like I'd be doing if I was going to Lakeview like I should be. And they don't even start school until next Wednesday. Last night, when I was complaining to her on the phone, she said the whole group of our friends knows it won't be the same without me there every day. But we still had the weekends—except for this one—and after school, didn't we?

Sure. She's the one sitting in classes with Ron, talking to him at lunch, seeing him in the hallways. I wanted to slam the receiver down and pop her ear-drum for making fun of me, for being such a sneaky bitch. But I didn't. Only because I knew she'd say that's not true; she'd say we're still best friends, like always, while forgetting to mention this was the perfect chance for her to get in the way of what I'd hoped for me and Ron. Almost hard to blame her when I think about how she'll spend today playing Shark Attack with the rest of my friends in his parent's pool. And with all those other girls around trying to get his attention, why should Ron even bother to think of me, stuck on the Our Lady of Redemption Freshman Orientation Retreat, paddling down some river with a bunch of people I barely even know. He never asked me to "go" with him. He never said kissing or touching me meant something was long term was guaranteed to happen between us. But Laurie knows better than to do that to me, and what about Jed or Al or any of Ron's other buddies who will be there too. God. Who am I kidding? I won't be who she's thinking about when she puts on that sick-yellow bikini and slides into the pool with the rest of them; I won't be on her mind when she hangs her legs over the side of the raft. She'll be the one laughing this time, hoping for the feel of Ron's hand, first around her ankle, then higher on her thigh as she's pulled under.

It's super-hot inside the half empty bus but I don't care. I don't feel like talking to anyone, so I walk quickly down the stuffy aisle and pick a seat near the back. I set my backpack and sleeping bag next to me to fill up the rest of the seat and pull down my window, where someone's written in black magic marker, "I want out," and "Eat Me," on the pale grey paint. It makes me smile. I wish I knew the girl who wrote it. I wish I had a marker of my own so I could add, "Jesus gloves me," or "Redeem Redemption", something stupid or funny like that.

I'm glad I'm still sitting alone when the bus begins to move. I pluck at my

sweaty t-shirt, squint down at the cars that glint sun as they pass. It's still too hot, even with the breeze, and Jupiter goes past in a shimmer of heat, like the whole city is under water or stuck in the middle of melting. Everyone is talking, and I try to tune out their giggly bullshit about boys and bands and teachers they're just beginning to secretly like or hate. "He kept on trying for second base but I just pushed his hand away—Doesn't the singer in Splodge Pipe look punk with his head shaved— I hear father Kessel never gives out A's in Freshman Theology." God, who cares? It's all so stupid. Stupid Little girls who went to Catholic grade school together, Jesus and everything safe shoved up inside their heads. They don't know anything about guys or music. I'm probably the only one on this bus who's ever even heard of the Misfits or the Dead Kennedy's or the Ramones or the Pistols or any of those other on that home-made tape I borrowed from Ron. Ron. Drinking pop, belly flops onto the rubber raft from off the diving board. Water volley ball with the floating net. Maybe pairing off when his mom goes out. Second base. How stupid. Something off a Happy Days re-run. Nobody talks that way anymore. And their nervous laughing about it. They have no idea what it means to be touched where it counts by someone you like. I laughed into his mouth when he touched me between the legs with his cold hand that first time. My hand on his chest, pressed against his heart beating so fast, like he'd been running after me for miles. He laughed quietly right with me, our kiss curving up into a smile as he pressed himself closer, eyes closing, dark spot, warm between us, rubbing, electric skin; which is the way I want to remember it as I let the engine's humming take the rest of their voices away. I wake up as the bus is passing through the park gate, slipping beneath a roof of trees into the green shadows where the air becomes wetter—like soaked sheets—but doesn't get cool. Limbs slap the metal sides and drag along. A little scream, more giggling when a branch shoves a fist of leaves through an open window.

We jerk to a stop at the canoe livery, and I'm glad when Father Kessel says he's already picked our partners for the trip. At least now I won't have to worry about finding someone to ride with. He stands up at the front and reads our paired names off a clip-board. Tan shorts and sweat stained t-shirt, white legs and skinny arms and limp grey hair poking out from under a fishing hat—he reminds me of a tour guide without his rope belt and robe.

Off the bus, my partner comes up to me right away.

"I'm Carla," she says, and I notice she's actually wearing make-up on a canoe trip. Then I catch the smell of perfume, hairspray riding the hot air. "You didn't go Refuge with any of them either, did you?" she says and gives the others a flick of her thumb.

I shake my head no, "Parcels Middle School."

"Ligget," she says, and I think I recognize her from algebra class. "I guess they want to keep the kids from public school together."

"Easier to keep an eye on us that way," I say without smiling, but she still laughs.

Father Kessel comes out of the livery fanning himself with his clip-board. He tells us to line up by the door for our paddles and life jackets, "Order girls, be polite, form a line, this way," he says, and they all really do follow him, just like sheep.

"Do you actually know anything about canoeing," Carla asks as we get in line.

I flick my hand through the little gang of gnats circling my head, "My dad's taken me a bunch of times," I say. "He taught me all the strokes." Then I notice the mosquito bites on the inside of my thigh. Great. I'm sure I'll look hot covered with a million huge welts when I go swimming over at Ron's after school on Monday.

"You'd better ride in back," Carla says, "I've only been once, and that was with my boyfriend, so we didn't do much canoeing." She smiles and lifts her eyebrows like

she's sure I understand.

"Did you bring any bug spray" I ask her. "I'm getting eaten alive."

"Yeah, my mom gave me some of this aloe lotion repellant stuff that even smells good." She pulls a squeeze bottle out of her back pocket and hands it to me, and I start thinking she might not be half-bad.

After everybody's taken their white floating seat cushions and paddles from the ranger he makes us go sit in the shade of a wood pavilion near the dock so he can give us what he calls the "rules of the river." But it's way too hot too even bother with that. No clouds, giant saw-grass; gnarly, high-rooted swamp trees and palms; air that feels like moss when you breathe; river so shiny with sun I can't even look at it "...water moccasin's mean the river can be dangerous and that is why you will stay in your canoes at all times until we have reached the cabins at the camping area..." and then I notice a little green lizard sunning itself on one of the pavilion posts. Once, when I was little, I caught one, kept him prisoner in my fist until he ejected his own tail to escape, left it wiggling in my hand.

When the ranger has finished with the rules, Father Kessel tells us to stand. Now we get to pray before we can go sweat all the way down the river. Everybody signs in. Father turns his palms up, "Dear Lord Jesus, keep these girls strong in your purpose. Help them come to know you better in thought and deed and in all the works and days of their lives. Help them today as they meditate and look to nature for affirmation of your wisdom. Help them tomorrow and ever after as they..." And he goes on with it, just another noise floating off into the background of buzzing bugs and bird whistles and the gurgling river I glance up at just in time to see a silver fish jump out, spinning, shining wet for a second in the sun before it splashes and back under again.

For the next few hours I steer us mostly straight with my J-stroke, even though I have to keep wiping my sweaty, dripping face with the back of my forearm every

other stroke. Less bugs out here on the water, but it's sweat they love, and nice-smelling aloe bug-lotion or not, I've got a little morgue of crushed mosquito bodies, sticky with my stolen blood, lined up on the metal cross-bar where I've smeared them from my palm. So hot. I just want to lean over and fall into the river and float away, all the way back home, right over to Ron's. But the ranger says no, we're not even allowed to rinse our mouths with this water much less swim in it. At least the heat or the moving around has made my cramps ease up. Only hurting less almost makes me worry more, and for a while I take every little twinge or gurgle in my tummy like a warning to wad my t-shirt up between my thighs while I make a dive for my backpack—but nothing like that happens—and then there are gangs of burping frogs and the silver jumping fish and turtles plopping off logs and bright little birds twirling out of the thick, green walls that line the river, and maybe that's even the hint of a breeze I feel.

"How do you like Redemption so far?" Carla asks. My stomach tightens up, sweat drops burn into my eyes, and I smash the mosquito on my knee into a red mess because she's brought me right back to this pack of girls, paddling, thumping gunnels all around me.

"It sucks," I say, and then I see the canoe with Father Kessel and the ranger coming up along side us. "Since you two have time for idle talk you've obviously thought out your answers to our lunch-time discussion questions," he says with his paddle across his knees, and I notice he's staring mostly at me. I shake my head, look down at the little trench of muddy water that runs along the canoe's spine. "Well, I look forward to hearing your thoughts."

Behind him, holding water in the stern, the ranger grins and shakes his head. Suddenly, he seems a lot younger than I thought at first, like twenty-one or so, and the smirk on his face makes me wonder exactly who he's making fun of. Before I have a

chance to figure it out for sure, he cuts the water with his paddle and shoots them off toward the head of the pack.

"That ranger's kind of cute," Carla says. "Did you see the way he smiled at us?"

Once he's out in front of everyone, the ranger turns his canoe sideways in the slow-moving river and points toward a clearing where there's a long dock running along the shore and another pavilion waiting. "To your right is the Dickenson picnic area," he half yells, "We'll be stopping there for lunch. Pull up to the dock and stay in your canoe until I come by to help you disembark."

All at once the other girls start paddling for the dock. I tell Carla to wait, show her how to hold water the same way the ranger was doing. We sit near the center of the river watching the rest of them bumping sterns and bows, scraping the canoes against each other—pinning their own paddles as they splash their way toward the dock like a bunch of idiots. "Patience, girls, Father Kessel is saying over the noise as he lets the ranger help him climb out of their canoe. "Form a line, form a line," he tells them, walking up and down the dock, wiping his face with a hankie. One at a time, the ranger helps them off their seats then pulls their canoes from the river and lays them upside down to drain.

After he's done with the last of them, I sweep my paddle in a big half circle to turn the bow and hope he sees. Carla's right. He is cute. Tall like Ron who's only seventeen, but not as skinny. I tell Carla to stop paddling, and I see he's watching me as I angle our nose toward the dock then steer us in so smooth the starboard side barely kisses the wet edge of the wood before we stop.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts. Jerk. How stupid can it get, having to stand up in front of everybody and explain why Jesus is important to your life? God, I'm surprised I didn't start bleeding right then, standing up in front of everyone

like a dork. "Because he loves me if I love him, no matter where I go or what I do," that stumped him alright. And then that sandwich. Warm bologna and cheese. No way, I'd barf that up in a second. Raisin cookie wasn't bad, though, at least it had some sugar in it, and I stole a couple extra for later when no one was looking.

Four o'clock, still way too hot and the ranger's already told us that at this rate we won't be seeing the cabins until six. Carla's finally caught on, though, one hand on the pommel, the other low down on the shaft like I've been telling her. Good, strong, straight strokes, my dad would say. She knows staying way out in front of the pack is the only way to keep Father Kessel off our asses. She looks over her shoulder for the first of the canoes to come into view around the green curve of the river behind us. Paddling hard has cost her the make-up, which is getting kind of blotchy around her eyes, but I don't say anything about that.

"Do you have a boyfriend, Jana?" she asks before she turns back to paddling.

I think about Ron and that time last weekend in the basement. He made no promises. I wonder if I let him touch me as my own promise of something more, a trick to keep his mind on me until I come back for him.

"Yeah," I lie.

"What's he like?"

I don't answer her right away. I put my paddle across my lap and start to think of ways to try and tell her about his dark skin and long black hair and almost spooky blue eyes, and then I realize how everybody's probably still over his house swimming, splashing around, having fun right now. I know the game they're playing. I can hear their laughter. When I get home tomorrow evening, too late for anything, Laurie will call and tell me about where his hands have been. In the dark on the floor of my room, I'll listen to her. I'll wish it was me he touched instead.

"Hey, aren't you steering us anymore?" Carla yells and I look up just in time to

watch us run a-ground on a half drowned tree trunk not too far from the bank.

"Oh, man, we've got to get off this thing before Father Kessel sees us," Carla says. "He'll probably give us detention for going too far ahead of everyone," and she's got her hand wrapped around one of the dead limbs poking just above the water, "C'mon, help me push us off," she says, and before I can tell her no she steps from her seat onto the slick log and slips and falls in. She comes up a couple seconds later, spitting water, thrashing around like crazy, "It's got my leg she shouts," and I almost start yelling for help when she laughs and stands up in the waist high water instead of going under again. "Scared ya, huh," she says, and starts splashing me and the water is so good and cold I splash her back until we're both all wet and laughing and barely able to hear Father Kessel a little ways down the river screaming, "I said you girls stop that foolishness right now."

The sun is getting low, cutting in glimpses through the trees and glinting off the nearby river as the ranger gets a fire going in the pit. He looks even cuter and younger than he did before, his cheeks puffing out as he blows. His hair is black like Ron's but it's not nearly as long, and I can see the pale scar curling down his neck and away under his shirt, and he has thick, veiny hands same as my dad's. The fire rises up, crackles, spits at him like a snake. He taps it with his boot and bits of red ember float above his head and disappear. All around I hear whispers and giggles and I know the others have finally noticed him.

"Time for evening meditation, girls" Father Kessel says as he steps into the clearing from the path that leads off to the cabins. Everyone take their places around the fire."

The girls break off from their little groups and find places for themselves with their blankets on the ground. Carla sits down next to me, looks around to make sure no one's watching, then puts her hands together by her cheek and makes a fake snoring

sound. I can't help but smile and nod.

The evening is a more comfortable kind of hot, and there's green spongy ground, and tall, fat-leaved plants, and the loud, non-stop noise of an entire world of crickets or whatever's winding up for the night.

Father Kessel tells all the girls to lie on their backs and relax, just like that gyno doctor my mom made me go see this last summer. I don't want to. I'd rather watch the ranger build the fire, or the sun sinking red-pink above the tips of the far-off trees, or the near-by river which I see turning blue-black in the dusk. But I lie down like he says to. What else can you do?

"Close your eyes and think of what we've discussed today," Father Kessel says, and I can hear his voice moving, getting louder as he walks around the outside of our circle toward me. "Meditate on the mystery of faith, the power of Jesus' love for our imperfect souls. What small sacrifices He asks in return for the incredible gift of Eternal Life. Obey His laws, live righteously, pray to Him, and the endless bliss of paradise is ours. How amazing. How truly loved we all are." His loud voice comes to stop right above my head, and I know he's standing over me, glowing with fire-light and all his answers. I know he's out there, lost somewhere in reddish-blackness that goes on forever underneath my closed eyelids.

"But it's hard," he says, "The ways of the flesh are so easy. So close. So familiar. Obvious. How do we stay on the path of the righteous? How do we keep from sowing our seed among the brambles that will choke us into lives of sin?" I hear him breathe out a long sigh, like he knows there's something he can never beat waiting out there for him, then his voice gets farther away as he starts walking again. "You girls are entering an age where you'll have to make a lot of difficult decisions. You take the example of our Lord Jesus. He was God and man and in your times of weakness He must be your guide. I want you to think about the Lord Jesus right now, I

want you to imagine him like he's someone you know, a friend of yours, sitting there next to you on the ground, talking to you about God's love for you."

I try to imagine this, my friend Jesus like a hippie with his long hair and beard and bare feet and dirty robe.

"Tell him how you feel," Father Kessel goes on. "Tell him what you won't tell anyone else. Ask him to help you if you feel confused or lost. He'll always listen."

Jesus takes my hand and my body gets warm the way it does when I'm floating and dreaming in the bathtub. He tucks a strand of his long hair behind his ear and bends over me, "I have been watching you," he whispers, then smiles. He leans down to kiss my lips. He has Ron's beautiful eyes. "You've never needed me to forgive yourself or anyone else," he says.

Something in my belly peels and falls away, a cramp shoots across my hips, and I sit up like my spine is on a hinge. I open my eyes, the sun is below the trees now, it's darker in the clearing where we are, but the sky is still streaked with red-pink swirls. Father Kessel stares me down from across the fire, his face a scary puzzle of bright spots and long shadows, the way a kid's is lit when he holds a flashlight under his chin.

"Haven't we had enough disturbance from you today, Jana," he says, without bothering to try and sound nice about it. Behind him, I can see the ranger leaning up against the trunk of a tree. He's whittling a stick with his buck knife and he's got that same smirky grin on his face.

"I have to go to the bathroom," I say.

Father Kessel lets out a hrummph and looks up at the sky for a second before he turns to the ranger. I stand up and walk around the circle toward them. All the girls turn their heads to follow me as I go past, and I want to look down at myself and check for the stain I'm almost sure is there, but I can't. The ranger is already standing when I

walk up, a flashlight in his hand. "Just follow the path back to the cabins," he says, and hands the light to me. "You'll see it on your right. You can't miss it."

Once I get out of sight, I'm practically running down the path back to the cabins and the outhouses. I rip open the outhouse door, pull down my shorts and shine the beam into my underwear and across my thighs, I even bend forward a little bit to get a better look at myself, but there's no blood anywhere. I sit down on the wooden seat. Goddammit, I can't stand any more of this stupid waiting, this stupid trip, all this Jesus talk. How am I supposed to know what Jesus means to me? How am I supposed to know what anything when I'm only fourteen. I can't even bleed like I'm supposed to, like Laurie and most of my girlfriends already do. They're probably all at the roller-blade park or the movies or the mall by now, maybe even still at Ron's house watching something funny on the VCR, maybe under blankets, hands crawling around. Shit. And I'm about to slap the wood wall with my fist when I feel something tickling my shin. I swing the light, catch tickle in the beam, it's the biggest, ugliest, spider I have ever seen in my life.

"God, Jana," says Carla, a few hours later, when we're almost alone in our cabin, sitting cross-legged on my bunk playing Rummy, "we could hear you screaming the whole way back to the fire pit." She shakes her head, smiles again, "You may not be big on boobs, but you sure got lungs," and she covers up her mouth with her cards to hide her laughing. "I thought father Kessel was gonna blow a nut."

"That's not true," one of the idiots says, "He was concerned. He's only trying to do what's best for us. He cares is all."

"Yeah, he cares so much he needs to talk to my dad when we get back tomorrow just to make sure I'm alright." I say. I won't be doing any swimming over Ron's this week. I wonder if it's okay to hate a priest. Carla snorts and shakes her head. In a way, I can see how the whole thing is funny—my scream ballooning out

until I'm there by the edge of the circle of firelight, panting, "Spider. Huge," while I try to catch my breath. Everyone laughing. Father Kessel's angry red face.

"You shouldn't talk about him like that," the idiot says with wide eyes as she zips up her backpack, "It's not right." and she walks out the door to go find the rest of them, probably ganged up in one of the other cabins, talking about us, about me.

"Rummy," Carla says, and she lays all her cards down, "you need to pay better attention if you want to win."

I nod, don't bother to say anything. There's way too much to think about already.

"We don't need to keep score," Carla says as she scoops up the cards and starts to put them all together in the pack. She shuffles once or twice then stops, gets off the bunk, looks around the cabin and at the tops of the other four bunk beds to make sure we're alone.

"So how far do you let him go?" she asks, sitting back down.

"Who," I say.

"Your boyfriend," she says, "You said before you had a boyfriend. Have you touched him, yet? Is it big? Gary's is big,"

"He's got a huge pool," I say. "His name is Ron."

"He wears one of those little speedo suits, doesn't he?" she says. "You probably go swimming over there all the time."

I nod, look down at my lap.

"I bet he's really cool, I'd like to meet him," she says and starts to deal. "We should double date or something, my parents go out of town a lot and it's just me and my older brother. He's a Junior at CC, you'd like him. All my friends from Eisenhower think he's cute,. He's even got a fake ID."

I hear what she's saying, but more than anything I'm thinking of the last time I

was in Ron's pool and what he told me about the Boyscout once I explained I wouldn't be over this weekend because I had to do a retreat on the Loxahatchee river. "It was like two years ago," he'd said in the deep end where we floated by ourselves, our bodies hanging part-way off the rubber raft. "The kid was in my cousin's friend's troupe. Stepped out of the canoe to goof around on a sand bar and BOOM the gator took him by the leg and drug him off. Just like that." Then he made a growling noise and grabbed me and we slipped off the raft and under the water and I thought I was going to drown I was screaming and laughing so hard. Later on, his mom went out shopping, and we left the others swimming to go off by ourselves in the basement, like he might have done with someone else today.

"What's the matter, Jana? You look kinda pissed-off, did I say something?"

"You shouldn't have gotten into the river. You heard what the ranger said about the water moccasin's. Something bad could've happened."

"Oh, come on," she says and tosses down her cards, "that was the most fun anybody had all afternoon and you know it. So what if the river's dangerous. Nothing happened, did it? Can't you tell how jealous they all are? None of them had the guts to do that. You come to the party my brother and me are planning on throwing once my parents leave for Europe next month. Now that'll be dangerous," she says and picks her cards back up. "And we got a pool too, you know."

A few hands later the cramps are back and I have to rock and fold my arms across my stomach to keep from going nuts.

"I don't think I can play cards anymore," I say, "I don't feel so hot. I think I should go to bed."

"You got cramps? Gonna get The Visitor, huh," Carla says and she breathes out and shakes her head like she's been through it a million times already, "man, that's a bitch, but it's better than having to worry about being late." She gets up off my bunk

and walks to the cabin door, "I think I'll go see if that ranger's still hanging around the fire pit. He's probably getting pretty lonely by now." She smiles, gives me those eye-brows again. "See you later."

"Yeah, see you later," I say and watch her walk through the screen door and off into the dark before I crawl inside my sleeping bag with my clothes still on. She acts so old sometimes. I wonder how far she's really let her boyfriend go. "The Visitor," I say to myself, like it really is some mysterious person. A man who keeps showing up out of nowhere. Next to my bed. In my bathroom. "Believe it, I'll be back," he says and he spreads open the red walls of my mouth and climbs inside me. The Visitor. Like an alien from across the universe who keeps showing up just to make me bleed. I don't remember my mom ever calling it that.

Cramps shoot, burn like stars across my black insides. Too hot in this bag. Too hot. I crawl back out and lie on top. Let the bugs have another shot. Feel one on my shin already, sticking that needle in—too tired and achy to smash him. Mom. How does she put up with this? No wonder her and Dad don't get along—but that's not true—they used to. Sunday morning's squeaky bed, muffled voices coming from their room. She'd pop out into the hallway humming, smile at me. Smell of bacon in the kitchen, Dad flipping pancakes. Church after breakfast and I'm eleven right between them kneeling on the dark, red kneelers of incense—smokey St. Ambrose, where the priest held the host up above his head, out to me, away from the giant statue of crucified Jesus pinned to the wall by floodlights. Seems like a long time ago. Haven't thought of Jesus for years. Until lately. Jesus. So tired, head leaning to one side, made fun of and whipped and stabbed, eyes rolled back, slack mouth always on the verge of shouting, "oh, no you don't," and his hands rip off the nails to grab the hammer out of that Roman's hands and break his face with it. Tired, way too tired for that. Splash holy water from the big marble fonts on the painted blood dripping from

the wounds, wash yourself, water salty like sweat dripping down my forehead after making the sign of the cross on my way out, salty water, dripping, washing off blood, warm sun outside...

...and the sky greying into dawn when my eyes snap open; a soft, steady breathing of girls telling me what I finally know for sure: The Visitor is here.

I grab a one of the Thins from my backpack and fold it into the back pocket of my cutoff's. When I stand I see Carla is sleeping on the top bunk, her face turned toward the wall. I leave her there, snoring quietly, and go outside.

The sky is getting lighter, across the river the tips of the trees glow like matchsticks, but the moon is somehow still out, bluing the darkness that covers the ground, and I head down the path toward the fire-pit because I will not go into that outhouse again. I can see the clearing, the fire going, until a huge shadow blocks the mouth of the path. I think about stepping off into the saw-grass where I won't be seen, but a beam of light nails me to the spot, and there I am covering my eyes with my arm and blinking.

"Up a little early, aren't you?" the ranger says.

"Gotta go," I say and in the yellowy beam of his light I notice I've got my legs squeezed together.

"Don't want to use that outhouse anymore, eh? Can't say I blame you. Never use it myself, doesn't seem right, somehow. Best to be natural, use leaves or a smooth stone." And then he just stands there, outlined in light from the fire he's had going since last night, smoke rising behind his head. My heart starts beating fast. I want to run away. I want to run toward him.

"Come with me," he says. I follow him across the clearing, where I see his big sleeping bag is laid out by the fire, then off into the saw-grass. A warm breeze blows across us, and I stay close, inhaling his wood-smoke smell, watching his beam of light

shine off in the tall, whispering everything as he picks a path through the half-dark. I trip on a rock or a log, start to fall. His strong hand shoots out, covers mine, and he pulls me up again, "Watch yourself," he says, squeezing.

"Yes," I say, "I will," and we walk on. Now I smell his wood-smoke on my fingers. I can't help wondering what it would feel like for him to touch me again, pull me close with his sooty hands. Was he alone when Carla found him?

Suddenly he stops, turns, and I almost crash right into his chest. We're in another little clearing near the river. The water gurgles as it goes past. I can smell sweet coffee on his breath. "This okay?" he asks and moves his flashlight in a circle around us. I'm about to tell him it's perfect when a strange barking sound comes to us from a distance.

"Alligator's" he says, "Don't worry, they're more afraid of us than we are of them" He waves his beam at the river still black and liquid-shiny with the moon. "I'll be right over there. Just give a holler when you're done."

He turns his back on me, walks off towards the river's edge. I yank my cut-off's down and squat in the grass turned white by the moon. I touch myself, and there's more than enough light to see the dark smear in my finger. I catch a faint whiff of iron, wipe my finger on the grass, then pull the back off the sticker and put the pad down on top of the small stain in my underwear.

I stand, slide up my shorts, hook the button. Finally. I feel like someone's pulled a plug inside me, let me out of myself. I see my own body, my own body, mine to own, bleeding, bare feet planted solid on the spongy ground, bony heels strong enough to smash the skull of a snake. We've made our deal, blood deal, me and Jesus, Jesus with Ron's eyes, Ron who's asleep right now with me standing over him dripping salty water into his mouth. Skin. Life of skin, our deal, men with mouths, nothing forever, divorce or dying, then tired, bloody arms reach up toward an endless,

empty sky. Later, when the sun is high, I'll find what I need to bring him. Pearly piece of oyster shell. Flamingo bone. Snake skin. Something like he's never seen. Ron. Boy. I'll make him touch it, put it in his hand. His hand. Other hands. A lifetime of hands is all we're ever given.

Something small rustles behind me in the grass. I stare at the spot, but there's nothing I can see. Otter. Water-rat. I almost feel like I could dive in after it, jump on it, hold it by the scruff, until I hear the rustling getting farther away. I look for the ranger. He's standing perfectly still, waiting for me by the river, just like he said, a statue staring out at the water, his flashlight beaming down from where he holds it next to his head. I want to call out, say, "Hey, I'm ready." I want to go over there and stand next to him and see what makes him hold his breath that way. I want to point into the dark river, whisper, "Alligator," in his ear as his light touches the bright, hungry eyes coming to the surface. And I move toward him.

GETTING BEATEN

You're just this side of Jackson, speeding eastbound along I-94 while listening to the college football game on your car radio. It's a crisp, October Saturday you're driving through, an afternoon of light breeze and clear blue sky, of leaves turned red-gold along the highway: a picturesque fall day in Michigan. But you're not noticing the scenery. You aren't even seeing the road, because you're being sucked along with the traffic's flow, watching the game unfold across the window of your mind, and right now you're starting to get pissed off because your team—your Alma mater—is choking, getting beaten.

"no! nO! NO! NO! NO!," you slap a hand down on the dash at the interception, the violent arc of your arm hitting and setting into a wild swing the scapula and transparent 3-D eyeball necklace you have hanging from the rearview mirror of your compact car. You shoulder back into your seat, squeezing the steering wheel in both hands as Michigan, the wrong team, runs the interception back for a touchdown. "Unbelievable," you say through clenched teeth as the crowd noise drowns out the radio announcer's voice.

It's hard to believe how fast the game has turned. First the blocked punt run back for a score and now this interception—all in the last few minutes before the half. Three mile markers ago Michigan State was winning ten to seven. Now, as the extra point goes up and through, they're down twenty-one to ten. You take a pull off the squeeze bottle of water you've bought to help your hang-over and wonder why this kind of annoying crap always seems to happen to you. You hardly ever pay attention to football in the first place. You might take in the occasional game at a buddy's house or in a bar, but you don't really care who wins. Why is it, then, that every time you get

involved, set some loyalties, your team falls apart—even when they're favored. It's gotten so you're starting to wonder if there's some kind of jinx flowing within your devotion. And though you know it can't possibly make any difference at all, you actually think about turning the radio off to give State a better chance at winning.

U of M kicks-off, and you're half-expecting State to fumble the return (you'll definitely turn the game off then, because, jinxed or not, you won't be able to take anymore). But State doesn't fumble the kick-off, and now they've got the ball on their own thirty-five with over a minute to go before the half. More than enough time for a hurry-up offense to set up a field goal, or make a few Hail Mary passes into the end-zone. "Let's go, Let's go," you're telling them, already imagining the long arc of the Bomb and the leaping scramble for the descending ball. Instead, the Spartan coach runs three fullback dives in a row before having the QB down—it to run out the clock. "Jesus, George, you're such a pussy," you tell the coach. You drive along listening to the half-time analysis for a few minutes, the announcers voices filling the car over the sound of cheering and the band's tinny brass, then your mind drifts to other things.

A lot of this pointless anxiety is probably due to your piss-poor mood, the fact that you're late and hung over and still have more than an hour's drive to Johnny's house in Detroit where you're supposed to be watching this game with your old-school buddies before helping get things ready for Dogger's bachelor party after. But that doesn't really explain this rage you feel at the game's going sour. It's only a game for god's sake—even if it is U of M against MSU—the biggest college rivalry in the state; it's not like you've got money down or anything.

The Spartan band kicks into the fight song that reminds you of those home games back in college. You and your buddies would stand around the student section screaming your heads off, passing around the bottles of schnapps you'd snuck in under your coats. You'd drink and wait until someone below grabbed a co-ed and hoisted

her up, up over everyone's heads, all the guys copping a feel as she was carried hand over head above the crowd and tossed—for all you ever knew or cared—over the lip of the stadium as a sacrifice to the gods of score.

You flip the sun visor down to block the glare coming off the rear window of a mini-van going too slow in the passing lane. Even though the right lanes are wide open, you zoom up to within feet of the van's bumper and flash your brights off the Phish and Dancing Bear bumper stickers. "Come on, come on," you say, "get over." The mini-van starts slowing down, sixty, fifty-five, fifty. You flash your lights again, beep the horn tightly a few times, then put the turn signal on and get ready to make your pass on the right, when the van, without signaling, begins to drift over. "Moron," you say and stomp the accelerator down. You pace even with the mini-van and shoot a stare at the driver. She's a youngish alterna-style girl, hair-wraps, nose ring, loose hand-knit sweater, probably alpaca or something like that. She's maybe twenty-two, twenty-three, six or seven years younger than you, and cute. "What's your problem," you mouth at her. She's shaking her head righteously, looking away. "Yeah, I'm the one with the problem for wanting to drive the speed-limit and use the fucking passing lane to pass people," you mumble, reaching angrily across the passenger seat to crank down the window, "Hey!" you yell at her closed window between glances at the road, "Hey, bitch!" honking the horn this time, and she finally looks over, a little fear in her face now. "Love your mother," you shout slowly, and you exaggerate your lips to make sure she can understand even if she can't hear you. You cock your head, give her a mock-smile and a peace sign, then hit the gas and leave her behind, still shaking her head as she fades from your rearview mirror.

You find your own impatience disturbing; and you're too annoyed to let it go like you usually would. It's ironic, you know, your hassling with a cute alterna-girl; you consider yourself quite the hipster with your Caesar cut and round shades and

goatee and black biker's leather, a grotesque face custom painted on its back by one of your painter-friends. A few years ago when you were back at State you would have put the slick move all over a kid like her, braless little neo-hippie girl with soft hair covering her legs. You were an English major; you used to wear the uniform: long hair in a pony tail, paisley shirt, ripped jeans and Birkenstock sandals. You would have fingered your earring, put down the government, gone on about reality trips and poetry while you pumped her full of keg beer. You would have talked about karma and the cosmic soul and the synchronicities of a connected universe; talked an endless river of crap and meant every word, in a way, as you swam her past your buddies smiles and off into a darker room. But things have changed. These days your friends are all about wedding plans and corporate jobs and middle management. They're getting into 401K's and looking to buy houses. Meanwhile, you're still living hand to mouth, bad teeth, no health insurance, free-lancing arts and entertainment reviews for the Kalamazoo Gazette. You've done your best to justify your lack ambition by convincing yourself that the soul-stealing suburban lifestyle would kill you. But you see the plans your friends are making, the money they're saving, and you're starting to wonder who's really fooling themselves.

Maybe she can't drive worth a damn, but she was a cutie, that girl in the mini-van. The more you think about it, the more familiar she seems. You wonder if she's older than she looks, if you could have seen her at some party back in East Lansing. Or someone just like her. She's a type, certainly. But then so are you. Easing up on the gas, you search the road in your mirrors to see if she's still there. A string of cars stretches out behind you, and you think you see the mini-van's boxy shape somewhere in the pack. You could slow up and wait. Get another look at her to be sure. But then you realize you're just wasting time. You're late and still feeling poisoned from last night's booze, and you have other things to worry about besides

trying to figure out what part of the past she fits into, if any. You flick the eye hanging down from the rear-view mirror on its fake gold chain, watch it swinging back and forth, winding and unwinding itself around the long cloth strands that hold the scapula's crudely sketched face of Jesus.

After the sweeping curve at Parma you see the flashing sign for the Velvet Touch Adult Bookstore. The bookstore sits on a rise at the side of the highway, and the white flash of PEEP SHOW 25 CENTS catches your eye whenever you take 94 to Detroit. Today the sign reminds you Cheryl and what you said to her last night—a scene you've been doing well to forget about up until now. Because you still didn't understand what made you talk to her the way you did.

The night started out well enough. Drinks and an intimate dinner over her apartment. She'd known about the bachelor party for weeks and didn't seem mind that you were going. Then she brought it up as the two of you were clearing the table after the meal.

"You guys will probably have a wild time tomorrow night, huh?" she said as she slipped the dinner plates into the soapy sink. "Are they planning on having strippers?" You nodded and smiled, dumped the extra salad into a tupperware bowl and snapped down the lid. You'd been expecting this all along and were surprised it hadn't come sooner, "Yeah, maybe some dancers." you said, "Nothing to worry about." "Oh, well, that's fine," she said. "That stuff doesn't bother me. I trust you." And that was all, and you thought, "Damn, I'm getting off easy." Then, a little later, when the two of you were sitting on the couch heating up, she asked you casually between kisses and unbuttonings what kind of things went on at your friend's bachelor parties, were there ever "prostitutes and stuff." An honest enough question, if a loaded and ill-timed one; and, normally, you would have simply steered around it, said, "Oh, just topless dancers," or something cheesy—suave like, "Not much compared to what

I've got going on right now." But you didn't steer clear, and you still aren't sure why. Whatever it was about her question, it got under your skin, and you went instantly cold. "Alright, fine, you really want the truth? You really want to know? I won't lie to you." And even though you understood that you were destroying all your chances for the evening, you told her in graphic detail about the lesbian sex show you'd seen at the last bachelor party you'd been to and how you assumed they'd have the same kind of thing for Dogger. It bothers you to think about it now, that weird feeling of self-displacement, a feeling like you were listening to someone else talking rather than doing the talking yourself. But you went on describing what the girls did to each other even after you saw the change in her face. You even threw in the stuff about how after their "performance" they went up into the host's bedroom with a box of cling wrap for twenty dollar blow jobs.

"You're sick," she'd said, venom in her voice. "I don't know what your problem is lately. You weren't like this when we first started going out." She got up from the couch and stood staring down at you. "I have to work early tomorrow. I'm going to bed. You probably shouldn't drive. You can sleep on the couch if you want." And she left you there alone without even saying goodnight. You thought about going back to your own apartment, then decided for some reason not to—maybe after she'd cooled off a little you could go and get in bed with her, press yourself against her warm back, say you were sorry. You clicked off the lamp, turned on the TV, cabled in on a wildlife show and sat there in the bluish dark feeling an odd mix of satisfaction and self-loathing while you watched a warthog trample a snake. You finished your drink, then hers, then made another and brought the whiskey pint with you to the couch where you drank little nips straight from the bottle until it was finished. She was already gone when you woke up late the next morning, not even a sympathetic blanket tossed over your legs. Head pounding, you went into the kitchen and put down a few glasses of

water before noticing the note she'd left on the table. "Just the idea of all you watching what those women do disgusts me," it began. "Getting drunk and screwing whores. It won't be such a big time when one of you dies from alcohol poisoning. Or AIDS. We obviously need to talk. Call me when you get back so I know you're still alive. You can let yourself out." You noticed the note did not say "Love, Cheryl," or "yours, Cheryl," or anything. It wasn't signed at all, as if you weren't even worth claiming. You wadded the note up and left it on her kitchen table. It was Already noon, and you needed to get on the road if you wanted to make the game over Johnny's. Instead, you went downstairs and took off your shoes and got into her bed, smelling her on the pillows. The note was a shock, but you remembered just enough to suspect you had it coming. You'd only been with her for a little over a year, and this wasn't the first time you'd gotten drunk and said ugly things to her when she said something even faintly possessive. You thought about getting up to write a note of your own to apologize, but instead fell into an uneasy sleep, knowing you needed to be out of there before she came home in a few hours.

You're still turning Cheryl around in your head when a sudden swell of cheering on the radio catches your ear as the teams run onto the field for the second half. You imagine The Boys camped out over Johnny's watching the game: Dogger and Hank and Sweet Mel and Bain and Joe D and Pharoh and Fuh-fuh Fred. They've got big screen TV, cases of beer, Spartan caps and sweatshirts on, a bottle of schnapps going around as they cheer and grumble over the way things are going with the game. You've been buddies with these guys through high school *and* college where you all rented and trashed that Animal House in the student ghetto of East Lansing. You saw them almost every day for nine years, partied, hung out, did everything together. You even managed to keep it up for those first few years after graduation. Now, between everybody's jobs and fiance's and relocating you're lucky if you can all get together

once a month. Soon, once it's babies and the rest of it, there won't even be that. Everything's changing so quickly for your friends; they're working day jobs and building equity, but you still feel the same way you did five years ago at State, smoking pot all the time and going to the bar four nights a week when you're not writing movie reviews. You push the gas down and take the speed up to eighty—today is probably one of the last times you'll all be together for this game, and suddenly you're feeling very, very late.

You're chewing on the inside of your lip as the Spartans kick off to start the second half. "JesuschristGoddamn," you shout as Michigan fields the kick in their own end zone and returns it deep into Spartan territory. Then you notice you're doing almost fifteen over and that your knuckles are not white but red across the top of wheel from squeezing. You back down on the speed and try to relax.

"Watch the option," you say under your breath, sitting perfectly still in the driver's seat, as if your attention can actually make a difference in the Spartan defense's ability to perform. Two plays later Michigan puts the ball in the end zone and you snap off the radio in disgust. It's all but over, the spine is broken, and you're not in the mood to put yourself through the ugly details of their falling apart. You'll find out the final score once you get to Johnny's. You drive in silence for some time, imagining what the party will be like tonight, and the girls. After Dogger goes down, you'll be the only single one left.

Just then you see in your rearview mirror a mini-van identical to the one you passed earlier, and you decide to slow down. It can't be her, you realize, not unless she's had a serious change of mind about her speed, but as the van pulls alongside you strain to look at the driver anyway: a balding middle aged man with a plain tight-mouthed woman, probably his wife, in the passenger seat, and a kid, maybe nine or ten, bouncing around in the back. You cringe a little at the sight of them—this is your

friends, maybe even you, in ten or fifteen years. The kid waves and you think "Nice kid," then he puts his mouth to the window and does a blowfish against the glass. You look over the top of your shades at him, wave back, grinning. Funny kid. Suddenly, as if all the rest was some kind of set-up, the kid goes straight-faced. He glances at his parents to make sure they aren't paying attention—which they aren't, because they appear to be arguing— then he gives you the finger, really gives it to you, getting his face into it even, his nose scrunching, his front teeth clamping down on his bottom lip as he jams his hand up against the glass. It's disturbing, but funny; so you're mad but still smirking and shaking your head when you take your hand off of the wheel to give him the same right back, and you're in the middle of that smirk and that gesture when you remember who the girl in the mini-van you first saw reminds you of.

She was probably a freshman, she told you that night what she was, along with her name, but, of course, you can't remember. You remember only that it was your Junior year at State and that you and Sweet Mel were walking back from the liquor store when you saw a few girls standing on the porch of a house party that was breaking up because the keg had gone dry. You stepped up, saw the permed, dirty blonde hair, the naive look underneath too much make-up. "Party's just getting started at our place," you told her, holding up the bag of liquor. "Come on over." Then you and Sweet Mel walked her and a friend back to the Animal House. You can't remember anything you talked about, but certainly you must have turned on the greasy charm, because after a few drinks and some grass, you peeled her off the couch, took her upstairs and, Wow, she said, the dorm rooms were so small, she'd never seen a room like this before: water bed with silk sheets, your bad paintings on the wall, books and manuscript pages all over the floor. You probably told her he you were a painter, a poet, whatever, it didn't matter—she'd never had an artist interested in her before. You got her into bed somehow, used some lie, some half- assed promise of

sincerity, an implied future of your interest, all the time knowing she'd be nothing but one night's lay. You remember trying to take her shirt off and that she wouldn't let you and that you didn't understand why until you slipped your hands under and felt the braille of acne mapped all over her back. You'd never before touched a girl with skin like that, and it grossed you out, but not so bad as to make you stop. You must have said something perfectly calculated in the pause of your disgusted surprise, that pause she always dreaded with a boy. "Oh that doesn't matter, I still think you're beautiful." And you worked at her and worked at her with your hands, gently but ceaselessly, trying everything to get her hot, begging finally like a high school boy begs, saying your balls hurt, come on, come on, it's okay, I really do like you, really. Until she finally gave in, letting you slip her panties past her skinny legs.

It was over before she even had chance to enjoy it and right away the first thing you'd wanted was to go back down stairs to meet The Boys for a victory drink. You could feel through the floor the noise of the cranked stereo and your friends shouting, but guilt kept you there in bed with her for just a few minutes longer. The same guilt that caused you to give her your real phone number when you drove her back to the dorm later that night. But you weren't too worried about it. You figured she'd never call, or, if she did, your friends could just deflect her, because you were always doing that kind of thing for each other. But she started calling the very next day, and The Boys played her off and played her off like you asked—until the day they told you she was starting to sound desperate, and you became afraid. Afraid she might be pregnant, afraid she'd say you raped her, which you knew was the figurative truth of it. Finally, you got so worried you called her up, said it just wouldn't work out, you were sorry you hadn't returned her calls, you hadn't gotten the messages, you'd been busy with school, you'd gotten back together with an old girlfriend. For a while, you kept looking over your shoulder, kept expecting cops at the door with a warrant. For a

while you hated yourself, swore you'd never do anything so vile again. Then you decided to be reasonable and forgive yourself, and so you forgot about her. Until right now when you step on the gas to get away from that kid and that mini-van which has made you think of far too much.

You turn the radio back on, try to find a song you know so you can sing along. But the image of girl's face and the memory of the feel of her acne covered back against your hands keeps distracting you. The late afternoon sun settles lower in the sky, putting a blinding glare into the rear window of every car ahead. It's too ugly to think about, what you did to that girl, what you're doing to Cheryl. A wave of headache curls over your ears and into your temples. You grab the Naya bottle and suck out the dregs as a Burger King billboard shoots by. HUNGRY? 15 miles, it reads. You should get something on your stomach if you're going to start drinking again so soon. But you're already late. Too late. Better to keep going and eat something at the party later where they'll have meatballs and hot wings and a six foot submarines and all kinds of greasy, drunk-food you'll regret having eaten the next morning.

You're pushing buttons, still looking for a decent station, trying to keep from thinking about that girl—if you'd really raped her, well, date raped her, which you think is more accurate, though no less evil—when you see the brights flashing in your rearview: a pick up bearing down on you doing at least ninety. You check the speedometer. Seventy-five, five over in the passing lane. You look to the right, the lane is wide open. You check the rearview again. That truck is still coming on fast, brights flashing a rhythm, the faces behind the windshield emerging now—a couple guys in baseball caps expecting you to get over. Screw 'em, you decide. They can go around. But you're getting nervous as the truck closes in, seeming almost to speed up, the brights certainly quickening, then staying on as the pick-up's grill fills the back window of your compact car. The brights flash off then on again. You just shake your

head and keep your eyes locked on the road.

When you first feel the push against your bumper you almost lose control of the car. Adrenal heat races up your neck and back, burns along your arms. You can't believe someone has actually rammed you on the highway. You start screaming into the rearview mirror, raising your fist, "Fuck you, you asshole son of a bitch," and you can see the stupid, satisfied smiles plastered across the faces of the two guys in the cab before the grill fills your mirror again and you move quickly out of their way.

You crank down your window and lean out, the thunder of wind filling your ears and ripping at your hair as the truck begins to pass. "What the fuck is wrong with you, man," you shout. The passenger in aviator shades and TKE hat gives you cold look and tosses a half-smoked cigarette through your window. "Loser," the guy shouts as they pull away. And there's just enough time to notice the flag attached to the truck's door jamb—a golden M on a dark blue background—before you have to slow down and look for the butt that you know has burned a hole in the upholstery of your car.

You find the butt and the burn hole it's made in the crevice of the passenger seat. You fling the butt out the window and step on the gas, pushing the little car to eighty, ninety, before you catch sight of them ahead of you in the passing lane. You know you're risking a huge ticket, maybe even an accident, but you don't care. No one can pull that kind of shit on you and get away with it. Fucking college kids, asshole frat boys, you're thinking, that was crazy what they did, ramming you; they could have killed you. What if you'd been some old lady or someone who couldn't keep control of things?

You pull up next to the passenger side of the truck and whip the empty plastic Naya bottle at the door. It bounces harmlessly away. The frat boy passenger in shades looks down. "Pull that goddamn truck over right now," you shout. The guy gives you

a blank look then leans out of your line of vision to say something to the driver. The truck swerves suddenly toward you, and you jerk the wheel to avoid the collision, then jerk it back again to keep from clipping another car doing what seems to be a very slow sixty five in the far right lane. "Motherfucker," you scream and cut in behind them, tailgating, your front end only feet from their bumper. You're imagining a pistol into your glove box, the way you'd wave the dull steel in smoker-boy's horrified face before pumping a few bullets into the door and the engine. Suddenly there is the red flash of tail-lights, and you lock it up, almost losing it, but still remembering to turn into the slight skid. They aren't stopping, though, only tapping the brakes to get you to back off or wreck your front end on the wide chrome bumper. They don't care if you hit them and trash your car; they don't care if you hit them and go through the windshield and snap your goddamn neck. You feel slight film of sweat breaking out along your skin. The truck's driver puts on the gas, the powerful engine growling. You're about to speed up and go after them again when you have a vision of exactly where this is taking you; you see yourself pulling in front of them, cutting them off, your car and the truck tangling, a wad of twisted metal rolling down the road. You ease off the gas pedal and let them go. Then you realize you should have at least had the sense to get their license plate, but it's too late for that now. You pound fist down on the dash, "The goddamn nerve," you yell, then you lean back, put your turn signal on, slide into the far right lane to calm down.

Minutes later you see the Burger King sign on its pole high above the expressway and decide to pull and off to get some food and check out the damage to the rear bumper. You're still agitated, but calmer now, at least not swearing out loud to yourself in the car anymore. But you can't shake this feeling that you've been violated, used somehow.

You take the exit, and driving toward the Burger King you notice the

frat-boy's pick up parked at a Mobil station. Something tells you to just let it go, but you know you at least have to pull in and get the plate number. Dogger's older brother is a private investigator; if you get the plate number you might be able to get the driver's address. The asshole obviously went to school in Ann Arbor—you and the boys could wait a few weeks to avoid suspicion, then make a weekend raid and sugar his gas tank, break off toothpicks in his door locks, because someone had to take this guy off the road.

The truck's cab looks empty when you pull in—you assume they're inside the Mobil Quick-Stop peeing or buying something. You pull into the space next to theirs and see through the glass doors that they're standing up at the counter buying beer and chips. The passenger notices you staring and elbows the driver who is holding the twelve pack. The two of them are dressed almost exactly the same, white baseball hats with TKE in gold on the front, tan pants, untucked flannels. You keep your eyes on them as you get out the car and slam the edge of your door as hard as you can into the side of the brand new truck. The driver's face tightens with rage. You lean into the door, hearing the edge grate along the truck's side before you close it. Then you're standing behind the car, looking at the good-sized crack in your plastic bumper molding when the driver comes outside and drops his twelve-pack of cans down hard on your hood.

"Dude like what's your fucking problem, man?" the driver says.

And that's when you decide without really even thinking that you've had about all you can take of yourself and everyone else. You spit once on the asphalt then walk toward him, walking right up into his face. He doesn't even look old enough to buy the beer he's just thrown down, and you notice he's a little taller than you are, wiry, but you know he's nothing but a punk-ass frat boy.

"My problem?!" Your hands shoot out, twisting up the front of his flannel as

you drive him back and slam him into the tall window next to the Quick Stop's door, cracking the glass. "You're the one with the fucking problem, pal," you say, "I'm putting you under citizen's arrest for reckless driving." You ball the driver's shirt up under his chin, start leaning into him. The cracked glass grinds.

"I didn't do shit, dude," the driver says, his hands finding your wrists and pulling.

"Shut up!" you say, "Shut the fuck up. "I'm taking you inside an we're gonna call the cops and settle this, or I'll kick you ass right here."

"Try it loser," and you turn just in time to catch the passenger's fist with your mouth. Still holding onto the driver, you reel back, dragging him along as you fall through a stacked display of washer solvent to the oily cement, him on top now, puddles of weak, blue liquid foaming around you as you thrash. You bring a knee up and push the driver off, then sit up to see two mechanics in stained Mobil uniforms coming on. You start to scramble after the passenger who is just now reaching for the truck's door when you feel hands take hold.

"What the hell is going on out here?" someone says.

"Let go of me, goddammit!" you shout.

The driver, who is also on his feet now sees his chance. He steps in punches you twice in the face before you can get your arms free to cover yourself.

"Hey. Hey!" one of the mechanics says, but the driver has already turned away. He kicks your fender hard with a heavy boot, leaving a black smear on the quarter panel, then he's in his truck turning the engine over.

"I said let me go," You jerk yourself loose from the mechanics, feeling a muscle in your shoulder tear. You take a few shaky steps toward the truck, but it's too late, the driver is pulling out fast, already hitting the street by the time your vision clears.

You turn on the mechanics. "Why did you hold me and let that asshole hit me in the face?! Why didn't you grab him?!"

"Easy mister, you just back off," one of them says, and you notice they both have long handled socket-wrenches in the hip-loops of their coveralls.

"Well did you at least get the plate number for chrissake?"

"You're the one who needed holding onto mister."

"You idiots have no idea what the hell is going on." you say.

"I know you owe me for a plate glass window." You turn at the voice. It's the manager standing at the door of the Mobil's Quick Stop, a woman grotesquely fat around the neck and hips and thighs, yet still somehow flat-chested. "And don't you try driving off like those two did neither. I got your license number."

"Did you get theirs?" You yell, taking a step toward her, "Did you get theirs?"

The mechanics move to get between to two of you.

"Didn't see as I needed to," she says. "Looked to me like you started everything."

You're sitting in the car in the Mobil's parking lot, watching the reddish sun slip behind the tree line on the other side of the near-distant highway. You stare at the ticket in your hand, think about tearing it up. Before leaving, the cops told you they weren't going to take you in, but this kind of public disturbance is a misdemeanor and you'll be getting a notice to appear for arraignment in the mail. As for what had happened on the expressway, since you don't have a plate number or any witnesses there isn't much they can do. You gave them the color and the make of the truck and a description of the driver and passenger and they said they'll try to keep an eye.

The manager waddles toward your car. She reaches a stubby hand through your open window and drops business card in your lap. Tina Cole—Mobil Management. "The police gave me your phone number and address," she says coldly.

"I'll call when I get a price on the window. It'll probably cost you around five hundred dollars."

After the manager leaves you turn on the radio and try to get the game. Nothing but static, the broadcasting station has been left behind miles ago. It makes no difference anyway, the game is long over. But you can't help wondering if the Spartans found a way out of that mess once you stopped rooting for them.

You check yourself out in the rearview. Your lower lip is cut and fattening; a circle of bruised blood is beginning to bloom along your cheek and beneath your eye. You wonder if you should just screw the bachelor party and go home, apologize to Cheryl; she's a better woman than you deserve. Maybe she'll even forget her anger and mother you once she finds out you've been sucker-punched and screwed over by the cops. Or maybe you should just forget her on general principle and go to that party and get a twenty dollar cling wrap blow job from a whore you'll never see again. Out there is a whole world of choices a man on his own can make. You could sell all your stuff, everything, buy a motorcycle and a pawn shop pistol and ride out to California with a wad of cash in your pocket. There's even an old girlfriend you could look up in L.A. once you get there. But you know that's just a pathetic fantasy; most likely you'll end up going to the party and slinking back home on Sunday with a hangover to go on living against yourself just as you have been. After all, The Boys are waiting, and how can you stand to miss these last few good times with them before it all dissolves?

You reach over and take a beer from the twelve-pac the kid left behind, which you grabbed after the cops stupidly left it sitting on the hood of your car without asking you one question about whose it was or if you'd been drinking. You pop it open, slurping up the foam as it tries to escape over the top of the can. The beer stings the cut in your lip, but you take a good swig anyway then set the can between your legs. Back in your first years of college, before and right around the time you did what you did to

that girl, you used to drive the county roads outside of Lansing with your buddies, drinking beer. You can still see the sun of those years falling through the trees, the bars of shadow along the road. There was always music too loud on the radio in those days, and a whiskey pint going around, talk of who was getting laid and how often. You were driving nowhere for a reason back then, windows rolled down to throw cans at mailboxes, nothing but road and any future you could imagine flying toward you.

You turn the engine over, slip the car into gear and pull back onto the access road. Ahead is the junction for the highway, and you know now it doesn't matter anymore if you go West or East, back home, or to the party. Lost somewhere between the two is the forgiving place you're looking for.

STEAM

He's walking his little daughter to the playground on a cool bright fall afternoon, the wheel— swept grit of broken glass winking sunlight up from the dry gutter, when she notices steam smoking through Detroit' manholes, lipping past the broken teeth of sewer mouths. "Issat smoke, Daddy?" Only three, and already she wants distinctions. That's steam," he tells her. "Steam," she says considering the word and idea of steam for the first time in her life. "Yes, steam." he begins, then pauses, considering how to best explain steam to a child. "It happens when you heat up water," he goes on, "You've seen how it is when your bath is really warm in the winter time. That's steam. It's water and air mixing together. Misty, there and not there, but you can feel it. They use it to heat the city" "Steam" she says, and laughs, then shouts it, skipping beside him, her hand in his, "Steam! Steam! Steam! Steam!" And he is happy at how simply happy she is, rejoicing at the mere sound of words. But when they hit the playground all she wants is the swing. She could care less about steam; she wants pushing, not her father's careful explanations. "Faster," she says. "Higher," and he sends her out then gathers her in, feels her body's warm imprint press his hands and fall away, over and over. "Higher." She still wants to go, "Higher!" one more good push and she's gone too high for their own good, wobbling the chains and hard plastic seat, scaring her, and she begins to cry. He reins the swing in, scoops her up, sees over the top of her head to the lean teenagers hooping on the nearby basketball court, one of them just now rising toward the netless rim. He feels his daughter tugging on his t-shirt, pulling him nearer. Wonder has wiped away her tears. "Look," she whispers, pointing to her footprint in the sand beneath the settling swing, "I was there, and now I'm not." He swallows hard and sets her down. More

distinctions on her part. And something in him breaks loose at her discovery, which is ¹¹⁹
nothing much to look at, a little shoe's mark near the butt of a cigarette. But it's more
than that, it's her first understanding of impact and leaving, the innocent beginning of a
moment he's always known will come: that day when she moves on to a life of her
own, and those years after when he'll be proof of love's power to place someone's
mirage inside your heart. "Daddy, let's go home," she says. He nods. She rides home
on his shoulders, pointing out everything, "Bus!" she says, when one breezes by.
"Crow!" she shouts, and he looks up just as the dark bird leaps from a building's edge
onto the sky.

THE BRAID

It's love at first sight when Alex meets Denise at the company picnic that sunny August day. And though, upon meeting her, Alex is thoroughly enchanted by her face and figure and personality, what captivates him most about her is her golden blonde hair, the tremendous, thick Nordic braid of it hanging all the way down to her waist. Ever since his childhood of three long-haired older sisters he has been this way: he has always been drawn to women with long hair. Alex and Denise are two of life's Beautiful People, mid-twenties, perfect in their in their youth, their looks, and their stylish, expensive tastes. Denise is near finishing her master's degree in Veterinary Science at the University of Michigan, schooling her wealthy parents paid for. She's come to this picnic with her girlfriend Marissa, an account executive at the company where Alex is rapidly storming up the ranks as a CAD engineer. It doesn't take Marissa long to notice the obvious, mutual attraction between Alex and Denise. Giving Denise a knowing smile, she makes an excuse and wanders off with her plastic cup of wine toward a pack of her co-workers.

Confronted so suddenly with being left together alone, Alex and Denise fall silent over their potato salad and messy beef ribs. They both feel the energy of their immediate attraction, and it embarrasses them, each in their own way, this thinly veiled desire they share. They chew on in awkward silence for a little while longer, then Denise stands her plastic fork up in her potato salad and sets her paper plate down on the picnic table they're sitting on top of.

"Do you believe in life after death?" Denise asks, mostly because she wants catch him off guard by asking something deep and unexpected.

"That's a pretty morbid question to ask someone you just met," Alex says,

licking rib sauce from the end of his fingers,

"Not really. It's just a question of faith," Denise says with a smile. "So, do you?"

"No. I don't believe in life after death," Alex tells her without hesitation, "I think the illusion of God comes from the fact that consciousness is the irony of mortality. People should to enjoy living while they can instead of worrying about what comes after. Which means I should probably ask if you'd like to go out to dinner with me sometime."

"Oh, you're good," Denise says. "Very smooth. Such a charming atheist," and she's still smiling, shaking her head at him, tucking a long stray strand of hair behind her ear when she tells him she'd love to go out to dinner sometime—if only to talk spirituality.

"How about sushi. You like sushi?" he asks.

"I love sushi," she says.

"Okay then. Sushi it is."

They fall into small talk, and Alex feels an almost unsettling happiness come over him as they sit at the picnic table in the sun talking and drinking plastic cups of beer.

A little while later George shows up with the All Terrain Vehicles strapped to the trailer he's pulling behind his brand-new Grand Cherokee. Alex and George work together, party together now and again after the day's consultations are over. Armed with nice suits and expense accounts, they've had their share of luck with upwardly mobile women in the happy-hour bars.

Denise is the first one to suggest they take ATV's for a ride because she's driven her brother's "plenty of times before." She is that kind of woman, one who's taken care of horses all her life, a woman who literally rides like a cliché through

idyllic green fields with sunlight glancing off the waving silken curtain of her golden hair. A woman who as a little girl said, "Daddy, I want a pony," and promptly got one.

She stands up and stretches. Alex glances at her out of the corner of his eye, admiring her nice figure, her tan legs, her shorts and t-shirt not too tight but showing off her firm shape— and he thinks, "Damn, she'd look hot working on her tan on the deck of my boat." Then, once again, he is drawn to her long hair which swings before him now like a golden rope she wants him to climb. His desirous eyes burn against the braid. Denise can not help but notice his looking, and she smiles.

Alex and Denise are just beyond the trail-head when their perfect world is forever changed. Alex is driving behind Denise, each of them on their own ATVs, bouncing along the trail. He's watching the braid slap against her trim waist, thinking of how he'd love to wrap his fingers into that long cord of soft, blonde hair, when Denise hits a berm that leans her way back. The braid swings out wildly, is snatched up in the belts of the motor located right behind the seat. The motor whines hot as the braid is sucked into its workings, ripping Denise from the ATV, tearing off her hair at the scalp as the vehicle rolls on. Maybe she feels only as if she's been hurled down at incredible speed, then the sharp tearing into black unconsciousness, Alex can not tell, but it is the most fantastically horrifying thing he's ever seen, the only real accident he's ever witnessed up close. He leaps from his ATV and is at her side, shirt off to swab her exposed, bloody skull. They are still in sight of the picnic tables, and the others have begun to notice something's gone wrong. "Call 911," he screams, even though he sees more than one person with a cell phone already in hand.

Alex realizes then that the doctors might want the scalp in order to try and re-attach it as they do sometimes with teeth or digits or limbs. Setting her head down gently on his blood-soaked shirt he runs over to the ATV stalled in the drainage ditch

at the edge of the trail. There is the dusty scalp dripping blood, pulled tight against the engine, the mangled braid coiled in the gears. He finds a tool-kit under the ATV's seat and takes out a small serrated blade. Gagging, he cuts the scalp free of the braid and hurries with it back to where she is stretched out in the dirt, still unconscious and surrounded now by people, Marissa there beside her holding her hand and crying.

When the ambulance comes he gives the paramedics the scalp which they rinse in a sterile solution and put in a cooler. He watches as they gurney her away and close the doors behind her. Then the ambulance is driving slowly down the trail toward the trail-head, red lights winking, the driver first chirping the siren in blips and fits then wailing it on full blast as he tips the front wheels up from the dirt trail onto the asphalt parking lot. Alex stands in the crowd watching the ambulance until it's out of sight. He stands there listening to the siren's fading, seeing Denise in his mind just as she was at the picnic table saying yes to his dinner invitation. Without a wig she will never look that way again, and how could he ever be with a woman so horribly scarred? How could he ever look at her without reliving what he's just seen?

The shocked people start to wander slowly back to the picnic ground. Instead of following them, Alex goes to the ATV Denise was riding and slowly, gently, works what's left of the braid free. Such a thing after what it's caused. Will she want it for some reason? Should he destroy it? Keep it? For a second he's angry that he even has to consider such horrible, ridiculous things. He feels the sickness of self-hatred rising in him, then a longing unlike anything he's ever felt before, like the dim the outline of a lie he's been telling himself for a long, long time. He considers the substantial heft of the braid, the countless golden hairs woven upon themselves again and again. He touches the tip of its length, pulls off the elastic hair tie binding the end. It's probably more than ten years of her life he's staring into, torn dead at the roots, unraveling, his fingers running through it without her even being there. He knows he should hurl the

whole mess of it into the bushes for both their sake. Though when this story ends he's still standing there unwinding it, getting oil-stains on his hands.

GOD'S SLOW BLINKING

Me and Jaycee drove west toward Oraibi and the solar eclipse for twenty-five straight hours, stopping only for fill-ups and to use the can. We had no time for sleep and no need to. A gram of coke and a baggie full of speed had our heads sopped full of gurgling noise, kept us floating on the sizzle of the Jeep's over-sized wheels.

High as hell and hauling speedy-ass all through the day and into the night. That was the way we road-tripped. Twisted half into the slot of whiteline, the miles ribboning out behind us. And this time in particular it was me and Jaycee on our way west into the Great Mojave Desert, chasing the coke-gags with hot slugs from a bottle of Jim Beam, passing the bowl of weed between us in the green glow of the dashboard, tape deck on low mumbling Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire."

It was my idea, driving like mad to make the eclipse, a total solar eclipse that the news said would be seen best in Arizona and New Mexico. We'd been in the Green Dog only the morning before, staring down our drafts and watching the TV above the bar when the story came on. Weatherman in a nice suit bubbling about the eclipse happening tomorrow, the first directly over America in almost a decade. Hearing about an eclipse automatically made me think of Jaycee's mom, Madeline, of our night together when she'd asked me if I'd ever seen an eclipse, and I'd told her no. Madeline had been on my mind a lot since successfully drinking herself to death not half a year before. Between what she'd said and my finding the *Book of the Hopi* in her room and that newscast, I knew immediately I had to see this eclipse happen with my own eyes. And with the way me and Jaycee were living back then, day by day with all that inheritance money she'd left us and no real jobs, we had no reason not to go.

So the morning comes, the morning of the eclipse, and we are fly-ing over Arizona desert, mesas burning yellow-red with the wash of sun-rise, Jaycee war—whooping, gunning the engine, acting all squirrely from the cocktail of drugs and from being up for so long. Detroit, Michigan to Oraibi, Arizona in seventeen hours. That was something. You drive that far in such a short a time and you see the world change in ways you don't see otherwise: a woman pelting chickens with feed, a man pulling the evening's mail from the mouth of his mailbox, a couple framed in the bright eye of a kitchen window sometime before dawn. There was some-thing solid about them, something that said they were alright right where they were. But we were not alright, and we blew past them like an ill wind, nothing more to us than the illusion of motion's ability to make our minds and bodies believe we were fine.

Because me and Jaycee were living complicated lives. Very compli-cated lives. For now it's simple enough to say we couldn't stay where we were for much longer—despite the money and ease—and we weren't even trying to talk about why. You just don't talk to your best friend whose family has taken you in about the fact that you fell in love with his mother right before she died.

A couple hours before the eclipse was supposed to begin, we passed a sign that said we'd entered reservation land, then the Jeep's engine started to sputter and died.

"What's wrong," I asked Jaycee as he coasted us onto the dirt shoulder.

"I don't know, it just cut off on me," he said.

"We outta gas?"

"No we're not out of gas," he snapped. Gave the gauge a disgusted wave.

"You just filled the tank last time we stopped. Don't you remem-ber?" And now that he'd reminded me I did remember the squat, dusty gas-station in a town with the ugly name of Klagtoh.

Jaycee tried the motor again. It didn't even turn over. "I don't believe this, shit"

he said. "Goddammit," and he slapped the dash hard with the flat of his hand.

"What do you think it is?" I asked.

"How the fuck am I supposed to know what it is. Do I look like a goddamn mechanic? Maybe it's the piece of shit battery or something." He grabbed his pack of cigarets off the dash and shook out a joint from the cellophane.

"What're we gonna do?" I asked.

"What else is there to do, Mark? We're in the middle of the desert. We're gonna wait." He wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm then fired up the joint, took a deep, noisy suck and slouched into his seat, "Somebody'll come by eventually," he said, his words mingling with the smoke as he exhaled.

"We can't just wait for someone to come by, Jaycee. The eclipse starts in an less than an hour. We need to find Oraibi."

"Man, you don't even know where this goddamn Oraibi place is. It's not on any of the maps."

"Look," I said, putting my finger to the road atlas on my lap, "according to this, Jeddito is maybe four miles up the road. Someone there will know how to get to Oraibi. Let's just walk there. No one's gonna come by. We haven't seen a car all morning."

"I'm not walking five fucking miles in this desert, man. Forget that shit right now."

"We can't just wait here, we'll miss everything."

"You know how to fix this engine?"

I didn't bother answering him.

"Well, then, bro, you wanna hit this or not." He held out the joint to me.

Half an hour later I'd given up on the idea that I could get us anywhere by sweating under the broiling hood and burning my fingers jiggling wires I didn't know

the purpose of while yelling for Jaycee to, "Try it now." I paced next to the Jeep, stoned, trying to will a passing car as I flipped through the *Book of the Hopi*, the book I'd found in Madeline's dresser a few weeks after she'd died. I'd read parts of this book before, right around the time I'd found it. It was mostly about rituals and the history of the Hopi and other stuff that hadn't really interested me very much at the time. But considering it was the *Book of the Hopi*, and that I was going to the desert where the Hopi live to see this eclipse, and that it was Madeline's book, Madeline who'd asked me about eclipses, bringing it seemed the right thing to do. So I brought the book along, and began reading bits of it, and I started working all those coincidences around in my head until coked to choking in the middle of the night I suddenly became convinced we had to see the eclipse on the Hopi reservation instead of in Flagstaff like we'd originally agreed. High as we were I was able to talk Jaycee into it by telling him the Indians would definitely be having some kind of eclipse ceremony open to tourists at their cultural center on the reservation. I'm still not sure why I wanted to do this, if it was just the result of addled thinking. I suppose I believed that going to a place Madeline was interested in to see something she'd talked about could get me closer to her memory somehow. I mean, I never did and never will know anything much about the Hopi; I'm a white guy from Michigan, and the way I ended up losing that book, I don't have the heart to get another copy or read anything else about those people.

Jaycee sat behind the wheel in the shade of the Jeep's safari top, hands hooked behind his head, his eyes closed, a sweat droplet forming at the end of his nose. "You should get out of the heat, man," he said without looking at me. "You're gonna get a sun-stroke."

"Hey, check this out," I said, "they got stuff about eclipses in here." Then I read aloud from the book, "'Taiowa, father sun, closes his eye and all things are

remade in the darkness. Taiowa opens his eye and all things take in his first light as they did at birth."

Jaycee laughed. He leaned forward, fished another cigaret from his pack and lit it, blew his hit into the windshield, "What's that mean, Jeep's gonna have a new engine when all this bullshit you're tripping about is over with?"

"No"

"What's it mean, then?"

"I don't know, exactly. I think it's about God giving us a fresh start. It's from something called the snake-antelope ceremony."

"It doesn't mean shit," he said, flatly. "No starting over, man. Done is done. That's why you don't know what it means. Because it doesn't mean anything. That book doesn't mean anything."

I looked down at the paperback open in my hand, this drawing of a circle, some Hopi thing called the Road of Life, was sketched across the bottom half of the page. Madeline had written the words "Stay round," next to it in a sloppy hand; it was the only place in the book where she'd written anything, except for her fading name in pencil on the inside of the front cover. I ran my finger over her words then shut the book. It was brand new when I took it from her dresser and brought it down to my room in the basement of their house where I'd been living since moving in from the VA orphan home a few years before. Now after one day's ride it was stained with ashes and booze, the spine was creased, half the pages coming loose and beginning to curl. I pulled the rubber band from my wrist and worked it around the cover then shoved the book into the back pocket of my jeans. "You shouldn't insult the Hopi, man," I said. "They're an ancient people. Oraibi is the oldest continuously occupied settlement in the United States. Those people understand things we won't ever understand."

"Is that more bullshit from the book?" Jaycee spat. "Oraibi. I don't think there

is an Oraibi, and even if there was, what the fuck does anyone living there understand that I don't understand. You're born, you live, you die, and you try to have a good time while you can. Period. They're just dirt-bag Indian living in caves in the goddamn desert, Mark. If that's understanding things I'm happy being an idiot." He turned around and started splashing through our cooler for another beer. There were only empties floating in the sandy water. "Great. Now we're outta goddamn beer." He turned to me, "Man, ever since you started reading that book." He paused, shot me a look I couldn't read, "Where'd you get that thing anyway?"

"They've got it at the library. It doesn't matter where I got it. At least I'm trying to look for something worth more than another bar or a bag of grass. That's more than you can say."

"What are you talking about?" he shouted. "This whole mess is your fault. This trip was your idea. Fucking bullshit. I don't know why I let you talk me into this. We should've driven straight to Flagstaff and sat our asses down on the patio of a nice restaurant and watched the eclipse from there."

"You're the one who's bullshit" I yelled. "Staying fucked up all the time. You put down anything you don't understand. Anything that might make you realize that you don't know everything there is to know."

"I do know everything there is to know," he said in a cold, even voice, "everything I need to know anyway. I love you like a brother, man, but you're not in the will. So don't piss me off. I can kick you out of the house anytime I feel like it. It's my house now, it's my everything now. And you owe me, man. You owe me."

"I don't owe you shit. You want to kick me out, go ahead. Kick me out. You've done nothing but become a bigger and bigger asshole ever since Madeline..."

"Shut up! Just shut up!" he cut me off with a chop of his arm. Pointed at me, "We don't ever say her name. You know that. We don't ever say her name."

He remained that way for a few seconds, then his anger broke and his arm fell and he let out a slow breath, heavy breath as he leaned back against his seat again and started shaking his head. "You're all fucked up, man," he said quietly, "Get out of the sun. Have some water before you pass out."

I knew I shouldn't have brought up Madeline. He never brought her up. He'd locked the door to her bedroom right around the time I found the *Book of the Hopi* in her dresser drawer, though I soon found where he kept the key. I went in there sometimes when I knew he'd be gone for a while, I suppose because touching her things was another way to feel closer to her memory, something easier to do than driving a few thousand miles to see the sun blotted out because of what she'd once said to me. But he was right; I owed him things I couldn't ever pay back. We'd been so close for so long, inseparable buddies since our freshman year in high school. And he'd asked his mother to let me move in with them after I turned eighteen and was old enough to leave the V. A. Then I be-trayed him with my love for her—even if he didn't know the whole of it, I'd still betrayed him.

But it wasn't something I'd tried to do or planned to do; it was just something that happened.

"I'm leaving," I said.

"Leaving? What are you talking about, leaving?"

"Waiting around is pointless. No one's coming. I'm walking to Jeddito, it can't be any farther than two or three miles. For all we know there's a gas station or a house with a phone right up this road."

"Do you see anything up the fucking road, man? The only thing up this road is more desert. And there's rattlesnakes and scorpions and all kinds of dangerous shit out here. Staying with the Jeep is the right thing to do."

"You do what you want. I'm going to look for someone." I took a big glug of

water from the gallon jug, spilling it down the front of my t-shirt, then set it back down on the passenger seat and started up the road.

"Don't expect me to come looking for you," he yelled after me.

I didn't say anything back, and for a little while it was perfectly quiet, just my shoes crunching on the shoulder until his voice came again, this time hollow with the distance, "Yeah, well I sure hope your goddamn book can help you find your way home." Words that made me stop and look back before I could ignore them and go on, because for the first time since I'd know Jaycee, I believed he actually would leave me behind if he found a way to start the Jeep while I was gone.

* * *

Mesas in the distance shot through with deep lines of red and gold. Endless stretches of sandstone, and scrub, and cactus spilling away in every direction. Arizona desert where I walked along the highway's shoulder, kicking up clouds of dust, wiping my grimy face on the t-shirt I'd tied sheik-wise around my head. And that desert heat, that air like swimming in a pool of my own blood. Hours ago it was all mysterious and beautiful to me, colored by warm highway wind blowing through my pleasant-sad thoughts of Madeline and my fantasies of what I was about to see once we finally made it to Oraibi. Now, pissed-off and sweating hard, head cored-out by coke and weed and booze, I felt like I was on Mars. And there was Taiowa, the Hopi's Father Sun, looking down on me. Burning a hole in my head, just like I'd read, burning a hole through the hardened soft-spot on the top of my skull—the hole where our human spirit crawls into us the instant before we start being born. Taiowa was boring into me, getting ready to open my head back up and take my spirit out and put it into another body, or junk it, or bathe for it forever in orgasmic light. Whatever he does to us when it's time. Jaycee was wrong. Who can say they know for certain how God or life works? Wonder has to still exist or we're all already dead. But Jaycee—the only thing

close to family I had left now that Madeline was gone—he didn't believe in Wonder. He didn't believe in anything he couldn't see or use, which meant his life, our lives, had become a search for ways to avoid meaning anything.

I'd moved into Jaycee's basement my senior year of high school, near the end of that time where Madeline was drinking herself to death. This wasn't long after first a pace maker then another man's heart had failed to buy her rich husband a new life. She was just starting to get serious about killing herself when I showed up. She was still young then, and beautiful, not much over forty when she died, though she would look old, so incredibly old, that last time I saw her, bloated and unconscious in her hospital bed. I remembered her more vividly than my own mother who'd died of blood cancer a few years after I was born, or my father, a Vietnam vet, who bought it when I was nine, his head erased by the freak accident of a snapping garbage truck cable as he walked past a construction site in downtown Detroit. After he died it was the whole saga of distant relatives who didn't want me, then the VFW home.

When I met Jaycee my freshman year in public high school, his father had just died of heart disease the summer before, and the two of us connected somehow, even though our lives were nothing alike except for our dead fathers. We started hanging out a lot, and whenever I'd spend the night over his house, which the VFW home would only let me do once or twice a month, his mom would make us a big dinner, and the three of us would have a great time playing cards or board games or commenting on the shows on TV. Whatever we did, whenever I was with them, I felt like I actually belonged somewhere. Maybe I somehow sensed I was filling an unconscious gap for Madeline, that other male presence she was so used to having around, the complete family trio.

Those nights, Jaycee and I would lie in our sleeping on the floor of his room and talk about all the places we'd go once he got his driver's license. Then one Friday

during the spring of our Junior year after we'd come home drunk and late from a keg party (Madeline never waited up for us), he looked at me having trouble pulling off my shoes and said, "Man, you should move in here once they let you out of that VFW place. We'd have a blast, bro."

"Yeah we would," I said, "We'd tear it up." We'd joked around about it before, my moving in, but I never took it seriously. And I assumed it was just drunk-talk now. I lay back on my sleeping bag; I could feel the room sweeping my head up into a spin.

"I'm not kidding," I heard Jaycee say as the weight of my pass-out fell upon me.

By the next day I'd pretty much forgotten everything he'd said about my moving in. But he brought it up at breakfast with Madeline, "Mom, we should let Mark move in here once he's old enough to leave the VFW home next year," he said, and by the way she sipped her Bloody Mary, smiled, then told me, "We'll see about that," I knew already that she was going to let me.

In the beginning I thought she was just being kind by letting me move in, giving her only child's best buddy who'd had some tough breaks a chance to finally get good start on life. Then I began finding half empty vodka bottles in the linen closet or under the couch. I'd known for years that Jaycee's mom liked to drink, but she'd always kept it together around me; so the bottles didn't seem like anything to worry about at first. But over time she started getting noticeably drunk in the middle of the after-noon, and Jaycee admitted to me she'd been drinking heavy ever since his father died, near a fifth a day, he guessed, which seemed impossible to believe until the blackouts started, then a trip to the hospital after we'd found her passed out on the bathroom floor coughing up blood. I suppose it eventually came down to the doctor looking at her liver tests or what-ever and telling her, "The next glass of booze will kill

you." But that wasn't even close to true. It took another couple years and many more drinks to finish the job Madeline refused to let us to keep her from finishing.

While Madeline was quietly killing herself, Jaycee and I both started taking classes in downtown Detroit at Wayne State, just kind of drifting, since neither of us had really made up our minds about what we wanted to do with our lives, being only twenty one, and Madeline was always free with the money she'd been left by Jaycee's dad. So we were taking a few classes, but mostly doing a lot of partying, a lot of bar hopping, bringing home girls to sit in the hot tub and such. That was when I started noticing these long looks Madeline was giving me, and the way she'd put down any girl I brought home once that girl was gone. I mean, I'd always found her attractive—those shock-blue eyes and the long brown hair she usually kept pulled back or pinned up in a kind of messy elegance. She was always letting that hair down around me, putting on a bikini and getting in the hot tub whenever I was in there alone or with Jaycee, and, man, she looked excellent in that bathing suit, her body still lean and smooth except for the little belly she was starting to get from the booze. She was making it tough for me not to think about her on purpose, I know that now. But I had to keep looking away, literally and in my mind, because you just do not think like that about your best friend's mother—your own mother, practically. And I'd be doing a good job of it, seeing her as "Mom" and everything, until she'd catch me off guard watching TV or something and start her fingers running through my hair, smiling as her gentle voice went into my ear, "Oh, Mark, you are such a fine young man, such a good friend to my Jay."

Then, early one morning after Jaycee and I had come home from drinking up the night at Circus McGurkis, all my trying to do what I thought was right was destroyed when she came down to my basement room in nothing more than her silk bathrobe. I'd fantasized about sneak-ing up to her room before; I'd awakened from

dreams of her in my basement bed and imagined her straddling me, a finger to her lips saying Shhhhhh. But I never thought it would actually happen, though I can't say I did one thing to stop it as that silk robe pooled around her ankles and she climbed in bed with me. The memory of that night, the feel of her body, is something I haven't been able to forget, even though she's been dead for years now. Probably because it's a feeling I don't want to lose, the last thing I'll ever have left of her.

That time was the only time we had sex; she died about six months later, a bloated, reddened bag of skin hallucinating in a private room at St. John's—it was horrifying how quickly her looks changed once her liver failed. But she'd backed off completely after that night, no more comments, no more bikini. And I in my confused shame never said a word to her about what had happened. We began avoiding each other; and I don't think I ever saw her sober again, outside of the very end in the hospital. I've given a lot of thought to what happened between us, obviously, and I can't help but feel sometimes that she believed her having sex with me was the last significant act she needed to complete before she could finally allow herself to die. I'm sure part of it was probably just our being human: both of us lonely, horny, and drunk; but I also think that in her drunken logic she was trying to attach herself to me in some way so Jaycee would still have part of her with him after she was gone. If that makes any sense. In his anguish over what she was doing to herself, Jaycee had begun to openly defy her whenever possible, even to the point of telling me once that he wished she'd just hurry up and get it over with. She knew how badly what she was doing hurt him, but she couldn't help herself. Why else would she say the strange thing she said to me in the awkward, tender silence after our sex? "Have you ever seen an eclipse of the sun, Mark?" she asked me. To which I answered, "No, I haven't." "It's like God's slow blinking," she said, "God looking away for little while so we can do what-ever we have to do to make things right. That's what this is. You know that,

don't you?" Then she kissed me on the forehead like a mother kisses her child, and a shiver of awful pleasure ran through me.

I'm not sure if I can ever claim to know exactly what she meant by those words. Actually, I was too freaked out to even believe what had just happened, but I've always felt that night in my room wasn't just about her and I, that it was more about forgiveness than sex. And though Jaycee didn't literally catch us at anything, I think I wore the guilt of the act so blatantly on my face that he intuited what had happened somehow, or maybe he had no idea at all. It's impossible for me to say exactly what he knew, because we never truly talked about it. But, not long after the act, it seemed like things had changed between me and Jaycee—even if the un-easy feelings were only on my side. Though how could our lives not change with Madeline dying right before our eyes? Then Jaycee's inher-iting all that money, and there I am wondering the whole time how much he knew about what had happened between his mother and I.

What all this means is Madeline's life was over way too soon, and by our early twenties me and Jaycee were confused and completely on our own, living off his inheritance in a large, well furnished, fully paid off house in Grosse Pointe Park. Jaycee cried at the funeral, but he did not mourn long. Drunk one night a few weeks later, I started talking about her, and I could feel myself getting misty-eyed. "You don't waste one more tear on her or I'll kick your ass out," Jaycee said. "We've cried enough. She could've had a beautiful life, and she threw it all away." And I wanted to hate him for saying that, just as he hated her, but he was right.

We started drinking more often than not ourselves. We threw big parties, screwed girls in the hot tub, dealt a little dope and coke and speed to some of the heads over at the high school. No more classes at Wayne for us, no jobs; we did what we wanted when we wanted, and as far as the accountant could tell, the interest alone on the inheritance meant we could stay completely wasted and still make taxes on the

house for the rest of our lives.

That winter Jaycee sold Madeline's Fiaro and bought the Jeep, and we started taking road trips whenever. Mexico after Jaycee saw a picture of Cancun on the cover of a travel magazine; California for the Rose Bowl because I said I liked the Spartans and he said he liked UCLA; Daytona and Ft. Lauderdale that spring for the party when the college kids went on break. And no reason behind any of it, just kicks, just going to go, going to avoid the past and the future and live life close to the gut. But after a while it just became a life full of things we paid for even though they really weren't worth anything. It was the life the stunted teenager in all of us dreams of, but I felt like a slave. None of it really belonged to me, and always in the back of my mind there was that anxiety over what exactly Jaycee knew, and my fear of what would happen to my life if I somehow got on his bad side.

In the meantime I hunted around the house until I found that key, which he kept in a magnetic key holder behind the fridge, and, like I said, I took to going into Madeline's room. I'd touch her clothes, her shoes, her jewelry, her underwear, that robe she wore down to my room. I'd sniff her perfume bottle, sit on her bed. Always being careful to get out and lock up before Jaycee came home, always making sure everything was left just as I'd found it. I couldn't keep myself from going in there; I knew already that I would miss her for the rest of my life.

* * *

I'd only walked a few miles but I could already tell I was badly burned. I pressed my finger-tips down on my forearms then pulled them away. White circles bloomed along my reddened skin. I checked my watch. 11:35, the eclipse had just started. I shaded my eyes with my hand and squinted up at the sun. It looked the same as always to me.

When I looked away, back down to the road, I noticed a glint up ahead in the

distance and continued toward it. As I got closer I could see that the glint was coming from the mirror of a dusted-over pickup truck pulled off to the side of the road with both doors flung wide-open and what looked like a pair of legs in boots sticking out the passenger side. Next to the truck was a make-shift souvenir stand — a particle board counter-top laid across two oil drums set up beneath a wind-rippled canvas tarp stretched over four long poles. Behind the counter covered with folded t-shirts and plastic bow and arrow sets and other cheap souvenir junk sat a black haired little girl, maybe six or seven. She had a wide flat face and nut brown skin, and I think she was Hopi, if only because the sloppy painted sign hanging above her head read "Hopi Ed's Tradin' Post."

She was the first Indian child I'd ever seen in person. The first Indian I'd ever seen in person. She had on a loose patterned skirt covered in Indian-style designs and a purple t-shirt with a peeling iron-on of a grinning Jack-o-lantern's face. She was eating a pop-tart pushed halfway out of its silvery wrapper.

I stood on the other side of the counter, sunburned, flooded with sweat, grinning; this was exactly the chance I'd been counting on. "Hi there," I said, "Are you Hopi?"

She stopped chewing and stared at me.

"Can you tell me how to get to Oraibi? You know about the eclipse today, right?" I pointed to the sky, "It's already started." I looked up at the sun again, then around at the desert. Already it seemed as if the light was leaking out of things, though I didn't know if I was imagining it or not. "We're in a big hurry." I said. "You'd really help us save some time if you could tell me where Oraibi is." She shifted in her seat, looking over toward the truck with the legs hanging out, looking back at me, looking me up and down. Then I realized I still had my shirt tied around my head. I took it off my head and put it back on, wincing as it slid past my sun-burned shoulders. I could

tell I was making her nervous, and I smiled to try and re-assure her as she nibbled her food in silence, the pop-tart wrapper crinkling in her hand.

Suddenly I remembered hearing somewhere that you could watch an eclipse through the filter of a torn open pop-tart wrapper without damaging your eyes, something I'd probably learned from the same place I'd learned that staring into an eclipse of the sun can make you blind.

"Hey, you want to see something neat?" I asked her. Suddenly I was filled with the overwhelming desire to share this pop-tart wrapper fact with her; it seemed important somehow that she knew a used pop-tart wrapper was more than a used pop-tart wrapper. I reached across the counter, dripping beads of sweat on the t-shirts and plastic tomahawks.

"Let me see your wrapper," I said, touching her hand.

She recoiled from my touch as if snake-bit, a look of horror rising on her face, "Daddy, Daddy," she screamed it just like any white child I'd ever heard as she ran toward the truck.

"No, no," I went after her. "I'm not going to hurt you." But it was already too late.

The Indian in the truck bolted awake and shot me an evil glare through the back window. Before I could say anything he was on his feet and coming toward me with a long knife in his hand. The little girl ran past him and climbed into the cab still shouting, "Daddy, Daddy," as she clutched the half-eaten pop-tart like a treasure and stared wide-eyed at us through opened door.

"Shut the fuck up!" he shouted without looking at her, and he, too, despite the long black hair, and red skin, and dusty jeans, and dirty, beaded shirt sounded just like any white man I'd ever heard.

"It's all a mistake," I said, raising my hands, "I was just showing her something with the pop-tart. I mean, I was telling her about the eclipse. Don't you know about the eclipse?"

He closed in on me, black eyes fixed and glittering, knife ready. I started back-pedaling

"I don't know what you're talking about. E-clipse," the Indian said. "All I know is the girl never wakes me unless somebody tries to steal something or she's out of change. We ain't sold shit today. That means you tryin' to steal from me. Or you some white pervert fuckin' with my daughter."

"No. That's not true. I wasn't trying to steal anything from you. I'm just looking for Oraibi."

He made a hissing noise and jabbed the knife at me. I jerked back.

"You're lying," he said. He was circling me now. "Ain't got no car. You with the fuckin' Bureau. Where's the rest of 'em? What, you want to take my girl away 'cause I got a bottle in my truck? So what. Fuck you Kachada. Haven't you taken enough from my people already?"

"I wasn't trying to take anything. I was just trying to show her something. I was asking her what kind of Indian she was."

"Same kind as me, the kind that wants the Kachada to stop stealing from us and leave us alone."

"You don't understand," I pleaded, and in my desperation I forgot the knife and took a step toward him, "I have to get to Oraibi, I have to get there before the eclipse is over."

"Back off!" He slashed out, and I felt the blade slice across the out-stretched palm of my right hand. I screamed, recoiled, long fingers of pain going up my arm and into my head. I clamped the hand under my arm-pit, felt the sticky wetness begin to

flush my t-shirt. I could see him coming toward me through my watering eyes.

That was when Jaycee pulled up in the Jeep. He had the empty fifth of Beam by the bottle-neck. "Drop the knife, asshole," he shouted, and he sent the bottle flying end-over-end toward the Indian's head. The Indian raised his arms to cover his face, and the bottle glanced off his shoulder, smashing to shards against the side of his truck.

"Get in," Jaycee yelled when the Indian turned toward his sound of his daughter's screaming. She had both hands covering her face; the pop-tart still partly in its silvery wrapper was laying in the dust below the open door.

I staggered toward the Jeep and fell onto the seat. Jaycee grabbed me by the belt loop and stomped the accelerator down, pulling me the rest of the way in as he cranked the wheel and swung a fast U-turn.

"What the fuck is going on?!" he said once the whole scene was disappearing behind us. "Shit, you're bleeding like crazy. How bad are you hurt? Is it just your hand? Lemme see your hand."

I showed him the deep cut across the length of my palm. "Oh, man, you need stitches, I gotta get you to a doctor. Keep that hand pressed tight under your arm."

"You fixed the Jeep," I said, "Why didn't you tell me you knew how to fix it."

"I didn't fix shit," he said, "I just tried again after a while and it started. It must have been a loose wire or overheating or something. It doesn't matter. What the fuck was going on with that Indian?"

"Nothing was going on, I was trying to get directions to Oraibi and he just freaked out on me, thought I was stealing, or trying to molest his daughter or something."

"What daughter?"

"Didn't you see her sitting in the truck. She was working that stand when I walked up. I think she got some glass in her eyes when that bottle exploded. She was

screaming when we drove off.

"What are you talking about. There was no stand back there. There was nobody sitting in that truck. It was just you and that crazy Indian. I think he was pulled over with a flat tire.

"Bullshit!" I yelled, "I talked to her myself."

"Jesus," Jaycee said, "Calm down. You're getting blood all over the place. I think you're going into shock. Just relax. Everything's cool, I'll take care of you." He glanced quickly in the rearview mirror, "I just hope that fucking guy doesn't decide to come after us once he gets that tire changed. He might have a gun."

I leaned back in my seat and tried to steady my ragged breathing. All around us a strange darkness and coolness was beginning to settle over the desert, the mesas, the cactus, the Joshua trees. It was five after twelve by the radio clock. The eclipse would be full in minutes, and we were nowhere near Oraibi; I didn't even have a popart wrapper to watch it happen.

"Hey, aren't we going the wrong way?" I'd finally realized he'd turned us around. "This is the way we came, isn't it?"

"Goddamn right it's the way we came. I'm taking you to the doctor in Flagstaff to get your hand sewn up."

"Turn around," I said.

"I'm not turning around, Mark. You're going to the hospital to get your hand stitched. Then we're gonna get a hotel room and get drunk by the pool for a few days until we decide to go home."

"No. We've got to turn around," I said, and I reached out and grabbed the wheel with my good hand, swerving us sharply toward the side of the road.

"Goddammitt, Mark, let go!" Jaycee back-handed me across the face, and I let go of the wheel. He straightened us out, held the wheel white-knuckle tight between

both hands.

"You asshole," he yelled above the wind. "You could have killed us. This is all because of that book and my mom, isn't it? You sneak into her room like I told you not to and look through her underwear drawer like some pervert, then steal her book, and you think I didn't know? You stupid motherfucker. You think some eclipse, some new start mumbo—jumbo can make up for what you two did?"

It was getting darker fast, late-evening bluish dark at twelve in the afternoon. Wind all the sudden giving me chills. Jaycee pulled on the headlights, the beams leaping out ahead of us to fall against the road. I looked over at him, saw his face, his profile so much like Madeline's, lit-up by the dash-light.

"That's right, Mark." he said, glancing at me. "You think I didn't know? I know where you got that book. I know more than you think. I saw the way you two used to looked at each other. And I was gonna let it all slide, because you're my bro, man, the closest thing to blood I've got. But you pushed it too far this time."

I turned away from him, watched the darkening desert flying past. Any minute now the moon would slide entirely over the sun, block its light, then move on. God's slow blinking. A chance to do what must be done then forgive ourselves for it while He looks away. We could kill each other in that darkness. Or forgive each other. The choice was ours. Maybe that's what Madeline was trying to get me to understand the night she came down to my room.

"After everything I've given you, a home, a family, money, how could do this to me?" Jaycee was shouting now, "You might as well spit right in fucking face, man. You probably fucked her, too, didn't you? I know you wanted to. Right? RIGHT?" "Give me that book," his hand shot out and tore the *Book of the Hopi* from my left back pocket. I didn't try to stop him; he was right in everything he was saying. "Fuck

this book," he screamed as he threw it out of the Jeep, and I watched it disintegrate into a mess of loose, snapping pages the second the wind snatched it away.

"You wanna keep living with me you better forget that book or my mom even existed. You don't ever go in her room again, you don't even fucking think of her. You got that?"

Then the eclipse's full darkness came over us, and in that blank space I made up my mind. It was a fist to the throat, the painful truth of what I'd done to us all. I knew then I'd rather leave this body and this world before promising such things to Jaycee, because no matter how much of a brother he'd been to me, no matter what I owed him, the kind of forgetting he was demanding of me was impossible.

SHOTS

It was his thirtieth birthday party, and he'd cooked a potful of chili for the large group of friends who were drinking at his place. All evening he'd been putting down shots of whiskey from a little glass shot-mug, a gift from his wife with his name etched into a circle of pewter on one side. "Now no matter how drunk I get, I'll still know who I am," he kept saying whenever someone toasted him.

By midnight the chili was gone, and he was good and drunk and sitting at the drum kit he'd set up in the rehearsal room of the house they rented. A couple of his friends had brought their rigs and they all plugged in and worked up jazzrock-countryfunk fusion of bass, guitars and drums. They started taking the music places, and he tried to lead the way, syncopating heavily, purposefully playing ahead of the beat or playing behind, tripping off every now and then into half-times before boiling his way back into straight 4/4 with a tight snare roll. He worked the spine of it, inspired though irregular in his rhythms, looking for a place inside the music, his own corner of the pocket—until he slipped so deep into the swirl of sound that something came loose inside. The whiskey spins had found him. Lurching up from the drum stool he staggered out of the studio and bumped his way through the party, the faces of his friends swimming past him on his way to the front door.

A cold night, December in East Detroit, dramatic black-blue shadows thrown across the snow by backyard floodlights: he did not feel the cold and so stepped outside in just his jeans and t-shirt, boots squeaking across the snow. After taking only a few steps he heard the front door opening behind him, and he took off running down the slick wheel ruts of his long, unshoveled driveway, sliding to a stop just before hitting the slushy, salted street. Then he turned to look at the waving, back-lit silhouette

standing in the open doorway—his wife, he assumed—light and loud music and voices leaking past her in a noisy halo. He waved a goofy, exaggerated wave in return, thought about how after five years of marriage the honeymoon was definitely over, then he started down the plowed street lined by mounds of snow.

Breathing in heavily from his sudden run, he felt the cold air pepperminting his lungs. He hooked his fingers behind his neck as he walked and threw his head back into the night. A lot of his favorite people were inside, and now he'd done too many shots to be able to talk sensibly with any of them. He'd done this same thing before, gotten wasted early and missed out, and he'd hated himself for doing it then as well. But not enough to keep him from doing it again. It was the shots. Belly up against the counter of some bar or drinking in his own house, it was always the shots that did this to him, got him too fucked up and put him in a place where he was going to forget everything important about a good-time night he would want to remember. But the way it fired his blood and his head, the way there always seemed to be something intangible new waiting just beyond the veil of the next drink—sometimes he didn't feel like stopping.

He stared into the many stars spinning against the cloudless winter night. He staggered a step, steadied himself, then shook his head hard to clear it. Everything up and down the block was frosted with snow, and the many street lights threw a still light across the picturesque houses. He'd always liked this neighborhood: big lawns, lots of trees, old Victorian gingerbread homes with ornate wood-work on the eaves and porches. And the rent was reasonable. Probably because they were still only a few blocks away from the North side of town where things could get dangerous.

A pair of headlights made the corner onto his street, and he blinked, stumbled in the glare then quit walking as he tried to squint through the high-beams into the windshield. More friends were expected. A black Cherokee rolled up next to him and

stopped. The tinted window hummed down; the driver was wearing a rubber Jimmy Carter mask and pointing what appeared to be a real pistol at him.

"Ka-blam!" the driver said, and laughed. There was more laughter from someone he couldn't see in the back seat, and he caught a quick whiff of weed. "You know where 713 is, brutha?" Jimmy Carter asked. He shook his head no. "Good for you," Jimmy Carter said, then the tinted window slid back up, and the car drove slowly past him, its tires creaking on the snow. He stood there watching the red tail-lights getting smaller, uncertain if what he'd seen was real. The spins were on him again, faster now, and he knew from experience there was no way to shake them. He staggered back to his house, more than once almost slipping and falling into the snow. Back inside, the heat and noise and people at the party seemed unbearable. His wife came up to him, a look of concern on her face. "You've had enough," she told him, "go to bed." But he didn't want to go to bed, and he wasn't sure if he could make it that far anyway. The room hurling itself upon itself, he flopped down into the overstuffed lounge, levered up the foot-rest, leaned the seat back, and immediately passed out.

Hours later he woke up confused by the dim, empty living room and the sound of sirens. Someone had taken off his shoes and socks and written "Love" and "Hate" across the tops of his bare feet in black magic marker. He didn't notice this, but staggered to the bathroom, tongue dry as gauze, his head whining like a gyroscope. He slammed a glass of water, retched, tossed in aspirin and more water until finally he could make sense of the sirens which were louder now and varied: fire trucks, police cars, ambulances—it sounded like a squadron of each were going down his street when, abruptly, all the noise cut off at once. He went to the living room window and looked out. An ambulance, two fire trucks and four or five police cars were clustered a few houses away, their red-blue lights splashing color across the snow and ornate

houses. He stood with his hand on the drawstring of the blinds, feeling as if there was some reason for him to shrink away from being seen. He belched and tasted Jim Beam then turned from the window, suddenly overcome by the idea that something was missing, that someone he didn't know had shown up after he'd passed out and taken a CD or a knick-knack or a guitar cable. He looked around the living room cluttered with empty bottles and full ashtrays and remembered he'd been having a dream right before the sirens awakened him—a dream of a door slamming sharply, loudly, over and over. Looking down, he noticed the words written in marker across the tops of his bare feet, and he went to sit on the couch to try and make them out. Sitting there, still drunk, holding the "love" foot in his lap, he knew vaguely that some important piece of the evening had been lost to him, but the question of who had written on him and the vivid image of the dream door slamming had forced whatever that loss was from his mind. For a while he sat that way on the living room couch, foot in his lap, siren lights pulsing blue and red across the living room ceiling, his brain firing and misfiring fragments of the night through his head. Then he got up and walked unsteadily down the hall to the bedroom, gnawed by the certainty that there was something he'd forgotten.

THREE WAYS OF THE SAW

They lip up the driveway in a blue Toyota truck, its bed eaten through with rust so badly I can see past the holes in the body to the blackened, dirty frame. The driver, a big, thirty-ish looking man with stubbly cheeks and a ball cap on, puts it into park. He takes a deep-drag on his cigarette then pulls it out from between his lips, says something over to whoever it is I can't see in the passenger seat because of how the truck is sitting in my driveway. I think of how long it's been, and part of me rasps with the urge to have one. Eight years I've kept that unopened hard-pack of Marlboro Reds in my freezer, and what difference would it make, smoking one now?

The driver steps out of the blue Toyota, slamming the door behind him with a hollow clang. He jets out two hard grey streams through his nose, drops his cigarette onto my drive and grinds it out beneath his work boot. He starts up my walk, and I lose sight of him after he passes by the kitchen window on his way to the front door. Then comes the bell. I set my coffee down on the counter, stand there for a little longer watching the passenger—a young guy in his own ball cap—come into my sight on the far side of the truck bed. He unhooks the bungee they've got the tailgate rigged shut with and starts getting out the chainsaws and gear. The bell rings again, and this time I go to answer, though I'd much rather these two weren't here today. It's bad enough what this storm has done, this wet-heavy snow so early in October weighing down the half-turned leaves, tearing limbs from countless oaks and maples, and of course, my Honey Locust. Only to melt off completely with yesterday's rain.

As soon as I open the door, his hand shoots up to take mine. "Mr. Ash," he says it more than asks.

"You the service," I say.

"That's right, sir. I'm JW," he says, and we shake on it.

"Here for the Locust," I say.

"Yes sir. Here for the Locust. If you'll just sign, please." He hands me the bid sheet on a clipboard. I check the price to make sure it's the same as the one he and my wife Bev agreed to when he came by after the storm a few days ago. I sign off and hand the clipboard back.

"Thank you sir," JW says, "We'll have it squared away in no time." He gives me a wide almost crazy-looking smile the way his eyes lock straight onto mine, and I look away. Down to the pack of Camel Lights right there in the breast pocket of his work shirt. Eight years, I'm thinking. I was sixty last time I smoked. Sixty when they told me they'd have to take a lung because of my twenty-two year pack a day habit. Eight years short of breath, and there still hasn't been a day where I didn't think of having one.

I stand in the open doorway watching him go back down the walk to the drive where the young man crouches pouring gasoline carefully into the saws through the can's long nozzle. He's not much more than a kid, really. Looks to be around eighteen. And he's concentrating hard on what he's doing, making sure not to spill that gas. He caps the larger of the two saws, slides the plastic sheath off the blade then hands the saw to JW, who eyes along the chain and turns his back to me, pulling the starter cord a few times until the saw kicks in and blue smoke goes rising all around him. JW revs the motor, the saw's pitch winding higher and higher into a jagged buzzing before he finally lays off the trigger and lets the motor fall into a throaty idle. I've been trying all along not to look at my Locust in the center of the lawn a few yards away from them, but I have to look now. Trunk is shattered at the main crotch maybe twenty feet up. Half the crown with all its mostly green leaves is thrown down and hanging to the grass, but still attached, like the way a woman might bend over to comb out her long

hair. The rest of this city hasn't done much better. Even downtown on Michigan Avenue there's limbs wrapped up in power lines or laying across the roads. Bev and I are lucky to have electric at all. TV news said most people in this part of the state won't be seeing power or heat for a while.

But today it's near sixty degrees. The sun's out, I got squirrels and robins and cardinals hopping across my lawn. More like spring than October, except for all these ruined trees. Looking at the empty, blue sky It's hard to believe that a few nights ago the sick groan and snapping of that Locust pulled me out of bed to the kitchen where I saw the damage then sat down at the table to watch the snow quieting everything.

JW cuts off the saw, sets it on the driveway and unzips the army green duffel, pulling out hard hats, coils of rope, a climbing harness, leg spikes, handing everything to the young man who arranges them carefully on the grass. My chest begins to feel tight, tighter than usual, and I decide maybe I better go back inside to rest for a while.

By the time I reach the bathroom cabinet, I'm wheezing like I've just finished running up and down a long, long flight of stairs, stairs like there would be inside a lighthouse or some high—rise—the kind of places I've never lived in because I've been living here in this house for more than half my life. I see my saggy face in the cabinet mirror, too pale, and think about the way all things eventually come apart. I turn my reflection aside, opening the cabinet to get at my pills—Elavil, M.S.Contin—pills like people's names which I swallow with two glasses of water before going into the living room. "Lung Cancer and You," one of the pamphlets Dr. Greenspan gave me the day after the storm is on the coffee table right next to "Dying with Dignity," a book I charged out from the library on my way home from his office. This is not the time to read them.

I go instead to the picture window and look through at my mangled Locust. Used to be every day when I came home from work I'd sit on the porch or the couch

for a few minutes and watch that tree grow. It'd been my habit since planting her our first summer here to eventually block the view of that telephone pole at the foot of my lawn. I always paid close attention to her, giving extra water in the dry, trimming when I thought it necessary. But I haven't been doing it so much these last few years, the cancer's made me tired, and she'd been doing well enough on her own, it seemed.

Over by the truck I hear a chainsaw's angry buzzing, but smaller this time, higher pitched, and I see it's the little one they've got going now, probably to take the tops off that hanging half of the crown so the tree will drop right when they cut into the trunk. Part of me wants to go back outside to watch them work. Maybe ask if there's some way to save what's left of the Locust, but what's the point. When JW came for the bid he told Bev there is no saving that tree, split at the crotch like it is. So her and I had bad news to trade that day after the storm when I came home from my visit to the Doctor's. I see JW coming at those down limbs, hear the pitch of the saw change when it bites the wood. I'm forgetting to watch my breathing now, and suddenly it feels like someone's shoved their hands inside my chest, wrapped them around my lung and begun wringing. I decide it's better to drop the shade on all this, which I do before going through the dimness to sit on the couch and catch my breath. It was so awful being in the Oncologist's office the other day—all the hours I've spent in there over these last eight years, waiting, getting bad news, getting good news, and now that we thought we finally had the cancer beat it's starting all over again. Metastasized to the other lung. "We can go back to chemo or radiation," Dr. Greenspan said. But I just shrugged him off. It's obvious I'm out of time. After five pretty good years of remission and everything Bev and I went through the first time around, all her worry and the worry of my children and grandchildren, my weakness and nausea and my hair falling out, I think my being out of time is just the way it's meant to be. It's the

way of all things eventually. And trite as that is, it comes to mean a great deal when you're forced to apply it to yourself. It almost seems peaceful, the idea of letting myself slowly suffocate, dying right here in this living room on some bed they've wheeled in, staring into a fire of Honey Locust wood burning in the fireplace, Bev holding my hand and the kids and their kids all circled around as the last of my life wheezes out of me.

After a while, the saw cuts off, the silence after filling a space of its own, and I think, you know, that's the way the world really is, the whole universe probably—filled mostly with silence broken now and again by the noise living things make. Then I hear the young man, "Where's he want this shit?" It's hard to hear him talk about my tree that way. Maybe after I rest a little while I'll go back out there and tell him to watch his mouth around my house.

JW cranks up the little Husquevarna and waves me over with it to the mess of branches hanging down off the tree. "Let's do 'er," he shouts over the idling motor. "I'm ready," I say, springing up from my haunches with the ropes over my shoulder and his harness and leg—spikes in my hands. Even though we already cut and humped probably a cord of oak this morning, the last thing I want is him thinking I'm tired or lazy, because I'm neither, and I want to keep this job, which is the best one I've ever had—so much better than driving pizzas or working a gas station register or greasing—out in a fast food uniform like most of my friends do. We've been busting ass with all this shit the storm left behind, and I want him knowing I can keep up. Not too many guys my age get to luck onto a crew like this one. And today, with GL and Danimal split off to handle the extra work, JW's eye is right on me, and that means the better I do, the sooner I get to climb and use the saws.

I set the gear down on the far side of the tree and walk over to watch JW cutting off the smaller branches. I keep a safe distance, making sure he can see me to know

where I am as things fall. I pay attention to how he works the saw up from the bottom if a branch is touching the ground, and down from the top if it hangs without pressure against it. This is how to keep the blade from getting pinched and the chain snagged, he's already told me.

Once he's sawed all the tops from the hanging limbs, I know it's my time to pull brush mule.

"Where's he want this shit?" I ask him, thinking probably at the curb for city pick-up, an easy-haul twenty feet away.

"Up there back in the scrub." JW points at the wooded hill beside the client's house where I can see the tangled thicket of dead cuttings they've probably been stacking there since they owned this place.

"You got it," I say, pulling branches from the big pile he's cut and dragging them off toward the hill. but I'm thinking, "Jesus, what the hell's he need it all the way up the hill for?"

By the last load of brush I'm stripped down to my dirt-smeared t-shirt, sweating, my work boots slipping now and then on the slick mud-path I'm beginning to wear into the hill. I do feel like a goddamn mule, grunting, hauling these long leafy branches by their cut stems through the tight spaces between trees, stepping over and through what I've already dragged to set what I'm dragging now on top of the pile I've made. I stop to catch my breath after the last of it. Down the hill, I can see JW standing on the porch drinking a cup of coffee, it looks like, and talking to the client—an old guy, maybe eighty, who's coughing into his fist now and again. I take my work gloves off, slap them against my thigh then go down the hill toward them.

"Yep, only thirty—some years old," the old man says, and he sounds sad as hell about it, whatever it is.

"Damn shame," JW says, and then they both look at me, standing there

sweating underneath my baseball hat. I feel sweat drops tickling my nose and wipe my forearm across my face. The muscles in my arms and back and thighs got the good burn going. I'm tired, but I can tell I've power to give yet, and I am ready to say—hey, JW, let's bang this out so we can get on to the next client. Because that's what getting paid by the job means—harder you work, more you make an hour. But this is JW's Tree Service, not mine, and I need to do it his way. For now.

"Can I get you something to drink, son," the old man says, "coffee, water?" and I think, damn, if I was his son I wouldn't be worried about getting a drink, I'd be worried about having to bury him. He's got thin, white, stubbly hair like a cut corn field, liver-spotted skin pale as milk, and he's breathing in short little pants like he's been going up and down that hill with me. For a second I think maybe it's my own quick breathing that's got him going, so I make a conscious thing of taking deep breaths and slowing myself down. I suck in a couple nose-fulls of the crisp fall air and the whole world smells turned over, new and wet, and there's the tang of gas and motor oil and fresh cut wood that follows us everywhere.

"Water'll be just fine, sir," I say.

"Mike, this is Mr. Ash," JW says, "Mike's my step-sister's kid," he says it almost like he's making an excuse for me, "Guess you could say he's my apprentice. Just graduated high school."

"That so," the old man says.

"Last June," I say, leaving out how goddamn glad I am about it.

"Yep. I'm teaching him the way of the saw," JW says, "Before he decides to be a smart-ass and go off to college or something."

"The way of the saw," the old man says in a far off kind of voice, like there's something sad about that too. Then he glances over at the totally fucked-up tree we've half cut down, hacks into his fist.

"Well," he says, "I guess I better get out of your way. I'll leave your water here on the steps, Mike."

"Thank you, sir." I say, and he waves a little it's nothing kind of wave at me as he turns to go inside.

JW drains his coffee cup and sets it down. "Let's get this over with," he says it almost like he's mad about it, and I wonder what's happened to get him so sour.

We go over to where I've left the spurs and harness by the tree. JW steps into one of the spurs and does up the leather straps. I watch how he winds the leather around the metal spike running along the inside of his shin before buckling it tight. He does the same with the other leg then steps through the climbing harness before buckling that on around his waist and between his legs. I hand him one end of the coil of rope which he loops through the `beaner hanging off his harness. He looks the tree up and down, steps to it and hugs the trunk in his big arms. He raises one leg and chucks the spur in, then straightens himself up on that leg and digs in with the other. Holding on by one arm and the spurs, he works the flip-line open with his free hand and slips it around the trunk to snap it into the clip on the other side of his harness. "Watch for tangles," he says to me about the rope hanging down from his waist to the ground coil. Then he climbs, working the spurs and flip-line together until he's reached the broken part.

"Send up the little Husky," he shouts. I grab his rope just above the ground-coil and put the two owl eyes in it then fold them together making the butterfly hitch in the single line just like he showed me. I wrap the loop around the body of the smaller saw and make it tight. "All you," I say up to him. He reels the saw in, frees it from the rope, starts it in one pull then begins cutting top down on the shattered base of the hanging limb we've already topped. Saw dust floats down on me, and not knowing where that limb will fall, I step back to a safe distance. We keep this pace, we'll knock

out one, maybe even two more jobs today. That's a hundred bucks at least I'll be taking home for eight hours work today, almost four hundred for the week. More than enough to start saving for my own chainsaw; more than enough to buy beer and gas my car so Carol Anne and I can go to the bonfire at the lake tonight and work toward that promise she's been giving me in installments, as the two of us like to say.

JW finally cuts through the limb and it creaks like an old door then slowly falls, peeling a layer of bark away from the trunk. He hooks the saw to his harness by the `beaner on it's tether then loops the long rope around the tree's good limb, putting a running bowline on it, I'm guessing, though I can't tell for certain from the ground. He shakes the rope out for me, and I walk it away from the base of the tree to keep it free of his legs as he spurs and flip-lines his way back down.

"Well," he says once he's unhooked and standing next to me, "Looks we can put the face— cut in right here and get this one to fall straight across the driveway."

"Sounds good," I say, starting to walk the guide rope over to where I'll need to stand. In my head we've already got this wood cut and tossed up that hill or to the curb or wherever the old man wants it.

"Cool out," JW says climbing out of the harness and spurs, "Let's take five." I notice he's short of breath and sweating pretty hard, and I realize he hasn't been looking too good lately, like maybe he's got a bug or something. He stretches his arms and back as he walks over to the porch where there's a plastic pitcher of water and two glasses set out for us on the top step.

"You're the boss," I say, letting the rope go, but part of me grinds. JW's pissed about something; he's slowing us up on purpose, though I don't know why.

"Something wrong?" I ask as I walk over.

"Nah, it's nothing wrong, just sit your ass on a step and relax a minute, Mike. This job isn't all about rip it down and drag it off you know."

"That's alright," I say. "I'll stand. I don't wanna cramp up on the other jobs."

"Have it how you like," he says. He gets his pack of smokes from his shirt pocket, shakes one out and puts it to his lips, then he takes it away without lighting and sits there holding the thing, looking at it like he's reading a thermometer.

"Mind if I bum one?" I ask.

He snaps back from wherever he's gone and eyes me up and down like I'm some dead tree he's about to take out. Snag he'd call it. A dead tree still standing.

"Nasty habit," he says, and he tosses the smoke he's holding to me.

"I know," I say, grinning around the cigarette once I've stuck it in my mouth. "Got a light?"

"When you start smoking?" He asks. I shrug. "Monica know you smoke?"

I shake my head and catch the Bic he's lobbed my way. I fire up the Camel, take a deep drag. The smoke tastes good. Carol Anne's already got me nearly hooked on her Marlboro Lights. "There's a lot your sister doesn't know about me," I say. "That's why I'm getting my own place. That's why I want to finish this job and get on. 'Cause I got bills to pay."

"Well, damn if you ain't the big dog howling." JW takes a sigh and fishes another smoke from the pack for himself. I toss his lighter back to him, wondering what the hell he's trying to get at. "Relax, Mike," he says as he lights up, "You got a whole life to burn through yet."

Goddamn kid is a good kid, but he's all crash and burn. These trees, each of them has a heart he still hasn't learned to feel. And he wants to climb. Wants to work the saws. You have to feel for the tree before you can spur up it, or that tree will sure as shit throw you down. You have to ask the tree to let you cut, or that tree might tell the saw to take a finger or your hand. Each kind of wood has its own kind of life, just likewe have our own ways of living and dying and talking, and our different shades of

skin. An Arborist isn't about cut it up and pay me. An Arborist is a goddamn surgeon, a healer, someone who cuts out what's dead so the rest can live on. Sometimes he seems to get it, this kid. But sometimes, like today, like any Friday, it's nothing to him but a means to an end. A paycheck.

I stub out my smoke on the walkway and stand. "Okay, Mike, let's do it," I tell him, and he walks the rope over to the other side of the driveway where he'll stand and pull once I put the back-cut in and the tree begins to fall. Usually I love this job, healing the trees, but it's like a funeral taking this Locust out with all that's going on here. Maybe the kid's right for once, maybe we do need to just bang this one out and get on. Mr. Ash's wife, Beverly, or whatever her name is, when I came to do the bid, she told me he'd planted that tree when they first moved in to block the view of the telephone pole out their picture window. Thirty-some years ago Mr. Ash planted it; he told me so himself today—that Locust is older than I am, practically twice as old as the goddamn kid, and all that kid wants is it down and out of here so we can get to the next job.

Beverly also told me about his cancer coming back, about how he's only got one lung right now anyway, and that there's only a little time left to him. That's why she wanted this done right away: she doesn't want her dying husband staring out their front window at the wreckage of something he'd loved for so long. Meanwhile, there's this little girl over her shoulder sitting in the living room with her whole life ahead of her, waiting on her accordion lesson, waiting to get started with everything, waiting to learn "Blow the Man Down," or "Greensleeves," for god's sake. Because that's the way life is. And that's what Beverly does when she's not out getting her husband's pills or setting up Doctor appointments and doing whatever she does for him, she teaches the accordion. Whole thing's a damn shame is what it is. He's only

sixty some years old, and I saw those school pictures and those wedding pictures and those baby pictures on the mantle. It'll be a lot of people he's leaving behind. They probably had a million sunny-day picnics with their kids and their grandkids horsing around in this yard under the shade of this tree, the sweet smelling clusters of white Locust flowers falling down around them like in some movie or a dream. Now the heart of it's been ripped open to the pulp, and there's no saving what's left. Just like there's no saving anything.

I crank up the two-foot Husky and put in the face-cut, careful about the angle so the tree will lay itself down in the line I imagine. "Ready!?" I shout over to Mike, who, caught in his surprise, looks to have had his mind on what he'll be doing tonight with that girl he's always talking about, instead of on what he's doing right now. "Get your head out." I yell, and he sets his mouth and nods, leans back into the rope he's clutching in the gloves.

I'm three-quarters through the back-cut when the tree starts going over wrong, falling toward my truck in slo-motion, and I already see the bed crushed when Mike heaves to on the guide-rope and manages to swing the trunk just past the trailer hitch, so it's only scratching branches and no real weight hitting the bed.

"Goddamn," I shout, cutting off the saw and running over to him; I'm keeping down the urge to smack him in the head and knock off his hard hat, though I'm not sure if it was a bad face-cut or his lack of pulling that made the tree fall the way it did.

"What happened?" I shout. "Weren't you pulling?" Then I notice he's just as upset as I am.

"Hell yes, I was pulling, I was pulling hard as I could just to keep that tree from smashing your truck. Why'd you face-cut like that? Why didn't you move the truck if you thought it was going to fall so close?"

I'm tempted to tell him to shut his punk mouth because if fourteen years of tree

work has taught me anything it's how to make a decent face cut. Then I realize it could have been both our fault, or neither. Trees will just fall their own way sometimes, no matter how careful you are. "You got to pull harder, Mike," I say, and leave it at that, though I know he's right about how I just should've moved the truck in the first place. I look over my shoulder to check if Mr. Ash has seen what's going on, but the picture window shade is down, and the house looks empty somehow, like he's already left us.

We start to section up the trunk and remaining limbs. I let Mike work the little Husky. Partly because I feel guilty for yelling at him, and partly because it's time he learns. He does good with the saw, uses it just like I showed him. But once we've finished and bagged up all the gear and swept the leaves and sawdust from the driveway, he grabs some of the choice firewood and starts setting it in the bed of my truck.

"Take that out," I tell him.

"What for?"

"Because I told you to, that's what for, " I say, and I can see him bristle. But I don't care. He wouldn't understand the reasons why every single stick of it should stay here, even if I told him. "Because the client wants all this wood," I say.

"Whatever, JW," he says, taking the wood back out and dropping it carelessly on the lawn, "Don't need to ream me out for it. I didn't think you'd mind if I took a few logs for myself. A bunch of us are having a bonfire at the lake tonight."

"That's fine, but the wood's staying here," I say. "And don't fuck-up Mr. Ash's lawn throwing down those logs."

"Sorry" he says. "Jesus." Then, "Why aren't GL and Danimal coming with the trailer? Don't you want the wood for the lot?"

"GL and Danimal got other things to do with the trailer," I say.

"We're stacking this wood near the side door for Mr. Ash. And that's

that."

"Since when do we stack people's wood for them."

"Since right now, goddammit. So get at it."

"Shit, this is going to take forever," Mike mumbles, but he starts carrying big armloads toward the side of the house. He is a strong kid, impatient, already getting big, and still without his full growth. He could become an ugly man if someone doesn't keep an eye on him, and I owe it to Monica to do what I can. I probably shouldn't've snapped on him the way I did. That sure doesn't teach him anything worth learning.

It's three by time we've got all the locust wood stacked. I don't bother knocking to tell Mr. Ash we're through; if he's resting, he doesn't need to be disturbed, and his wife and I have already made all the arrangements about the check I'll be getting in the mail. So I just pull the carbon off the paper-work, fold it up, and stick it in the mailbox mounted on the house next to the front door.

Mike's already in my truck waiting as I come down the walk. I can tell through the windshield that he's searching my eyes, trying to see if I'm still pissed at him, or if I'm just tired. Well, I am tired, all the time lately, and irritable, and this weird itch in my throat makes me think I should go see a doctor even though I don't want to. Maybe I'm just getting old. Thirty-three, and I can't climb and carry quite like I used to, though I've learned some little thing with each tree I've taken down. Each tree that is so much like a person if you take the time to look close enough. If you take the time to understand what you're looking at.

"That's all for today," I say as I get in and slam the door, "Let's knock off."

"Knock off?" Mike says, and he doesn't try to hide the disappointment in his voice.

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure," I say. "And you'll be getting your pay today so quit your bitching."

"I wasn't bitching."

I take a smoke out and light it, thumb without looking over to the low stump I've cut smooth. "Mike, what kind of tree was that we just took out."

"I don't know. What kind?"

"That was a Honey Locust, Mike. Some of the hardest wood there is next to Ebony. Tree like that can live hundreds of years unless some storm or sickness takes it down."

"Yeah, so."

"You need to learn the difference between the trees, Mike. It's like anything in life, it's important to know difference between things, especially when most people see them as the same." And that's all I can tell him. Even though I know it's a helluva lot more complicated than that.

"Okay, I'll try to learn." he says. Then, "Can I bum another Camel?"

I turn the engine over, toss my pack into his lap, "It's time for you to start buying your own, my man," I tell him as I back out of the driveway then pull forward onto the street in front of Mr. Ash's house. And as we pull forward, I see Mr. Ash at the stump, down on one knee, an unlit cigarette between his lips. He's been there for I don't know how long, running his fingers over the cut. The rings of time. How much has passed. How much he has left. It's the circle of history at the heart of every living thing he's touching now. I think of that Locust wood we've stacked against the side of his house. A year or two, at least, before it will burn. Who knows if he even has that long? I lean forward, look across my half-nephew and wave, though when Mr. Ash lifts his head right then as if called, I can tell it isn't me he's looking at, but a darker place, the end of a path through woods I've yet to see. "Take care," I say, anyway.

GENUFLECT, GENTLEMEN

PROLOGUE

You ask: Who is this obscuring counsel yet lacking knowledge? But I have spoken of things which I have not understood, things too wonderful for me to know.

Job 42:3

All wars are boyish things, and are fought by boys.

H. Melville

This isn't the kind of thing most people can truthfully say about themselves, so I'll just be blunt. I used to be a rock star, a famous, long-haired, leather wearing, stoned-out ROCK AND FUCKING ROLL STAR. I was the guy every teenage boy dreams of being at least once in his life, the dark angry voice making the girl's hearts thump, the guitar behind the noise the parents couldn't stand. I put on the cliché'd lie rock and roll seduces so many with and wore its skin clean through with rubbing up against the loudest soundtrack of excuses you'll ever need to keep you bombed out of your mind. Keep you stunted and believing you'll always stay eighteen; you'll always be filled with this animal desire of rage in longing only the young can have.

Because that really was me living out the fantasy. I was making music with my band, touring the USA and Europe, getting high and getting laid all the time. It was literally my life as a lame slogan on a six dollar t-shirt: "100% Rock and Roll." Just like the tattoo on my right shoulder says—one of the few tats I have that I actually remember getting.

So much stupid living. Now there's all that fucked up blank space in my head. Years of it. I thought it all *so very* rock and roll of me at the time, getting and staying as high as I could. And I believed I had no reason not to, not with my every need

already being met. Women wanting to screw me purely because of who I was. People I didn't even really know with names I'll never remember styling me out and getting me too wasted to speak. Then all the rest of the debauchery and weirdness I eventually found my way into. Though I won't say I regret any of it, drawn as I am to lecherousness and the darker sides of oblivion.

And how else are you supposed to approach it, this rock and roll music, this codified "rebellion," the white man's soul-less washed-out version of the Jazzy-Blues? Twisted on smack with an ironical smile wrapped around a smoke was the only way I felt comfortable by the end. Especially if you live to play the way I always have. Because it's all been done before, and unless you're a Hendrix or a Dylan or Keith Richards, which I'm not, it doesn't really make much difference. You're just fodder for the pop machine. A shadow figure in a game that would still play out the same even if you weren't around.

That's not to say I didn't do everything I could to respect my music. I'm a solid guitar player, and I've written more than my fair share of damn good rock and roll songs. Musically innovative, lyrically fresh—just as good if not better than most of what's out there these days. They were obviously good enough to make me relatively famous for a time. But my addictions and the jaded glut of the industry mean I'll never be much more than a footnote—an observation I was way too fucked up and egocentric to make during the years of my fame, and one I would have ridiculed with indifference had it briefly wandered through the pot-holed landscape of my mind.

But as a thirteen year old upper middle class suburban kid teaching myself guitar I didn't know much of anything about anything, let alone musical integrity or taking things too far—though I was more than willing to learn. Jellyroll playing whorehouse rags, T-bone high on reefer. Googly-eyed Robert Johnson poisoned dead from jealous whiskey. Sleepy John Estes and his 38. Pistol. Ledbelly jailed

twice for murder. The young Muddy Waters, the women melting before his perfect, shining pompadour. It would take years, four albums and almost a decade forgotten, before I'd even get close to understanding as I do now the truths those men were touching with their music, what they meant by the evil, god-fearing twisted-gut joy-in-loss of their blues. But shove them all through the inevitable pop mulch of Chuck Berry and Bill Hailey and the Killer and the saintly, pre-cheeseburger-junkie King, then you get bands, white rock and roll bands, the music of which I could feel and understand, even at thirteen.

Bands: the idea of a gang of sonic brothers making the music that could take me away from my dissolved family world of three older sisters already married and gone, my father traveling all the time for his PR job, both him and my mother on the well deserved downside of raising three girls and deciding that their boy, their only boy, an intelligent, sensitive, late in their lives child, should be allowed to spend all that time listening to his records and teaching himself to play guitar.

My older sisters left practically the whole British Invasion behind in my parent's basement when they went off to college, and now I had that music all to myself. Between the Beatles-Kinks-Who-Rolling Stones and my late night clock-radio sessions, the gates blew wide open. Into the record store where Led Zeppelin-AC/DC-Rush-Black Sabbath-Deep Purple-Pink Floyd baptized me with dreams of getting up on that stage under the flashing lights to jam-out on my guitar, my songs, my words, my torn soul set loose in your goddamn face at one million miles an hour, so loud and so righteous your ears will ring with my screams and garotted notes for days. It didn't matter if I had no idea what to say, I understood the calling: rock and roll as a holy fire in your blood carrying you away on the sound of The Truth torn free. Now remember, this was the late seventies when I was thirteen, back when you just lay on floor listening to that record for hours, looking at the pictures on the jacket and reading the lyrics

on the sleeve, maybe scoping an insert if you were lucky, praying for a tour to hit town before the band broke up or someone O. D.'d. This was before the music videos it is now almost impossible to remember beyond—though I can't put down the medium that made me famous for those few years and a multi-millionaire before I partied almost all of that money away. We would never have gone anywhere if it wasn't for MTV running with our first video the way they did. What the hell was I saying? Oh, yes, that the idea of starting a band, playing in a band, being a rock and roll star, was all I dreamed of at that age.

So I convinced my parents to buy me a cheap, used electric guitar: a black Magnum Les Paul Studio copy, which I ran through a borrowed Peavey Special 135, to be specific; and I started playing along with Tony Iomi and Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix and Jimmy Page and Angus Young and everyone else I was into, hour after hour, day after day. I never took a lesson, just played along with the records and picked up things from the people I jammed with. I met a lot of theory-heads during my years in the music industry, session dudes out in LA who went to the GIT and can read sheet and play any scale so fast it sounds like someone shredding cheese with a rotor saw—but that's not rock and roll, no matter how thoroughly they have been deceived to think so. Rock and roll in that secret vein you grow from your ear to your heart by driving late at night down dark back-roads or light-slick city streets with the radio cranked too loud and a bunch of bozos hanging out the windows of your car. Rock and roll is wearing that record groove—less from playing it over and over, comping along on your axe until there're blood-black lines worn into your fingertips from the oxides on the strings. Who cares if you don't know the Mixolydian mode from the Phrygian mode? If you can't feel what sounds good from the get-go, man, you'll never get your band off the ground. Two Platinum albums proves that I didn't need lessons anyhow; I've always had the Unborn Buddha Mind in me, though I didn't

know what to call it at the time. You don't need lessons to teach yourself how to feel. All you need is perspective, and that is true for everything, from music to religion to life in general. Which is what this is all about, I suppose. Perspective. Which is easy for me to say, now that I've actually found some. So, I'll get to the point. Being raised Catholic, and not having too much to stay home for, I asked to go away to Orchid Lake St Mary's, an all-boys Catholic boarding school across town from my house, a move which certainly changed the course of my life. Because I took my guitar with me and formed my first band, Voyager, by the end of the fall semester my freshman year.

This means there's a Jesus factor as well as the rock and roll to consider here. Because the Lord God Jesus Christ on the Most High, a source and facet of the Truth of All, is one of the main reasons why I'm writing this down. During my childhood I spent some serious time on my knees in the flickering, incense-thickened illumination of stained glass played through with Sunday morning's sunshine. I have been circumcised and baptized; I have confessed and been confirmed; I have eaten the meat and drunk the blood of God, and I was glad for it, Jesus Christ being the only rock star I could conceive of before my musical enlightenment. So help me, God knows that in my early youth I believed with a heart so starved for Divine, merciful love that I spilled tears of joyous self-shame at the mere thought of Christ's tremendous, absolutely unsurpassable sacrifice. Until rock and roll took the scales from my eyes. Or blinded me, depending on how you want to take what I have to say here. And I really don't have too clear an idea yet of what that is.

But I have to start somewhere. Because God compels me to a new beginning, which makes this text something that's not necessarily for someone else to read, a purgative thing, so to speak—though I know my name and its association with the band already guarantees this manuscript would probably make me some money if I ever decide to give it to a publisher. Especially with our ugly break-up and all that court and

woman trouble getting into the music magazines and tabloids the way it did.

Twice I've been through re-hab since the fame died. I try not to think about it, throwing my fame away, though it's unavoidable; I even hear a few of my bigger songs like "Slave" and "Twisted Situation" on the radio every now and then. But I know I've just got to put those drugs and that life behind me and rely on the strength of what I've found. Almost three months I've been out and clean now as I begin writing this (though I still like to smoke weed and drink the occasional beer). It's the longest stretch I've gone without touching gag or smack since I started using. And I'm doing okay, me and my boa constrictor Alice C. holed up in my small and wonderful log retreat here at the edge of the forest on the Oregon coast looking down from the cliffs at the pacific ocean—this place being the one thing I can still afford because of the royalty checks. That and my jeep. But there's so much scar tissue on my brain. So many holes in my spirit and in my memory. And now, with what happened this last time through re-hab, I know God wants me to use the wreckage as a means to a better end. Because I must say I truly am reborn—that I can feel God's voice whistling glorious music through the holes this life has put in me. There's a riot of words, of darkness and light, going on inside my me, a riot I need to let out—and I haven't felt like writing anything, lyrics or music, for a long, long time. It's a joy to feel like I've been taken over again, just as I was first taken over by the music at thirteen to begin the amazing tragi-comic odyssey that would land me here. I know so much about sacrilege, of course God has chosen me to say something about sacredness. Perhaps there's even a plan for me. A plan I will not understand until the moment is right. I've even had that dream again, and for the first time since I had it the Saturday afternoon I slept through my high school graduation on the couch at my parent's house—that dream of Jesus talking to me while he sculled a single across the perfectly flat skin of Orchid Lake. It's pathetic, I suppose, how it's taken so long for me to finally regain the clarity of

mind and ego one truly needs to consider matters of the spirit, but those high school years were the last years before I was turned inside out by fame and money and drugs and all the rest of it, the last days when I really thought of Jesus or The Church or anything spiritual in a positive way. And so I must admit I am inclined to take the dream and my rebirth and all I've experienced as some kind of sign, as God's will within the forces that drive me to this table to think again of those days and tell how I was lost and how I have come to find myself again.

CHAPTER I

Who is this coming up from the wilderness like a column of smoke from the burning of myrrh and frankincense, of all the powdered spices that merchants bring?

The Song of Songs

The middle-weight eight met before dawn in the dorm lobby and began stretching. Some leaned forward in the dim light, shadowy faces lost inside the hoods of their grey sweatshirts as they pushed with extended arms against the tan brick walls, working their hamstrings. Others sat on the worn carpet, knees butterflied, pulling their heels toward their crotches to loosen up the muscles of their groins. A few, like Newt and Slebka, just stood there, looking listlessly into the glass trophy cases hung on the walls, or up now and then at the crucifix nailed above the Holy Smoke's door with the dead palm reed curled behind it. I balanced myself on one leg, folding the other up behind me, pressing the bottom of my running shoe against my ass while trying to loosen the frog-muscle of my thigh.

The dorm was quiet but for the groans that came with the pain of un-knotting our muscles, sore and tightened with sleep; and the low hum of the single florescent light that had been left on in the lobby seemed much louder than it would in a few hours once the alarm went over the PA to wake everyone for morning classes. For almost a month now the middleweight eight had been getting up early and meeting in the dorm lobby to stretch before running down to the lake to row. We'd also been getting up alone. The heavyweight, lightweight, even the novice crews were still sleeping like everybody else. But that's the way it was rowing for the Old Man, Jack LaBlaine. If the Old Man said you needed two-a-days to get ready for the State Championship Regatta, then you rowed two-a-days.

Newt turned away from the trophy case. I saw the dim ghost of his shoulders

and hooded head reflected in the glass, the ornate M with an oar cutting diagonally through it on his wide back.

"You guys ready?" he said.

I scanned the faces. "Where's coxy?" I asked.

"I went by his room and woke him up before I got here," Newt said, "Fuckin lazy ass is probably still getting dressed. He can run down to the lake alone. Let's go."

"We oughta wait for him," I said. "The boat should run down together."

"Oh, come off it, Mooney," Slebka said. He was slouching against the wall. "How can you be gung-ho so early? What the fuck, it's not even five-thirty." He made show of yawning and stretching his arms before letting them flop down to his sides. I shot him a disgusted look, which he ignored. Slebka got on my nerves. He was soft without being fat, a true lazy-ass. He never pulled his weight behind the oar, but he was still one of us, one of the senior tribe—even if he'd just come to O.L. the year before, same year as Napes and the Holy Smoke. He was also Newt's rich, Polo-wearing, dope-smoking buddy who could get you a bag anytime you wanted, so I usually didn't say much about his bad attitude when it came to the crew.

"You do what you want, Mooney." Newt said. "The rest of us are leaving now."

I looked around at the crew: Judgie, Perce, Groover, Rom, Belch. No one seemed too interested in backing me up on the team unity idea.

I shrugged it off, "Whatever, Newt. You're the captain."

"So let's go then," he said.

We hit the side door of the dorm and packed outside into a fine drizzle of rain, our gang of feet slapping an echo off the sidewalk as we ran. It was sometime near the end of May, a few weeks before graduation, and it was still cool in the early mornings. A thin mist hung above the wet grass, shifting in wisps around the Shrine Chapel,

rising toward the copper skirts of the giant, hollow statue of Mary that hung above the chapel doors from a cable in her spine, her arms extended, palms turned out in that motherly, universal gesture of empathy and consolation you will see her making in churches and backyard shrines the world over.

We left the sidewalk, cutting across the grass we were always being told to keep off of, and bee-lined it toward the lake which was about a half mile from our dorm. We ran by the new cafeteria and on toward the Old Campus—brick buildings left over from the days in the late nineteenth century when O.L. was a military academy. Before it became a seminary, then a seminary and a small college and an all-boy's Catholic boarding high school.

We huffed past the places where the Zeb's lived, 'tards like Benny the half-wit and the other Solidarity-era Polish immigrants the church had given asylum to, people who weren't all necessarily retarded, but may as well have been as far as we were concerned. Especially for the way the men did their maintenance work and planted flowers in the beds around campus with such painful, almost tragic patience. And the way the women shuffled to and from the chapel fingering rosaries and mumbling gibberish beneath their shawls—the same women you could say, "I'll have three chicken heads and a battleship," to in the cafeteria and still get the usual smile then cabbage roll, splat of boiled vegetables, and greasy perigees ladled onto your plate. We dealt with those people almost every day, even if it was just to say, "Thanks for the slop Pani," or "Hey, Pan, nice job on those shrubs." But we never considered what it must have felt like for them to leave so much of their lives back in Poland, their families, their lovers, their friends. At least I never did. I was a self-absorbed teenager caught up in my own problems, which were really nothing much when you compared them with the problems these people, these Zebs as we called them, had. I know I sure as hell wasn't concerned with them that morning as we ran among those

dingy old-campus buildings, a few lightbulbs here and there throwing silhouettes against the yellowed window shades of the rooms where the most devout of those exiles and half-wits had risen early to pray before going to six-thirty mass. As we crested a grassy rise I caught a glimpse of the sun breaking the horizon beyond the near-distant lake, pushing an orange-red glow into the sky as it traced a shimmering finger of light along the surface of the water. The edgy cawing of a single crow broke the stillness, then we were spilling down the rise, back into the half-dark, running among the small stands of trunks that edged the lake, running past the devil tree—a lightning scarred Oak directly across from the bricked-up window of an abandoned out-building. Rumor was that years before any of us came to high school at Orchid Lake an exorcism had been performed in that room, a demon drawn from a writhing seminarian and cast into the tree just outside the window, and the tree struck by unholy lightning—though not killed—the instant the demon entered it. Rumor also said that when the priest who performed the exorcism died, the tree would die with him, and the demon would be free to enter someone else. None of us had ever seen this priest or knew what his name was—he'd gone back to wherever they'd summoned him from after the exorcism—but we did know that the exorcism had supposedly happened a long time ago, before any of us were even born, and that the priest was an old, old man then. We all knew it was a bunch of bullshit. But it was something good for scaring freshman with. And we felt kind of obligated to pass the legend on being that the seniors of our freshman year had used it on us.

Down near the water's edge past the black slashes of branches, I could see the wink of the lamp Coach Jack had set out for us by the boat house door. I imagined the wiry, wise-cracker old man standing there in the dim boat-house, grumbling, pacing among the rowing shells and racks of oars, thinking, no doubt, of how he needed to work on five-man to keep him from shooting his slide, or seven-man's lean to port at

the finish. The Old Man was maybe sixty-five then, retired from his construction company which he'd passed on to his oldest son Donny who coached our heavyweight eight. He was short, the Old Man, but with a full head of completely white hair. He knew a million dirty jokes, had a million stories about rowing and being on the water, and he could do more one-armed push-ups than anyone on the entire rowing team, even the strongest heavyweight. He was a hard-ass, old-school coach; he took no lip or sass from anyone, no matter how talented or valuable to the crew you were, and if you didn't respect him and love him the way a serious athlete loves a great coach, then there was probably something wrong with you. I'd been rowing lightweight since I was a sophomore, and I was proud that by my senior year I'd gained enough size and strength to earn my seven-man's seat in the middleweight eight, the boat Jack coached, because the Old Man was the best rowing coach you could have. That year, after Newt was elected middleweight captain during our spring training down in West Virginia over Easter break, Jack had even taken me aside and said, "It's a damn shame, Dan, I was hoping you'd be the one. Captain's about guts and leadership, not a popularity contest." It was the kind of thing that made me want to pull an oar for him until my arms dislocated and my legs seized with cramps and my heart blew up from pumping too hard, like that Olympic rower from Japan. I know I wasn't the only guy who felt that way about him; he radiated a kind of real man's honor and integrity you didn't get from any of the brothers or priests, people like the Holy Smoke, and Popey, and Napes.

Newt worked his way up beside me in the pack. He'd been lagging before, hanging back, talking with Slebka and Kirby; I'd heard their voices, their little snorts of laughter, though not what they were saying.

"You going on skip-day, Mooney?" he asked.

"Yeah, probably," I said. Word had been going around the senior floor of the

dorm during the last few days. Some time over the next week the whole class was planning on blowing off and going downtown to see a Tiger ball game. It was something we all thought we should do, something we thought we were entitled to, actually, especially after years of putting up with so much crap from Napes and the Holy Smoke and all the other clergy who seemed to get off so thoroughly on telling everyone exactly how to act. But I wasn't everyone. Not anymore. My situation that year was unique, and so was Newt's, the both of us being on Citizenship Probation. We were fully aware that doing something like cutting class and going downtown meant the Holy Smoke would have our asses.

"You might want to think about that," Newt said.

"Fuck it," I told him. School was almost over, I was sick of worrying about getting in trouble. Graduation was only a few weeks away. I'd already been accepted to Michigan State, though I wasn't so sure I still wanted to go to college now, even if my parents had plenty of money to pay for it. Everyone back then, especially my father, was always telling me that a college degree was what I needed to help me start a career. But I'd had enough of sitting in a classroom and being told what to think, and I didn't want a future of a house in the 'burbs with a wife and kids. I'd grown up with that, and although it was safe and comfortable it was also pretty goddamn boring. I felt like there was something else meant for me, some kind of life lived closer to the gut, and I was hungry for it. I wanted to get out into the world and really start making the music I was always listening to and playing. More and more as that year went on I'd been considering actually going for my rock and roll fantasy of just packing up after graduation and taking a Greyhound to LA with a dufflebag full of clothes, a demo tape, and my electric guitar. It wasn't a college degree that got you signed to a label. You got signed by going to where the music scene was happening and writing kick-ass songs and getting the right band together and playing out until the right person heard the

music. And I had enough faith in my talent to believe I'd get signed once that right person heard my songs.

What I'm saying is I'd had about enough of sticking to the probation agreement I'd signed that September after the Appeals Committee granted me re-enrollment. The whole deal was a likely set-up for failure: three points and the Holy Smoke could broom me. And, depending on who you'd crossed, you could get a point—along with the punishment of an hour facing the wall in detention—for just about anything: playing catch in the hallways; missing lights-out; forgetting to make your bed; being late for class or studyhall; mouthing off to a lay-teacher or a brother or a priest; leaving campus without permission—all things I'd been caught at over the last two years, along with most of the guys in my class. The difference was the Holy Smoke didn't have a complex with them like he had with me.

There was also, of course, getting caught at real trouble, like fighting, or drinking, or smoking cigarettes or dope, which, in the usual circumstances of first offense, got you three points, a week's suspension, and a month on Saturday work crew cleaning toilets and painting and vacuuming in the dorms while all your buddies were home for the weekend picking up girls at house parties and living otherwise normal teenage lives. Getting caught at anything so serious meant automatic expulsion for me now, and this during my senior year, the year that was supposed to be and had always been the top-dog year of ultimate privilege at Orchid Lake St. Mary's Preparatory. But I'd known the stakes going in; I'd gone to those appeal hearings and signed that probation agreement anyway, instead of just backing down and heading off to the cool and casual world of public school for my last year. That's how badly I wanted to graduate with my buddies and wave my diploma in the Holy Smoke's face while thinking, "Who's laughing now, you twisted eunuch? Who's laughing now?" That's how badly I wanted to come back and finish what I'd started.

And I was, after all this, still considering going on senior skip-day, regardless of the consequences, because I'd had enough of looking over my shoulder, enough of all year walking on broken glass, worrying about the Holy Smoke every time I indian-burned some shit-head freshman or had the urge to go off campus to see someone like Sheri. I was sick of staying behind, sick of sitting in probation meetings with Newt and the rest of the Proby Club listening to Earl Nightengale's positive self-motivation tapes while our classmates were off celebrating the end of their high school years, drinking beer and smoking grass in the woods behind the dorm.

Jack's keen old ears must have heard our shoes squeaking through the dew-wet grass. Or maybe he saw the dark clot of our bodies moving through the mist. "Come on, run it, run it, run it," his peppery voice drifted up toward us from the lake. He always seemed to know we were there before you'd expect him to. I saw his silhouette moving against the growing light, the flat water of Orchid Lake behind him in the clearing like a pane of blue glass now stitched across with a line of glimmering, and I put an extra kick in my stride, leaving Newt behind me. State's were that coming Saturday, and I wanted to win our race; I'd have time enough later on to worry about if I should go downtown next week with my classmates. I set my mind to the idea of our eight bodies in sync, pulling that shell around the lake, popping the catch as the Chicken Hawk shouted, "Power ten" through the mega-phone strapped to his head. Coach Jack puttering alongside us in the dented aluminum motor-launch saying, "That's right, men, swing it, swing it, I'll be goddammed if you haven't got that boat hopping. You're gonna hand those clowns their asses come Saturday. You'll get open water on 'em."

That day after lunch I was planning crashing for the forty-five minutes or so we had before afternoon classes, but when I got back to my dorm room I found Hank, along with Kroeter and JB, sitting around the stop sign on top of a milk crate that Hank

and I used for a card table. They were all three in uniform—navy blue blazers, grey slacks, white shirts, red ties, black shoes, except Kroeter and JB had bandanna's wrapped around their heads, pirate-style, and Hank was kneeling between them with a cap gun in his hand.

"What's going on?" I asked as I walked in and closed the door behind me. Hank looked up and grinned, "Mao, Mao," he said matter of factly, then pulled a single cap off the yellow plastic ring of caps made for the kind of gun he had in his hand. He held the gun out so JB and Kroeter could watch him press the cap into one of the slots of the eight cap cylinder, then he flipped the chamber shut and set the gun down on its side on top of the stop sign. "Ready?" he asked, looking back and forth at each of them; they nodded, and he spun the gun like you would to play Spin the Bottle. We watched it spinning until it stopped with the nozzle pointing toward JB

"Oh, man," JB mumbled, "Not again. My ear's still ringin'."

Even if you rowed crew or played football or basketball or whatever, there was still plenty of time to kill at Orchid Lake during a given week before you went home on Friday, and we invented plenty of goofy ways to kill it. Time between morning classes and mass. Time between studyhall and lights out. Lots of time after afternoon classes when you could even occasionally get a town-permission to go into Beago Harbor where you'd eat at McDonald's or smoke in the woods or look for someone old enough and cool enough to buy beer for you—unless you had to practice after school, like I had to with soccer every fall and rowing in the spring.

And then, of course, there was time like right now between lunch and afternoon class where guys would be doing stuff like this Mao Mao thing, or copying that afternoon's homework for stoned out teachers like Mr Gaut, a man usually so hung over he'd just tell us to read our history books for the whole period. Because, despite its billing as Orchid Lake St. Mary's Preparatory, the academic education at that place

was a joke. With the exception of a very, very few, I don't think anyone there taught me anything useful or good, except for my friends who gave me the only real brotherhood I've ever had, with the exception of what I'd eventually have with the band—which didn't last and almost killed me in the end anyway. Everything else I learned at O.L. had to do with understanding the uglier side of people's authority trips.

Here I am getting off-track again when I'm supposed to be talking about time and our goofy ways of killing it, although that's the type of rambling that's going to keep happening as I work at unscrambling this. Things are just kind of pouring back at random now that I've decided to try and remember, or maybe I should say re- imagine, what happened to me at that place.

So, anyway, all that time was our spare time, free time where you could crash, like I'd been planning on doing, or wait in line for the pay phone to call your girl, or go outside and play ball or whatever; maybe even go swimming in the lake if it was it was a nice enough day. If it was after dark or the weather was bad, or you just didn't feel like being outside, you could always spend your free time doing the usual dorm action, which meant going to the rec hall and playing pool or ping pong or the Defender video game or hanging in someone like Newt's room, bullshitting about girls and how far you'd gotten with them. Sometimes you'd maybe sneak in some Risk or Dungeons and Dragons—the playing of which, according to the brothers and priests, was an act of devil worship that could get you expelled.

Occasionally, a smartass freshman might make things interesting by wandering onto the senior floor, someone like Ozog, who I think liked the attention, in a sick way, and you'd yell, "Nigger pile" or "Freshmeat walking," and whoever was around would chase his ass down, dogs on a rabbit, piling on, shoving his face into the carpet, saying, "Hey freshmeat what are you doing? You're not supposed to be up here in dangerville." And the kid would whimper, whine sorry, sorry, give you his reasons

why—the pay phone on the freshman floor was broken and he had to call his mom, or whatever; sometimes he'd even get a little frantic, say he couldn't breathe, start crying—just like you'd done four years before when the seniors came after you with rusty disposable razors for the dry shave, shouting "Come'ere sped, you don't want to take that dirt off your upper lip, we will."

Once you'd man-handled and scared that freshman in the proper O.L. manner, you'd give him the lecture about those Medieval days when you were an underclassmen, before the Holy Smoke came, and how the seniors would say, "Hey kiddo, want to go to Greenfield Village," then stuff your whole body into the picker—shrubs; or how they'd come blasting into your room in the middle of the night to flip your bed, frame and all, against the brick wall; or how they'd snag you in the hallway and hang you by your feet out second and third floor windows, slapping your belly hot—pink as your shirt fell up around your face. Then you'd tell the kid to scram, letting him off with a couple knuckle busters to the soft part of his bicep, or a rap to the side of the head, or a wedgie; because you weren't out to really hurt him too bad, just scare him like you'd been scared when you were a freshman, thirteen or fourteen and living away from home for the very first time. But sometimes it would get ugly, a smartass underclassmen might cross the wrong upperclassmen on a bad day and get himself a punch in the face or blanket party or his head shoved into an unflushed toilet for a shit/piss—shampoo. All that changed once the Holy Smoke came.

It was one of the best things about that school: the fact that there was always a buddy to hassle underclassmen with, or goof off with, or talk to about whatever. Someone to invent a wacky gun game with like the one Hank and Kroeter and JB were playing right now; someone like Cheevnick to play goalie in front of the pocked metal fire—door at the end of your floor for a game of tennis ball hockey—until a supervisor like Napes or Wadgob or Skin came and took the ball away and handed you Citizenship

Violation.

"Mao, Mao," Hank shouted, shoving JB's shoulder, "Mao, Mao."

It had taken me a while, but I finally figured out what they were doing with this Mao, Mao stuff; they were imitating that scene in *The Deer Hunter* where the American prisoners are forced to play Russian Roulette in front of those Viet Cong guards. I don't think Hank was screaming the right words, though I suppose he didn't really know or care what the right words were.

"Mao, Mao," Hank said in a fake Asian accent, "Mao, Mao."

That morning Mr. K., who was also my soccer coach, had just finished showing us the video in third hour Polish History, a class everyone was required to take, regardless of your ethnicity, due to all the rich Polish patrons who'd dumped money into the school. How *The Deer Hunter* was connected with Polish History, I don't remember; we'd long ago given up trying to figure out K. anyway. He was one of the lay teachers, same as Gaut, only not dumpy and slack-faced, but six feet tall with eight-foot legs, spidering all around the room, going in and out of the rows of desks with this crazy look in his eye, talking about Ladislav the First and Jan Paderewski and these other important Polish people I've long since forgotten. He tossed a Bible into the trash can next to his desk on the first day of classes our freshman year, telling us God was in the heart, the book had nothing to do with it. And, as I know now, he was absolutely right, though I have to say that the book can do a lot of good, if used with thoughtfulness. We all liked K, especially for things like tossing that Bible into the trash—even if we didn't get what he was talking about at the time because we were so busy waiting on that lightning that didn't strike him down. But K. was temperamental sometimes, and tough to get along with. He ran our legs numb as a soccer coach. He had bad-ass aim with a chalkboard eraser too, and if you

nodded off in his class you could be sure you'd wake up in a white cloud to everybody's laughter. Anyhow, we didn't much care what the movie had to do with Polish History; it was a good movie and had taken up two days of what was often an intolerably boring class. With the exception of the eraser throwings, and the Bible shtick, and anecdotes like the one he told us about Catherine the Great actually being this ugly, ugly, nymphomaniac who'd been crushed to death beneath a horse she was trying to screw because the special harness they were lowering it onto her with broke.

"Mao, Mao," Hank shouted, shoving JB again.

"Alright, alright," JB said, "fuck off already," and he slowly picked up the gun and placed the barrel against his temple.

"Mao, Mao. Mao, Mao."

Eyes crimping closed, J.B. squeezed the trigger and the gun cracked out, then clattered down onto the stop sign as he dropped it and howled over onto his knees, putting his hand to his ear, "Jesus fuckin' goddamn shit, I'm deaf." He shook his head, "No way there's only one cap in there." He said

"You watched me load it," Hank said.

"Dude—man, you got the worst luck," Kroeter laughed. "That's three in a row. You wouldn't a been worth nothin' in the 'Nam."

"Blow me, Kroeter," JB said as he worked a finger around in his ear-hole then pulled the finger out to look at it. "Man, you guys, I thought I was bleeding for sure. I don't want to play anymore."

"Pussy," Hank said, picking up the gun and opening it to show JB the single cap in the cylinder, now used. "See. I told you."

I walked over to my desk and sat down. I liked rooming with Hank. We'd become pretty close being on the rowing team together, going down to West Virginia for spring training this year and also last year when we got in trouble on our final night

for celebrating the end of training by drinking Coors and driving the dark, twisty back roads with Martin and Davies, two seniors in Hank's heavyweight boat who'd come down to training in Davies' car. I was an excellent time, little towns and general stores popping out of the night—black hollows like the white of a shocked eye opening. I also remember how sick I'd felt once we came back to the college campus where they were letting us sleep on tumbling mats in the gym and found out we were busted. But a week later as we cleaned the mortar between hallway bricks in the dorm with toothbrushes, Hank and I agreed it had been worth it. Jack had already forgiven us, said we were idiots for drinking and driving don't do it again, but he didn't kick us off the team. Napes and the Holy Smoke were the ones who really got all bent out of shape over it, going off about Christian behavior and that we were representatives of the school when out in public and should therefore be punished with even greater severity, even though what had happened had happened on break when, technically speaking, we weren't in school. It was the kind of thing they'd eventually use to justify their special grudge with me, but right then, that Saturday during in the spring of our junior year while we were cleaning, it was Hank squirting the hinge oil he'd taken from the storage closet all over the Holy Smoke's door knob, then telling me, "Joke him if he can't take a fuck."

That's what I liked about Hank, you never knew what to expect with a guy like him, and he was one of the few people didn't mind the risk of living with me—even being under the double secret evil eye from the Holy Smoke and Napes the way I was. Earlier in the year I'd walked in on him and the Ape teeing golf balls out the big sliding window of our room with a five—iron. Another time I'd come back to a crowd of underclassmen standing at the door of the bathroom we shared with our blockmates, UE and Hawkeye—he was charging kids a quarter each to look at this gigantic two-foot turd he'd somehow managed to lay unbroken around the circle of the toilet bowl.

He'd made about ten bucks in two days before I finally forced him to flush it.

"How about we go down to the freshman floor and do some terrorizing," he said as he loaded a full ring of caps into the gun. "They're all sleepy from lunch and shit. I want to see the look on Belch's face after I shove this up his nose pull a couple off.

"Smoke his boogers up." I laughed.

"I'll smoke Mrs. Mooney's boogers up," Kroeter guffawed, and he grabbed at his crotch.

Hank gave Kroeter a that's-not-funny-stare. Hank didn't like mother jokes.

"Whatever, Kroeter," I said, turning to my stereo on the credenza and putting the needle down on the Van Halen II album already on the turntable. I turned it up loud, listening to that Eddie-guitar snarl.

Like a lot of guys at O.L., I killed time with music; but, unlike most of them, I was making it as well as listening to it. I formed two different bands in my years at that place, and I spent a lot of time playing the guitar in those bands, or practicing alone. Unlike the Holy Smoke and Napes and these other people who were trying to get me to believe in the "mysteries" of their faith, the music was always there for me, impossible to deny. There was nothing I couldn't hear or feel, no contradictions I had to take on faith. There was just listening and playing what came from inside you, and living wild and high and true to whatever you felt. So whenever I could get away with it, I turned that stereo or my guitar amp up good and loud, and didn't usually care about getting yelled at for it, because none of my favorite musicians had to worry about being too loud; and they didn't have to put up with bullshit lights out or worry about getting in trouble for skipping mass or smoking weed and drinking champagne with some girl in their room.

"Turn it down, turn it down," JB said from where he was kneeling on the floor

with a hand pressed against his ear, and I dropped the volume a few notches, but not much.

I looked over at Kroeter still sitting there on the floor wearing his shit-eating grin, happy as he was for laying the burn on me. "Maybe you should just get out of my room, Kroeter," I said above the music.

Kroeter and I were just now getting to the point where we could hang out again. We had been roommates our freshman year and it hadn't gone very well. I'd met him during in the eighth grade at the U of D's Jesuit Academy, the kind of place where getting caught at screwing off meant the Jesuit brothers actually pulled you by the ear and cracked your knuckles with a ruler like you'd think only happens in the movies. Kroeter was the one who'd told me about Orchid Lake in the first place, told me how kick-ass adventure style this boarding school across town near his house was. Sisters all moved away and married, Dad traveling for his PR work all the time, my home situation was such that I wanted to get out of there. It was just me and my mom most of the time. I didn't really have many friends; the snotty Izod, duck-shoe wearing kids in my neighborhood sure didn't like me very much, and I was also getting into fist-fights and other trouble on that lame-ass bus ride I had to take downtown to the Jesuit Academy every weekday. So I asked to go away to school at O. L., and my parents said okay. But by the end of that first year Kroeter and I could barely even look at each other. I still don't know what went wrong between us, but by our senior year enough time had passed for us to start patching things up; we did have some of the same friends—there were only fifty guys in our grade—so we had to hang around each other. But he still liked to get under my skin now and then, maybe because he knew he could.

"Sorry, man," he shouted, "But you gotta admit you left yourself wide open for that one."

I waved him off.

"What?" J.B. said. "What're you saying? He was still on all fours and shaking his head hard like he was trying to clear water from his ear, "Goddamn I think I broke my eardrum. Fuckin' A. I hear wind or something."

With the music and our talking, we didn't hear the master key sliding into the lock. As the door opening inward caught our attention, Hank turned on instinct and squeezed off four or five shots into the black expanse of Brother Lyle's cassock. He seemed almost shocked when the big man didn't drop.

"In-coming," I mumbled below the music, though part of me wanted him to hear it.

Brother Lyle—Napes—launched his bowling ball body toward Hank, snatched the cap gun from his hand, then noticed the bandanna's on Kroeter and J.B.'s heads and yanked those off too. "Kill that garbage right now," he yelled at me, as if what was happening was all my fault, or the music's fault. I made a disgusted face and flicked the stereo off. Napes stood there in the ringing silence glaring at me for a few seconds before he looked away at the others. "Do you gentlemen mind telling me WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?"

Hank offered it up, "Um, uh, we were just playing around, Brother Lyle, Mr. K showed us *The Deer Hunter* in class today and, um, we were kind of acting out the game those guys were made to play when they were prisoners back in `Nam."

Napes shook his head, took a deep breath, let it out in an exaggerated sigh, "They obviously aren't working you hard enough at rowing practice, Mr. Glupka," he said. "Can't you gentlemen find anything more intelligent to do with your time? Don't you have any homework? There is a mass you could attend between lunch and fifth hour, you know."

"We just went to mandatory mass before lunch Brother Lyle," Kroeter said, which made me remember why he and I were starting to get along again. "And we got study hall to do our homework."

"Shut up, Jim. What about you Mr. Mooney? What do you have to say about this?"

"You're bullshit for trying to sweat me over something I had nothing to do with," was what I wanted to say, but I just shrugged. He was looking for a chance to trip me up, and I didn't want to give it him. He was just as predictable as the Holy Smoke, always looking to put me on the spot because he didn't like my questioning his authority. "What does it matter if I forgot to make my bed today, Brother Lyle? No one's gonna know but you and my room mate." He was all the time poking his head into the open door of our room as he patrolled the corridors during study hall, catching me on my bed reading sci-fi novels or listening to my headphones. "I'm on the honor roll." I'd say when he told me to get up. "What good is being on the honor roll if I can't I listen to music or read on my bed once I'm done with my homework?"

"Because those are the rules," was his stock answer. "And the rules say students will not lie on their beds or listen to the radio or any type of stereo during studyhall," he could probably quote it right out of our student handbook. "You'll get back to your desk right now, Mr. Mooney."

Most of his problem with me was due to bad blood between us. In the beginning of our junior year when he first showed up with the Holy Smoke and became my floor supervisor, he tried to buddy up to me, said he could tell I was a leader among the guys and that he'd like my help keeping an eye on things; the guys would follow my good example. It was the same speech the Holy Smoke gave me a few weeks later, "They emulate you Dan, they respect you." and it was the kind of bullshit talk I knew meant they were really after something more. I mean, they were

way off. I wasn't the person they thought I was, this trend-setter or leader among my classmates. I was an outsider, a guy who'd been nicknamed Gearhead and King of Distortion because I wanted to play rock and roll music instead of football. So why they picked me to latch onto, I'm not sure. Maybe they were trying to recruit me. Maybe in their own sickness they could somehow tell that deep inside my heart I was a person who had paid attention through all those years of catechism and was sensitive to the ideas of love and honor and sacrifice as seen in Gospels, that I brimmed to the point of tears at times when I considered how weak and sinful and petty I was compared to someone who had the guts to completely love his enemies and allow himself to be humiliated and whipped and nailed through his bones to the cross.

I was also by that time beginning to have my serious doubts about all this talk I'd been raised with; all this kneeling and standing and confessing to the scent of incense in the name of transubstantiation and "do this in memory of me." Once you gave it some logical consideration, you had to admit the All Powerful, All Loving, All Knowing Being they were pushing had no real reason to play this game with us. Each day I stay clean it becomes clearer to me that most so-called Christians are obviously misguided in the way they believe what they believe. But back in high school the kind of obvious hypocrisy I was dealing with simply made me wonder if Jesus was even real at all. Jesus was real, is and has always been very real, though I don't mean that in the way the Christians I've just mentioned would mean it.

I'm not saying that there were no sincere clergy at O.L., because there were some, but there were also many mind-fuckers who used the name of Jesus to get what they wanted, and that is one thing I could never abide, a hypocrite. I may have gone on to become about as Sodom and Gomorrah as you can get after I left that place, addicted to almost every thing I could stick inside myself, having sex with more women than I can remember the names of; I may even have ruined the lives of others on my way up

the bone-pile of fame—it happened so fast that I really cannot say; but I have never claimed to be anything other than what I was: Ignorant of God's purpose for me, a person who was looking for God his whole life without knowing it, and in all the wrong places. Even in my decadence, my lost years, I was at least honest in that much, in my not knowing. And, whatever Jesus was to me back then in high school, God or holy man, dirt-poor rabbi carpenter or just a rabble rouser, I believe I felt that he probably wouldn't want me buddying up to people like Napes and the Holy Smoke, even if they claimed to be on his side.

What it comes down to is that because of who I was and who they were I didn't get along with Napes and the Holy Smoke at all, and, as a result, the demerits and citizenship violations started piling up. They were on me for everything, sticking a paper clip through my ear, spiking my hair, wearing the wrong color socks with my uniform, writing Black Sabbath on my neck on ball-point pen, being late for study hall because I was talking to some girls in the dorm lobby; and, circumstances being what they were, I knew they were the prime movers behind the denial of re-enrollment letter citing my, "inability to live according to the established rules and standards set for dress and attitude," that came to my house at the end of summer my junior year.

"Mr. Mooney, I expect an answer when I ask you a question," Napes said.

"I don't know, Brother Lyle," I said, "I just got here. It's like Hank was saying, I guess, they were just playing around, acting out the movie. No big deal."

I watched his fat cheeks flush red around his goatee. "No big deal. NO BIG DEAL!" he shouted. "Glupka is lucky I didn't come flying in here and rip off his arm when I saw him pointing that pistol at me. I've already had too many guns pointed at me in my life. You point guns at people and you're gonna get your face kicked in."

I shrugged again to show him how harmless I thought it all was. I might even have had a hint of a smile on my face; his anger was funny and actually pretty pathetic

when you thought about it. "Hey man, he was only kidding," I said. "He didn't mean anything by it, he just got kinda caught up in things."

"Don't talk to me like that, Mooney," he said, "That's the kind of attitude that got you on Citizenship Probation for THIS ENTIRE YEAR. You think it's funny pointing guns at people or pretending to kill yourself?"

"It's only a cap gun, Brother Lyle, it can't hurt anybody." I gave J.B. a quick look to make sure he wasn't still holding his ear. He was pulling a rabbit, staying still and looking down and hoping not to be noticed. "They were just doing it for the dare, playing around."

"Playing around. Do you have any idea how many men were killed in Vietnam!?"

"No. How many?"

"Don't get smart ass with me, Mooney! Too many men to be playing around about it."

"I wasn't being smart ass, Brother Lyle, I really want to know."

"That's it, I've had enough of your crap. Get down to my room right now. We need to have a talk."

I wanted no part of that. Being locked down alone with this six-foot, three hundred pound bag of contradictions. That's where the whole Napes thing came from—the fact that he'd lied to us about being in Vietnam; that's what Napes was short for, Napalm—guys saying "in-coming" and jumping to the floor laughing whenever he'd just left the room. The truth was he'd come to O.L. from a parish in a bad, bad part of Philadelphia, and he probably had seen some ugly things, people dead in alleys and stuff. But he was just an intimidator when you got down to it, threatening people with Citizenship Violations and pushing them up against the wall and getting in their faces, always talking about Tough Love and all that. I'd seen him go at The Mutha, the

biggest guy in our class, almost as big as Napes himself, just for mouthing off. Napes smashed him against the door of his room like a stubborn bag of ice, got right into his face and threatened him with all kinds of shit if he didn't straighten up. That was his way when he felt something needed proving, shove a guy around some, then administer a smothering hug. "Come to Brother, son." A little talk about the Lord Jesus while he rubbed your shoulders too hard with his fat paws. It was true he'd gotten to somewhere strange in his life, but he'd never been to Vietnam.

Why he lied about going to the war, though, I don't know, but he was old enough to have really been there. Maybe he was sick and really believed he had gone when he hadn't, or maybe some of his friends went and died or were mangled and he felt guilty that he took Holy Orders and got out of it. But the why's of it really made no difference to me, the fact that he was lying was enough.

Sad thing was a lot of people still believed his bullshit; even after we found out the truth near the middle of our junior year from Top-o who worked in the dorm office and had snuck a look at his files—between '65 and '73 he'd been in college, then seminary. But you could still pass his open door and see them sitting apostolic at his feet in his candle-lit, incense-smokey room, underclassmen listening as he told them those same stories he'd told us the year before about how he'd been to Vietnam and seen people get the napalm—seen them dance like living sticks on fire. Told them about all the VC he'd offed as Ranger, and the way he'd held his hand over a man's mouth to keep him quiet until he felt him die. Every sick detail of it all. He talked about men with their faces blown half-way off, about men holding in their own guts, carrying around their balls. He said he prayed and cried for those men every day, that God had shown him the way to the Lamb through blood. And though I do not want to paint him as cardboard evil—he was a complicated person with his own life of reasons like anyone—it made me want to disobey everything he said, all this faking at being the

hard—ass tough—love warrior monk from 'Nam.

"Didn't you hear me Mooney?" he said, "Get going."

I started toward the door; saying no was not an option. I looked around at Hank and Kroeter and J.B. as I walked past them and out into the hallway; they all had guilt on their faces. "What about these guys," I felt like saying. "They were the ones playing the goddamn game making fun of Vietnam." But I didn't say anything.

"Brother Lyle," Hank said after me, "Dan wasn't doing anything, it was all our idea, he was just watching."

"This isn't about your game anymore, Glupka," Brother Lyle said as he shut the door behind us.

Once we'd walked a few rooms down the hall I heard the faint whistling of their three voices through the closed door. They were making missile sounds. then someone—I think it was Hank—said, "in—coming," not too loud, but loud enough that I heard and snorted a little laugh. Brother Lyle, walking behind me, gave me a good, solid shove between the shoulder blades, making me stutter—step.

"Trouble's not funny for someone in your situation Mooney," he barked. Now get going, I don't have all day to waste on the likes of you."

CHAPTER II

Getting directly back to the rock and roll part of this, I will say that my senior year I somehow managed to convince the Holy Smoke to let me use the large storage closet in an unused locker room on the first floor of the dorm as a rehearsal space. What made him say yes, I'm not sure. Maybe he was tired of bitching me out for playing too loud in my room the year before. Or maybe he had a whiff of Christian kindness after putting me through so much grief over that previous summer—three times before an Appeals Committee, then signing my ass away to him on that Citizenship Probation contract just to be allowed back in. He did have the odd habit of being really cool to me when I least expected it. After I'd gotten two quick points that fall for being late to study hall twice, he'd cut me slack a in number of situations where he could have easily written me up for the last straw. So had Napes, both of them letting me off for stuff like lofting snowballs into the long line of guys filing down the sidewalk between the classroom building and the dorm, or swearing out a freshman who'd had the audacity to say something when I took my rightful cuts in front of him in the lunch line (the type of thing they were doing with increasing frequency now that they knew they could run sniveling to the Holy Smoke and actually get results). It could have been some kind of payback for all those times I played mass, first position GCD tunes like "Alleluia! the Strife is Over," or "Now the Green Blade Rises." Whatever his reasons, he knew how driven I was to play and how much rehearsal space meant to me. I know he was aware that I'd had a band named Voyager going my freshman year with my buddy Bilvis singing and playing bass, and Pidge, a sophomore, on the skins. Though I'm sure he believed I had no real talent and certainly not the ability to take things as far as I eventually would once I left that place.

Voyager, the first band I ever formed, rehearsed in a different room than the storage closet I scored from the Holy Smoke my senior year. Voyager's space was a good-sized utility room right off the dorm lobby, the same room where I'd be attending those probation meetings four years later, listening to those positive self motivation tapes with Newt—the two examples in a room of underclassmen they were trying to steer back from riding the fine line and ending up like us, their version of Bad, I guess. I'd sit there in those once-a-week meetings, president of the Proby club, as I'd been unanimously named by the rest of them, and I'd think about all the jamming I'd done in that room, filled now with the big table we sat around, a crucifix and O.L.S.M. banners nailed to the walls. I'd listen to the Dean, Mr. B, (who had never really given me any problems at all while he was Assistant Dean during my first two years there, and who was also now secretly beginning to die from some unnamed blood disease) going on and on in a half-assed way about how we needed to straighten up our act. And I'd just tune him out, let my eyes roll back into what was probably the first great rock and roll moment of my life: that Friday night my freshman year when we'd gotten drunk and jammed in the very room I was now doing my time in.

I'd stolen the fifth of Jack Daniels from my father's stash. He had most of a crate, eight bottles left over from my sister's wedding reception the summer before at our big house on Lake St. Claire, and I didn't think he'd ever miss the one (and he never did). That Sunday when my folks drove me back to school, I snuck along the bottle in my knapsack. I told Bilvis and Pidge about it, and that Monday evening, after we rehearsed for our first gig coming up—an eighth grade graduation dance at the Catholic school where Bilvis had gone the year before—we hid the bottle under the pillow inside Pidge's bass drum. All week, whenever we'd go in that room to play, we'd finish up a song and stare at the bass drum and grin at each other. We called our folks and told them not to come get us for the weekend because we were staying up at

school to practice for the gig which was only a few weeks away. That Friday after most of the guys bailed for home, we hit the rehearsal space and locked the door from the inside. Bilvis and Pidge were all for just taking out the bottle and getting bombed, but I was for drinking and playing to see how the music would hold up under the buzz. "That's how real rock stars would do it," I told them, "Maybe smoke a joint, too," though I wouldn't start into weed until I roomed with Bob Coli the next year. "Let's do a hit each straight from the bottle before every song until we get drunk or run out," I said.

Four or five songs into it, I felt this flower of hot joy uncurling inside me. We went into "Summer-time Blues," and I started jumping around, kicking the scissors, windmilling my arm like I'd watched Pete Townsend do in some concert footage I'd seen on Mtv, something they'd just come out with that year. We throttled that song, man; I mean, I could feel the steam boiling off me, see, through my half-lidded eyes. Pidge's arms going blurry behind the kit, the sweat rolling down Bilvis' face as he lipped the microphone and chugged the bass line. I felt something magic, holy, rising up through that mix of booze and noise, and I knew right then I'd been called, summoned by a higher power I would drop all else to follow. We put the rock and roll ending on it, vamping that last chord over the drum rolls and cymbals, building, building, like you've heard every rock and roll band do since the beginning of time, before crunching it down, Whomp! And I swear to God I could hear the future's cheering in the ringing silence afterwards.

We were getting ready with the bottle again when we heard a light knocking at the door. Holy shit!—we all threw the look at each other. I stashed the bottle in the back of my amp, and Bilvis went to see who it was. Father Dewis, looking something like Friar Tuck in his brown robe with the knotted rope belt cinched up beneath his belly came strolling in.

"Quite a noise you boys are making," he said in a friendly way. We all nodded and forced smiles. "No, no. Don't mind me," he said, "Go on with what you were doing. Play me a song."

I was about ready to puke from fear. He had to smell the booze on our breath, in the air, and though Father Dewis was, from what I remember, a genuinely kind man, one of the sincere clergy I was talking about before, I had no doubt he would bust our asses royally the second he realized what was going on.

I looked from Bilvis on the mic to Pidge behind the kit; they were both dead-white, practically shaking with the urge to just turn themselves in and get it over with.

"I Love Rock and Roll," I said. "Hit it, one, two, three four," and we tore into the tune, this cheesy, if inspired, Joan Jett and the Blackhearts cover we'd been working up for the dance because it was all over the radio.

"Owwww" Bilvis howled out before going into the verse, and I bent the melody riff, a little pentatonic thing as we took off, thumping on through it with fire, me putting a little extra sauce on the guitar solo, just to see how the good father would take it. And I'll be damned if I didn't look up and see him tapping his sandal along.

"That's some inspired playing," he said once we'd finished. He was staring right at me, or into me, I should say, as he said it. "I'm more a Glenn Miller man myself, Maybe some early Miles. Before all that fusion crap." He looked around the room, nodding at the Jimi Hendrix and Doors posters we'd taped onto the walls, "But I wasn't too old to appreciate the sixties, if you know what I mean." He gave a little sniff, like he was checking the air for something. I wiped the sweat off my forehead, smelled the booze as I passed my hand over my face.

"God has given you boys a gift, you know," Father Dewis said, "Music is a sacred vocation, don't abuse it. Daniel, you should come see me sometime about playing guitar in mass."

"I will Father," I said. And I did.

"You boys have a fruitful practice," and giving a little wave, he left, closing the door firmly behind him.

"You think he knows," Bilvis said.

"Shit, if he does, he doesn't care," I said, fishing the bottle out from behind my amp. "Otherwise he would've busted us." I unscrewed the cap, took a swig to kill the nerves, felt the liquor's harsh candy rolling across my tongue. "Fuck it, don't worry, " I said, handing the bottle to Pidge, "we got thirty songs to go through yet. Let's jam."

Like too many things that happened during much of these last thirteen or so years since I left that place forever, I don't remember too much of what went down after that. Vague impressions. Evening falling into bluish night out the little window of the rehearsal space, my fingers turning into mush; we got too drunk to play much sooner than I thought we would, and we took the bottle back to my room to finish it. Once we killed it we ran up and down the hallway yelling and tackling each other. We had the whole freshman floor to ourselves; nobody stayed at O.L. for the weekend unless they couldn't go home or were up to something. Like we were. And we were lucky that was the case, since we could barely stand or talk; we were giggling, gibbering idiots falling all over ourselves in the hallway. How we didn't get busted I'll never know; God's plan for me must have already been in effect, because no floor supervisors or anyone else came around to give us a hard time. Sometime during that night I remember listening to Hendrix and staring at the full moon out the tall, open window of my first floor room. High in the guitar's swirl I leapt up onto the credenza beneath the window then jumped through—the entire screen, frame and all, popping loose, miraculously, without tearing or bending, as if I too was now excused to rise and kiss the sky. I didn't fly very far, but landed face down on the cool grass, the screen beneath me, and I rolled over to see the stars spinning crazily to the soundtrack of

Pidge and Bilvis's laughter, their faces in the window. "Goddamn what a ride," I shouted, sitting up, then I wiped my forearm across my face and found out I had a bloody nose. I'd sipped at beers before, but that was the first time of the countless times to come that I'd gotten wasted out of my mind. I woke up the next morning on the floor of my room with the trash can nestled in my arm, albums scattered all over the carpet, the record player skipping on "Crosstown Traffic." "...get through to you...get through to you...get through to you... And the first thing I did was stumble with a silly, painful grin down the hall to Bilvis' room to wake him up and joke about this is how rock stars must feel the morning after a big show.

Senior year was a different thing altogether. Pidge lost interest in Voyager over the summer of my freshman year, and without a drummer things just kind of fizzled. I was still playing all the time, in church, in my room, on the weekends when I went home, working on original tunes—sometimes with Bilvis—but I couldn't seem to get a band going for either my sophomore or my junior year, and, besides, things like rowing and soccer and partying and girlfriends and getting in trouble with Napes and the Holy Smoke started taking up my time. But senior year I was able to convince Whiz and Pharaoh, a couple juniors Bilvis and I knew, to play rhythm guitar and drums. And so I cranked up the band again, this time calling it The Standing Hamptons. Until my old man had dinner one night with an English friend and was bragging on me, I guess, talking about my band, when the guy busts out laughing and tells him the phrase is really British slang for hard-on, something I was fully aware of and took some pride in, actually, since we were playing Catholic high school dances in front of all these priests and nuns and chaperons who had no idea what our name really meant. I still remember that home-weekend when my old man took me aside and confronted me with a mixture of anger and pride about the name. I think this was in the winter of that year, long after I'd been through the Appeals Committee routine and had

actually gotten almost comfortable and maybe even a little over- confident in my ability to walk on waves of broken glass. "I can see why you'd think this is funny, but what if they find out? You'll get expelled. Do you really want to throw this whole year away on something so stupid?" I tried to come back with a few lame excuses—we live near a street named Hampton, so does Bilvis, it's just a coincidence, blah, blah, blah. "Don't bullshit me," my dad said. "Change the name." So we changed the name to The Hamptons, which isn't slang for anything as far as I know, except maybe for the flaccid thing itself.

But I'm getting off the subject again. I can't seem to help it after all I've done to myself; and it's funny, in a way, sad-funny, I'm starting to realize, that I can remember more clearly, or perhaps re-invent more clearly, the things that happened to me in high school than I can the first US tour my band took in 1990 (and no Bilvis was not in it, nor was anyone I knew from the life I'm describing now). But this isn't supposed to be the story of my fame and all the debauches it caused—my deviated septum, or the duct tape I used to use to keep the flies from laying maggots into my festering tracks as I shot up and nodded for days on end in some shitty hotel room in those years after The Un-named broke up. That kind of info you could get from those two Rolling Stone interviews I've read but barely remember giving, or one of those bullshit unauthorized pulp band bios I've seen at Waldenbooks down the road in Gold Beach. This is—hopefully, supposedly—me sorting through the broken shell of my mind to see what remains. This is me, now that I've finally found some measure of justifiable righteousness, looking at the past to try and find out what God wants me to do with my future.

After I scored the big storage closet in the locker room from the Holy Smoke in the beginning of my senior year, I found a master key in the hallway by some freak stroke of luck. Now I could get into just about any room in the dorm except for deans

and supervisors like Mr. B., the Holy Smoke, Wadgob, and Napes; now I didn't have to deal with the Holy Smoke playing carrot on a stick with the key every time I wanted to use the storage closet to practice by myself, something I was doing all the time by the end of that year, especially with LA woman sunny afternoon growing so strong in my mind as the spring came on. It was also a way to keep myself occupied and out of the Holy Smoke's line of fire as I wood-shedded and thought up ways to try and tell my parents I wasn't so sure about college anymore. Of all the people I ended up fucking over, it's them I'm the most sorry about. They'd always been fair with me, always shown me love and treated me right. But I knew they'd never let me follow my rock and roll vision. And it was getting so I was beginning to believe that if I did go West I would have to leave without saying goodbye and call them when I got there to say I was alright.

And so with the way things were for me at that time, I'd be in that room for a few hours almost every day, working on songs for my demo, recording on my four-track (I was already starting to sing them myself by then), playing my new guitar—a '68 Les Paul Gold-top I'd picked up at some music store I don't remember the name of in downtown Detroit and paid for with money I'd earned playing high school dances. I loved that guitar. I took it with me on every tour the Un-named did. I played it played it at ear-splitting volume in front of thousands of people, and I ended up hocking the thing for meth.

So I spent a lot of time in that room. That evening after the Mao, Mao scene and all the subsequent bullshit with Napes, I was down in the space by myself working on material (I already had the skeleton of most of the songs that made up our first CD worked out by then.) when I heard someone pounding on the locker room door. I hid my bowl, sprayed the Lysol, popped a mint from the bag I kept in there and went out through the locker room to find out who it was. The storage closet was in the very

back of the locker room, and I had it thoroughly sound-proofed. As long as I kept my guitar at a reasonable volume, or didn't beat the drums too hard, no one knew if I was in there. Once I got to the door, I just stood and listened, waiting for whoever it was to knock again or say something.

"Mooney, are you in there?" It was Top-o, knocking, Top-o who'd been manning the dorm office for the last two years as part of his work-study and had access to everyone's files.

"Mooney, if you're in there you better listen," he said, "Brother John" (the Holy Smoke) "wants to see you in his room right away."

My heart started pounding. I sighed and leaned my head against the cool tile wall next to the door. It was bad enough being called up to the Holy Smoke's room when you were straight, he was such a head-tripper; the last thing I wanted was to go in there with a buzz on. Flashes of paranoia started shooting through me. What did he want? Was this it, point number three and the broom? But Napes had just given me the big respect speech in his room then hugged me too hard and too long and let me go; he hadn't written me up or anything. He'd even told me he wasn't going to say a word about it to anyone, and that he wanted to see me make it through to graduation just as bad I did. All of which made me want to say "Then why'd you and the Holy Smoke convince Principal Devine to write me that fucking letter saying I couldn't come back for my senior year," instead of "Thanks, Brother Lyle," which was what I really said. I started feeling sick to my stomach. Had I come all this way, made all these sacrifices just to get thrown out so near the end? I thought about my parents. I was basically a good kid, I knew they'd probably be on my side no matter what went down, but I'd already put them through a lot of shit, though I suppose they must feel those high school days were nothing compared to the way I'd break their hearts eventually.

It was a pleasant, sun-dappled evening in early September when my parents

drove me across town to Orchid Lake for that third and final appeal. I remember walking with them up the stone steps to the small classroom building where I'd spent the last three years getting erasers thrown at me and dodging upperclassmen. Putting up with teachers like Mrs Belia, who wore black skirts almost every day and never seemed to figure out that we were putting chalk dust all over her chair, or Mr. Ragdon, a sadistic algebra teacher who I'd watched encourage half my math class at goading Phil Quartz, the class scape-goat, into a hysterical, slobbering, desk-kicking exit from the classroom by just standing there smiling as they called him Warts, Warts, Warts, over and over.

I remember the Zebs cutting hedges, puttering around on their riding mowers, how green the lawns seemed and the rich smell of the freshly cut green-life hanging in the air; I remember seeing some of my buddies in the near distance out on the soccer field and football field, and waving to them, and their waving back. I knew I would miss the place, the friends I'd made, all the bullshit we had to put up with, the same way you might miss anyone or anything that's given you both grief and cause for pride by testing your will to endure.

But I was feeling pretty unenthused about whole situation; I'd already been shot down twice before, sat there in a metal folding chair before a panel of clergy and teachers and administrators as they went over my permanent record item by item and called me out on every single thing I'd ever been caught doing wrong at Orchid Lake. I listened to their accusations, filled with a weird mixture of pride and shame—Napes and the Holy Smoke may have had their suspicions, but these people didn't know the half of what I'd actually been into, like the fact that I'd taken LSD on our junior class trip to Cedar Point, for instance. The charges I was up against, though, late for study hall, insubordination, dress-code violations, failure to make my bed, et cetera, they were all crap, and all violations I'd earned from Napes or the Holy Smoke, except for

the suspension I'd gotten for drinking with Hank that last night of spring training. But drinking was something a lot of guys had on their records. The whole thing had the stink of vendetta to it, even my parents could tell, and we knew it most likely had something to do with what happened between me and the Holy Smoke and Napes during that junior year.

So I assumed I'd be shot down again. Nothing had changed since the last time I'd faced these people. Besides, I'd already begun to attend South, the public school near my house, a whole new world compared to the scene I was used to: a thousand kids versus the two hundred at Orchid Lake; fine, fine rich girls in tight-ass Jordache and Calvin Klein jeans walking up and down the hallways and stairs; an outdoor quad where the students who smoked could do so without any fear of reprisal; kids cutting class on a whim, going out for burgers, going back to their working or vacationing parents' empty houses to party down, or get some casual sex; and not a crucifix or uniform blazer with a crest on it, or a wound-up guy in a cassock to be seen in your worst nightmare. And, as I was just beginning to discover, there had to be at least fifty guys at that school who were just as into the idea of getting a band going as I was.

I even knew some of the kids at South already from going to grade school at St. Paul's in my neighborhood, snobby but beautiful girls like Susy Mesalle who I hadn't seen since the sixth grade, and who'd had done much in the way of growing up in the meantime, to the point of even finding me attractive and mysterious because I'd gone away. And so what if they didn't have a crew at South, I'd already made starting goalie on the varsity soccer team, though I was thinking of maybe quitting because of what could happen to my fingers. I'd only agreed to come back to O.L. and fake eating humble pie before the Appeals Committee this last time because my parents had stuck by me, never asking, "What the hell did you do?" not once since the day that letter denying me re-enrollment arrived. Their prime motivation was love for me, I'm

certain, and their pain over the fact that I was being treated unjustly, which I was, at least in terms of how drastically I was being punished for what I'd been caught doing; but there was also an element of righteous indignation to their anger, an accusation they had to counter in the idea that they'd failed somehow at raising me. A failure I've probably done far too much to pound home since that time; something that hurts me during these clearer moments in a way it's hard to put in words. But regrets are pointless. That's the beauty of Jesus infinite forgiveness, as I'm beginning to realize, or someone like Bankei's idea of the unborn Buddha mind: what you've become is all that's preventing you from being who you really are—a divine thing, god's creature.

When my mother approached me after I'd come home from soccer practice at South that day in the early fall and said, "OK, Daniel, just this one last time," I could have easily said no, but I didn't. I figured I owed it to her. Besides, it didn't bother me so much anymore that they weren't going to let me back in to live my glory year after having to eat dirt for so long. Every time I plugged in my guitar, I could already feel in my bones that I had some big times to look forward to. Big times a lot of my classmates would gladly trade places with me for, even though I wouldn't wish the bad side of those big times on anyone now.

But unlike my first two appearances before the Committee, this time we brought along my father's younger sister, Vivian, a Dominican nun, for extra moral ammo. I hadn't seen Vivian more than once or twice since my childhood when she'd come to visit my father with his other two sisters, Claudia and MJ, also Dominicans. I remember being scared by their full habits, which covered everything but their faces and hands. They used to pick me up and whisper sing song things to me; and the only way I could even tell they were human at all was because of their smiling moon faces poking out from beneath that crazy headgear and their warm bare hands underneath my arms.

The four of us went into Principal Devine's big office and my parents and Sister Vivian took seats on the couch behind me while I sat in my folding chair before the Appeals Committee, who, as before, were set up behind a long folding table shuffling through copies of my permanent record. The committee was a stacked deck: Principal Devine, Napes, Mrs. Krouse, and, of course, the Holy Smoke, sitting in a chair off to the side, his crossed leg jiggling up and down beneath his cassock. The only difference was that Mr. Coop, my biology teacher, was on the panel this time. Mr. Coop was a straight-up guy. He had like eight kids or some ridiculous thing, and was far too nice a man to have to put up with people lighting their farts on fire or starting fist fights in class, climbing out the windows and running off across the lawns, taping Hustler beaver shots onto the pulldown anatomy charts. All of which we did to him. He was the kind of teacher who would hurl a beaker against the wall and wave his arms around going, "See, see, that's kinetic energy, boys." I didn't really put much effort forth in his class or any class, for that matter, because, as I said, the education there was largely a joke, and I was more than smart enough to get good grades without studying. But I was glad to see the Coop there, because I knew he was there in the interest of fairness.

So we went down the list of my citizenship violations the same way we had the last two times, the Committee citing the infraction then asking me why I'd done what I'd done so they could frown and shake their heads while did the best I could to justify my actions. Then we hit the suspension for drinking.

"Not just drinking," Mr. Coop said. "It mentions vandalism here as well."

No one had mentioned vandalism the last two time I'd been through this. I was shocked at such an out-right lie. After Jack had caught us he'd originally thrown us all off the team, and in our shame and grief over this Hank and I just crawled into our sleeping bags and fell asleep. But a few other guys who weren't even with us had

also been caught drinking, and they went berserk at getting busted, running drunk off into the night, eventually tearing up a bathroom in the fieldhouse where we were staying. Hank and I had nothing to do with the vandalism, and that was probably the main reason why Coach Jack had let us back on the team.

"That's not true," I said, "I didn't have anything to do with that. I was passed out when that happened. Practically the whole rowing team is my witness."

"Then why does it say vandalism on this Citizenship Violation?"

"It was reported to me that the incident involved vandalism," The Holy Smoke said. "I merely wrote down what I was told. I wasn't aware that Daniel hadn't taken part in that. The point is he was drinking."

"Well, these kind of inaccuracies are important to the committee's judgment Brother John. Is it possible that there are any more?"

"Not that I'm aware of," he said, folding his arms across his chest. He looked like he was dying to fire up a cigarette.

Suddenly I could feel a tangible wrath shooting over my shoulders and pushing itself up against the Committee. I turned my head and saw Sister Vivian, a woman who's probably only had a handful of truly sinful thoughts in her entire life, shaking her head angrily, and I almost wanted to cry for my guilty thankfulness—she didn't know the half of what I'd been into either, and there she was, wordlessly defending me because she believed in love and forgiveness. Her angry silence was making the hypocrisy of the whole situation obvious.

Mr. Devine broke the awkward silence with officialese, "As before, the Appeals Committee will take these issues under advisement, giving special consideration to this new information. Mr. and Mrs. Mooney, Sister Vivian, Daniel, thank you for being here today. The Committee will contact you within a week regarding our final decision."

A few days later I was down in the basement of my parents house, trying to cop the solo to "Voodoo Chile," when my mother came downstairs, hugged me, and told me I was back in. If that was what I wanted.

"Mooney, you in there," Top-o knocked a few more times but I could already tell he'd given up, and soon there was silence on the other side of the door. I needed time to come down before I went to see the Holy Smoke. I'd only taken a few hits—I didn't want to smoke my lungs out with the State Championship coming up—but still. I went back to the closet and finished whatever song it was I'd been working on. I decided to let the Holy Smoke wait another hour or so; I figured I'd tell him I was out running, getting ready for the regatta on Saturday.

The Holy Smoke took one last drag and jabbed out his cigarette in the full ashtray. He looked up from the ashtray at me, but still held in his hit, like something needed to be decided before he could let it go and breathe again. He shook his head in that tired, this-is-for-your-own-good way the people responsible for punishing you always seem to have, then he exhaled through his nose, jetting the two grey streams down against the paper-littered desk where they seemed to tangle into each other before rising up between us and dissolving.

"Where were you, Daniel. Dennis Topolski has been paging you over the dorm PA for more than an hour."

I shifted in the chair he had set up directly across from his desk; I'd gone back to my room and brushed my teeth, did some eyedrops, and put on sweats and jogging shoes before going to see him, "I've been out running around campus Brother John," I said, "working up my wind for Saturday."

"That's odd," he said, giving me a yellow, filmy-toothed smile, "You don't seem sweaty or anything."

"I took a long cool down, walked for about a mile. Keeps you from tightening

up later, that's what Coach Jack says."

"I see." He shook out another cigarette, lit up, blew his hit over toward the lamp standing next to his desk where the smoke took on substance, curling into itself beneath the lampshade. "Why don't you tell me what happened with Brother Lyle today."

"Brother Lyle told me he wasn't going to mention that to anybody," I spat—I'd been a fool to believe it could have been otherwise.

"Well, you certainly don't think he meant me, do you? It's my job as Assistant Dean to keep up with the floor supervisors regarding any disciplinary problems in the dorm."

I was getting pretty goddamn sick of this game; we'd been playing it for far too long, ever since he came to Orchid Lake the year before. Sometime in the fall of that year, my junior year, a month or so after the "You're a leader among men," speech he gave me, I'd been told to sit down in that same chair in the Holy Smoke's room because I'd gotten in three fist-fights in one week due to guys calling me Dumbass the Wonder Stud for being caught in bed with my girlfriend Cindy the Saturday before.

I'd met Cindy in the beginning of that previous summer through Malta, a buddy I played soccer with who would eventually end up becoming my roommate after Bob Coli left school only a few weeks into that junior year. Cindy was a friend of Malta's girlfriend, from his neighborhood, and I loved her with all the true urgent pain of a young man's first love. And what was keeping us apart? The idea that our love—a love that I could feel was purer than any God I'd been told was real—was a fornication.

We had just finished the act that day we were caught. I'd read in porno mag (there was always porn floating around the floor, stashed under mattresses or between the books on the shelves above our desks) that women liked intimacy after sex; so,

after flushing the condom down the toilet, I crawled back into bed with Cindy and we lay there breathing together, filled with love and amazement over this tremendous thing we'd just discovered when—BLAM—the door blew in and there was her mother screaming, "No, Oh, My God, No, No." like someone had just been murdered. The rest is supremely tragic and also comic in a way—Cindy shocking out like a deer in headlights while I put on my shorts, her mother reading me the riot act and pounding my bare shoulders with her little fists as I walked down the stairs and out the door. It was only the third time we'd ever had sex, the first time Cindy had really enjoyed it because there was no pain. We'd given our virginity to each other, and now we were forbidden to even talk on the phone. After her father called my house in a screaming rage about how lustful and sinful and evil I was, it was obvious we'd never be allowed to see each other again, even if we would find ways around that eventually.

The whole thing filled me with a tremendous confusion, because I couldn't find the sin in what we'd done, regardless of what I'd read in the Bible and been told by the clergy. All this yelling and screaming and guilt didn't seem to have anything to do with the love and forgiveness Jesus was talking about, or the love Cindy and I felt for each other, and I was suddenly well on my way to saying fuck it all as far as the standard narrow-minded Christian morality was concerned. My disdain and disillusion found its vent in the soundtrack of the music I was playing and listening to which told me above all else to DEFY AUTHORITY. Live free on your own terms or die. And that was, I think, when I truly began what I'll call my Dark Turn Inward.

So the Holy Smoke sat me down in his office and made me tell him why I was so disturbed. I probably said something similar to what I just wrote in the above paragraph but with less twisted clarity—back then, I couldn't have described the way I felt in such words. Things had been pretty good between us up that point, me and the Holy Smoke, we even kind of got along—I had no reason to dislike him, because he

hadn't started The Game with me yet. So I not only told him what had happened with Cindy but also about this dream I'd been having since the day Cindy and I were caught; this dream about her mother sneaking into my house and stabbing my parents, and me coming down stairs to find their dead bodies and her standing over them, grinning evilly. I told him how I suddenly had a pistol in my hand and shot her down, gave her every single bullet and a few empty clicks before jumping on her fallen body and beating her like an animal with the pistol butt. Then I was outside, hugging Cindy in the swirling ambulance light and there was a pull away, a crane shot rising up into the air, like I was someone watching the movie of my own life. I looked down on Cindy and I hugging in my parent's driveway, Cindy murmuring, "It'll be alright, it'll be alright," only from up above where I am I can see she has one hand ready to sink that same knife her mother used on my parents between my shoulder blades. Then I wake up. I had no idea what the dream meant, except that it proved I was very upset, and the Holy Smoke shocked me by going off into this bullshit interpretation of it. According to him the murder of my parents actually represented my guilt over the pain I'd caused them, the murder of Cindy's mother my frustration; the pistol was my penis, and Cindy with the knife was a symbol of my current sexual frustration and the fact that I felt betrayed by her vagina and was now probably masturbating too much as a result—all this shit that didn't really have anything to do with the hurt I was feeling or the understanding I was looking for. I didn't need Freudian psycho-analysis, I needed someone to tell me that I'd make it through this, that my heart would heal and that, maybe, someday down the road when things cooled out, I might be able to start seeing Cindy again, as long as we promised to be "good."

"You're lucky her father didn't catch you," the Holy Smoke said after he'd finished interpreting my dream. "Back where I come from they would have cut your balls off for that kind of bullshit." He seemed incapable of understanding or

acknowledging the fact that Cindy and I weren't just horny animals—we were in love. All my life I'd been told to respect the clergy, to believe without asking; but this didn't seem like the kind of thing Jesus would say to me if I came to him with my problem. So I wasn't sure how to feel about what he'd just said; it wasn't like I'd broken a rule and brought a her into my dorm room to have sex or anything. As far as I could tell he had no real reason to be mad at me at all. Maybe he was trying to be hard ass Mr. Bronx or something, saying I should just buck up and take like a man losing forever the girl I loved more than I'd ever loved anything but music. I'm not sure what he was trying to say, but that conversation was the beginning of all the problems between us. After that I started questioning every single thing he said in theology class.

At first the Holy Smoke tried to play-off my open defiance of him in the classroom as a kind of healthy doubting Thomas-ism, but his lack of solid logic when it came to my questions made it so other guys, like Kroeter, started speaking up; and it soon became obvious that a lot of us were through accepting "That's one of the mysteries of our faith," as an answer. And even then it wasn't so much that I wanted to disprove what was in the Bible. It was more like I was trying to disprove anything the Holy Smoke believed in because back then I couldn't bear to believe in the same God he did.

I let out a big sigh, "I don't know Brother John, didn't Brother Lyle explain it you? I was just hanging in my room watching those guys play that game and he came in and Hank fired the cap gun at him. Then Brother Lyle started asking me a bunch of questions, and I guess he didn't like my answers."

"Didn't you think of telling them to stop, Daniel."

"I don't like telling people what to do."

"It is your responsibility to set a good example. People look up to you, you know."

"No they don't."

"It's too bad you have such a low opinion of yourself."

"I don't have a low opinion of myself."

"Then why don't you set a better example."

"People should set their own examples, they should figure things out for themselves, instead of looking to someone else for the answer."

"Which basically means you don't like following the rules here at Orchid Lake."

"You're twisting my words," I said

"I don't believe so."

I crossed my arms and shook my head at him, then looked away in disgust.

"Well," he said, stubbing out his cigarette, "I can see this isn't getting us anywhere. This is exactly the kind of attitude that got you thrown out last year. It's the same attitude that's gotten you two points this year. One more point and your out of here. You understand that, don't you, Daniel? Insubordination is no small matter, regardless off if it was this afternoon with Brother Lyle or right here and now."

"Are we finished yet?"

He slapped his hand down on his desk, "No, Daniel, we are not finished yet," he shouted, and my skin crawled as I felt a few droplets of his spittle landing in my arm. He leaned back and tried to re-collect his cool. Hand shaking, he reached down for the pack of Marlboro Reds on his desk, looked inside, and seeing the pack was empty, crumpled it up and threw it into the trash. He shook his head and let out a raspy sigh, then pushed his chair back from the desk and started groping around inside his cassock, coming out finally with another pack of Marlboro Reds. He tore the cellophane off, opened the pack, shook out a cigarette and lipped it. Then he tossed the pack down on the desk in front of me.

"Take one if you want," he said as he lit up, "I know you smoke." It was one

those simpatico gestures he was always laying on us—a completely transparent, "I'm down with you boys" act he laid on people after he'd already busted them and punished them for smoking in their own rooms. "You really need to have a cigarette, come see brother," he'd say, "Brother understands how it feels to need a cigarette and doesn't want you go sneaking out or hiding in the bathrooms." And sometimes, when the weather was bad, the guys who really needed to smoke, like Campbell or the Keeb, instead of sneaking out to the stand of trees behind the dorms where they'd usually go to smoke or get stoned, would take him up on it for the convenience, even though they didn't much enjoy the company.

"No thanks," I said, because I didn't smoke but the occasional cigarette at a keg party on the weekends, and he'd never caught me at that, obviously. "Got to think of Saturday."

"That's right," he said, exhaling, "The regatta. And now that I think about it, you don't smoke cigarettes anyway, do you?"

A nervous charge went over me. Could he tell I was stoned? I felt pretty straight, the tension of the situation had definitely killed whatever was left of my buzz. I shrugged, and he gave me a look that meant, "I know about you and your friend's pot smoking, even though I've never been able to catch you at it."

The Holy Smoke exhaled a slow, grey stream directly into my face. He picked up the full ashtray and set it on top of the Bible near his elbow, spilling some ashes on it then leaving a light grey smear as he brushed them away. He tapped the burning cigarette across the ashtray's lip.

"What's this I'm hearing about senior skip day?" he asked.

And there it was, the real reason he'd called me to his room—to try and force me into narking because I was in a tough situation. Well, I was no suck-dog nark and he knew that. I'd been brought with the Code those years before he'd showed up; and,

as far as I was concerned, I was graduating in a few weeks without breaking it.

Besides, there were other people he could turn to if he really wanted info, like Queen Mike or Fat.

"I really don't know what you're talking about, Brother John. Why would I be involved in something like that? I mean, I'm on citizenship probation. I'm not looking for trouble, I want to walk graduation with my friends."

The Holy Smoke's ghost-pale face went red, the stained teeth flashing. "Don't bullshit me Mooney," he snapped, "If something goes wrong on the way to Detroit, if anyone has an accident or anything, we're the one's responsible. We are completely responsible for you during the week while you are living here. Now tell me what's being planned or you might just end up with that point for insubordination."

"I can't tell you about something I don't know anything about, man." I shouted back at him. "And I don't think it's very Christian to threaten me with punishment when I haven't done anything wrong."

I knew I'd just crossed the line. You didn't yell at the Holy Smoke. But I knew also that he wouldn't dare write me up for that third point. Not for this. He had no real proof that I knew anything, and yelling in defensive anger wouldn't stand up before the Appeals Committee if he tried to use it as a last straw—unless I cussed him out. He needed something more if he wanted to kick me out this close to graduation.

"Oh, good Lord, quit acting like a persecuted child," he said. "Just get out of here," he dismissed me with a wave, ash falling onto his desk from his smoke still in hand. I was up and out of there before he had the chance to change his mind, "And don't you even think about going with them." I thought I heard him say as I walked out into the hallway. Which made me want to go back in there and confront him again. Maybe even ask him what was wrong with him and exactly what the hell his problem with me was.

It's hard to explain how much I hated that man, and I actively hated him for quite a few years after I left that place, up until the time when the amazing things that started happening in my life because of the music wiped him and that school from my mind. I mean who cares about what happened to you in high school when you're in a band that's taking off, signing record deals, getting invitations to the Grammy's, and being flown around the country in label-owned jets. And the drugs that took hold of me from there pretty much cleared out anything that was left.

But that's all over with now that I've been reborn. Like I said before, I realized some things while re-reading the Bible this last time through re-hab, and as part of figuring out what's next for me, I'm also working on trying to forgive myself and anyone else who's ever sinned against me. Which means I'm also working on forgiving the Holy Smoke, something that almost makes me wish I knew where he was right now so I could share with him the answers I've discovered to those questions the he couldn't seem to deal with in theology class.

For example, how can there possibly be Original Sin? Why would God punish the people of the future for the sins committed by those in the present? The Holy Smoke could never tell me more than "That's one of the mysteries of our faith," and that wasn't an acceptable answer. Original Sin is actually a metaphor for the "fallen" state of the individual soul, not the collective flawed moral condition of all un-baptized people. When the story begins Adam and Eve existed in eternal harmony with God. The struggle of mortal humanity they fell into, their metaphor of eating from the Tree of Knowledge, is the metaphor of each individual's struggle with the world; it's the same struggle you see in Christ's story, that's why Jesus had to become human to show us how to redeem ourselves, to show us we are capable of self-enlightenment, not to give us the chance to erase some generalized condition of sin we're all born into. Because we're not born into sin at all. We're born Holy, and we always will be Holy, it's just

our form and our understanding of that fact that changes. We are culled from the Divine All and born through our human consciousness into "knowledge" of a physical world. It is this physical world which causes us to forget we are divine. That is the logical meaning of Original Sin: our first tragic forgetting of our own holiness. It has nothing to do with punishment for petty disobedience, and everything to do with the consequences of the sin we've committed against ourselves and humanity by forgetting our collective divinity and trying to fill the world with the desires of our ephemeral, physical selves, rather than filling ourselves with the world, something that purely IS. This is the Unborn Buddha Mind the Zen philosopher Bankei speaks of; and Emerson's giant eyeball embracing the whole time-space continuum, "I am nothing, I see ALL;" it is the spirit-mind completely outside of something as ridiculous as the Church's version of Original Sin: our actual state, a state of pure IS, of pure being. This is the one thing we can always return to, regardless of what we've done, because it never leaves us, we merely forget where it is because we get caught up in the world's distractions. Understand. Jesus doesn't say I'm God and you're not, like some snotty little kid. He says I am the Son of Man and God is in me. As the Son of Man, the Son of Humanity, Jesus is Everyman, the one whose sacrifice supposedly stood for us all, and if God is in him, then God is in everyone. Therefore we are all part of God through the simple fact of being. The Buddhists have always understood this in their way, and Jesus understood it also. What else could he mean by saying, "Do this in memory of me," then cannibalizing his own body and blood before sharing it with his apostles? It certainly doesn't mean create priests and cathedrals and crusades of moral hierarchy for the sake of imitating that ritual; more likely, it means God is literally inside us all, so cast out your lust for pointless Things, your inability to truly love yourself and others; worship instead the simple purity of spirit and body which is the glory of God who is the I Am in All (everyone and everything in existence included).

It's amazing, really, Christianity's inability to understand this simple, central idea of the Gospels, especially considering how couched in symbol the whole bell and whistle show of the mass is. But that's what confusion the church has come to over the years, despite any good they may have done. They understood thousands of years ago that there's no hype—edge to the Everyman's truth of all. They needed an icon, a front man, a "suicide right on stage," just like Jagger sings it, if they were going to get anywhere with selling this act. Someone the masses could glom onto and project their dreams upon: a rock star rising to the heavens through a lightshow of angels bopping out on golden trumpets and trombones, all of us guilty sinners now and forever caught between cringing and clapping, screaming in hoarse joy because we've been promised he's coming back for an encore (which they'll keep postponing, because Jesus isn't coming back since it's impossible for him to ever really leave us.) Man, what's that say for them if even a train-wrecked dooper like me can see they've got it all screwed up. But, then again, they're out of business if they admit Jesus didn't initially come to redeem us, just to remind us that we can redeem ourselves if we love each other enough to make the sacrifices it takes to get there. People don't want to put money into the collection box once they realize they can rise from their dead selves and become something more all on their own.

But, even though I could set the Holy Smoke straight now, maybe even help him see the right path himself, I certainly couldn't have done it then, my head all filled-up with confused anger and rock and roll. I was just an eighteen-year-old kid who wanted some wise guidance, something true to believe in, and in all my looking I saw truth only in the music, which I could hear inside me and make for myself.

So instead of going back in there and telling the Holy Smoke what an asshole I thought he was, I started back toward my room. But before I'd gone very far I realized I was too wound up to deal with whoever might be in there. Smartass Kroeter, or

Newt and Slebka playing euchre, or even Bilvis hanging around, talking with Hank about the regatta on Saturday, asking me "Hey, what'd the Holy Smoke want, man?" Then I remembered my master key, my miraculous gift from the rock and roll gods, and that I had almost two hours until studyhall, and my guitar and half a doobie waiting for me in my storage-closet rehearsal space.

CHAPTER III

That Friday evening I got the suicide's brains on me then decided once and for all I was going to make it as a rock and roll star.

But I still hadn't made up my mind about that yet when Jack took all four crews around the lake that afternoon. Just a little work on our racing starts, he said, just a little paddle before the rest of the boat coaches came and we loaded up the boats and left for downtown. And that was all well and good, until it started getting obvious that he didn't like what he was seeing with our boat.

"Watch it Seven Man. You're shooting your ass." (I pulled Seven Man.) "Quit diving at the catch, Stroke." (Newt pulled Stroke). "Don't drop it into your pecker at the finish, three." (Slebka pulled Three Man.) "C'mon, Three Man, pop that catch and glide. Christ on crutches, I been telling you all year. It's that goddamn soda you're always drinking. I can see that shit oozing out of you. Too many candy bars. All of you. Too many girlfriends making you soft. What the hell happened to my iron men? Oh, hey, sorry. Must be my ails-hymer kicking in. This is the Novice boat. Right? Because it can't be the same hard-ass crew I had out here the other morning. Those men had heart. Those men were oarsmen. What'd you novices do with my oarsmen?"

Eventually he got so disgusted he told the other crews to let it run and so he could watch us more closely, following in the launch, eyeballing our form and shaking his head, berating us with the scowl in his voice.

I could feel the shame heating my ears. Jack was right, we were rowing like a boat full of novices, rocking port to starboard on an uneven keel from people leaning out all the way through the stroke and at the finish. No lift and drive in our catch. No

synchronized roll in the feathering of our long, black, graphite oars as we came up in our slides to hit it again. An eight-man shell should feel like a giant engine when everybody's on—human pistons pumping that boat to speeds far beyond the capacity of its singular parts. The same is true with a good band, if you listen: the music on the whole is always something more powerful than any of the players alone. It's a groove thing, and something was definitely wrong with our groove that day.

"Okay coxy, that's enough. Let 'er run." Jack yelled over the motor after we'd rowed a few hundred yards.

"Let 'er run," Chicken Hawk said, and we finished out the stroke and let the boat glide, the curved backs of the oar-blades skittering across the surface of the water as we gradually lost momentum.

Jack dropped the launch's motor into neutral and floated along beside us. "I'm bringing over the lightweights for a racing start," he said. "Don't embarrass me or yourselves by letting them beat you. You men get your shit together. Your heads are all over the place. Whatever it is your thinking about, graduation parties or whatever, forget it. We still got one more race to win. Get your minds back in the boat." He tossed his megaphone down, put the motor into gear and turned the accelerator handle sharply to cut the launch away from us, speeding back the few hundred yards toward the other shells in the near-distance.

"Man, what the fuck's wrong with Jack?"

Hunched over the handle of my oar, I heard Slebka's voice drifting down from the bow.

"I mean, this is bullshit, man. I give up a guaranteed blast in Lauderdale for spring break to go to fucking nowheresville West Virginia to train, I get up early practically every day for the last fucking month, and now I got this geezer giving me shit the day before states after we've been kicking ass all season."

"Tell him to shut up," I said to the back of Newt's neck, the same neck I'd stared at over countless miles of water because you are never supposed to look out of the boat while you are rowing. Looking and steering is coxy's job—that's why he's the only one facing in the right direction. The rest of you have your backs toward where you're going. And seeing isn't why you're there anyway; you're an engine part in a drag racing machine, and you become and stay an engine part by doing exactly the same thing over and over, perfectly, for fifteen hundred meters while staring at the neck of the guy in the seat in front of you.

"I mean, I could be home right now. Banging my girlfriend or whatever. Instead I gotta sit here in this stupid, fucking boat and get bitched out by the old man."

"Tell him to shut up, Newt," I said. "No talking in the boat."

Newt's shoulders rose and fell in a shrug.

"I don't even know why I'm doing this. I gotta sleep on the floor of some gym tonight instead of in my bed. I gotta listen to everybody farting and snoring. Gotta get up at five in—

"Shut your goddamn hole Slebka," I turned violently in my seat, rocking the shell. "We've all made sacrifices for the crew. I could be home partying, too. I could be playing my guitar. But I'm here. Because I want to be here. Because I choose to be here. You don't want to be here, you should've fucking quit months ago and gone on spring break like you wanted. Otherwise you're dragging this boat down. We should've gotten a novice or a lightweight to take your seat, man. I've been watching your puddles, you're barely pulling you pussy."

"Fuck you, Mooney," he said, but I ignored him.

"The hell is wrong with you guys," I yelled it up into the air. "We got to get our heads together. We been winning all season. Swinging like crazy just the other morning. Now we can't even get the boat to set up. You seniors don't care anymore

because you're about to graduate? That's bullshit. We're supposed to lead this fucking boat, man. Tomorrow is the last chance we'll have. You want to lose the last time you ever row for Orchid Lake? Fuck that! I refuse to go out a loser after win—"

"Drop it, Mooney," Newt said. "No talking in the boat. Remember."

"Yeah, sure. Whatever you say, Captain." And I left it at that, all of us sitting in sullen silence, drifting along until Jack came back with the lightweights.

I couldn't understand why the boat was falling apart. Maybe after all those years at O.L. we were tired of anybody bitching at us, even if it was someone we usually respected, like Jack. We were all hot to get out of there and go on with our lives, I'm sure of that. I thought about the Holy Smoke calling me a child in his office a few days before. I wanted to put a State Championship in his face so bad, get a plaque hanging in the Grombowski Field house with a picture of the middle-weight eight on it—State Champions. Something he'd have to look at all the time after I was gone. Of course, a few years later, my face would be all over the place and I'd be a bigger winner than either of us could have ever imagined, and also on my way to learning that winning and losing are sometimes the exact same thing.

"C'mon you men, that's how to hit it, now you're moving. That's it. That's it. You're gonna show these peckerhead middleweights who really owns this lake, aren't ya?" Jack was pacing the lightweights as they rowed over to us. They looked sharp, synced in, the boat setting even at the catch and finish. Some of them would be taking seats in the middleweight eight next year, the seats Newt, Slebka, Kirby, Perce and I left behind after we graduated. "Okay, let her run." Jack said, and they began to glide up beside us.

Jack buzzed over to us in the launch. "See that? You see those men? Did you watch them row over here? They're looking fantastic, those men. Iron in their bellies. They're hungry, they're horny to win. Not busy thinking about college girls and

graduation parties. This boat used to hop it twice as sweet as those light-weights. This boat used to be the goddamn meanest, fastest crew on this lake. I'm not so sure about that now."

It was an old trick of his, this pride thing. And it usually worked on us. But we seemed deflated somehow, ready to move on, of many minds instead of one. We were all about coasting, now. Riding out these last few easy weeks to graduation and getting out. Which was exactly the kind of attitude that killed a boat's soul, and exactly what Jack sensed in us.

Jack brought the launch behind both shells and raised his red and white megaphone with the O.L.S.M. Eaglet logo on it. "Okay, men. Give me a racing start and a two-hundred and fifty meter sprint. Get 'em ready coxys."

"All eight up in you seats. Half slides," Chicken Hawk said, and we set ourselves into position, hands wrapped around the handles or our oars, arms fully extended, knees bent. "C'mon you guys," the Hawk said angrily, throwing what little weight he had to one side against the shell's starboard lean, "Set it up straight. Slebka, Kirby, you're fucking leaning, I can see your heads from all the way back here. Set it up."

I felt my oar-handle rise as the boat set up even again. We waited, rigid, eyes locked on that neck a few feet away, ready at the catch. "Alright, let's blow these fucking lightweights off the water," Chicken Hawk said through the mini-megaphone strapped to his head.

"Are you ready?" Jack said. "...Row!"

"Half, half, three-quarters, full," the Hawk called out the stroke series we used at the gun of every race. The boat began to surge. "Power thirty!" he shouted, and the grunts worked loose from our lips. I took a glance at the light-weights out of the corner of my eye, making sure not to turn my head. We were dead even. "Let's go,

let's go, you're falling behind," Chicken Hawk was screaming, "Come on, what are you made of?" I muscled the oar through the water, tried to make the graphite stem bend. Catch, stroke, slide and feather; catch, stroke, slide and feather; catch, stroke, slide and feather—I could feel the boat beginning to hop, moving like a thing with a mind of its own. I felt myself falling into the slot, dropping into that groove where sixteen arms and sixteen legs pumped cadence like an elephant's heartbeat. Whump. At the catch. Whump.....Whump.....Whump. The boat feeling like it's actually rising out of the water when you hit.

"That's it. Now you're swinging, now you're swinging," I could hear the old man screaming shrilly from somewhere behind us, water splashing in my face, but I wasn't sure which boat he was talking about.

I snuck another look over the side. We were pulling away from them. It seemed there was something left to us, after all.

By the time we got off the water the other coaches had showed up from their day jobs, and the crews stripped the rigging and loaded the rowing shells and oars onto the boat-trailers. Then we all piled into the two vans for the drive downtown where we would spend the night before the regatta, which started early Saturday morning on the Detroit river.

We drove the highways to Detroit, sunshine glancing off the cars, full-on spring with the van windows pushed open and breeze playing in our hair: a bunch of teenagers on bench seats, bullshitting among ourselves, making goofy faces and obscene gestures at people as they passed us, but doing it on the sly, and keeping the laughter to ourselves so Jack's son Donny, who was driving, wouldn't get wise.

There were two other boat coaches besides Donny and Jack. Stroklevitz for the lightweights. Ukramic for the novices. But it was always Jack and Donny who drove the vans towing the boat-trailers, mostly because they were overly-concerned with the

shells, some of which were newly donated and worth thousands of dollars. Sometimes I liked to ride in Donny's van. Sometimes in Jack's. With Jack you got all the crazy stories he'd be telling that year's novices. Stuff about rowing back in some imaginary day when the shells were made out of steel instead of wood or graphite, and an oarsman pulled so hard that crabbing a stroke meant the back-snap of the oar took his head clean off. The stories were funny to listen to, though you'd heard them all your first season. The main problem was that some of those rides were very, very long—we rowed regattas in Ohio, Indiana, and all over Michigan—and with Jack you got no music, because Jack didn't like to play the radio. He liked talking, or singing these crazy old tunes from the Forties we'd never heard before.

Donny had his own stories he told over and over. Especially the one about how he mangled his pinky finger on the gunnel of an eight man shell he was stroking in three-foot swells. "Bet your ass we won that race," he'd say, sticking that twisted, unbendable finger up in your face like some kind of medal. "Never quit pulling. Not even if your seat comes off the slide." But, unlike his dad, Donny would play the radio for us, even let us choose the stations. And if you sat in the back row of the van, like I was sitting right then with Newt and Hank and Bilvis, you didn't have to listen to his stories; you could bullshit or sleep, and groove to the jams while you watched Donny's mouth move when he turned his head sideways now and then to emphasize some point in the story he was telling whoever had gotten stuck with a seat near the front.

"Ramble on," a Led Zeppelin tune I liked, came on the radio, and I called out for Donny to turn it up.

"Radio's already too loud," Donny yelled over his shoulder, wind carrying his voice back to me. "You better quit with that guitar, Mooney. You're going friggin deaf." And without missing a beat, he went right on with whatever exaggerated story

he'd been giving them. He was right about the deaf-thing. I was still too young to pay much attention to it, but the tinnitus had already started, a ringing that came on suddenly, then quickly faded. Not the constant background high-tone making me go, "What'd you say? What was that?" like I have to now. But that's what a few US arena tours standing in front of a wall of Marshall's will do to you—and I was always too much of a rock and roll purist to wear ear-plugs. Not even those fancy custom-fitted ones. The music just doesn't sound the same all filtered and deadened like that. No edge. Which is everything as far as rock and roll is concerned. It doesn't matter now anyway. I can hear well enough, I guess. Though people must think it strange when they talk to me and I turn my head and put my ear to them, rather than looking them in the face. I mean, I'm only thirty years old.

"Put it more in the back speakers then," I said.

The Led Zeppelin song got me thinking of Sheri, a girl I'd been seeing on and off since Cindy and I agreed we should start dating other people during the summer of my junior year. As much as Cindy and I loved each other we were getting tired of not being able to have a normal relationship, always sneaking around and worrying about getting in trouble. It was more her idea than mine. We did still get together maybe once or twice a month, and she wrote me at school, and we talked on the phone when we could, but we realized things would never be normal between us, and so decided to move on with our lives.

Sheri was a self-acknowledged Led Zeppelin fanatic, which was one of the things I really liked about her, her genuine rock and roll fanaticism and attitude. That, and the fact she wasn't into any kind of commitment as far as our relationship went. She owned every single album Zeppelin ever made, had posters and pictures of the band she'd scissored from Cream and Circus and Rolling Stone tacked up all over her room. She was a junior, a year behind me, like Cindy. But unlike Cindy she was a dirty

blonde into too much eye make-up, tight-ass jeans, and black t-shirts. Screwing Robert Plant was her big fantasy. And she talked about it with a seriousness that made me jealous—because she wouldn't screw me.

We met at the beginning of my senior year during a Welcome Back dance at Mother of Holy Mercy where she went to school. Mercy was the kind of place where the girls actually wore white oxford blouses, and black patent leather shoes, and knee socks, and plaid knee-length skirts. She wasn't dressed that way for the dance, though; at the parochial school dances, the non-formal ones anyway, we were usually allowed to wear whatever we wanted, just nothing with "Satanic" images on it, like most Megadeath or Iron Maiden or Black Sabbath t-shirts; and no jeans with rips in the ass or knees; and no mini-skirts for the girls. I'd spent the first half of the dance out in the far end of the parking lot in my mom's car, which she'd lent me for the evening, working on a buzz with Malta and Bilvis, passing the whiskey pint around, talking trash and jamming to the cranked radio until the bottle was empty and we had our courage up. By the time we three rolled into the swirling disco-ball-light of the gym, soundtrack of Prince or The Cars or The Romantics or whoever it was pumping underneath our unsteady feet, my head was such that I took one look at her lean little package all wrapped up in those tight, faded jeans and that Zeppelin t-shirt, and I thought to myself—well, goddamn, there's my rock and roll fantasy girl. I swooped down on her gang of friends at the first slow song and asked her for a dance, and she said sure. Right away I started talking about how much I liked Led Zeppelin and that I played guitar in a band. She pressed up closer against me, said she'd like to hear me play sometime. I could tell already I was good as in. I introduced her to Malta and Bilvis, and she introduced them to some of her friends. We all spent the rest of that night dancing—fast and slow—and talking, making fun of how square the parents who'd volunteered as chaperons were. By the end of it all I had her number written on

a little scrap of paper that I showed Malta and Bilvis as I drove us to some party, or back home, or wherever. I don't remember.

When we first started seeing each other, I used to skip dinner and go AWOL after soccer practice in that free time between practice and studyhall, running the five or so miles to her house. Her mom worked evenings doing I don't know what, and her dad always seemed to be out of town—I'd only seen him maybe once or twice, which was fine with me, because I had the feeling he knew exactly what me and his little girl were up to. More often than not, she'd usually end up giving me a blow-job on the floor of her living room while we listened to Led Zeppelin on her parent's fancy stereo and watched her parent's porno movies—they had a whole box-full under their bed.

After the sex, she'd make me a sandwich, and I'd run the five miles back to school all rubbery-legged, usually making it to my room just in time for study hall, just in time for Napes with his funky goatee to poke his head in the doorway and catch me at my desk, all sweaty and out of breath and smiling over what I'd just gotten away with. "Out running, Brother Lyle," I'd say when he asked me where I'd been. And I had no problem looking him right in the face when I said it, because I wasn't lying, and I hadn't done anything wrong as far as I was concerned.

Sheri and I toyed with the idea of boyfriend/girlfriend thing for a little while, but we just didn't want it. A large part of me was still in love with Cindy, and Sheri said all that going-together stuff wasn't really her style anyway—the casual sex and hanging out was what she was into. Eventually, it got so all I had to do was call her up on the pay phone down at the end of the hall, and she'd invite me over for the treatment. No questions asked about if I was seeing some other girl or whatever, which I sometimes was. I was starting to get plenty of attention from the girls I met at the basement parties and the dances The Hamptons were playing. But I'd always come back to Cindy, missing her with an ache of regret born of one careless afternoon (we

weren't guilty of anything, I realized, but being stupid enough to get caught), the two of us meeting in secret, kissing and crying and stealing sex in the back seats of cars parked down dark streets, or in the bedrooms of friend's houses when their parents were out. But, like I said, we knew it was over, that her dad would forever want to put a boot to my head or cut my balls off like the Holy Smoke had said. And Sheri was always around, so convenient, popping into my life now and again, showing up at some of those parties and dances we played, seeming extra eager those nights to take me off to some private place where she could show me how much she'd enjoyed my playing. But beyond that kind of groupie-thing, I couldn't see what she was getting out of our relationship; I mean it seemed kind of one-sided; she never, ever, screwed me, or even let me touch her down there; it was like she literally believed in saving herself for Robert Plant.

It was all harmless stuff though, really—her little groupie number, and me imagining myself the rock star laying back to accept his rock and roll payday, both of us looking to get as far away as possible from the idea of being Catholic and guilty of anything other than trying to have a good time. Because I was starting to believe that was all we were guilty of—trying to feel good and have a good time. I knew my parents and all the Holies back at school thought it a sin, what we were doing; but, what kind of God was it these people were talking about? One who chose to let us know desire then punished us for it by calling its fulfillment sin? Why would God, who has all of the Universe, all things in and outside of time to consider, think us sinful for giggling and groping (half from fear even) in the darkness he created? Why would God think us evil for trying to beat the deadlines on small pleasures in our small lives on our small planet taking up its small place within a small, small corner of a vast and seemingly endless space? You'd think God would want to applaud every honest kiss, or embrace, or touch of the tongue to skin for it's proof of our bravery in the face

of such ridiculous odds. God doesn't love us for our potential to be perfect. Otherwise he wouldn't have made us flawed. God loves us for our trying, for our seeking, our falling short. Again and again. Loves us for our struggling, because such a thing has been lost to God by the nature of what God is. I.

The devout will say that by our sexual acts Sheri and I, or Cindy and I, or Any girl and I were stepping outside the boundaries of His prescribed Law and defiling our souls—ruining our chances for Eternal Reward; but the god of those who believe this is nothing more than a jealous little boy playing with his toys. I refuse to degrade my God in that way. My God knows only the joy in our living happiness, the sorrow in our living folly. As I've said, to be human is already to be Holy. And to be in love is to believe in a religion where God is fallible—just as we are. That's what Armageddon means, not the finale of Jesus shooting lightning from his fingertips. Wiping away all evil as he surfs down from the clouds with Elvis and James Dean. Armageddon is the day evil dissolves because we've, each of us, suddenly realized that holiness is not imposed from without but nurtured from within. ...see how the pendulum swings. Holy tongues of fire licking the air above my head right now. And Christ almighty what I've had to do to myself to notice they were even there. I may very well come back to these pages tomorrow all fucked up on smack again. Or any number of things. Who knows but tomorrow itself? I am forever standing on the blurry edge of that hole I'd love to fall back into. White-noise sleep. The risk is always carried in you, and you'll never stop wanting that warm kiss of I Don't Care. But you've got to revel in your weakness, tear yourself down to nothing before you begin to build again, go so deep into perversion and decadence you swing all the way around loathing and despair and come back into clarity from the other side. You must be shown your lowest self before you can be raised up again in wisdom. Amen. Otherwise you've not seen the All of yourself; you are only what you've been told you

are, what you've made yourself into, not the true being you've been underneath all along. Since the beginning of time. And forever.

Just look at Sidhartha, or Job, or Moses cast by Pharaoh into the desert. Maybe they didn't run toward trouble like I did, and I'm by no means putting myself on the same level as such people, but the end result is still the same—God is forever taking us from on High and dragging us through the dust of despair to suit the Holy Purpose which will raise us up again; such is the way to enlightenment.

But, of course, you can't see any of this until you've been to the mountain, so to speak, and if you say you can see it without being there, you're a liar, or a hypocrite, or a fool—someone like Napes or the Holy Smoke who should never have been given the chance to mess with people's spirituality. That was my mistake. Believing what others told me, rather than simply being. But if you get half a childhood's head full of Christianity, then do enough gag and smack, and screw enough women, and have enough people telling you you're a poetic, musical genius and the next hip-thing, it gets easy to see only part of the truth and let your spirit fill up with the idea that you are your own Jesus. Which I understand now that I am. As you are your own Jesus. And everybody else is their own. I've already explained this. But that's not the kind of Jesus I thought I was then. I mean, I believed I was a singular Jesus, the Lamb, the same kind of Jesus the church would have us believe in— the kind of faultless being you project your worship onto and measure your own obvious failings against. The kind of Jesus it's a goddamn sin to even think ever existed.

Sheri and I lost touch after high school the way most people do. Until about seven years later—right during the height of our fame, '92 or so—when I saw her looking ultra-fine backstage at a show we'd played somewhere in Chicago. Tight mini-dress, booming body, et cetera. The kind of girl we were always telling the roadies to give backstage passes to. She had to remind me who she was; we embraced

once I remembered. Wow! Hi, it's been so long. How are you? How've you been? All that. She said she was a lawyer now or something equally weird and unexpected; said she'd been following the band ever since she'd recognized me on Mtv; said she'd tried to get a hold of me through the label, but no luck. She was practically peeling off her clothes this time, freaking on the scene we had going— surgically enhanced women, and all the Dom P and free shit you could do floating around backstage. I eventually took her in a limo back to my room, a suite in some swanky hotel downtown, and we did up almost half a gram of pure flake. She finally gave it to me then. We banged each other like crazy all over place while I yelled stuff about "How's that for Robert Plant," or some such thing—if I'm remembering right, though I could certainly be re-imagining that, same way I'm re-imagining a lot of this. And she gave me herpes. Something I am definitely not imagining. Something which has caused unbelievable emotional pain and complication in my life, and maybe even done something to help save me.

You can't imagine the situations I've had to turn down because of my outbreaks. Because I refused to inflict this disease on somebody else. Not if I could help it. Squeegee and Thumper and Ott (the other members in The Un-named), they'd be heading back to the hotel after a show—girl on each arm sometimes—going "C'mon Moonman, c'mon. It's only rock and roll, but I like it." And I'd have to tell them, no thanks. Even when I did go with them during an outbreak, which I was having all the time, it seemed, in those days, I'd just end up getting too wasted and staggering away to my own room once people started taking off their clothes. Maybe try and write some songs about my pathetic pain, the worm between my legs—thank God I at least had the music to fall into—but usually I'd end up doing more of whatever taste I was into at the time and passing out, or staying up all night tweaking. until finally crashed. There's something important in the irony of that, I think. A guy with the permanent, cyclical

clap cock-rocking it up on stage in front of an arena full of all these screaming girls he won't ever lay a hand on because he's worried about spreading his disease. Conscience is an odd thing. I wonder if Sheri had one. I wonder if she really was that much of a calculating bitch at heart, not caring what she was doing to me just because she was having sex a rock star, getting as close as she ever would to her dream. Or if she was merely a victim also, someone misled like me, catching a dose of bad luck while out looking to lap up the life's blood of every single thing.

I'm not whining or saying I haven't had my fair share of sex or whatever. I've had more than my fair share. There were plenty of times I was sexually clean, and plenty of times I was too blasted to know or care if I was or not. So I probably did end up giving this disease to some women; I ask them right now to forgive me. I will say on my behalf that I used a rubber and did my best to check out my parts beforehand, all things considered. And it's not like these women didn't realize what they were getting into. They knew the risks, though they probably weren't considering them at the time, just like I'd neglected to do with Sheri that night in my suite.

But I can't help believing I got the herpes for a reason, and I don't mean as pay-back for my sins; because, as I've already said, you've got it all wrong if you believe God works that way. I understand what it means to be celibate in the face of great sexual opportunity. What it means to desire something in the world and suffer into the power of abstinence because of what you believe. I've sat there on the toilet, all hung-over, time lost in some come-down, holding myself in hand, looking at these blisters busting out all over me, thinking "Jesus, what the fuck have I done to myself." And that's exactly why God gave all this pain to me. Not to punish me, but to show me that sex and drugs and a finger always on the pleasure button had taken away my powers of self-reflection, of self-examination. Of course, at the time, I was just bitter over my bad luck, the missed opportunities. Now I understand that the blisters were

and are the metaphor of my broken spirit made literal. They are my life's reminder that mindless indulgence will turn you away from your true self, the perfect self you were before you unwittingly conspired with the world to convince yourself you're really someone else: a rock star, a Catholic Brother. At least that's how I'm seeing it right now, at this moment, which doesn't mean too much, because what I think tends to change itself around all the time, as you've probably noticed.

And here we are, way off track again. Talking about my dick's tribulations and what they might mean to my soul. So I'll just get back to it, and say this van ride downtown with the rowing team was before any of the pain and self-knowledge, or much of anything at all, had happened to me. This was before I lost my true self, or found my true self, or both. And sitting in that van, thinking of Zoso Sheri and her abilities was making it so I had to put my hands in my lap to hide the ideas that were rising up inside my sweat-pants.

"Hey. Mooney." I jumped at Hank's hand coming down on my thigh.

"What? Whaddya want?" I'd been looking out the window, doing a fantasy number on my next visit to Sheri's, staring at but not seeing the burned out shells of the houses slipping by at the edge of the highway as we hit the outskirts of the city.

"So Wednesday's the day," he said. "We're taking off right after mass. Game starts at two. They're playing the Brewers. They win it'll put the streak at twenty-two. You're riding with me, right?"

"I don't know," I said, "Newt doesn't think it's such a good idea."

"Shit. He told me in Graut's class today he was going."

Really?" I looked across Hank and Bilvis at Newt. He was asleep, head leaned against the window, his face half-hidden inside the hood of his sweatshirt.

"It doesn't seem like a smart thing to do, Hank," I said. "That's exactly the kind of thing the Holy Smoke is waiting to bust me for. I told you the shit he pulled on

me in his office the other day."

"Fuck the Holy Smoke. We go to morning classes. Go to mass. How can he get pissed at us? Especially if everyone skips. He can't just throw a couple guys out if we all go. It's either everyone or no one. We just have to make sure everyone goes. They all skipped last year, man. They've been doing it every year since whenever, and nobody's ever gotten in trouble. It's tradition."

"No one ever used to get in trouble for partying on Ring Day, either," I said, thinking about the ceremony in church one Saturday almost exactly a year ago where'd they'd put us all in tux's, blessed the class rings, and slipped them one at a time onto our white-gloved fingers. That night was traditionally a night off, an unpunishable party night for the juniors. My sophomore year, when Mr B. was still Assistant Dean, I remembered seeing him laughing in the lobby at how obviously drunk some of the guys stumbling back into the dorm were. Everything was cool with him as long as people weren't driving. But our ring day Mr. B. was in the hospital getting tests done, and we had the Holy Smoke and Napes patrolling the halls, handing out suspensions to anyone they caught with a buzz on, which wasn't me or Bilvis or Hank or Malta, because we'd gotten a freshman to pop out his screen so we could sneak up the back stairs to our rooms.

I shook my head, "Holy Smoke doesn't give a shit for tradition, Hank," I said.

"You're not gonna want to miss this, man," Hank said. "Tigers are on their way to the World Series this year, I'm telling you. First time since '68. It's gonna be a throw-down."

"Yeah," Bilvis said, looking across Hank at me, "Campbell and Keeb and Scammer are even thinking about dosing. Maybe we should dose too."

"Oh, right, come back from downtown with a head full of acid so I can watch the Holy Smoke melting or some shit while he reams me out and gives me the broom

for skipping."

"Nobody's getting thrown out," Bilvis said. "Not if we all go like Hank was saying. Besides, you're the King of Distortion, man," he laughed, calling me by a nickname I'd been given my freshman year. "You've dropped in front of The Holy Smoke before. He ain't nothing you can't handle."

"Yeah, I guess so." I said. I couldn't help smiling myself now, because it was true.

I'd dosed during the class trip the year before. The only one in the whole class to do so. Hunkered down in my seat, I ate two tabs of blotter acid then stepped off the bus at Cedar Point, this giant amusement park they'd taken us to in Sandusky, Ohio. I found spaces in my head that day I never even knew were there, heard sounds like I'd never heard before. Malta, who'd never dropped before, thought I was acting crazy all day, talking gibberish about how I was Jesus Hendrix living right now through the glorious, liquid crucifixion of my guitar. But he stuck with me. Even through my freak-out on the roller-coaster when I was convinced my safety bar had come loose and tried to climb out after we were already moving, then started screaming, "Jane stop this crazy thing," and laughing hysterically for the whole ride. That was the first time I'd seen aura's, the perceivable energy human bodies and all living things give off that we're usually too distracted to notice. I felt the charge of the Life-Force racing through me, felt my connection to every single thing, and knew I'd crossed over into a higher way of knowing, though I was too young and too dumb to understand how it worked at the time. I've never forgotten that feeling, though. No matter what else I've forgotten. It's there sometimes when the music is playing you, but not always. I've gone looking for it inside every drug and every trip I've taken since. Or maybe I was running from it; that's definitely what I was doing after the band started coming apart and I threw away those years on heroin. I don't know for certain what I was doing—that's

why I'm writing this, as I've already made clear. I've obviously spent too much time looking for, or running from, something that I couldn't quite find. But from where I'm at now, I try to see that experience at Cedar Point for what it was—a step in both the right and wrong directions; a visionary, mis-spent afternoon, a premonition toward the universe's Holy connectivity, toward the Truth of All I would finally end up realizing after this last time through re-hab.

It's not like it was any dramatic revelation—Paul knocked off his horse by lightning or something like that. I was just staring at this dead fly on the window sill of my room in the Detox, all the heavy withdrawal agonies a week or so behind me. And it dawned on me that as that fly dissolves and I dissolve and everything dissolves we don't just become nothing. But part of Everything. And that's what heaven must be: becoming part of the Whole in a way outside the conscious ego-life you must live as a human being. So I went back to the Bible again, the book I'd been reared within, and I saw things in a way I'd never seen them before. Through the filter of my experience, I suppose.

It's hard to explain, hard to find words for. Whenever I try to share it with someone I always end up feeling like I'm talking about The Force from Star Wars or something. So I'll just leave it there for now. And say I saw ugly puke-green waves shooting off the Holy Smoke when I came back to the bus that day, perma-grin splattered across my face. I knew that he knew I was up to something—perhaps word of my tripping had gotten back to him through Fat, or Queen Mike (who only would have narked on me out of his hysterical concern. "Oh my God, Brother John, Dan Mooney ate a whole bag full of LSD pills. He's gonna freak-out and die!") But I was somehow in a space inviolable, a sacred space, and I glided right past The Holy Smoke's glare and into my seat just as if he was already the confused and angry ghost he is to me now.

I watched a Mohawk Vodka billboard shoot past us on the highway. I sighed and leaned my head back against the bench seat. I was tired in body from the rowing and tired also of worrying when all I wanted to do was live on my own terms.

"I don't know you guys," I said. "You have to let me think about it."

Once we got downtown they took us to the DYC to drop off the shells and get us weighed in. There were guys from all the crews we were racing tomorrow like Riverview and Ecorse and Wyandotte standing around edgy in their racing tanks and sweats eyeballing each other, checking out the boats. After we'd all been classified we went back to the place we were staying, another gymnasium—just like Slebka had complained about—though this time attached to a Catholic school where they took us to the cafeteria and had these old volunteer church ladies feed us an all-you-can-eat spaghetti dinner. The heavier middle weights, guys like Slebka and Newt, had been starving themselves for the last few days, running around with trash bags on underneath their sweats to cut weight. It would almost make you sick watching them eat, going through line again and again, putting away three and four plates of over-cooked spaghetti doused in watery sauce with slabs of buttered Wonderbread and grape juice to wash it down.

After dinner we had some free time, and most of the guys lay down on their sleeping bags on the tumbling mats to bullshit or play cards, but Jack said it was okay when a few of us asked to go outside and walk the meal off, just stick close, because we weren't in the best part of town. The school was right there on the river, so Bilvis and Hank and Kroeter and I decided to head down the cement walkway that ran right along the water's edge. We weren't too far from the school when I noticed Newt and Slebka cutting across a nearby field toward a big clump of bushes.

"Look at those fuckers taking off to get stoned," I said, "You'd at least think they could wait until tomorrow after the race like the rest of us."

Eventually we found a little park. A few trees around a cement plaza. Some benches facing out over the river. There was a young black girl, maybe eleven or twelve, sitting on one of the benches, kicking her legs.

"You standin' on him," she said, looking up at us. She'd been crying. "Y'all walk around."

"What're you talking about?" Kroeter said.

"I said you standin' on him." She pointed at our feet, angry now. "Move."

We looked down to where she was pointing. There was a dim chalk outline of a prone figure drawn on the cement, a faded red stain spreading out from the head. Hank and Kroeter were standing on the sprawled legs of it.

"What the fuck!" Hank said, stepping back, "Oh, Jesus."

"He tol' mamma everythin gonna be alright then he come down here and did it. Sat on this bench and did it. Wensday morning 'rouna time sun was comin up. Devil in him, she said. Now he in the ground. An' right there." She looked at the outline shook her head for a strangely long time.

"Maybe we should be going back," Kroeter said. "Let's go back," and he turned and started heading along the river the way we'd come.

"Wait up Kroeter," Hank said, and he went after him. Hank's father was a doctor who'd died in a routine operation, an appendicitis or something, when Hank was still a little kid. Hank didn't like to talk about death. He didn't even like to think about it. That's why you didn't make mother jokes around Hank. She was all he had.

He said we goin' Bob-Lo this weeken'," she mumbled. "Promised." She was looking at me. "He lyin to me, head open up leakin' all on the ground when they foun' him." She stood from the bench. "He lyin," she shouted, "He lyin' 'bout everythin." and she took off running across the lawn toward the near-distant street.

"Man, what the hell was that all about?" Bilvis said as we watched her running

away.

"I think her father might have killed himself Wednesday morning." I said. There were small chunks of something dark and purplish on the sidewalk a few feet from the head, something the clean-up people seemed to have missed.

"Damn," Bilvis said. He walked over to the bench she'd been sitting on and took her place.

I saw some fallen twigs beneath the near-by trees and went over to pick one up. I came back to the outline, crouched and started poking at the small clumps of purplish stuff, smearing them on the sidewalk. I thought I could see a few black hairs poking out. I poked for a little while without saying anything, getting some onto the end of the stick. I couldn't understand how anything could be so bad you'd do this. Though I must admit that over the worst of these last few years I'd think of countless ways to do the same and only a few reasons not to.

"I'm heading out to LA after graduation instead of going to State." I said, looking up at Bilvis. I made up my mind then as I said it, as saying it was all it took to make it true.

"What're you talking about?" Bilvis said.

"Exactly what I just said. I want to get a band going out in LA. I think we can make it—I mean, I want you come with me. We make good music together, man. I don't know. I got this feeling like something incredible is destined to happen to me. All I have to do is get there."

"You and a million other guys."

"Yeah, but I know I've got what it takes."

"I'm not doubting you, man" he said, "You're a great guitar player, you write great songs, great lyrics. It's just the odds. It's crazy."

"Man, you're nothing if you don't believe," I said it because I had to convince

myself.

"Maybe. But my parents would kill me if I pulled a stunt like that instead of going to college. And so will yours."

"It's my life I'm living, not theirs," I said angrily. Then more calmly, with a hint of my knowing how this decision would hurt them: "They'll learn to understand. C'mon, Bill. Bilvis, man. If anyone knows I'm talking about I thought it would be you. This is our chance to live the life we've always dreamed about. Can you imagine how awesome it would be? LA, man! Sunny every day. Wine, women, song. Can you imagine what that would do to us, being famous and everything."

"Dude, you got that shit on your sweatshirt."

"What?" I looked down at myself. He was right. Somehow during my talking and wild gesturing I'd touched the stick to my sweats, gotten the red jelly of the suicide's brain on my chest just above the heart.

"It's getting dark," he said, standing to leave. "We should go back. We'll talk about this later. Like at the titty bars in Windsor tomorrow night after we win the regatta.. How's that for rock and roll, man." He slapped me lightly on the shoulder.

"Yeah, okay. You go on back," I said. "I'm gonna sit here for a minute and think." Still looking at the gunk on my shirt, I sat down on bench. I tried to pick some of the gunk off, but it just smeared. Bilvis stood there watching me.

"It's not that I don't want to go, Dan," he said, "or that I don't think we'll make it. It's just not realistic. You know?"

I sat there looking down at the brains, thinking about how it would be cold in the morning and that I'd row in my sweats among the other boats through the early river's mist out onto the open river, taking this guy's brains for one last ride. I thought about how I would pull that sweat-shirt off for the race, tucking it under my bolted-in shoes, and how the brains on the chest would fly down the river with me, and it

wouldn't matter to it how we did. I thought of that little girl and what her daddy's suicide had done to her dreams. Of Bob Lo Nirvana, that rusting, half-assed amusement park down-river she'd probably never get to now. There'd be gunshots going off in her head for years, maybe the rest of her life. That's the way it is. You get lost and blow your brains out on the park bench of despair. Blow your dreams and your life into the wind and onto some kid's sweatshirt. Most people never break free of themselves. Most people never even come close to touching their true dreams, let alone living them. They settle for whatever they get. And only because they're too afraid of the unknown, so used to the lives they've let others map out for them they become convinced that that life is the same life they'd always wanted for themselves.

"When will it be realistic, man?" I said. "After you're married with a job and kids and a mortgage and all that shit?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said.

"That's exactly why I'm going now. Because it's the best chance I'll ever get."

"You do what you gotta do, but I owe it to my parents to at least give college a try. If it doesn't work out I can always come join you. Right?"

"Sure."

He started walking off. "Don't stay out here by yourself too long," he said over his shoulder. "It's probably dangerous."

"Yeah, I'll be right in." I watched him go, his grey sweatshirted back with the big red M on it fading into the dusk. He was one of my best friends, and we'd still hang out in the months to come, jam and play some graduation parties, but I knew right then that the true music between us was over, or at least on hold indefinitely. Because I was leaving, just like the suicide had left, and for some of the same reasons, because even though the life I'd been handed was fine, I wanted something else, something more, a change. So I was taking most of myself, all of myself practically—but for that

little remnant I'd left behind in people's minds—to go off into a place where it seemed nobody dare follow.

I've already mentioned that for the first part of my Junior year I had a roommate named Bob Coli. He'd been able to come to O.L. on a special work–study program, same as Top–o, and we'd become friends near the end of my freshman year, during that time when Kroeter pulled his hate on me. We decided to room together as sophomores, and we'd had such a good time we decided to live together again the next year.

Bob was a very cool guy, but temperamental. He was from a much tougher neighborhood than I was and wore his hair feathered and parted down the middle and as long in the back as he could get away with, kept a long–handled Goody comb in the back pocket of his uniform pants. We were into the same kind of music, too, especially bands like Sabbath and Deep Purple; it seemed like we always had something to talk about as far as that went: favorite bands, favorite songs, favorite albums, favorite guitar solos. Bob was also the first guy to ever get me stoned.

"Man, all those dudes you worship, they're high all the fucking time. How else do you think they write such kick–ass music? They sit around all day smoking pot and jamming." We were in his garage that Saturday, working on his go–cart, the tingly sensi buzz making me feel like I was hovering inches above the oil–stained floor. I'd just smoked my first–ever joint with him in the abandoned house right next door to his own. Now everything in that garage seemed beautiful, miraculous: the scattering of tools, the gas cans, the lawnmower and rake and shovel, the duct–taped windowpane leaking beams of dust–moted light. It was as if it all radiated with some kind of inner life. "You gotta do your research, man," he said, grinning and tapping the pack of cigarettes in his shirt pocket where he'd stashed his weed. Back at school the next

week he floated me his dog-eared copy of the Jim Morrison biography, *No One Here Gets Out Alive*, which really opened up my eyes in a variety of ways. Not only to what Morrison was saying, but to what the people he was into were saying, people like William Blake and Aldous Huxley. Of course, at the time, I was primarily into the tripping and sex and freedom and rebellion, but now its obvious that the whole idea of the doors of perception is really just another metaphor for how we come to realize our own divinity. "When the doors of perception are cleansed man will see all things as they truly are, infinite." I typed that one out and put taped it right here above my desk.

But even though I'd just started smoking weed, I'd always known what Bob was getting at. I mean check out the back-jacket of *Who's Next*, an album I'd owned in the eighth grade. The front has them zipping up their pants, walking away from this authoritarian looking monolith out in the middle of nowhere that they'd all just obviously pissed on, which says enough in itself. But the picture on the back has them completely, glamorously wasted in a dim room: four greasy-looking long-hairs in freaky clothes laughing and slouching all over a folding card table with bottles and ashtrays and other indiscriminate objects strewn across it. I spent hours staring at that jacket as I listened to the album—some of most kick-ass, incredible music I'd ever heard—wishing myself into a chair at that table. Then I ended up becoming exactly what they each appear to be in that picture, by which I mean someone who's been completely fucked up more times than they can ever possibly remember, because what's to stop you if you have the means and the inclination. What that picture on the back of the album fails to show you is how, somewhere down the white line, the rock and roll party life changes from rebellion to exploration to escape to addiction and death. Which is exactly why one of them is dead and the rest are all clean now.

Just a few weeks into the fall of junior year, Queen Mike came running over to

the gym one afternoon and interrupted my lifting. "Mooney, Mooney, come quick Coli's freaked out and trashed your room. They've taken him away in an ambulance." I ran with him back to the dorm; Coli had been acting a little weird lately. And he had reason to. The Holy Smoke was getting in his face about his bad attitude, writing him Citizenship Violations, calling him down to his office almost daily to define and discuss his "problems." I'd been over Bob's house a couple times on the weekends the year before (he'd been over mine, too, which blew his mind, this big house on a hill looking out over the water), and I knew where he got the attitude from. The place was dirty as hell, junk and spare auto parts tossed everywhere, on the counters and tables, in the corners of almost every room. And the dishes looked like they'd never been done. His mom was a beaten-down ghost; his dad was a mechanic, I think, but he spent his weekends on the couch watching TV and drinking beer, snapping, "Take your rich pal the fuck outside, Bobby." just about every time we came inside.

When I got back to the dorm I found our room trashed, but methodically so, as if Bob had taped a line straight down the middle and destroyed only the things on his side of it. He'd flipped his bed, slashed his pillows and sheets and mattress, ripped down the bookshelves attached to the wall above his desk, torn the drawers out of his side of the dresser/credenza that ran length of the room, and dumped his clothes on top of it all. The only thing he destroyed that could be said to be both of ours was the room's vanity mirror which he'd evidently smashed with his clock radio, now in pieces in the sink, covered with mirror shards.

A few days later they let me see him in the Juvenile Detention Center where he was being held, because the Holy Smoke was actually thinking of pressing charges for the destruction. "What's wrong? Why'd you freak out and trash your side of the room?" I asked once we were alone. "Freak out." he said coolly. "I didn't freak out, man. I had to get the fuck out of there. That Brother John was playing fucking mind games

with me. He even put his goddamn hand on thigh, man. Up high. Fuck that school. I don't want to be anywhere near that guy. He's a freak, man, you better watch out for him. He was asking me a lot of questions about you. If I noticed any homosexual tendencies or anything."

That was the last time I ever saw Bob Coli. "Hey, man, can I have your shoe laces," he'd said to me right before I left. They'd taken his away. I sawed my pair in half with my room key and replaced my shoes with the one, pulling my pants down over the tops so they wouldn't notice I'd given the other to him. I guess he busted out of that place somehow a few days later. I think I remember hearing he eventually went on to become an Army Ranger or something. I guess the one good thing that came from the whole ugly scene was my asking Malta to move in afterwards, which resulted in our becoming even better friends as co-conspirators in driving Napes insane with being wise-asses and doing shit like cranking Sabbath in Coli's honor every morning while the hall was bustling with guys getting ready for class, going room to room, looking to bum a disposable razor or a spare tie or some socks or zit-cream or whatever.

So, being that I was feeling dragged over the coals by the Holy Smoke lately, I'd been thinking about Bob a lot, wondering where he was and how he was doing. Like I was on that Saturday night after the regatta, hunkered down between Hank and Bilvis in the back seat of JB's Nova, my drunken head lolling.

"Smashed the fucking mirror, man. Just like in Tommy." I slurred under the turned-up music. "Set himself free. No more Holy Smoke head-trip."

We were all us good and drunk, on our way back from the Windsor tittie bars where we'd gotten in with our driver's licenses doctored to make us fake nineteen. We always had a blast in Windsor. The women over there loved us; we were so appreciative. So obviously in awe of them when they walked across the stage to where we

were sitting at its edge and crouched before us, putting their knees on either side of our ears, wrapping a belt or a whip or nylon around our necks and pulling us toward their musky, perfumed nakedness. In the free reign of our bravado and nervousness, we always drank far too much around them.

Malta and JB, who didn't row, were just along for the ride, good and drunk for the hell of it—celebrating the idea of our graduating soon, I guess. Bilvis and Hank were good and drunk because the heavies had won their race, won the state championship for heavyweight eights, had their pictures taken tossing their coxy into the river. They still had the medals around their necks. Medals the strippers would play with when they cozied up; same way they liked to finger the gold guitar-pick necklace Cindy had given me. I was alone in that car in the privilege being drunk to drown my sorrows. Slebka had crabbed with less than five hundred meters to go, first lurching the boat by getting his oar stuck in the water, held there by our momentum, then letting the oar-handle swing past his head to push the blade flush against the side of the shell under the other starboard oars. It was the worst thing you could do in a race, letting the oar-handle pass over your head after you crabbed. We were way out in front when it happened, five or six boat-lengths ahead, and it threw our rhythm and stopped us so dead we ended up losing to Riverview by open water.

After the regatta that morning, as we were getting ready to go, Jack had taken me over by the still-wet shells resting face down on saw horses and talked to me about skip day, of all things.

"Heard you men are thinking of cutting class and going to the ballgame Wednesday," he said, tugging on the faded bill of the Tigers cap he often wore. I doubt if anyone had told him directly, but he was a sharp old man. You couldn't put much past him. After all, he'd caught Hank and I drinking the year before during spring training when we thought we'd been pretty damn sly about it.

"That's what I hear," I said.

"Good season for it. They're off to a fine start. S'posed to be nice Wednesday, too. You goin'?"

"I don't know. I'm thinking I might."

"Hate to see what could happen to you," he said. "You being on that probation."

"Yeah, I know." I ran my hand along the slick underside of our new middleweight shell, the Clara LaBlane, named for his wife. I'd never row in it again.

"Coach, what would you do if you were me?" I asked.

"I can't tell you what to do. You gotta go with what your gut says. But I will say I didn't attend Donny's confirmation to watch that last game of the world series in '68. I didn't think Clara would ever forgive me. She did. The people that really love you, the people that really matter, they'll always forgive you. Even when you're not ready to forgive yourself."

"I'll drink a beer in the sunny the bleachers for you." I said. "If I decide to go."

"You do that, son. You got nothing to be ashamed of. You pulled your heart out all season. Now go on and find that lazy-ass, pop drinking Slebka and tell him to get over here. Someone's got to unscrew all this rigging before we can load the boats."

But cruising through the florescent tube of the tunnel on our way back from Windsor, drunk on strong Canadian beer, high on weed, images of all that sex-meat in my head, the oncoming traffic looked slick and shiny like the cars in some futuristic ride, and I could have cared less about rowing, or skip day, or graduation. I was ready to put it all behind me. Because I had this game beat. Two weeks and I'd be out of there; then I could tell the Holy Smoke to stick his head up his ass if I felt like it. I was ready for sun and sex and drugs and rock and roll and no one telling me what to do or what to believe. Walk stoned on the beach in Venice with high lyric poetry in my head

like Morrison. In the separation of my buzz I was already zooming down that vein toward a new, larger life. I'd have amps stacked so high I'd break a leg if I jumped off the top of them. Four Les Paul's instead of one. And a Tele, and a Strat—a white-on-white, just like Jimi's. All I had to do was make the right connections and get the right person to listen to the demo I'd have finished by the end of the summer. They'd never be able to turn me away once they heard.

It was the beautiful dream I was dreaming, and I would find it, eventually, but certainly not in the simple, idealistic way I'd imagined. Of course, back then I couldn't have understood how easy it would be to throw the dream away or where losing it would take me. But right then, the tape-deck cranked, my buddies singing along to Pink Floyd, those long tubes of bright light clicking past, the future seemed impossible to squander, or the perfect thing to squander. And then, just like it always happens, our free-glide ran out, and we were all clogged up, still in the tunnel, stuck in the exhaust fumes of the long backed-up line for customs.

"Hey. Isn't that Henderson and Rebee in the car in front of us," JB said. Henderson went to Blomfeld, the largely Jewish public high school right near O.L. He and JB were from the same neighborhood, childhood buddies. We'd partied with his crowd before. They had these crazy commando style cheerleaders at his school. I'd almost gotten together with one of them my freshman year. Lisa, I think her name might have been. Suddenly, with loss of wind and the flow of our moving, the spins came over me. I leaned my head back against the seat, closed my eyes, swallowed. I heard the doors opening, Battle yelling, "Henderson. Dude—man, what's up?!" Laughter. The stagnant, putrid air of the tunnel sweeping into the car. I retched, coughed. Then all was swirling darkness.

I came—to in the back seat, alone. How we got through customs, I don't know. Someone must have lifted up my head and told me to say "American," like we usually

did for the biggest drunk when we were coming back from Windsor. I had no idea where I was. Somewhere downtown by the look of it. There was JB's car I was sitting in, and only one other car around, which I recognized as Henderson's Camero. Nothing else seemed familiar about this empty gravel lot, the rows of seedy broken-windowed brick buildings. I got out of the car and crossed the lot to the sidewalk. The spins had worn off. I was stumbly now, light-headed, but it felt good to be numb and strapped into that fuck-it attitude. With the regatta over, there was nothing left to care about, except finals, which were nothing, and graduation, and you usually didn't worry about losing at that.

From the sidewalk I could see the flashing, tilted, neon martini glass sign of a bar on the corner, hear the juke-blues spilling out.

I went over and opened the door, poked my head into the noise and smoke. There were JB, Hank, Bilvis and Malta, coconut in the chocolate, standing up by the counter, trying to get the bartender's attention. I walked in, walked over to them and stood there, feeling the room's eyes on us all. We were the only white people in the place. The youngest people in the place.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I'm trying to get directions back to 94," Bilvis said, "But I can't get anyone to talk to me."

"Where's Henderson?"

"He's outside with Rebee," JB said, "talking to some whores. It's Henderson's birthday. Rebee's trying to hook him up with a blowjob."

"I didn't see them out front" I said. "But his car's still there."

"They must have scored, then," Hank said.

"Guess so," I said, stepping up to the counter, brushing the sleeve of some brother's silk shirt. "Hey," I shouted to the bartender who was down at the other end

of the counter talking with a group of men in expensive looking suits. "Can I get a JD on rocks over here? Please."

The bartender shot a look at me like I'd just whipped it out and pissed all over the counter. He shook his head and went back his talking.

"Well fuck you then," I mumbled.

"Hey, my man," the brother in silk shirt next to me said. "Gotta square?"

"A what?"

"A cigarette, man." he said, his eyes focusing in on me like he'd just noticed I was white. "A square."

I bummed a couple smokes from Hank and gave one to him. He lit up and stared at me, his elbow propped on the bar. "Y'all should get on out of here," he said through his slow exhale. "Y'all gonna get fucked up you stick aroun."

"Is that so," I said. I wasn't sure if he meant he was one the people into doing the job. It sure didn't seem like it. He seemed to be living in slow-motion. Had these sleepy eyes, and kind of oozed in his chair even though he wasn't really moving. I knew he was blasted on something, but I had no idea what. Of course, now I know he was a junkie and just being junk honest, as junk will make you do when you are in the full pleasure of its warm hands. Lying and just about every other degrading thing you can imagine is for later, when you're yowling from the pit of Need.

I looked around, most of the people in there were still staring at us. "Well, we better go then," I said. "You know the way back to 94 from here?" I asked

He shook his head, "Naw, man. I don't drive."

I noticed a table full of brothers near the back eying us and talking among themselves. "Okay, it's cool," I said to the junkie. "Thanks for the tip, man." I turned back to my friends. "Let's go you guys," I told them, "I just found out how to get to the highway." And we hurried out of there.

When we got back outside Rebee was standing on the corner talking to two husky voiced black women in high heels and tight, one piece mini-dresses, his arm draped over one of them. He was smiling from ear to ear. He'd obviously just gotten off.

"Where's Henderson?" JB asked.

He's still down the alley with her," Rebee said. "He's got whiskey-dick. It's takin' him a while. Look, you can see them from here."

Fifty feet or so away you could see them in the dim alley next to a dumpster, the woman crouching and bobbing in front of Henderson, who was standing, leaning against the alley wall.

"Hey, baby," the other whore said to JB as she slid up next to him. "Wanna party?"

"Well, let's talk about that," JB said.

Right then the sleepy-eyed junkie from the bar appeared in the doorway. He was shaking his head. He waved me over with slow hand.

"Don't know what you fuckin' with, homes," he said quietly.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Those ain't bitches."

"What?"

"I said, those ain't bitches. They's fags. Trans."

"Bullshit." I looked over at the girls; they were a couple of hot, if whorish, looking black chicks with crazy, piled-up hair-do's and knee-high leather boots. Something right out of a skin mag. My friends sure didn't seem to have any doubts from the way they were laughing with them, raking them up and down with their eyes.

"Look at they hans." he said, limply holding out his own. "Look at they hans, they got a man's hans."

I zoomed in—past all the cleavage and curves—onto their hands. Veiny, strong-fingered, wide-fingernailed, masculine hands. Veins snaking up their waxed, corded forearms.

"Unbelievable." I mumbled and walked back over to them. I don't think I ever would have noticed without his telling me. Now that I'd seen, it was obvious. Their voices, the wigs. I looked down at their crotches, wondering if they'd just tucked their parts back between their legs, or if they'd had them removed.

I wasn't sure what to do. We were all pretty homophobic, being that we were Catholic boys living together. We were always wrestling and grabbing and pushing each other around at school—all this extra energy with two hundred teenagers living in the dorm. It didn't matter if we were in our uniforms or our jeans or our underwear, you'd pinch a welt onto someone's ass as you passed them in the hall or flick a guy in the nuts when he wasn't looking; some of us even took it to the point of running up on a buddy at a keg party and putting a big, wet kiss on him just to freak people out. The guys at the at Rice and CC and the other parochial day schools could say what they wanted about us having gay sex orgies in the dorm. We'd just meet them late at night in the parking lot of some fast food joint and settle who the fag was that way. We really didn't care much what they thought; we were the ones winning the games. Besides, our girlfriends who had to put up with us when we came home for the weekends knew what we were really like.

There's no denying that you got closer than usual with the guys in your grade. Living with the same people for four years, smelling their stench and eating with them every day, telling each other at night about your girl-troubles or your school-troubles or your home-troubles, putting up with all the bullshit rules and goofing around together and sharing all your hopes and dreams did that kind of thing to you. It made it so there was some sense in a guy like Wormy's jumping on you drunk at a party and

sticking his tongue in your mouth before you could shove him away— though that's kind of an extreme example. Our situation made for a love-hate like only brothers or people who've been through some kind of baptism of fire can have. But queer for real was the last thing you wanted to be at Orchid Lake. Queer for real could make you an outcast and get you your face smashed in. Queen Mike, the trainer on the soccer team knew all about that.

"C'mon, let's go party, baby." the one on JB's arm said to him. "Twenty-five bucks." She gave Rebee and the whore standing next to him a look. "I'll do you jus like 'Tisha did your fren' here. Like 'Shonda doin' your fren inna alley now. I likes white meat too, baby."

"No. No thanks, we gotta get going," I broke in. "That dude in the doorway there—" I pointed over my shoulder into the doorway and saw the junkie was gone, evaporated. "—this guy in the bar just told me some guys inside were talking about giving us some trouble. We should get out of here."

"Fuck 'em, bring 'em on, man," JB said.

"Mooney's right, JB," Hank said, looking around suspiciously. "We probably should get going."

"Sounds good to me," Malta said.

"Yeah, let's go," Bilvis said.

"Naw, naw, it's coo, baby," the whore said, stroking a coffee-colored hand along JB's arm, "I go in 'n' talk to 'em. It's coo."

"I'm telling you guys there's nothing to worry about," Reebec said, and he reached over and squeezed the ass of the whore he was talking to.

"You wanna go again," she smiled at him. "I do you for twenty this time."

Right then Henderson gave a whoop and stepped from the shadows of the alley, tucking in his shirt and zipping up his pants, "'Shonda" right behind him

smiling.

"We really need to get out of here, JB." I said, "We've got a long drive," and in my hurry to get going I actually grabbed JB's free arm and started pulling him off, the whore pulling back. "Hey, now," she said to him, "don' you be gettin cole whiff me."

"Jesus, Mooney, okay, okay," JB said, yanking his arm free of my grip. "We're going, alright? Sorry," he said to the whore, unhooking his arm from her hand. "Maybe some other time." The whore made a pouty face and put a girlish cock to her hip. "What's a matter don't ya'll like pussy?" she said with sass as we walked off.

Minutes later Battle and Henderson and Rebee stood next to Henderson's Camero saying their "Later on's," high-fiving over the birthday blowjob as the rest of us piled into JB's beat up Nova. I caught a look at Henderson's face after he'd climbed into the passenger seat of his car—Reebee was doing the driving since it was his birthday. He's was staring at us through the rolled up window, rocking back and forth in his seat, mouthing the word "awesome" over and over. Rebee stood by the driver's-side door jangling the keys, laughing across the roof with JB over something I couldn't hear.

"Man, where's that roach?" I asked Malta.

"Got it right here," Malta said, pulling the matchbox out his pocket and handing it to me.

I wanted something to take the image of the whores' mannish hands out of my head, and I kept looking over my shoulder, waiting to see them wiggle into the lot, shouting, "it's coo, baby, it's coo," as a black wave of brothers with glinting blades came around the edge of the building right behind them. We needed to go. But part of me wanted to stay and hang with what was weird and dangerous. I wanted my Jack

Daniels on the rocks. I wanted to sit in that dark bar with all its blue smoke and blue music and black skin and ooze along toward the bent dawn like I knew that sleepy-eyed brother would do. I did a quick fantasy number where I went into that bar with my guitar and laid down a hot version of Jimi's Red House, the only thing close to the true blues I knew at that time. "Goddamn, white-boy can play," the brothers would say, and the real black women would circle around. I was so ready to break out of my safe, plastic preordained, white, suburban life. Getting knifed would maybe kill me, but at least it'd be interesting, and if it didn't kill me I'd be that much more of a bad-ass for the scar. A dark riot of voices rose up inside me. Forget all this certainty. Walk the dark streets looking for the night music, lean up against a dirty alley wall and share a bottle and smoke a reefer with some freaks I'd just met. Go with the sleepy-eyed brother to get a taste of whatever he was on. I could step out of that car and just walk off into another life. Maybe an ugly one. Maybe an incredible one. As long as it was something unfamiliar. The only one stopping me was me.

But I knew what would really happen. We'd take the slick freeway back out to the 'burbs; I'd get dumped off at my folks' big house on the lake around four, raid the fridge and go out to the deck and stare at the moon throwing its long white line of glimmering light down onto the water until I passed out in a lawn chair, the sound of each lulling wave as tender and predictable as the easy life spread out before me: college, job, marriage, children, retirement, death.

I pulled out the Navy-issue Zippo I'd copped from old man's dresser drawer and fired up the inch-long stub. I took a deep drag and held it in. "Ere you go," I croaked, handed the roach off to Hank up front. JB climbed in behind the wheel. "My house tomorrow, then," he said to Rebee before slamming the door.

"Damn, Mooney," he said as he took the roach from Hank and turned to the back seat, "what you got against a guy's getting a little." He took a hit, then passed the

roach on to Billvis.

"Just looking out for Angela, man," I said. I liked JB's girlfriend, Angela. She went to Mercy with Sheri. But she was nothing like Sheri. She was the definition of Nice Girl, a frustratingly beautiful virgin who got angry and lectured him about respect if he even tried to slip a hand beneath her bra. I was glad I didn't have to put up with that.

"Well, I'll look out for Angela from now on, man,," he said with heat, then he turned over the engine, the radio blasting back on, our wheels spitting gravel as he threw it into drive and peeled us out of the lot back onto the street asking me, "Now where'd you say the goddamn highway was?"

First few times after that night when I saw them over that summer, I felt a little bad about not telling Henderson and Rebee they'd gotten blowjobs from a couple whore-queers. But there was no point to it really. Done is done. It's not like they were my good buddies or anything; why ruin things for them? I mean, nothing's ever as it seems anyhow. One day you're out in LA sitting on a fat leather couch, completely twisted on kind-bud and cocaine, and you see yourself on Mtv and you're on the cover of the Rolling Stone on your glass coffee-table, and you think, "Man, this can't be really be me." But it is you, and so you step out into the eternally sunny California afternoon, hop in your expensive convertible with an exotic, tragically-hip, pierced and tattooed chick, and the two of you drive around the Hollywood hills all day, drinking Chevas Regal straight from the bottle, and she goes down and gives you rolling head when your song comes on the radio. And even though you might not realize it until years later, you and that woman are just as surely the same as any trans-gender crack whore, with the exception that you will have to fall through your own fame's dissolving, your label's blatant disinterest when the creative vision dies and the records stop selling, then the desperate, drug-hole dug into your soul to fill the

vacuum. When suddenly, there you are, in re-hab, realizing all this, trying to shed the liquid handcuffs, your anus torn from passing fecal matter the size of a softball because the heroin has kept your intestines from any real peristalsis for months. This is when you'll finally discover that mortality is the irony of consciousness, and that you must be more than the bag of skin and gut and bone you've brought so near to ruin, because God cannot merely be cruel or indifferent to our suffering, but is All Things, and that means there's something sacred beyond this life we know. The sacrilege comes with putting conditions on our getting there. God doesn't care about the sins of the ephemeral, physical body. This life we know now is just one minuscule phase of the eternal Universal Life that is our part in the Truth of All. Today a body. Tomorrow a molecule within a newly forming star. No one's who you think they are; no one's who they say they are, because we're changing with every second that passes. That's why Jesus shunned the Pharisees and washed the feet of prostitutes. To show them they were something else. Something more.

CHAPTER IV

Come into the open, my beloved, and show yourself like a gazelle or a young stag on the spice-bearing mountains

The Song of Songs

Queen Mike stood up and walked to the lectern at the altar's right side."A reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel." he said then looked down at the Bible and began to read.. "The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he led me out in the spirit of the lord and set me in the center of the plain, which was now filled with bones. He made me walk among them in every direction so that I saw how many they were on the surface of the plain. How dry they were! He asked me: 'Son of man, can these bones come to life.' 'Lord God,' I answered, 'you alone know that.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy over these bones, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! Thus says the Lord God to these bones: See! I will bring spirit into you, that you may come to life. I will put sinews upon you, make flesh grow over you, cover you with skin, and put spirit in you so that you may come to life and know that I am the Lord.' I prophesied as I had been told, and even as I was prophesying I heard a noise; it was the rattling as the bones came together, bone joining bone. I saw the sinews and the flesh come upon them, and the skin cover them, but there was no spirit in them. Then he said to me: 'Prophesy to the spirit, prophesy, son of man, and say to the spirit: Thus says the Lord God: from the four winds come, O Spirit, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life.' I prophesied as he told me, and the spirit came into them; they came alive and stood upright, a vast army. Then he said to me: 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They have been saying, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off." Therefore, prophesy and say to

them: Thus says the Lord God: O my people, I will open your graves and have you rise from them, and bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people! I will put my spirit in you that you may live, and I will settle you upon your land; thus you shall know that I am the Lord. I have promised, and I will do it, says the Lord."

Queen Mike closed the book gently and looked out over the student-filled Chapel.

"This is the word of the Lord," he said.

"Thanks be to God," the congregation of students mumbled.

There is no boundary, no lasting reign to Death, a word which really means Change; we will all be reborn into the truth of All through the power of God's spirit, through the power of our spirit acting through God who is each of us at once; all things at once: From where I'm at right now the meaning of Ezekiel 37:1–14 is beautifully clear. But that Wednesday, sitting off to the left side of the altar with my acoustic guitar, I was struck by the horror-movie quality of the scripture. What a thrill of terror Ezekiel must have felt as he stood alone in the center of that plain watching death's dry bones magically click themselves together. God's voice tangling among his own thoughts, taking them over—even if he was getting used to it happening, "From the four winds come, O spirit, and breathe into these slain so that they may come to life," God of All making him conjure those bodies into re-fleshing themselves, layer by layer with organ, raw muscle, and vein; then the skin peeling back on, a stocking of flesh rolling up the thigh and belly and breast and neck and face. Finally, the Spirit's infusion and their unsteady rising to stand before him on that desolate pain: an endless sea of the re-aminated touching their own limbs in wonder.

It was hauntingly beautiful and fantastically gross, and I almost started to laugh out-loud as I leaned forward with the guitar on my thigh to play the Responsorial Psalm, "Show forth O God your power," I sang over the chord progression, "the

power with which you took our part/ for your temple in Jerusalem, let the kings bring you gifts."

"Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth," the refrain came swelling back at me, a few voices floating over the top of it in a queer falsetto. I looked up from the guitar-neck and saw Hank and Bilvis and Malta and Newt and Kroeter sitting in the middle of the senior section, their heads tilted up together like a do-wop of howling dogs. And the Holy Smoke swooping down toward them from his observation station at the back of the chapel, cassock flapping as he strode along the side isle to the edge of their pew and hissed something; them snickering down in their seats as he walks of flaming mad afterwards.

After we'd finished with the Responsorial Psalm, the congregation stood. Father Populski, the Chancellor of the Orchid Lake Schools, coughed into his soft, chubby fist and stepped up to the pulpit to read the Gospel. He clacked censor, waving it back and forth over the book, clouds of frankincense spilling out, thickening the air around his head. He handed the censor to the waiting altar boy, some cherubic freshman who's name I didn't know, then he put his hands at each side of the lectern. Ahem; and his mouth drolled open. "W owych dniack mowil Bog wszystkie te slowa: "Ja jestem Pan, twoj Bog, ktorym cie wywiodl z ziemiegijskie..." I saw the glint of the gold ring on his pinky as the light of the lectern lamp struck it; glanced down to the hem of his vestment to check his shoes. He usually wore Gucci loafers.

Wednesday's the Gospel and Homily were in Polish, another nod to the largely Polish backers who donated so much money to the parish and the schools. So we'd up bits of the language over the years. We knew all of the cuss-words—how to call a guy a shit-head or say his mother a whore; we also knew how to say "hello" and "please" and "thank you" and the like, but most of us couldn't follow a conversation or understand a reading in the language, and as Popey (our name for him) droned on, I saw

heads start to sink forward, gradually coming to rest on the pew-backs in front of them as guys tried to make tuning-out or crashing look like meditative prayer.

It was just one of countless ways we killed time during mass. We were always "booking" people, setting up the thick, hard bound copies of the *We Celebrate* songbook on their tall edge behind a guy so it would hit him in the tailbone when he went to sit. It happened to me all the time. The more obnoxious of us, like Newt and Slebka, even resorted to thumb-tacks and such to get guys screaming "Ow, Shit" in the middle of mass. Eventually it just became reflex to check and make sure your space was cool before you put your ass down. Sometimes we'd do a pew full of synchronized leg crossings—fourteen guys in one row putting their right foot across their left knee then counting to ten and switching to put their left foot over the right knee. Over and over, through the homily, until we got bored or the Holy Smoke materialized at the end of our row whisper-hissing, "You gentlemen will cease right now." Some guys even brought their hand-held electronic baseball or football games with them (this was when those simple blip games first came out, years before Nintendo and all that), the stupid ones forgetting they needed to disable the sound-wire until the noise of an electronic touchdown or home run would suddenly bleep out through the chapel air; a few seconds later you'd see the Holy Smoke or Napes leading them out by their collar. And yes, we would actually pray sometimes, at least I know I did, because that's what I'd been taught to do, ask with genuine sincerity for help or guidance in how to be kinder, more honest, or to quit masturbating or fornicating, or whatever. But most the time I ran fantasy scenes through my mind, as I assume most of us did, mine, though, usually rock and roll fantasies of playing in front of a Woodstock-sized crowd and having them really getting into what my band was jamming, when I'd suddenly be interrupted from this fantastic riff I could hear and was trying to remember for later by

having to kneel or stand while mumbling something like, "Lord I'm not worthy to receive you but only say the word and I shall be healed." Which is very ironic considering what was wrong with me in those days compared to what would be wrong with me eventually when I was never kneeling. If it wasn't the rock and roll fantasy I was flashing on, it was something about a girl— maybe the jog I'd just taken the evening before to Sheri's or the plot of my next secret rendezvous with Cindy; or, it could be a party I was planning on hitting that weekend, or the big game or race I had coming up. And part of me wanted to ask for help with that too, but it didn't seem right asking God to help you win some game or get drunk or laid.

When I wasn't playing for mass, I'd bring in my little pocket-sized notebook and work out lyrics for my songs, which I could hear the music of quite clearly in my mind, except when they were being interrupted by the hymns. But that day up on the altar with the guitar, I wasn't trying to write (I couldn't get away with it up in front of everybody), I was thinking of how much I liked to play: the idea that if God had given me any special gift or calling at all, it was there somewhere within the music. I was also thinking about the ballgame, wondering if I really should go along or not when my buddies took off for downtown right after mass. And sitting there thinking that and looking out at everyone mumbling along all dressed exactly the same, I couldn't help rolling the idea of free will around in my head—a subject the Holy Smoke had brought up for obvious reasons just a little while before in fourth hour theology class.

"Why does God give us free will?" he'd asked. "Why does He give us a choice when it comes to following His laws or disobeying them?"

"Because He wants us to choose the right path, not be forced down it by our fear of Him," I said back. It was what he wanted to hear.

"A thoughtful answer, Daniel. You're quite correct. God gives us the freedom to do as we please because He loves us, and He hopes we will choose the path of

righteousness, the path of—"

"—but what if my answer doesn't make sense," I interrupted him. "Because it's not free will if you know you'll be punished with Hell for doing other than what God wants. That's not choosing."

The Holy Smoke smoothed a hand across the top of his balding head, "God would not create anything but a moral universe," he said. "And in a moral universe Evil must have it's punishment, just as Good must its rewards. But why choose Evil when there is Good—when God in His grace allows us our choice, and in his mercy allows us the intelligence to see and avoid the negative consequences?"

"But that's not free will," I said, "that's just making the consequences of the choice you want people to take better than the consequences of choice you want them to avoid. If God wants us to truly have free will then He accepts our ability to go against His will and actually probably wants us to go against His will so He can forgive us then make us understand how we were wrong. Which will keep us from making the same mistake again. And that's the start of wisdom."

I couldn't have said it at the time but I think I partially understood then that what God is interested in is our learning how to redeem ourselves. That's the truly human struggle. Otherwise the whole creation scenario is static and rather pointless. Act right: bliss out; fuck up: be damned. Redemption is where the variety is, within that eventually flawless way we can each discover our divinity. That's God's joy in us, and the true reason for free will. As I see it right now, anyway.

"You're forever twisting my words, Daniel." The Holy Smoke shook his head as he paced back and forth in front of the blackboard. "What God asks of us is clear. The Bible tells us. We can follow His laws or disobey, and we break His heart when we choose disobedience. The sinful must always be punished, even though God wanted then to make the right choice in the beginning."

"But doesn't God forgive all sins as long as we're really sorry for them?"

"Yes, God always forgives the legitimately penitent. But not all people are penitent. Some people choose Evil. They choose Hell."

"Those people are lost," I said. "And God must be using them according to His own plan. Otherwise there's no point in evil, and the whole world is abandoned. I'm talking about the basically good people who sometimes do things wrong for whatever reason but are honestly sorry for it afterwards, maybe even trying to understand themselves better for what happened. God wants those people to see first hand what it is to forgive themselves and others. That's what Jesus wants us to learn, right? How to turn the other cheek and stuff. You can't know what it is to truly forgive someone until you've done wrong and been forgiven yourself. And that means free will isn't really about doing right or wrong at all. It's about deciding to choose forgiveness afterwards. Regardless which side of the issue you're on."

"Yes, Daniel, the Holy Smoke said with great tiredness, "I suppose that's partly true, but remember, God's forgiveness does not free us from the consequences of our actions."

"It doesn't free us from the action of our consequences either," I wanted to say back, but I'd had enough of debating with him. Even if you were right, he'd never fully admit it. He couldn't afford to let you win and undermine his authority.

"...ani tego, co jest na ziemi nisko, ami tego, co jest w wodach." Popey droned on. I looked up at the huge green copper Jesus sagging on the cross hung against the wall behind the altar. His head was bent down and angled toward me, the spear-wound already in his side, the taste of vinegar drying like a wise word on his slightly parted lips. What was he trying to tell me? That I should go, or that I should stay behind this afternoon? But I knew he couldn't answer. He was saving all he had left to raise his head one last time and say, "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they

do." before giving up the Holy Ghost into the black sky with an ear-splitting clap of thunder.

By the end of mass I still hadn't made up my mind if I was going or not. Popey led the recessional slowly down the center aisle and off into the priests' chambers as I played the chords to "Peace is Flowing like a River," hearing the subtle sound-shift as guys changed the word peace to piss. I had a strange vision of the loin-clothed Jesus jumping down from the cross to take up my guitar, blood flying as he windmilled his green arm along the strings, sliding across the smooth, marble floor of the altar-stage on his green knees. Who was he anyway but the greatest Idol, the first rockstar in the universe, playing to the captive audience of his own creation? I mean, what a show that crucifixion must have been, three hours of earth-shaking and rivers flowing backward, the black sky roiling with angels' moaning despair. And all for us. A performance far beyond anything the Un-Named or any band or anyone could come even hope to come up with. "Thank you, Thank you, I love each hair on your head more than all the sparrows of creation. Good night." Then the weeping women take him away to wash his bloody limbs and wrap him in the finest linens.

After the song was through, the Holy Smoke strode up center aisle and took his place at the foot of the steps right before the altar, arms folded across his chest.

"Seniors are dismissed from chapel to the dining hall for lunch," he said, and my classmates began to quickly file out, one row at a time, making half-assed genuflections, a jerky bend of one knee along with a scrambled hand gesture that was supposed approximate the sign of the cross. It looked more like a bad disco dance move than an act of reverence.

I buckled my acoustic into its case and stood up from the sideways facing pew at the left side of the altar where I'd been sitting in alone. I walked off the altar-stage without crossing myself or kneeling or anything like that and headed for the side door.

"Genuflect, gentlemen. Genuflect, gentleman." the Holy Smoke was going on like a skipping record, trying to get people to genuflect properly as they hurried out of the pews. It was the same thing he'd been saying to us after every single mass since the first day he came to Orchid Lake two years ago. I put my hand to the cool metal handle of the side door and pushed it open with a click. A bright wedge of sunlight and birdsong cut into the chapel; this was Beautiful Day with Perfect Blue Sky being painted onto the world outside. I looked back over my shoulder at the Holy Smoke as I slipped through the door. He was staring at me, smiling, nodding in a way that said, "Go on, go on, you're not fooling anyone but yourself." Our eyes locked in the instant, and I realized he knew what I was going to do before I did. Now that he'd shown me the way, I wasn't about to disappoint either of us. I nodded and raised up my guitar toward him in a way said "All right then, see you later." He just kept that intense, ugly smile on me, so I put my back to him and pushed on through the door, out of the dim church and into the sunlight. "Juniors are now excused to the dining hall," I heard him say as the door fell closed behind me.

"Come on. Come on. Come on. Let's go space truckin'." We had Deep Purple full-volume on the tape-deck and the windows down as we flew along I-75 toward Tiger Stadium in JB's Nova, sipping beers.

"Fucking Tigers gonna whip ass today," JB shouted at the windshield. He had his a beer wedged in his bare knees, right hand on the wheel, his bare left arm out the window beating time on the door.

"Goddamn righteous," Hank shouted from the back seat, he turned his ball cap around backwards then up-ended his beer and drained it. "Gimme another," he said, handing me the empty as he put on his shades and fished a smoke from his t-shirt pocket. I reached into the twelve pack nestled between me and JB on the front seat and passed one over to him. Malta bent down behind JB's seat, cupping his hands against

the wind as he fired up a joint. He got the cherry hot with puffing then handed the joint to Bilvis who cheeked a big noisy suck then offered it to me. I shook my head no, took another sip from my can of beer, one of the two or three I planned on drinking over the course of that entire afternoon. Skipping was enough. I didn't want the drunk/stoned charge laid on top of it. I'd already told JB he could get as bombed as he wanted at the game. I'd drive us back to school.

Flying down the road with the jams cranked and our shades on and the warm spring wind in our hair, it was hard to believe that a little while before I'd been standing in the brick hallway of the dorm, hand still on the doorknob of my room when Napes appeared out of nowhere and came up to me. After stashing my acoustic in the rehearsal space, I'd gone back to my room to change clothes like the rest of the guys had. I saw Hank's uniform tossed carelessly down next to the basketball on his unmade bed. He was waiting for me at the parking lot behind the boat-house in JB's car with JB and Malta and Bilvis, maybe even Newt, if Newt had decided to ride with us. My hands were shaking as I quickly changed, throwing my tie and jacket and pants across my desk chair. I put on a t-shirt, shorts, and sneakers, took a few deep breaths and walked to the vanity, looked at myself in the mirror. I thought about Bob Coli. I hadn't talked to him in over a year. Suddenly I felt like calling him. Maybe later, when we got back from the game, I'd call him and see what was up. Tell him what we'd gotten away with. He'd get a kick out of that. I slapped on some stick deodorant to deal with the sweating. Then I stepped into the hall, and Napes caught me before I could shut my door.

"Where are you off to, Mr. Mooney?" It seemed he'd borrowed that same ugly smile right off the Holy Smoke.

"Just going to shoot a little hoop before afternoon classes, Brother Lyle." I felt like he could see my heart's pounding underneath my shirt. "Such a nice day, you

know."

"I wasn't aware you liked basketball," he said.

"Variety's the spice of life. Isn't that how the saying goes?"

"Yes, indeed, it is." He put his big paw to the door and pushed it open, looked inside. "Mr. Mooney, you need to make your bed and hang up your clothing before you do anything."

I was tempted to laugh in his face over the obvious way he was playing me. He knew exactly what was up. Here was his chance to say something sincere to me regarding the seriousness of what I was about to do, and what was he doing? Fucking with me. He certainly knew the Christian thing would have been to warn me. Though I suppose I still would have gone, regardless. I've always had to learn the hard way, through the experience itself, which is the best way, actually—if it doesn't kill you. I mean, no one ever held the rolled bill to my nose; no one put the pills on my tongue or the needle in my arm. It's surprising, the justifications you will concoct. But, on the other side of it, countless people told me I'd never make it in the music business. What it comes down to, always, is the experience, not faith or speculation. So I had to go. Why do you think Jesus spent all night in the garden crying blood and praying for strength? I mean, if anyone wanted to skip out on the whole ugly scene it was him. But he had to accept the pain of human consequences before his actions could do anything toward saving anyone. There can be no sacrifice if there are no consequences for the person doing the act.

"Sure, Brother Lyle," I said and went back into my room, feeling a weird apprehension when followed me in, his huge body blocking out the doorway as he watched me hang up my uniform and make my bed.

"This is a level one citizenship violation, Daniel" he said as I finished. "I could write you up for this. You know that don't you?"

I sighed, shook my head, avoided his eyes, "Yeah, I suppose you could."

"Well, let's just forget about it," he said putting his hand on my shoulder. "This once. You were lucky you were here to take care of it. I know you boys get busy and forget, especially with the excitement of graduation coming up. Mr. Glupka, on the other hand, this is the third time this week he's forgotten to make his bed. You can tell him when you see him that he's earned himself a detention."

"I will, Brother Lyle. Thanks, Brother Lyle," and I moved out from under his hand to go past him, but he was still blocking my way.

"Daniel," he said with great seriousness, arms folded across his huge belly now, and I thought, here it comes, finally, the threat, the warning; but he nodded over toward Hank's bed, "Don't forget your basketball."

"Oh, right, yeah, sure," I said, grabbing the ball up. Then I was past him, running toward the dented metal fire-door at the end of the hall, "Have fun," his last words to me, still playing in my ears.

Bilvis shrugged at my saying no to the joint then double-hit before handing it off to Hank. Hank took a deep drag. An easy smile rolled onto his face. "Nothing like smoothing out the rough edges on the day," he said, smoke curling out his nostrils.

"You sure Newt is going?" I shouted back to him over the music and wind. I'd been feeling even more paranoid since I got down to the boat-house and saw he wasn't with them.

"What?" Hank said.

"I said, are you sure Newt is going?"

"Huh," he said.

"Goddammitt," I turned down the radio, "Is Newt fucking going or not?"

"Jesus, mellow-out, man," Hank said, He drew a few quick, sharp inhales in the pause, "You talked to him yourself yesterday," he croaked, exhaling as he spoke,

"I think he's riding with Slebka and Kirby and those guys."

"You think he's riding with them?"

He's riding with them. Okay. Just relax, everyone'll be there and no one's getting in trouble. Fuck, man, even Queen Mike and Fat are going." He held out the joint to me again, "Sure you don't wanna hit this?" I shook my head, turned back around in my seat and stared out through the windshield.

Then I felt Bilvis's hands come down on my shoulders and start squeezing. 'It's cool, man," he said. "Everything is perfect. Beautiful. Look how nice it is outside. We got sun, we got beer, we got weed, and we got the wide open road of everything right in front of us. You wanna trade sitting in a fucking classroom for a ride like this. This is the only time you'll get to make this ride in your whole life. I mean this is it, man. finals next week and we're out of there."

"Amen to that, brother." JB raised his can then sipped from it.

"Dude, we've been dreaming of walking graduation forever," Malta said. "All those nights last year talking about how we couldn't wait to take our diplomas from Mr.B and say see ya, loser. I'm telling you, after four years of bullshit rules and bad food and detention and church all the time and no women and everything else, we owe it to ourselves to enjoy this. We're outta there, man. We are free, dude, free."

"K.O.D." Bilvis said, squeezing my shoulders again, "Holy Smoke even tries to give you any lip, you just put the guitar voodoo on his ass."

"Yeah, I know," I said morosely, raising my own can and draining it, then crushing it in my fist and tossing the crinkled wad down between my feet, "I just don't want to blow it after coming so far." I reached into the twelve pack and pulled out another beer. Popped the top on it. They were right. I needed to relax. There was no turning back, and like Bilvis said, I just would've hated myself for not going. I was locked into the flow, whatever the consequences. I was hoping I'd feel better once I

found Newt downtown and saw how he was taking all this.

Have a Drink on Me, an AC/DC tune we covered in The (Standing)Hamptons came on the radio.

"Oh, yeah, turn it up, turn it up!" Bilvis slapped his hands down on my shoulders. His good energy caught me. I grinned and leaned forward, maxed-out the volume.

Whiskey, gin and brandy, with a glass I'm pretty handy. I'm trying to walk a straight line, on sour mash and cheap wine. So come on have a drink boys, we're gonna make a big noise. Don't worry about tomorrow, living for today. Forget about the check, we've got hell to pay. Have a drink on me. Have a drink on me. Have a drink on me...

So many days and nights of hanging out, listening to music in our cars, listening to music at parties, listening to music as a way to color the dead times and weird times and fun times in the dorms. Somebody always had a radio on somewhere, or a record or a tape playing. Malta cranking Aldo Nova's Fantasy out his window over a field of guys playing pick-up tackle football without pads; Dogger wiring the PA speakers on our floor to his stereo and setting up W3 North in his room, broadcasting Seeger and Nugent and BTO at top volume until somebody in charge caught on; Chicken Hawk penning the dorm office door closed right before lights out once he'd kicked Top-o out and set up the office jambox in front of the PA mic blasting Van Halen, and all of us getting to stay up later and goof off in the hallways listening to the music until someone could get in there to turn it off; and, of course me, getting yelled at constantly, written up sometimes, for playing my guitar too loud either in one of those rehearsal spaces or in my room. You've seen it made fun of in movies and shit like that, but it was everything to us because we were living it, feeling that music and the

buzz and the energy carrying us to something higher, something we were too young to understand. What's that's cliché? "Youth is wasted on the young" Nah. "The young are wasted on Youth," is what I say And rock and roll was the undeniable soundtrack of that youth, a large part of what I lived for, and one of the truly rebellious things we could use and enjoy and usually not get in trouble for at that school.

So the five of us clanked our beer cans together and sang the song.

We'd long since memorized all the words.

Prince in his funky purple suit and ruffly foppish shirt and cuffs dances across the huge, light-splashed stage in his platform shoes. "Let's go crazy, let's get nuts," he sings into his mic head-set and the crowd eats it up. He sashays down a long runway in his tight-ass purple pants, guitar pointing straight up from his crotch like an electric hard-on, hips thrusting, jacking his hand up and down the neck. At the end of the runway he gives one final stroke of his hand, one more big hip-thrust, and white fluid starts shooting from the headstock of his guitar in a long arc out over the crowd.

The whole thing really bothered me. Not so much for the jack off stuff, which I saw as more comic than anything, but for the lack of respect he was showing his music, his art, something that should never be made so trivial if you expect to be taken seriously. I mean, smashing your guitar was one thing. I'd seen video of Townsend splintering an SG into scrapwood; I'd seen video of Jimi lighting his Strat on fire at Monterey. And though such acts made me cringe in disagreement I could still understand the sacrifice those guys claimed they were after: this guitar will play tonight's music for you and only you and no one else. Ever. Just as this actual moment of live interaction between me, the musician, and you, the audience, will never recreate itself, regardless of any sonic or visual documentation. It's there in the Jazz mentality, too. Sure, I'm being idealistic; you can scoff and say such acts were simply gestures of rebellious rage or high sensationalism, the precursor of the misguided arena produc-

tions that would bring mainstream rock music so near self-parody in the late Seventies and on through the Eighties, but you've never been up on stage playing your heart out in front of thousands and thousands of screaming people, the cliché of their burning lighters as numerous as the stars in the most star-filled sky you've ever seen. Therefore don't judge my opinion, because you can't claim to understand what it feels like when the sound of people's cheering literally shakes your clothes like a wind. And what makes them listen, truly listen? The music, not the theatrics. A great light show, some cool, tripped visuals, sure, that's all a legit part of the ticket, man, but it's there to enhance, not overshadow, the music. At least that's the way I always demanded we use lights and visuals in the Un-Named. But this Prince cum-guitar thing though, it was a prop, a bad gag, an attitude distraction. Of course rock and roll (or call it "R&B" in this case) is all about sex. Of course the instrument is a phallic symbol, but like Zappa says, "Shut up and play yer guitar." Who cares about your fake orgasm, little man? I'm there to be moved by the music. Even near the end, when I was practically nodding off on stage, forgetting my own cues and lyrics, I never lost sight of that; it's just that I'd put a wall of drugs between wanting to do it and being able to.

"Oh, my God, look at that faggot go," JB leaned forward on the couch and shoved his hand into the big bowl of pretzels on the table in the TV room at Bilvis house. "I can't believe they play that kinda shit on Mtv," he said with a mouthful.

"I'd climb up on the stage and punch his fucking lights out if I was at that show and he squirted that stuff on me," Hank said from the lounge across the room where he was kicked back with the foot rest levered up, sipping a cola.

"You'd never go to a Prince concert anyway," Malta said, leaning forward to get a handful of pretzels from the bowl.

"Who would?" Hank shot back.

"I would if some hot girl wanted me to take her," Malta said.

"Oh pleath, oh pleath, take me," JB squealed, then he shook his head and snorted a disgusted laugh. "The girl would have to pay my ass to go see that guy."

"Whatever," Malta said.

"C'mon Mooney, gimme the remote control," Hank said, "Or at least change the channel. How many times do I gotta ask?"

"He ain't shit, man. I'm better'n that guy, I don't need no trick guitar," I said, partly because I was jealous and partly because I already knew I was capable of shooting something more meaningful than fake semen out into an audience.

"C'mon, dude, change the channel," Hank said with annoyance. "I can't stand this shit."

I got up from where I was leaning against the front of the couch, sitting on the floor. I felt a head rush swim over me and put my hand on the couch's arm to steady myself.

"Fuckin' change it yourself," I said, tossing the remote into Hank's lap then walking out of the room.

"Relax, Dan, everything's cool," I heard Malta say as I went through the doorway into the kitchen. But we all knew it wasn't cool. That's why we were being so uptight with each other.

Things weren't cool because as far as we knew Newt never showed up at the game, and no one there, not Sleбка, or Kirby, or anyone else knew where he was or if he'd even left campus that afternoon. "I went to his room," Sleбка said when I found him sitting in the bleachers with Campbell and Keeb, not even paying attention to the game but drifting on acid, a warm, forgotten paper cup of beer dissolving in his hand. "I knocked and waited and waited and waited but no one ever came." He shrugged, stared off into a world I couldn't see, then looked up at me, seriously. "But he's here even if he's not here. We're all here but not here. Aren't we?"

"Yeah, sure, we're all here but not here," I said, leaving him to figure the rest out for himself, because a hot siren of nerves had just started going off inside me. All for one and one for all didn't mean much if people stayed behind. I glanced around the centerfield bleachers—the place we'd all agreed to meet—as I walked back to where I was sitting with most of the rest of the class. It looked like Newt wasn't the only guy who'd decided not to go. Ten, maybe fifteen guys of the fifty in the senior class were missing including Fat, but not Queen Mike, who looked to be having a really flamboyant time cheering and drinking a beer. And no one there had any idea where the guys who hadn't showed up were, if they just hadn't gone, or if they'd gotten into accidents like the Holy Smoke seemed to believe someone would.

It seemed I was the only one on probation who'd cut class and gone to the game. The only other guys in a situation even close to my own were JB, Kroeter, and Malta; they'd all been on probation for the first half of the year, but they'd been let off after fall semester for good behavior. And none of them, not even Newt, who, like me, had full year of probation with no chance of reprieve, had ever been thrown out, or run through the appeals committee wringer, or forced to sign a customized re-enrollment agreement. Suddenly I felt swallowed up. I looked around the bowl of Tiger Stadium. I'd read somewhere that the Beatles had played there once and that the screams were so loud you couldn't hear a note they played. They might as well have been playing right then. The place was packed, everyone screaming and doing the Wave, because it wasn't the Beatles, but the Tigers beating the hell out of the Brewers. When I got back to my seat I started drinking in earnest out of anxious fear, hitting up the beer guy—who for some reason never carded any of us—for another cup every time he came by. I decided not to say anything about Newt's being missing to anyone; they were all cheering and high-fiving and enjoying the game. After all, I didn't know for certain he wasn't in the stadium somewhere.

So now I was stumbling, mouth dry and headachy from cheap vendor beer, into Bilvis's parents kitchen, glad they were out of town. And though I hadn't been the one to drive us back as I'd promised, no one gave me any shit, because they'd eventually realized why I was so upset without my having to tell them. "Let's not fucking talk about it," I kept saying every time they tried to tell me not to worry during the ride. Then Bilvis, who lived right near O.L., suggested we all go to his house to dry out for a while before heading back to the dorm to face the Holy Smoke and whatever consequences he'd decided upon.

Bilvis was in the kitchen making fluffed ham sandwiches, pulling the meat out of the plastic deli-bag and putting it on the mustard covered bread. I sat down heavily at one of the counter stools.

"You better eat something," he said, sliding a sandwich across the counter toward me."

"Not hungry," I shook my head.

"Well, at least drink some OJ or go brush your teeth," he said.

I checked the clock above the stove. 5:30. "Can I use your phone?" I asked. Cindy's mom usually didn't get home from her job at the insurance agency until after six—though sometimes, like on the Saturday she caught us, she came home early. Her dad worked second shift at the Chrysler plant near their house. Even when we were legitimately dating I barely ever saw him. He wouldn't be home until after ten, and he'd sleep like a dead man until the next morning.

"Sure, go ahead." Bilvis said.

I took the cordless phone off the kitchen wall and punched in Cindy's number as I walked into the nearby bathroom and shut the door. I needed someone to talk to, someone not so close to the scene who wouldn't say "It's cool, it's cool," because they were afraid to say anything else.

"Hello?" It was Nikki who answered, Cindy's older sister. Nikki who'd graduated the year before and who'd fucked up so many times and caused so much havoc at public school they'd given up on her and put the leash on Cindy and sent her to an all girls Catholic school in desperate over-compensation; Nikki who'd been in her own bedroom doing who knows what with two guys as Cindy's mom pulled into the driveway that Saturday afternoon; Nikki who'd heard the garage door opening and had had the time to get those two guys out her bedroom window and onto the garage roof before her mom came upstairs; Nikki who said she'd pounded on the wall and tried to warn us as we lay hugging in our afterglow—even though neither of us heard anything until the door blew in and the pathetic-comic end of us began.

"Hey," I said, "Cindy there?"

"Oh, hi Dan," She was playing it sexy. "How's it going?"

"Okay. Cindy home?"

"Geez, Mr. Attitude. What's up your ass?"

"Nothing. Is Cindy home or not?"

The phone clattered like she'd thrown it down on the counter. I could hear the Prince tune in the background, they had Mtv on too. "Cin-dy!" Nikki's brassy voice, sing-song. "Romeo's on the phone."

Right away, Cindy breathless on the phone in her room, "Hello? Danny?" I'd always loved the sound of her voice, like someone snapping a cool sheet out over you on a warm summer night. "Wait a sec," she said, "I got it, Nikki," she called, her voice muffled by the phone against her breast, I imagined. A few seconds more, then the downstairs phone landing hard on it base.

"Okay," she said.

"What are you wearing?" I asked.

She gave a little exhale into the mouthpiece. I could hear her smiling.

"My uniform," she said, "Why?"

Like Sheri, Cindy was in her junior year at an all-girl's Catholic school, Ladywood, where they wore uniforms, just like the girls at Mercy did, blouses, knee socks, tartan skirts, though the colors and patterns were different.

"Take it off," I said.

Pause. "Why ?" she laughed it just a little. "You know that phone sex stuff makes me feel weird. I don't want to be with you over the phone."

I was sitting on the closed toilet-seat, hunched forward, an elbow propped on my knee, my forehead resting in my palm, "That's not what I mean. Just take off the uniform. I don't care if you stay naked or put clothes on. I don't want to talk to you while you're wearing that uniform."

"Danny, what's wrong?"

"I fucked up, Cindy. I really fucked up."

"Are you Okay? Are you drunk? You sound drunk. You can't keep calling me drunk, Danny. It's bad enough you call me on the weekends at three in the morning drunk and risk getting me in trouble. Now you call me drunk at five in the afternoon in the middle of the week? My dad's already started threatening to take the phone out of my room." She paused to let the silence sink her words into me. "Where are you anyway?"

"I'm at Bilvis's house. Did you take off the uniform? I don't want to talk about this unless you take off the uniform."

"Bilvis's house? What are you doing over there on a Wednesday? And why didn't you call me on Sunday night over Angela's house like you said you would?"

"Take off the uniform."

"God, alright, fine." The phone thumped down on her soft bed, the cover of which I knew was light blue. I heard her mumbling, the phone being fumbled as she

picked it up again.

"There, I'm naked. Happy now?"

I'll never know if she really took off her uniform for me or if she just faked it, but through all that's happened to me since I've kept the simple, unquestioning honesty of her gesture in the back of my mind somewhere, an image of her small body sitting naked at the edge of her bed, face crossed with concern for me, phone pressed against her ear, knees together, her long, blonde hair pulled to one side and curling down to cover a breast. It is the way I'll forever see her, because I never saw her again.

"Have you ever thought of just getting out of here," I said, "Maybe taking off to a place where it's always sunny and you can do whatever you want. A place where there's always music and people having a good time. No pointless rules or kneeling or guilt."

"What are you talking about? What did you mean when you said you fucked up? What's wrong?"

"I think I wanna go to that place, Cindy," I said, standing, taking a few steps toward the mirror. I fingered the knick-knacks Bilvis's folks had arranged in the bathroom. A handled cup with a disk of soap in it, a lather brush, a straight razor. I took up the razor, flipped it open, looked at myself in the mirror.

"I'm always hearing this music, you know," I said. "Music and words inside my head, and sometimes it feels like I have to keep poking holes in my life to let them out. Like nobody will let me just be myself to do what I want to do and say how I feel. I'm tired of it. I'm so tired of everything." I put the razor against my cheek and scraped along the skin, dry shaving.

"Stop talking like that," Cindy said, "You're scaring me."

"Do you love me?" I asked.

"You know I love you," she said almost angrily. "I love you more than

anything. Now please tell me what's going on."

"What about that guy Ryan you're seeing now,"

"It's not the same. Whatever happens between you and me, I'll never love anyone like I love you."

"I'm leaving," I said, pointing the angled tip of the razor into my cheek right on top of the cheekbone. The tiny slice welled with blood, and a thin droplet began to leak a slow line down my face. I couldn't understand why I wasn't feeling anything; it was as if I was in the mirror watching myself do this to someone else. I dropped the razor into the sink. I was starting to scare myself. "I'm going to follow the music and I'm afraid you don't want to come with me."

"Are you in trouble at school? Why won't you tell me what happened?"

"I am telling you what happened. What is happening. But you're not listening to me."

"I can't stand to hear you so upset," she said. "We need to see each other. I'll tell my mom that Angela and I have a study-date on Friday, and you can meet me over there and we can go somewhere and be alone and...shit...I think that's her pulling in. I've gotta go. I'll try to call you on the pay phone on your floor tonight, but don't call anymore this week or they'll get suspicious. Just be safe. And remember I love you. Okay? Bye."

"I love you too," I said, but I think in her hurry not to get caught she'd already taken the phone away from her ear and so didn't hear me say it.

I turned off the phone and set it down next to the sink. I rubbed at the thin line of blood off my cheek, the fine red track of a tear already drying. I wet my fingers with spit and wiped it completely away. I turned on the sink and washed the razor, dried the blade with a hand towel and put everything back the way I'd found it.

Just then the phone rang. Maybe Cindy's mom hadn't come home after all.

Cindy and I knew all our friends numbers—my folks didn't like me talking to her either, and so we usually called and made our plans to meet from someone else's house. It was a whole net of lies we were being forced to spin because we were in love and wanted to keep seeing each other. But I wasn't sure if I should answer the phone or not; I didn't know if Bilvis needed to pretend no one was home in case it was his folks calling to check their answering machine messages.

"Get that, Mooney, would ya?" his voice came through the door.

I picked up the phone, pressed the TALK button, "Hello?"

"Bilvis? This is Top-o. Is Mooney there?"

"It's Mooney, Top-o. What's up?" I asked, but the question was only a formality. I knew already what he was about to tell me.

"Mooney, oh my God. You guys have to get back here right now. Brother John's been calling your name over the dorm PA every fifteen minutes for like three hours. I think he's kicked you out, a few other guys, too."

I felt the bottom dropping out in my gut, it was a tough thing to hear, but I can't say I was surprised. I couldn't figure out who else had gotten the broom though. Maybe Newt really had gone after all.

"Who else besides me?" I asked.

"I don't know. Brother John keeps coming into the dorm office and saying, 'They're out of here, they're out of here,' asking me if I've seen you yet then stomping out when I say no."

"Okay, I'm coming back," I said, "but don't tell him you talked to me. I don't want him to know I'm coming."

"Okay." Top-o said. He was a little square, but a good guy; he wouldn't tell. I shut the phone off and stood there leaning against the bathroom counter. A tremendous ringing seemed to start form somewhere deep inside my head then work its

way out through my whole body, shaking me physically.

"There was a pounding on the door. "Open up, man, I gotta piss," Hank said. "You're Goddamn right I'm gonna get some off her," he was saying to Bilvis as I slid the door open. One look at me and the grin dropped from his face.

"Who was that?" Bilvis asked.

"Top-o," I said, stepping out of the bathroom. "We need to leave right now."

I used my master key to let us in the back-stairwell fire-exit. That was the other type of thing it was good for besides getting me into the practice room, getting us past the locked, outer side-doors when we didn't want to risk walking through the lobby; or letting someone in their room when they'd forgotten their key. For obvious reasons I kept the key a secret from everyone except my closest friends; you don't want that kind of thing floating down your floor, the fact that you have a master key. Guys would be trying to borrow it all the time, or copy it, or steal it from you; and, also, I didn't want people suspecting me when something was stolen from someone's room, because things did get stolen occasionally. One night during studyhall that fall they'd even pulled us all from our rooms and made us line up in the hallway and put our hands one by one under an ultraviolet light to check for traces of the invisible ink the Holy Smoke had used to mark a wad of cash they'd left on the desk in Fat's unlocked room. A wad Fat said was subsequently stolen. At first, Hank and I thought it was a drug shakedown, and we were sweating because I was holding. As we waited in line for word of what was actually going on to get passed along to us, watching the brothers and floor supervisors pace the floor yelling, "Shut up, no talking," while the RA's went into our rooms to dig through everything, I started working that baggie deeper and deeper into the crack of my ass, because I didn't know what they were doing to you once you made it to the front of that line. By the time we were close enough to figure out what was actually going on, it was hard for me to hide my disgust.

Christians weren't supposed to set people up. Sometimes people had their reasons for stealing, especially as a way of paying-back a nark like Fat. Whoever stole that money probably used it to buy alcohol from the Caldean who owned the Corkpopper right across the street from campus.

"Why don't you make him put his hands under the light," I nodded toward Fat when it was my turn before the Holy Smoke sitting behind his table with the lightstand on it.

"Of course Charles has some of the ink on his hands," The Holy Smoke said, "He put the money there."

"Awful convenient if he wanted to take it himself," I said, thrusting my hands under the light, flipping them back and forth to show I was clean.

"Are you accusing Charles of stealing?" the Holy Smoke said.

"I'm not accusing Charles of anything."

This was the kind of garbage we had to put up with at that place.

A bunch of the guys were standing in the hallway talking when we popped out the stairwell door onto our floor, and at seeing us they all fell silent. It was a strange thing, everybody standing there quietly, no one playing ball or screwing off like usual, no different kinds of music from various rooms turned up too loud and tangling with their shouts as they ran up and down the hall. Newt stepped out of the crowd. Walked up to us.

"I'm sorry," he said to me.

"You should've told me you weren't going when I first asked you."

"I didn't change my mind until after mass today. I saw you walking out the side door with your guitar. Man, the way the Holy Smoke looked you, something in me said, 'Don't do it, don't go.' I went down to your room to tell you, but you were already gone, and Napes was in there looking through your drawers, so I just kept on

walking. He pointed to Malta and JB, "They threw you guys out too. And Kroeter."

"What the fuck are you talking about, Newt," JB shouted, "That's bullshit!" I've been off probation since December. Malta and Kroeter, too," he stabbed a thumb at Malta who was already slumping against the wall in disbelief, his usually swarthy skin seeming very pale, even in the dimness of the hallway.

Newt shrugged, "That's what he said to me when I went down to his office to ask him what was going to happen to you guys.

"Fuck that," JB said. "No way, no fucking way." He shoved through everybody then took off running down the narrow, windowless hallway, swearing at the top of his lungs, "No fucking way, no fucking way," until he slammed through the fire door at the far end and disappeared.

"Where is the Holy Smoke now?" I asked Newt.

"Down in the lobby waiting for you."

"Well, he can wait a little while longer then," I said and walked off toward my room.

I was tossing my clothes into a duffel bag, trying to figure out if anything was missing and wondering what I was going to tell my parents when Hank burst into the room, threw his baseball hat hard at the window and started pacing back and forth.

"Fucking Holy Smoke, cocksucker goddamn bullshit son of a bitch," he said. "They can't throw you guys out. This is fucking wrong, man. Wrong. I swear to God I'll kick his fucking ass. Asshole! I can't believe this shit is happening."

"Hank," I said, turning to him, "Just cool out, man. Four guys is bad enough. Don't make it any more. I'm gonna go talk to him and see if he won't change his mind. At least about the other guys."

Fuck him, man. Go tell him to fuck off, you go put a fist in his fucking face.

"You know I'd like to," I said.

Oh, Jesus," he quit pacing and held his head, "Why did I ever talk you into going? You wouldn't have gone if I hadn't kept bugging you." He looked like he was about to cry.

"I went because I wanted to. How could I let you guys have all that fun without me?" I tried to smile but couldn't manage it. Then he came up and hugged me, really hugged me, like the way you'd hug someone when someone they love has just died. It surprised me, I don't think we'd ever hugged before, except in exuberant victory or during our drunken falling all over each other.

"Oh, cut it out, you fag, I said, pushing him away, because I thought I was the one who was going to cry now. It's alright, man," I said. "I'll just go tell him I'm sorry. Maybe he'll forgive me."

"Fuck," Hank said, turning away. He kicked the stop-sign table and it clattered up against his desk. He sat down on the credenza and crossed his arms, started shaking his head. I walked out and left him sitting like that. A little ways down the hall I heard him start up swearing again and pounding his fist on something.

I tried to put together what I was going to say to the Holy Smoke as I walked downstairs to the lobby. Basically I was hurt and angry and I couldn't understand what I was guilty of in an altruistic sense. It seemed an awful petty thing to throw me out for. Downright evil, actually. A cruel and unfeeling act in the inflexible name of The Rules. But I don't mean to make the Holy Smoke into a cardboard villain or anything. He was a human being, and maybe concerned with holiness, though it's hard for me to know for certain, because I honestly can not remember a positive casual moment between us, though I think there may have been a few. He was, from what I see now, a very confused man, not unlike I am guilty of being, though in a much different way, obviously, as it all must be different for each of us in our singular lives.

One time the Holy Smoke left Bilvis' younger brother, Groover, alone in his

dorm room/office when he was briefly called away for some reason, and Groover poked a head back into the Holy Smoke's bedroom area and saw a silken piece of red lingerie peeking out from underneath his pillow. And there were other rumors going around about him which I don't need to repeat. The point is we could only guess what kind of strangeness he was into. The whole idea of a celibate clergy is suspicious as far as I am concerned. I mean, who knows, the poor bastard probably even felt guilty when he masturbated. But whatever he was into in his private life I am fairly certain he was never as twisted as I eventually became. Then again, even during my worst conscious moments I wouldn't have been so rueful and petty as to deny a few boys a ceremony they'd been looking forward to for the last four years just because they'd broken The Rules and skipped school on a traditional lark to go to a baseball game.

The Holy Smoke was standing in the middle of the lobby facing the main doors, hands on his hips, when I came up behind him.

"So this is it then," I said once I was a few feet from him, "I hope you're happy."

He spun on his heel, cassock swirling, "How did you get in here without my seeing you," he snapped.

"I don't think that really matters anymore, does it?"

"You....," he spat, his face red and contorted with rage. He made a chopping motion up by his throat with the edge of his hand, "I've had it up to here with your disrespect. You've gone too far this time, Mooney. God knows I've tried to be fair to you." He took a step toward me, poking his finger into my chest as spoke. "But you just had to keep pushing. Didn't you? I shoved his hand away. A look of righteous indignation slipped onto his face.

"You're out of here." he shouted, fists clenched in tantrum at his sides, "You know that. Out of here!"

"What does Mr. B have to say about all this. I want to talk to him."

"Mr. Baronovski checked into the hospital this afternoon to undergo some tests. He is very ill. He doesn't have time for this kind of foolishness. I am acting Dean of Men in his absence. And as Dean of Men I say you and your idiot friends are out of here. You left campus without permission. And that is automatic expulsion for people on citizenship probation."

"But Malta and JB and Kroeter weren't even on probation," I shouted back. "You had no reason to throw them out. You just did it because you know you can't get away with throwing me out alone since almost everybody in the class went to the game."

"Think what you want. Those three were never officially removed from probation by Mr Baronovski."

"Why? Did he forget to sign their release forms because he was too worried about being sick?"

"It doesn't matter why," he said smugly, "You're all out of here, and that's final. You four will leave this dorm today and receive your diploma's in the mail." he dismissed me with a an irritated wave and began to turn away.

"Hypocrite," I said.

"What did you call me?" He stepped toward me.

"You heard me."

"Say it again." He shoved my shoulder like a little kid in a school yard stand-off—when he should have just jacked me and shown truth of his feelings so I could at least have the chance to show him how I felt right back by smashing his ugly face. But my hitting him would have given him the win, made him even more certain that he'd done the right thing by throwing us out.

"You're pathetic, man." I said turning away, walking across the lobby and

down the hall toward the locker room.

"Where do you think you're going?" He was right behind me, bad breath on my cheek, yapping in my ear.

I stopped in front of the locker room door, my back still to him, I pulled out my ring of keys and started looking for the master, "I'm going to get my Les Paul."

"You'll do no such thing. Your parents can come back and get all that noise making equipment of yours after they've taken you off this campus."

Muscles coiled to smack him, I turned around and got right into his face, and through his anger I could see the fear. I was a few inches taller than he was and in excellent physical condition, and he knew I could take him if it came to that. "Not you, or anyone is telling me what I can or can not do with my guitar," I said. "I'm done with letting you tell me what to do. Just leave me alone. Go have another cancer-stick and relax, okay? You've had your say."

I stared him down and he looked away, then I turned and put the key into the locker room door, opened it.

"Where did you get a key to this room?" he demanded.

"That's one more thing in life you'll never know. Now leave me alone, I'm finished taking to you"

"No you're—"

Just then Hank came running toward us from across the far side of the Lobby, Bilvis hot on his heels.

"Goddamn had enough of this shit you son of a bitch asshole fucking queer fuck you fuck you kick your ass," he was screaming as he ran toward us, Bilvis trying to catch him, shouting, "Wait, Hank! Stop! Wait!"

The Holy Smoke just stood there with his arms crossed, a sardonic look on his face. Because no one had ever dared to before, I don't think he expected Hank to

follow through on his threat until Hank bowled up and shoved him hard with both hands, causing him to stumble back against the wall. "Kick your fucking ass" Hank was shouting, trying to get loose from Bilvis who'd caught him now and was wrapping him up, pulling him back.

William, you'll get this idiot out of here this instant or he'll be the next one on his way home."

"Yeah, okay, Brother John," Bilvis said, but he was having a hard time dragging Hank off with all his swearing and thrashing around.

"Hank," I shouted, "Hank," until he quit struggling and looked at me. "Go back to the room and mellow out," I said. "You're just doing what he wants by getting angry."

I watched the fight leak out of him. He looked down, started shaking his head.

"I need you to help me pack, okay?" I said, "I'll be back up in a little bit, I'm just getting my guitar."

"Yeah, Hank, he'll be right back," Bilvis said. "Come on, let's go," and he led him away off to the stairway.

I looked over at the Holy Smoke leaning up against the wall. An oily sheen of sweat was glistening on his face, and his hair which he usually had combed over to cover his bald spot was standing straight up. He was puffing like he'd just run a long way. He noticed me looking and straightened himself up, smoothed his hair. He started fumbling in the pockets of his cassock for something, probably a cigarette. He didn't seem to have one.

"I've already called your parents," he said. They'll be here any time now. So go ahead and get your ridiculous guitar, Mooney, I could give a rat's ass about your foolish little rock and roll fantasy life. You're never going to amount to anything." He began to stalk past me.

"Reap what you sow, Holy Smoke," I said, and he paused, his back still to me. I'm sure he was aware of our nickname for him, but I don't think anyone had ever called him that to his face.

"Walk on, man," I said, "you got nothing real to say." and he did, he walked off, shaking his head and mumbling about the tests God sees fit to put us through.

And that's basically how that part of the story ends, though a few other interesting things did happen. After leaving our floor JB ran screaming down the railroad tracks that ran behind the school. He ran for maybe ten miles before coming back. Kroeter just left campus and walked home because he lived close enough. Malta and I packed all our stuff and brought it down to the lobby where we sat alone for a while waiting for our folks while the unrest welled along our hallway three floors up. "Jesus, Malta, they can even steal your dreams," I said to him then, which seemed true at the time, and which actually made him start cry and made my own eyes mist up, though I refused to shed even one tear over what had happened.

When our folks finally did show, most of the senior class came down to the lobby, and everyone took something, a laundry basket, or a shoebox, or a stereo speaker out the cars. People came up to us, hugged us goodbye, said this wasn't over by a long shot, the whole class was maybe going to boycott the graduation ceremony, but I knew there was no changing things. Hank was the last to come up to me, wiping his eyes on his t-shirt in front of my mom who was also a getting teary-eyed. "Here," I said taking the master key off my ring and giving it to Bilvis, "Give this to your little bro, he's got some time left to do here, maybe this'll come in handy." I got in the car with my folks, who weren't at all angry with me but sad and angry for me, and we pulled out from the circle drive in front of the dorm. Looking out the back window at everything receding as we drove away, it was like some bad movie with everyone standing at the curb or in the windows of their rooms all glum-faced and watching us

go, someone waving now and then.

There was a town-hall type meeting with all the students and parents in the Grombowski Fieldhouse that weekend. My father told me later how when the Holy Smoke would not budge on his decision to bar us from the following weekend's graduation ceremony Queen Mike stood up and gave this eloquent speech on what it meant to turn the other cheek and truly be a Christian, working himself up to point of slobbering tears until my mother went over to console him and sit him back down in his metal folding chair. My father also told me that he got in the Holy Smoke's face after the meeting and told him he was a hypocritical fool, and the Holy Smoke said, "He's just like you, isn't he," and my old man said, "You're damn right he is." Tim Divel even snuck out of the dorm the night before graduation and spray-painted our four names on the sidewalk in front of the church where all the clergy and students and teachers would see them when they walked in procession to the chapel for graduation mass. But I guess the Holy Smoke noticed the names early that morning and sent some of the zebs out to sand-blast them off. There was also some more talk about boycotting, the out and out rebellion of the forty-six remaining guys just not showing up for graduation at all. But, of course, when it came down to it, they walked, and who can blame them

My mom told me I was zonked out on the couch sleeping that Saturday when my classmates were walking graduation. The way I kept flipping around, moving my arms, she said it looked like I was really having some kind of dream, but she didn't know the half of it. It's hard to explain; I guess it's kind of like that cheesy poem you see plaqued up in people's houses sometimes, that thing about two sets of footprints in the sand and where did you go God in my dark times when I looked back and only saw one set footprints behind me—and God says something like, "Well, that was when I carried you." It was kind of like that, but nothing like that at all really. The dream is

me in a shell, the Clara LaBlane, but not the Clara LaBlane, you know how that is in dreams. Only I'm the stroke, not Newt, and instead of an oar I'm rowing with a guitar, holding it by the neck, and instead of oarsmen behind me there's seven amps in the other seats blasting out the Apostle's Creed at full volume: We believe in one God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. *We believe in Jesus Christ, his only son, our Lord. He was conceived in the power of the Holy Spirit...et cetera.* When I look over my shoulder to see how I'm doing, like I know I'm not supposed to, I can see my boat is flying, popping at the guitar-catch, I can feel the hop, and my oar, which is a guitar but not a guitar, glancing off the steel of my guts at the finish, my arms burning wires as I feather and slide, feather and slide. It's a winner's pace I've got going, I can feel it. Then out of nowhere there's Jesus in a skull right next to me, an oar length's width away, his face shining with sweat and blood from his thorny crown which he's wearing, and blood on the oar handles from his holey hands.

"C'mon, he says, don't you give up on me, we're just starting." And he's pace with my amplified eight; he's making it look so easy, a peaceful smile on his sad face and the boat is glowing and misty around it's edges as it shoots along a few inches above the water. "Power ten," I'm shouting at the amps, but they're not listening, and that Jesus, man, he's gaining a seat on me with every stroke; I can feel the strength-sucking fear of losing taking my wind away. Only I don't quit, not in this dream. I start leaning out over the gunnels for that extra reach at the catch, and those amps start playing one my own songs, only its one I haven't heard before because it hadn't been written it yet. I'm swinging hard now, gliding back into the finish, gliding up into my body's coil before—Pow—I strike the catch again. I keep looking, looking out of the boat like I know shouldn't, and I can see that Jesus getting a deck on me now; Christ, he's just too good, too strong, his form too perfect. And by the time I start awake he's

got goddamn open water on me. A few months later I finished my demo and left town for good.

EPILOGUE

While the day is cool and the shadows are dispersing I shall take myself to the mountains of myrrh and to the hill of frankincense.

The Song of Songs

Like I said at the start of everything: None of this is true because of what I've done to myself over these last thirteen or so years. Yes, the general action of it is true. I went away to an all-boy's Catholic boarding school, started a band, got in a lot of trouble because of my rock and roll attitude and ended up being thrown out—twice; once at the end of my junior year, and again, a week or so before graduation. That summer I finished my demo and moved to LA, purposefully alienating everyone from my past, including my own family, to focus on forming the band which hit it big in ninety one and eventually gave me much more than my fair share of fame before it all fell apart and I totally fucked myself up on drugs. But just take that final showdown I had with the Holy Smoke for one example, I can't remember exactly what we said to each other in the lobby that day, though I know we had words; but what we actually said—that's one of the many things I can't get back. Just like I can't get back so many other things, even the good ones, places I've been, things I've done, what friends have said. It's not as if any of this really happened exactly this way with everyone saying exactly what I've written here and being in such convenient scenes and all, though the general situations are true. But I am no longer capable of remembering exactly what happened to me at Orchid Lake, I'm too burned out, to put it simply. It certainly could have happened this way, and maybe it should have. I don't know. The point is that the gist of the place and my experience there is in these pages; what that's worth I'm not exactly sure yet; God will reveal the purpose to me eventually. I know writing this

has helped me see more clearly why I made the decisions I did in my life, and there's some wisdom in that, in therapy. But writing this has also helped me hone my newly realized theology, flawed as it is. But what else can be expected when God choose a broken instrument as the vehicle of the Divine Idea? Those years between after high school and now, when I was in LA working toward making it and then living the repercussions of my own success, God was the last thing on my mind. As I've said already, you don't need God when fame and drugs have convinced you that you are God, or at least an alien in to your own life.

But now, after writing this, I've come to see I was right all along, in a way, to get as lost as I did. Because it took getting lost to discover that I really am God. And so are you. And so is everyone. And everything. I've been over this before, I know, but it's important you understand. I think that's part of why I wanted to go back that time at O.L. to begin figuring this out, because until these last few months that was the last time in my life I can even remember caring if there was a God at all.

My specific spiritual struggle aside, I still think there's an interesting story here in the way I've tried to tell it, like a story writer might write when this is actually kind of an auto-biography. It made it easier to talk about myself when I could pretend I was someone else, use a different name and everything. But, put my name on the cover, and I really could sell this. And that would help me in starting my new life here in Oregon. I don't want to get involved with that re-union tour Ott's been trying to talk me into. It's time for another drastic change, obviously.

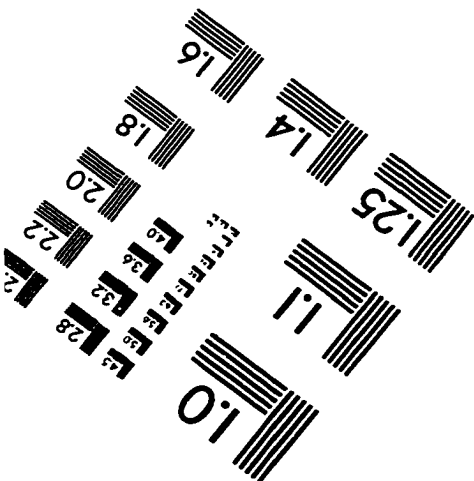
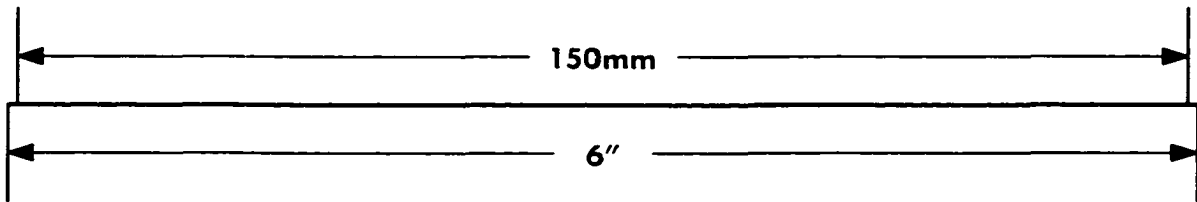
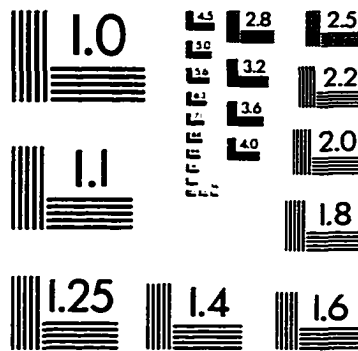
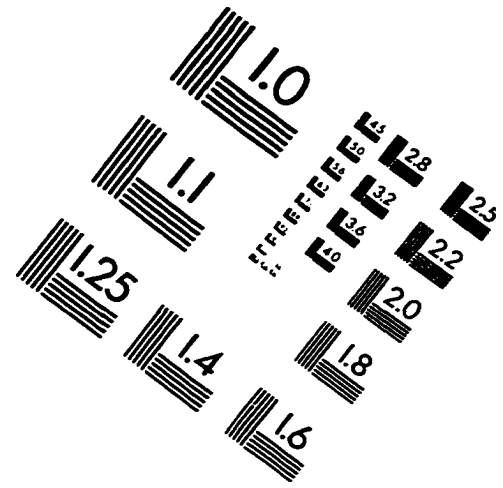
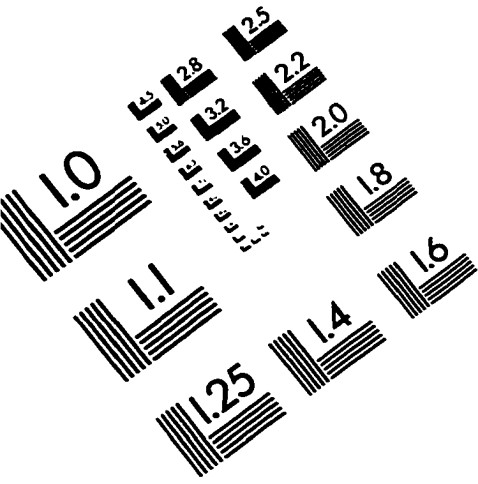
I've also wondered lately if it was something bad in his life that drove the Holy Smoke to the Brotherhood, or if he was just "called." Called just as I feel I've been now, though in a different way and toward a different thing, because I'm nothing like the Holy Smoke. Or maybe I'm not so different from him after all. Either way, it's time for a new life. Maybe even a woman someday. Maybe in about another thirteen

years when I turn forty. I'll be less stressed then, and maybe the herpes will have cooled out some. Though I suppose the right woman would love me despite my disease.

Meanwhile, I'll collect my royalty checks and tend my outdoor garden and my two closet pot plants and record my music in my basement studio and listen to the ocean's pulse while I read. I'm into Bankei right now, the idea of the Unborn Buddha Mind, as I've mentioned, but when I'm through with him I'm going back over the Gospels again; the Bible is such a rich book, the Old Testament especially, and thinking about it so much while writing this has made me even hungrier to see how it proves everything I mean. I know my Truth is in there, the words of Christ and the prophets are too wise to deny me. The message has just been muddled over the ages; it needs re-translation, the re-vitalization only a new voice and vision can supply—if the those who need the Truth are to see the Truth delivered unto them. God needs only the instrument of His power to play out His meanings, which I, in my new understanding, surely am. Because God has decided to put use to the misguided life I've lived, this life that almost killed me before I found The Way. And I am the right choice, there is no doubt. I mean I do have the charisma going for me, all that experience in front of crowds. I know what it's like to stand up in front of thousands and show them the contents of my soul; the spirit that flows through you then, the power of that energy is Holy like unto The Word. I have been the channel before, the bridge between the human and something higher. I have felt God's will flow through me, electrified; I have sung My Word, to the masses, My Word. Which I finally see now has always been His Word because He and I and You and Them and Everything are all one and the same thing: One Holy, Eternal Universe Within God. And I've been away, so far away for so long, days and years going by not seeing anything, but the drug the drug the drug.

There: I will reveal the whole truth to you as I realize it right now, here at the very end. Nothing is preordained and therefore guilt is false. God is active. Not precalculated. He/She/It/Us/All lets us do as we will (because we are, by un-tampered nature, good) while guiding everything toward the final result of the Divine Plan, the nature of which it is pointless to speculate upon as it is a matter of infinite regression when it comes to the mind's relationship to reality and the Universal. Yes, we can say it that way the High Mind. Or we can just say it plainly: "God is everywhere, and God loves us All because God by His own nature must be in every molecule of every single thing, which is really only one thing in the end. I must admit I am compelled to speak this truth; I thank God for showing it to me by giving me the free will to see the both the most beautiful and the ugliest sides of myself. And as a person of renewed honor there's a debt I want to pay. So I've been thinking lately about joining the Catholic Priesthood. From my experience they're in need of help, and it is familiar stomping grounds. Why go back to the Church after what I've seen there? God doesn't care which medium I use, and if you think he does care, then my message hasn't reached you. This priesthood idea isn't permanent or anything, either, I don't think. Maybe Until I'm forty or so (around the same age the Holy Smoke was when he showed up at O.L.), and ready for a woman, a wife, a family in my home at the edge of this land. Unless, of course, the Church changes that ridiculous celibacy rule (One of the first things I'll start rabble rousing about once I get my collar.). But the more I think on it, the more the idea of the priesthood appeals to me: a few years to nurture my Holy Spirit, preach, and get my mind right— which will take some time and careful meditation—while helping other people get their mind's right. So many of us are lost. That's what this comes down to: helping people find God by finding themselves. That's why I've been saved from myself, to show the lost they can be found. And after all I've been through, I'm thinking the Church could use a guy like me.

IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



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