

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Scott V. Gallagher for the degree of Master of Arts in English, presented on May 7, 1999. Title: Renovations.

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Jennifer Cornell

The six stories within, "Still and Silent," "Cold Comfort," "The King of Porn," "Miscuts," "In Between," and "Renovations," are part of a work in progress. They attempt to show how the characters, although they may seem to struggle for independence from the family unit, are in fact strengthening the bonds of connection between them. By creating a collection of stories revolving around a single family, I hope to illuminate how this tension between the desire for and the fear of affection, approval, and acceptance shapes the family as well as the characters and creates interdependent relationships. This dependence upon each other may, over time, seem to lessen in importance but never does it truly disappear. In the end, I hope these stories show how important family is, regardless of how good or bad they may appear. And if you try to ignore it and pretend your need for it isn't there, sooner or later it'll smack you in the face like a sock full of pennies as a reminder.

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Renovations

by

Scott V. Gallagher

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Scott V. Gallagher, Author

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RENOVATIONS

STILL AND SILENT

Quiet. Mama said to keep quiet. That's what he had to remember. The second most important thing was to be still. That was a big thing too. Being still was easy. He could hardly move sitting between the two arms, one in a big black sleeve, the other bare, creamy and thin. All around him grownups played statue in the pews and he wondered if his mama had given them instructions too.

If he turned around, he could see a row of heads extending to the right and left above the yellow-gold back of the pew. He tried to sit up and look around, but a large hand was placed on his left leg reminding him that his father sat heavy beside him. His head gleamed dark and clean in the yellow overhead lights. Sean had watched his mother make Daddy sit on the toilet while she carefully parted his hair on the side, combed it straight, and froze it solid with hair spray while his father closed his eyes and grimaced.

Above him, the ceiling floated on propellers that spun very fast at the end of long poles. The fluorescent lights glowed like a million fireflies trapped in the glass tubes. If he listened hard enough, he could hear them buzzing and flying into the sides, trying to escape. Up front, a voice rose above the whirl of the spinning blades. He was sure it was the big man who shook his hand and had said "hi" to him at the door on churchday.

Leaning forward, he watched his shiny, black shoes swing in and out of sight beneath the pew. Between his legs, the cover of the bench looked like a green triangle on a field of black. He scratched at the surface; the sound reminded him of his dog digging

at the closed door of his bedroom at night, trying to get in so that he could sleep on Sean's warm Star Wars Blanket.

They told him they would be saying goodbye to Grandpa. *Where's he going?* he had asked. *To heaven*, they said, so Sean kept an eye out for his Grandpa. He didn't want to miss saying goodbye before he left for his trip.

Sean placed his hand on his father's, comparing his warm, pink nails to his father's purplish ones. Sean's nails were long, unlike his father's. He lifted his fingers to his mouth and, one by one, bit the tips off of his nails and spit them out. *Stop that*, said his father, pulling Sean's hand away from his mouth.

All along the wall he saw windows with pictures colored on them. Some had bright red crosses surrounded by yellow light. He had made something like that in Sunday school, but with construction paper. He wasn't allowed to draw on windows.

Their reflection danced and shimmered on the flat, brown carpet. No one else looked at the windows or seemed to wonder at the reflections. All eyes were forward but his. He hadn't seen any other children when he came in and his brother had cried his way out of coming. Sean had watched from the hallway outside his brother's bedroom as his mother held Rich to keep him still. *I don't wanna go*, his brother had cried, so they had let him stay with the neighbors. They had a new jungle gym in their back yard and Sean had wanted to play in it, but he wasn't allowed to stay.

Daddy, he said tugging on his jacket sleeve. He didn't answer him, but that was normal. *Daddy, I'm bored*, he said, emphasizing it with a sharp tug. *Quiet*, said his father. He tightened his grip on Sean's leg until it started to hurt. *I'll take him, Tom. Come sit with Grandma, Pumpkin*. Sean liked that she called him that. It wasn't just the

name he liked, but the way she said it—twangy like so that it always sounded to Sean like she said “punkin”.

As soon as his father released his grip, Sean scooted over to his grandma’s lap. He could move around more and was further away from his father who seemed distracted and more short tempered than usual. *Grandma*, he said. She shooshed him, but it didn’t bother Sean as much as it did when his dad did it. *I’m bored*, he said. *It’ll be over soon*, she whispered. *Just hold tight a little bit longer-- for Grandma. Then you can let it all out.*

He leaned back against her chest and stared at her cheek. Her skin was as brown as a grocery bag and crinkled like paper that had been crumpled up then smoothed flat again. His grandma’s gray and black hair was twisted into a bun at the back of her neck, black with streaks of white like chocolate and vanilla ice cream swirled together. She gave him a wink and a weak smile. He would ask her to get some ice cream when they left. He hoped it would be soon.

Her skeletal arms encircled his waist; spindly fingers rested on his small, bony knees. He stared in wonder at her arms then reached down to touch them. Her skin felt leathery and cool and lay across the bones like a sheet hung out to dry on a clothesline. His fingers followed blue green veins as they zigzagged down her forearms and across her wrists to where they disappeared into her palm. Faintly, he felt a weak throbbing in them as they pushed against his finger dam. *Grandma, do you feel that?* he whispered. *Pay attention, hon* she said, but he didn’t know what to pay attention to. He kept playing with her arm, running his fingers around the spots and whorls. He leaned back against her

and looked around. *Where's grandpa*, he asked. *Please be quiet, pumpkin*, she asked. *Be quiet for Grandma and pray.*

He pinched his eyes shut like he was supposed to until he saw sparkles in the dark, then opened his eyes and watched the stars fade around him. Everyone around him had their heads bowed. His father had his hands clasped together in front of him. The mole on the end of his father's nose just barely touched the back of his thumb. Strands of hair had slipped out of place and hung over his forehead. His mama's eyes were closed and the skin between her eyebrows was pinched tight into a knot. Behind him his grandma rested her forehead against the back of his head. No one can see me, he thought. Not even Daddy. He stuck his tongue out at his father, quick in case he would see. *AMEN*, said everyone suddenly, then their heads flipped up like dominos in reverse.

The voice stopped, replaced by wordless music that rose and fell, a carousel tune played at slow speed. People around him began to stand up. Eager to move, he wriggled his way off his grandma's lap only to have his arm grasped by his mama. *Stay with me, Sean.* They joined the line at the end of the benches and walked toward the front of the room. His mama let go of his arm but then took his hand. It felt cold and sweaty and he wanted to let it go. *Are we going home?* he asked. *Not yet*, said his mother.

His father turned left toward a large silver box Sean hadn't noticed before. He tried to follow him, but his mama pulled him to the right toward a set of doors. *What's that?* he asked. *What's what, honey?* Before Sean could say anything else, his mother steered him through a pair of swinging doors into another room. *What was the box, Mommy?* He asked. *I bet you're hungry, aren't you?*

The ceiling was not as high here and he was allowed to move and talk freely, but there was hardly anywhere to go since the room was so full of people. He could talk, but no one would hear him over all the loud voices, so he stuck close to his mother, following in her wake as she pushed through the throng. He walked through a forest of legs that stood dark and foreboding. People were talking and laughing, but it didn't seem right to him. These people laughed with their mouth closed, afraid to show their teeth. He didn't like it. Reaching up, he gave a yank on his mama's dress. *Mama, I want to go home*, he said. *Would you like something to drink?* He loved juice, especially orange juice without the floating stuff in it. *No juice*, she said, *but how about some punch*. Taking his hand, she led him towards the white tables standing against the wall. It was not far away, but his mama kept stopping to say "hi" to people he didn't know. They all touched him, patted him, squeezed his cheeks or took his hand in theirs and shook it until his shoulder started to hurt. He was stuck there until he once again tugged on his mama's dress to remind her of her punch promise.

At the table, his mama put a big plastic plate in his hands and filled it with little sandwiches, cookies, pickles, and some other things he didn't recognize. She led him to a chair against the wall and set him down. *Stay here*, she said handing him his glass of punch, *I'll be right back*. Sean wasn't really hungry, so he set the plate down and just ate the cookies. Strange faces surrounded him and he quickly lost sight of his mama. He felt like he did on his first day of kindergarten, left alone in a room full of strangers who were all trying to get him to smile. He had hidden beneath a table and it took his mama to get him to come out. He wanted to find her but was afraid to leave the chair, afraid that his

mama might come back to get him while he wasn't there. He would've even been happy to see his father, or anybody he knew.

The double doors leading out into the big room were beside him. He wondered if the silver box was still there. He slipped off the tall chair and walked out into the big, empty room.

He walked alone out into the middle of the brown carpeted room. Above him floated the propellers and he started spinning in circles, trying to keep up with them. *Round and round and round we go--*, he chanted. He spun until he got dizzy and fell down on the floor. He kicked his feet up and down, trying to focus on his shoes and stop his head from spinning. When he finally stood up he saw the box. It was big and the metal color of one of his cap guns. Below it was the step where his mother made him kneel and pray on Sundays. Climbing the step onto the altar floor, he grabbed the edge of the box and tried to pull himself up, but couldn't. He saw a velvet stool and dragged it over to the box, stood on it and looked inside. He was surprised to see his grandfather.

He was asleep, his eyes closed and hands crossed over his big belly. He looked a lot like Sean's father when he fell asleep on the couch, but more relaxed than his dad usually was. *Grandpa*, he whispered. *Hey grandpa, you awake*, he asked. He wondered why his grandpa hadn't sat with them earlier. Maybe he's sick, thought Sean, and because he is a grandpa, they gave him a special place he could rest. His grandma was in the other room with his mother and father and he thought he'd better wake up his grandpa before all of the food was gone. He knew how much his grandpa liked to eat. Together he thought they could find his mother among all those people.

Reaching down into the box, he tapped his grandpa's big belly. Still asleep. Moving his hand up he tapped his shoulder. Nothing. Leaning far into the box, he put his hand on his grandfather's cheek and whispered into his ear, *Grandpa, time to get up.* He didn't move, not even a groan. His grandpa's skin felt cold and dry, like the dirt beneath his front porch. He rubbed his grandpa's cheeks to warm them up and noticed he was leaving gray smudges on them. Thinking his hands were dirty, Sean wiped his fingers on his blue button-up shirt. He left smeared, tan hand prints down the front of it.

He rubbed his finger across his grandpa's neck then used it to draw a circle on the back of his hand. He did it again, this time drawing a swirl up his arm and under the edge of his sleeve. Patiently he tattooed his arms with grandpa's make-up until his arms glowed an earthy brown.

Grandpa's neck was now mostly grayish-white with tan streaks, so Sean moved to his face. He ran two fingers along his grandpa's cheek then made two lines across his own, Indian style, from ear to chin. His finger slid down the bridge of his grandpa's potato-like nose, then marked his own.

When he was done, Sean felt tired. He looked toward the double doors leading into the room where his parents were and could hear the sounds of laughter and conversation. He figured his parents were busy, so he grasped the edge of the box and pulled himself over the edge onto his grandpa's belly. The blanket covering his legs was silky and cool to the touch. Sean got beneath it and laid his head on his grandpa's chest. He could hear his grandpa's heartbeat, slow and heavy like the ticking of a big clock. The smell of lavender tickled his nose and the rise and fall of his grandpa's chest lulled him to sleep.

COLD COMFORT

His fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Warner, called early that Saturday morning during breakfast to ask his mother why he didn't have a jacket to wear to school, and to say that she knew of a certain church that provided them to families like theirs. His mother was quiet, with her back turned to him, the phone cradled between chin and shoulder. He sipped his milk quietly at the kitchen table and watched her back shake as she swiped at the dishes in the sink, her arms shoving their way into the sudsy water, her sleeves pushed to the elbows but slipping with each deeper dip. Angrily, his mother assured the woman that her son did indeed have a jacket, thanked her for her concern, then hung up. She turned to face him and asked, "What's wrong with your jacket, Sean?"

"It's too small," he told her. He spooned the last of his milk from his cereal bowl, careful to avoid the sugar mud at the bottom. She took his plastic bowl, rinsed it furiously in the sink, and left him holding the spoon.

"Go get it," said his mother's back.

"What?" he asked.

"Your jacket."

He lay the spoon on the table in front of him. Thin scratches etched the surface from overeager forks or slips of the butter knife. Towards the middle of the table was a moon-scar of crisp black plastic, a burnt semi-circle from a too-hot pot. He picked at it with the nub of his fingernail.

"I don't know where it's at."

"Now," she said.

"Fine."

He found his blue Colts football jacket and brought it into the kitchen. She made him try it on, pulling and tugging at the sleeves and waist, determined to make it fit. He pushed his hands as far past the cuffs as he could, complaining the whole time about how tight it felt, how he could hardly move in it, how it would show his underwear if he leaned too far forward. It was too old, too worn, and he tried to convince her that he had definitely grown out of it.

“What can I do?” he said. “It just doesn’t fit.” His shoulders began to ache from the forced stretching.

She passed a critical eye over him. “How long have you had it?” she asked.

“A long, long time.”

“Doesn’t seem that long.”

“I can’t help it if I’m growing,” he said.

“It should have lasted longer. I’ll take it back.”

“Whatever,” he said, taking off the jacket and dropping it onto the floor by her feet.

“As soon as you father gets back from his shift we’ll go.”

“Why do I have to go?” he asked.

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Pick it up and get dressed.”

He kicked the jacket from the kitchen into the living room before picking it up. In his room, he tried to think of a way out of going with her. Normally he would just lock his door and refuse to come out, but his father would be home soon and his temper was

shorter than his patience when he worked nights. He had been on the night shift for the last month.

It wasn't long before he heard his father's Ford F250 grunting up the driveway. Sean could picture him sitting heavily behind the wheel, his body shifting to compensate for the ditches and potholes, one hand gripping the top of the window, the other steadily guiding the truck around the worst of the obstacles.

He made it to the kitchen just as his father came in the back door. He was a big man, filling the doorway as he walked through it, and Sean stepped out of his way when he came in.

"Hi Dad," he said. His father tossed off a "hello" as he slipped off all the trappings of his job: the grease-stained jacket, the cheap mesh hat that made his head look twice as tall - the kind companies always give away for free-- an impossible number of keys on a ring that jingled when he walked, and his steel-toed boots, the black worn to brown at heel and toe.

"I'll get your dinner," said his mother. She took a plate out of the microwave and set it on top of the burnt spot on the table. His father dropped into a chair and arched his back, stretching.

"Is there any Coke to drink?" he asked.

"We're out," said his mother. "Sean, you ready to go?"

"Where are you going?" Sean's father pulled the plate of food toward him then reached behind him to grab a fork out of the drying rack on the sink.

"To the mall," she said.

“What for?” With his elbows on the table, his father scraped at his plate, shoveling his food into his ~~mouth~~.

“Because my teacher called,” Sean said.

“Why did his teacher call?”

“It’s nothing important,” said his mother. “Let’s go, Sean.” His father settled into his food quietly. Sean and his mother left him hunched over the table with his back facing the door.

The car was parked out front in the gravel driveway. It was a Chevrolet Impala—big, loud, and the dark green color of poison oak leaves in the summer. He hated to be seen in it. His mother went into the garage and came out with a hammer.

“What’s that for?” he asked as she slid onto the black vinyl seat beside him.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “Now put your seat-belt on.”

In the Mountaineer Mall parking lot, his mother attacked the zipper of the jacket with the hammer. He could hear the dull crack of the cheap metal as she pounded it into the pavement, but he couldn’t watch. He slumped further into the bench seat of the Chevy and pushed the garbage on the floor around with the toes of his scuffed Keds. Dirty withdraw slips covered with sneaker stamps papered the floor beside torn envelopes with plastic windows and a forgotten JC Penny sale flyer. He shoved it all beneath his seat with his heels. The driver side door was open and he glanced over to see his mother with her back to the door, examining her first hit. The jacket, his jacket, lay in a heap on the oil-stained blacktop. He cringed at the thought of it getting dirty.

“Why didn’t you do that at home?” he asked.

"I forgot," she said, spreading the jacket out and taking aim.

Whack!

He had tried to clean it up some before they left to make it look as new as possible. Right before his father had come home he had wiped the white, imitation leather sleeves with a bar of ivory soap wrapped in a damp washrag. Little could be done to the elbows where the leather had peeled away like a sunburn, exposing the vulnerable material beneath, but he'd scrubbed at the grass stains nonetheless.

Whack!

The burrs had been harder to get out and his mother's iron had done little to the creases. The once white horse, the symbol of the Colts football team sewn on the back of the jacket, was yellowed and fraying at the edges. When they bought it a year ago, his father had said they were a great team and Sean had believed him. The Colts jacket had been the nicest one on the clearance rack at Hills Department Store during their going out of business sale. His father had remarked to him how lucky he was to find such a great jacket displaying such a spectacular team for so cheap, as if Sean were the one buying it. The guys at school had all been Dallas Cowboy fans, but that night, after he had gotten home with his new jacket, he forever swore his allegiance to the Colts. Sometime during the spring, for reasons quickly forgotten, he and his friends had become L.A. Raiders fans and he quit caring about the jacket and the team it represented. It was as used as used could be and he felt sure that the sales people would know, but it was too late.

Whack!

“That should do it,” said his mother, inspecting the broken zipper. She picked up the jacket and shook off the gravel bits clinging to the fabric. “Hand me those plastic bags.”

He grabbed the balled-up plastic from between his legs and tossed it across the wide seat. She lay the jacket on the roof, took the crumpled plastic, and separated the two bags. She snapped the bags open with a sharp pop! without a blink or a flinch. With her arms raised, her off-white sweatshirt rose just enough for him to see the pink smile of a scar spread across her stomach, the belly button poised like a nose just above it. Her pants were too tight so she had unbuttoned them and the zipper was separating in a toothy grin. Unconsciously, his right hand slid to his crotch to check if his own fly was open. She lowered her arms and her sweater slid over the eyeless face and he quickly moved his hand to the armrest on the door.

“Which one looks better?” she asked.

She held the bags up for him to view. Both were white with wrinkled lettering on each side, which was starting to flake off. The larger one had “Fashion Bug” written on it in orange with the picture of a smiling, red and black lady bug beside it. The other was from Montgomery Ward and looked about the right size for a pack of socks and maybe some underwear, but too small for the jacket, he thought. Definitely too small.

“They look used,” he said. He turned his attention to the door handle and peeled off a piece of crumbling chrome paint with the stub of a fingernail.

“Come to think of it, nothing but girls clothes at the Bug,” she said, “so it looks like Wards.” She took the jacket and squeezed it into the bag, then, holding it in her arms like a stuffed sack of groceries, asked, “Are you coming?”

“No,” he said.

“All right then. I guess I’ll just pick out a new jacket for you. How about a pink one with some flowers on it. Or baby blue with one of those cute cartoon characters you see on Saturday mornings. They’re called Smurfs, right?”

Sighing, he tucked in his shirt and opened the door slightly. He looked around to see if anyone had seen what his mother had done. She was always embarrassing him and just the thought of walking into a store with her made him uncomfortable. He remembered when she had taken him and his best friend to see *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Before they left she had popped her own popcorn for them to take in. The Warner movie theatre had a sign posted on the door and by the concession stand saying no outside food or drink allowed, so he’d packed his pockets with what he could and left the rest in the car. He and his buddy had eaten their stash before the previews were over when his mother showed them a purse-full that they could have. For the first half of the movie he was afraid someone would come and ask them to leave. He was so mad that he hurried his friend to the car while his mother was in the bathroom and she had yelled at him for taking off without telling her. She did it in the parking lot, in front of his friend. He had refused to speak to her the rest of the night.

The coast was clear so he got out of the car then hurried across the parking lot and into the mall. Standing just inside the glass doors, he chewed on his nails and waited for his mother. She walked casually across the parking lot as if everything was normal and under control. She was short, short enough that he could reach up and push her thick, red glasses back onto her nose. Her cropped, red-blond hair shone unnaturally in the sun as

she pulled his father's jean-jacket more tightly around her. He thought she dressed very un-motherlike, always in jeans rather than dresses.

"Stop biting your nails," she told him as they entered the store. "You're going to make them bleed." She called it his dirty habit but he couldn't stop.

"I'm gonna go to the toy section," he said. He put his hands in the pockets of his faded Levi's and jingled the three dollars and eighty-six cents in change he'd brought with him. "Come get me when you need me to pick out the jacket."

"Oh no you don't. I'll never find you there. Just stay with me. We'll get your jacket, then go home." The checkered walkway they stood on split just beyond the door, going straight through the woman's section or left towards the Hardware Department. He went left past the bright red and green riding lawn mowers and weed-eaters with names like The Green Machine and Lawnboy. One even had a round blade on the end and a sign below it that said "The Weed Master will cut through anything: Please do not touch!" When he reached down to test the sharpness of the blade, he realized that his mother wasn't following him. He turned around and headed back towards woman's clothing. He found her leafing through a pile of clothes on a big table.

"Come on, Mom, let's go."

"Just a minute." She picked up a blouse, checked the tag for size and material, held it against her, leaned slightly back, put shoulder pads to shoulders, collar to neck, checked the sleeve length, checked the price tag, put it back and picked up another.

He wandered into the dress section where a woman with blonde hair and make-up on was casually inspecting skirts hanging from a chrome pole along the back wall. Every five or six feet the clothing parted to show a framed poster of a well dressed lady with a

gleaming smile posed to perfection. Across the bottom was written "Dressed for Success" in stylish black letters. The blonde woman had on a knee-length black skirt and a shiny black belt with a gold trim, right out of one of the posters. She noticed him looking at her and gave him a smile. He approached the opposite end of the rack and worked his way through the tags until he stood just to the left of her.

"Looking for a present for your mother?" asked the saleswoman. Sean noticed she was tagged Christine and he thought the name fit her well.

"Uh huh," he answered. "She likes the clothes here."

"I see." She pulled two skirts from the rack, one dark brown with a slick looking belt already in the loops, the other a reddish-purple. "It's very hard to shop for a woman, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He examined a lavender skirt with pink flowers on it. "She shops here all the time."

"Perhaps I can help you. What size does she wear?"

"Uh, a size six," he said, looking at the tag hanging inside the skirt.

"She must have a very slim figure, but I hope you're not thinking about that one. It's a bit gaudy."

"No," he said. What a wonderful name, Christine, he thought. It sounded fancy to him, like the name of an expensive perfume.

"What do you think about these?" she asked, holding up the two skirts she had chosen. "Cinnamon is easy to match with just about anything. Burgandy is a bit harder to match, but very eye-catching. Which do you like?"

"The brown one's nice, but they're both pretty," he said.

“Then take both. They might even be on sale.” She held them out and he took them by the cheap metal hangers and told her thanks. His mother had taught him to always say thanks when somebody gave you something, and he always did. The saleswoman cupped her left elbow with her other hand then raised her right index finger to her chin, tapping it softly with a day-glow orange finger. It looked like a bright arrow pointing to a smile, whiter than a new pair of sneakers. “I hope she likes them,” she said. “Don’t forget to tell them at the counter who helped you.”

Just then his mother walked up behind him and said, “Come on, Sean. We need to get going.” His ears warmed instantly and he turned around to see his mother standing there with the bag held limply in her arms. The plastic, he noticed, was stretched taut and the white had become partially transparent like a Juicy Fruit bubble about to burst. You could almost make out what was inside.

“OK, OK, let’s go then.” He tried to push past his mom but not before she grabbed the skirts out of his hands. She held them out toward Christine.

“Could you put these back, please?” said his mother. “Thanks for all of your help.” His father’s jean-jacket seemed like an intruder among such nice clothes, but his mother smiled and didn’t seem to notice.

Angry, but not wanting to make a scene, Sean brushed past his mother and made his way back onto the walkway. The store wasn’t that busy for a Saturday morning and he hoped it would stay that way. His mother burst from the clothes beside him as if shoved from behind.

“What was that about?” asked his mother.

"Nothing," he said, and started walking. They walked past the normal clothes and approached the uncomfortable lingerie section. Bras and panties didn't yet interest him, but they bothered him enough to increase his pace, his eyes focused straight ahead.

"Looking for a present for me?"

"No," he said, fingering his pocket change. He picked up his pace and pulled ahead of her. "Just leave me alone."

As they approached the counter, he slipped away to look at the Izod shirts hanging next to a mirror. He took a green one off the rack and, holding the hanger up to his chin, glanced at his reflection in the mirror. He liked how the alligator emblem looked stitched onto the breast pocket, regal and aloof.

"Can I help you ma'am?" asked the salesman behind the counter.

"Yes. I need to return this jacket. I bought it for my son a couple of weeks ago."

"Why are you returning it?" asked the man. Sean watched the salesman to see how he reacted when his mother pulled the jacket out of the bag. When he saw what condition it was in his face stiffened as if starched. Sean put the Izod shirt back onto the rack, preparing to flee if necessary.

"See, the zipper is broke. I know kids can be rough but when I bought this jacket I assumed they were designed with that in mind. So you can understand why I brought it back."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't think this is one of ours. Are you sure you bought it here?"

"Of course I'm sure. I shop here all the time."

"Do you have a receipt?"

"Do you think I would keep a receipt for three weeks?" snapped his mother.

"Who does that? Especially for clothes."

"But, ma'am, we need some sort of verification that you bought this jacket from us."

"Are you calling me a liar?" asked his mother. Sean's face got hot and he tried to appear casual as he walked over to the next rack of shirts. He tried to ignore what was going on behind him and studied the tags dangling at the end of the long-sleeved turtlenecks: \$19.99, 100% pure cotton. His mother stood straight and tall, feet spread slightly apart, and on her tiptoes like a ballet dancer. He had seen her face down his father many times in that position and he knew she was digging in for a showdown. "I'd like to talk to your manager, please."

"Let me see if he's available," said the tie man. Sean couldn't bear to watch the battle so he escaped to the electronics section, hoping they had a game set out to play demos. When his family came to the mall he would often spend most of his time playing Atari on the demo unit they had set up. Sometimes he'd get to play for an hour or more while his mom and dad were walking around window-shopping. The unit was there but it didn't have any game cartridges in it so he couldn't play. Unwilling to go back, he wandered over to the wall where the games were displayed.

Glass doors kept the newest games out of his reach. A big yellow arrow with "NEW" written on it caught his eye. It pointed to a game called Pitfall that he'd seen advertised on TV. The purpose of the game was escape. You had to run, jump, and crawl your way past the bad guys to get out of the jungle alive.

"May I help you?" someone asked from behind. He turned to see a salesman with crossed arms and a robust face staring down at him from atop a striped red tie.

"No thanks," he said. "Just looking for now." He didn't have an Atari. His father once mentioned a Christmas possibility but that was a long way away and he knew his father wasn't working extra shifts to buy presents.

He headed back to the clothes section, hoping that his mother was ready to get the jacket and go. When he got near the counter he saw a kid from school named Eric looking at pants. His mother stood behind him with an armful of pants and shirts with the hangars still in them.

"Hey, Sean!" the boy called out. Sean stopped and pretended to notice him for the first time.

"Hey, Eric. What are you doing here?" Sean and his friends called him a momma's boy behind his back because his mom drove him to school and picked him up every day. He always wore shirts with collars and you could tell that even his jeans were ironed. They walked toward each other and met by the wool sweaters.

"Trying on pants," said Eric, ignoring the tags hanging from the jeans. "I hate shopping with my mom."

"Yeah."

"How about you? Getting clothes?"

"Nah, a new jacket." Sean put his hands in his pockets and stirred his change.

"Cool," said Eric. "Did you see the new LA Raider jackets?"

"Been looking at them."

“My mom said she’d buy me one if I promised not to tear it up.” Sean nodded and jingled his change in response. He found a quarter and rubbed it between finger and thumb.

“Well, gotta go,” said Eric. “See ya Monday.”

“Yeah, Monday.”

He watched Eric walk away in his perfect pants and when he was sure Eric wasn’t looking, he ducked into a circular rack of sweaters. On the other side of the rack was the counter where his mother was working on a different salesman.

“Ma’am, I’ve checked three times and I’m sure we never sold this type of jacket.”

“I see football jackets right over there,” said his mother.

“They’re a different brand. Look, lady, I’m just the department manager. I can’t authorize this. Let me get the store manager for you.”

“Fine,” said his mother. Sean could hear the drumming of her fingers on the counter, fast and heavy but without the click-click of long polished nails. He sat quietly with his hands in his pockets and squeezed his coins until he could feel their edges bite into his palms. He wished she would just admit defeat so they could leave. Below the cotton curtain of his hiding place, he watched her foot tapping a quiet beat on the carpet beside her brown handbag. She’d had the bag for as long as he could remember. It lay on the floor like a flattened beach ball with a dull, brass “A” glued to the loose flap. He didn’t understand why she couldn’t just pull out her checkbook and write a check for a jacket. He was sure they would accept it. They always did.

A pair of buffed black dress shoes made their way across the carpet, stopping beside his mother’s yellow sneakers.

“Ma’am, the store manager can’t come out now,” said the dress shoes, shifting slightly, “but he wants to know how much you think you paid for the jacket.”

“It was about fifty dollars. Forty-four ninety-five minimum.”

“Fine,” he said. “You can pick any jacket from that rack over there.”

He couldn’t believe it. She had won. He stood up and parted the wool enough to see her looking to her right.

“That rack?” she asked, raising her arm to point.

“Yes,” hissed the salesman. “You’ll have to sign a return slip.”

“What about this one over here?”

“No. Just that one.”

“Well,” she said. “I suppose that’s alright. I’ll let my son pick one out.” He hurriedly crawled out from behind the clothes rack on the side furthest from his mother, then, trying to hide his excitement, walked around to meet her.

“There you are,” she said. Her face was flushed and her eyes were watery, but she pointed to a rack with a steady finger and said, “Hurry up. Go pick one out.” He eagerly went over to the rack and started inspecting the jackets, appraising each for color and coolness. His grin changed to a frown as he realized that the only good ones were way too small or way too big.

“Mom,” he asked as she came up to stand beside him, “can’t I look at another rack?”

“No.”

“Why can’t I get one of those?” he asked, pointing to the Los Angeles Raider’s jackets prominently displayed on a rack by the walkway.

“Because you can’t.”

“But why not? Can’t you just pay the difference?”

“Because,” she said, “it doesn’t work that way. Pick one so we can go home.”

“Never mind. I don’t want one.”

“There’s nothing wrong with these, Sean,” she said, hugging her shapeless bag to her breast. “Hurry up.”

“NO!”

“Stop being stubborn. Pick one or I’ll pick one for you.”

He knew people were watching him, maybe even Eric parading around in a new pair of Levi’s. He grabbed one and handed it to her. At least it’s black, he thought, and it doesn’t have a hood.

“Here,” he said, angrily.

“Try it on,” she instructed. The man with the blue tie watched while he slipped it on.

“Too small,” said his mother. “Find one with some growing room.” With his ears burning, he grabbed one off the rack, tried it on quickly to his mother’s satisfaction, then handed it to her, saying he’d meet her in the car.

“Not bad for your old mom, huh?” asked his mother. She lightly tossed the new bag carrying his new jacket through the open door onto the seat. She lifted and pulled the big car door shut. Her purse clinked and clacked as she felt for her keys, digging her way past all the junk he knew was in there. It was filled with everything from gum and peppermint candy to seldom used make-up and pencils with the tips broken off, dried out

magic markers and some scraps of paper. Floating around in there somewhere too was the checkbook she had refused to use.

"I told you I didn't want it."

"Yeah, we all heard you." The car started with a rumble and jerked as she put it in drive.

"I'm not going to wear it," he said. He kept his face toward the window, refusing to look at her.

"Why not?" she asked. "That's a sixty dollar jacket we got for free."

"I mean it. I'll just freeze at the bus stop every morning." He glanced at her, saw she wasn't paying attention, then angrily began to peel away the shiny chrome paint on the door handle. He did it unconsciously, without looking.

"How about we celebrate with some ice cream? We can stop at the Dairy Queen on the way home."

"Not hungry," he said.

He wouldn't let his body touch the bag with the jacket in it during their ride home, which wasn't easy to do. Twice, around sharp turns, the plastic brushed against his elbow. His mother kept one hand on the wheel and rested her right arm comfortably on the bag as if it was an armrest. They drove past the Dairy Queen without stopping.

They arrived just as his father was getting ready to leave for his second shift. Recently, against his mother's wishes, his father had begun working an extra shift at night and they hardly saw him anymore. Sean didn't know why his Dad worked so much. Though they never gave him any money, his parents seemed to have enough to buy new tires for mom's car and his dad's truck. He'd even been with his father the

week before when he bought a brand spanking new water heater when they already had one. And he had paid for it with a check.

They had quit yelling at each other about a week ago, but he could tell the argument wasn't over. He saw it every night when she would make his father's lunch out of the dinner he would be missing. His father had yet to complain about the spaghetti or lima bean sandwiches.

His mother had him try on the jacket and model it in the kitchen.

"Nifty," said his father, looking at the bright blue star on the back with the grey football helmet in the middle. "How much?"

"Not a penny," she said. She leaned back against the counter exposing her belly smile and unbuttoned pants straining to stay zipped. Sean looked away. He watched his father slip on his boots, lacing them up with practiced ease.

"It wasn't easy," she said. "I had to argue with the salesman."

His keys jingled their way onto his belt clip. He then put on his jacket followed by his hat.

"I think the manager was afraid to come out and face me," she said, eyes still on his father.

"I bet. Have you seen my work gloves?" he asked.

She suddenly seemed to deflate, her air of pride escaping in a sigh. "I'll get them," Sean said. He took off his jacket and tossed it onto the table where it slid off onto the floor then ran to his parent's bedroom. He returned with his father's leather gloves, the palm blackened with use and the fingers hardened into a half-grip.

"Not those, my winter gloves. Never mind," said his father, standing up.

His mother picked up the jacket, brushed it off, and hung it on the seldom-used coat rack by the kitchen door while Sean and his father watched.

“The Cowboys are a helluva team,” said his father. “I’ll bet they make it to the Super Bowl this year.” Then he left.

Yeah, thought Sean, watching his mom, maybe.

THE KING OF PORN

I was twelve years old when I became the king of porn at Westover Jr. High School. It didn't happen out of the emerging sexual desire that all boys going through puberty and wet dreams have. At least not totally. No, it was a business venture, fueled by the desire for an item that haunted my thoughts from the moment I laid eyes on it – a \$169 bright red Huffy dirt bike with mag wheels. It hung from the ceiling of the sports department at Montgomery Wards. I was entranced by chrome handlebars, off-road knobby tires, fire engine red paint, glittering reflectors, and a shiny black imitation leather seat that just beckoned my butt like a La-Z-Boy does an old man. I had to have it, would do anything to get it, and after one glimpse, I was set on a path of depravity that would forever leave a black mark on my seventh grade record.

In cases like this, kids usually blame their parents and deny all responsibility for their actions. I won't do that. I had wanted the bike for Christmas but didn't get it. Instead, my father had bought one of the new VCRs that had become popular that year. He bought it as a gift for the family rather than focusing on our individual wants. No, I won't blame him because he valued what was best for all of us like any father would – and should. My parents explained that to me when I sat dejected amidst boxes of socks and Fruit-of-the-Loom underwear. Soon thereafter my birthday came around and again, no Huffy bike to free me from the confines of my backyard. Instead, I got a plastic skateboard, and my father surprised us with a cable box for the TV that gave us 36

channels to enjoy, including a subscription to the Playboy channel for him. Although I had never heard of the channel, I'd seen enough of their magazines to know I would like it. My friend Dave had two Playboys stuck in a Sanka coffee can and hidden in his garage. We looked at them often. Only too late would my father realize the Pandora's Box he had brought home.

Mom worked all day and usually fell asleep early after dinner while Dad worked the night shift. This left me plenty of time to watch TV unsupervised. My interest began out of an innocent curiosity for the channel Dad wouldn't let me and my brother watch. It was inevitable that one night I would finally give in.

In nervous anticipation I checked the driveway to make sure it was empty. My father's green Chevy Impala was gone with nothing but the usual oil stain remaining. I went to my parent's bedroom where my mother was sleeping and called her name softly to make sure she was knocked out. I turned off all the lights and seated myself in front of our old 21-inch Zenith Super Special. All was ready. I turned the volume knob down low and clicked the TV on.

Sitting as close to it as possible, I slid the white, plastic lever on the cable box to channel 33, and there she was. Eva Andrada, Miss September, beckoning to me as she frolicked in the ocean surf. I was so enraptured that my Dad could've been standing behind me and I wouldn't have noticed. But she was only the beginning. It was three a.m. when I finally turned off the TV and slid the lever back to the Disney Channel. With tired eyes, a dry mouth, and tight shorts, I made my way quickly but quietly back to my room. After a few tense moments beneath my sheets, I thought dreamily about all that I had learned of sex in the last five hours, more than I had ever thought was possible.

Satisfied and content, I drifted off to sleep thinking about waves and women, and how they just seemed so perfect together.

The next day I told my friends about what I'd done, what I had seen. But they didn't believe me. They called me a liar and dared me to prove it, so, with the family VCR and a blank tape, I did. I recorded a show called "Electric Blue"—the announcer pronounced it very seductively, *Electric Blue*, which set fire to my imagination. I taped it to show my friends after school and, after watching it three times, they believed me. Immediately they began asking me to borrow it so we had to work out a viewing schedule among us. Joey could peruse it from the time he got home from school around three until his parents got home around five. He would then meet Mike at his house where he could watch it until about seven when his Dad got off his afternoon shift. Dave was stuck being last because he lived with his grandma who had glaucoma, was partially deaf in one ear, and had a gimpy leg, which meant he had the most freedom to watch and hide the tape in case of a near discovery. Unknown to me at the time, my network had begun to take form.

Within a week they tired of sharing and wanted their own copies so I borrowed my aunt's VCR from next door, supposedly to copy rental tapes, and began fulfilling a desperate need for my friends. I charged them a blank tape and five bucks each for the risks I was taking, and thus was my business enterprise born.

After two weeks I had made thirty dollars off of them and I started thinking that if I earned enough money I could buy my dream bike on my own rather than wait for Mom and Dad to do it. Meanwhile, word of the merchandise I was providing had leaked and began to spread through the undercurrents of the seventh grade locker-

rooms. Guys I hardly knew were coming up to me in phys-ed. and on the playground, in the lunch line and in the hallway. Before I knew what was happening I had orders for sixteen tapes, all of them paid for up-front. Add that to the previous \$20, and I was already more than halfway to cutting those cables that kept my beautiful bike out of my reach.

After that I borrowed my aunt's VCR nearly every day and began churning out episodes of *Electric Blue*, *Naked Nurses*, and *Blondo the Nude Detective*. I spent so much time copying them and fearing possible exposure that I hardly watched them myself anymore. But while I had kicked the habit, my friends and classmates were being sucked deeper into their addiction. Pretty soon I had branched out to the eighth graders and my business began getting too big for me to handle alone. I enlisted my buddies, Joe, Mike, and Dave to help me, promising them free movies in return.

So now Dave would take his grandma's VCR over to Mike's and make copies while I provided fresh merchandise from my father's Playboy station. Joe kept track of the increasing number of orders coming in. Within a month from the time I started, I had made over two hundred dollars, enough to get my bike and still have some money left over for knee-pads and racing shirts to wear when riding. I told myself I was going to stop then and even informed my friends/employees that I was going to close up shop now that my goal had been met. Needless to say, they were not happy, and threatened to open their own business without me. But I knew that I was receiving too much attention and it was only a matter of time before I was caught. I had made my decision and I stuck to it, until recess of the next day.

That afternoon I had my usual group of cronies around me begging for more tapes. They held out grungy bills and baggies of change; one guy even offered me his lunch for a week but I had made it a policy not to accept I.O.U's. Then it happened. The crowd began to quiet and above my pleading classmates I saw a bloated, pug-nosed face that no mother could ever love coming my way. The large body beneath it parted the crowd in front of me like a shark's fin cutting through the ocean. Before I had time to run, before I had time to hide, HE stood in front of me – two hundred pounds of hamhocks and lard held together by a hatred for anything and everything that represented authority, or anyone who got in his way. He was Rick Lucas, supreme bully and three time ninth grader.

I stood alone before him. Frantically I tried to think of a reason for him to be mad at me, but I couldn't. Not that he needed one. He stepped closer, reached behind him with his left hand and I cringed at what weapon he might pull out. I had heard rumors of him using Chinese num-chuks on his victims but I knew of no eyewitnesses. He brought his hand forward and I squinted in a vain attempt to prepare for the pain. Then I noticed what he held. It wasn't num-chuks or any other beating tool. In his hand were a used videotape and a crumpled five-dollar bill. Shaking only slightly, I reached out and took them. He then raised his empty hand, smacked me lightly on the cheek and said, "Give me a copy of the best you got, kid." Then he left. Whether I wanted to be or not, I was back in business and feeling secure with the blessings of the powerful.

After that, I quickly rose in the ranks of popularity to a level previously unknown to a seventh grader at Westover Jr. High. Everyone was suddenly my friend and the ninth grade guys were giving me high-fives in the hallway. With Lucas's approval, not to

mention the free movie bribes, the other bullies left me alone. Girls became attracted to my new bad boy image and rumors began to circulate that so and so caught me and such and such a girl making out in dark corners and meeting for after-school rendezvous. Except for some inexperienced, sloppy kissing with Kara McMasters behind the Monkey Bars at lunch, they were indeed just rumors, but it didn't matter. It all added to my reputation.

I began to lose track of why I had originally started this enterprise and the dirt bike was pushed to the back of my mind. I had spent some of my earnings on a new pair of shoes and a watch to keep up appearances and at the pinnacle of popularity I walked the halls in my red Converse Chucks and bright yellow Swatch watch like a God, the physical embodiment of coolness.

I had been dodging the principal, Mr. Barry, or Dinglebarry as we liked to call him, for weeks. He knew something was going on but wasn't quite sure what. His magnified eyes had been watching me through his Coke-bottle glasses ever since the first week of school when I accidentally started a food fight in the cafeteria with the tossing of some cold Tater-Tots. He strode the school grounds like an over-weight cop on the beat and I knew that flatfoot had it out for me. But my business had grown so big I was having a hard time keeping it under wraps.

I decided I had to cut back on orders and, following the tradition of supply and demand, raise my prices to maintain my income. I felt secure in the fact that my post-pubescent friends would fork over the cash without question to get their fantasy fix. I was wrong. The price was set at ten bucks and a blank tape and many of my classmates

couldn't afford it. No sooner had I refused a couple of kids for lack of funds than my mini-empire came crashing down around me.

Dinglebarry came for me near the end of fourth period in Mrs. Cain's Geography class. He entered without a word and slowly walked to the front of the room. My number-two pencil had become slippery in my grasp and I slumped in my seat. Mrs. Cain was standing in front of America, pictured on the map behind her. Dinglebarry stood opposite her, blocking most of Asia from my view. I remember thinking, hoping that maybe he had an important message for her and he had to deliver it personally because the PA system was out. Then they turned as one, focused their eyes on me, and I knew the jig was up. Probably someone who couldn't afford the rise in prices had ratted on me for not selling them a tape.

I followed him out of the room and down the green carpeted hall to his office in a silence broken only by the thigh-rub of his polyester pants. I was a little afraid but I knew the worst they could do to me, some whacks with the paddle and detention, was nothing compared to what my father would do if he found out. I had been to the office before for various misdeeds and I wasn't really that worried. But when I saw the tense looks on the secretary's usually smiling face, I knew that something was out of the ordinary.

That something was my father waiting for me in Mr. Barry's office. They had called him out of bed and his red-rimmed eyes stared at me with a promise of pain that made my butt swell in anticipation. I tried to step away from him but he reached out and caught my elbow in an iron grip numbing, my arm down to my fingers. My father's

physical presence in that room made Mr. Barry (an imposing person in his own right) look like a plump Teddy Bear beside a Grizzly.

“How should we deal with this?” asked Mr. Barry as he squeezed his bulky frame behind his desk.

“I’ll deal with it,” said my father.

“Selling pornography to minors is a rather serious matter, Mr. Gallagher,” said Mr. Barry. He withdrew three tapes they had found hidden in my locker and placed them on his desk in front of my father. They were titled “The Best of E.B.,” edited versions of *Electric Blue*. It was my most requested tape and by far some of my best work.

My dad looked at me and I could see him connecting all the pieces in his tired mind. He knew what I had done and how I had done it.

“In cases like this we usually punish them with detention,” said Mr. Barry. He was regaining his confidence and leaned slightly forward in his chair. “And paddling.”

My father turned back to face him and stated calmly, but with finality, “Give him all the detention you want. I’ll take care of the rest.”

Without another word or a look back at my flustered principal, my father took me by the elbow and steered me out of the office. Just then the lunch bell rang and my friends and peers came pouring out of their classes into the main hallway. My father half-pulled, half-carried me down the long, long hall, leaving a wake of silence behind us. He said not a word as we walked the corridor and I struggled to keep my composure, at least until we left the building.

My fame was well known and there was no question as to what had happened. My fellow students were watching the death of a legend and giving their last respects. I

knew come Monday that I would be just another seventh grader, but also ridiculed and cast out for daring to become more than I was meant to be.

But that was OK. After I regained feeling in my behind, I realized that I had served an important function, easing the strain of sexual awakening as my friends headed on their path to adulthood. And in the coming weeks while I rode through my neighborhood on my brand new, bright red Huffy dirt bike, I kept thinking about the three important lessons I had learned from this experience: never tell your mom where you got the money from, never overcharge your customers, and never, never lose sight of your dreams.

IN BETWEEN

She was a pig. She was a fat, ugly, fake-blonde pig, and Sean felt like shouting it out the car window when Richard said they were going to pick her up before they went to the mall.

“Keep your mouth shut about this to Mom,” Richard told him.

“You’re supposed to take me to the mall, not her.”

Sean had tried to say it without raising his voice, but his brother seemed to notice some hidden sarcasm, as he usually did, and punched him in the arm.

“You’ll get a lot more than that if you tell Mom,” said Richard. “I’ll get you to the mall, don’t worry.”

Sean hadn’t yelled when his brother hit him. He didn’t even say ouch, just sucked in air between clenched teeth, then rubbed his bruised shoulder through his Dallas Cowboys jacket. He knew it was better not to say anything.

Still, keeping quiet was a hard thing to do in Mom’s small Chevy Cavalier with a thirty minute ride ahead of you up into the mountains. Sue Dalton, the pig, lived up on the Kingwood Pike where there were still patches of snow in the shadows of cliffs and in the ditches along the roads. Most of the people who lived around those parts worked for the lumber companies, if they were lucky. If not, then they collected welfare while waiting for the next temporary hiring spree. At school they called them “Pikers” behind their jean-jacketed backs. But not too loud because they tended to have a temper and liked to fight, even the girls. Sue was like that. She was the meanest, most feared girl at Westover Jr. High school and she picked more fights with guys than with girls.

Like most guys he knew, Sean believed that you should never, under any circumstances, hit a girl. "Only a coward attacks a woman," his father always said. Sean believed that and had never felt the urge to hit a girl, until he met Sue.

He was in eighth grade and had just turned fifteen when he found out that Sue, a two time ninth grader, had taken a liking to him. One day Tonya Weaver, one of Sue's cronies, handed him a letter. It was a plain sheet of paper, elaborately folded so that it couldn't easily be opened. Inside, written in pink, it said, "I really think you're cool. Do you want to go together? Love, Suzie." Sean had immediately written "No" at the bottom in black. Then, to soften the blow, he changed it to "No, thank you," before sending it back.

After school he was talking with friends when Sue approached, followed by Tonya and some other girls. They all had on acid washed jean jackets; the blue and white marbled design had gone out of style the year before. Their hair was teased into frozen halo-like poofs that reeked of Aqua-Net. Sean's friends stepped aside as she walked up to him.

"Do you want to go with me or not?" she said, hands on hips. She was a large girl, "big boned" as his mother would say, and a good six inches taller than he, twelve if you included the hair.

"Look, I really think you're a nice girl," he said, "but I'm just not interested."

He barely got the words out before she grabbed him by the shoulders and brought her knee up into his groin. He fell to the ground like a bird shot out of the air, his eyes glazed, legs folded to his chest. From then on he was known as the guy who got the shit kicked out of him by a girl. Not long after that fight she started dating his brother.

Sean could feel the air blowing in from Richard's partly open window as the little brown hatchback wound its way into the hills. He reached down and pushed the temperature control to red. Richard looked over but didn't say anything, but he didn't bother to roll up his window.

"You know you're not supposed to drive up here," said Sean.

"So."

"Dad said to take me to the mall and that was it." Sean looked at his brother's lean face. Patches of hair had begun to grow on his chin and cheeks, varying from blonde to dark brown. He was wearing one of their dad's hats, the bill smudged from the grasp of grease-covered fingers. The words on the front had peeled away, leaving only a slightly cleaner outline of the name of the company that their father worked for, Wierton Mines.

"We'll be screwed if the roads start to freeze," said Sean. "Dad warned you about the tires being bald."

"They're not gonna freeze."

"How do you know for sure?"

"Because I know," said Richard and he said it with such confidence that Sean could almost believe him.

"How?"

"Because I said so, now shut the fuck up."

His dad had used the same logic earlier when he asked why Richard had to take him to the mall instead of him.

“Because I said so,” his dad had stated. His father sat on his bed and pulled off his steel-toed boots.

“Then why can’t Mom take me?”

“She’s making dinner and I’ve got to get some sleep.” He looked up at Sean standing beside him and said, “He’s not going to do anything. He knows better now.” Sean couldn’t wait to tell him how wrong he’d been.

Even though he expected it to happen sooner or later, Sean was still surprised when he found out that his brother had actually been arrested. He had expected to be older when it happened, maybe married with kids of his own when he got the call from his mother saying, “They finally caught your brother. He’s being held without bond.” Then he would be able to tell his parents that he’d known it would happen eventually, that he had warned them but they hadn’t listened. But when the call came it wasn’t his mother on the other line. It was the Sheriff, and Richard was only seventeen.

The police had called at about one a.m., just an hour after his dad had gotten back from his afternoon shift. Sean had been awake reading and was shocked when the phone rang. So seldom did it ring that late, he almost believed it quit working after nine. His father’s angry voice tempted him down the stairs to the kitchen. His dad was lacing up his work boots while his mother leaned against the doorway wearing his dad’s heavy, burgundy robe. Through the slit in the front he could see her light green nightgown, the color of an after dinner mint. His dad told Sean’s mother to go back to sleep. “I’ll take care of it,” he assured her.

Sean hurried to his room, threw on some clothes, and met his father at the kitchen door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” asked his father.

“I want to see.” He waited for the “no.”

“Suit yourself.”

The jail wasn’t at all what Sean expected. It was downtown, like on television, but it wasn’t in an imposing stone building with guards in snappy blue uniforms watching the doors. They had to walk behind the old courthouse and down a flight of stairs to the basement where a plain looking wooden door was marked “Jail” in black stick-on letters with gold edges. Inside he saw four green surplus metal desks with three rather plain looking men behind them. No phones were ringing, no inmates cursed at the policemen from behind bars; in fact, there weren’t even any bars in sight. He saw that someone had put some flowers on the sill of a tiny window in the top of the wall by the door. A dusty radio on top of a filing cabinet was playing music from the local radio station, WVAQ. He’d never thought that cops would be interested in the weekly top forty music countdown.

A deputy led them to the Sheriff’s office where they were invited to sit down.

“How are you, Tom?” asked the Sheriff, pouring some coffee. “Haven’t seen you around town lately.”

“I’ve been busy. With work and all.”

“I know what you mean.” The Sheriff handed him a steaming, Styrofoam cup.

“What do I have to do to get him out?” his father asked. His dad just sat there, real still with his hands laced over his belly and his bloodshot eyes watching the Sheriff.

The chairs they sat in looked like they came out of the dressing room of a department store, chrome frames with worn, plastic tan cushions. They were low to the floor and his father sat forward, his back straight, legs uncrossed.

“Well, Tom,” said the Sheriff, “the other boys confessed to stealing the car. Your boy just went along for the ride so I can release him to you. I’ve reduced the charge down to vandalism with a fine, that way it won’t go on his record.” The Sheriff walked around his metal desk and took a seat in a high-backed leather chair.

“Thanks, Joe.”

“No problem. These things happen.”

“How much is the fine?” asked his dad.

“One hundred and fifty.”

His dad had been reaching for his wallet, then stopped and instead pulled the checkbook out of his front pocket. It was dark blue and the plastic cover was cracking at the edges where it folded over. On the cover was a yellow smiley face sticker Sean had put on it a long time ago when they were giving them away at the bank. The yellow and white sticker was turning brown from handling and Sean regretted having put it there.

“I’m sorry, Tom,” said the Sheriff, “but we can’t accept checks for fines no more. Too many of them been bouncing. You have a credit card?”

Sean stared at his hands in his lap and watched the fingers wrestle with one another, intent on not looking at the Sheriff or his dad.

“No,” said his dad. “Not one that I can use.” He put the checkbook back in his pocket and lifted the coffee cup to his lips with both hands, as if to warm them. The

Sheriff leaned back in his chair. It squeaked beneath his weight, sounding to Sean like fingernails on a chalkboard.

“Well, you could leave him here and then I’d consider it time served and erase the fine. It’s almost two a.m. and you can pick him up at nine. But then it’ll go on his juvenile record.”

Sean watched his father, hoping that he would take the deal. He thought about all the things he could do with so much money. He could get a new pair of Reebok hightops, the blue and yellow ones, same as those worn by the Lakers and Magic Johnson. Or a brown leather bomber jacket from JC Penny’s. Maybe some Polo shirts from Stone and Thomas at the mall. Anything, thought Sean, would be better than wasting it on his brother.

“Look Joe, if you let me write a check I can post date it to Monday. I get paid then and I give you my word it’ll go through.”

Sean, with chin on chest, put his hands into the pockets of his jacket and tried to sink into his seat. The Sheriff leaned forward with more squeaks, then steeped his fingers on the green surplus desk.

“All right,” said the Sheriff. “Since I know you and all, I’ll accept it. But remember, I know where you live.” The Sheriff smiled at them both. His dad finished his coffee, tossed the cup into the gray metal wastebasket by his chair, and once again pulled out the plastic checkbook.

“That you do,” said his dad. “That you do.”

#

Sean couldn't help but get angry as he thought about all that money. Richard had been grounded for three weeks. After two he was allowed to use the car again, but for errands only. Sean didn't like being considered an errand, but he resented his brother even more for using him as a loophole in his punishment just so he could see the pig.

"It's getting dark," said Sean, looking out the car window.

"So?"

"It's almost six o'clock and the mall closes at nine."

"We'll make it."

Sean watched the scenery as they wound their way around the curves. He had been up here about two months ago with his father and Richard to pick up Sue and bring her to Christmas dinner. He remembered passing the small windowless white church perched on the edge of the main road like a filling station. It had one of those big yellow signs with pop-in plastic letters in the parking lot like you see at grand openings of new stores. Beneath the lighted arrow it proclaimed "Jesus Saves" in bold black letters. He remembered how ridiculous he had thought it was and how he had said as much aloud as the passed.

"What's wrong with it?" his brother had asked.

"It's obvious. Of course Jesus Saves. What else would he do? If he didn't then nobody would go to church." Sean was squeezed in between them on the bench seat of his dad's Ford F-150. He was frustrated because he knew once they picked up Sue he would be forced into the back to find a seat among all of his dad's tools and cast-off

Pepsi cans. Although the truck bed had a top on it, the wind still whistled through the cracks and you could hardly hear yourself think over the rumble of the engine.

"So stupid," said Sean as the little Cavalier chugged past the church.

"What?" asked Richard.

"Nothing."

"Then quit mumbling."

The car slowed as they topped a rise in the two-lane road. To the right was a schoolbox toppled over on its side. He had seen many of them along the main road, set up for kids to stand in while waiting for the bus on cold winter days. This one looked like it had been down awhile because of the grass growing up around it. Spray painted on the side facing the road was written "Randy + Tonya" in flame-orange. It marked the turnoff for Sue's house.

The car bumped and shook on bad struts as Richard pulled off the blacktop and onto the gravel road. Almost immediately he hit a big puddle filled with muddy water that made the muffler scrape as he pulled out of it.

"Stick to the sides where there are fewer holes," said Sean.

"Do you want to drive?" asked Richard.

Sean wanted to say yes, but he mumbled, "No."

"Then don't be a backseat driver." Richard turned the wheel and started hugging the berm as they jostled their way into the woods.

Sean's temper flared, flaming up his chest and into the back of his throat. He didn't think his brother knew how to do much of anything, except get into trouble. He

was good at that. When Sean and his father were bringing Richard home from the police station he couldn't even explain why he had done it.

"You had to have a reason for doing something so incredibly stupid," his dad had said.

Sean was in his usual place in his father's truck, squeezed between his seemingly massive father and the tall, too lean form of his brother.

"What were you thinking?"

"I guess I wasn't!" said Richard.

"Damn right you weren't!"

"What a surprise," said Sean.

Richard viciously dug his elbow into Sean's side.

"Stay out of this," said his father.

With his father beside him, Sean felt confident enough to jab his brother with his elbow. Quick as lightning, Richard charlie-horsed him in the leg with the knuckle of his right hand.

"Dad!" cried Sean.

They were just reaching the top of Dorsey's Knob as their father pulled to the side of the road and slammed on the brakes, forcing Sean and Richard to brace themselves to keep from banging their heads.

"That's enough, both of you," yelled their dad. "Richard, get into the back."

"I don't want to sit in the back. Make Sean do it."

"I said get into the back!"

Richard stared at his father and Sean sensed rebellion. Richard's hands were fisted and his jaw clamped as tight as a pair of vice-grip pliers. Sean tried to disappear into the seat, keeping himself as quiet as he could.

"Why are you always taking his side," yelled Richard.

"Do I have to drag you out?" asked his father.

Richard stared at him, his eyes vibrating. "I'd rather sit by myself anyway," he said as he opened the door and slammed it behind him. Sean quickly scooted across the bench seat and rolled the window down to let in some air.

"Good riddance," he said.

"Sean," said his father. "You're not helping matters any."

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"But--"

"Not another word."

When they got home Sean hurried to his room, slamming every door on the way. He didn't know what was happening between his brother and father downstairs. He didn't care. Probably just another argument, he thought. Dad will yell, Richard will yell, mom will keep them in their corners, and nothing will change.

The car bounced its way up the empty gravel driveway of Sue's house. It looked to Sean like a garage. Its walls were cement block all the way up to the flat roof with no windows that he could see. A stovepipe came out the side facing the driveway and the air shimmered around its cherry red base. Beside the door in the front was a wooden sign

that announced this was the Dalton residence. They parked over a large oil spot, a giant inkblot on the pale gray gravel.

Richard turned off the car and took the keys out of the ignition.

"Get in the back," he said. Without waiting for an answer he got out and crossed the front yard, careful to stay on the patio stones and out of the mud.

Sean stayed in the front seat, arguing with himself about whether or not to move. He decided to hold his position. After all, he was going along with Richard driving out here. Letting him ride shotgun was the least his brother could do.

Ten minutes passed and the car was starting to get colder. Sean zipped up his jacket and put his hands in his pockets.

"What a prick," he said. Richard was often the cause of his discomfort. He was always thinking about himself with no regard for anyone else, especially not Sean. The day after Richard had been arrested Sean had basketball practice after school. He was waiting outside the gym for his mom to pick him up.

"You're late," said Sean as he stepped into his mom's green Chevy Impala.

"We had to find your brother."

"Why? What happened?" asked Sean.

"He skipped school and didn't come home."

Typical, he thought. "Wasn't he grounded?"

His mother just looked at him, then focused her attention back to the road.

"Where did you find him?" asked Sean.

"At the Rio Grande restaurant."

"The one by Hills Department Store?"

"Yeah," said his mom.

Sean was mad. Mad for having to wait out in the cold for an hour while his brother was eating Mexican food in a warm restaurant. He had skipped school with Sue and some of her other friends. They had all tried to sneak out without paying the bill, but Richard and Sue got caught. The manager had threatened to call the police if they didn't pay up. Richard had called his dad to bring him some money. That's how they found him.

"Should've left him there," said Sean.

"He's your brother, Sean," said his mom. Sean wanted to say, "So what. That's no excuse," but he didn't. Maybe it was the way she gripped the smooth black steering wheel, choking it until her knuckles shone white and bloodless.

"He's your brother."

The car was cold enough for Sean to see his breath by the time Richard finally emerged with Sue, walking hand and hoof. They kept close together, whispering into each other's ear as if sharing a personal secret. His brother was walking a little taller and he didn't seem to care that his jacket was open and his shirt was untucked. Sue stepped carefully across the patio stones while Richard happily trudged alongside her through the mud. Eager to get going, Sean jumped into the backseat as they approached the car.

Richard opened the door for Sue, standing patiently while she squeezed herself in. She had the same acid-washed jacket on with matching jeans that she wore at school all the time. The jeans were hard to miss because they were tighter on her than an Ace bandage. The sides were laced together all the way up to the hips rather than sewn and

you could see pale white skin bubble through the gaps. Sean and the guys at school would joke about how revealing the tight jeans really were, how they could see the outline of her vagina. They could tell she was a slut by how deep the seam pressed into her crotch. Besides, she had the biggest breasts in school and they noticed how she always seemed to wear tight shirts or low cut tank tops that let made them easy to see when she leaned forward. Sean didn't understand how his brother could date such a girl.

Richard climbed in on the driver's side and Sean couldn't keep himself from saying, "It's about time."

"Do you have a problem?" asked Richard, his eyes challenging Sean from the rearview mirror.

"We'd better go or we'll never get there," said Sean.

"We'll leave when I'm good and ready."

Richard leaned over in the seat to meet Sue's liplock. Sean turned his head to look out the window, sinking his fingers deeper into his pockets for warmth. He could at least start the car and turn on the heat, thought Sean. Up front they slurped an end to their kiss and Richard revved up the engine of the little hatchback.

"Hey, Seannyboy," said Sue from the front seat. He could hear her wink at him. Pretending not to notice, he rested his forehead against the glass and looked outside.

The wind had picked up and brushed the unmowed grass flat and the sky took on the cold color of a silver coin. Gray snow the size of cereal flakes began to fall and Sean watched them slowly melt, clinging to the teary window. The car slid more than backed out of the driveway and Richard pushed the brakes until they came to a stop halfway into

the road. He kicked it into drive and squealed his way through the potholes towards the main road. Sean wasn't surprised when they didn't make it.

He had heard people say "Always turn into the slide," and that's just what Richard tried to do. When he lost control on the first hill he slammed on the brakes and cut the wheels to the right, into the slide and directly into the ditch at the side of the road.

"Jesus Christ, Rich!" said Sean when the car came to a jarring stop. "What the hell are you doing?"

Richard had pushed himself into his seat, his arms braced against the steering wheel, elbows locked.

"Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

The front right wheel was in the ditch, but otherwise the car seemed undamaged. Not so for Sean. He hadn't worn his seatbelt and had hit the back of Sue's seat with his head. He tried to open the door but it was stuck, the bottom edge wedged into the dirt slope.

"We'll never get out now," said Sean. "I told you not to come out here."

"Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you."

The hatchback was tilted at an angle towards the right, the front end dipping lower than the rear. Richard was cursing continuously and banging the dashboard with his fists. He seems all right, thought Sean. Then he saw Sue's head lolling forward as if she were a puppet with the string cut loose.

"Sue?" said Sean.

She was strapped in nice and tight, the seatbelt cutting through her perm and anchoring her to the seat.

"Hey, Sue." Sean straightened her head and felt a growing bump on the right side, just above her ear. "I think she banged her head on the side window."

Richard had quit pounding the dashboard and was staring at her.

"But she had her seatbelt on," he said. Sean put his hand in front of her mouth and felt the heat of her breath against his palm.

"Way to go," he said.

"It wasn't my fault the car slid into the ditch," said Richard. He too put his hand up to her mouth. "I can feel her breathing. You felt it, didn't you?"

"She's probably got a concussion," said Sean. He remembered that people always had concussions on TV when they banged their heads and that they would eventually wake up and be ok. But he wasn't going to tell Richard that.

"She'll probably die," said Sean, releasing her head and letting it rest against the window.

"Shit," said Richard. "I'll go for help. Just stay here and watch her. Maybe you should lay the seat back."

"You're not supposed to move people if their neck is broke."

"Her neck's not broken."

"Could be."

"Just watch her, I'll be back as fast as I can." He forced his door open and let it shut behind him. Sean didn't remember seeing any other houses along the road other than Sue's. He wasn't too worried, though, because he knew that his dad would come

looking for them when they didn't return home. It wouldn't be hard to figure out where they had gone. Dad had forbidden Richard from seeing Sue after the restaurant incident.

After paying the bill at The Rio Grande restaurant, his dad had driven Sue to her house and then brought Richard home. Sean would have liked to have been in the truck during that ride. As it was, he was waiting in the kitchen with his mother when they got back. Richard came in first, his father right behind him, his feet stomping heavily.

"Tell me what in God's name is wrong with you!" said his father.

Sean was sitting at the table beside his mom drinking Coke out of a large plastic McDonald's glass with a faded picture of Kermit the Frog on the side. The Muppet reminded Sean of his brother: bug eyes, no chin, long skinny arms and legs, nothing but bone and gristle, and as slimy as a frog's hide.

"I'll tell you what's wrong with him," he said.

"Shut up, Sean," said his dad.

"Tom," said his mom. "Calm down."

"Just leave me alone," yelled Richard. "All of you." He pushed past his dad and into the living room.

"I'm not finished talking to you," said his dad, grabbing Richard by the arm and pulling him back into the room.

Richard spun around, fist at the ready, and punched his father in the side of the head, breaking the plastic earpiece of his glasses. Sean had been hit like that by his brother before, the knuckles jabbed into his temple, so he knew it had to hurt.

His father just stood there, glasses hanging on one ear, retaining his tight grip on Richard's arm. Although Richard was as tall as his dad, he was about one hundred pounds lighter and half as wide. It didn't take much imagination to figure out that there was still muscle beneath his father's growing potbelly. Sean remembered getting smacks with a wooden paddle custom made for him and his brother when they were younger. The welts on his backside and legs were gone but the impression it left on him wasn't. He had a healthy fear of punishment from his father that Richard had evidently forgotten.

"You want to hit me?" said his father, taking off his broken glasses and setting them on the counter. "Do you think that'll solve your problem? Well come on then!"

"Tom," said his mother, "stop."

"I'll take care of this." His father's anger swelled to a blister, his face red and his patience irritated to the point of bursting. This wasn't Sean's father. His father was always in control and was never one to lose it to the point that his hands shook. He didn't recognize this person and it frightened him.

"Well, come on. You're a big man, stealing cars, running away from home. You want to blame someone? Think you can hit me like you do your brother? Then do it, damnit!"

Sean had been in many fights over the years with his brother and had seen Richard get this empty look in his eye, almost as if he wasn't there anymore. Then he would fly into a rage, arms flailing, legs kicking, his temper exploding like a soda can opened after being violently shaken. That's what he did now.

His father took the pounding for a few seconds then he too seemed to let loose. He easily brushed aside Richard's blows and smacked him repeatedly against the side of

his face and head. Richard's glasses went flying and it didn't take long before he fell to the floor, arms held before his face trying to ward off the large, callused blows of his father's hands. They were large hands, each finger fat as a broom handle and roughened by wear. He carried his work beneath his nails, coal dust mixed with hydraulic oil, and in the wrinkled skin around his knuckles. Sean had seen his father's hands carry cement blocks, tear apart an engine, and, more rarely, cradle the smaller hand of his mother, but he'd never seen them do this.

"Tom," screamed his mother, "that's enough."

Sean half stood and watched Richard lying on the floor, struggling beneath his father's anger.

"I'm tired of this. Do you hear me?" asked his father. "I'm tired."

His father wasn't stopping and his mom was desperately pulling on his beefy arm to keep him from hitting his brother. Sean wanted to say something, but he didn't know what.

"He's your son," screamed his mom, her short frame trying to place herself between her husband and Richard. "You're hurting him!"

She finally forced her way between them and his father pulled back. His breath came in gasps like a fish trying to breathe unfamiliar air. Sean's brother just lay there, his legs moving slowly in uncoordinated motions; his nose was bleeding and his eyes were open but unfocused.

"Sean, get some ice," said his dad. He rushed to comply, stepping carefully past his kneeling mother, keeping his mouth shut while he emptied the ice tray into a dishtowel with blue flowers printed on it then handed the pack to his father.

His dad bent down to help Richard to his feet. They were both unbalanced, almost falling back to the floor. He walked Richard to bed, his left arm around his shoulder for support, his right hand holding the ice pack to his nose. Sean wasn't sure what had happened. He felt like opening a window and asking his mother if it was over.

"You okay, mom?"

"I'm fine," she said. She picked up his brother's jacket and set it on a hook by the door. Then she straightened the chairs, pushing them under the table until the wooden backs were flush against the tabletop. "I'm going to go to bed."

"Alright. G'night mom."

"See you in the morning," she said, then added, "things will work out. Don't worry." She clicked off the kitchen light and he stood there a moment before going to his room.

###

His brother had been gone about fifteen minutes and Sean was getting bored. The snow was falling heavier now, bringing a silence with it that made him feel as if he were alone in the world. Except for Sue, he thought. He leaned forward to check on her and he could see her breath smoking from her mouth. Her jacket was unzipped and he saw that she had on a low cut sweater that revealed the crevice between her breasts. The skin was dimpled from goosebumps and he touched it with his finger, moving it in a back and forth pattern as lightly as he could. It felt soft but textured like the skin of a baseball.

He didn't see what was so spectacular about them, why his brother would talk about feeling and kissing them. He lifted the fabric of her sweater away from her bra

until he could see the small satin bow hidden like a winged insect between her breasts. They seemed too big to Sean, misshapen and globular like balloons half filled with water. He looked around to see if anyone was coming, but the windows had fogged up. That's when he saw Sue's eyes open and watching him.

He let go of her sweater, letting it snap into place then fell back into his seat.

"It's okay, Seannyboy," said Sue. "I won't tell anyone."

"I'm sorry—I was just checking on you—sorry." Richard will kill me, he thought. The sun had slipped behind the mountain and the fog on the windows blended with the shadows outside, yet he knew she was smiling at him.

"I better check on the car." He opened the door and jumped outside, thankful for the cold that slapped his face. He wished his brother would get back, or, better yet, his father would show up.

Though he'd only been outside a few minutes, Sean's hands were stiff and cold when his brother returned.

"How is she?" asked Richard.

"Awake."

Richard tried to open the passenger side door. It was locked so he knocked on the passenger window until Sue rolled it down.

"You okay?"

"Great driving. My head hurts and I'm cold. So are we stuck or what?"

"I think we can get her free. Why don't you get behind the wheel and turn the car on. Warm yourself up some." She rolled up her window and turned over the engine, but it wouldn't start.

"Pump the gas some!" said Richard into the closed window. The engine kicked in with a thump and Richard started surveying the rear of the car.

"What are you doing?" asked Sean.

"Sue, get ready to back it up." Richard slid into the ditch behind the car with no regard for the mud he was getting on himself. Sean had his nice clothes on so was watching from the road, careful to stand out of the way.

"Why don't you just wait for Dad?" he said. "He'll pull it out with the truck."

Richard ignored him and banged on the rear window of the Chevy. "Hold on, Sue." He found a downed branch and tried to wedge it underneath the axle.

"That's not going to work," said Sean.

"You have a better idea?"

"Yeah, just wait for Dad."

"Can't."

"Why not?"

"Because I didn't call him. Sue's phone didn't work." The tires squealed as she punched the gas, mud flying from underneath the front wheel onto Richard's chest and face. "Hold it! Not yet, damnit!" He was wet from the snow and looked tired, his glasses slipping down his nose, his face as pale as an old sock beneath his sparse beard. The branch looked slick and icy. Without gloves on, Richard was having a hard time keeping hold of it.

"The wheel jack would probably work better," said Sean.

"How do you know?"

"Because I know."

"This will work," said Richard still trying to slide the branch underneath the bumper.

"Look, take the jack, lift the front end and put those big rocks from the ditch underneath the tire. Let down the jack, put it in reverse, and it should back right up, no problem."

He had that dumb look on his face again. Sean knew he didn't understand. He didn't understand and there was no way in hell that Sean could explain it to him.

"Hold on," said Sean, retrieving the jack from beneath the back seat. He splashed his way into the ditch and paused beside his brother. "You start carrying the rocks over."

He pulled the branch out and worked the jack underneath the axle, careful to make sure that the base was flat on the road. Richard stood red and useless, bathed in the light of the taillights.

"I'll take care of this."

He got the jack in place and started to pump it. Inch by inch the wheel was lifted out of the rut it was in. Richard piled up rocks beneath it as fast as he could. When the tire was even with the road Richard stopped him.

"That's enough," he said.

"It'll work better if we go higher."

"That'll work. We need to get out of here as soon as we can."

"Why?"

“All right, Sue,” Richard yelled. “When I tell you to, gently give it the gas.”

“We should make it higher, that way it’ll roll off onto the road.”

“It’s good enough.”

“I’m telling you— ”

“Shut up! I know what I’m doing.”

Just then they heard the sound of a car coming. Its lights shone on the tops of the trees then slowly slid down to the road as it came over the hill toward them. The deep throated rumble of the engine and the slight miss as it struggled to keep running in idle—it sounded like a caged animal trying to break free. It was a truck. His father’s truck. It stopped about a car length behind their hatchback, its light causing them to squint from its glare.

“Now, Sue,” yelled Richard. “Go easy!”

Sue gave it too much gas and the tower of rocks Richard built beneath the tire toppled and the front wheel fell back into the ditch. The wheel dug into the bank, spitting mud and bits of grass at them.

“Let off the gas, Sue,” yelled Richard, hands falling to his sides. He pulled off his glasses and wiped the mud from his face on the sleeve of his jacket. Sean looked down and saw that he too was covered in mud. He was cold and his feet were soaked and getting numb in the chilled water of the ditch, but he was too tired to climb out.

“I told you it wasn’t enough,” he said to his brother. He heard the truck door slam and the sound of their father’s booted feet crunching toward them. Richard sat on the edge of the ditch, his hands grasping the snowy grass.

“It’s never enough,” said Richard. He raised his muddy arm against the harsh white light of the truck’s high-beams, waiting.

Snow had accumulated on Sean’s hair and was starting to melt. Droplets slid down his face and neck like cold sweat. He wanted to reach up and brush the covering away, but he knew that it would keep coming down-- that, in the end, the effort would be wasted.

MISCUTS

They were putting together the last stained glass window; he was cutting the colored glass into measured pieces while his son, Sean, fitted them together in the frame. Tom enjoyed working at home. Even if he didn't like the work he was doing, he knew it was a hell of a lot better than repairing mining equipment in the dark forty hours a week. And sometimes, when his workshop wasn't too cold, the deadline not too close, and his son was working with him, he would catch himself whistling a nonsense tune and have to force his attention back to what he was doing.

The workshop was in his basement and it was obvious that he spent most of his time there. There was a buck stove in the corner of the room, its exhaust pipe cherry warm, and a cord of wood stacked along the wall beside it. A pair of leather gloves hardened into the shape of a half-grip lay on top. A large piece of singed indoor-outdoor carpet covered the cement floor in front of the stove and a plastic lawn chair with a pillow on it was positioned for maximum warmth.

He had been forced into early retirement after his third heart attack and had come home to discover that his wife had transformed their small house. Coasters made of cork awaited teary glasses on the end tables beside the rose patterned couch and love seat. Pictures hung on every wall in the living room and crowded the coffee table and TV. Some of the frames were simple and made of wood while others were metal and glistened in the multi-colored light shining from the two Tiffany lamps in the corners. Ceramic bears and plastic hearts encased black and white baby pictures of his two boys. They both

had chubby faces, olive black eyes, and wispy hair as thin and clear as fishing line. He could never distinguish which boy was which.

He bought a small microwave and a battered Mr. Coffee machine at a yard sale and had then retreated to the basement where the only thing hanging from the walls were tools with handles worn smooth with familiarity. The only objects that looked out of place among the heavy workbenches and racks lightly coated with corn yellow sawdust were twelve white boxes carefully stacked in an out-of-the-way corner with "Sean's Books" written neatly on each. He allowed his son to store part of his ever-growing collection there as long as he didn't need the room.

He had quickly turned a stress-relieving hobby of making stained glass into a profitable business that consumed most of his time. His pension was small and he wasn't able to collect social security for fifteen more years so he began accepting more orders for windows, trying to keep a step ahead of his monthly bills.

Unlike most fathers he knew who didn't make time for their children, he was actively involved with his son's college education. His eldest son had dropped out after his first year and joined the Air Force, and Tom was determined to make sure that Sean didn't quit and make the same mistake. He even helped him financially by paying him for helping out in the glass shop. Not much, he thought, but every little bit helps. It was his way of showing support as well as the value of earning a dollar.

Sometimes they talked when they worked together and that day they got around to the subject of medical school. He said that getting accepted was like money in the bank.

"I suppose," said Sean.

He turned to look at his son, bent over the wooden table and concentrating on fitting a clear, oval bevel into the middle of a star pattern.

“Suppose nothing. It’s a fact.”

The conversations between them were usually one-sided, but he considered it an asset that his boy was a listener rather than a talker. Doctors needed to be good listeners, he thought.

“Do you have any idea how much my medical bills are?” he asked. “Two weeks in the hospital cost over eighty five thousand dollars. And for what? They probe you and stick you, take your blood, take your urine, then take your wallet and leave you with nothing but half a gown and a plastic cup to piss in.”

“You have good health insurance,” said his son.

“That’s not the point.”

“I know.”

Tom reached for his coffee cup and saw that it was empty. He went to get more but the remainder of the morning’s first pot had burned into a black crust.

“Want some coffee?” he asked his son.

“I don’t like coffee.”

“How can you not like coffee?”

“I just don’t.”

Tom shrugged. He couldn’t imagine not drinking coffee. It was often the only thing that got him up in the morning. Nothing fancy, just simple and dark with sugar and some powdered creamer. His wife had once talked him into trying a cappuccino; he took one look at it and complained about paying three fifty for a cup half filled with foam. He

preferred a more bitter brew like the kind his father used to make in the heavy glass and metal percolator when he was a kid. Tom would watch from the kitchen table as the dark fluid burped against the clear top and steam escaped from the edge of the lid. Buttered toast and fresh coffee took the place of his cereal when he was twelve.

In the top drawer of his workbench were two blue mugs and a can of Maxwell House. He pushed aside the dusty can of decaffeinated Sanka bought by his wife, and set his hidden stash on the table.

"It's a lucky thing that we have such a damn good medical school here in town," he said, scooping the crystals into the filter. The coffee grounds looked like dark dirt, rich and loamy, and just their smell made him feel more alert.

"It's really not ranked that highly," said Sean.

"It's good enough. Doctors are doctors and money is money," said Tom, "and hospitals don't give two shits where you come from." He knew that for a fact. He could hardly understand his cardiologist, Dr. Jan, because of his East Indian accent. "Am I right?"

"I guess," said his son. Tom watched him struggle with the bevel then hold it up to the light to see if anything was wrong with it. Tom watched it shimmer like a moving rainbow, as if each color were trying to out-race the other. "If money is that important to you," added Sean.

"What do you mean?" asked Tom.

"Never mind."

Laying it back on the table, the boy tried fitting it into the pattern once again but he still had trouble getting it to fit. Tom saw the wrinkles in Sean's forehead pile together in frustration.

"Don't force it," he said.

"What?"

"Don't force it or it'll break. Make sure all the other pieces flush with each other then slip it in."

"I did that already. It won't fit."

"Want me to do it?"

"No!" said Sean. "No. Look, I'll finish it tomorrow, okay? I need to go study anyway."

"At least finish that section. I promised these windows would be done by Monday and that only gives me two days." He pulled his red handkerchief from his back pocket and used it to wipe his face then clean his glasses. His son was a blur in front of him. When he put his glasses back on Sean was once again hunched over the table, his head down as if trying to make sense of the glass in front of him.

One of the bulbs in the fluorescent light overhead began to blink slowly, each on and off followed by a nagging tic-tic-tic. Tom looked up in annoyance.

"Damn light," he said, "need to fix that."

The coffee machine gurgled that it was finished. He pulled his mug from the drawer and filled it to the brim. Bits of paint and glue covered the outside and the bottom had bits of wood and paper stuck to it that made it wobble a bit when he set it down. He had bought the two mugs during his son's orientation day almost four years ago at a store

on campus called "Fan's Choice." It was cobalt blue with *WVU Medical School* written on it in bright yellow. Tom had shown it to his son in the store, but he wasn't impressed.

"Ten dollars is a lot to pay for a coffee mug," said Sean.

"You have to splurge once in a while," said Tom, admiring the mugs. They were heavy and well made, he was sure. He held one up for his son to admire, his fingers fitting comfortably around the handle. Tom could see his distorted reflection in the glossy finish.

"Nice," said Sean, looking at his watch.

"Do you want one?"

"I don't drink coffee."

"Well, you can drink other stuff out of it, you know."

"I know."

"Then here. It's on me." He took another from the shelf and held it out to his son.

"I won't use it," said Sean. He hefted his backpack onto his shoulders and walked to the front of the store where the book racks were, disappearing among their bounded pages while Tom bought the mugs.

They left the bookstore and went looking for the financial aid office at the student union. The commons area was filled with new students dressed in their best with many parents wearing suits, ties, and shiny loafers with tassles. Those without suits had on khaki pants and shirts with collars on them. They all looked like bankers or lawyers to Tom, the kind of people who didn't know what real work was. He noticed that Sean was watching them, too.

“Look at all those stuffed shirts,” he said to his son. “You’d think they were going to church or something.” He put his hands in his pockets and rattled his change, feeling reassured by the sound as they headed toward the stairwell.

“Why did you have to wear them today?” asked Sean, as he started up the steps.

“What?”

“Your boots and keys. Nothing’s going to fall on your feet and your keys won’t open any doors here.”

“Just habit,” said Tom. “Why? What’s wrong with them?”

“They’re loud.”

“So.”

“I just don’t understand why you had to wear them. That’s all.” The boy hurried up the stairs, taking them two at a time. Tom went more slowly, his chest laboring, but he refused to use the handrail. He made a point of stomping and jingling up the rest of the stairs and reached the third floor landing just after his son banged through the doors and into the hall beyond. Above the double doors was a glowing red exit sign that seemed to pulse brighter than dimmer, steady as a heartbeat. Tom paused, finally leaning against the handrail, trying to catch his breath. He felt weighted down and tired. Old age, he thought. The mugs clinked as he picked the bag up from the floor. He pushed his way through the doors, into the hall, and then went in search of his son.

He regretted that Sean had to take out student loans for school, but he knew it took money to make money, and he explained it as such to his son at the time. It hadn’t been easy to convince the boy, and he got angry when he thought his son didn’t

appreciate the advice he was giving. But he didn't want to argue, so, feeling the need to be supportive, he moved the discussion away from money and school.

"Your mother told me about that contest you won." With the rounded end of the glass cutter he went to work tapping a sheet of purple glass along a score mark so it would break the way he wanted it. "Congratulations. Good job." Tom waited for a "Thanks" but it didn't come. He looked up to see his son take a piece of glass, sky blue with wispy strands of white through it, and hold it above the frame as if unsure where to place it.

"What did she tell you?" asked Sean.

"That you won fifty dollars in a contest at school," he said.

"It was a short story contest in fiction."

He continued tapping the glass gently, preparing it so that it would break evenly. He wanted to remind his son about how important it was to focus on school and his future career. You had to work hard when you're young so that you can afford to relax later. There was always time for hobbies later on. But he knew his advice would be taken the wrong way, so he kept it to himself.

"My story won first place."

Tom looked up and was surprised to have his gaze met and held by his son. Turning away, he picked up the sheet of dark glass, one hand on each side of the score mark, and bent the edges until it cracked, straight and true, down the center. He took one piece to the grinder and blunted the sharp edge with practiced ease.

"You'd think they'd give you more for first place," he said, unable to stop himself.

He heard glass break behind him, so he turned around.

“What happened?”

“I dropped it,” said his son. Shards of blue and white lay on the floor by his feet.

“I see.” He didn’t want to yell at his son, even though he had broken six dollars worth of glass. “Just be careful. Keep your eyes on what you’re doing.”

“I can’t do it,” said his son.

“Sure you can,” he said. “Here, I’ll show you.” He brought the square shaped piece of purple glass over to the table as his son backed out of the way. “Just follow the design and it’s easy.”

“I’m really sorry.”

“It’s only six bucks worth of glass. I can add it to the final bill.” He tried to force the piece into place beneath the star pattern.

“Dad--”

“No!” he yelled, surprising himself. His son wasn’t the type of person to give up; he knew it for a fact. Who is this stranger pretending to be my son, wondered Tom. He continued more quietly, “I don’t want to hear apologies. Let’s forget about it and get back to work.” Looking through the colored glass he tried to see the pattern drawn in black ink on white paper beneath it, checking to see if he’d miscut any pieces. He had been careful to shape each piece so that it fit perfectly between the lines of the overall design. It was probably his best work and he couldn’t figure out where he’d gone wrong. He was so focused on making the square of glass fit that he didn’t notice the sounds of retreating footsteps behind him, looking up only after he felt the basement door open like an indrawn breath—held deep in the chest—then shut with a reluctant sigh.

RENOVATIONS

I was sitting on the unfinished deck of my parents' house eating a warm bologna sandwich and drinking a flat Coke when I realized I hated coming home. It wasn't even really my home anymore; it was my parents' new house that I had helped them build. My own home was 3,000 miles away on the other side of the country, yet there I was sitting in a peeling white wicker chair with sweat running down my back. Mom was a short, older woman with bottle-blond hair and large, red-rimmed glasses that covered her eyes like a windshield. She wore a purple sweat suit decorated with rhinestones and her tennis shoes were shiny white, as if fresh out of the box. It was the middle of July yet she hugged herself, cradling her breasts in her arms. She filled the uncomfortable silences with family gossip, pausing only to sip hot Lipton tea from a coffee mug with a picture of balloons on it.

"So your brother cut a hole in the floor of his trailer to put the tub in, but he cut it too big and he has to put in a new floor," she said, rocking back and forth in her plastic chair from K-mart. "Can you believe it?"

"Yes, I can," I said, and I could. Richard, my 28-year-old brother, was constantly renovating the dilapidated trailer that rested about 300ft behind our parents' house. He lived on their land rent-free while my parents paid his utilities. Mom said he had that bad Gallagher luck. She said that was why he always seemed to end up working for someone who had it out for him and caused him to quit or get fired. I had more sympathy for his previous employers and his trailer than for him.

"I don't know what we're going to do about that boy," said my mother, putting on a smile that showed too much teeth.

"Don't do anything," I said. "He's never going to change." My brother's latest scam to avoid responsibility was to go back to college so he could, as my mother said, "get a real job."

"He's trying to, but those God damned professors up there keep fucking him over," said my father. He sat across from me in a chair identical to my mother's and slowly ate his smashed bologna sandwich while staring at something in his backyard that I couldn't see. He had a habit of talking at you without looking at you.

His fading black hair was combed thickly to the side of a face that drooped beneath his glasses. He had on a tan, short-sleeved shirt with a collar, similar to every other shirt he owned. He wore them in the summer and winter, though he put an undershirt on when it snowed. The shirt barely covered his growing belly, causing the fabric to separate like parting lips between the buttons. He finished his sandwich and wiped off his mouth with a paper towel. Mustard smudges lingered at the edges of his mouth as he turned and, finally, focused his attention on me.

"The bastards keep scheduling his tests on the same days and they won't let him take one or two of them later so that he has a chance to study for them." He grabbed his glass of soda and threw it back like a shot.

"That's the way college is, Dad. You can't expect them to schedule their tests for his convenience alone."

"He's just another God Damn number to them. They shove the information down their throats, get their graduate students to grade the tests, and move them through with as

little hassle to them as possible. All they seem to care about is your fucking money. Two thousand dollars, please! Thank you. See you next semester!” My father’s arms were beginning to flail and his body came a bit further out of his chair with each profanity, as if his curses were giving him energy. My mother appeared calm but her chair was rocking back and forth faster and faster, feeding off my father’s drama. I realized that I, too, had moved slightly forward in my chair, and forced myself to relax and lean back. It was similar to the episode the day before when he couldn’t find his car at the airport terminal. My father had cursed every sign he encountered as a personal attempt by “those God damned airport people” to confuse him while my mother kept insisting she could see their car one aisle over. We found it back where we began our search. We must have missed it in the excitement of my arrival.

“Calm down, Dad,” I said. “The doctor said you need to relax to keep your blood pressure down.”

“Well, it makes me so fucking mad,” he said. He took a deep breath, straining the imitation mother-of-pearl buttons on his shirt. “Take, take, take. Everyone’s got their hands in your fucking pockets these days and nobody’s giving back anything.”

“Well, let’s change the subject, hon. Sean didn’t come all this way to hear about his brother’s problems,” said my mom. “So how is your teaching going?”

“Fine,” I said. “The kids don’t want to learn anything. My class is a requirement for all college freshmen and they treat it as something they have to do, but don’t want to. What little they do, they complain about. Sometimes I wonder if it’s what I want to do for the rest of my life.”

“Well, you’re smart, honey. I’m sure you’ll figure it out,” she said, turning to look at my dad who had pulled out his knife to work on his nails. “Did you tell Sean what happened to his cousin Beth Anne?” she asked my father with that gossip gleam in her eye. He acknowledged her question with a brief glance then went back to scraping his cuticles. “She’s dropping out of school.”

“Why?” I asked.

My mother loved spreading news about the family. It was a game between her and her five sisters to see who found out what first and how fast they could spread it. This didn’t allow for many secrets in our family.

“Guess.”

“Just tell him, for God’s sakes,” said my father.

My mother paused for effect then leaned forward practically purring with contentment. “She’s pregnant!”

“There’s a surprise,” said Dad.

While my mother talked I watched my father staring at the backyard where the only thing between my brother’s trailer and us was a pile of lumber slowly rotting under a worn blue tarp. The weather was hotter here than back home and I took another reluctant drink of my Coke, cringing at its warm bitterness. What I wouldn’t have given for a cold beer, but my father didn’t drink. He was the exception in the Gallagher family. His father, my grandfather, drank every day—Pabst Blue Ribbon and Johnny Walker. They called him Buster Gallagher because of his short temper. He was a jeep driver in World War II, driving officers along the front line of the war in Europe, and he even reached the level of sergeant until a fight with an officer got him demoted back to private. That’s

where he learned to appreciate good Bourbon. He died when I was five and Grandma gave me a little wooden box filled with foreign coins and blank postcards signed simply, Love Bus.

I don't know why my dad didn't drink. After all, he had been in the Air Force during the Vietnam War and the few stories he told about his time there revolved around guys getting drunk in dark bars in Saigon or Tokyo. Maybe it was because he spent most of his time in the air, shuttling shipments of supplies between Alaska, Japan, and the Phillipines. He even spent some time in Hawaii though he didn't like it. "Too damn hot," he said. "Nothing to do but lay in the sand and fry like a piece of bacon."

Although he hadn't liked the Air Force, he did love to fly. He once told me about a trip over Panama when the pilot of the cargo plane he was travelling in invited him up to the cockpit. Standing between the rickety torn chairs of the pilot and navigator, he had a 180 degree view of green mountains and valleys bordered by the Pacific and Atlantic oceans shimmering like diamonds in the sun. White clouds drifted by, disappearing into mist and haze as the plane glided through them. "Now I'm not a religious man," he said, "but at that moment I felt like I was sitting on the front porch of heaven and let me tell you, God's got one hell of a view."

I was uncomfortable sleeping on my parents' couch that first night. It was too hard, too small, and had splotches of pastel colors spreading over it that made me feel like I was drowning in saltwater taffy. My mother woke me when she yelled across the yard for my father. I sat up and looked around to get my bearings. Even without looking

at a clock I knew it was early. It felt early. The sun was too bright, the air too new, and the smell of coffee wafted in from the kitchen.

The newly decorated living room was factory clean and smelled of plastics and glue. The walls were papered in white with green and red flowers that crawled to the ceiling and disappeared beneath its off-white stucco. What shocked me the most was the wine-red carpet that shone like an open wound in the morning light coming through the window. The whole effect made me long for the paneling and bare wooden floors of our old house.

“Good morning, honey,” said my mom as I walked into the kitchen. “I wondered how late you were going to sleep.” I slipped on my glasses and glanced at the kitchen clock; 8:15. I had wasted two whole hours since dawn.

“Where’s Dad?” I asked while searching through the cupboards for a coffee cup.

“At your brother’s. He’s helping him unload something from his truck.”

“Where are the cups?”

She took a cup from the dishwasher and handed it to me. I checked to see if it was dirty. “It’s clean. Do you want some donuts?” she asked, pulling a box from the cabinet. It was one of those white bakery boxes with a clear window so you could see what was inside. They were all glazed donuts, my father’s favorite, coated with sugar that looked hard and waxy.

“No thanks,” I said. “Do you have any bagels?”

“Nope. They don’t fit in the toaster.”

Just pouring the coffee made me feel more awake. “The doctor told Dad he wasn’t supposed to be lifting anything heavy. Remember?”

"I know, but try telling your father that. Richard came over earlier to ask him for help and he just picked up and went," she said, looking out the kitchen window. "I'm surprised he didn't notice you on the couch."

"I'm easy to miss."

She looked at me for a moment then turned back to the window. "His coffee is going to get cold if he doesn't get over here." She took a glass from the dishwasher and filled it from the faucet. From a plastic pillbox, she took four multi-colored pellets from the section marked Monday.

"I thought the doctor got you off most of your medication," I said.

"Oh, he did. These are my vitamins," she said with enthusiasm. "They keep me young. This green one is algae extract from a lake in Oregon. It cleans the toxins out of my body. The brown one is liquid root extract to keep me from catching colds or the flu."

"Vitamin C and Zinc are proven to do that. Why don't you take them?" I asked.

"Oh, that's nonsense. That's just what they want you to believe to get you to buy their product. Root extract is the only sure-fire prevention."

"What about the gold and the gray one? What do they cure?"

"They don't cure anything, honey. The gold one is Ginseng, which gives me energy throughout the day, and I found that when you take it with St. John's Wort, I can handle any problem that comes my way. Why don't you try some?" she asked hopefully.

"No thanks. I'll keep my chemicals simple," I said taking another sip of coffee.

“Sean, you shouldn’t depend on chemicals to get you through the day,” she said then poured her pills into her mouth with the eagerness of a kid with a handful of M&M’s.

She had been a beautiful woman once. She often told me so and would pull out an off-color picture of her standing in an empty yard beside our old house as if to prove it to me. “See?” she would say, holding it up to the light of the glass tulip lamp by the couch, a gift from a nameless aunt. Her skin glowed with a ghostly hue in the picture, a trick of the light or an overexposure. Her hair had been beaten into a beehive and balanced with precision and poise brought about by self-assuredness untested by time. It had been more blonde than brown then, rock-hard and unmoving in the wind that bent the tall, uncut grass hiding her ankles.

Bony was the best way to describe her twig-like frame of before. Bony but not unhealthy. Her wide “baby bearing” hips foretold ample thighs, a promise kept by time. Her knobby knees and shallow cheeks were softened only by the fuzziness of bad photography. She wore a yellow bikini, daring for the time. “You’ll never see me in one of those again,” she’d say patting her ample pouch which was stretched by two births that had left a scar marking her waist like the stamp of a tight belt. After I was born she had to have a hysterectomy, leaving her with only two sagging breasts to show what had once been possible.

I finished my coffee and was reaching for a second cup when my father walked into the kitchen.

“Don’t drink it all. Leave me a cup.” Dad’s cup turned out to be a twenty-ounce mug, which emptied the pot.

“Think you have enough there, Pop?” I asked.

“Why don’t you come help your brother?” he asked.

“Help him do what?”

“He took that tub back and traded it for a bigger one. It’s a Jacuzzi tub with three jets. We need to move it into his bathroom and put it in.”

“I just got up,” I said. “And besides, I’m only here for a few days. I thought maybe we’d go fishing down at the river or drive up to Cooper’s Rock and check out the view.”

“The river will still be there and the view is the same as always. You can do all of that later,” he said, reaching for the box of donuts.

“I still need to take a shower.”

“Why? So you can get all dirty again?” he said. “If you want to help then help. If you don’t then don’t.” He shoved a donut in his mouth, grabbed three more and his mug of coffee, and went back outside. I could see him through the kitchen window walking over to Richard’s.

“I’ll make another pot,” said Mom.

“Never mind,” I said then went to take a shower, hoping it would relieve the throbbing pain in my head.

My mother had me take her shopping to try to find some stone angel figurines for the flower bed she was planning to make. I had planned on visiting friends that afternoon, but instead I found myself pushing a cart filled with potting soil around the Lawn and Garden section of a new Super Wal-Mart that had just opened in town.

“What are the Wal-Marts like in the West?” she asked.

“They’re the same.”

“Are they as big as this one?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t they sell surfboards and stuff?”

“I don’t live at the beach, Mom.”

“Oh. That explains it.”

We talked very little and I was eager to get the afternoon over with. On the way home she asked me to stop at the grocery store

“Why?” I asked

“I need to get some chicken for dinner tonight.”

“Don’t get any for me. I’m meeting Joe and the guys at the Brew Pub.”

“Can’t you do that tomorrow night?”

“I’d rather do it tonight.”

“Well, you’ll just have to do it tomorrow. You’re father wants the family to get together tonight for dinner. Even your Uncle Dale’s coming.”

“A family dinner? You mean getting together to watch Dad stuff himself then get into an argument with Richard or Dale.”

“It’s not always like that, Sean,” she said. “Not always.”

Uncle Dale showed up at exactly six smelling of Brut cologne and Brill hair crème. He was actually my father’s uncle, not mine, but he insisted I call him Uncle too. He greeted me at the door with a hearty handshake and a bottle of bourbon. His gray hair

was slicked back and he wore a short-sleeved shirt with a collar and dark brown, polyester slacks that were held up by a large belt buckle he had received from the coal mines when he retired. It showed a golden man bent over shoveling on a field of shiny black. He had always spoken badly of his years in the mines and I often wondered why he still wore it.

“Good to see ya, boy. Where’s your father? I brought him some drink for dinner.”

My father walked into the room with a frown on his face. “You know I don’t drink, Dale,” he said.

“Oh? I’d forgotten. More for us then, eh Seannyboy?” he said to me with a wink, causing the lines around his eyes and cheek to crinkle like crumpled newspaper. I smiled back at him. My father didn’t get along with Dale that much, but with my grandparents dead he was the only other family Dad had left so he put up with him.

“How’s work?” he asked.

“Fine, I suppose.”

“You happy out there?”

“You’re the first one to ask me that.”

“We’re all proud of you, ya know?” asked Dale.

“Yeah, I know.” I took his jacket and hung it by the door. “I think mom’s got dinner ready.”

We ate Shake-N-Bake chicken, potatoes, and salad from a plastic bag at the seldom-used dining room table with the extra leaf placed in the middle. Dad was at the one end of the table and Uncle Dale at the other while my mother and I sat across from

each other. Between her and my father was an empty plate with blue flowers around the edges and a full glass of iced tea with moisture droplets running down the sides.

"Where's Richard?" I asked.

"Pass me them mashed potatoes, Seannyboy," said my uncle through a mouthful of chicken.

"He said he was coming for dinner," said Mom. "Who wants bread?"

"Potatoes, boy. Don't be stingy."

I passed him the potatoes. "If he doesn't come soon he's going to miss the food," I said, glancing at my father who was quietly cutting his chicken into bite size pieces.

"Maybe I should call him and let him know we started already," said my mother.

"Where's the gravy?" asked Dale.

"We don't eat gravy anymore, Dale. It's got too much sodium in it and causes your blood pressure to go up," she said, placing a handful of bread slices on a folded napkin in the middle of the table.

"Just leave him alone," I said. "By the time he gets over here we'll be done anyway."

"No gravy!" said Dale. "You can't have mashed potatoes without gravy."

"I'm sorry, Dale. I didn't make any. We're trying to eat healthier these days," said Mom, looking at my father whose attention was focused on his plate. "He could at least have dessert with us. Maybe I should call him."

"Forget about it, Mom. If he comes he comes."

"Nothing's safe anymore," said Dale to no one in particular. "Can't smoke cigarettes, can't drink liquor, now they're trying to get rid of my god damned gravy."

"I'll call him just in case he forgot," she said, pushing her chair away from the table to stand up.

"For God's sakes, Mom! Would you just eat! Rich is a big boy and can take care of himself. If he was hungry he'd be here."

"I say to hell with healthy!" Dale said, raising his voice. "Eat what you want and put some gravy in your life! Pour it on till you're swimming in it and let all those healthy fuckers eat bran till they shit hay bales."

"Sean, don't raise your voice to your mother," said Dad between forkfuls of salad. "Go ahead and call him, Mother."

"Why don't we all just stop eating until poor little Richard gets here."

"Yep," Dale said, "that's the way I feel about it. Can't eat mashed potatoes without gravy."

"Let's just settle down and have dinner," said Mom. "I'm sure he has a reason for not making it."

"More than likely he's just studying for school and forgot. He promised to help us work on the porch tomorrow so we'll see him at breakfast," said Dad with a note of finality, signaling the end of the discussion.

"Nah," interrupted Dale. "He just doesn't give a damn about anybody but himself. Hell, the only time he'll do anything for you is if ya pay him or he needs something from ya." He reached across the table and snatched two slices of bread from the top of the stack in the center. "Last month he asked me to weld a some supports together cause he was gonna put a roof over his porch, or some such nonsense. Said he'd mow my grass."

“And did he?” I asked.

“Hell no, it’s asshole deep to a ten foot Indian because I kept waiting for him to do it. Gonna have to take a weedeater to it before I can mow it now.”

“That’s enough, Dale,” said my father.

“Ya should’ve kicked that lazy shit out on his ass years ago.”

“I said enough!” yelled Dad, slamming his fist on the table. The room went quiet. My mother looked from Dale to my father then got up to clean her plate. Dale shrugged his shoulders and scanned the table, holding a slice of bread in one hand and a knife in the other. Then he raised his eyes, looked at each of us and asked, “Where’s the butter?”

We split up after dinner. Dad went to the basement to work on something, Mom went to bed to read her National Enquirer and Weekly World News, and Dale and I went out onto the back porch with his bottle of bourbon.

The sun was almost gone and the shadows beneath the trees began blurring together. The smell of fresh lumber mingled with the scent of my mother’s gardenias growing in green plastic planters along the edges of the porch. Crickets chirped their music and frogs at the neighbor’s pond croaked to their mates, “Here I am, here I am.” Lighting bugs stumbled through the air like drunken fairies winking at me, urging me to try to catch them like I used to do when I was a child. There’s something about sitting on a porch on a hot summer evening that forces you to relax and just be. Almost against my will I felt myself enjoying it.

“Nothing goes with a summer night like a glass of bourbon,” said Uncle Dale. Of course it also went well with Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, and just about any Friday,

Saturday, or Sunday, too. But at that moment I agreed with him. He filled two coffee mugs then handed one to me. The warm, syrupy liquor burned away the memory of dinner.

Dale leaned back in his chair and gazed at the sky. He eased into a gentle rocking rhythm, pushing off with the toes of his dull brown boots. His mug rested on his belt buckle as if it were a platter.

"Hey, Dale," I said.

"Yeah?"

"Why do you wear the belt buckle?"

"Why do you think? To keep my pants up," he said, smiling.

"I thought you hated the mines."

"I do."

"Then why don't you wear a different one."

He considered that for a moment, greasing his thoughts with more sips from his mug.

"So that I don't forget, I suppose."

"What? Working fifty to sixty hours a week in the dark? I'd think you'd want to forget."

"Work is work, boy. It's not supposed to be fun. But I met a lot of good people there, became friends with most of them. Besides, when you do something for most of your life it becomes part of you. Hell, I got enough coal dust in my lungs that you could throw this old body into a buckstove and heat your house for a week!"

I laughed because I felt I had too.

“Are you glad to be home?” he asked.

“It seems like I never left.”

“Hah! That’s the way of things.”

I took a long pull from my mug and nearly choked. I was embarrassed, but Dale was smiling.

“Mom seems to be doing better. She’s off her pills,” I said. “The bad ones, anyway.”

“Uh, huh.”

He seemed to be waiting for more and he wore his patience like an extra shirt, long-sleeved and untucked.

“Dad’s the same,” I said. “All of our conversations tend to end up in arguments, but I guess I’m used to it.”

“Two bulls butting heads. Just like him and your Grandpa.”

“I always thought Richard took after Dad.”

“Oh, he does. Both of em’ like to tinker with machines, go hunting and such, but you have his temper. You think alike.”

“And that’s a good thing?” I asked.

“You seem to have done alright.”

I didn’t say anything more because I didn’t want to think about it. No one had ever compared me to my father. I looked like my mother, sandy-blond with hazel eyes and a round nose. When we happened to run across old family friends or relatives she’d say, “Look how handsome he is. Takes after his mother,” then she would always add,

“He hates it when I say that,” and I did. But think like my father? I hated the idea of that even worse.

We talked of other things after that. Nothing important, just our own sort of chatter to add to the evening sounds. It was good to talk about nothing and drink. We kept drinking and I tried to disconnect myself from my body through alcohol. I wanted to get to that place where I felt separate from everything so that I could stand back and get an objective view of the world, my world. But the night was stronger than I was and I ended up puking over the side of the porch and stumbling to the living room with the help of my Uncle Dale.

The next day I woke up with a headache that would last through most of the afternoon. That morning my father got me up early to work on the back porch. I had wanted to drive alone into town, maybe stop by our old house to see what had happened to it since I'd been gone. Dad had other plans. It was nine o'clock and after choking down a stiff donut with some harsh coffee, I found myself in the backyard with my head still pounding from last night's bourbon. Dad had no sympathy.

“Let's go. Take that tarp off and pick out all of the 2x4's. We'll need them to brace the rails,” he said, standing on the porch with coffee cup in hand and a worn leather tool-belt around his waist that threatened to drag his pants down. The porch itself was basically done. We had finished it the previous summer before I left to teach. One side still needed railing installed and the stairs meant to connect the porch to the yard were little more than 4x6 posts sticking out of the muddy ground. I walked over to the lumber pile and tugged the crumbling cement blocks off the edges of the worn blue tarp.

"Be careful not to tear that tarp! It's my last one."

I tried to lift it slowly, but the past year had weathered it until it was fragile and stuck to the wood underneath. I was careful, but it still tore.

"Damn it. I told you to be careful," Dad said, easing himself over the edge of the porch, making sure not to catch his tool belt. He dropped the five feet to the ground, paused long enough to pull up his falling blue jeans, then marched over to stand opposite me on the other side of the pile. "You gotta do it slow," he said, pulling on it gently. There was a rip, and a large tear opened up where his hands grasped the edge. In anger he bent over and tore off the tarp until most of the wood was uncovered except the section by me he couldn't reach. It was only nine-thirty and my father was already in a bad mood.

"Are you done?" I asked.

"Who says plastic lasts forever! Cheap-ass junk." He crumpled a piece up in his hand and tossed it to the ground. As he stood up I noticed the tip of the scar on his chest where his shirt was unbuttoned. It'd only been a little more than a year since his bypass. Mom said he was getting better and I tried to believe her.

"Just relax, Dad. I'll take care of it. Why don't you call Rich and get him up."

"Already did. Said he has to study." Wiping his now damp brow with his hairy forearm, he glanced at Richard's place, as did I, as if I could see if he actually was engrossed in a textbook. All I saw was a dilapidated trailer with various tools and half-completed projects lying bare to the sun. A rusting roto-tiller was partially buried in what started to be a garden. His old tub lay at an angle in the mud, shiny white from the morning dew. There was a rusty car jack and a pile of rotting wood he had cut last year

for the wood-burning stove he'd installed, but never used. My brother's lawn looked like a junkyard in its infancy that threatened to eventually overtake my parents' home.

Although it was early, it was already getting hot. I took my shirt off and started carrying boards up to my father.

"So," I began, "Dale's still drinking too much."

"Yep," said Dad, eyeing the 2 x 6 I had just handed him. It was warped from exposure and would have to be nailed at one end, bent into place and then nailed at the other end. "Always has a bottle near at hand. It'll get him in the end if he doesn't slow down." He shook his head slightly. Sweat was breaking out on his forehead as he twisted the long board into place. "I just don't know why people won't listen to what's best for them."

"I'll do that, Dad. You nail."

"I got it. Nail it down quick before I lose my grip." I quickly pulled out two nails and pounded them into place. My father let go of the board with a sigh, then mopped his brow with a white handkerchief pulled from his back pocket. He always had one on him and would just as soon use it to blow his nose as clean his glasses. He had a whole drawer of them and when I asked him what he wanted for Christmas that's what he usually asked for.

"Mom said she was off most of her medication now," I said, getting the next board.

"Hah! I guess you could say that. Instead of five different pills, she's wearing a patch that injects medicine all day and is stronger than all the pills combined. It's like consolidating a God damn loan." He butted the board up against the last one and I held it

while he nailed down the end. "But she's feeling better so I'm not going to argue about it."

"She says her vitamins are making her feel better."

My father laughed. It was the first time I'd heard him genuinely laugh since I arrived. "Root squeezin's, mud, and pond scum. She's so used to popping pills that she had to replace them with something," he said, looking at me with a smile. I smiled too.

"It's too bad we can't find a pill for Richard," I said. Dad hammered in the last nail, turned to look at me and leaned against the new railing.

"Why do you criticize your brother so much?" It took me a second to realize that our conversation had suddenly switched gears.

"I should ask you why don't you criticize him more?"

"Your brother has a lot of problems, but he's trying to take care of them and get back on his feet."

I walked across the porch to the railing we'd installed last year and leaned against it. "Dad, he's been getting back on his feet since he was twenty. He's almost twenty-nine, so don't you think he should be kicked out of the nest to fend for himself?"

"Why? So I could watch him crash and burn?"

"Yes." I said. "Then maybe he'd learn how to take responsibility for himself."

"He's just had a lot of bad luck and as long as I'm able, I'll help you boys as much as I can."

"You never helped me through college, paid my electric bills, or gave me any support."

"That's because you never needed it."

"You could have offered."

"You could have asked."

I was getting angry and I was determined not to let that happen, to not lose control of my temper.

"I didn't have to worry about you, Sean," he said. "You're doing fine on your own. You don't need my help, but your brother does. I can't just sit idly by and let them cut off his electricity or repo his truck. He's my son, for Christ's sake." He glanced into the back yard then back at me as if gauging everything that I was and Richard wasn't. "Just like you."

"That's right, Dad," I said, bending over to retrieve my hammer. "We're both your sons." I grabbed another board and placed at the end of the last one, determined to complete this job.

We worked silently through the morning. Less talk means faster work, my father always said. I saw my brother working underneath his trailer, but he never did come over.

"What's Richard working on?" I asked, taking a break.

"He's installing an air conditioner."

"Then what's he doing beneath his trailer?"

"He's connecting it to his heating ducts. It's a central air unit."

"In that piece of junk trailer?" I said, laughing. "Where in the hell did he get money for that?"

"I'm starving. Let's get some food," said Dad. "We'll finish later." My father lay down his hammer and started up the unfinished stairs. He pulled out his handkerchief and started to clean his glasses.

"Dad," I said as he worked his way up to the porch, "you can't afford to keep giving him money."

"Drop it, Sean. Come and eat."

"Why?" I asked, my voice beginning to rise. "So you can stuff your face so you won't have to talk about it?"

"I said to stay out of it, damn it."

"You're just going to keep letting him take advantage of you, aren't you? You're just going to keep letting him do it until either your money gives out, or your heart."

"Whatever I do is my business. Not yours. You didn't want to be involved with our problems, remember? Your brother might be walking all over me, but you're the one who walked away. All the way across the fucking country!"

The heat of my anger disappeared as if doused by a bucket of cold water, the steam escaping my mouth in a sigh.

"It was for work."

"What? There's no work here?" he asked.

"Not for me."

He looked at me like I was a stranger. His gray-blue eyes squinted in the glaring afternoon light; two half moons indented his skin where his glasses rested on his cheeks. I wished he'd put them back on.

He wiped off his face, slipped on his glasses, and walked up the stairs. The back of his shirt was streaked down the center with sweat and his kerchief hung like a crumpled flag from his back pocket.

I left on a Sunday. Usually my parents would have been at church when my taxi came, but they didn't go anymore. My father had lost his faith in the last year, although he seemed to find it at Christmas and Easter. My mother still had her King James Bible beside the bed, but now it got dusted with the nightstand. We walked out to the driveway and I handed the taxi driver my small suitcase, which was more empty than full.

"We could have driven you to the airport," said Dad. He stood beside my mom with his light blue shirt halfway unbuttoned and his hands buried in the pockets of his green shorts. The scar down the center of his breast was pink and quiet beneath his hairy chest and I felt a strange urge to reach out and touch it, to see if the blood still flowed beneath its surface.

"Be careful, honey, and call us collect when you get home." Today's sweat suit was canary yellow, her favorite color. She held out a baggie of sliced fruit in her hands for me to take. She always gave me fruit when I went on a trip. I took it and gave her a mom-hug, one arm, slight squeeze with a quick pat. She felt so old and fragile, I hesitated letting go of her.

"When does your plane leave?" asked Dad.

"In two hours. I don't want to have to hurry, though."

"I don't know where your brother is," said Mom. "He probably forgot you were leaving this morning."

“Probably,” I said.

My father nodded his head slightly as if in agreement. “When do you think you’ll be back?” His eyes were more gray than blue and they seemed to beg for an answer he couldn’t ask for and I couldn’t yet give.

“I don’t know. I’m still low man on the totem pole at work. Probably not for a while.” Another slight nod of his head. He looked so tired to me then, I almost wished he’d get mad about something so I could see some life in him, see that he wasn’t getting as old as I feared. I wanted him to hug me, to feel him squeeze the air out of me in a rib-crushing bear hug like he did when I was a kid. The last time he’d done that was in fourth grade when I brought a report card home with straight A’s on it. I wasn’t sure if he had it in him anymore. “Maybe Christmas,” I relented.

My father stepped closer to me, pulled his hand out of his pocket, and held out a rumpled twenty-dollar bill.

“For snacks,” he said.

“It’s alright. I’ve got money.”

“Take,” he said. I took.