There Were Bears and Rumors of Bears is a collection of stories that explores spiritual injury and recovery using a variety of interior and exterior narrative approaches to depict the profane and sacred, the mundane and non-ordinary, aspects of experience. In each story, the characters encounter situations in the physical world, and sometimes beyond the physical world, that create a pressure that forces them up against or through aspects of their emotional makeup causing profound changes. In “Where is the Sleeping Joe Bower…” a dream narrative is used as a springboard for interpretation and examination of the psyche of the dreamer, who is outside of the story. “The Hamburger U” offers a portrait of a young girl that is grounded in consensus reality, using elements of personal biography to offer an explanation for her depression and a death to suggest the distance she has to travel to escape the condition. “Riding the Sit Bones” and “There Were Bears…” show the transforming power of male and female relationships on the psyche. “By this Gospel…” and “Bb” speculate about the role of ancestry in the present emotional and spiritual conditions of the protagonists. “Some Things You Lose” honors the day to day struggles inherent in overcoming broken relationships and addiction, and “Greektown”
juxtaposes violence and non-ordinary metaphysical experience. The collection is held together by a poetry of voice and examination of specific detail that is common to all of the stories, although the points of view and characters change.
There Were Bears and Rumors of Bears

by
Andre M. Miftaraj

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Andre M. Miftaraj, Author
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DEDICATION

To the old man,
Bejkush Rait Deromemaj
Where is the Sleeping Joe Bower, Why Does He Dream?

Joe Bower lost his job at the Plasma Center when he accidentally squirted hepatitis-tainted blood into the mouth of a surgical glove salesman. It was his ninth month drawing blood and he was walking away from the centrifuge with a pint in hand and truth be told his mind was not on his job.

The glove salesman was standing at the aid station flirting with the Clinic Director. He had just told a joke and he was laughing with his head back and his mouth wide open. Daydreaming, Joe Bower absentmindedly tossed the bloated bag of blood from one hand to the other and skewered it on an IV needle. A stream of blood arced from the punctured bag bisecting the salesman’s face and shooting into his mouth. His eyes went huge and he put his hands to his throat and stuck his tongue out and everyone in the room stood perfectly still with their eyes on him.

Joe put his finger over the hole in the bag to stop the spouting. A string of spittle hung from the salesman’s tongue and then he involuntarily gulped. A man with a needle in his arm said, “That’ll ruin a punchline.”
The Plasma Center didn’t want to let Joe Bower go. He was a good worker and dependable and people liked him. But it was that or a law suit and this he understood. You couldn’t just go around squirting sick blood all over the place where people were laughing. Blood is money after all. In this case anyway.

The blood in the bag tested positive. The Clinic Director called Joe Bower into her office and said, “I hope you’ve got some money in the bank, Joe.”

There was a model of a human heart on her metal desk. Joe picked up the plastic heart and slowly dismantled it. It came apart into a collection of interlocking pieces that assembled one on top of the other upon the descending aorta. He weighed the pieces in his hand.

“What an unlikely confluence of events,” he said.

He built the heart back up slowly one piece at a time.

“Unfortunate is more the term I would choose.”

“That goes without saying,” he said. “What are the odds though? Think about it.”

He put the heart back on the desk. The Clinic Director picked it up and held it before her with both hands like a chalice and squinted compassionately.

“Do I have to actually say it, Joe? Because I really don’t want to say it.”

“You don’t have to say it,” Joe said. “I just hope the salesman doesn’t get sick that’s all.”

“If there’s anything I can do,” she said, lowering the heart to her lap.

“Tell him I said I was sorry.”

He stood up and shook her hand and turned to go. He stopped at the door and said, “For what it’s worth I liked my job.”

“I know you did,” she said. “Don’t forget to leave the smock.”
Out of work Joe experienced a familiar oppressiveness, the result of too much free time and too little wherewithal to be free. The persecution of necessity. He got up early the first couple mornings and got the paper but it was midweek and the want ads were pretty skimpy. The third day he drank beer all day and watched TV. On Sunday he combed the papers and got his resume together, figuring Monday morning he would start making calls.

Monday morning Joe Bower awoke contemplating himself. He was thirty-four years old and had no job, no wife, a tiny apartment. While waiting for the kettle to boil Joe went into the bathroom and faced the mirror. He opened his mouth and inspected his teeth, fillings all molded to them like sculpture. He stuck out his tongue and studied it diagnostically, holding it with two fingers and pulling it to one side and then the other. He read the tiny red veins in his sclera like they were tea leaves.

“What do you make of your future?” his reflection asked him.

When no answer was forthcoming he shrugged and they turned away from each other.

The tea kettle screamed and Joe went to the kitchen and took it off the burner and put some food and water down for the cat. He looked at the kettle, he looked at a cup he had taken down. Then he put the cup back in the cupboard and put on his shoes and went out.

The sun was shining and the world was working. It was June and it was warm and there had been no rain all Spring. He wore jeans and a T-shirt and a baseball cap that said Hemp. People were on their way to their jobs in their cars, all lined up one behind the other on Bayless, engines straining to beat the traffic light. In each car a different pair of eyes, a different radio station playing, a different set of concerns but still a unifying dip from the same big pool of stress, like pearls of trouble on a necklace of sorrow. Joe walked up Bayless and turned onto Stone Church road. There were small old bungalows with shingle siding and small patchy lawns. Some of them were for sale. There was a real estate boom and these
flimsy and plain little homes, Joe knew, would go for more than what he could gross in seven years. He passed a large tract where bulldozers were breaking ground on new construction.

Joe turned into the entrance of a subdivision behind and across the drainage ditch from his own complex. The subdivision consisted of cheap frame townhouses. They were small and plain and showing age but the grounds were nicely kept and black and white people lived here in equal numbers. He walked along the curving main artery to the far end of the development to a park and he entered the park and from there he could see his own shabby complex. He walked through the park which was astonishingly large considering its location. It was a good forty acres of mowed grass bounded by the drainage ditch on one side and the freeway on the other. At the one end were the townhouses and at the far end woods that Joe had never seen before. There were picnic tables and a playground and monkey bars and a course for disc golf. Joe walked an asphalt path that went straight to the edge of the woods then paralleled them and went around their end then straight along for a couple hundred yards into another residential area. At the end of the woods there was a small trail leading into the trees and Joe left the asphalt path and followed this trail. The path was obviously walked frequently because it was well worn and it turned here and there and wended its way along. If not for the fact that the freeway traffic could be plainly heard Joe would have thought he was in the middle of nowhere. In all directions he could see only trees and he was amazed there could be so much wilderness so near his complex without his having known.

He had walked a good quarter mile into the trees when he came upon a pit that had been dug near a huge white oak. In the pit were the remains of a fire. Around the pit was a plain wooden chair, a small table, and a grocery cart lying on its side. He continued on and when he had walked a half mile he saw buildings through the trees. He could make out blue siding that looked new and the structures seemed large and he didn’t recognize them at all. He walked
toward them and exited the woods into a residential area off Bayless east of the complex. It was not a neighborhood of tract homes but rather an assortment of old and new dwellings—some brick, some wood; some elegant, some not much more than shanties. And here at the edge of the neighborhood and backing right onto the woods was a brand new concrete street and seven brand new buildings. The places were finished in neat aqua blue siding and white trim with carports out in front. A storage shed was built into one side of each carport and each storage shed had a locked door.

There was a realtor's *Open House* sign propped on the sidewalk in front of the first carport. It was very quiet up and down the street, only the sounds of birds and the muffled traffic. He tried the storage area door on the first carport. It was locked. Slowly he climbed the steps to the first house and through the door window he saw that there were electric lights burning even though it was day. He tried the door, it was open. He pulled it closed again and rang the bell. A man in a beautiful black suit answered the door. He was about sixty years old and his hair was all white and he was pale and handsome.

"Come in," he said.

Joe stepped in.

"You're my first visitor," the man said. "I'm John Schell. Forgive me but I've forgotten my business cards this morning."

"Doesn't matter," Joe said. "Mind if I look around?"

"Of course not. I'll give you the tour."

He ushered Joe Bower into a large white living room and across the room to a small dining table.

"There are brochures here," John Schell said, handing one over.

The man's shoes were dirty and left smudges across the white carpet. Joe took the brochure and said, "So these are condos?"
"They're site condos. Individual structures and lots in a condominium development," the man said.

"So that means you own the house and the lot," Joe said.

"That's right. They are individual structures and lots in a condominium development. So there would be an association fee. We take care of your lawn and your snow removal and the upkeep so there would be an association fee for that."

They sat at the table.

"Would you like some coffee?" the man said.

"Yes," Joe said.

John Schell stood and looked around at the empty kitchen counters. He opened and closed a couple of the cupboards, smoothed his pockets and said, "I'm sorry I don't seem to have any."

"Why did you offer?" Joe said.

He put his hands together in front of him and smiled a snakey smile and said, "My apologies," in a way that reminded Joe of his catholic school youth.

"Let me ask you something," Joe said. "What happens if a guy gets in a bind and he can't pay the association fee. He still owns the house right?"

"Well the kind of people who would live here would never have that problem."

"Anyone can have that kind of a problem," Joe said. "Believe me. I know."

"The fee is nominal," John Schell said. "Anyone who could live here would have no trouble paying the fee."

"But the fee goes up over time right?" Joe asked. "It doesn't stay the same. Equipment gets old and needs replacing, labor costs go up. The fee inflates. Right? It's only natural."

"Well only to compensate for inflation."

"What guarantee is there of that?"
“I don’t see your point.”

“The point is what happens if you can’t pay the association fee. Do they take your house away? They can’t take your house away, right? You own it. So what do they do? Let your lawn go? Let the snow pile up? That would drive the property values of all the other condos down. Say I fall on hard times. I can just make my mortgage but I can’t make the association fee. What do they do to me?”

“I don’t know the answer to that.”

“Then why are you here? If you can’t answer the obvious questions?”

“I can answer most meaningful questions.”

“Obviously that’s not true.”

Joe looked at the man. The man looked at Joe.

“Sir are you interested in purchasing a condominium?” the man said.

“How can I purchase one when you can’t tell me what I want to know?”

John Schell kept looking past Joe Bower toward the door as they had been talking, as though he was hoping for other prospects to replace Joe. Joe turned around, following his glance and looked behind him and the yellow light was shining in the foyer on the pale carpet and white door. No one was coming in.

“How much do you want for one of these?” Joe said.

“They start in the two forties.”

“Let’s say I want to buy one.”

John Schell blinked his eyes several times in quick succession and pursed his lips and swallowed.

“Have you spoken to a loan officer yet?”

“Not yet.”
"I suggest you talk to someone about a mortgage and get pre-approval and then come back and see us."

"Who's us?"

He blinked and swallowed again.

"Me, sir."

"Yeah well I'll do that. I'll talk to my financial representative about my eligibility and the collateral and so forth and we can set this thing with signatures."

"Splendid. That'll do for now then, sir?"

"Definitely. You'll be here tomorrow?"

"I'll be here tomorrow."

"I'll see you then."

Joe stood and looked at the man's dirty shoes and left. He walked into the thickness of the trees. From afar the woods appeared dense but from inside they consisted more of space than of trees. He stopped and turned and waited. The back door of the condominium opened and John Schell emerged, slipping through the open door in stealth and closing it gently, with one hand along the door seam and one on the knob. He stepped delicately down the wooden steps of the rear deck and came across the small back lawn toward the woods, looking back over his shoulder as he came. He walked as a man in such a suit would entering the woods—as though he'd rather not be stepping where he was, as though he wished there was some way to walk the walk without doing the treading. Joe Bower made himself narrow beside a tree, creeping around it as John Schell approached, like the effect to the other's cause in some equation of tangentiality to the trunk. John Schell stopped at the rustle of leaves right in front of the tree and Joe stopped and held himself as still as prey and there they stood, just two men breathing in the woods, the one unknowing of the other's presence. The agent tilted his head in attention and his eyes moved to one side and stayed and Joe bower felt his knees begin to
quiver and he thought of just stepping out and making himself known without regard
for explanation. Then the agent John Schell dropped his head and stepped off quickly down
the path. When the sound of his footsteps faded Joe Bower went after him.

The path Joe had entered at one end of the woods exited at the other end at a footbridge
across the drainage ditch and he watched John Schell cross this bridge and walk unsteadily up
the gravel path on the opposite side and into a parking lot. These were the parking lots of
businesses along Bayless, east of Joe's building. John Schell went straight across the parking
lot to the back door of the building and turned a key in the lock and disappeared inside. Joe
crossed the bridge and went to the building and tried the door but it was locked. So he went
around front and peeked around the corner and the sign out front said *Schell Funeral Home.*
Joe Bower stood upright and scratched his head. He pulled the coins from his pocket and
spread them in his hand. He looked up the street and looked at the sign again, put the coins
back in his pocket and went home.

There was a viewing in progress the next day when Joe Bower approached the funeral
home. He went walking again on the same route and took the path through the woods, crossed
the bridge and came to the parking lot behind the funeral home. It was full of cars. He went
home and changed into slacks and a shirt and tie and put on a sport coat and went back to the
funeral home straight along Bayless, walking in the front door wearing the same muddy shoes
he had worn walking through the woods. He signed his name in the registry of the bereaved
and walked on the wine-colored carpet to where three men stood outside the doorway to one
of the viewing rooms. Joe Bower approached the men and paused and nodded solemnly and
entered the room where padded chairs were lined up in rows before a simple wooden casket
made of poplar. Joe walked around the walls of the room, crossing the front of the room to the
casket. Going down on one knee he crossed himself and stood and touched the cold stiff hand of the dead woman lying there in the box and walked over and seated himself. He felt inexplicably overcome with emotion and he put his face in his hands. A woman sitting next to him placed her hand on his arm and said, “There there.”

“There there,” he returned.

“I’ve known her my whole life,” she said. “And yet only now is she finally real to me.” She began to cry.

“It’s sometimes hard to allow existence to someone,” she said when she had stopped crying. All Joe could do was nod. “Because it could be at the expense of your own life,” she said. “At least that’s how it seems at the time. And now it seems wrong for judgement to enter into it, but I can’t help feeling guilty and sad.”

They sat there hand in hand for a long time and when he was about to rise she said, “We find our people in strange ways and in strange places. But find them we do as God makes presents of us to each other. Bless you,” she said and she kissed him.

“Thank you,” he said.

She squeezed his hand and he stood and left these strangers to their grief and he went to find the mortician. He felt indignance tempered by a profound pity for the mortician and he imagined if there was a God it must be something like this that he felt for the human race, pity so profound as to remove all edges from the indignance, a great roundness of feeling that encompassed all feeling like the roundness of love, all of its joy and sorrow and forgiveness alloyed into a single unity.

He walked toward the back of the building and down five steps to a lower level and turned left down a narrow hallway with walnut paneling and framed portraits of men in suits hanging from the walls. He came to a door that said Office and he put his ear to the door and turned the handle. The mortician, who had posed as a real estate agent for some reason
unknown to Joe Bower, sat behind the desk across the room. He was holding a romance novel and he looked up and saw Joe Bower and his mouth made an O but no sound came out. Joe stood squarely in the doorway until the mortician looked at his muddy shoes and then Joe said, "I had a certain need to remind myself of my mortality today."

The old man's face turned red and he slowly straightened in his chair but said nothing.

"Enjoy the rest of your story," Joe said. Then he turned and left.

That night Joe Bower couldn't stop thinking about the dead woman. He got it into his head that you could ask questions of the dead and that they could answer. The question he wanted to ask her was simply, "So, what advice would you give to a guy like me?"

Next morning, hair combed, teeth brushed, Joe Bower walked through the woods to the condominiums and knocked on the door and John Schell opened the door and said, "Yes, sir, won't you come into our open house today?"

"Thank you I will," Joe said.

John Schell gave Joe Bower the grand tour and they were full of good feeling and there was no more talk of the association fee. Every feature of the home was perfect and the prospect of a future in such a dwelling was free from so much as a shadow of blemish or foreboding and they parted with a warm handshake and an understanding that a transaction that would be satisfactory to both of them would be performed in the very near future. Their shoes left light brown smudges all over the white carpeting.

Joe Bower felt an inexplicable satisfaction at the charade they had played and he knew he should leave well enough alone, but his curiosity got the better of him and after several days had passed he went back to the condominiums. There was no sign of the mortician and the doors were locked and Neighborhood Watch stickers had been placed on the windows. He
retreated to the woods and climbed a tree and kept watch on the condos but there was no sign of John Schell. As the hours dragged on Joe Bower became bitter and disappointed in himself for being too weak to stay away. He also felt a kind of betrayal that his co-actor had stood him up. He climbed down from the tree at dusk and went home and late in the night he went to the funeral home and crept around the building trying all the doors. They were locked and he went over to the drainage ditch and found a rock and broke a window in the foundation and reached in and unlatched the window. He propped it open and slid down into the mortician's office. It was dark and he stepped down onto a bookcase and upset a picture frame and it slammed down with a huge metallic racket in the stillness. He waited until his eyes adjusted to the dark, listening intently for any sound that might indicate that he had been heard. All was quiet. He crept out of the office and down the hallway knowing that behind one of the doors he was passing must be the room where the corpses were prepared for viewing. The thought made him almost hysterical with fright and it took all his concentration to keep a lid on this fear. He followed the stairs up to the main level where the viewing rooms were and continued on up to the second floor where the mortician had his dwelling. In a hallway that ran the length of the building he saw light coming from a door and he made his way carefully toward it. The door led to a parlor and he peeked in and it was empty. Across the parlor was another open door and when he made his way across to that he saw through the partially open door a bedroom and in the bedroom standing before a full-length mirror was John Schell. He was naked and his body was white but he was relatively fit for a man his age. He was standing sideways to the mirror and staring down into it and his buttocks were covered in shaving cream and he was slowly drawing a shaving razor through the cream. He worked very carefully and when he had swiped himself clean of the cream he dropped the razor into a ceramic bowl and stared into the mirror while he ran his hands over his behind in a kind of
ecstatic trance whispering, “I’m a little boy, I’m a nice little boy,” over and over again, not in sexual arousal but in pure drunken sensuality.

Joe Bower could barely contain himself. He slunk out of the room and stumbled down the stairs choking on his own laughter. He found a room where caskets were stored and climbed into one that sat on the floor, closed the lid and laughed until he almost suffocated. Even when he heard the old man coming down the stairs he couldn’t stop laughing. The door to the room where he lay opened and still he couldn’t stop. The old man never opened the casket and never confronted him and he was still laughing when he climbed out the window and he laughed all the way home.

Joe Bower was practically beating down doors to find a job. He awoke one day thinking *What am I doing!*

He had money in the bank for one more month’s rent but beyond that he had no means of support. The idea that he might actually become homeless took on a vivid energy and he walked around in a state of near panic. He interviewed for a job proofreading transcripts for the court, but when the woman who interviewed him asked if he had any experience with citations the only definition he could recall for the word “citation” was in the context of moving violations. What she was referring to were references in the written decisions that cited precedents. This blunder unsettled him and he mumbled like an idiot for the rest of the interview. He couldn’t wait to leave because he was acutely aware of his incubating stupidity for as long as he was stuck in that room. When he got out into the fresh air his face still burned with embarrassment and the feeling of incompetence bowed his head and rounded his shoulders. He was amazed when they called him the next day to return to take an editorial test. He got no sleep that night and was anxious and thickheaded and he got in an argument
with the girl administering the test over whether it was actually correct to use the article “an” or the article “a” before a word starting with the letter h.

“I realize nobody speaks that way,” he said. “But technically it is correct.”

“I dit’n never hear that,” she said. “If you even just say it—an hysterectomy—you can hear it dud’n sound right.”

“I swear to you it’s true. Please just look it up.”

“No it’s not. I have the answer sheet and that’s not the right answer. Besides that, have you ever read the book Word Power? Because I have and—”

He could see this was going nowhere and he got up and left in the middle of her little self promotion and went to a bar and drank a pint of beer. Before he left he applied for a job as a waiter, thinking that he would be rewarded simply for the humility implied in the act. But still nobody called. In his desperation he briefly considered doing telemarketing but his self respect wouldn’t let him get any further than just the thought. He figured he’d be better off homeless.

A week and a half had gone by with no sign of the mortician. Joe Bower hadn’t returned to the funeral home since the ass shaving, and he lay awake squeezing all his concerns for the future with worry, trying to visualize for himself a doorway into the world, resenting the mortician for bailing out on their little fantasy, especially after Joe Bower had made it known to the mortician that he had something on him. While he lay there in the late hours obsessing over John Schell and his smooth behind suddenly the light bulb went on. Joe bower got up and got his clothes on and went out. He walked down Bayless to Stone Church. It was chilly. The sound of the freeway made a large stripe across the night. The world seemed large and familiar to only some very deep part of him that seemed not part of him at all, but rather something small he recognized floating out in the distance on a sea. In the headlights of an approaching car a raccoon loped across the road in a malefic hunch. In the
subdivision he heard the screams of an arguing couple coming through an open window. The park seemed like a wilderness and he felt awe moving through it, as though he were the first human soul privileged to enter this space and leave his imprint on it. At the edge of the woods he paused, reluctant to enter a place so dark. The moon stared down like a predatory eye in the head of some great black squid.

He stood at the edge of the woods and listened to the yawning freeway and the greater silence underlying it, reading with his skin the many threats inherent in the monochrome, as though all the hostage colors of day turned malevolent in the clutching grasp of midnight. He stepped into that realm between the trees and made weapons of his fears as they arose, turning them on the darkness like threats. There was walking within him a separate being with a life of its own and it lived whole chapters of existence with each step, complete stories playing out in the energies that ran through him as he stepped from shadow to shadow. He prowled on his legs, this stalker of nothing, feeling his animal being bubble and foment from some place deep in his middle and rise over him like a malignant pride. No part of himself faced him. All parts looked away, and the voice of secrecy whispered to him crime.

A homing instinct led him through this jungle home. A possum fell in a feigned death beside the path at his approach. An owl clutched tighter its dangling prey. Then he saw light through the trees, barely visible at first but cutting a larger hole in the blackness as he approached until he came upon a fire so bright it seemed impossible that it could have been hidden within all the space of these woods. And he stopped at the edge of the fire pit where John Schell sat on the wooden chair with his elbows on his knees staring into the fire. He wore khaki pants and black work boots and a flannel shirt and he looked like a sad boy with an old face. They stayed there for a long time in silence until finally John Schell spoke.

"Even the brightest spot in the center of the flame has a shadow," he said. "I remember discovering that when I was a very young boy. I would stare at the center of a candle flame at
the whitest spot. It would become dark and enshadowed and I would have to look away and slowly bring my eyes back to the center of the flame to renew its whiteness. I had completely forgotten about it until I discovered it again in these flames.”

“It finally dawned on me this was where you were,” Joe Bower said.

He picked up a half walnut shell at his feet, like the cast of a small brain, and threw it into the fire.

“You might have known sooner,” the mortician said.

“I see that now.”

A coal snapped in the fire and a cinder arced up from the flame and landed on the old man’s arm. He brushed it to the ground and ground it into the dirt with a movement that was oddly dainty in the heavy boots he wore. At the base of the fire a limb glowed red like the pure spirit remains of what had dwelled within the now burned wood, purified of its material burden and reduced to something as pure and elemental as a star.

“I lived with the dead my entire life,” he said. “And it never meant anything to me. I had somehow convinced myself that they weren’t real. That they had never really happened. They were just inventory. They didn’t exist except as elements of my particular form of commerce. But then little by little I began to be disturbed and no trick I could pull would counter the effect it was having on me. And now all the living remind me of the dead. You remind me of the dead.”

He looked at Joe Bower.

“It’d make me sick too if I reminded me of you,” Joe Bower said. “Or if you reminded me of me for that matter. Weirdo like you.”

“Now now. I’m just trying to tell you something. About how the misery of the bereaved began to become real to me. About how I wanted to deal with people who were still on the rising road. Young couples with happy kids. I wanted to be an agent to bring people
together with their homes. That’s how it happened. I used to watch the construction
as they erected the condos. Then they were finished and I found one open and the sign was
inside and I put it out. Then you came along. Not some young family. But you. I looked at
you and you seemed as much a corpse as any corpse I had ever seen."

Joe Bower poked a long crooked stick into the fire and the flame gathered to it and took
possession of the tip, turning it black and lengthening along the shape of it. He kept the tip
down and the flame climbed up the stick.

“How ‘bout a little fire, scarecrow?”

He poked the burning stick into the deadfall about and a small patch of grass lit and the
blades curled as they burned and he stepped on it and it smoked. He put the tip down and the
flame grew on it. The mortician took a stick from the fire and turned it, staring.

“Be happy you have a job old man,” Joe Bower said.

“I don’t want it I tell you,” the mortician said.

“Count your blessings.”

“And what are they?”

The mortician put the torch into some dead leaves, watched them catch fire, reached his
foot out and stepped it out.

“Don’t ask a poorer man to tell you what to be grateful for,” Joe Bower said. “It’s
insulting.”

He poked his stick into the nearby brush and they both watched as the fire so naturally
became a part of it. The dry matter gave itself over willingly, like it was supplicating to and
merging with a higher power it had beseeched for an age.

“Maybe you pissed away an opportunity,” Joe Bower said. “You had a house filled
with sorrow and a constant society of dead and you rejected all this fraternity with the ultimate
for diversion and rubbish. Romance books. Be a servant, an agent of comfort. Not an empty suit.”

Joe Bower set a fire nearer to the old man and when the flame on his stick almost became lost the old man added his to the mix and a new fire ignited. They worked at it with their sticks and stared into it as it grew. Joe Bower stamped around the edges of it to contain it.

“That’s a pretty idea,” the mortician said. “And about as useful as poetry. I bury carcasses. I drain bodies of blood and scoop out guts. I deal with the garbage of biological life. And I dwell in the emotional excrement of those left behind.”

“That’s the price you pay for the opportunity,” Joe Bower said. “That’s the association fee isn’t it?”

The old man put his face in his hands and heaved a heavy sigh and said, “How did my woods become such a place? I used to play in the woods when I was a boy. I knew the names of the plants and the trees. Then death began to erase my mind. I can’t remember the things I knew. I can’t trust anything. Now look at me. What am I doing here? And who are you?”

“I lost my job,” Joe Bower said.

“I don’t even care who you are.”

“I didn’t ask if you cared.”

“I don’t want to know your story,” the old man said. “I already know it. I drain your blood and fill you with preserving fluid and sew your lips shut and you lie in a box in one of my viewing rooms. That’s your story. That’s who you are. I don’t care what you think.”

“Now,” Joe Bower said. “There’s a wealthy view of life.”

A second fire the equal of the one in the pit now burned beyond the edge of the pit in a pile of fallen twigs and leaves.

“You won’t be able to put that out if you’re not careful,” the old man said.
"I might not be able to even if I am careful."

"And you'll burn the woods down."

"And?"

"Don't be stupid now. Put it out."

"Fire cleans out the dead material and makes room for new life," Joe said.

"Put that out I mean! You'll burn the whole place down."

The old man stood up and struggled out of the pit and began stomping one boot into the fire Joe Bower had set. The fire jumped and flared and sparks rose on the hot draft and the cuff of his pant leg caught fire. He slapped it out and stepped on the fire again until he had smothered it. He got a lungful of smoke and coughed harshly and watered at the eyes. Joe Bower set another fire a few yards off.

"You're crazed," the old man said. He sat down coughing.

"Think about what you do with your life," Joe said.

"Did."

"What do you mean did?"

"Did with my life."

"Either that means your life's over or you quit your job."

"I did quit."

"For what better thing, do you think?"

"To study at the Guild for Structural Integration."

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a place where you work with bodies of live people instead of dead ones."

"Don't you have to be alive to get in?"

"Of course you do."

"Well," Joe Bower said. "That counts you out then."
The old man stood up and took his burning stick and said, “I was counted out a long time ago. I don’t know when life stopped being life but it did. I don’t know if it was something that happened to me or something I carried into this world with me. I seem to remember a time when life was real, a long time ago when I was a child, but it’s so long ago now I can’t even say for sure. All I know is that this existence, whether I created it or it was inflicted on me, this particular existence is deficient in possibility. It has no past and no potential for future. It’s like a little tunnel that has been capped off at both ends. I crawl in that tunnel or I lie in that tunnel and maybe unbeknownst to me it is being dragged somewhere or it floats on the river of blood I have released from the dead. But no light gets in and no light gets out and there’s nowhere to go but where I am. Hope is on the outside of the tunnel but how do you get out of the tunnel?”

“Hey,” Joe Bower said. “Lighten up.”

They were on opposite sides of the pit and the old man stared at a point on the ground where he was setting a fire as though he was in a trance.

“Maybe you need a guru,” Joe Bower said. “Maybe you need a pet.”

The old man moved his shoulder in a barely perceptible shrug and looked as though he was about to cry. And then he did cry. He inhaled and his face contorted and his eyes closed and he started bawling like he had been stricken with some ungodly kind of grief from who knows where. The sobbing came loud and long, then louder and longer like he was being squeezed by a bigger and bigger hand each time he wailed. He bent at the waist and heaved his cries into the ground and the woods echoed with it and Joe Bower didn’t know what to do. He went from feeling absolute pity for the man to wanting to bash his brains in with a rock.

“Come on now,” Joe said, and he went over to him, leaving burning the fire he had set. “It’s just life eh? One day at a time and all that. Something will turn up. What about the Guild for Structural Integration?”
But the old man waved him off and staggered away, dragging the burning stick behind him and setting fire to the leaves. Joe Bower turned around and looked back across the pit to the fire he had left burning and looked again at the old man and the trail of flame he was leaving. He took one step toward the old man and stopped and turned and took one step back and stood there not knowing which way to go first.

"Old man!" he called.

The old man stopped and turned and he was holding his torch and in the light of the torch he wore a demonic look.

"Look around!" Joe Bower said.

The old man looked past Joe then back to him. Then with great speed he kicked the leaves around him into a pile and set them on fire and ran from sight.

"Hey!" Joe Bower yelled. "You idiot!"

He ran to the pile of leaves and scattered them and stomped out the flame and the air was full of smoke and soot. Another flame sprang to life to his left and he saw the old man standing there with his torch in the air and he yelled, "The Guild for Structural Integration boy!" and disappeared into the darkness.

"For God's sake," Joe Bower whispered.

He looked back to the fire he had left on the other side of the pit and a single tree was on fire like some ceremonial offering. Again the old man yelled "The Guild for Structural Integration!" and a new fire bloomed in the darkness far away from where Joe stood. Joe ran over to the burning tree. The area around the fire pit was lit up like it was day and he gathered handfuls of loose dirt and threw them at the tree. But the flame was climbing in the branches and now another tree began to burn a hundred yards away. Again the old man's voice came echoing in lunacy, "The Guild for Structural Integration!"

There was fire everywhere and Joe Bower thought We're up the creek now.
He chased the old man but the old man had set fires along the path then disappeared into the trees and brush. As Joe Bower fought some of the smaller fires, a large patch of dense brush to his left lit up in a ball of flame.

“John Schell!” Joe Bower called. “John Schell!”

The woods where Joe stood were full of light now and he ran toward the drainage ditch thinking only that there would be water there and not what he might do with it. When he got there he looked frantically around for the possibility of an old bucket but he found nothing but a crushed paper cup and he scooped it full of water and got up and before he had run three steps it had all run out a hole in the bottom. The fire could be heard now. It made a hushed sound like surf or distant traffic.

The first siren began in the shrill distance and by the light of moon and fire Joe Bower made his way along the trail in the direction of the condos thinking How the hell did I get myself into this. He broke the window in the back door to the first condo and let himself in and felt his way along to the staircase and up the stairs from memory to the bathroom in the master bedroom where there was no window and he shut the door and turned on the light. He was filthy and black from soot on his hands and face and he got in the shower and washed himself. This condo being the model, there was fancy soap in the dish and towels on the rack. He washed his filth down the drain and dried himself and got dressed, turning his T shirt inside out in an attempt to hide the stains. He turned out the light and waited for his eyes to adjust and went out the way he had come in. The entire interior of the woods was glowing. He ran out onto Bayless as the first fire engine raced past him down the street. People were already gathering across the street, standing in their robes and pajamas and looking up at the glowing sky above the woods as though it was something on their TV sets. Faintly from within the woods the old man could be heard shouting his demented cheer.

“He’s out to fucking lunch,” Joe Bower said.
A second fire engine came up the street from the other direction followed by a cop car, and men in rubber coats and boots were dragging the long canvas hoses from the trucks and stretching them out in the street, screwing them to the hydrants and cranking the hydrants open. A cop stretched yellow tape across the footbridge behind the funeral home and across the end of the little street off Bayless that dead ended at the woods. Firemen with spades and oxygen tanks on their backs crossed the bridge and entered the woods. One fireman with a hose followed them, spraying down the vegetation as he went. Another man with a hose sprayed the roofs of the houses and businesses at the edge of the woods. The sirens came now from all parts of the town.

Joe ran to try to cross the bridge and a cop stopped him.

"I have to go in there," Joe said. "Someone I know might be in there."

The cop looked at him and wrinkled his nose and said, "What are you wearing, perfume?"

"Someone I know needs help."

"You know something about this fire?"

"No. I just—"

"Get the hell out of here."

"Listen to me," Joe said.

The cop pulled his club out of his belt and came at Joe and Joe turned and fell, crabwalking backward as the cop came at him with the club raised. Joe got up and ran along the drainage ditch beyond the commotion and stepped into the water and when he looked up at the woods he saw vague flitting movements at the edge of the brush. He tried to focus his eyes and he assumed they were shadows being cast by the wavering flames. Then there was a quick shadow on the opposite bank and heard something hit the water, then the same thing again, and the grass between the woods and the ditch came alive and a squeaking and
squealing filled the air and the water began to churn. Joe turned and crawled and
scrambled up the bank and as soon as he ran into the street where the fire trucks and the
onlookers were a swarm of rodents poured in droves up the bank and into the street, rats and
mice and raccoons and possums with a full load of young attached to their bellies teemed into
the street and covered it like a live crawling carpet. Squirrels and snakes and woodchucks.
Women screamed and began to run, their faces hideous masks of fright and delirium and the
firemen disbelieving stared in shock before turning their hoses on the vermin and scattering
them in waves against the curbs where they dispersed across the swampy lawns and up the
street into Bayless, running in multitudes up the road, crawling and scampering and slithering.
Waves poured from the edge of the woods like bugs from under a rug in a mass infiltration of
the surrounding neighborhood. People could be seen running and screaming with rats clinging
to their robes and raccoons at their heels, possums lying twitching here and there in the street.
From out of all of this chaos came one savage black dog and it grabbed one fireman by the
boot and one of his comrades turned the full force of his hose on it and sent it rolling off in the
spray all the way across a lawn, pinned against a house. As soon as the hose was taken off it
rose and ran streaking in its madness and took the foot of a fleeing woman in its teeth, tugging
wildly and savagely back and forth while she screamed and held her head and rats ran up the
sleeves of her housecoat. The hose was brought to bear on him again and he rolled away and
disappeared, snarling and snapping its watering jaws into the night with the rest of the refugee
animals and all the people fled back to their homes.

Fire trucks in great numbers occupied the side street and Bayless and were at that
moment roaring through the park and all other approaches to the woods. Helicopters chopped
the air overhead. Water and ash rained down in a black mist that could be seen in the lights of
the emergency vehicles. The woods were a conflagration and in the middle of it all the old
man emerged and walked onto the middle of the footbridge and stood there with his arms held
straight out to his sides. Joe Bower saw him in the full blaze of the vehicle lights and he looked like a man who had just risen from a coal mine or a fool in a minstrel show. He was entirely black but for the whites of his eyes and smoke rose off him like some apparition from hell. His mouth opened like he would say something and smoke rose from it.

"The Guild for Structural Integration," Joe Bower said.

The old man's eyes moved in Joe Bower's direction and then he fell flat in a puff of smoke and soot in the middle of the bridge. The paramedics ran to him and put an oxygen mask on his face and he was soon carted away. That was all there was for Joe Bower and he walked away.

Rats were scurrying along the foundations of his complex when he got home. For at least the next day and night he heard sirens all through his dreams and he rose often, feeling poisoned from all the smoke he had inhaled. The next time he went out all the air smelled burnt.

He was sick for many days and he dreamt of horrible things and beautiful things and always he resisted reentering the world, for the dreams seemed rich and layered with meaning and the promise of some crucial deliverance if he could sustain them, while the world seemed thin and caustic and stale. Finally the dreams came no more, but he carried their suggestion into the world still in the back of his mind. Their haunting presence implied that he should find their mystery, their deliverance, somehow in the waking world. But this seemed a job too elusive and he felt too small for it.

When he walked to the park it was covered in ash that had carried off on the hot wind and sifted down. It was an utterly desolate world among the burnt trees, black and dead as some devil's lair. He ignored the yellow police tape and walked all through the charred mess.
It was so completely devoid of life that when he neared the bridge he knew there was some live thing close by because he could feel it. He slowed down and stopped in the gravel before the bridge. The black dog was lying invisible except for the whites of its eyes in all that ash. Joe glimpsed the eyes, recognized there was something there watching him. It lay on the black ground with its mouth open, the lips high on the teeth in a snarl. Joe stood quietly looking at it, feeling as though this were transpiring in one of his dreams. He set his feet wide apart and crouched low into his legs, made strenuous claws of his hands and put his arms in the air. His face became a mask of anger, each eye a hungry rictus, and his tongue curled out in an arc from his mouth to the tip of his chin like the thick peel of some decadent fruit. From his lungs and from his throat came a violent issuance, angry and aboriginal, and he arched his back and stamped his feet, putting all potential enemies in the expanse on notice, saying, *I am the angriest God and I will not be afraid.*

The day Joe was evicted he saw a *For Sale* sign in front of the funeral home. He wandered the streets all day, and at night he went to the funeral home and broke in through the basement window. Standing in the silence down below he saw light up the stairs and he heard faint music. He didn't go to see what the old man was up to, but he knew exactly what the old man was doing. The old man would have salve on his burns. He would be sitting on the side of his bed looking at the floor with his elbows on his knees, watching his thoughts chase around in his brain one after the other. In the room where the caskets were stored Joe Bower found one like he had lain in before and climbed in.

Sleeping in the coffin that night, these were the gentle dreams that came to him—of meeting with all of his refugee possums and raccoons on their diaspora into the wide world. And with them the dead woman. He came to an understanding with each animal, and to the woman he posed his long-held question and she answered him thus: give love, be grateful, have forgiveness. *Learn what you are.*
The Hamburger U

It was her father calling from Toledo.

"I think they got him," he said. "No one's seen him for two days."

The sound of his breathing came over the line.

"Who?" she said.

"The boss, Janie, the boss! Who do you think? His wife is gonna call. She's gonna be crazy. You're just gonna have to deal with it. Do the best you can. Keep your head."

"Dad, I'm just sitting here."

"I know, honey. Just try to listen to what I'm telling you."

"I'm sitting here smoking a cigarette!"

"Don't get hysterical," he said. "You're not smoking in the house are you?"

"I was outside but I had to answer the phone."

"Who called?"

"You, dad. You called. Jesus—"

She was starting to cry.

"Okay, honey, don't get hysterical. That's the last thing we need now. I thought you meant somebody called before. But don't smoke in the house. Your mother will go nuts. I'll never hear the end of it."
“I wish I knew who it was you were talking about, that’s all.”

“Okay, go outside. Don’t smoke in the house. Maybe she won’t call. It’s okay. But I know she’s got the number, that’s all. Tell your mother I called.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I don’t know. Not for a couple weeks. It’s busy. We’re short. I got a cook gone, I got a waitress gone. It’s hell. And now this. I’m down here by myself. I go home to an empty trailer. It would help to hear somebody say I love you.”

“I love you, daddy. I better go outside now. I gotta flick my ash.”

“Okay. Don’t answer the phone.”

She sat outside on the trunk of her mother’s Fury drinking lemonade with ice and smoking. Down the dark street the houses hunkered one after the other. She imagined strangers crouched within, looking with anxious faces toward the ceiling for some kind of respite from whatever power it was that persecuted them. The sound of the freeway rushed like gas escaping from a long wound in the earth.

She rolled over and looked at the clock radio. It was five-fifteen. She put her head back down. The phone kept ringing. She pulled off the covers and stepped across the trundle bed her uncle slept in when he was drunk and had nowhere to go. The phone on the kitchen wall was making a shattering noise, the bell like the clamor of a fire house. She found a light and turned it on and lifted the receiver from its cradle.

“Hello?”

“It’s Misses Cassella. Please! Is my husband there? Hello!”

“Hello? Who is this?”

“Oh my God! Please help me!”
"I think you have the wrong number."

"Oh please. Let me talk to your husband."

"You have the wrong number."

She hung up the phone and went and sat down on the toilet, then rose and washed her hands and face. She was looking for her cigarettes when the phone started ringing again.

"Please help me for the love of God. Is your husband home? Tell him who it is."

"This is Janie," she said. "I don’t have a husband. I’m sorry, I can’t help you. I have to go to work."

The woman on the other end started crying.

"You’re scaring me," Janie said. She hung up the phone.

When she was dressed she stood at her mother’s door and tapped, pushed it open a crack and stuck her head in. Her mother was snoring lightly and the green light from the clock radio cast a withering halo on the side of her face.

"Mom! I need a ride to work."

The snoring stopped and her mother groaned.

"I need a ride to work," she said again. She stood for a long time waiting, holding her own breath so she could hear her mother breathe. "Mom."

"Take the car, for pete’s sake," her mother said. "Let me sleep."

She opened the door and slipped into the dark room. Her mother’s purse was on a chair beside the bed and she groped around for the keys.

"What time will you be home?"

"Same as always."

"I have a doctor’s appointment."

The keys were in a side pocket and she took them and left the room, then left the house. The phone rang as she shut the door. She drove down Thirteen Mile Road to Crooks and went
north. It was hot already. Or still. The pants of her janitor’s uniform were polyester.

Thank God the shirt was half cotton at least. She left several buttons open while she drove to feel the breeze on her skin.

It was early but the traffic was starting already. At Caldwell International she pulled in and drove all the way around the office complex and parked in back by the lab. She buttoned up her shirt and showed her badge at the security booth, then got some coins from a can she kept in the janitor’s closet. She walked the hallway to the end of the lab building and through the breezeway to the office complex, past a wide expanse of cubicles and down another hallway to the break room where she bought a cup of coffee and a chocolate chip cookie from a vending machine and took them back to her closet.

The lab building was a long rectangle with a main hall running down its middle. At one end was the maintenance shop, which was the headquarters for the men who did all the electrical and plumbing maintenance for the office complex. At the other end was Shipping and Receiving. In between, off the main hall, were various kinds of shops or labs and some smaller hallways that housed departments like Metallurgy, each with a few tiled offices for engineers and managers. Many of the labs had catwalks and there were many hidden places, storerooms and maintenance closets throughout the building. On the floor on both sides of the main hallways were huge axles and other kinds of hardware, some on wooden pallets and some sitting directly on the sealed concrete floor. She had been working here for seven months and she still wasn’t completely clear on what they did. She wasn’t actually a Caldwell employee. She worked for a janitorial service called Hollander that had a contract with Caldwell, which was too bad because Caldwell employees made good money and she didn’t.

She worked the seven to three-thirty shift and slept every day after work, always waking later in the dark, twisted in the sweated sheets and dying of thirst. Then she watched *Fernwood*
Tonight and The Tonight Show and went out to sit on the trunk of her mother's Fury and smoke.

Sitting on an upturned pail in the janitor's closet she took a sip of coffee, then set the cup on the floor and unwrapped her cookie. String mops hung between dowels on the wall and the thick dry strands hung like doll hair, dull and gray and aged. In the back corner was a water tap for filling mop buckets and beneath it a drain in a square of ceramic tile with a raised edge, like a shower stall without the enclosure. Large mop buckets on wheels were parked in the opposite corner with the mop wringers unhitched and set down in the bucket and the black handles of the squeezing levers protruding beyond the bucket's edge. It smelled like dirty water and wet cloth but there was also a hint of sweetness from the pails of floor wax. The wax they used was white and creamy as milk and when it poured from the spout in the top of the five-gallon plastic pail there was a tint of blue just around the edges of it in the light and it had a lovely smell. Once a month they worked a midnight shift and stripped and waxed the floors in the few areas where they were tiled, the engineering section and the little clusters of offices tucked away here and there off the sides of the labs. She didn't mind working the night shift. It was quiet and there was no one to bother her.

The crisp clatter of the twisting door handle startled her and the door of the closet swung open, knocking over the coffee and spreading it across the floor like an unfolding hand. She brought her legs together, twisting to the side and was pinned on her pail between the door and the wall. Her boss, Mr. Günter, said, “Oop!” and stepped into the closet. He looked over at her and said, “You are here early. And I've spilled your coffee.” The two statements were delivered with a discreteness and an attitude of folksiness and spontaneity that had all the warmth of stainless steel issuing, as they did, from Mr. Günter's aura of energetic efficiency. He was in his sixties with white hair around a bald and freckled skull, wore square wire-rim glasses and had a body as spare as a wooden saw horse. He wore a white synthetic dress shirt.
with sleeves rolled to the elbows and polyester dress pants. He was bow legged and his forearms were covered in a lofty mesh of white hair. He grabbed a mop from the wall and made a big but efficient show of mopping up the coffee, making a few brief swipes that soaked up most of the liquid, then flipping the mop over so all the string splayed across the floor, a few more strokes, then standing the mop in the low, tiled basin and running the hot water.

“I’ll get that, sir,” Janie said.

“No need,” he said. “I should retire if I can’t mop up a little coffee.”

“Sorry,” she said.

“Why should you apologize for drinking coffee?” he said, as though there was nothing perfunctory about her response. “I drink it too.” She wasn’t sure where his accent originated, Germany or Scandinavia, some part of the world she knew nothing about.

Steaming water ran over the mop. He closed the tap and twisted the mop handle, braiding the strings of the mop-head into a tight wad, then put the handle under his arm like a lance and leaned onto it with his body weight, going up on his toes and flexing his knees like a man at much more serious work. The mop squelched and the water spread from the bottom of it and ran down the drain. Mr. Günter then gave the mop another twirl and a couple taps as if it were a hoe and swung it up and hung it between its dowels. The strings of the mop-head swung and a drop of water flew into Janie’s eye. She saw it coming, the largeness of it, its arc and its gray-brown color, but it struck her before she could close her eye. She blinked and the dirty water brimmed at her lower lid and ran down her cheek.

Mr. Günter stood there, his chest rising, breathing through his mouth. The pale freckles on his scalp were shaped like amoeba swimming there beneath his skin.

“You take care of something all at once,” he said, “and you don’t have to worry about it later.”
“Yes, sir,” she said, wiping the water from her cheek.

“Now,” Mr. Günter said, “I have to introduce you to the new guy.”

He stepped aside and held his hand out as though inviting someone to pass. A guy about Janie’s age leaned in and looked at her. She was still half behind the door and she reached around and extended her hand.

“Now Mister Ken, this is Miss Janie, whose coffee I have spilled first thing in the morning.”

The boy took her hand and his face turned red. He was tall and athletic looking with curly blond hair. His head seemed slightly small for his body and his face was tight, his lips thin and chin pointy. He wore a rugby shirt and he was built like a quarterback.

Mister Günter said, “Ken is playing hockey and football and...what else?”

“Lacrosse.”

“Lacrosse, which I don’t even know what it is. He’s out from college for the summer. So today you train him Janie, okay? Make him feel at home. Take him on the regular morning round for the garbage and sweeping. I have given him the rotation sheet for the afternoon tasks all week. We will show him the FactoryCat and other things later when I have time. So, give him a tour first, make sure he has everything he needs, and if anything else tell Bill at the security station to page me as usual. It’s okay?”

“What happened to Pepper?” Janie asked.

“Pepper gave notice. He decided it was too far to drive from Walled Lake. He didn’t say it to anyone. He call me at home and gave me an earful and he quit. Just as well.” He brushed his hands together schweep schweep as though wiping off the dust. “Now I have business in my office. I will talk later to you.”

He walked out and was gone. Janie stood and came out from behind the door. She motioned the new guy in and shut the door.
“He makes me nervous,” she said.

Ken stood very woodenly and looked strained, like he was about to have a bowel movement.

“Seems like a nice guy,” he said.

“Wait till you get to know him,” she said.

“I don’t know,” he said.

She offered him half her cookie, and he creased his brow and said, “That’s okay.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “Take it.”

He took the cookie and turned it over to look at the underside, then took a small bite and held the cookie at his side and stared at the floor while he chewed.

“Come on,” she said, opening the closet door. “I’ll show you where everything is.”

They walked through the labs with the wheeled trash can rolling along between them, and she introduced him to all the men whose names she knew. He shook hands respectfully with each one, and she didn’t notice until late in the day that the leers and feigned pinches and catcalls that usually kept her on edge were for the most part absent. It wasn’t exactly a relief.

On the way home she could barely keep her eyes open in the traffic and the broiling sun. It took forever to get through the lights. The sun was like a drug. All she wanted to do was get home and sleep. There was no breeze when the car was not moving. She pulled up her pant legs, she took off her shoes and socks.

At home both doors were open and there were flies in the kitchen. Her mother’s bedroom door was closed. She heard her mother call from behind the door.

“Janie!”

She went to the door and opened it a crack.
“Don’t let the light in,” her mother said.

Janie stepped in and shut the door. It was dark. The room smelled like throw up. A large fan on the dresser made a terrible noise and blew the air around.

“I missed my doctor’s appointment,” her mother said.

“I told you to give me a ride,” Janie said.

“I don’t want you to get upset,” her mother whimpered, “but something happened.”

Janie felt mildly sick to her stomach.

“Is dad okay?”

“Yes, he’s fine. But that man he’s been working for in Toledo is missing. That Mr. Cassella.”

“What happened to him?”

“They don’t know. He’s missing. He was mixed up in something. You know the kind of people your dad gets involved with.”

“Is dad mixed up in something? Is he coming home?”

“Well he can’t keep working down there. Nobody even knows where the owner of the restaurant is. His wife has been calling all day. I don’t know what she expects from me. I told her I’m sick, I have a migraine. She acts like I did something.”

“I told her not to call here.”

“You talked to her? When?”

“Before.”

“I wish you could have taken care of it.”

“Mom! What am I supposed to do? Don’t cry, mom. You’re making me upset.”

“I’m sorry, dear. Go make yourself a hot dog.”

“I’m not hungry. I’m going to sleep.”

“You’ll be up all night.”
“I don’t care. I can’t stay awake.”

“Did you eat?”

“I had a cookie.”

Janie opened the door.

“Don’t let the light in,” her mother said. “It will kill me.”

Janie woke up sweating and thirsty and wanting something sweet. She crawled out of bed and stood in the middle of the room straightening her underwear. It was so humid she felt short of breath and her heart was pounding. As hot as she was the cold water from the bathroom tap was shocking on her skin. The pipes screeched when she opened the faucet and bucked when she closed it. There was no other sound in the house except the fan in her mother’s room. Outside the sound of the freeway traffic spilled over the city like foam over the rim of a glass. In the kitchen she poured a glass of lemonade and spooned jam from a jar and ate it. The juice didn’t quench her thirst but she couldn’t bring herself to drink water. She feared chemicals and bacteria in the tap water. She sucked on an ice cube.

There were stars in the night sky. She sat on her mother’s car and smoked. When the phone started ringing she lost her patience.

“Hello!” she said into the receiver. “This is Janie. What do you want?”

“Hello?” a man’s voice said sheepishly.

“Who is this?”

“It’s Ken. Is this Janie?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s me.”

“You said I could call you. Should I call back?”

“No, I just woke up that’s all. I’m a little groggy.”
“You want to go back to bed?”

“No. I’ll be up all night. What do you want?”

“I was wondering if you want to meet me at the arcade.”

“What for?”

“Get out of the house for a while. Play pinball.”

“Yeah? What else?”

“Talk.”

“I don’t have a whole lot to say when I’m awake,” she said, “much less when I’m comatose.”

“My dad says I’d be better off hiring a drifter to do my talking for me,” he said.

“I don’t get it.”

“It would be cheap. And better than all I usually have to say, according to him.”

“Hm. We could always read the paper out loud,” she said. “Mayor-implicated-in-sludge-hauling-scandal.”

“What?”

“I just meant that’s what the headline would say.”

He didn’t respond.

“In the paper,” she said. “If we were reading it out loud.”

“Yeah,” he said.

“Anyway.”

“I’m going up there,” he said. “You want to meet me up there?”

“Yeah okay. I’ll go up there for a while.”

She was brushing her teeth when the phone rang again. She spit in the sink and slurped water from her hand. The cold water made her teeth ache.

“Hello.”
The voice on the line quivered like a plate of glass about to shatter. “Have you found anything out?” it said.

“Who is this?”

“Please. He is my husband. Nobody will tell me anything.”

“I don’t know anything,” Janie said.

“Please help me.” The voice started moaning and long sobs came forth like the voice of some spirit trapped in a mine, like something coming up through the rock. “You must know something!” it said. “Please tell me!”

“Your husband will be fine,” Janie said. “You’ll find him.”

“No. I won’t!” the voice said. “Something’s wrong—”

She heard the receiver hit the floor and she hung up the phone.

As she walked down Thirteen Mile Road Janie couldn’t shake the feeling that she was not fully dressed. She had checked herself in the mirror several times but she still felt like something was missing, like when she stepped into the light something terrible would be revealed and people would point at her like she was some animal. She was wearing shorts, flip-flops and a halter top. She tried to stay as far from the street as she could, but even so cars slowed as they passed her, men shouted at her through their open windows. Somewhere that woman was lying on her floor crying and nobody would tell her where her husband was. But why wasn’t she asking the right people, the people who knew? Janie felt like all this trouble was coming out of nowhere and rubbing up against her life. If she did something different, something out of the ordinary that would pull the channel of her life over this way or that, somewhere to the left or right of its customary groove, maybe the trouble wouldn’t have anything to lean up against. Maybe her life would go around it.

Her reflection in the drug store window did not seem inappropriate, so she walked next door and through the door of the arcade into all the bubble and clack and bells of the pinball
machines. She did a loop around the whole place and found Ken at Pat Hand and slipped in beside the machine and leaned back against Double Jeopardy with her elbows on the glass top. Ken kept his eyes down on the game and his face turned red.

"Let me finish this ball and then we can double up."

"This is my best game," she said.

She was jittery on the first ball and was too quick on the flippers, but soon she settled down into her game and won a free ball, then lit up the joker and started spinning up big numbers. On the fifth ball she turned it over and the machine made that big clack that said free game.

"I told you this was my best game."

"That's pretty good."

"You care if I smoke?"

He shrugged.

Between the two of them they turned it over so many times that they had more free games than they could play.

"Not bad for a quarter," she said. "Should we leave them for somebody else?"

"Okay."

A pretty girl walked up and put her coin in the slot of Double Jeopardy. The numbers reset and the balls came down the chute.

"Let's go," Janie said.

He was tall compared to her and he didn't say much. He kept his jaw tight and he reddened easily. She found that she could lead him around the place like a big horse. It was like he had no will of his own. She tested this control by leading him from one machine to another, changing her mind, changing it again. And always he acquiesced, he went along.

She even dared to send him next door to the drug store to buy cigarettes for her and he did that
too. When he came back, she could see that he was building himself up for something and when they ran out of change he said, “You want to go to White Hill?”

She shrugged. “Okay.”

He drove an old Dodge Polara and whenever it hit a pot hole the jarring and the racket made it feel like the wheel was coming right off.

“Need some new shocks,” he said.

“These ones are about shot,” she said.

She sat by the door instead of next to him like she always saw other girls do. He cut the headlights when they entered the service road by the park and the gravel crunched under the tires as the road narrowed and went up the backside of the hill. Exhaust fumes wafted through the car and they rolled up their windows. Sometimes he steered way off to the side of the trail to go around a large rock or root, nudging the accelerator so that the car heaved forward, pushing them back into their seats, and the tires slipped a little in the gravel. There were two other cars at the top of the hill and they stopped the car away from the others and cut the engine. The lights from the hospital were ahead of them and stars could be seen in the sky. Janie lit a cigarette and Ken stared straight ahead through the windshield.

It had been a long time since Janie had been to the top of White Hill. She used to come here when she was a kid. In the winter they rode sleds down the slope facing Providence Hospital. A sad kind of thrill was present there, slippery and dark. In this place she had imagined a future that she now knew would never come, and from that lost future’s surrogate she looked back on a false past, one that had lost its flesh and was now only a spirit in the heaven of her memory. She remembered that she used to know exactly who she was back then. But she had felt endangered for so long that she had completely forgotten. Endangerment had made her a different person. She used to know how to control who she was, but through some subtle process the skill had been removed.
A Medevac helicopter took off from the hospital roof and came toward them, its lights blinking white and red, and flew over the hill to retrieve some injured person somewhere. Was she dead or alive? Janie lit a cigarette. Ken waved the smoke away so she leaned across him and rolled his window down. As she turned the window crank her face brushed his and he kissed her. She turned toward him and put her arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. His lips were dry and she almost had to force her tongue into his mouth. They kissed for a while and then she sat up against him with her head against his chest and her arms around him. He had one arm on the door and the other along the seatback and occasionally he squirmed and he sat with his legs apart. Janie threw out her cigarette and turned her face up to him.

“What do you want me to do?” she said.

He cleared his throat and said, “Nothing.” Then he squirmed and he opened his legs wider.

Janie sighed. She knew that he wanted her to take the initiative, to make the decision for them. She kissed him again and slid her hand down to his crotch and tugged very lightly on his zipper and then let it go. He kissed her hard and then he touched the back of her head and she pulled away from him and leaned against the far door. She removed one of her flip-flops and stretched her leg across the seat and dug a toe into his ribs. He clamped his elbow to his side and held her foot to the seatback.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Dooon’t,” she mocked, pulling her foot free and poking at him again. He grabbed her foot and stared resolutely. She poked at his ribs with her fingers. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward him and wrestled with her until he had her restrained and held tight up against him.

“You know who I hate?” she said.
“Who?” he said.

“That Mister Günter. He’s got one water-tight ass. If I was a man I’d make sure he knew he wasn’t one.”

He let her go and made a false contemplative sound in his throat. It made her want to slap him.

“You know who he reminds me of?” she said.

“I bet I could guess,” he said. “Me?”

“That’s the brightest thing you said yet,” she said.

“I’ve got a ton of them,” he said.

“You and the drifter you pay.”

“Right.”

“I’m just teasin’; don’t get so upset.”

“I’m not upset.”

“Yeah you are.”

“No. I’m not.”

“You seem like it.”

“Well.”

“You got a girlfriend?”

“No. You?”

“Got a girlfriend?”

“Boyfriend.”

“Don’t be so serious.”

“Do you?”

“No. And I don’t plan on it. At least not right now,” she said, reaching for the door handle. “I have to go pee now. Then I better get going.”
She got out and urinated squatting in the bushes and when she got back he started the car and eased it down the hill, neither of them saying a word until they pulled up in front of her house. He stared straight out through the windshield, and Janie opened the door and the dome light went on. She stepped out and up in the sky the Medevac chopper flew over, transporting someone to the care of doctors. For all the sound it made as its rotors split the air it sent no breeze their way. She looked into the car. “Be nice if you could take a joke,” she said and she closed the car door and went in the house. He squealed his tires when he pulled away, and she heard them squeal at three stop signs after, each screech fainter than the last, fading like a memory of some childhood emergency.

It was hot and she couldn’t sleep and at four o’clock in the morning the phone started ringing. Janie flew from the bed and rushed to the kitchen and snatched the receiver from the cradle.

“Lady!” she said. “You need to get a grip!”

Under the stainless steel hood of the FactoryCat were four large square batteries. Each cable had a collar on its end that slipped over the battery post and a nut to tighten it. The batteries were clean and the labels on their hard plastic tops were clearly visible. The posts and connections were kept free of corrosion with a stiff wire brush. The compartment that held the batteries was just the right size for the batteries and the cables, like a crate made specifically for the protection and shipment of this cargo. The whole thing was neat and latent with power and efficiency. For Janie this clean and uncluttered configuration of batteries and cables, this greaseless and attractive arrangement of hardware, the batteries like perfect hewn building stones, the cables sheathed tidily in grooved rubber casings, was what made the machine run. The motor was somewhere deeper in the machine, not visible to her from here
and might as well have not existed. The FactoryCat would leap forward quietly when
the operating handles at the rear were depressed and roll ahead on its spongy tires. It put
down a film of soapy water in the front which was contained by a squeegee and sucked up in
the rear. It was like a miniature Zamboni for the corridors of industry. The dirty job it did
was always contained under it within the dimensions of its footprint.

Janie unhooked the battery charger and was filling the reservoir when Mr. Günter came
through the large metal doors of the maintenance shop.

"Janie!" he said from across the shop. His voice echoed off the walls. He walked
briskly toward her, a man of importance. "You are filling up the FactoryCat with solution!"
He often made declarative statements about mundane events as they transpired, fixing them in
place and editorializing with his tone of voice, most often suggesting accusation regarding
things that had seemed purely innocent outside of his presence. *Might we not convene,* his
voice seemed to say, *around this event together and see if we don't agree that some
transgression is being committed?* Transgression or not, he seemed to think it healthy to
always be asking the question.

"I am filling up the FactoryCat with solution," Janie said.

"I just wanted to tell you," he said. "Our Ken has been moved up to the office complex
for the day to squeegee some walls for me. Not to worry. I will have him back to help you
tomorrow. Everything is okay?" He looked at the FactoryCat, checked the cables, kicked the
tires.

"Everything is okay."

"Good. I go."

Janie had noticed his hands as he checked the cables, the white hair on the backs, their
largeness, but particularly the fingernails, the fact that they had no facial arc but were flat, set
into the flesh of his fingers as if pressed into clay and that the whites started too low, so that
even though the nails were short fully one third of the nail was white. It made her feel sick somehow; they were like the fingernails of a dead man. She watched him walk away, his bowed legs and marching gait, his flat posterior, polyester dress pants and brown suede shoes. The blue collar pretense of checking the cables, the white collar pretense of his Sears and Roebuck wardrobe.

_Who am I to these people?_ she thought.

Janie exited the maintenance shop and saw Mr. Günter walking through the breezeway to the office complex. When he turned left, she turned right and threaded her way through the building to the elevators. She pushed the button and waited feeling self conscious. The receptionist looked her over dismissively. She rode the elevator to the third floor where she knew the new office partitions had been erected and through one open door she saw the edge of a canvas drop cloth. She went into the office and there was Ken with his back to her holding a sponge in one hand and squeegee in the other.

“I came to talk to you,” she said.

He stiffened but didn’t turn around. He swiped the water off a prefabricated wall panel with the rubber blade and bent to his left to dip the sponge in a bucket of water. His lips were pursed and his face was red.

“Do you hear me?” she said.

He began washing the next panel.

“I’m quitting,” she said. “And I want you to know it’s got nothing to do with you.”

He kept working. He was wearing a Hollander uniform now and she could see the muscles of his back working under the shirt.

“I’m just tired of mopping up, that’s all,” she said.

She strode across the room and as he bent to dip the sponge again she snatched it from his hand, spraying both of their shoes with dirty water. He flinched like someone had just
fired a gun and stood there blinking. Some of the water had been flung into his eyes. The sponge, clutched in her hand, leaked on the floor between them. She got the feeling that he was not being authentic, that he wore the uniform of a hardened heart but that his real heart would say something altogether different. But he wasn’t brave. Nor was she. She could think of nothing sensible nor anything wicked to say.

"Is this the Action news or the Eyewitness news?"

"I don’t know," her father said. "I think it’s the Action news."

"Isn’t she from the Eyewitness news though?" Janie said.

"You’re thinking of the other one."

"No this one. Her, isn’t she..."

"It’s the Eyewitness news," her mother said from the bedroom.

They were sitting on the couch in the living room watching the television. He had been there looking anxious when she got home in the afternoon, surrounded by brochures and papers and dirty clothes. Janie didn’t mention that she had quit her job, and he didn’t ask why she was home. She had gone to sleep, and when she got up he was still there worrying over the things surrounding him. There was a story on the 11 o’clock news about the sludge hauling scandal. Something about payoffs. The mayor.

"We had to close the place," her father said, continuing where he had left off when she went to her room. "There was no one there to run things, do payroll. Nothing. I don’t know anything about that. They still haven’t found him but it’s only a matter of time. I swear to God not two days before he disappeared we were sitting having a beer in the back and he was laughing—laughing! Because two guys had come to talk to him. I said Roberto are you out of your mind! These people don’t fool around. This is money we’re talking about. This is
your life. He just laughed, like, like it was some amusing little thing. What are they
gonna do? he said. I’ll pay them when I can. I said, Roberto you got to listen to me. You’re
not understanding what’s going on here. These guys do not play games. You do not play
games with them. Two days later he disappears. No one’s seen him since.”

Her mother said something from the bedroom.

“Go see what your mother wants.”

“What do you want, ma!”

They heard her voice faintly through the door. “I said, I told you not to go with that
guy.”

“A guy uncle Vic knows has a McDonald’s franchise,” her father said. “In Toledo.
I’m tellin’ you, that guy makes a lot of money. He started out with one, he’s got two now.
What they do they send you to the Hamburger U. That’s where you learn about how to run
McDonald’s.”

“What’s that?”

“What?”

“Hamburger U?”

“It means the Hamburger University. You need a lot of money to get started on a
franchise but you’ve got the McDonald’s name behind you.”

Her father’s hair had grown shaggy since the last time she saw him, and he smelled like
onions.

“They make you account for every little thing though, right down to the penny. Even
the amount you throw away every month. You don’t throw the right amount away and there’s
a guy wants to know why. You always got to answer to the company. That’s why they’re
McDonald’s. But there’s a lot of paperwork. Every month. He showed it to me. There’s a
stack this high. You wouldn’t believe it, Janie. All weekend long he’s doing paperwork. You
have to take an exam and that’s where I don’t know if I can handle it. What do you think, honey?”

“I don’t know, dad,” she said. “I’m just the daughter. Don’t make me decide. You have to decide. You have to be the father.”

“Sometimes you know things though. Just like I knew about those guys Roberto borrowed from. One thing we have in this family is intuition. We have gut instincts.”

“I don’t know this.”

“I was just asking. Just in case.”

“Well don’t ask. Don’t ask me.” Men and boys were the same, she thought. They wanted you to make decisions for them and then they hated you for it.

Her father was biting his lip. He seemed anxious. “I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know. All that paperwork.”

The person on the Action news or the Eyewitness news said, “Police find a suspicious vehicle abandoned in the parking lot of a Southfield hotel. What they find in the trunk will shock you. After the break…”

Her father sat up and said, “Oh my God.” He got up and crossed the room and turned up the volume on the TV. He sat there through the commercials with his leg jumping. “For Christ’s sake,” he said. “Christ’s sake.”

When the commercials ended they came back on and said that earlier that day an employee of the hotel in Southfield had called police about a Pontiac Lemans that had been in the parking lot for at least two days, maybe three. The car hadn’t moved and it wasn’t registered as belonging to any of their guests. A peculiar odor could be detected emanating from the car. The news anchors in the studio were very concerned about this car, and they showed footage from earlier that day of a reporter at the hotel who also seemed very concerned. They specified several times that it was a Pontiac Lemans, as though this had
some special significance, as though the car itself was suspected of something. You could see the car over the shoulder of the reporter and between the police who were standing there to keep people away.

Janie’s father was gently shaking his head. “I tried to tell him,” he said. “It’s not a game. You don’t play games.”

The camera zoomed in for a tighter shot, eliminating the reporter from the picture and squeezing into the small space between two officers and into the open trunk of the car. What could be seen there as plain as day were two black shoes and the cuffs of a pair of dress pants. The shoes were stacked on their edges one on the other, indicating that whoever was wearing them there in that trunk was lying on his side. The position of the shoes was just like it would be if a live person were wearing them. No different. The camera quivered on that spot and periodically the view was obscured by some out-of-focus object moving into view and then away, revealing the shoes again in perfect focus. A pair of shoes on a pair of feet.

The door to Janie’s mother’s room opened a crack revealing a sliver of her mother’s face, one eye rolling toward the TV. “It’s him?” she asked.

Janie’s father looked toward the bedroom door, his mouth quivering.

“I tried to tell him,” he said.

“Oh God!” her mother exclaimed. “Who’s going to call that woman?” Her stricken eye turned toward Janie. Janie’s father turned to her as well.

“Me?” her father said, eyebrows and shoulders rising and both hands pointing toward his chest. “I have to do it? After what I’ve been through?” The eye hovered in the crack in the door like a marble on a string.

Janie watched the TV carefully, squinting and leaning forward to see if anything would change or become clearer, if there was anything she had missed. She wondered what the rest
of him looked like, this man whose decisions threaded end to end led to the trunk of that car—if he still looked like the husband he used to be, or if dying had made him different.
Riding the Sit Bones

The moon was a big white hole in black felt hanging over the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Stu stood on the terrace watching until her face emerged, like it always did since that first time back when they were together. It was the same moon it had been last year and the same moon it had been fifteen hundred miles behind in Cleveland, the face of Melora Judge the puppet queen glowing there all cheeky like the luminous mask of comedy. But cheap, like something Walt Disney dreamed up. Every month it came around and there she was, and it drove him mad to contemplate a universe where she was the moon but he was not the sun, where she was in the sky and he was on the dirty earth.

A fibrillar cloud drifted slowly from the west, turning and spreading like something hairy on the sea. It slowly moved beneath her moony face. A breeze blew the French doors shut behind him. Then the air lay as still as clay.

Melora Judge had long been famous when Stu met her in the Cleveland theater where his first play *What the Heart Wants the Eye Won’t Allow* was to be produced. She was doing a month-long run of her marionette shows. This was the era that had succeeded first Erth shoes and then Disco, this was the era of college radio's great influence, this was the era of the alternative newspaper. William Burroughs was back in vogue; the Sex Pistols were born. The phrase "performance art" and names like Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle were tossed about
like revolutionary slogans. In the middle of all that Melora Judge slipped in. It was an astonishing thing really, her success. A phenomenon like pet rocks. Her marionettes had filled some obscure vacant niche in popular culture in that era when the desire for something new was filled by something old. Regional theater became like Vaudeville for anyone who called himself a storyteller or performance artist. Most of it was just weak standup comedy but she really had something, and she became the queen of the crop. People all but threw money at her.

The two puppets that made Melora Judge famous were called Falloir and Querer. It was generally acknowledged among the patrons of marionette theater to be a sign of her genius that she named her puppets after foreign verbs, although Stu had never heard the origins or the rationale for this belief and suspected it was just an example of the kind of apocryphal toilet paper that always sticks to the shoe of celebrity. It made him suspicious, but his suspicions were not his main master in those days.

The basic premise of her act was this: Falloir and Querer were abandoned by their papa the big Sequoia who, due to old age and excessive soil erosion, had been uprooted and floated downstream, fated to become the rotting floorboards in a boomtown saloon. The two saplings were left to fend for themselves in the woods, struggling for sunlight against avaricious shagbark hickories and the envious larch. There were themes of spore promiscuity, cross-pollination, fairies and wolves, and the evil lumbermen who finally beguiled and metamorphosed them, took them from the garden and put breath in their noses, robbed them of one life but gave them another. From roots to strings: they had been anchored from below, now they were strung from above. Which was the more free state: to be rooted to one spot but nourished, or to be mobile but ungrounded, detached from mama earth? Everything she did after that was just a variation on the theme.
She got famous on the puppet circuit, the spawn of a cultural boredom and aesthetic resentments. She opened for punk rock acts and did gigs at topless clubs. There were puppet dolls marketed, puppet jewelry, even talk of a weekly television cartoon show. She'd been on Saturday Night Live the year Robert Downey Junior was one of the players. In fact she was all over the place, in every town Stu might call home. Her picture was in magazines, her puppets were in gift shops and dime stores.

She was an icon when Stu and his friends were still college boys. He had seen one of her puppet shows in a porno theater years before they met, when it was still low budget and bawdy and she was almost a part of the audience, sitting on the edge of the stage playing bad accordion and throwing ad libs from the puppet's mouth. It was as though you were just lucky enough to be sitting in this really funny girl's room. Then later he saw her on TV. It put him right back in his childhood neighborhoods. Her act was somehow so familiar it was like he had written it himself. But there was always something small that didn't quite sit right with him. It almost seemed too obvious, too confessional, too fresh from the street. But then to meet her all those years later: how could he avoid infection by delusions of destiny? What vaccine could possibly inoculate him against a first exposure to celebrity and the bewildering face of fame? He could tell when he met her that she had the gene for success. She was imbued in person with the kind of mystery most people possess only when magnified by television or other media. She shone beyond the boundaries of her skin. Her soul stretched out of her body and laid hands on him.

His name was Bud but she always called him Stu after one of the early puppets, an ugly wooden stickman with swollen eyes and a hardon like some lewd Balinese icon. Stu was resentfully flattered by this. He didn't like being a nickname, but everyone in the theater picked up on it and it stuck. After while even he thought of himself as Stu. He hated the
feeling that she, a famous person, had invented him, that he'd lost his real name in there somewhere.

She came to a rehearsal of his play and stayed until everyone was gone. She said his work was brilliant. She quoted some of his best lines back to him and opened her mouth in mock surprise and covered it with her hand. They stood close in the darkness backstage. He kissed her and the old world fell away. He stood on the threshold of some greater realm.

Neither of them were Twilight Zone types, but it was all magic and trouble from the word go. One time when she was on the road travelling with one of her shows and he was pining for her miserably, he looked up at the moon and there she was. The phone rang and it was her. She said the light from the moon had cast a vampiric tree shadow on her wall and she knew it was him. The moon had been theirs ever since.

Suffice it to say that they both believed it to be a divinely choreographed nutcracker. Everything happened so fast there was nothing one could do but bare the teeth and go for the jugular. He was jealous of her fame and money and the confidence it gave her. He was doubtful of his own talents. She was on the road a lot. She knew a lot of men and spent a lot of time with them. Suspicions led to accusations. In a perfect world, he felt, I would be her.

As for the climax, it was as stupid as anything could be. She had wanted to give him a haircut and once she got rolling she shaved both his head and his face. She couldn't decide what she wanted him to be. She left the hair on his neck like a fur collar. In retaliation he clipped off her fingernails while she was sleeping, never dreaming that this would be the unforgivable act. They argued violently. They made accusations. They split. A year later the sun still burned his scalp.

After the split she found another man, and he matriculated to the college of Bacardi on the rocks. Then after months of piggyback binges, nights of dementia ensued — spiritual sweats and existential labors. Bad dreams and a buzzing and corrosive galvanization in the
lining of him, a kickbull rodeo in his soul. He had recurring dreams populated by relatives who were long dead walking on carnival midways and Roman roads. The dreams were so bad he got nightmares from the dreams. The bed was drenched every morning as if he'd been doused with buckets of water. At the peak of it, when there was nothing but ozone left in his big empty glass, the invisible devil parked himself in Stu's front yard and all the arms of nature became stage props. Stu went out there and had it out with the red one, spitting and crying and snapping his vanity like a rattail, and when the devil was finally on the canvas Stu found a budding intuition had replaced the humming dynamo of fear in his guts.

He spent loony anchoritic weeks rolling this little bud between his fingers. Sniffing it, inspecting it monkeywise. What he found was that the disposition of this newly discovered faculty was like that of an old diesel rig. Sometimes he couldn't get it started and other times it kept running even after the key was removed and he'd gone to bed. He saw double meanings everywhere, he was blood relations with trees and rocks. Then he would ask too much of it and it would poke through his ribs like a needle and leave him paralyzed flat on his back. It was like suddenly being fluent in every language that ever existed but having a debilitating stutter.

After six months she sent him a very impersonal card saying that the actors on the circuit missed him. No Dear, no Love — just the facts. They were still living across town from each other. He worked during those months on a construction crew hanging doors on storage units after production of his play was shut down. The production had all hinged on the promise of an NEA grant that was yanked because the subject matter of the play was deemed unfit for the stage by senators in Texas and maybe one of the Carolinas, representatives of the people, old men who said the ideas Stu had should be stuffed back into his head for life without parole. What he thought passed for drama was apparently somehow not good for democracy. All that fallout from the Reagan plague.
Working construction that summer he was cooked like a stuffed cabbage. Ninety-nine degrees and ninety percent humidity. Another five months went by. When the wind chill factor hit fifty below the next winter he took it as a sign against him and decided to leave that state, where he had lived all his life. He sold everything but the dog and moved west. It took him three days driving in the old Ford with a box of her love letters in the trunk and the dog howling in the back seat. He traveled until the terrain looked right and then he stopped. This is how he wound up in New Mexico. He went through seven states to get where he was. A new life was what he intended, beyond the sphere of her celebrity.

He found a little efficiency the first day in Santa Fe and spent a week running around to garage sales and flea markets to furnish it. There was no closet space so the box with her letters sat in the middle of the floor where he used it to set his coffee and newspapers on. It was that big. After six months of love and trouble, a year of convalescence got him to the point where he could read the want ads without having to close one eye. There were jobs he had done before and hated and jobs for which he was not qualified.

He had no night stand, no love seat, no coffee table, no steak knives. He ate warmed canned stew from his camping cookery. The kind with the huge thumb print on the can lid. He found a therapist and a sensei, even a chiropractor for his curved spine, but no employment. He was running out of money. He had all the peripherals of this bachelorhood but it appeared the core was missing. The chiropractor said he had an unusually broad pelvis, that if he was a woman he could give birth no sweat. The sensei said he was unbalanced, like something with no arms. He sought the counsel of women in these matters of health. He assumed they could heal him.
Waxing, waning, revolution. Spring tides, neap tides, ebb and flow. For thirty-three years the moon had been nothing to Stu but one of a million symbols of futility, of things that could not be known, that troubled reason like the wind troubled the air. Womby things, fluid things, things beyond the ken of his dry bag of bones. Intuition and all the things that reputedly upset men. Half a life spent reading books and brooding and he felt like nothing more than a fact-stuffed heathen.

The face he saw then and now on the moon was exactly like a photo of Melora she had given to him from a magazine called Puppet Personae. She had been too impressed with it herself to give him the actual photo; she photocopied it. It looked like so: The head was tipped slightly back and to the right so it looked down to the left at him. The face wore a Dippity Doo look, kind-o'-hip-kind-o'-wow. He could have slapped it right off that lunar mug. But then sometimes the oopsie look turned aghast. He saw horror, he saw the tracks of tears. The mask turned from comedy to tragedy. It very much resembled her puppets.

Novice that he was with his intuition, Stu couldn't tell the difference between true revelation and his ego giving him a ribbing. He searched for this particular New Mexican moon's meaning, what it wanted on this night to represent.

"Fetus?" he said, still eyeing the cloud that had camped right there below the moon. "Are you telling me that girl is pregnant?"

They hadn't slept together in a year. But what if she had had his baby and not told him about it? His status would be changed immediately from child to father, hers from heartbreaker to milkmother. Could this have happened without him knowing it? He figured it was a good pretense for calling her after this baleful lunar year. He could be smug and accusative. They could talk magic.

The phone rang twice and the machine came on. "Hey this is Melora. I'm currently busy trying to find a word that rhymes with antidisestablishmentarianism. The closest I've
come so far is the word orange. Leave me a message and I'll get back to you at recess." After the beep he paused, said, "I am here, you know..." Another beep followed.

"Stu?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Hey-hey!" She sounded as breathy as a little girl. And perfectly friendly. "I can't believe it. Where are you?"

It was as though they had spoken only yesterday. That's how familiar she sounded.

"I'm in New Mexico. I was looking at the moon and thinking how it still reminds me of you."

"It still reminds me of you," she said. Then the friendliness left her voice entirely.

"Sometimes."

He walked to the French doors and looked out at her face and the wobbled halos it emanated like poorly stacked plates. Here he was talking to her fifteen hundred miles away and she was right there looking down on him through this keyhole in the sky like some cosmic video phone, a communications system that was half High Tech and half Big Bang.

"I got sober," he said.

"You're a drunk at heart, baby. It's what I liked about you."

There were things he had rehearsed, a style of intimacy they had had when they were together, a sexual grammar, and he marched into it like a wooden soldier.

"I saw you riding a horse last night," he said. "It was in the desert. You were naked and I came..."

She only laughed, like a tire puncture with a whistle in it and he recalled the way she looked, her skin gone slightly flabby, the smoker's cough and the obscene cosmetics. She was older than him, and you might say she was even homely. But there was something of beauty and power in her nevertheless. They had matching his and hers mental cases, what it was.
"Let me go out on a limb," he said. "I miss you."

"Listen, Stu, that's not something I can talk about with you any more. I have a boyfriend. He's Indian. He carves wood. He makes my marionettes. You should see his face. He looks like something lightning cracked off a mountain. But with lots of hair. Look I don't know what to say. I'd like to be kind I really would. But that's not something I can do. Sorry if I'm dropping the ball here."

Sorrow was not what her voice contained. When she hung up he was so angry he bit into a fork and his fillings lit up like diodes. He kicked the box of letters and sent the contents exploding into the air, their names and addresses in her hand all over the floor, hearts and arrows on the flaps, marionettes and cancelled stamps. The letters said things like I see the moon and I think of you, which was not at all the way she spoke. It couldn't have been clearer had she written, I'm not yours anymore. His dog sat on the terrace and howled at the moon.

Stu scoured the want ads in the New Mexican while drinking coffee and smoking at a wobbly table in the Aztec cafe. He circled an ad that mentioned travel and qualifications he was no longer sure he could meet: punctuality, reliability, lack of felony convictions. He called the number from the pay phone and made an appointment with a man whose voice sounded like James Taylor. The address he gave was of a film production company in an office on Marcy, and for a little while Stu thought maybe he had gotten inconceivably lucky. On the way over he imagined how he might turn his play into a movie script.

The man's name was Aaron Ergo. He had long straight black hair in a pony tail to the middle of his back. His eyes were an unsettling milky blue as though he had some affliction that might have caused him blindness. When he talked he locked his eyes on Stu's and never
averted them. His voice was even more nasal than it seemed on the phone and he spoke with various hums and emphatics interjected into his speech giving it a distended sing-song effect.

"Actually the production company belongs to my father. He just lets me use his office. He produces videos on a freelance basis. He's currently making a safety film for the New Mexico prison system to demonstrate procedures for the various types of machinery the inmates use on their various work details."

He asked Stu what attracted him to the ad. Then he stared at him, pursed his lips, put his fingertips together like a television therapist and waited for Stu's response.

"Travel," Stu responded.

The nature of the job was this: they would sell posters and fine art reproductions at universities throughout the Midwest. They would see places like Columbia and St. Louis, Missouri; Bloomington, Indiana; Minneapolis, Minnesota; Cleveland, Ohio; and Madison, Wisconsin. When Stu heard "Cleveland" his heart jumped and he figured he had hitched a ride on the fate train. Some fine thread from the loom of destiny had just wound itself around his ankle and he knew right then he had the job no matter what he would say or do. He sat glassy-eyed with his mind clattering like a pinball machine.

Three weeks later they were on a plane to New York. They flew into La Guardia and took a cab to Brooklyn. The poster company was run out of an old warehouse. The owner of the company was a childhood friend of Ergo, and every year Ergo took the six week tour to sell posters. The rest of the year he collected and traded antique guns in New Mexico. Neither endeavor made him much money but it kept him from starving.

They loaded a Hertz van with a thousand pounds of posters and accessories and left at two p.m. in a downpour. They spent the first night in a cheap motel in the Poconos. The next day they drove in shifts all the way to Columbia, Missouri. All Stu thought about was
Cleveland and what would happen in Cleveland and the unlikelihood that any of this could happen: that he would leave his home for some distant and exotic place and so soon, and so unexpectedly, be going back to it via some wholly separate route and some wholly independent enterprise. His will had removed him; his destiny was returning him.

Ergo was a talker. He talked in minute detail about the trials of past tours, things that had gone wrong, assistants of inferior mettle, the process of loading in and loading out at all the different schools. He fancied himself a thinker too, and he spit it out endlessly in that nasal sing-song on the subjects of politics and sociology and philosophy, opinions not so unlike Stu's own but which ignited his contempt because of the proprietary nature of the presentation.

"Mm have you noticed that uh every five years pop culture spawns a new generation? Each is just another foolish cultural iteration of a society that idles at such high RPMs that it burns off everything that emerges before it can even settle. Pop culture is a know-it-all adolescent who knows nothing. Pop culture thinks it knows something, thinks it is something. But really it's as superficial as the hat humanity chooses to wear in any particular locale. All the real things happen in love. All the politics and culture and evolution play out in the struggle of love."

"How many times have you taken LSD?" Stu asked. "Because I think you're lapsing into a flashback sequence and it's starting to freak me out."

Ergo turned those milky eyes on him nervously and actually shut up for a while.

They started in Columbia, Missouri where they set up in a Best Western motel and spent an evening removing posters from tubes and placing them into heavy plastic sleeves. The sleeves had grommets along one edge, and the sleeves were stacked and bound into great
heavy books by tying rope through the grommets. While working along Stu took the contents of one of the tubes and spread the heavy roll of glossy posters on the bed and anchored each end with a phone book. He peeled off several posters of Smashing Pumpkins and put them in a sleeve, turned the sleeve over and put in several Nine Inch Nails. He put the extras of each back in the tubes, and when he turned back to the bed there she was, in full color, twenty-four by thirty-six, holding the rough and complicated piece of hardware after which he had been named and staring right at him—Melora Judge in block letters across the top of the poster.

Ergo, working on the next bed said, "I must confess I don't know who half these people are. Do you?"

Stu couldn't think how to answer. "I'm going out to smoke," he said.

"There's still lots of work to do before we turn in," Ergo said.

"Yeah there is."

Stu sat by the pool where a family of obese people all swam in their underwear and argued and cussed loudly at each other. It seemed a very unsafe place to be somehow, like a Third World country.

It was hot as the jungle the whole time they were in Columbia, and Stu spent all his time digging posters out of the Hertz, fighting through the hoards of students and refilling the sleeves. Every time he pulled another stack of Melora's posters out of a box he gulped hard, knowing each copy put out there with his hand was putting money in her pocket. Ergo tended the cash box. They were outdoors under tents. In St. Louis they were inside in a cramped space. In Bloomington they had a huge gallery. Time passed very slowly, town by town. Each evening they packed up the Hertz and found somewhere to eat dinner. Ergo usually got looped on a couple of beers and a Cognac and recited long sequences of the Mel Brooks movie The Producers. Stu's spirits got lower as Cleveland got nearer. He wanted to flow like
water with his destiny but he was as dense as lead. He began to hate Ergo and ignore his directives.

Cleveland was cold and overcast and they were outdoors under tents at Case Western Reserve University, where Stu had gotten his Masters in Theater Arts. Stu's disposition turned as evil as a lizard's. He turned his back when spoken to. He snapped viciously at students who got in his way. His spine housed an ice-cold expectation that she would appear any moment. This is what he had wanted but now he feared it greatly.

"Melora Judge, oh I love her! I saw her in Ann Arbor last year!" some student would say.

It seemed a particularly small promontory he stood on.

Five days they were in Cleveland. At night he walked by places where they used to go. He hung around outside the theater. But he contacted no one. The time passed and nothing happened and they left. Stu was exhausted and his heart was black. He wanted to go home.

The weeks unrolled slowly and Stu acquiesced to parts of himself he had thus far not known. If it became necessary he felt that he could just as easily kill Ergo as anything else. They sped from state to state in the Hertz, the poster of her always buried back there somewhere like a malignant spirit. Finally in Moorhead, Minnesota the last of her sold and they would not replace her for the rest of the tour.

The last stop was Madison, Wisconsin. They rolled slowly and silently into town in the rocking Hertz like immigrants from a foreign land. There was some mix-up with the hotel booking, and by the time they found a room elsewhere and moved in their day off was almost shot. Stu went walking while Ergo went to survey the place where they would load in the following day, as he always did. This was Stu's first time in Madison and he was surprised at all that was going on. There were musicians on every corner. It was lively and yet dismal.
Papers blew down the streets. It had the pall of sorrow that hangs over all state capitals and the excitement and energy of a college town. He watched, like a hungry thing kept from a feast, the people in the restaurant windows in couples and in groups. He tossed coins into the boxes of musicians and listened while the wind swallowed the feeble vibrations of their instruments. Walking down one such street the crowds of people became more dense as he approached the university. Then in a commons area there was the singing of a gospel choir and people dancing.

Stu picked his way through the crowd toward a stage in an area bounded by three buildings. On risers at the back of the stage were two rows of young African Americans in robes led in song by a young man, also robed, who faced them and conducted and danced and stomped. Their voices were loud and metallic and brisk. There in front of them in the middle of the stage was the feature of the show engaged in some sort of performance art. One person and two marionettes. Melora Judge in the Midwestern twilight and gusting wind and gospel, surrounded by an adoring crowd, performing in a way Stu had never seen before. She controlled a marionette with each hand and she too was strung with strings on her wrists and arms and ankles and legs and the strings were connected to the hands of the puppets and the puppets' strings to hers. They danced and cavorted and mimed in a kind of Mummenschanz of marionettes. It was bawdy and burlesque. It was poignant and surreal, and yet she was so real. When she rolled her head and jerked her limbs she was a puppet. When the marionettes made her jump and react they were people. The reality created was so engrossing, the performance so virtuosic, it made her seem almost magical. The spell carried, even there out of doors under the open sky without the intimate confines and acoustics of an auditorium to assist her. Her talent was so enormous that it carved its own reality out of the larger reality of nature through the sheer perfection of execution, her veteran expertise. The marionettes seemed to dance on their own while she sat slumped on a box. While she parried with one, the
other seemed to rise and cross the stage on its own. In the finale, as the choir sang with such force it seemed their voices could raise the sun, she genuflected to the puppets and rose and the puppets genuflected to her and then lay there, heaps of wood and string on the stage no longer possessed of souls. She bowed to the audience and raised her arms to the choir and bowed again.

"I heard the music. Was it a good show?"

Stu turned and Ergo was standing there holding a large paper cup of coffee and a bag of licorice. When he turned back she had left the stage.

"Want some?" Ergo said, holding up the licorice.

"I don't have time for you," Stu said.

He left Ergo there and walked wide around the crowd toward the side of the stage. The choir swayed and sang a gentle melody while the crowd slowly dissolved, reluctant to draw itself out of the spell. She was signing autographs in a crowd of people near the stage. She flirted with her fans like they were children.

"Would you sign this for my boyfriend? He loves you."

"Sure, sweetie. Should I say 'I would've signed your ass but you weren't here'?"

"Oh, yes! He'd love that."

"Can you put that on mine too?"

"I'll actually sign your ass," she said.

"Mine too?" someone else asked.

"For you," she said, "I'll sign my ass and you can take it home with you."

When she saw him she winked without breaking stride and went right on with her business. He moved off slightly and leaned against the railing of the steps that led to the stage. She signed her name until everyone was satisfied and begged off politely to a small group inviting her out for drinks. She walked over to him.
"O.K. come on," she said, as though relenting to some pestering child. She took his hand and led him up to the stage where a man was packing the marionettes into a large wooden trunk.

"Oliver!"

The man turned toward them. He was tall and dark with hard chiseled features and long black hair in a pony tail down his back.

"Oliver, this is Stu. He came to the show."

Oliver held out his hand and Stu grasped it. His hand was large and dry and his grip strong.

"I've heard a lot about you," Oliver said.

"Uh huh."

"I read your play and liked it quite a lot, though I thought it was unnecessarily vulgar. It didn't need to be like that."

He was still holding Stu's hand.

"That opinion and a million dollars will get you a seat in Congress," Stu said.

"So I've heard," Oliver said.

"On second thought," Stu said, "you don't have the handshake for it."

Stu pulled his hand out of Oliver's grip and had to take a step back to keep his balance.

"Can you excuse us for a second, Stu, and wait for me down by the side of the stage?" Melora said.

Stu held the handrail tightly as he descended the steps. He watched from the ground as Melora and Oliver exchanged words briefly and hugged and kissed.

"This town's a trip ain't it?" she said when she came down from the stage. "They love me here."
"That's different."

"Say what you will, Stu. Might as well while you've got the chance."

"I always do."

"Except when you say nothing at all."

At which point he was speechless.

They walked up the same street he had come down, but it was a completely different experience with her than it had been alone. She was like some small-town mayor campaigning for re-election. She shook hands with homeless people, grabbed men's hats and tried them on, threw dollar bills to the musicians. Faces that had seemed menacing to him became sheepish and childlike when faced with the likes of her.

"I didn't come here looking for you," Stu said.

"What did you come here for?"

"I'm working."

"Doing what?"

"Selling posters."

"Posters."

"That's right. I'm riding around the Midwest living in motels and selling posters to college people."

"That sounds lively," she said.

"It's not all it's cracked up to be. Although the groupies are a nice perk."

"I'll bet there are lots of them."

He plugged his hands into his pockets and sought for a strategy.

"You don't seem at all surprised that I'm here. Why is that?"

"Oliver had a feeling you'd be here. We talked about it last night."

"What does that mean, 'Oliver had a feeling'?"
"He just had a feeling, that's all."

"All right."

They walked in silence for a while, side by side, he looking into the shops, she looking into the street.

"Where are we going?" Stu asked.

"A place I go," she said.

It was called Montmartre and it looked to Stu like you might have to know yoga just to get in. They sat on embroidered cushions on a bench that ran along the wall.

"Is it gonna stomp on your twelve-step program if I order a pint?" she said.

"Order a gallon, I don't give a shit."

"If it bothers you I won't."

A waitress wearing black slippers and what looked like bedroom curtains for a skirt came to the table.

"Good evening. Would you like to hear about our specials?"

"Pint of Bass for her and tea for me."

"What kind of tea?"

"Non-yogic tea! Regular fucking tea. Just tea that's all. Why does there have to be a kind?"

"Black tea," Melora said to the waitress. "Any old breakfast tea, honey, O.K.?"

"I'll bring the kind with strychnine," the waitress said, and she walked away.

"I've got to go to the john," Stu said, and he started to rise, paused. "No I don't. I don't have to go to the john. That was me giving in to nerves." He sat back down. "What did you tell the Indian about me?"

"That you weren't worth the paper you were printed on." She laughed. "I told him you were a piece of fiction."
"God that's nasty!"

"Well it's good fiction!" she said.

The waitress returned with a tray, set down the pint. "Pint of Bass." She set down the tea. "Fucking tea." She walked away.

"You took right off," Melora said. "You just weren't around anymore. You left all your actors hanging there with no dialogue. Not to mention me."

"I had this sense that you might be pregnant!" he blurted.

She looked flabbergasted that he had ignored what she said completely.

"To you I am!" she shot back. "Because all you see is yourself everywhere. You've got this little baby dinosaur growing in your belly. You don't want a girlfriend, you want a midwife for that Mesozoic lizard of yours. It's not my job. I'm sorry. I think you've got a lot of stuff you don't know about."

"You want to talk about things you don't know about? You're evil. I know you are, because I'm evil and you were with me."

"But I'm not anymore."

He sat there and wrestled with demons of seduction from every single liquor bottle in that place. It took everything he had to resist. He could see it was useless to seek revenge. It was like she had this big fort on a hill and he was a lone soldier with a slingshot, or like he was fighting a southpaw and couldn't figure out how to get through his protection. He resigned himself to compromise, to cease and desist and immediately he felt some relief. Someone came over and asked for an autograph. Then another.

"I never expected you to call," she said. "I liked it that you just disappeared. It was classy."
"I called to say that all the things we said, all the magical things, the memories, they're all true. Just not in the way I thought. I didn't know what they meant. I'm still in the kindergarten of divination, but I believe we met for a reason."

"I wish I knew who was responsible for this confidence job," she said. "Our meeting I mean! Like if some jokey God brought us together, ya know? I'd like to find him and beat the hell out of him."

"What do you want?" Stu asked sincerely. "If I could offer you something to make things right, what would it be?"

"A photo of your tombstone," she said.

He felt like he was swallowing a ball of yarn.

"I'm kidding," she said. "There's some reason why you're here. Let's stop dancing around and get to it. But don't be mistaken, I'm going to hurt you like you hurt me."

"You already did."

"Stop wallowing in your astrology and tell me what you think happened to us. I'd like to know, just for kicks."

"We both threw the left hook at the same time and knocked the shit out of each other," he said.

"You dumped me!" she scolded. "Like all those other wannabes from my old man on down."

"That's not true," he protested. "I tried to kill you, but I did not dump you."

"Do you always have to be so Dada, Stu? Talk to me not at me. You envy me. You hate me because I didn't keel over and die about you. It's right out front like a twisted chrome bumper. You can't even come down out of the attic and sit in a chair like a human. Look at you; there's nothing holding you together but stress. You think I'm made of something cold
and impregnable but I'm not. But I am determined. And you're not. Not really. You
could be but you give up too easily. You're too remorseful to ever really have revenge."

"You won't give an inch will you?"

"What do you want me to say? That I loved you? Well I won't. I won't do it. You
abandoned me. This is my abandonment of you," she said. "I used to want to marry someone
and then just destroy him, because I thought I had it coming to me. Be glad I got over that."

"You're the rose of my neurosis," he implored. "You're my whole stinking family
stuffed into one skin."

"Don't be such a chicken shit," she said. "All that stuff, that magical stuff, it's in your
mind," she said. "Go out there. Go out that little moony hole. It's the way we came in.
You're living in a cul-de-sac. Turn around. Go back to the suburbs. It's where everybody else
lives. At least you won't be alone."

He was inclined at first to accept her advice. She was an authority figure to him.
After all not just anyone could rise from nowhere and be a success at puppets. But something
told him it was not true. There could not be just one way out. It felt improper to double back.
That was what would give him momentum. To find that way out, to be righteous for once. To
savor a meek conquest in this way since he could not conquer her. All he had going was a last
resort.

"Well, anyway, tell the Indian I said Hello."

"He don't want to hear it," she said.

She walked away and he watched her, this little container of fame and charisma and
triumph, his great big issue come down to this small moment. She had stuck him with the bill.
The first pint was like going home. As were the ones that followed. He favored basement bars, dim places, hideaways, and was quickly reminded of what he had so easily forgotten: that drunks don't want to listen, they only want to be heard. He drank through all the phases to be drunk through: the relaxed, the confident, the extroverted, the philosophical, the savage, the decomposed — all leading to the inevitable termination point: the contrite. On the streets he went from corner to corner forming unwanted duets with all those guitar boys who were chasing their dreams. The ability to harmonize was completely absent from his voice, but he was oblivious to the fact that no one wanted him. He told them all his desires and ambitions, and at the moment when he was feeling most free, standing in front of the Wisconsin state capitol building looking for his moon, infused with a long lost recollection of some birthright, some legacy due for being a young man in America where just being a young man was supposed to be the ticket to realizing all dreams, he was arrested. His face was in the ground and they chained his hands behind him like a slave. With his ear to Abel's earth and the knee to his back, forces in the form of many vapors vied within him and the tiniest part of wisdom prevailed. He let open the part of his heart he had sworn to not let open and heard it clearly spoken: Thou shalt not kill. Which put a crimp in his plans.

The prison of contrition was more confining than the jail cell where he awoke. What he knew had been rafted away on a river of alcohol, and he emerged from a hammering sleep not knowing whether this prison he had awakened to was in fact his normal reality. For a time he knew only sorrow and vomit. He wrote Melora a note saying, I'm dreadfully frayed by your absence. Love, love, love.

"The bail comes straight out of your pay," Ergo said when he picked him up. "You're damn lucky, boy! It would have been a lot worse if Oliver hadn't filled in for you."

"Oliver what?"
"I met your friend Melora coming from Montmartre when I was looking for you. Well you don't meet the subject of one of the posters you sell every day, so I introduced myself and we ended up partying all night at the motel, the three of us. They were really nice. Oliver is an antique gun collector as well, so we had lots to talk about. When you didn't show up Oliver agreed to help me out. Boy, I wish I could have him for an assistant next time. Very fast and very conscientious, unlike you. If we had lost a whole day's business because of you that would have been about it for your paycheck."

Stu was never so glad to be on the road. In the light of day he felt like a spy in a hostile country. He took the wheel of the Hertz and hit the highway at eighty-five miles per hour despite Ergo's protests. He crumpled the note he had written in jail and threw it from the window. They got a ticket for speeding in a town called Bitely, and there went another chunk of his hard-earned pay. The rest was just counting the mile posts.

In New York the flight was on time. It was only partially booked so they sat well apart from each other. It was night when they reached Albuquerque, and the feel of the air in Santa Fe was so sweet a kiss he almost cried. He was home.

The next day Stu commenced his inauguration into the Pepsi generation. He bought inline skates, the whole panoply of punk armor that went along with them, Day-Glo shorts, a cap that said Metallica. Put it all on the VISA card, and went down along Acequia Madre crouched like a downhill skier. He skated all the way across town, dodging traffic and taking his life in his hands on St. Michael's and Old Santa Fe, to the urban trail where the asphalt path was marked in increments of a tenth of a mile and labeled alphabetically. He alit at the letter L, amazed at the skill he had retained from grade school hockey play, and skated all the way back to the letter A without a clue how to stop. The trail ended in the parking lot of a
Toys 'R' Us where an old man who was learning to inline skate was wearing a T shirt that said *Falloir* and *Querer*, under which was the heart with two crossed arrows stitched through it and silk-screens of the two puppets. The same heart she had drawn on her love letters. There was no name for the emotion he felt at that moment. It was below human.

The whole way back through the alphabet he labored up a gradient so subtle the eye could not detect it. His legs and lungs burned. Sweat papered his shirt to his torso. Tiny lizards scurried across the path ahead of him like terrestrial eels. When he got to the other end he could go no further than W. A construction crew was digging a huge trench through X, Y, and Z to widen a highway.

He had to double back to L to quit the path. His back was killing him and he could see that this was going nowhere. What he needed was not a new look and all the modern conveniences but to be less of a fool, to stop apostrophizing his faith and assuming that love would strike an arc across the gap all on its own. He took off his new gear right there on the asphalt and gave it all to a little Hispanic kid who was coming home from school. "You'll grow into them," Stu said, and the kid ran off with arms loaded and eyes wide for thieves.

Stu walked home barefoot. By the time he got there he was thirsty as the dirt. He barely had two nickels to rub together.

Over a period of three days the muscles in his neck and back seized up one by one. He went to the chiropractor who, according to her shingle, also did something called Esoteric Healing. This seemed a thing he could believe in. She worked on the Astral Body, she mingled her energies with the Higher Centers. She laid him out on that medieval bone table and with the subtlest of manipulations in the region of the tail bone she had him blubbering like a seal.

"It has come to pass that my worst enemy is my own skull!" he wailed.

"On your back," she said.
She guided him gently into a pretzel-like configuration, like she would make a Mobius strip of his spine, torqued his torso to the left, knees to the right, placed her knee on his rump. She said, "Hup!" and all at once put a move on him that should have resulted in him being spoon fed by day nurses for the rest of his life. It sounded like a rabble of arthritics cracking their knuckles in concert. He was about to tell her to call the paramedics when she said, "O.K. get up now, Stu."

He sat up and felt as loose as an eleven year old boy.

"Sit in this chair. When your back acts up roll the sacrum like so, as far as you can without real pain, then back, then not so far, and back, then less again, and back, then almost not at all. And stop." She demonstrated. It looked like she was having sex with the chair. "Let your body figure out the rest. It has a better memory than you do. Be mindful of the sitbones. Don't let your weight double up on your spine. Let gravity pull your weight straight through the sitbones on a line to China. That'll be forty-five bucks. Pay my assistant on the way out please." She hugged him sympathetically.

Driving home into a pink sunset Stu felt reborn. Then a flood of involuntary imaginings of Melora and Oliver having sex blanched his heart and his back seized up again. The putty was on the flux now. But swimming the channel between the land of what ails and the land of good health there was no guarantee he wouldn't drown. He had dived in and now had to figure how to build himself a raft on the way across.

That night the stars and moon were all white hot apertures in the cloth and what it told him was that behind that curtain was a mighty bright light. He took a chair on the terrace and smoked like a diesel, one cigarette after another. "It's just life," he said to the face of the moon. "Let the things that belong to her be hers. And the things that are mine be mine."

Midway through his seventh smoke he flicked the burning cigarette away and said, "I quit" and looked up at the waxing moon, the dark and the light mingling on its surface like yin and
yang. He straightened his posture and swung that sacrum like a bell. "I'm Bud Beem, actually," he said softly. The dog was sleeping at his feet.

In the half of the moon that was in light he saw a single eye but not an eye like hers. That hairy little cloud would come across the sky again in time. And when this bitten moon was again its rightful whole, he would see not her face but his own. Beard and all.
By This Gospel of St. Mark, Your Father Was Ugly

Ismet left the warmth of his bed and stood in the strangeness of the dark and early hour. He dressed himself and went to the kitchen where the pot was cold atop the cold stove. On the sideboard were tins of meat his older brothers had brought with them when they came out of the mountains. They had brought no wild game since the leaflets were dropped and they had seen the first soldiers in the village.

On the table was the liquor jar and below the table were the boots his uncle had given him. Usually his mother would arise and build the fire and the kitchen would fill with warmth and the smell of cooking. The others would begin to stir, the sisters first to fetch wood from the outbuilding and milk from the goat, then his father, coughing and standing at the door to spit and light a pipe, and then too his uncle who had returned yesterday by horse from Vlorë and stayed the night, all taking tea in the kitchen.

Ismet took a chair from the table and carried it across the room and set it carefully before the cabinet that held the family’s only books. He stepped onto the chair and reached above the cabinet where his father’s gun rested and he removed the gun and stepped down. He crossed the room and leaned the gun against the wall next to the door, went to the cabinet
again and opened it and took one cartridge from the pouch of cartridges on the shelf above the family books. The cartridges were too valuable to take more than one and the ruminating Ismet had done during the night gave him confidence that one was all he would need to get meat for the family. He put the cartridge in his pocket and closed the cabinet and replaced the chair. He opened the door and took the boots in one hand and the rifle in the other and went out, putting the boots under one arm to close the door behind him.

It was still very early and the shapes of things were just beginning to emerge from the dark. The great tree that stood before their house was only implied in this dim hour. Ismet sat in the dirt before it with the butt of the rifle on the ground and the barrel against his shoulder and put the boots on his feet. He stood and gently drew back the bolt of the rifle, being careful to make no sound that would contradict the silence any more than the shapes of things did the dark. He fetched the cartridge from his pocket and placed it in the breech and put the bolt forward and began walking.

Ismet had never been allowed to hunt with the others because of his age. But what he knew about the hunt was that it began very early in the morning. His father and brothers would leave early and go through the wood they called the beard of the mountain because from afar it appeared as whiskers below the mountain’s face. Through the beard of the mountain and across the high meadow and somewhere further they looked for the wild goats that lived high on the mountain and for deer and other game as well.

Ismet loved his country, the ground beneath his feet, the mountains, the rivers and trees and all that dwelt within them. He knew from the stories his father told and from travelers who carried newspapers that the country was something bigger than he could understand, that there was a king and a long history and many different regions where they spoke the language differently than they did in his region. But to him the country was the property his father owned and the few villages that were near enough to walk to or to visit on horseback, the land
they hunted and farmed and the region where all their family and all the other people they knew lived. It had always seemed large to him, but since the planes had flown over dropping leaflets and foreign soldiers appeared on the roads the country no longer seemed large enough or far enough away.

He walked away from his father's house and on his right he heard the snuffling of his uncle's horse and saw its shape lying in the grass. There was no sign of the dog. The boots were tight and they made his steps seem jarring, as though he were a post being driven into the ground with each step. But they made him feel sturdy and separate too, like something made of more than flesh, like something that was all bone and hard substance, and he thought of all the soldiers he had seen coming up the road and now he felt he was in some way like them. He walked carrying his gun, across the plain toward the river and he reflected upon himself, the walker, going over the land. The boots produced a difference between him and the land and he felt a strange power in this. The walk was long and the darkness slowly receded and things meekly took their shape, coming forth to look on his newness.

He walked through the wood of the beard of the mountain and he named in his mind the trees for which he had names, the ones whose names described them and the ones whose names were a thing of mystery to him and caused him to become lost in his own thinking about their origins. There was the tree that was named white skin or white bark, the one called green through all seasons because it never lost its leaves even in winter. There was the tree that was named after the forearm of a warrior—the strong arm that carries the sword—the wood of which was smooth and so hard it could not be cut with an axe. There was the tree called the tree of God because it was the tallest and so came nearest to heaven. He began crossing the stream running clear over the unsmooth rocks and the stiff soles of his boots were like boards under his feet compared to the soft leather of his old sandals. When his feet were bare or in the sandals he normally wore, his footing was as sure as a goat, but in the boots he
Ismet's uncle had come to the house yesterday, a day later than expected. He had come up the road on a tall horse prancing as though he were in a parade, sitting so high and straight in the saddle that Ismet wondered how he could have traveled with such composure all the way from the city which was more than two days' ride. Alongside the horse ran a lean black dog, its tongue hanging from its mouth and its eyes turning from one side of the country to the other, turning and snipping at the horse's heels.

Ismet ran to the road and waved his hands over his head and cried, "Uncle! Uncle!"

His uncle held his head up high and his eyes straight ahead like a statue of a man until he was almost on top of Ismet. Then he pulled the horse up and swung down from the saddle and smiled and said, "I am here."

He stamped his feet in a way that was very formal and on his feet he wore boots that were new and shiny and ran halfway up his calf. They were tightly laced and had one buckle high up across the top. He wore a military uniform with a wide belt around his waist and another thinner belt that came over his shoulder and down across the torso. On his head was a
soft cap which he removed and creased, slipping one end beneath his waist belt and letting the other half fold over the belt.

"Where is your father?"

"He is inside. At the table."

"What about your mother?"

"Gone to the village with the sisters. They return tonight. Uncle?"

"Yes, nephew."

"The soldiers were here. They were dressed like you and they took some of the sheep, uncle, and left father with bank paper."

"Do not worry about the sheep. When you have bank currency you do not need sheep."

The horse was worn out and underfed, and Ismet saw now that it was only his imagination and his affection for his uncle that had made him seem to prance. He left him under the great tree in front of the house with the reins in the dirt. The dog looked at the horse, then at its master and turned and headed for the river.

"Who is it who owns that dog?" Ismet asked.

"The minister gave that dog to me before I left the city."

"To you, uncle?"

"Yes, to me."

"What is he called?"

"He has no name," his uncle said. "It is for us to determine one for him. What would you call him, nephew?"

"I would call him after myself," he said.

"Wait to see if he obeys you first," his uncle said, and he ruffled Ismet's hair.
Ismet stared at his uncle. He was tall and handsome and he looked splendid in his uniform even with the dust of the road on him. He took a satchel that was slung from the saddle and said, “Come. We go see your father.”

The year had been marked by the coming of soldiers. They came first in the spring. The Italians came marching up the road in columns as far as the eye could see and with them came trucks and large guns raising a curtain of dust that climbed in the air and hung down the middle of the valley. His father spoke Italian and Greek and he knew the valley and the surrounding mountains well, and the officers stopped in the house and spoke with him about what was to come. They took nothing other than the few sheep they negotiated for, but they carried themselves as though the place belonged to them. They were like their own small country in this remote place and what war there was was beyond their sight and seemed of no relevance to them, nor could they muster concern for the besieged ones, whoever they might be. All Ismet knew was that the soldiers came from somewhere far off and they were traveling far to slay some enemy. The soldiers sometimes threw him candy and he yelled Faleminderit! Të shkoftë mbarë—Thank you! Good luck. But he never ate it. He threw it in the river.

Some of the soldiers were almost indistinguishable from Ismet’s own people and some of them spoke his language. They were not so friendly nor were they respectful of his father. Then soldiers of their own people came and went in the countryside. Some were to be feared, his father said, and others were not. Ismet did not know which were which because they all looked as he did and spoke his language.

Men from the cities were put to work making roads throughout the countryside, and at this time his brothers began to take to the mountains. They stayed away for days at first and
then they stayed away for weeks. And by and by a time came when one of these

groups of their countrymen came and he could tell by the way his father acted that they were
to be feared. They were only lightly armed and one of them was not armed at all and he
carried paper. The one who carried paper looked as though he had never been to war. The
paper had writing and this paper was known by an ugly name. His father called this paper
with the name *propaganda* and he said it with the utmost disdain, a ferocity that seemed too
ominous for mere paper. The picture was the picture of the man his uncle called the minister,
and the man with the paper who looked like he had never been to war spoke to Ismet’s father
the way some landowners spoke to sharecroppers and he said to take these papers and
distribute them throughout the villages. Ismet could see that his father wanted to strike the
man but he did not and Ismet could not understand why his father who was very brave would
tolerate this man with the paper who looked like he had never been to war or even hunted. It
was from the words on this paper that his uncle had been persuaded to go to the city and had
returned the way he had.

Ismet and his uncle passed from the brilliant sunlight through the doorway into the cool
and tranquil interior of the house. Ismet’s father sat at the wooden table in the middle of the
main room. He was stocky and he wore woolen pants and the simple leather sandals that were
common in the region. He had a big face with a wide fleshy nose and a fleshiness around the
eyes. His forearms lay on the table and his hands touched lightly on either side of a clay cup.
In front of the cup sat the jar of *raki*, brandy. Ismet’s uncle greeted his father formally and set
the satchel on the table and stamped his feet the way he had when he dismounted in the road.

Ismet’s father looked at the uniform his brother wore and he looked at his cup and
shifted in his seat and said, “Who are you supposed to be?”
"I come from the people's council," his uncle said. "From the meeting with the minister." He was very lean and had sharp features and a fine nose and a great mustache.

"Sit down," his father said.

"I have important news."

"I said sit down."

"See the things I have brought." He pulled a pair of boots from the satchel. "For the boy," he said. Then he pulled out a jacket like the one he wore. "For you."

Ismet saw a look of hatred come over his father's face but he turned his attention to the boots and he could barely contain his excitement. They were leather boots, not like his uncle's, not an officer's, but a foot soldier's, like he had seen the army wearing when they came through first heading east, taking with them some of the family's sheep to feed the army. He had both feared and admired them for their power, been enthralled by them as by some unknown race of beings. They had guns and equipment like he had never seen before and he saw their fine equipment as a manifestation of some special quality they possessed within them. And now here before him in his possession was a representation of that force. He reached for the boots.

"Don't touch them!" his father shouted, turning a ferocious look on Ismet.

"Leave the boy alone," his uncle said.

"You sit down you fool."

His uncle's face reddened. The dog appeared in the doorway all wet from the river and looked in at them.

"Get that dog out of here," his father said.

"It's uncle's dog," Ismet said. "Given to him in the city."
The dog entered and lay with its chin on the floor and it looked up without
moving its head and growled softly. Ismet stretched his leg out toward the dog and moved the
boots away from the dog with his foot so they would not get wet.

“Do you know they’ll shoot you like a dog if they see you wearing that?” his father
said.

His uncle shrugged his shoulders up and looked behind him and back again. “Who?”
he said, with his eyes wide for emphasis. “Who’s going to shoot me?” He looked down at his
clothing. “It’s for the people.”

“What people?” his father said.

“For the people.”

“What leader, you fool? We have leaders all over the place! All over the mountains are
leaders now.”

“But you know the leaflets; we are with the fascists now.”

Ismet’s father stood up from the table and drew back his heavy arm and slapped his
brother in the face. The sound of the slap was like the breaking of a branch. His uncle’s head
snapped to one side and he stepped to that side to maintain his balance. The dog half raised
itself and looked at Ismet’s uncle. Ismet reached out to the dog and it bared its teeth at him.

“What are you doing in front of the boy?” his uncle said in shock. “What’s the matter
with you? I bring you something from the city. Why you treat me this way in front of the
boy? I am your brother...”

“Do you think I will wear that garbage? Look at you! Your jacket is Italian, your shoes
are German. They will shoot you down if they see you like that.”

“Who?”

“The fighters. My sons! Your sons! Where do you think they are?”

“I don’t know.”
“They are in the mountains.”

“Why? I told you there was the people’s council. You have seen the leaflets all over the villages. Look at the clothes, money. It is a treaty for trade.”

“They have come here already. They have taken. They will take more until we have no meat. Only the goat for milk.”

“I have been to the meeting of the council of the people. We will unite all the people. They are an old people, like we are!” Ismet’s uncle said. “And that must be good that comes from something good, because the law of the people says that bad cannot come from good.”

Ismet’s father crossed the room to the cabinet and opened it and he took from a shelf one of only two books that the family possessed. It was a large book and heavy, with a red cover and the black eagle with two heads that was the symbol of the people and of their national hero who was a great warrior of an earlier century. The book was the Kanuni, the code of the people, and in it were the laws by which all their people throughout the mountain villages and the plains too had governed themselves for longer than anyone knew. The only other book that belonged to the family was the Bible, and while Ismet’s mother concerned herself with the Bible it was the custom of his father to concern himself with the Kanuni. The book was covered with a piece of sacred cloth and whenever Ismet’s father removed this cloth he put it to his lips and folded it carefully and placed it back on the shelf atop the Bible which was covered too with special cloth. There the cloth would stay until his father finished with the book, when he would put the cloth to his lips again and wrap the book in it and place the book on top of the Bible. The Kanuni resided always on top of the Bible as it was his father’s book and the one he concerned himself with most.

Ismet’s father had read deeply into the Kanuni and was respected throughout the surrounding villages as an authority on custom, and he was called on often to mediate disputes. Ismet had always had a deep pride regarding his father’s stature and his reputation
as a judicious man, and as his father's son he reaped the benefits of his father's renown through an assumption of respect himself. He was presumed by most from the outset to be an honest boy and he had a premature sense of the responsibility of this gift and had assumed very early a grave dedication to honesty uncharacteristic of most boys his age. But now as his father put the cloth to his lips and folded it and brought the book to the table and opened it on the table he felt arising in him something unfamiliar, a deep seed of some kind that gave birth to a wild vine that wove in tangles through his breast and threatened to come at him through his throat. It felt powerful like a horse of war and Ismet felt a desire to take the reins. He realized with a vague instinct that he had just become proud of himself, mistaking his pride for manhood, and he felt a great justice in knowing he would become a man in a land of war.

"The blood of the good cannot become tainted!" Ismet's uncle said. "That must be good which comes from something good." He sat staring hard at the table with his arms crossed.

Ismet's father said, "This uniform you wear has caused you to presume to know what you do not know. At least before you were sensible enough to recognize your ignorance. Take it off and burn it before it makes a complete fool of you."

"What I say all the people will say, and their authority is greater than your own. This uniform is a symbol of the initiation I have made and the nation will make, which I will not name. I will not say what so obviously provokes you in your own house and give you reason again to humiliate me before the boy."

Ismet's father opened the book and turned first to pages he had marked with strips of hide and paused briefly at several pages as he always did when he had cause to open the book. Then he turned to a place deep in the book and he said, "This is the application of law," and he read. What he read seemed to Ismet to be a story of some kind about two men who must
have lived in a time that was very old because the Kanuni was very old. Some said it was as old as their people but his father said that while no book could be as old as a people it was nevertheless very old. The story his father read was much like this:

In a time long ago there was a gathering to assembly of the princes of the land to adjudicate concerning, among many other issues, the cases of families who were in blood with each other, that is to say who were involved in the blood feud. Among the princes assembled were two of the most noble: Prince Kastrioti who was the greatest of warriors and the hero of all the nation, and Prince Dukagjini who was also renowned as a warrior but was revered most of all for his judicious mind. Of all the deliberations in which they were ever involved together they disagreed only once and this was on the matter of blood. Prince Kastrioti believed that blood was either good or bad and that all who came from good blood were good and all who came from bad blood were bad. Prince Dukagjini believed with all of his passion that both good and bad could be born from any blood: del i miri prej të keqit e i keqi prej të mirit. The hero Kastrioti was implacable on this point and in front of all the assembly Prince Dukagjini—who was the elder by far and had known the father who Prince Kastrioti could not recollect, having himself been hostage to the Turks at a young age—rose and challenged the hero by saying, “Prince Kastrioti, go and inquire of your mother to tell you of the father who sired you. But require her first to swear to the truth on the Gospel of Saint Mark!” No ruling was made while the hero Kastrioti went to his mother and demanded of her what kind of man his father was who sired him and whether she had ever been unfaithful. With her hand on the gospel she confessed, “By this gospel of Mark your father was ugly. And he who was ugly sired you who are handsome. And never in my life have I committed adultery.” When the assembly was gathered again Prince Kastrioti said, “I concede to the judgment of the most judicious Prince Dukagjini.” And so the matter was settled and henceforth applied to law.
“Now,” Ismet’s father said. “Quote no more laws with which you are not familiar. And think about what kind of father you want your sons to find when they return from the mountains, where they hunt like dogs all those who would sell the nation for a suit of clothes.”

Ismet reached for the boots and was knocked from his chair by a blow to the back of his head. He looked up from the floor and his father looked down on him with eyes that were like weapons.

“Do not touch the filth he has brought here!” he said.

Ismet got to his feet and went to his uncle’s side and stood looking back at his father and he felt the thing in him begin to hide itself, like a man pulling a hood around his face.

The mountain seemed larger in this early hour or he somehow smaller in comparison. He felt dwarfed and after coming through the wood of the beard of the mountain he was uncertain of his mission. His conviction had been so strong under the covers of his bed but here in the presence of the mountain he felt his sense of himself shrinking in the face of a creeping doubt. Maybe he was committing a sacrilege he had not been told of, being on the mountain in this early hour. For courage he tried to animate the thing inside him by dwelling again where he had been the night before rather than where he was at that moment. He thought of his uncle coming up the road and he thought of his father at the table and of the long line of soldiers he had seen raising dust in the road, the great numbers of them marching off to the killing that was somewhere else beyond these mountains further on where the road ended. He thought that it must be true that at the end of any long road that lay right across the belly of a nation, that ran over its fields and its mountains and crossed its rivers, at the end of any such road must be hordes of strange others whose swelling numbers pushed them
inexorably up that same long road like bad blood running through a man’s vein and that it was the strange other who must be killed to preserve the blood of the man. The killing that was his birthright and his love for the land wrapped themselves around that dark face within him and became one thing together, whole and without separation, and as he marched across the high meadow boot before boot, heartbeat on heartbeat, and breath on breath the sun rose on the mountain.

The sun rose on the mountain and Ismet saw across the valley a company of men making their way along a ridge. They were very small in the distance and he knew that if they were to look across the valley from their mountain and see him standing on his, he too would be something very small to them. He held the gun across his front and watched them travel like ants across the massive rock, too insignificant to hold any real meaning. He wondered if they were his people or possibly some strange others and he thought to pull his gun up to his shoulder and look at them down his barrel to see how it felt to prepare to kill a man, but before he could do so something made him turn. It was some small sound and he didn’t know if the sound made him turn or if he started turning before hearing the sound or if the sound was even real. It happened so fast. He was turning and the mountain turned before him, and the gun was at his waist and when it fired—when the gun took it upon itself to fire—the terrible sound was like a large hole in the world. The smoke from the muzzle hung in the air like a thick yarn and beyond its obscurity his uncle’s dog jerked in mid stride, as though kicked by the boot of a giant, and turned in the air and fell lifeless to the ground. There was a small dark spot in the fur of its chest. On its back was a ragged-edged opening like a large hole torn in a coat. Blood collected on the rock.

Ismet looked down at his father’s gun there in his hands. The smoke drifted over him and went away down the wind. He stood there with the dark promise enciphered in his heart and nothing moved. The dead dog, he saw, had nothing in common with one that was living.
The sounds and evocations of my father’s music are among my oldest memories. He was a Folk music hobbyist and he began teaching me to play guitar when I was very young. He wrote only a handful of songs in his life but it is true that they were melodic and original. The words were fresh and sincere, the melodies were entirely innate to the content of the song, the two together were earthy and true. The songs were structurally simple and rarely consisted of more than three chords but the simple structures left themselves open to the loveliest of melodies. In fact when my father found that a melody he had invented required more than the typical three-chord accompaniment it was sometimes a struggle for him to find the fourth chord and a big payoff in relief when he did. It was a mystery that all music could be conjured from just seven notes, and while he was conversant in the medium he was painfully aware that he was not musically eloquent. But he knew what he liked and he had to insist that counted for something.

He liked Woody Guthrie and Hank Williams and by the time I was six years old we were sitting together in the old chairs around the kitchen table playing guitar and singing This Land is Your Land and I’m so Lonesome I Could Cry. My older brother played harmonica and
my sister and mother sang harmony but the pride in my father’s eye was for me. In my tender and inchoate consciousness this was a given and it was similarly understood in the family. It was only in later years, during the hard labor of the soul that seems to be part of the dirty work of living that no one escapes, certainly no artist, that I became a bystander to my own life and had the perspective to witness what were the collective assumptions of our family and interrogate them about their origins and authority, about the tacit bargaining and treaty signing that went on under the table, the negotiation and commerce of familial love. Love has its vanquished the same as war, and the curse of being favored is that there is restitution to be made and forgiveness to be begged. But when the heart and soul are new to earth and still securely in the cradle of their mission much is taken for granted, and I never questioned my position as heir and prodigal and chosen one.

My talent blushed and came forward. It was a great moment for me when I was first able to play along with my father and harmonize on those songs that had been with me since the crib. At eight years old I could play guitar as well as my father and at ten far better. We made a noise as a family that we knew was special and we raised our voices loud. We played my father’s songs along with all the other songs and always sooner or later my father would say, “Play the river song, Ricky,” and he would sing his favorite composition while I finger-picked accompaniment.

A voice can be so large it frightens. My father shut his eyes and leaned his head slightly to one side and when he sang the sound filled the house like a dangerous thing.

The mule is bent and lame
It carried me from Tulsa yesterday
Daddy’s dead and gone, we laid him in the ground

It was my father’s dream to be a famous singer. But in the neighborhoods where I grew up the obstacles to success and celebrity were only too well known, and the personal means to overcome these obstacles, which my father imagined would quite naturally emerge over time,
never manifested. The maturation of his soul, which in his imaginings came as
suddenly and naturally as a windfall and imbued him with a new spark and spirit, confounded
instead and he turned to a devout and regimented religiosity to squeeze the dark water from
his soul and win God's favor. He went to church on Sunday, he went down on his knee at
night, he read the admonitions of Saint Paul. But pray as he might the world that came to our
home through the television and radio remained exotic and remote and as impenetrable as a
jungle in a foreign land and he remained always an unrealized artist.

The fields have all gone brown
The sun is like a devil in the sky
The rain won't fall and the river won't rise

We all come from lineages we scarcely know that recede back into history to vanishing
points beyond our vision. And surely all the bibles that have ever been are as full of psalms as
the one we know; and the number of chants and the voices that have dispatched them to God's
ear, been body to those musical souls, is beyond comprehension. As heirs to the forward
thrust of humanity the depth of our bequeathal is unutterable to the point of a sacred and
pregnant persecution. What is possessed in the human voice is all the reverberation of the
human heart and the human heart is very old, its pain is very deep, and its joy even deeper.

The river won't rise, the river won't rise
There's nothing for my cup, the wells have all gone dry
The rain won't fall and the river won't rise

Back then my father was the assistant manager of the Wayside bowling alley on Outer
Drive in Hull. His family had come to Detroit from Kentucky when he was a boy and his
father worked on the line at the Ford River Rouge plant. The stories my father told about his
childhood had about them a wistful melancholy for the waning days of an era of feuds and tent
revivals. There was the implication that he had been baptized in the cultural waters of a
society that no longer existed, some separate sphere of legend and grail of which he was the
only remaining representative. No one knew what he knew; no one had been where he had been. Even his own siblings he treated as though they had come from some common place. He knew right from wrong and he had an acute sense of his privileges. He counted his wife and children among his possessions and this element of ownership was part and parcel of love and not at all incompatible with it. He knew himself to be a just man, a flawless reasoner and arbiter of common sense, an impartial judge.

The Sunday services and the scripture readings had their counterpoint in the bowling alley where my father had acquaintanceships with a diverse crowd of people. There was the obvious assortment of restaurant workers, an alcoholic public defender who drank in the Wayside bar, salesmen, drivers of meat trucks, auto workers and the odd hooker who it was felt was particularly victimized by fate but had maintained her dignity despite circumstances. Even a notorious gang leader named Ferris Johnson. My father was gregarious and witty but opinionated and not without enemies. He lent money within his means on a regular basis.

They had two things in common, these people in my father’s circle—they thrived on their own legends and they drank. My father included. They cast themselves at the center of morality tales in which their heroism was the common theme. Sometimes this heroism was evidenced by their confronting some perpetrator, sometimes by the admission that they had done somebody wrong and then made amends for that wrongdoing through public apologies and bestowment of expensive liquor or something else precious. They were ritualistic in a very shaggy way and like most people they did what they could to get along, often at cross purposes to their happiness.

Sometimes in the summer when school was out and my father was working afternoons I was allowed to sit up late at the lunch counter or in the bar while he balanced the till at the end of his shift. This was just a couple years after the riots and summer nights were still laced with a trace of menace, as though the violence had ripped a seam in the garment of civility
through which some dangerous potion seeped and ever since there was the detectable presence of something atmospheric and predatory spicing the air. Black people had begun to patronize the bar at the Wayside, crossing the threshold either with a kind of solitary defiance, parking themselves conspicuously at the bar with a sullenness that prohibited social intercourse or spilling through the doorway in groups loose with laughter, surrounding tables in the middle of the place like divinely appointed repo men conspiring to take the place back. Before the riots they would only have entered in a deferential way to buy cigarettes or change a dollar but now the tacit racial propriety that had governed interactions along the border of Outer Drive was no longer respected and an outlaw mentality took its place. I remembered the common gunfire and the glow of fire in the night sky just over there, the National Guard on street corners and the armored vehicles in Cadillac Square, how the seeds of insecurity were sown throughout our lives so pervasively that every breeze on the skin made the hair on the back of your neck stand up. Living had become a patently unsafe endeavor for all.

In my father’s little kingdom there was ritual of his own devising and for his own glory and he made use of his captive audience every weekend to showcase his talent and, less so, mine. Any time he wrote a new song he would tell one of his cronies about it and they told the rest and on Saturday night they took turns making respectful overtures.

“When are we gonna hear that new one, Ed?” Decker the public defender would say.

“Not right now boys, I’m busy.” And he hustled off to the other end of the establishment to troubleshoot a defective pinsetter or fry burgers for an absent cook.

“Come on, Ed, gimme something from down home,” one of his cousins said. “The shit I’m hearin’ on the radio these days I might as well pour concrete plugs for my ears and stop ‘em up for good.”

“I got my hands full here, Buddy.” He barked out orders at the waitresses, threw out a drunk who had gone sliding down one of the lanes like a ballplayer stealing home.
As the night wore on he paused from time to time with an elbow on the bar and said, “I tell you what Decker, it’s like a little miracle every time one of these songs comes out of me. It’s like I don’t even know where they come from. This new one I got has got a melody that might put all the other ones to shame.”

“I sure admire that,” Decker said. “You got talent, Ed. Now me I’ve been to school and I may know a lot but when it comes to the creative realm — well I don’t have a creative bone in my body.”

“This one’ll get you,” my father said. “I guarantee it.”

“I definitely can’t wait to hear it. But you know, whenever you’re ready. I know you’re busy.”

“Sonny, get Decker a refill here! The man’s glass has been empty half the night.”

Decker looked at me and said, “Your daddy’s a talented man.” He was a thin man, Decker was, with a sandy mustache that was getting in his mouth and pale eyes that were slightly bulgy and moist at the edges. “He’s got real talent. When he gets his break he’s gonna be somebody.” He brought his beer glass to his lips and turned away from me to drink, his eyes already gone inward.

The sound of balls rolling the hardwood lanes and the clashing of pins was like an artificial thunder, some pale and mechanical representation of storms to come or perhaps warnings of ones we could avoid. Sometimes several balls across various lanes thrown in coincidental unison made an apocalyptic crash; sometimes the whole place went almost quiet but for the clip of a solitary pin like the knocking out of a single tooth. Then with the night at its fattest, when all the leagues had bowled their last frame and migrated to the bar, he took the small platform in the back corner and turned on the sixty-watt bulb in the drop light hanging by the cord.

“Bring me my guitar from behind the bar, Ricky,” he said.
I took him his guitar and then I took my own and he shut his eyes and did what he felt God had put him there to do. When it came time I played the river song and he sang it and then left the stage, taking credit for both his talent and mine, for who was I but his son and how had I gotten here but as the fruit of his creative potential. Everyone met him with both fists full of beer when he came down off the six-inch-high stage where he left me picking arpeggios all around the edges of the river song, the bar flies slapping him on the back and the black men settling their attention on me, looking with a fixity of expression like one does when hearing serious news.

There was a kind of agitation I felt on those nights as some seed of rebellion began to sprout within me. I used to lie awake at night staring at the radio dial and listening to the hits on AM radio until long after any chance of being rested by the time the morning alarm went off had come and gone. The digital hours and minutes went around on their wheels and the lever of the sixty-minute sleep timer rose from its down position until it had only one minute left and I pressed it down again, resetting it over and over. The first time I heard the song Crocodile Rock I stared at that green light on the dial and felt the full flare and constriction of indignance from having ownership of something that is yours stolen away. That was not what I knew music to be. The timer clicked off, the green light went out.

Things changed when I started studying music outside the family. To this day it seems I'm waiting for the return of that time when we harmonized. It's not a conscious expectation; it's an undertone, a bit of static always there below the plump hum of everyday life, a jagged graph line etched across the lost moments waiting for an egg to cook or a TV commercial to end. An anxiety that is never completely consumed, not by the night's last drink, not by the
most obliterating lovemaking. The desire is only to go back and look at that moment, now that time has fully revealed it as a turning point, to go back and inspect it to see if its features reveal its nature, to walk around it and wonder at it at leisure, to know it in its heyday and determine whether it was wise to itself or not, if it knew its own purpose, and if not then to feel like one had not merely been its fool. If only I could freeze it like a spike on an oscilloscope and marvel at its lack of differentiation, puzzle over how such sameness could conceal such drastic change and such calamity. But time pays out the present inexhaustibly and now is always the nearest cousin to then that we have. A moment is a moment and their essence is all the same.

When I was twelve I joined the school band and began learning to read music and recognize key signatures. It was an absolute revelation to me the response I had to the sight of notes on the staff. It was not a thing I could even find words for, but looking at musical notation the feeling that came to me in the middle of my chest was of nature, like the whole and good earth resided right there in my heart. It was so natural, the sight of it. I saw the music like whole pictures on the page. There was no necessity for study aids or mnemonic devices, no Every Good Boy Deserves Favor to memorize the notes on the staff. I did have to learn. But the learning did not have the futility so common to abstraction; it had more the feeling of memory, like I was teasing from out of my mind something I had once known. And the more the complexity increased the better it felt to me. The clusters of notes that represented chords did not strike me as more work to do but rather as more food to eat. They hung there like meaningful clusters of grapes. The higher the notes climbed above the staff and the lower they descended below it the more assured I felt facing the page. Where there was complexity there was no intimidation, only nourishment.

I learned chord constructions with names I could never have dreamed of—diminished, augmented, suspended—all of which meant something personal to me. I had it perfectly, the
sense of it, and by instinct I dared not analyze it. Any instance where music
contradicted itself or had to contort to compensate for some irregularity, I understood. I
anticipated what I was about to learn. The arrangements of sharps in the key signatures
resonated with different parts of my being like each rang a specific bell in me or was a
particular color that was quite clearly visible to my soul’s eye. It was a language and it was
the language that I spoke by nature.

At the end of the first week of band practice the band teacher, Mr. Gage, asked me to
stay after. I was playing an old Kalamazoo back then and I was putting it in the case as the
woodwinds and brass packed up their cases and filed out.

“Wait here a minute, son,” Mr. Gage said.

He went into the office down the hall from the practice room and came back carrying a
guitar case. He set it flat across two chairs and pulled the clasps and opened the top. It was an
old Guild with a spruce top and F holes and a trapeze tailpiece. The wood of the fretboard
was dull and there was a gummy film on the chrome hardware and what looked like a cigarette
burn on the head. The strings were new and had not been clipped and the wire ends stuck out
all around the head like the springworks of a derelict clock. But its shabbiness was only
superficial. It had altogether about it the look of a reverend article, a tool of divination or a
geometrical mystery like a suspension bridge, some thing that sent whispers to your heart of a
crossing you had heard of once but forgot.

“I played with Ellis Marsalis when I got this guitar, before he went with Cannonball
Adderly,” he said. “Go ahead, pick it up.”

I took it and held it face up across my lap and looked at it.

“You know who Ellis Marsalis is?” he asked.

“No,” I said.

“Tune it up,” he said.
I set the Guild on edge on my thigh and plucked the open strings, dialed the B string down a quarter turn and pulled it back up again. I strummed it again then played an E chord.

"It's already tuned," I said.

"You sure?" he said.

"Yes sir."

"How do you know?"

"I can feel it when it's out of tune," I said.

"What's it feel like?" he said.

"Like...sort of like your shoes are on the wrong feet or like your sleeve is all twisted and you can't get your arm through it. How it makes you feel sort of irritated right here." I pointed to my breast bone.

"You know how to improvise?" he said.

"Little bit," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Play something to this."

He started playing a gentle chord progression, a ballad.

"Can you play in B flat?" I asked. "That's my best key."

"Why is B flat your best key?"

"My dad's songs are mostly in B flat to match his singing."

"Your dad's songs? What kind of songs does your dad write?"

"My dad writes great songs."

"Sing one for me," he said.

"I can't sing," I said.

"What do you mean you can't sing? Anybody can sing."

"You ought to hear my dad sing. His voice'll take the paint off this place."
“He’s not here though, so you’re on your own. Come on there’s nothing to be afraid of. There’s no jury here.”

“I’ll play it for you,” I said.

I had spent what must have been hundreds of hours playing his songs, and I had invented layers of orchestration around the chord progressions so that I could work both my father’s vocal melody and my mother’s harmony into a complex net of notes that was like the banjo picking in Bluegrass music. I made an exercise of playing these arrangements of mine over and over while going deeper into daydreams until my fingers had their own independence and my mind’s ear could listen to the music like some bystander who took no part.

Acceptance from family, though it is expected from the outset and presumed to be unconditional, is life’s most precious commodity. But the acceptance of strangers has a sweetness all its own. And when one becomes inured to familial praise, precious words from an other not only feed the heart but somehow replenish the golden glow of acceptance at home. Mr. Gage’s response was one of the nicest things I’d ever heard. When I finished playing he spoke in a down home dialect that was unlike the very formal way he spoke in class.

“Boy,” he said. “If you ever take a notion to lay your music aside, I’m gon’ tuh hire a man to kick yo’ buh-hind till yo’ head get back on straight.”

Then he pursed his lips and squinched his eyes and raised his eyebrows and laughed in a high pitch. My face went hot with pride, that polar opposite of shame that strangely shares the same manifestation.

There are two other things that Mr. Gage said to me that first evening and both seemed strange to me, like he was trying to tell me something I should know but that at the time I didn’t get.

He said, “Do you know what it means to be bi-dialectal?”
“No I don’t.”

“It means to speak in two dialects. For example, there’s the way I speak at school?” He sat up straight and straightened his tie and cleared his throat. “And there’s the way I talk wid duh folk.” He slouched and made a sly grin. “You see what I mean?”

I nodded.

“You don’t have to forsake one for the other. When you can speak more than one way you can travel in more than one land. Dig?”

“Yeah, kinda.”

He took up his own guitar, a big hollow-body Gibson with a dark reddish arch top and pearl inlays.

“Having said that,” he said. “Let me show you this.”

He flattened his fingers over the strings in a strange configuration and strummed, then interjected a melancholy little riff. His fingers jumped back to the chord and he walked it down chromatically and slung another little sliding riff that climbed up to again caress the first solemn chord. His fingers moved with such distinctness and yet such fluidity, like smooth dark fish that swam up and down the neck without effort. The music had luster and glow and inexplicable emotion, very full, very warm.

“You know what that is?”

“No.”

“That’s the flatted fifth. You know what they call that?”

I shook my head.

“Classical guys used to call that the devil’s interval.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes you feel things you don’t want to know about.”
He gave me some things to practice, then he gave me a Django Reinhardt record and told me to listen to certain tracks from it. Before I left he said, "Now I want you to take this guitar home and I want you to practice on it. Don't you ever get rid of that Kalamazoo cause that's your first guitar and you never get rid of your first guitar. But—" He slid into the dialect of the folk again—"yo' music done got too big fuh dat thing."

"Oh," I said. "I couldn't take that."

"Sure you can. I'm just lending it to you for a while."

"I don't think my dad would like it."

"Tell him to talk to me about it."

"I better not."

"You want to be in the band?"

"Yes."

"Then take the guitar."

He took the guitar from me and put it in the case.

"Come on I'll give you a lift home."

"It's okay," I said. "I'll walk. I live real close to school."

"You're gonna walk home at night carrying two guitars?"

"It's okay."

He shook his head.

"You got a guitar in each hand and you're gonna carry books and a record too? Get real."

We rode home in his big Ford LTD. I told him to stop in front of the house next to ours and I got the guitars out of the back seat as fast as I could.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'm not coming in for coffee. Now shut the door and remember what I told you to practice."
When I walked in the house my father was sitting at the table reading from the book of Acts. He was usually at work when I got home but it was his night off. I set the Guild on top of the washing machine in the back hall and carried my guitar to my room which was off the kitchen.

"Where you been, Ricky?" my father said. "Why are you so late?"

"I just got back from band."

"What band?"

"You know, the school band we talked about. You said I could join."

"When’d I say that?"

"You and mom said."

"What the hell they gonna teach you in band anyway?"

My mother came out of her bedroom and said, "Ed, watch your mouth sitting there in front of the open book."

He closed the book and said, "What kind of band is it?"

"It’s like a jazz band or something," I said.

"A jazz band? What, like Dixieland?"

"I guess."

"We said last week he could try it out," she said.

"I don’t want nobody messin’ with his music," my father said. "I’ll teach him what he needs to know."

"He knows more than you do," she said. "You haven’t been able to teach him anything for a year."

"More like two," I said.

"Don’t get smart, boy. Your family says what your music is. Not some school. I don’t trust nobody messin’ with my music. History and arithmetic is one thing, but music is
another. A school is an institution and like it says on Woody Guthrie's guitar 'This Machine Kills Fascists.'"

"Don't be melodramatic," my mother said.

Our house was an old house that was built way back when Hull was just a part of the North Field. The original structure was the main room, a bathroom and two bedrooms directly off the main room. There were no hallways. Two large additions were made over the years. First the kitchen was added with a bedroom directly off it. Then years later the back bedroom where my parents slept, a half bath and the back hall were added. My mother was standing in the doorway of her bedroom and she glanced toward the back hall where I had set the Guild.

"What's this?"

"Mr. Gage gave me that to use," I said.

"Who's Mr. Gage?" my father asked.

"He's the band teacher."

I went and grabbed the guitar and brought it into the kitchen and set it on the floor.

"What are you doing with that? Where's your K-zoo?"

"It's in my room," I said, pulling the clasps.

"If you traded off that Kalamazoo I swear I'll tan your hide, boy."

"It's just a loan. I said no but he said I had to to be in the band." I pulled it out and held it up to my father. "Here look at it."

"Get that thing away from me."

"For Pete's sake, Ed, don't be obstinate," my mother said. "What is so wrong with him learning something new? It'll be good for him to learn to read music. He needs to know that kind of stuff. Do you want him to spend his whole life in the bowling alley too?"

"My whole life ain't over yet if you hadn't noticed!"

"You know what I mean," she said.
"You mean I'm never getting out of that bowling alley. You mean you think it's all over."

She sighed and said, "For Pete's sake, Ed," and the way she said it could not have been more pathetic. The weight of love eventually drowns us all. We tread water as long as we can, but the exhaustion shows. My mother went back to her room.

My father looked at the Guild. "Put that thing away," he said, and he got up and left the room.

Ferris Johnson was a gambler known for playing the horses. He was a black man with bright blue eyes and he was only twenty-four years old but he was big and he knew no humility. He wore polo shirts and pleated pants and the pants bunched a little at the ankle and the shirts were always coming untucked so that he looked half dressed up and unkempt at the same time. He didn't swagger or posture, in fact there was something decidedly un-macho about the way he walked. But he moved with confidence and never made excuses for himself. His criminality was his full and only identity and the girls he turned out on the street were as devoted and respectful of him as fear can make someone. Even the brassiest of them behaved demurely around him because that was what he demanded. They pretended to act like family, showing a sweetness and concern for each other that sisters might show and the harmless flirtation toward him of nieces for a favorite uncle. But there was something metallic and harsh around the charade.

Their smiles were hard and their eyes shone with the gleam of alcohol. The bonds between them were brittle and their fast talk and hard ways were a shell through which no evidence of their humanity could be seen. Ferris Johnson's girls came through the place in
their high heels and short-shorts, all legs and paint and jangling bracelets and they never seemed to face you for long and never spoke directly to you but looked over your head and conversed with more than one person at the same time. I remember them as always receding, even when they were sitting before you talking tough with their eyes shining they seemed to be moving away, bent slightly at the waist and skating away on gangly legs and platform shoes, the promise of something growing in you even as they diminished before you. More and more they cut through the Wayside to loiter, look for action, smoke cigarettes. Ferris Johnson became a fixture in the bar, always sitting with a small glass of something sweet before him. From time to time he bowled a game, taking a lane by himself and throwing the balls like a retired pro and showing no interest or care even when he threw seven strikes in a row and a crowd started to gather expecting a perfect game.

During this time I practiced with Mr. Gage’s band several nights a week and rarely spent time at the Wayside. My brother, who was six years older, got a job at the Chrysler tank plant. He quit school his senior year and rented an apartment in Centerline. My sister, four years older and embroiled in all the intrigue of sweet sixteen, disappeared into a reliance on cliques and extracurricular activities, the magic of fashion and invented persona and the power of sexual allure. Any sorrow or confusion I might have felt under any other circumstances at the elemental changes my family was undergoing was displaced by the feeling that I was being initiated into some great mystery, that my real life was being handed to me. What I did not realize was that what was happening was the seduction of my soul by my own worst desires. I was becoming a bigot against my own kind.

Sometimes when I would learn something new with the band, when Mr. Gage opened up some new aspect of music to me, I felt like a thing of goodness had been bequeathed to me that was a boon for all, that I could take it around like a magic light in a box and anyone I showed it to would feel the blessing I felt. But there seemed to be no one to share this light
with. My father, when I would see him, was preoccupied with matters at the bowling alley. Sometimes I overheard my parents talking about growing dangers, about the possibility of moving the family elsewhere.

One night I came home and my father was off work. He was in the living room watching *It Takes a Thief* and I said, “Daddy, you want to play?”

He looked like Bobby Darrin but he was beginning to show signs of middle age. He had imprints under his eyes and his cheeks were starting to fatten. We got out our guitars and played some of the old favorites. Between songs I told him about some of the things I was learning, the chord constructions and key signatures, reading musical notation. I got to talking about the Relative Minor and how the notes of the Relative Minor were contained in the Major scale that was its relation. He looked perplexed and when I tried to demonstrate on the neck of the guitar he just stared at the fretboard as though he could hear the recession of his dreams there like a Middle Eastern lament. I couldn’t understand what it was that prevented him from seeing what I saw so clearly myself. My good thing turned bad in the face of his limitations and I felt we were no longer partners.

“I don’t like what they’re teaching you,” he said.

“We can see that,” my mother said.

Two days later there was a fight at the Wayside. It was a Friday night, which was usually a practice night for me, but Mr. Gage had cancelled to fill in for someone at a gig in Cleveland. The parking lot was full and the place was packed. I walked through the door into the narrow rubber-floored entryway where the doors to the restrooms were and all the smells of the place hung in a rich mixture, the sweet beery smell, the tobacco, and leather and alley wax together with the night air and the camphor and stench from the bathrooms. This narrow entrance was long and dark and at the end was a heavy door and through it came the muffled clatter of pins and the voices and music that would suddenly expand and become tremendous.
when you pushed through that door entering into the huge space with the lanes one after the other until you couldn’t count them, the arms swinging and the smoky air a curtain through which all these strangers from who knows where came to play and be on display, enjoying equally the modest isolation of the curved plastic seats from which they could watch and speculate and measure and the communal stage where you stood to throw your ball, standing exposed and open to all judgment. The bowling alley was the place of possibility and promise in our neighborhood.

While still in that passageway the door to the men’s room swung open and one of Ferris Johnson’s girls stumbled out followed by an old man with a tweed hat and a sport coat. He had heavy creases at the sides of his nose and a big belly surrounded by a new alligator belt. His shoes were suede with fake buckles.

“Ok, I’m going back to the bar, honey,” the girl said. “You have fun.”

“I just had my fun,” he said, and he patted her behind.

“You know where to find me now,” she said. “Don’t be shy.”

“I wouldn’t know how,” he said.

The man turned toward the door to the street and the girl turned to go back into the bowling alley, falling in a step behind me. A huge rush of embarrassment went through me and the heat of danger hummed in my stomach.

“How you doin, Ricky baby?” she said.

I knew who she was. Her name was Jenny and she was a seventeen year old white girl who I had seen around the place for a few months. She seemed to be particularly despised by my father and Sonny and Decker because she made no claim of victimization and expressed no desire to get off the streets. She was Ferris Johnson’s newest girl and she went around on his arm whenever she wasn’t on the street making money for him. She was beautiful, I thought. She had dark straight hair and a face like Susan Dey. I couldn’t for the life of me
imagine how a girl like that could have fallen through all the safety nets of her pride
and self respect to a place of such shame and I had had fantasies of rescue since I first saw her,
fantasies of such archetypal simplicity and naïveté that they folded immediately each morning
when I set eyes on the real world.

"Fine," I said.

"You gonna play us some music tonight, honey?"

She put her arm around me. Her voice was a soft corrugated riffle, a woman’s voice,
and though she playfully condescended to me I liked the attention.

"I don’t know," I said.

"You’re a foxy little man," she said. "I bet you drive all the little girls at school wild."

We came through the door as another one of Ferris Johnson’s girls, a short black girl
who called herself Princess, was coming through arm in arm with a tall man in cowboy boots.
Far down into the bowling alley beyond the shoe counter, my father came twisting his way out
of the crowd that stood bottlenecked at the bar entrance and behind him Sonny the bartender
and they didn’t look happy. When my father set eyes on me his face became madder still.

"Get your hands off my son!" he yelled.

He ran toward us and grabbed Jenny’s arm and yanked her away and I said, "Dad, she
didn’t do anything."

Jenny pulled her arm free and he turned and slapped me in the face.

Sonny grabbed Jenny from behind and pushed her back through the door and my father
put his finger in the face of the man with the cowboy boots and said, "You need to get along,
partner. Take your whore with you."

The man put his hands up and backed a step and went through the door with the black
girl close at his heels. My father followed them, me behind him, into the long dark
entranceway.
“Don’t you tramps ever come back here!” he shouted. “Don’t be turning my bowling alley into a whorehouse.”

Sonny let go of Jenny and pushed her on ahead of him toward the door.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, you tramp,” my father said.

She tipped her head back defiantly and said, “Yeah well maybe you should too.”

“I got nothing to be ashamed of,” he said.

“That’s what they all say,” she said.

He started to go after her. “She’s going,” I said.

My father turned and raised his hand again and said, “You get inside before I lose my temper.”

I stepped back and puffed myself up and looked past him but Jenny was no longer watching. She charged through the door to the street and without looking back stuck her arm out straight toward us with her middle finger in the air. Then she walked away. I was alone there with my father then and even he seemed to have already forgotten me. He walked back through the door and Sonny came back up the shoot and put his hand on my head. “It’s okay, Ricky. There’s lots of trouble tonight, that’s all. It’s not your fault.”

We followed my father back into the bowling alley past the shoe counter and into the bar where Decker was behind the bar watching the till.

“Gimme a roll of quarters from the drawer, Decker,” my father said.

Decker pulled a roll of quarters from a cotton sack and handed it over. My father walked over to the table where Ferris Johnson sat with a glass of liqueur and said, “Mister, it’s time for you to leave.”

Ferris Johnson had an embarrassed grin on his face and for all his reputation it was clear he was not going to resist. He stood up and very nervously said, “It’s cool,” and when he stepped out from around the table my father hit him with the fist full of quarters. Johnson’s
head snapped to one side like it would twist right off. Both hands went to his face and in his eyes I saw utter shock and fear. All the way out of the bar, with my father stalking after him, he shook his head back and forth with rapid little turns as if to say, "What in God's name are you?"

In the neighborhoods where I grew up every kind of bigot could be heard to say, "Don't get me wrong I ain't prejudice against niggers..." and then go on to describe the particular kind of black person they could not abide. I was just a kid, but to me that sentence said everything you needed to know about those who spoke it. My father was one of those people.

The morning after the incident Sonny called to say that someone had driven a car through the front of the bowling alley in the middle of the night. My father was remarkably calm about it.

"I guess we traded in all those little holes for one big one," he said.

It wasn't as dramatic as it sounded and the hole was covered with one big sheet of plywood. It was only the store room behind that bar that had been damaged. My father seemed strangely relieved at the news, as though the hole in the building meant there was no vengeance pending. A great worry had obviously been taken from him. In the days that followed I was confused by my own feelings. I was thirteen now and while I was not without awe at his courage I felt resentment too. He had shamed me in front of the opposite sex. That she was a worldly woman too, one who would not herself be shamed, made it worse. She was not one of the girls from school. She was someone, I thought, who was testing the very limits of God's forgiveness for her. My father never acknowledged that anything had happened to
me that night and that was unacceptable to me. Though he was the father and I the son and still a long way from manhood, there was one realm where I had power.

Everyone was talking about how my father had run Ferris Johnson off.

“Now don’t get me wrong,” Decker said, his moist eyes pale and serious. “I have defended a lot of black men, and I have nothing against them. As God is my witness,” he said seriously to the floor, taking a sip of beer and curling his upper lip in to get the suds left on his mustache. “They’re the same to me as any other man. But that Ferris Johnson, he is a bad man. It’s got nothing to do with his color. He’s a bad guy and your father did what he had to do. He’s a brave man, your father.”

My father and sonny were buoyant and for a week or so there was no sign of Ferris Johnson or any of his girls, although I kept hoping that Jenny would show up just so I could see her and be seen by her. Then one night my father suggested that we do what we hadn’t done in a long time and really play it up one Saturday night, maybe even write something new and have mom and sis come along to sing as well.

“I’ve got an idea, dad.”

“What’s that, Ricky?”

“Why don’t I get Mr. Gage down here and the band too and show you and everyone what I’m learning. We can all play.”

“I don’t know this Mr. Gage. I don’t know anything about all that relevant minor stuff. That ain’t music to me.”

“It is music. It’s just music.”

“It ain’t real music. My music is real music. Nothing you get from strangers means anything next to your family’s music.”

“I just want to show it to you, that’s all.”
"The only thing you need to show me is how you back me up on that guitar. Now I don’t want to hear it. And I told you to take that Guild back where you got it."

But that night I made the case to my mother and through the wall, while I lay in bed, I heard her lobbying on my behalf. I knew that any argument she made would carry with it the threat of mutiny because my father’s actions had brought the threat of danger into her family’s lives, and always with danger the shadow of death came following.

In the weeks that followed I felt the presence of betrayal in me like a piece of rice, a small and slender but hard thing, a persistence which interrupted the sameness of my undifferentiated self, a thing which while it kept to itself would not be obscured. Even during practice with Mr. Gage when that most precious of all states of mind was accomplished where the spirit of the song itself showed up and slipped a hand into each player like a puppeteer, like a mesmer, and you fell away from yourself in total service to the song, when you were in that zone where the eyes don’t focus or blink, nor do they see, even in that place the small polished piece of rice sat in the middle of my dark self like a pebble in a Petri dish. It was there when I conceived the idea for the arrangement I would do of my father’s song, it was there when I lay awake staring at the green dial on the radio, it was there when the night finally arrived when I packed up my Guild and rode in Mr. Gage’s Ford LTD with three black men and walked with them into the Wayside Bowling Alley and introduced them to my father. For those weeks the hard kernel made no secret of itself or of the fact that despite my trying it could not be spit out. Yet to this day a fury in my heart rails in protest that it was not warning enough.

The hole in the brick had been replaced below the high windows on the front of the building and the new mortar stood out and showed the ragged shape of the new section of wall puzzled in and interlocked with all the old brick. I walked in with Mr. Gage and Walker and Carl Wright and went down that dark entrance into the whole place where the lanes were
laddered all the way down to the far wall in diminishing parallel until they were
almost one of top of the other. We walked along the carpet past the shoe counter and the low
racks of balls into the bar where I saw Decker sitting on a stool amidst the noisy crowd and
my father and Sonny behind the bar, my father bent over the sinks plunging beer glasses over
the brush spindles and glaring across the room where Ferris Johnson sat wearing a green suit
before a table where there sat a glass of something sweet. We pushed through the crowd and
over Decker I shouted, “Dad this is Mr. Gage,” and right then I felt that piece of rice lodge in
my esophagus.

My father looked at me and looked at Mr. Gage and back at me again. His lips just so
slightly came away from his teeth. Mr. Gage held out his hand and said, “Pleased to meet
you, Mr. Lovett. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

My father held up his dripping hands like a surgeon by way of excusing himself.
Decker stood up and laughed self consciously and extended his hand to Mr. Gage. Mr. Gage
looked at me.

“That’s the stage over there,” I said.

As we crossed the small dance area before the stage Ferris Johnson stood up and
shouted, “Play some soul music! Motown!”

We set up on the little stage with barely enough room for two chairs and standing room
behind for Walker and his upright bass and Carl Wright and his saxophone. As we tuned up
Ferris Johnson stood swaying in front of his table looking drunkenly toward the stage and my
father stood drying his hands behind the bar and glaring our way too. I counted out the time
and we started playing the arrangement I had done of the river song, the tempo faster than it
had been and the melody abstracted and obscured among the twisting and twining melodies
that Carl Wright blew on his horn, the identifiable notes of the original melody intermittent
peaks that stood up just higher than the surrounding range of notes while I matched those
markers with chord variations. It required a good deal of attention to maintain the ear's focus on that known melody, even if you knew it well. The one bulb swung slightly overhead and the music seemed to run away in several directions as Ferris Johnson took slow stumbling steps toward the stage and my father came around the end of the bar. I concentrated on the music, trying to gather those various strands in, to focus the music and find that zone, create that space that would allow the music to blossom and take over, turning the musicians into servants of itself. But the music seemed to spray outward as if giving in to some external suction and Ferris Johnson kept coming. That kernel pressed back when I swallowed.

"Play some soul music!"

Johnson was in the middle of the dance floor and he stumbled forward until he stood almost over me. My father was behind him and he looked at me with disgust and he grimaced and shook his head.

Then he shouted, "Turn around, nigger!"

Ferris Johnson turned around and we stopped playing. My father stood there in front of Johnson and he got in a boxer's stance with his left hand out in front of him and a roll of quarters in his right.

"I got your favorite surprise for you right here," my father said.

"I got yours," Johnson said, and he reached inside his jacket.

Even across the short distance of that room I saw the muzzle flash first and then heard the awful sound of the shot, as flat as two boards clapping together but so loud that hearing it felt like something terrible had happened to you, like you had just been dropped into a crucible. My father's fists were raised for battle and the blood sprayed like spit as the bullet passed through his wrist. His loose shirt snapped where the bullet passed through it. Then a dark wet stain appeared at his side just above his waist. Mr. Gage stood up, handing me his guitar, and grabbed Ferris Johnson from behind and the gun dropped to the floor. Decker got
up from his bar stool and stood rigid but swaying with fists at his side and wide eyes
as if he were going to do something, but there was no real thrust to his posture. It was a look
of confrontation for the sake of his dignity only. Someone pushed him back down into his
seat. He grabbed the edges of the seat and made like he was going to get up, but no amount of
tempting would have gotten him back up and anyone who even cared to glance at him knew it.
My father made a dismissive gesture toward Johnson, the way you do when your patience for
something has run out, and drops of blood arced across the space between them and sprinkled
the floor. My father looked at his wrist. He sat on a stool at the bar and wrapped his wrist in a
bar towel and said to the bartender, “Take me to Providence, Sonny.”

The next time I saw my father he was in our back yard standing before the fire barrel.
His left arm was covered in thick bandaging from just below the elbow down. His pompadour
had fallen and his hair was flat against his head. The firelight from the barrel moved the
shadows from place to place. The remnants of his guitar were sticking up out of the barrel. I
was so overcome with misery and love and horror that I couldn’t speak. He poked a stick into
the fire and sparks rose on the air. “You have to understand,” was all he said, “that dreams
have a price.”

I stayed with Mr. Gage for a couple of weeks and during that time I told him everything
there was to tell about my father and his music and his dreams. Mr. Gage said that maybe we
were not all meant to be composers. “Maybe we come to this earth more than once,” he said.
“And one time you’re a farmer, and another time you’re a salesman, and another time you’re a
poet. You see what I’m saying? And that last life you have before becoming an artist is the
most confusing of all, because you’ve got one foot in the mud and one foot out, you have a
tongue but you can’t speak, you have eyes but you don’t see yourself clearly.”

Like so many things with my father, his injury was less transforming than he imagined
it would be. And in fact he was able to play guitar again when he was rehabilitated. The two
of us became estranged of course but the creative impulse is infinitely persistent and so is love. While a reconciliation would not be easy it would in fact come about. As it was my nature to create music I would do that too and from that something beautiful would come.

My life used to be known to me in befores and afters. There was the father I knew before and the father I knew after, the music of my childhood and the music I came to know after. But beyond before and after is the third part that replaces them. In the middle of my life now the act of creation comes to seem like memory. Memory becomes myth through the leavening of time and trial. The single notes of experience, past and present, take on a third harmonic and become fuller orchestrations. And even if the third is ever fully understood there is still the remainder of the seven to follow. There is always something we do not know but which we may know in time. There is always music after.
Some Things You Lose

There are things you know when you're a child that you teach yourself to unlearn for fear your uniqueness will get you exiled from the tribe. When I was a kid I could tell a person was left handed by looking at his face, and I could always tell when there was water nearby by looking at the sky. I knew by instinct who in the world to trust and who to fear. Now that I'm a man I no longer have these abilities but I cling to the hope I can get them back. The place into which they vanished is a very dark chasm that began to open at adolescence when I was suddenly afflicted with vertigo, obesity, and a persecutory breed of moods so horrible and black it eclipsed all light. This is where addiction began. To say where addiction began is easy. To say how the condition of spirit it was meant to soothe came to be is another matter. You struggle toward the answer on paths of words and memories that perhaps never get you near it. You look for its resonance in the patterns your life makes now, hoping that in the smallest bit of truth the entire hologram is contained, that by shedding light on the fragment the whole will become visible.

When I first met Pere Handel I was living in an old converted warehouse in Depot Town, and I had been sober for six months. I was thirty-three years old. This was the year after my father died, when my wife left me, I lost my job as a programmer, and went into debt
all within a fairly short period of time. A close friend of mine hooked me up with Pere. She didn’t know him well but said he was in some kind of group that was keeping him sober. “He almost died from liver disease more than once,” she said. She gave me his number, and I called him. He said he’d meet me at the Brakeman bar.

"You can't miss me," he said. "I'll be the tall skinny guy with white hair."

A bar seemed like an odd meeting place for two recovering drunks, but at the time it didn’t occur to me to object. I could see the Brakeman bar from the window of the warehouse. I got there first and sat there drinking club soda waiting for him. He was about six feet five inches tall and he did indeed have white hair. He walked through the door and paused with his head tilted back looking around the room. When he spotted me a strange look of weariness and disgust crossed his face, a look that seemed half apology and half accusation, as though he had just tripped over his own shoelace and was silently admonishing himself for being so clumsy. He walked over and said, "You look like a guy who's waiting for someone." I was about to get up to shake hands, but he didn’t extend his, just pulled a chair out and sat down. "What can a guy get to drink in this dump?" he said.

We repeated what we had already said on the phone to dissipate our nervousness, and fifteen minutes into the conversation he said, "Well it's clear you're an alcoholic." Just like that. We were on adjacent rather than opposite sides of the table and his chair was angled a few degrees away from me so that when he talked to me it was almost as if he was talking over his shoulder. His eyes would be on the table in front of me and at the end of a statement they would lazily meet mine for an instant, then he would look up in the direction he was facing as though the two of us were sharing a view of some vista, like we were sitting on someone's porch looking out at the lake.

"I did all my hard drinking in a ten year period," he said. "For a long time nobody knew, because I was so good at covering it up. I went to class drunk, I went to committee
meetings drunk, I had bottles in my office. Nobody could figure me out because I was such a good liar. And of course secrecy and dishonesty, well they're what an alcoholic lives on. No one would have found me out either had things kept going along the way they were. What happened was the guy I used to drink with all the time — this other linguistics professor — he got caught and they put him in rehab and he ratted me out."

He said all this with a kind of self-reflective amusement, as though this was cute behavior done by some mischievous little boy who he no longer was.

"You'd think a guy like that might look out for you a little bit," I said. "You figure he'd take the fall with a little grace."

"He was my best drinking buddy," he said. "We'd been through a lot together. Now he's dead. He got hit in the head with a spotlight at one of these Praise Raves at a church in Southgate. He was speaking in tongues and the scaffold that holds the lights broke and fell on top of him. His wife was this fat old fundamentalist bitch who sat around the house all day reading from the Epistles and playing Parcheesi and telling him what a loser he was. Now she's suing the church for two million bucks."

There is a kind of only half-real clairvoyance and conviction that overtakes a person who has recently both lost his mind and gotten sober. It was while in this state, and a state of unemployment as well, that I joined the group with Pere Handel. I leapt into sobriety with the same kind of hope and optimism with which one would begin a new life in a small town. There was the feeling of a new start, the feeling that I could actually be different, that the effort would contain some magic that would awaken a new spirit in me and the old one with all its conflict and its taint would be put to rest for good. But of course the condition in which
you live is something you carry around with you and is not so easily changed. Wherever you go you tend to recreate the trailer park you grew up in.

My wife Dina accused me of battery when I left her. We used to rent motel rooms sometimes on the weekends in little towns like Tecumseh and Adrian or out in Battle Creek or Kalamazoo to be away from home and the phones, the place where our problems lived and intruders knew how to find us, and we would create our little cocoon there and drink. We'd bring along some clothes and toothbrushes and nothing else. We'd buy two Styrofoam coolers that we could throw out when the weekend was over. We filled them with ice and I bought two bottles of vodka for her and a bottle of Scotch and a case of beer for myself and iced them down and we loosened our belts. We got drunk first then went out to cheap bars and played darts with strangers or danced to country music. We did the things other people did. In the middle of the night we'd find a body of water — a lake or a river or a hotel pool — and take off our clothes and get in the water and hold each other and kiss like we had just met, like things were really ahead of us instead of behind us. We did what we could never do sober which was open up to the world. It was the morning after one of these nights that my hangover became something more than a hangover. The poison was taking control. I felt lucid and stable but my hands were shaking terribly. I saw small hairy creatures retreating to the corners of the room. I had some understanding of what they were and what they were doing there. They represented the long-awaited arrival of something fated. The thought of ever having to leave that room filled me with a panic of such magnitude I couldn't hold it and I began crying. Dina held my head and poured liquor down my throat until I calmed down and that was the moment when our tenuous alliance began to unravel. I told her the next day that we both needed to quit drinking and that I was going to get help, and in that moment I felt her slip away from me.
The next week she told me she was leaving. There were the bitter negotiations of emotion that characterize separation, but finally I wouldn't let her go. She tried to walk out the door and I physically restrained her. She clawed my face and screamed and bit me and in the end I had to release her. I was the injured one but she had me arrested and got a restraining order. I was convicted of assault and part of my sentence was that I had to take a drug called Anathahol for eighteen months and submit to random drug tests to make sure I was taking it. They could call me any time of the day or night and I had to go in for the test. The drug prevents you from drinking because if you do so while taking it you go into convulsive seizures. It was frightening at the very least and in a small number of people potentially fatal. I had quit drinking on my own and now I was being forced by the court to honor my commitment. Out of defiance I went out drinking and within a few hours I was sorry I had. I started seeing vivid colors and three-dimensional shapes behind my closed eyes. Then there was a stinging way in the back of my throat and I started gasping for breath and salivating profusely. My whole body started convulsing and I fell to the floor and my stomach got very hot. It was that it was not as gruesome as it sounds though, because for the time it took for it to happen I was in no emotional pain. The seizure eclipsed everything else for a short time and I almost preferred it to the torture my soul was going through. But when it was over I lay in a dark well of loneliness, feeling a part of nothing on earth and hating myself utterly.

They say you shouldn't quit smoking at the same time that you quit drinking because the two activities will always be linked together in your body. If you start smoking again you'll start drinking too. Quit the booze first, deal with the cigarette and sugar addictions later. I craved sugar. I ate doughnuts and chocolate bars every day. Without alcohol I felt
unhealthy. I was tired all the time. But I went for walks every day and sometimes I went to the pool and swam, sat in Riverside Park and watched the river.

The group met five nights a week. We were left on our own to negotiate the treacherous weekends. There were four of us who were regulars and Bucket, the facilitator, made five. Others would come and go who were court ordered into rehab, but we were the core group. McKenny Cruz worked for the city collecting trash. Kip Hardy was a bricklayer. Pere Handel was a retired professor on disability. I was a former programmer; Bucket, the social worker. Bucket was the kindly spiritual anchor for the group, but Pere Handel was the real authority in that room. He was the regular member whose sobriety was oldest and seemed to be the most stable; he was the one whose approval everyone sought; he was the one who interpreted each of our confessions and fed them back to us illuminated. His own speeches were not so confessional but were more esoteric musings on fine points of his sobriety and on the meaning of the group's work. He seemed in every way Bucket's peer and compliment. I had found a mentor for my struggle and he seemed fond of me as well. We were both college graduates and Cruz and Hardy were working men.

Pere Handel was living with a woman named Wanda — a legal secretary — and her two kids in a house on the Huron river. He had an ex-wife named Alta who was from Brazil. They had been married for seven years and had 2 kids. The years of Handel's alcoholic decline were the years he was married to Alta. He drank himself into rehab once, and she told him then that the drinking had to stop. He quit for a time but started again and this time wound up in the hospital with severe liver damage. She divorced him and got the kids and the house and he got his ten-year-old Mercedes Benz. He had visitation rights with the kids but with the stipulation that he remain sober. He, like me, was subject to random drug tests and Alta used this little weapon to torture him. All she had to do was call her lawyer and say that she had reason to believe he was drinking and he would be tested within the hour. He stayed
sober for some time but started drinking again, and again wound up in the hospital.

"I just about bought it that time," he said. "When they took me to the hospital my stomach was huge. It was the size of two basketballs because apparently what your liver does when it shuts down is, since it can't process the waste, it just squeezes all the water out of every cell that passes through it and dumps it into the stomach. The first thing they did was stick a catheter the size of a pencil in me to drain out all the water. That first night they pumped seven litres of water out of my stomach. There are a couple weeks there I don't even remember. Needless to say the witch caught wind of this and I lost the visitation rights to my kids. I've been fighting like hell the last eight months to get them back. I've got a good lawyer and I've got Kyle Bucket and even my doctor on my side pulling for me. Everyone's got complete faith in my sobriety. I'm working the program and I've learned my lesson. All I want is to be able to see my kids, but their lying bitch of a mother is determined to keep me from them. And her husband is a lawyer. I've got a couple avenues left and they're going to assign a mediator to our case and if I can convince this mediator that I'm sober for good I just might succeed."

Pere Handel had dark puffy circles under his eyes. He was skinny. His hands shook. His eyes were yellow, his skin was yellow. He had to take two to three naps a day. His liver was shot. Even so, he looked twelve years younger than his fifty-two years, and his blood tests were showing remarkable improvement.

"My doctor is a liver specialist and he's never seen anything like it. He says he doesn't know why I'm not dead. When I'm leaving his office he says, 'Pere, you keep on making me look good.'"
Kyle Bucket read a short passage from a book of devotions that talked about God and how He loved us and how we were in His care and I listened but the words were just words and they went in my ears and nowhere else.

"What we do," he said, "is go around the room and take turns talking. You can just listen if you want and when everyone else is done you can say something if you feel like it. But don't feel that you have to. It's perfectly fine the first few times not to speak until you get used to it. It always seems strange at first. This is not a place where you should feel pressured. We're here for you."

They were polite and respectful and they talked about frustrations on their jobs and said they got along better with their wives now that they were sober. They said they were grateful for finding this group and didn't know what they would do without it. They thanked everyone for listening. I listened judgmentally and berated myself for it. I was impatient and I arrogantly felt like these people were all visitors in an arena that actually belonged to me. I was looking for a remedy, to get to a new world and leave the old country behind. I knew it was going to be a long swim, and I also knew I was going to find out that it was actually longer and harder than I could possibly have imagined once I got in the water and started stroking. But I didn't see any reason to put it off.

Everyone spoke before me that night except Pere Handel. I talked about Dina. I told the whole story from the first kiss to the restraining order and every drink in between. And about the last time I saw her:

"I was going to kill her. I was that far gone then. I hated her that much. In my heart it was a done deal. She had crushed some part of me that was so deep I didn't even know it existed until it was writhing under her heel. I felt like she had crushed my soul and that somehow she was out there doing this stuff with impunity. I felt like I was the one trying to do the right thing and yet I was suffering all the consequences. What the hell was that about?
Where was God in that circumstance! I decided I was going to get an admission of
guilt and an apology or I was going to spill her blood. I got a .38 caliber revolver from a
buddy of mine and I went to the house. She hadn't even changed the locks and even that I
took as an insult. It was like she was saying she had no fear of me. I let myself in the back
door. I was in a psychopathic state almost beyond the material. I felt like I could walk right
out of my skin, like I could cross the room just by thinking it, like my emotions could fly like
bullets from the middle of my forehead. I went into the dining room and sat on the floor under
the window behind the table. I sat there in the dark and waited. I knew she was at a bar
somewhere. I knew she was with a man. These were facts, as real and tangible to me as mud
bricks. It occurred to me then that that was a true statement. "These are facts." And I thought
of the seeming innocuousness of the word "fact." How could this small word have such power
to disrupt my life? Then I felt something I'd never felt before: a presence in the space around
me, like something I couldn't see was trying to communicate with me, some thing held behind
a membranous sac like a giant biological cell wall. That was all. Just that feeling.
Miraculously the madness in me faded and I sat there pondering the utter simplicity of the
things I desired but couldn't have: this floor of boards that she walked on, the place where she
sat, the things she used, her: a woman. I sat there trying to discern what it was that kept these
things from me. Again I had the sense of something trying to communicate with me, and that
was all it wanted to communicate: that it was there. Not something about my hatred, not
something about love, but just that it was there. That in all the trials of your life there is an
unseen presence. It makes that which is seen seem less huge. My body became hot and I felt
a knowledge infuse me of what was on the flip side of my hatred, how what lay under it was
the loss of a monumental love. The hatred was the weight that kept the cap on that loss
because to face it would be to face the loss of the world, annihilation of the self. The love of
life, the birth love, the mother love. The hatred is to cover the loss, the guilt is to cover the
hatred, and the shame is to cover the guilt. It all combines into this dark, smothering canopy of depression that makes you lifeless. Alcohol temporarily eased the pain. I remembered that way back when I started drinking in high school I thought I was matriculating to the higher education of the world. But in that moment, waiting there to commit murder, I realized that all your real credentials are earned in the family and you're a lot better off when you finally have the sense to own them.

"I heard her car pull into the driveway. I heard her key in the lock. She entered and turned on the light in the front hall. She walked though the dining room and dropped her keys on the table. In the light from the hallway I could see that she was wearing clogs and jeans and a T shirt. I saw her bare heel disappear through the doorway as she walked into the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and poured herself a drink. All this seemed like magic to me. Coming out of the kitchen she saw me. She seemed to glow like some ethereal being. She didn't seem startled. I waved the gun by way of saying hello. She rolled her eyes and said, 'Don't you make a mess in my house.' And she went upstairs to bed. Just fifteen minutes earlier I would have killed her and that would have made her wrong. Her faith in her confidence would have failed her. She had such confidence. A confidence so great she need never be wary. But the fact was that she was only human and she would bleed like everyone bleeds. How could she be so sure that I wouldn't do it? How could she be so right?

"Ten minutes later she came down the stairs and said, 'You're not supposed to be here you know! I have a restraining order!' 'I know,' I said. 'Well?' she said. 'Well?' I said. 'Lock the door when you leave,' she said. Then she went back upstairs for the last time.

"I left some time late in the night. I locked the door. I went back to my place. The things that happened that night happened, they were real, they had meaning. But they did not end anything or put everything right. I still get almost as murderous as I did that night. But I learned something and my world got larger because of it. And I was left thinking that
everyone interacts with the unknown, even those who refuse to. Their resistance makes direct contact with the thing being resisted. The mystery and the denial share a common border. Now to remember this fact, that was the trick."

Kyle cleared his throat and said, "I'm glad you spoke up. It's important that you know that it's always OK to say whatever you want to say in here. And nothing you say leaves this room. If you have a real desire to get better and you work the program, what you do in this room will help you get better."

"Just tell me what the protocol is," I said. "And I'll follow it."

We all stood in a circle in that small room, closed our eyes and joined hands and said the Lord's prayer. I felt like the middle of the circle was a deep dark hole and I was falling into it.

I went back to my room above the warehouse in Depot town and stacked a plate with doughnuts and ate them and drank cold milk and looked out at the people spilling out of both bars I could see from my window, drunk and hollering in the street. I had a dream that night that I had broken my sobriety. I was sitting in a bar with a couple bikers drinking beer and whiskey and over a period of time a spooky little feeling started to creep up my spine and suddenly I remembered that I had been sober and somehow without even realizing it I had blown my sobriety. I had no idea how I had forgotten I was sober or when I had started drinking. I was just there in the bar and the deed was already done.

I woke up feeling like someone had poured molten lead down my throat. The bed was so wet with sweat I had to change the bedding and wring the sheets out before I put them in the laundry bag. I sat in the window and smoked a cigarette. Bolts of lightning flashed through my head all night. By morning the sheets were drenched again.
I was sitting on the toilet reading the book of *Revelation* the next morning when the phone rang. It was Pere Handel. He said, "John Waites, you shook up that group last night. I could see in their eyes they were excited about being shaken off their complacent asses."

"Maybe I came on too strong," I said.

"We need to shake up each other's stuff. That's how we stay sober. I've got eight months in now and I'm starting to see how this thing works. And it does work, but it requires humility. That's what I've found out."

"I felt good about it last night. I just hope I didn't piss anybody off."

"They all lean on me. But my approach is perhaps too intellectual. That doesn't necessarily help someone when the monster's got his hands around your throat. We're all gonna learn something from each other."

"I hope so," I said. "I've got that drug as a deterrent, but sometimes that's not enough. It tends to make me feel defiant."

"Listen, I've got a bit of a crisis over here and was wondering if you'd help me out. I've got to take Wanda's kids to school and I've got a flat tire. Could you come give us a lift?"

Pere Handel's house was a big old frame house with a long back yard that went right down to the river. When I got there his old black Mercedes was sitting by the curb with a flat tire. The house was spacious and some of the rooms were cozy and nicely furnished and others were bare and dusty. Their house was the size of two normal houses but only half the rooms were habitable.

"Come on in," Handel said. "I'll give you the nickel tour."

Wanda’s kids were in a back bedroom that was converted into a play room. When Handel introduced me to them they barely looked up from playing Nintendo. We piled into my car and I drove them to school and they seemed very autonomous and isolationist, as
though between themselves they had everything they needed and had no need or interest in going outside the border of their fraternity. It seemed like I could never get a good look at them, as though their faces were always turned away or looking down or otherwise shielded. To this day I couldn't tell you what they look like.

"We'll be back to pick you up at three thirty," Handel said when we dropped them off.

They squeezed out of the back seat with their backpacks and scampered off around the corner of the school almost on top of each other but still separate, one just a nose ahead of the other, like two ferrets.

"Let's go back to my place," Handel said. "I'll buy ya a cup of coffee."

We drove back to his place and he led me to the screened back porch and pointed to a chair. He disappeared and came back a minute later and plopped a book in my lap and flipped open the cover and pointed to a spot in the table of contents and said, "Check that out while I make espresso." The book was an edition of America's Best Short Stories from the sixties and it took me a minute to realize what he had pointed to. About two thirds of the way down the page was the title A Country Called The South and alongside it—by Pere Handel. It was a story about a young white man helping to organize a freedom march in Mississippi.

Handel returned carrying two cups of coffee on saucers. When he tried to set mine down his hand was shaking so hard the cup was rattling.

I took it from his hand.

"I'm weak," he said. "It happened so fast too. One minute I was a happy healthy drunk guy. The next thing I know I wake up in the hospital and I'm feeble as a stroke victim. It's like somebody did something to me while I was unconscious that ate away all my strength."

"What does the doctor say about it?"
"I'll probably never be the same. But he says if I stay sober and keep doing what I'm doing I'll be close to as healthy as most invalids."

"I know I'm not supposed to ask this but: think you can go the distance?"

"Oh yeah. I'd be a fool to blow this one. If I ever want to see my kids again I have to do it. What do you think of that?" he said, pointing to the book. "Isn't that something?"

"Yeah what is this about, you're a writer?"

"I used to write in another life. I knew a lot of writers so it was easy to get published. It's like anything, you know the right people..."

"Who did you know?"

"Allen Ginsburg, Gary Snyder, all those west coast guys."

"Kerouac?"

"I never met him. We sort of crossed paths a day apart once in San Francisco. I met Neal Cassady once but by then he was so fried from speed that he wasn't even human anymore. He was just a pair of eyeballs, a shirt and some boots. Couldn't even talk anymore."

"Ever met Ferlinghetti?"

"Oh yeah. He stole one of my girlfriends once."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding."

"How did you meet these guys?"

"I was an activist back in the sixties. I went down south with a bunch of other students to help register black people to vote. I started meeting people that way. Abbie Hoffman. Malcolm X. I knew Malcolm X quite well. I talked to him a couple days before he got killed."

"I don't know what to say. I've never been so near greatness before. I feel like I should bow down."
"You don't have to bow down before anyone, John Waites. You're a king and you don't even know it."

"How did you get to Michigan?"

"Got tired of being beat up by rednecks. So then I was in a band for a while. Went to grad school, got a job here teaching. Married my first wife."

"Where's she?"

"She's here. She's a nurse at a clinic nearby. We're still great friends. We built a house together outside of town on Hall Road with no furnace, no electric for five years. It was much more rural out there back then. We stayed together a long time, but it wasn't a marriage. It was a great friendship. We were dating other people. Eventually it was just time to dissolve the legal part of it."

"You've done some interesting stuff, Pere Handel."

"Isn't that something?"

He nodded toward the cup in my hands.

"Wanda and the kids got me the espresso machine for Christmas," he said. "What are you doing with yourself?"

"Not much. I read a lot. Sleep. I'm tired, you know. I go to the park, walk downtown."

"Well hell you come here any time you want. I got a couple things going on with the Observer and the Metro Times so I'm working in the mornings. But my strength doesn't hold up for very long. I sleep a couple times a day. Other than that and getting the kids to and from school I'm just eating time like you. If you're out walking drop on in."

"I'll do that."

"Absolutely do. That reminds me, I've got to do something about that car."

"You got a jack?"
"I think so."

"Well let's go take a look at it."

"Finish your coffee first."

He had owned the car for more than a decade but he seemed like a stranger to it. He was sitting in the driver's seat with the door open and his feet on the ground and was leaning over rummaging around in the glove compartment trying to figure out how to open the trunk. I walked to the back of the car and tested the trunk lid."

"It's open," I said.

"Did that do it? I thought that was the one. Been a while since I had to get in the trunk. What do you find?"

"Everything's here. There's a spare but it's flat too. I'll get that other one off of there and take them up to Discount Tire."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah of course. Give me something to do."

"Well me and Wanda will have to have you in for dinner."

I jacked up the car and took the wheel off and took it and the spare and got them both fixed. When I got back Pere Handel was asleep. There was a note on the living room table saying make yourself at home. I wrote on it that the car was fixed and I'd see him at group later and I went outside and put the wheel back on the car and put the jack and the spare in the trunk and closed the lid. I was about to leave when I noticed I had left the crowbar lying on the ground. I picked it up and threw it on the floor in the back seat.

I bought a paper and sat in a coffee shop smoking and doing the crossword puzzle and drinking tea and thinking about what I would say that night. I thought about Dina a lot in those days and I thought about alcohol. Most of the time I didn't feel like drinking but sometimes the cravings hit and sometimes they stayed for weeks without a break. It was an
itch, like someone dropped Alka Seltzer in my chest cavity and it was bubbling away and tickling all my organs. I craved to gulp a nice hot shot of whiskey to cover it and stop the itch. I imagined gulping down whole pints of beer. I tried not to think about Dina but I thought about her and I felt something so deep and raw it was unclassifiable. I felt forsaken by the entire race of women. I was impatient for this phase of my life to be over, for it to have been gotten through. I thought if I stayed sober and bared my soul in the group that I'd be liberated, removed from this zone of emotional terrorism. I looked forward to the group. It was the only thing I had going at that time.

McKenny Cruz said, "I'd just like to say something if I could. I think it took a lot of courage to come out and say what you said, John Waites. It's not easy to put your real self out in front of people like that. I wanted to. But I never did. I always held something back because I was afraid to say everything, afraid people would think I wasn't a man or something. Now I feel like I can, though. Because of you. I feel like he's only been here a short time and this group is a different group and I want to say how that I'm glad you're here, John."

"I'll second that," Kip Hardy said.

"I think we all feel the same way," Kyle Bucket said. "We're all glad you're here, John. And you're doing really good work. And if you continue it I have no doubt that your recovery will deepen and you're gonna see things change in your life. I just want to add — and this isn't to take anything away from you John because I think everything McKenny says is true — but we're all equal members in this group. No one is above anyone else, including me. We're all just doing the same work. And know that it's safe to say anything you want in here and it stays in this room. OK?"
Everyone nodded. Bucket smiled and said, "Good work, John." He turned to Pere and said, "Pere, how you doin today?"

"Well I'm afraid I'm going to — I'm fine Kyle, thanks — I'm afraid I'm going to officially make this the John Waites admiration society, not only because I was so floored by what he shared with us in here but because he helped me out of a jam earlier today and it really showed me how this thing works. And I was wondering what I was going to say tonight and listening to John made me think of something puzzling that I had written in my journal. I wrote: It's almost impossible to believe you deserve better than misery. Your seven selves assure you that you're going about everything honestly. I asked myself what I meant by that. And then something you said John about sitting in that room and what you went through made me think that we do have different selves and different layers of self and that addiction plays on this. Addiction is a monster that knows what it wants and depends on the fact that you don't — know what you want, that is. Or it either. And in its guile it can play these selves one against the other so that we don't know which is the real one and which is the addiction talking. After my marriage to Alta ended I was holed up with the bottle for weeks on end in the place where I lived, never going out and never seeing or talking to anyone. I actually believed I could go the rest of my life without ever interacting with either. And that might have been true because the way I was going then my life wasn't likely to be very long anyway. Such long periods of isolation and solitude caused me to believe I could no longer learn anything through observation or experience but only through books or some special medium, some pipeline to the unknown that from time to time delivered to me thoughts and ideas I could not come up with on my own. Finally I believed that sometimes God talked to me, or spirits of some kind. What they had to deliver could be suggestions of something profound, something of wonderment, or warnings and admonitions. You don't want to hear the warnings because the warnings always turn out to be prophetic. And it occurred to me then what the
source was of that tremendous feeling of loss that arises upon getting sober. It's the loss of contact with this realm of mystery, this place behind the face of the world. Because only two things you know can connect you with that place: love and alcohol. But the two can't coexist because they both want possession of your soul. We are, each of us, the guardians of our own souls. But who will keep us from corrupting them ourselves? Who is there to protect your soul when you are the soul's assailant? When love is corrupted, addiction steps in to fill the breech. And so the only thing you love from then on is the vice itself. And when you choose life over death finally, when you choose sobriety, you lose the only thing you have left that stands for love, and that is the love of alcohol, the loss of all those sensations that pour directly over an inflamed or depleted soul. The bitter and the sweet, the mixture of life and death in a glass. In the end it is futile to love an inanimate thing. So we know boys, the only way to reconnect with that place of mystery is through the people we love. That's why working on sobriety always means working on relationships."

We all stood in a circle and joined hands and said the Serenity Prayer: God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

We stumbled out of the room into what always seemed an altered world. It was not the place we had left when we went into the room but a subtler place, a place whose real intentions were less obvious and whose atmosphere was less apt to keep us upright, as though gravity were different or our own instruments of balance had been altered by the experience in the room. I felt a little disoriented and dizzy. Saying goodbye for the evening was always awkward after such intense emotional exercises. And the scene that confronted us seemed as though it had been put there by irony itself. The room where the group met was the end room in an old six-room motel. The room used to be a hooker's trick pad and the other five still were, so when we walked out there were girls sometimes sitting in the open doors of the
rooms or walking up and down the streets wearing shorts and bikini tops. It was a serious test of my resolve every time I came out of that room to be confronted by so much flesh, to be face to face with the seduction of exactly the kind of decadence I was so vulnerable to. I felt like the others knew I had been to this motel for other reasons back when I was still drunk.

Kip Hardy and McKenny Cruz were both married men whose marriages had been damaged by alcoholism. Kip Hardy, like me, had a wife who loved to drink and didn't want to stop. She was beautiful and he owned his own business so he had money. He was a bricklayer and he approached the group with a very workmanlike style. The things he talked about were material, were immediate, were about solving problems that affected his day to day functioning: guys were drunk on the job, guys didn't show up for work, his wife was making him jealous. He had been in the group twice before in years past and had gone back out there drinking for a long time. Sometimes when I finished talking his face was red as though he was embarrassed. When Pere Handel would finish talking Kip Hardy would often pass his hand over his head and go puffff to indicate that it was beyond his comprehension.

McKenny Cruz worked for the city collecting trash. He lived with his wife and three children. He had been injured on the job and was embroiled in a lawsuit with the city. His approach to recovery was mostly religious. He felt it was the devil who made him drink. He had been in gangs when he was younger and had spent time in prison. Now he was trying to be a family man and a churchgoer. All the people in his immediate and extended family were drinkers and most thought his sobriety was just a momentary lapse of reason on McKenny's part. They tried on most Friday nights and all major holidays to persuade him to get drunk. No matter how many times he tried to explain to them that he didn't drink anymore, that it
wasn't good for him, that they were doing him harm by always tempting him, they
just looked at him with slowly blinking eyes as if they had no idea what he was saying, as if
wondering why this family member who they had known all their lives and who had always
spoken English just like them was suddenly talking to them in some foreign language.

I liked McKenny Cruz and I got along well with him. Kip Hardy and I were cordial
but I felt like we had force fields around us that would never let us get too close. Most of the
time I felt the reason I couldn't get near him was because he wasn't anywhere near himself.
He had no idea who he was so there wasn't much chance anyone else would know either. The
rest of the time I thought that it was just me trying to offload my wreckage onto his deck. In
any case, we both kept a good face on and kept a straight-arm's distance between us.

Kyle Bucket was Kyle Bucket. His last name was actually Bouquet, but he had grown
up in Texas and Bucket was what they turned it into. It was his group. He was decent and
honest and sincere and committed. But what worked for him didn't work for me. His daily
devotions had no power. They were too brief and too polite to have any impact. I needed
words that would surround me and force me to grapple, words that would shake me until
things started to fall out. Something needed breaking. Kyle Bucket was a sergeant in the
army of salvation, and everyone knows it's the sergeants who really run the army. But I
arrogantly believed in those days that I should be fraternizing with the generals.

Now Pere Handel. What I can say about Pere Handel at this point is this: for some
reason I wanted for him to admire me. Because that would put me up at the height of the
people he had known. And I knew I could get his professed admiration but that wouldn't do it.
There would still be the difference that he was willing to sell his soul to the devil and I wasn't.
I sincerely wanted to change, or at least I believed that I did.
I walked to Pere Handel's house for dinner. He opened the door and said,
"So you made it. Come on in." Coming down the hallway behind him was a woman wearing white shorts and a large T shirt. She extended her arm and hand straight out in front of her for the last four steps of her approach.

"This is Wanda," Pere said. "Wanda, this is the guy I've talked so much about."

"I'm John," I said.

She took my hand firmly and shook it once abruptly, as though she were trying to shake water from her hand.

"I've met some celebrities in my time but none of them had quite the advance press you have."

"I've been acting as your PR man," Pere said.

"I'll take it," I said. "Good PR has been in short supply for a long time."

"Not around here," Wanda said. "You've got fifty percent of the electorate by default and the other fifty are predicted to swing by the end of the evening. So you're in friendly country. Come in and sit down."

We went into the living room and sat.

"What can I get you to drink?" Pere said. "I've got vodka, bourbon, and beer."

"You've got a bold sense of humor, Pere Handel."

"How about soda?" Wanda said.

"Soda's good."

"Ice?" Pere said.

"Please."

Pere left the room.

"So how do you like the group, John?"

"I like it a lot. I think it's going to be a big help. I'm really glad Pere got me into it."
"Pere loves it. He never misses it for anything. I'm amazed. There has
total transformation. But he's at the point now where he doesn't have much of a
choice. It's the group or death basically."

"Is she enumerating my lifestyle options again? Of which there is one," Pere said.

He entered the room carrying a water glass, a coffee mug and a wine glass. I looked
at the wine glass, I looked at his face, I looked at Wanda.

"Here you go, dear," he said, handing the wine glass to Wanda. "Club soda, John."

He crossed the room in three strides. He was wearing corduroy pants and tennis shoes. His
left foot pronated noticeably, causing his sole to distort to one side. I was sitting on the couch,
Wanda was in an armchair next to the archway, Pere pulled an ottoman out into the open floor
space and sat on it. He was folded up so his knees were higher than his lap. He took a sip
from his coffee mug. I took a sip of my drink. We all sat there looking into the tops of our
glasses.

"I got some distressing news today," Pere Handel said.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"I swear there's no end to that bitch's guile!" Wanda said. "What were you thinking
when you married her anyway?"

"I wasn't thinking anything. I was drunk," Pere said with a bemused smile.

"You would've had to be," she said, smiling as well.

"So what was the news?" I asked.

"You remember how I was talking about this mediator who I was supposed to meet
with to talk about the visitation with my kids? We had a date set for this meeting and just as
it's drawing near she pops up with this scheme. She has her lawyer file some kind of petition
saying that they can prevent the mediation from ever happening if I don't submit to yet another
psychological evaluation from a psychiatrist of their choosing. I never heard about this. I've
been going through this process for months submitting regular progress updates from my physicians, getting a court-arranged psychological evaluation, character references from Kyle and others. And all along the way I kept asking, 'Is there anything else I have to do? Is there anything I should know about?' They say, 'No, everything's set. No problem. Don't worry.' And then she springs this shit. She keeps managing to find something every time we get close to the mediation event. She delays it as much as possible. You know she's a therapist, right? Well she got one of her cronies to agree to do it and the first available date is a month and a half from now. I'm gonna ask the court to force them to do it sooner, because they're just doing it to keep me from seeing the kids for as long as possible."

"How long has it been since you've seen your kids?"

"Eight months, since I drank myself into the hospital. I'm only allowed to speak to them by phone once a week."

"That's gotta be tough for the kids."

"They're always asking why I don't come to visit. It breaks my heart. Last week when I was talking to Todd he said, 'Daddy did you pass away?' I said, 'Pass away? Where did you get that idea?' He said, 'I heard mommy say that when people pass away they don't come to visit anymore.'"

"That's just criminal," Wanda said. "That's just completely criminal. That woman is doing them more psychological harm by keeping them from seeing their father than he could ever do to them. She ought to be locked up. She's the one who shouldn't be allowed to see the kids."

She stood up and left the room. She walked with very deliberate steps in an almost military manner with her back straight and her head tilted slightly back. She had a flat ass and skinny legs and her torso was not shapely. She had short brown hair that was feathered back on the sides and just covered her ears. She had a face that would have been almost boyishly
cute in her teens but had matured into something too close to mannish. She looked like a truckstop waitress and she wore no shoes.

"Bring us some more drinks while you're out there," Pere said. Then he said, "Oh hell I'll get them."

He stood up and for one second I saw that look on his face, the look I had seen when I first saw him in the Brakeman. It was a look of disgust or self recrimination and it was so brief and yet so explicit that it left you feeling confused and vaguely worried.

Everything in the room seemed to be made of slats or of such unstable construction that small things would fall through gaps if tampered with or whole pieces of furniture would collapse if the wrong component was upset. It was like being surrounded by booby traps. The whole room felt like it was hovering just at the angle of repose, ready to topple at the slightest tip. There was a table whose surface sat on top of a collapsible wooden foundation which had a cross support that prevented you from stretching your legs out without putting your feet through the space between the cross support and the top, increasing the likelihood of getting a foot caught and knocking the whole thing over. The table top itself wobbled when touched and felt as though it could somehow slide off on its own. A heavy hemp weaving of some sort covered most of the table top and there were candles in metal candle sticks that disconnected from their bases if touched and colored rocks and paraphernalia whose function was esoteric but which had the look of something organic, something sacred, legacy of some shaman—wooden carvings, pieces of hard shaped leather riveted together, spherical objects wrapped in some kind of hair, the suggestion of moving parts but no discernable purpose to any of it.

Half the couch was covered in stacks of books two feet high. I looked around for something that would remind me of myself but I didn’t find what I wanted.

Pere Handel appeared from the hallway and said, "Well you ready to eat?"
He had a slight smirk on his face and he said it with some implied meaning, some mockery, like we were men of great abilities reduced to activities far below our potential. Things were stated in such a way as to imply a persistent irony, a transcendence of all that there was to invoke irony. There was so much more to everything Pere Handel said than the mere words, but it wasn’t what he would want you to believe.

We went into the kitchen where Wanda poured herself a new glass of wine and pronounced a terminating, “Well!” She flared her nostrils and filled her chest with air. “You men enjoy your dinner. I’m going to go be mother to my kids.” She left the room.

Pere Handel tossed a bitter salad of Romaine lettuce with little bits of red pepper and Mandarin orange. The dressing was mostly lemon with very little base.

“I don’t know where you are on cuisine, John, but around here we favor people food.”

I sat on a wooden folding chair that was lower than it should have been. He pitched salad onto two plates. Then he put out a bowl of green beans that had come from a can, macaroni and cheese that had come from a box, and spare ribs covered in barbecue sauce.

“I hope you eat meat.”

“What else would you eat?” I said.

“You’ll like this barbecue sauce. Wanda makes it. Her grandpa was one of these good old boys from Tennessee used to make moonshine and had his own special recipe for barbecue sauce. Those guys took eating cooked pig pretty seriously.”

Pere opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of white wine and pulled the cork.

“Go ahead and eat, John. I’m gonna go and make sure Wanda’s comfortable. She’s got a pretty high-stress job and by the end of the day she’s pretty wiped out.”

He left the room carrying the bottle by the neck.

The lettuce had not been torn. You couldn’t take a forkful of salad without getting the whole leaf. Lemon splashed on my chin. I piled my plate with macaroni and took a slab of
ribs and began eating, the table coming up to my chest like I was a kid. The macaroni had no mass, the ribs were tough and the barbecue sauce had too much vinegar in it. I shoved macaroni into my mouth and it was like eating air. I gnawed at bones and chewed until my jaw hurt at the temples. I swallowed boluses of pure fat. There was a sticky smear all over my hands and face. I kept eating and not feeling fed, like the center of the meal was missing.

I put my plate in the sink, went out to the back porch and rolled a cigarette. When I passed the playroom it was empty and I saw that there was another doorway on the other side of the room which must have led to the empty rooms on the other side of the house. I smoked and watched the river and forced myself to think about certain things and not about others. I said prayers I had learned and found somewhat useful. It was a difficult exercise and didn’t have enough real power, although I was told of its value by others who knew. The job was to nurture belief, they said. So I kept at it. It was a frustrating exercise and it made me think I was missing some necessary faculty for change and that the things that were supposed to be true would not be true for me.

A certain kind of strangeness in people is expected. The ratio of your expectations of certain kinds of behavior to tolerance of certain others becomes inverted. You learn to factor in the flaws and eccentricities in any relationship and in this way what is aberrant becomes what is normal. Then someone who is always late is on time and punctuality is aberrant and disruptive. The bad and the good begin to look like the same thing so that one person’s strict adherence to schedule becomes exposed as neurotic just as much as the pathologically tardy. It didn’t surprise me a whole lot when Pere didn’t show up again that evening. I was about to leave but it was so peaceful there I rolled another cigarette. The darkness slowly congealed and I became terribly sad listening to those lecturing waters and thinking about the past.
Before I quit drinking I had reached the state where I couldn't get drunk any more. You start out in the situation where the more you drink the more drunk you get. But by the time it's over the more you drink the more sober you get. The first couple drinks you're already loopy. Pretty soon your face droops and you look like one eye is melting down your cheek. Everyone knows you're a drunk and you bore them to death saying the same stupid things over and over all night. Then you get the clarity. Your head clears up. Your torso and your organs get like a big clean copper drum. Then the clarity acquires an austere edge. And you drink more and more fiercely and the clarity gets harsher and harsher even while you're getting farther away, falling down into yourself, and some ancient slave of memory keeps your body upright and moving as though you were only one drink into a night of stiff postures and polite conversation. Then the fear starts to creep in but you're so sopped it doesn't matter. It's just there as a little hint of what's to come, saying Have a good night's sleep smartass because you're waking up in my bootcamp tomorrow.

You flop on the couch and the room holds perfectly still. Everything is so blinding it's like you're living on the inside of a light bulb. You want time to stop, you want time to leap far forward, you want it to do anything but what it's doing, which is ticking patiently toward the task of tomorrow, keeping you lashed to the back of destiny as it slowly evolves into what will finally be your end. You sleep a sleep that is as metallic and reflective as stainless steel. You wake in the middle of something darker than night. The pressure in your bladder, the need to urinate, needles you like something much greater than what it is, because somehow behind it on a tow rope are all the responsibilities in your life you know you have to face but don't have the courage to. You crawl across the floor to the bathroom, you urinate with the light out sitting on the toilet like a woman, head pounding like a mad man is in there trying to get out. You don't go near the mirror. You crawl back to the couch and put all your muscle
and influence on a sleep that nevertheless refuses to come. For the moment you have an amicable thing with time, like a convict with a sympathetic jailer. But it doesn't last.

You finally fall asleep at daybreak and the next time you wake you've shrunk in a way that scares you. You're less of a human, you can feel it. Something vital and essential has pulled away from the margins of you and receded toward some focal point, as though heading for a drain down in the middle of you from which you've pulled the stopper. The life in you has taken all it can and is running out of you. You are hunched and holding yourself like a hypothermic man. Fear begins to fill the room like a gas. It seeps in through the door, the windows, from somewhere and it fills the room and it seeps into your limbs like they are empty tubes. By the time it fills your stomach and chest it is a fear so clattering and rampant that it rules the house and runs over you like marauding pigs. You can't do anything but lie there and quake. The sun beyond the shades, the horns in the street, the very furnishings in the room are full of accusation and menace. You're no longer a man. You're an unmitigated coward: broken, caved, unwhole.

I went back into Pere Handel's house and stood in the living room looking around and trying to memorize the features of the room but the will of the inscrutable room was stronger than my own and it hid behind itself. I walked home and lay myself out in the warehouse and went to sleep.

Kip Hardy came to the group drunk. He was standing out in front of our meeting room talking to McKenny Cruz and the tails of his work shirt were untucked and hanging down to his thighs. The shirt was unbuttoned down to his sternum. He was talking loud and Cruz stood there silently, not looking very happy.

I walked up and said, "What are you drunks up to?"
Kip Hardy turned toward me and said, "There’s the world’s most serious man!"

He put his forearms on my collarbones, one on each side, and leaned his forehead against mine.

"You know what I like about you?" he said.

McKenny Cruz grabbed Kip Hardy by the shoulder and said, "Don’t lean on him like that."

He pulled on the shoulder and firmly turned Kip Hardy around and held one of Kip’s shoulders with each hand. "What’s wrong with you, man? You don’t do that to a guy."

Kip Hardy pulled away and stepped back and said, "Cruz, you’re all right." He was laughing. "You got your little things. But that’s cool. No one’s gonna say it’s bad or what not. You’re all right. Don’t worry about it.

"But you know what I like about you?" he said, looking at me.

"What’s that?" I asked.

"Nothing!"

He was a stupid-looking guy who seemed very dangerous, like some incident of ancestral incest had dumped a trace of madness in him. But it wasn’t a madness with any integrity. It was just raw ignorance and substandard biology. Of all the people I’ve ever known I would guess him to be the one who could most likely resort to cannibalism with a clear conscience.

"Yet!" he said, and he dropped his mouth open and laughed from his throat. "But I’m still lookin. Haven’t given up on ya yet. But your time’s getting short so get your ass movin."

He laughed again and turned and walked into the meeting room.

While Kyle Bucket was reading from his book of devotionals you could hear the sound of Kip Hardy’s breath whooshing in and out of his nostrils. He was tipped back in a folding
chair with his hands on the back edge of the seat and his chest sticking out. I sat on
the worn out old love seat near Kyle, who sat in a chair to my right at one end of the room.
Pere Handel was next to me on the love seat with his head down staring at the floor, his legs
crossed and his journal in his lap. Hardy was at the opposite end of the small room from Kyle.
Then Cruz in a folding chair across from me. We bowed our heads and said the Serenity
Prayer. The thing that sticks with me about it is the way that McKenny Cruz always stuck the
word *that* into the prayer: the things *that* I cannot change...the things *that* I can.

"John, let's start with you. How you doin' today?"

"I feel like a piece of shit falling off a shelf," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear that. What's going on?"

"I want to drink. I feel like I'm being eaten by termites!"

"I'm glad you're saying it here and not just carrying it around with you. Is there
anything you think might help?"

"Yeah," I said. "Inhaling a lot of water."

"Now we don't want to go down that road. I appreciate the way you're feeling, believe me."

"I know," I said. "But I don't know what the hell to do with this stuff. I'm in a straight
jacket and I don't know how to get out of it."

Kip Hardy stood up from his chair and raised his arms and looked at the ceiling and
shouted, "I say to all Gods! Be who you claim to be or make no demands of me!" Then he
shook his fists and walked out the door.

Kyle calmly stood up and closed the door.

"My apologies for that disruption. I take full responsibility for that. I try to ensure that
sort of thing won't happen."
Cruz said, “Why should you take responsibility for it? It was him. He’s been drinkin’. And it’s not the first time. That’s not fair to all of us. I don’t want to hurt the guy or nothing but I’m having a hard enough time. I’m not gonna make it if there’s guys coming in here drunk.”

“We don’t know for sure. We don’t want to make assumptions.”

“He was talking to me outside and he smelled like a bottle of vodka.”

Kip Hardy was the weak link in the brotherhood. He had broken the chain we had made and while Pere Handel put on a suitable show of sympathy, Cruz and I were both mad as hell.

“This is a small town,” Cruz said. “This guy’s walking around out there and I’ve entrusted my anonymity to him. I don’t like it, I feel like I can’t trust him. Who knows what he’s doing out there!”

We were both fighting the urge to go back to a happier time where misery was oppressed by deceit and lust and alcohol and no matter how futile, how destructive, how illusory everything was under that dark umbrella of addiction it seemed better than what was out here, where it was all raw desert and there was no sheltering ever from the blind and merciless sun.

There were many other nights and moments and conversations during that time but I don’t remember them. I had the requisite affection and empathy recorded in my head for these people. They were important to me. But they didn’t matter really, because all that mattered was the answer and they were not it. I looked for saviors everywhere. I saw wisdom that wasn’t there in cabbies and whores and coffee shop waitresses with nose rings and screwed up hair. I inspected the words and actions of astrologers and masseuses and anyone who appeared to have some kind of control of his life so from them I could get some control of my own. I committed acts of generosity and matched my politics with whoever I associated with and it didn’t matter because I had no politics, I had nothing to be generous with, I hadn’t felt
anything but lust and repressed rage in my whole memorable life. So I mapped all
my hopes on Pere Handel, probably because deep in my secret soul where I was never allowed
to go I knew that there wasn’t a stinking chance he could pull it off. He had all the hallmarks
of one of my classic personal disasters — intelligence, charisma, guile, weakness. And he
hated himself. What chance did I have against that? I thought Pere Handel was somebody
and I wanted him to like or even need me so I would have to believe that I was somebody too.
He knew famous people, he had done enviable things, he was broken and drunk. You couldn’t
be much more credible than that.

There are certain laws woven into the fabric of the universe and chief among them
regarding human affairs is the domino effect. We all fall down. All systems tend toward
disorder if not maintained by an outside hand. We tumble to the tempo of entropy. Our
serenity prayer seemed to be going unheard. Once Kip Hardy brought the breath of alcohol
into that room the well was poisoned. We other three kept nervous eyes on one another, not to
try and catch the other guy but to discern whether he could see that undoubtedly we would be
the weak one, we would be the corrupter, we would be the next domino to fall. The guilt and
lack of personal conviction were enormous. I struggled. I itched. I wondered where I would
find the will to restrain myself.

Kip Hardy had an out of town contract and was leaving for three weeks. Shortly a few
new guys were court-ordered into the group. This both distracted us and pulled us back
together. As senior members of the group we wanted to set good examples. There was a guy
like Kip who talked about headlines of tragedies each day and expressed sympathy for people
who were involved in the world’s crises. There was a handsome weightlifter with a cocaine
problem who was chomping at the bit to get back out there. Then there was a young Hispanic
guy going through a divorce whose wife was using custody of their daughter to get back at
him. She was living in their house with another man. This guy was in pain and he was
working hard and you could tell he had a hard road ahead of him. All of us saw in
him what we ourselves had been just a short time ago. This is the guy we all tried to help. We
told him exactly what the process was like and that the hell of it would pass and we were all
proof. But there is only so much you can do. You can’t cross the desert for someone else.
Everyone’s got to make the journey himself.

The weightlifter was gone within a week, the tragic guy was often absent, and the other
guy worked hard day by day. On a sunny Monday a few weeks later, the day Kip Hardy
returned, Pere Handel walked into the room smiling and sat down and Kyle said, “I think Pere
has some good news and since good news is scarce in here these days why don’t we let him
start off today. Pere, how you doin?”

Pere sat down grinning broadly and looking at the top of the opposite wall and said,
“Well I’ve had just an extraordinary weekend. I’m just on top of the world. I’m delighted to
be able to share the news with you that last Friday I had a meeting with the mediator and the
judge and my visitation rights have been restored. I get to see my kids now. It’s even better
than I hoped—three days every other week and for the whole weekend on the intervening
week. After the hardest eight months of my life I’ve been given another chance, in large part
because of the help and support I had from so many eminent folks. I had outstanding letters
from Kyle and my doctor and the therapist I’m seeing. Everyone stood up for me. I don’t
know what I did to deserve it but I am appropriately humbled and grateful. I want to thank all
you guys in here for being so supportive during this whole thing. It really got me through.”

As he spoke he made eye contact briefly, then talked to the floor, then made eye contact
with someone else, looked down at his lap. When he finished that strange look of his crossed
his face and he looked vaguely embarrassed or self conscious. We all cheered and
congratulated him and felt as good for him as the closed hearts of substance abusers could.
We would all get together at Pere’s house the next night to meet his twins.
We were in Pere’s car on the way to pick up Wanda from the law firm. I was driving and Pere was in the passenger seat holding a glass of wine between his knees with both hands.

“I usually drive with my right hand,” he said. “And hold the wine glass with my left and rest my elbow on the armrest. Haven’t spilled a drop yet believe it or not. It’s kind of a test of my will and it gives me a feeling of confidence to know that I don’t have to live in fear of it. I think it’s useful.”

We were behind a U-Haul and it was rush hour and I couldn’t see around the truck and I couldn’t get over to pass it. I didn’t know why the hell there was a glass of wine in the car I was driving, in the hand belonging to Pere Handel, who I had come to depend on as my authority in sobriety.

“Easy does it there, chief,” he said.

I was just inches from the U-Haul’s bumper. We hit every light between Ypsilanti and Ann Arbor and there was a clot of resentment forming in my chest. I cut off a cab while swerving around the U-Haul just as a cop was passing in the other direction. I looked in my rear-view mirror.

“I saw that too,” Pere said, turning to look. “His lights just went on. Time for a little evasive maneuvering.”

We were approaching an intersection just as the light was turning. I ran it and so did the cabby. Then I turned down a residential street. I knew the town well and could get downtown any number of ways. The cab followed us. I went on my way zigzagging through the neighborhoods and the cab kept following. I drove slower and slower, pausing longer and longer at stop signs.

“All right you prick,” I said.
I turned into a court and the cab followed and I hit the brake and threw it in park. The wine glass jumped from Pere’s hand, hit the glove box and splashed to the floor. I threw the door open and got out and walked to the cab and slammed my fist on the hood. It bonged like a kettle drum and I pointed a finger at him through the windshield like I was aiming a gun and yelled, “You wanna go?”

He stepped out of the car and came around to where I was standing. He was young. He had long frizzy reddish-brown hair in a long braid in the back. He wore a loose cotton shirt with a nehru collar that hung to his knees and baggy cotton pants and he wore no shoes. He was pasty and almost frail looking but for some reason when I saw those bare feet I knew I was in trouble. He walked up to me and gave me the cowboy stare. I never even saw his legs move. He kicked me just above the knee, then put a torquing lock on my wrist and twisted until I was on my knees with my face on the pavement.

He stood over me and leaned over and said, “Aren’t you humiliated?”

“It’s all relative, I guess. You got your jollies, now why don’t you go get a fare?”

There were pebbles pressed into my cheek and it felt like every bone and tendon in my arm was about to snap.

“Apologize,” he said.

“Come on, man, get real!”

“Apologize,” he said, and he pulled my arm farther back across my back.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “that you’re an asshole.”

I heard the car door open and Pere’s footsteps as he walked over. He very politely and diplomatically said, “I’m terribly sorry. It’s my car. I should have been driving. Give me your hand, son.”
My arm was released and I rolled over onto my back and Pere stood there shaking the man’s hand and leaning forward and smiling into his face. The cabby put a hand to Pere’s solar plexus and pushed him away.

“You wanna go down too, old man?” he said.

“Now look here, son,” Pere said.

The sound of the slap was like a douche bag hitting the floor and the look of dumb humiliation and indignation on Pere’s face was more than I could stand. I jumped to my feet, ran to the car and got the tire iron from the backseat floor and went with an empty head and a black heart at the cab driver who began scooting backwards alongside the car in a wide stance. I swung the metal bar over my head and brought it down on the hood of the car.

“How much do you care about your job?” I said.

He got back into the cab and left without so much as looking at us again.

Pere Handel sat slumped in the passenger seat like a closing parenthesis. The wine glass lay on the floor between his feet. He licked his wrist like a dog licking a paw. He gave me a very sad and depressed look and said, “You okay?”

“I’m all right,” I said, and I put the car in gear and started rolling.

“Wanda’s gonna be pissed,” he said.

“Wanda’s gonna be pissed?” I said. “Don’t invite me to tell you what state my mind is in right now!”

I continued toward downtown stop sign by stop sign on the side streets, keeping an eye out for taxis. Pere looked out the side window. He turned and looked at me with overdone perplexity.

“Did I miss something?” he said. “Is it just me or was that completely uncalled for?”

“No and yes,” I said. “Not necessarily in that order.”

“What do you mean by that crack?”
“Nothing. Just tell me how to find this law firm,” I said.

“Right at the light,” he said.

We parked behind the court house and she came across Fourth street. She wore a black skirt, white blouse and pumps. She got in the back seat, shut the door and immediately removed her panty hose. She looked over the seatback at Pere’s empty hands, the glass on the floor.

“Hi, babe,” Pere said.

She stared out the side window.

“You wouldn’t believe what happened on the way down here to pick you up,” he said.

“Just shut up, would you? Until I can get home and get a drink.”

He glanced at me with that pathetic and disgusted look and I steered us back to his place. Wanda got out of the car first when I pulled up to the house. Without a word she slammed the door and walked into the house leaving us sitting there. Her perfume was sweet and it left behind a large footprint.

Pere picked up the wine glass and said, “She’s always like this after work.”

“So are coal miners,” I said. “But with them you can excuse it.”

“Don’t let it get to you,” he said.

“It wouldn’t.”

A short while later Kip Hardy and Cruz and Kyle Bucket showed up and while we were all practicing our awkward silences a car pulled into the driveway. Pere went to the door and I followed him and getting out of a big blue Buick was a pretty Hispanic woman. She opened the back door and two kids tumbled out. They were both pale and frail looking and they were twins. She came to the door, one child holding each hand. She looked like a perfectly sane and practical mother. I expected the kids to come running up to their father but they didn’t.
Maybe they had been instructed not to. They stared at the ground around them while their parents spoke.

“Alta this is John. John this is my ex-wife Alta.”

“I don’t want to meet your friends, Pere,” she said.

Pere didn’t even flinch. Addressing me he said, “And these are my kids!”

He stepped onto the porch and knelt down.

“Hey, kids! Got a hug for your daddy?”

They seemed stunned and they stood there expressionless. Their mother kissed them both and told them to be good. She looked down at Pere kneeling there and said, “Pere, you know I already don’t trust you. If you do anything wrong — and I know you will — I’ll take them away from you again and that will be the end of it.”

She kissed the children again and said, “I’ll call you before bedtime. Now be good. Mommy loves you.”

She stepped off the porch, got into the car and left.

Pere was kneeling with his hands on his thighs. He said, “Aren’t you even excited to see daddy?” in an animated and childish voice.

One of them said, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“We can arrange that I think.”

I stood holding the door open and the guys were in the hall behind me.

Pere said, “John, this is Todd and this here is Leif. Guys, this is daddy’s friend John.”

Todd bowed his head shyly. Leif stuck out his lower lip and held up a fist. I held up a fist too and he marched over and slugged me in the thigh.

I said, “Well at least I know where me and you stand. Any friend of your daddy’s is no friend of yours, is that the way it is?”

Pere herded them into the house.
I remember just three other things about that night. Two of them are statements Pere made to me. The third was his other ex-wife Sheila.

Kyle and Kip and McKenny and I spent most of the time talking about our work lives while Pere and Wanda and all the kids were in some other part of the house. At one point when I was out on the porch smoking Pere came out and said, “This is usually a fun household. It’s because the kids are in a new situation and they’re nervous, they’re kind of quiet. We usually have a lot of fun in this house, you’ll see.” I thought it was weird that he should think I was passing judgement on the lack of fun in his household. I didn’t even like the word. As a sober adult I had absolutely no idea what it meant.

Later he caught me in the kitchen rinsing my tea cup. He stood in the middle of the room smiling and looking up into a corner of the room.

“I just had a very strange moment,” he said.

“What was that?”

“I was in the downstairs bathroom putting aftershave on my face and as I brought my hands up to my face — “he patted both cheeks lightly with open hands — “I had a strong flashback or feeling of déjà vu and I realized that’s what I used to do when I was a professor when I was drinking. I would put on after shave to mask the smell of alcohol before class.” He looked at me. “It was weird.”

He looked pleased. He smiled. There was no trace of that look that I found so troubling. Then he left the room.

His first wife Sheila made an appearance late. The thing to be remarked upon about her was that she too seemed perfectly sane and reasonable. She was a nurse who worked for a clinic. We chatted and shared a cigarette and then I walked home.

I lay smoking in bed in the warehouse with the window open listening to the drunks spilling into the streets at closing time. The people having all the fun. I heard them again the
next night and the night after that. I battled the urge to drink minute by minute. I stood before the mirror and tried to hold my breath longer than my reflection. I dreamt again that I had broken my sobriety and awoke feeling that something was going wrong. On Monday I went to the group and we listened to Pere talk about the kids. I heard in his voice the kind of fatal optimism you hear from people in trailer parks who have heard through the grapevine of imminenthirings at some factory where they could make a dollar an hour more than they currently earned. Prize enough to attain at least some part of one of their dreams, turn them into something unlike themselves to themselves. An ear perpetually bent to the call of the slum of the ambitious man’s paradise. A mantra of futility. The dope of hope.

I skipped the group for the rest of the week. Kyle called and voiced his concern. He told me to watch out for slippery places.

“You know what I mean,” he said.

“I could walk a tightrope covered with Vaseline right now,” I said.

“Sounds like some famous last words,” he said.

“For somebody else maybe,” I said.

“Those are the rest of the famous last words,” he said.

I left town for a few days and drove to some of the small towns up north. They were all overrun by vacationers and so were the campgrounds. Everywhere I went people were drinking beer out of cans. I was smart enough to know what I was up to. I was also smart enough not to fall for it. When the urge to drink got too strong I thought about the worst moments of my life and told myself that more drinking would lead to more of those. I knew it was true and the fact that I knew it so well made the choice easy to make. But it didn’t make it any easier to live with. I took the Anathahol faithfully. I stopped in Mancelona at a trailer that had a sign advertising palm reading. I knocked on the door but nobody answered. I tried
to peek in the window through a slit in the curtains but all I could see was a wooden
table and a bell jar.

The next time I saw Pere Handel he was drunk.

We were twenty minutes into the Monday night meeting. I was talking about where I
had been that afternoon, cleaning out a storage locker full of junk I owned, and how going
through the boxes of novels and boxes of photos made me equally sad and nostalgic.

“The photos also evoked remorse,” I said.

Kyle Bucket was about to respond when the door swung open and Pere stepped into the
room in a march with his head down, reached back and closed the door behind him and sat on
the couch.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said.

It was obvious there was something wrong. His head was bobbing and his eyes were
half closed. I could feel the dread filling my stomach.

“I want to say this in front of everyone here because you all have a right to know.” He
hadn’t looked at me. “I drank,” he said.

He was sloshed. His speech was so slurred it sounded like his spit was effervescent.

“I don’t know why I did it. I didn’t mean to do it. I didn’t see it coming at all. I was
pouring Wanda a glass of wine like I do every night and I just—it just happened. I just drank
it without even thinking to do it.”

“How much did you drink?” Kyle asked.

“The whole glass,” Pere said.

“How many glasses?”

His brow creased like he was involved in a serious calculation.
“One!” he said.

“Pere, how many? You need to be honest with me.”

“Just one, I swear.”

“All right, Pere, the first thing you need to do — look at me — the first thing you need to do is never, ever, pour wine for anyone again. That practice needs to come to a stop right now! I warned you you were playing with fire.”

Pere nodded. He looked like a sad little boy getting a scolding in the principal’s office.

“And if Wanda doesn’t go along with that you’re gonna have to start thinking real hard about whether your relationship with her should continue. Realistically, you’re not going to be able to stay sober living with someone with a drinking problem.”

“Think about your kids, man!” McKenny Cruz said. “All that work you did to get them back and now you’re gonna screw it up again. And what about the rest of us that look up to you?”

“Wanda kicked me out of the house,” Pere said. “I don’t know if she’s going to let me back in.”

“Did you drive here?” Kyle asked.


“You’re not fine.”

“I drove over here fine. I’m not drunk…”

“Pere, listen to me. You’re not fine! You need to shut up now and listen. You’re not fine, you’re drunk and you’re not getting behind the wheel of that car again tonight.”

“I understand,” he said.

“Now we need to get you sober and do whatever it’s going to take to keep you that way. I can talk to Wanda if you think that would help.”
“It might. If you and John could come over and explain to her what I’ve done here.” He looked at me and said, “Can you help me?”

Kyle took Pere home in Pere’s car and I drove Kyle’s Blazer and I thought about the guy I had first met and the guy I had just seen and I felt sick. Humiliation was hardly the right word for it. It was like watching someone get raped. His helplessness and submissiveness were obscene. I followed them to Pere’s house and parked in front and just as they were getting out of the car Wanda came out the front door and stood blocking the front walk with her arms crossed.

“He knows he’s not welcome in this house if he drinks,” she said.

“We understand,” Kyle said. “We’re not here to judge you in any way…”

“Judge me? I’m not the one who’s drunk. I’m not the one who lost his children. I told him I wouldn’t sit in the hospital and watch him die and I won’t. If he wants to kill himself he’ll have to go do it somewhere else because I’m not having it.”

Kyle was standing on the walk in front of Wanda. Pere was on the far side of the car looking like one of the homeless. He walked around the front of the car unsteadily and stood behind Kyle. I walked across the lawn from the curb.

“Can we come inside and talk for a couple minutes?” Kyle said.

“I’m not living with it, Pere. I told you that.”

“What?”

“You know what! Don’t you lie to me!” She was shouting and pointing at him. “I’m not going through it again. I told you that. I’m not living with it.”

“Why don’t we go in the house for a minute,” Kyle said.

“He brought you two here so he could hide behind you.”

“We came because we wanted to. We’re concerned about him. Can we come inside please?”
“He stays out here,” she said, and she turned and walked into the house.

“Pere, just wait for us,” Kyle said.

Kyle walked into the house.

“You okay, Pere?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “There’s no more wine. I poured it down the sink.”

I went into the house and into the living room. They were both sitting on the edge of the couch. I sat on the edge of a chair. I spoke to Wanda.

“I’m not going to pretend to know what you’ve been through with Pere. All I know is he’s been really important to me in my sobriety. Everyone in the group depends on him. I want to help him however I can.”

“You’re a fool,” she said.

“I’m concerned about his sobriety,” Kyle said.

“What sobriety?” Wanda said. “He’s blasted.”

“And I’m afraid if you kick him out he’s going to stay that way. I know you’ve been through hell with him and I don’t blame you for feeling the way you do, but with a little understanding hopefully this will just be one incident and not a pattern.”

“I don’t want him here tonight,” she said. “I won’t let him in this house drunk.”

“If he stays with one of us can he come back tomorrow?”

She lit a cigarette.

“I’ll think about it. I’m really near the end of my rope. I don’t need this shit in my life. He can call me tomorrow when he’s sober and we’ll see. I don’t know how I’ll feel tomorrow.”

I was completely unprepared for the effect Pere Handel’s loss of sobriety had on me. A kind of fear settled on me that I couldn’t shake. I felt vulnerable. I felt literally as though some unseen force would snatch me off the street and into a bar and that I would be drunk
before I knew what had happened. I felt my sobriety was in grave danger of being sabotaged and that it was completely beyond my control. I didn’t know that I had become so dependent on Pere for my sobriety, and I wasn’t sure how or why it had happened. I had seen him as something I might be. Somehow I imagined him to be the road by which I would gain back all the things I had lost since childhood, the gifts given by some unknown bestower of occult peerage and lost to the darkness of dissoluteness. More and more the truth of Pere Handel seemed to be represented by that disgusted look that appeared on his face like a shadow cast on him by something outside of him. I had seen it, I had seen who he was and this knowledge was there like a constant shadow in my mind but I had never reached up and pulled it down and laid it on the table and looked at it for what it was. If I had I would have seen the proclivity to turn lies into schools of thought and I would have known that he was a man who would lose his children. The things that are most obvious are the things that are the most well hidden. Pere knew this and he put this to practical use. I remembered him standing in front of me and telling me he had put after shave on and it had reminded him of his drinking days. I realized he was drinking the night he told me that. I hated him for wanting me to be his savior instead of him being mine. Things went from bad to worse.

Four days after Pere’s glass of wine he was still looped. His hands shook so badly he couldn’t hold a pencil.

“The doctor said my liver is so bad that it’s taking forever to process that small amount of alcohol.”

He was taking prescription tranquilizers he got from a doctor friend. He said that they were all right because they were prescription, that he felt his slip was nothing and that he didn’t feel he had blown his sobriety and needed to start over. Where he had been sly when he was sober, now he was just obvious. On a Wednesday afternoon a week after he drank he
came to the group loaded on pills and said that Alta had accused him of molesting Todd in the bath and visitation was immediately suspended pending investigation.

“She’s just doing this because she heard through the grapevine that I drank,” he said.

“That’s not even something that would ever even....” He looked perplexed and struggled to find words. “Appeal to me.”

“Oh God that’s ridiculous,” Kip Hardy said.

“She’s nuts,” Cruz said. “What an evil bitch!”

“We know you wouldn’t do anything like that to your kids,” Kyle said. “We’ve gotten through worse than this, we’ll get through this too.”

I couldn’t muster any sympathy for him and I felt very guilty and conflicted about that. I wanted to believe him but I had a grudge and couldn’t be objective. We’re drunks; that’s what we do. We damn our kids to keep our lovers and remain enslaved to our parents. I believed he did what they said he did but I didn’t think it was sexual. I believed he did it to ensure that his life remained in a state of chaos. Otherwise his relationship with Wanda would end. If he got straight she would leave him because there was no way she was quitting drinking. What was disturbing was that I understood. I could almost imagine on my worst day drinking doing such a thing myself for the very same reason.

“You know I used to live here right?” Pere said.

We were sitting in the warehouse in canvas chairs. It was the first time Pere had come to the place where I lived. He showed up unannounced holding a plastic cup with a lid.

“What do you mean?”
“I used to live right on the other side of that wall,” he said. “The first time I was hospitalized and almost died. I used to sit in there and drink and never go out. I always liked the idea of you living here. It sort of fit.”

I couldn’t tell if he was aware just how nasty a thing that was to say.

“No I didn’t know that.”

“Have you talked to your ex lately?” he asked.

“No.”

“Mine is turning out to be my Waterloo. I was thinking about what you said at your first meeting with the group.”

“I’d just as soon not listen to comparisons right now,” I said.

His face turned red.

“All right,” he said. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“You meant everything by it. Just tell me what you want.”

“She’s got me called down for a piss test, John. I have less than half an hour to get there.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I’m going to lose my kids,” he said, and he started to cry. “I’m going to lose my kids and I’m going to lose Wanda. They’re all I have.”

“You’re not going to lose Wanda, Pere. Unfortunately. Not the way you’re going. You’re doing all the right things to keep her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Forget it. I don’t want to be your executioner. I wish things were different. A lot of things. I can’t help you. I’m having a hard as hell time helping myself.”

“Actually you can. Sheila works at the clinic they’re sending me to. She’ll help me, John. She said she would.”
“What do you want me to do?”

“Just piss in this cup and leave it outside your door. She’s probably on her way over here now. I told her to look for the cup and if she didn’t see it, just to leave.”

“You want me to risk going to jail?”

“They’re my kids, John. I deserve another chance. Anyone would.”

“I can’t do that! You know my situation! You dug your own grave, Pere. Why did you pour those glasses of wine? What the hell is the matter with you? Are you *stupid*? I could *kill* you! You ruined everything.”

He hung his head between his knees and wept.

“Come on, man. I’d do it for you,” he said.

“What did you do to help me? Lie, that’s all!”

“How can you be so cold? You’re stronger than me. I can’t help you. You have to help me.”

“How did that become my job?”

“You expected it to be *my* job!” he said.

He got up and walked to me and dropped the cup in my lap and went to the door.

“What your conscience tells you,” he said.

Pere Handel walked out of the warehouse.

Again I knew what I was up to but this time I fell for it. It was dim and comfortable and familiar in the Brakeman bar. I sat in the window with the pint on the table before me. I was about to act as Pere Handel’s judge, jury, and executioner. I never wanted to be like him. I thought by destroying him I was destroying the liar in myself. The idea of real change seemed such a remote possibility now. I didn’t believe it was real and I needed to find something to
make me believe it. How could I become like Kyle, a constant soldier of righteousness? I raised the glass and I drained it and I waited. Pere Handel would have my water. And he would see, as I did then, that it was really no different than his. I sacrificed my sobriety so I could fulfill what I saw as my obligation and so he would still get what was coming to him. It seemed like I had to hurt someone to save myself.

In the group we talk about bottoming out. The bottom is a point at which you are forced to make a decision between your life and your addiction. They talk about the bottom as though it is a firm place from which you can bounce back up, an absolute place that occupies a space nothing else can occupy and beyond which nothing can go. I found the bottom to be an occasion on which a choice was forced, and it was not an absolute but a mercurial thing that could move relative to your commitment. It implied the end of something by its name. But nothing really ends. You grow up, you get smarter, but you still don’t know anything. And right now I couldn’t tell you which hand Pere Handel writes with.

When I saw Sheila’s car pull up outside the warehouse I walked out. At home I pissed in the cup and gave it to her and shut the door. I lay down on the bed. I could feel the shaking coming. I lay there and waited for the seizure. When it was over I lay in a blessed state, free from myself and a part of all things. All things at once resided in me and they swelled and they dipped like waves and I swelled and dipped within them.

When I could move I picked up the phone and dialed Dina’s number. In those moments I experienced death as it really was, the return of all lost things. The return of life in its wholeness. And that wholeness was everywhere. In the vastness of space in the telephone wire and the rippling pool in the middle of my heart, in the strong dark legs of trouble and the thick night air of temptation, the cold lead of loss and the elastic membrane of desire, the clinging past and the aloof future and the lust of lust of lust.

Dina! Dina! Dina! How could I love you?
There Were Bears and Rumors of Bears

No matter how big a place is or how few people live there, he thought, if there's only one road running through it people are bound to find each other. Jones was on the road to Mount McKinley. He had a rider with him, a hitchhiker named JP who he picked up at a crossroads. The hitchhiker wore a bandanna over his head and rubber boots.

"He'll be riding in a Jeep," Jones said.

"Yeah that's what you said," JP said. "I'll keep an eye out."

Jones pushed in the cigarette lighter and fished inside his coat for cigarettes. He pointed at the lighter. "If that's gonna bother you you can open your window."

"It's your truck," JP said.

The lighter popped and Jones was still reaching for the cigarettes. JP pulled the lighter out and held it up with the red coil toward Jones.

"Hang on," Jones said.

He let go of the wheel and the truck drifted to the left. He removed his seatbelt and unzipped the down ski jacket, putting his hand into the flask pocket. The truck straddled the
line. He jerked the wheel to the right and released it and the truck swerved back into
the right lane and kissed the shoulder. It started drifting again.

“Looks like you need an alignment,” JP said.

“Shit I ain’t crazy,” Jones mumbled to himself. “They’re in here somewhere. There
we go.”

He pulled out the cigarettes, shook one from the pack and took the lighter from the rider
and touched it to the end. His lips made little popping sounds. The red coil had faded to gray.
A wisp of smoke rose and did a double take in the crosswind and was sucked out the driver’s
window.

“Might as well rub two sticks together,” Jones said.

“Here I’ll cook it again,” JP said.

He put the lighter back in the dashboard and pushed it in.

“You were telling me about the woman you met,” Jones said.

“I waited on her in the restaurant up at Denali where I was working and we got to
talking and she asked me if I wanted to go with her down the peninsula to Homer.”

“Just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“You must be some playboy,” Jones said.

“Meeting girls is the easiest thing there is,” JP said.

“Is that right?”

“For sure.”

“If what you got works that well take my advice and bottle it.”

“You can’t make a secret of the fact that you’re trying to get laid. That’s all there is to
it. You lead with your hips and you just come on.”

The lighter popped. JP reached for it.
"I got it," Jones said.

JP pulled it out and handed it to him.

"I said I got it," Jones said.

He let go of the wheel again and took the cigarette out of his mouth, touched it to the coil and put the cigarette back in his mouth. He gazed down at the end of the cigarette cross-eyed and puffed at it.

"She'll either go for it or she won't," JP said. "And if she don't, so what, because the next one will. Everyone wants to get laid right? So why put yourself at a disadvantage? You might as well wear a flag that says so."

"And that works for you," Jones said blandly.

"It sure as hell did this time. For three days you could hardly get a razor between us."

"I gotta tell you, you ain't good lookin' enough to be all that."

"You don't have to be good looking to get girls," he said. "Unless you're stupid."

A palpable silence congealed around the statement.

"I must be an idiot then," Jones said.

They were passing a fenced property where buffalo grazed when Jones saw the Jeep approaching. There were no other vehicles in sight and Jones slowed the truck and squinted to focus on the oncoming vehicle. He saw red hair behind the wheel and he put his arm out the window and flashed his lights. The driver of the Jeep stared blankly ahead at the road and drove right by. In the mirror Jones saw the passenger slap the driver's arm and point behind and the brake lights lit up. Jones pulled off the road and backed up until he was even with the Jeep which had pulled off on the other side. The driver was standing by the Jeep and the passenger was emerging from the other side and setting himself to piss with his back to the road.
“What’s up, Habit!” the driver said, smiling and motioning behind him with his head. “Buffalo!”

“Hello, Horse!” Jones said.

Horse had a big dip of snuff in his lower lip. “I’d love to shoot them bastards.” He shrugged and smiled. “Just bloodthirsty, I guess.”

“I don’t remember the last time I had cause to use that word,” Jones said, coming across the road. “Or what context it might have been in.”

They shook hands.

“When’d you get out?” Horse said.

Jones looked up the road. “I already don’t remember which day. It was the day before yesterday or the day before that.”

“I meant to come see you. Never got around to it. Seems like there’s always somethin that needs killin.”

Mitch came around the Jeep pulling up his zipper.

“Don’t let him bullshit you,” Mitch said. “He never meant to come see you.” He shook Jones’ hand.

“Seriously though,” Horse said.

“You didn’t miss anything,” Jones said. “Bunch of people in pajamas rocking back and forth. Rolling cigarettes, staring at the floor.”

“I never got the whole story,” Horse said. “I come back from the Slope and you were gone. People around town were sayin’ all kinds of shit. It don’t surprise me that people lose their mind in that town though. The place is full of vipers.”

“I’m just glad to be out,” Jones said.

“What’d the doctors have to say?” Horse asked.

“Said I got a little too close to God,” Jones said.
“There you go.”

They stood in the road and looked at the buffalo. Jones looked at the horn, then at the hide and then at the eye. They seemed so utterly and disarmingly prehistoric and so unwary of the humans before them, as though their hearts contained a much larger picture of existence than the life and death struggle of the flesh that these two species had engaged in for so long. They were just very there, in a big brown shaggy way Jones found enthralling.

“Surprised to see you out here, Habit,” Horse said.

“They told me at the Mercantile you were coming back down from fishing today so I figured I’d see you.”

“I thought Mitch was bullshittin me. He grabs my arm and says pull over there’s Jones. Where you goin’ then?”

“Up to Denali.”

“Yeah, eh? Did you get any news in the nut house? The bears have gone berserk. All kinds of famine and shit from the drought. Someone got mauled eight feet from the front door of the hotel at Denali.”

“I go a bit berserk myself,” Jones said, smiling feebly. His cheek twitched.

“Seriously though.”

JP came out of the truck and crossed the road. “Those are some bigass cattle,” he said. “These boots are jest about big enough to bugger one of them bastards if I was a hillbilly. But I ain’t. One of you guys can borrow them though if you want.”

“This is JP,” Jones said. “He’s full of funny ideas.”

Horse looked at JP. Looked at his bandana, his rubber boots.

“What, you ain’t got a real name?”

“John Paul.”

“What’s your trip?”
“It changes all the time,” JP said.

“I coulda figured that,” Horse said. “Just by looking.”

Mitch grinned and cast a loaded glance at Horse. “Don’t listen to him,” he said to JP. “He’s like that to everybody.”

JP’s hands were in his pockets. He grinned and hunched his shoulders and pushed his belly out and bent his knees. “I’m used to it,” he said. “When I was a kid my brothers used to—”

“We’re all interested as hell,” Horse said.

“So what’s going on up at Denali, Habit?” Mitch asked.

“The thought of hanging around Clutching after getting out of the hospital didn’t seem like a good idea. Karla’s all over that place and I don’t necessarily want to run into her just yet.”

“She ever come to see you?” Mitch said.

“No she never did,” Jones said.

“The stories were flying about her,” Horse said.

“So I heard.”

“Tell the truth I think you can do better than that,” Horse said.

“Well,” Jones said. “Everyone knows more about love than someone who’s in it.”

“We were just talking about that,” JP said.

“Well I guess you set him straight already then,” Horse said.

JP put his hands in the air and puffed out his cheeks. “Sorry, I forgot,” he said. “This is your planet.”
Back in the truck JP said, “Why do they call him Horse? Is it because of his big teeth or cause he can shit while he walks?”

“It’s cause his name is Horace. He does have some big teeth though, don’t he?”

“I bet he hates that. I’d rather been hit hard and called Junior than walk around hiding that humiliator under my coat. Why does he call you Habit?”

“You know the word jones? It’s what they say when somebody needs a fix.”

“You got a drug habit?”

“Not any more. But I used to have ‘em all.”

“You don’t look like it.”

“You ain’t seen the inside of me.”

At Denali in a bar in a converted railway car, they sat on benches at a narrow table with an off-duty park ranger and a woman Jones knew from Clutching named Joyce Shaganaw. There were a lot of young people in the bar who worked at the hotel. At the end of the long narrow room a Grateful Dead concert played on a bigscreen TV. They were all lit up and JP was telling a story.

“There was this guy my uncle knew right? This was back when I was in Idaho. He takes his daughter deer hunting with him. She’s like eleven years old, right, or maybe thirteen or something. Anyway. He’s divorced and the old lady took off and the kid lives with him and they get along okay and everything. So they’re out in the mountains and it starts snowing and they’re up in a tree stand and the old man he’s got to take a piss. Normally he’d just piss off the tree stand but his daughter’s there and he figures he better get down and go out behind some brush to water the old horse. Well he goes to get down and he slips and falls out of the tree stand and he gets caught on two branches, one under each arm, with his full weight
coming down and he knows he’s screwed right away cause he hears one shoulder pop out of the socket and feels something tear on the other one. But if that ain’t bad enough he was holding his gun when he was climbing down and when he got caught on the branch the gun went off and it was pointing straight up in the air. He falls the rest of the way to the ground and he knows, he just knows without any doubt that he just shot his daughter. The moment while he’s laying there waiting for her to hit the ground is the longest minute God makes. He’s thinking how in the world could this possibly happen? I had a totally different life not three seconds ago! How could I have killed my daughter just because I had to take a piss?

“But then his daughter screams Daddy! You don’t need to be told that’s the best thing he’s ever heard. He says Oh my god baby are you hurt? She screams Daddy! Daddy! and she climbs down the tree and throws herself on him and the pain is so intense the old man starts puking right there. But he’s thinking thank God my daughter is alive. That’s all I care about. I don’t care what happens from here on out as long as she’s okay.

“Long story short, the old man can’t walk. I don’t know if you ever had a separated shoulder but it’s a bitch, I mean it. He’s got one dislocated and one separated and he can’t move so the girl makes a little snow cave by laying him between the roots and piling snow around him and he sends her off to go back to the car and get help. The car is over a mile away and he tells her how to get back to it and off she goes.

“In a couple hours it’s dark and there’s no sign of her and the old man is getting worried. Well she can’t find the car and eventually she comes wandering back in the middle of the night and she’s frozen so badly her hands are turning blue and she’s getting frostbite. The only thing they can do is lie in the snow together and wait for the end. He tells her to fire off the gun a couple times in case anyone can hear them.
“The girl’s hands are so badly frozen that the old man knows he has to do something for her. He can’t have her put her hands under his armpits where it’s warm because it’s too painful with his two wrecked arms. So he does the only thing he can do. He puts her hands between his legs because it’s the warmest spot there is. So there they are father and child both in agony lost in the woods buried in snow.

“They try to sleep and the old man is delirious with pain and he drifts in and out of consciousness. He slips into a dream and he dreams that it’s his wedding night and he’s in bed with his bride and they’re about to do it. He wakes up and despite all the pain he’s in and everything else he’s got a hardon. Now the girl is in complete despair. She knows with complete certainty that her daddy is gonna die and without going into too much detail about her actual actions here let’s just say that as a final act of charity for her daddy she takes care of that excess buildup of pressure he’s got there.

“They don’t know it at the time because they’re buried in a snow cave but it’s daylight and people are out looking for them and when the old man cums he grunts like a bear and they hear him and soon they’re rescued.”

Jones turned his attention to the TV screen and all the kids dancing in front of it.

“That’s a stupidass story,” Joyce Shaganaw said.

“What are you, an idiot?” Jones said to JP.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” the ranger said.

“Hang on now,” JP said. “That ain’t the end of the story. Let me at least finish it before you go trying to cancel my show. Remember this is a true story so don’t go taking it out on the sponsor.”

“True my ass,” the ranger said.

“His ass,” Joyce said.
“Life goes on,” JP said. “And while it seems like there’s a possibility here for a *happily ever after* ending that’s not what happens. What happens is this:

“They get hauled out of there and make a full recovery. But things are weird between them. They live in separate parts of the house like strangers. They don’t talk. It’s like they don’t even know each other. The old man starts drinking. The girl starts drinking and then she grows up and moves out of the house and she gets one of those eating disorders. As a woman she only dates young boys. She gets really messed up because from the day of the accident forward the old man never really speaks to her again. She feels guilty for giving what she thought was the last comfort for a dying man. Fate saved her life but in cruel way it ruined her. The last anyone heard of her she was living on the streets in Portland. Now you tell me: what is the moral of *that* story?”

Jones said, “That girl’s heartache was already there when she was sitting in the tree stand with her father and long before that.”

The ranger looked disgustedly at Jones and said, “What a hefty crock of shit that is.”

“That story’s not even true,” Joyce Shaganaw said. “You know how I know?”

“How?”

“Because the whole reason he got out of the tree was to take a piss but he never even took a piss. You never said that he even got to take a piss. And how did they hear him anyway when he was buried in a snow cave?”

“And the award for missing the point goes to Miss Shaganaw,” JP said, handing her a cigarette butt from the ashtray.

“Here’s your moral,” the ranger said. “It’s better to piss off a tree than get pissed on by fate. Now let’s get another round of beers!”
The bar was clearing out. Jones was drunk. The lights had come up and the kids were all pressed together near the door, pairing up for the walk back to their camps, making sure they all had bear spray, telling each other to make noise as they walked to scare off any bears that might have wandered near innocently. Jones pulled himself up from his slouch and got down on his hands and knees and swayed his head from side to side like a bear. Then he reared up and bared his teeth and roared. They looked at him with disdain.

“I never could stand people like you,” the ranger said.

“I never could give a shit,” Jones said.

“That’s what I mean,” the ranger said.

JP had disappeared with Joyce Shaganaw. Outside the ranger said, “You need a lift?”

“Yeah,” Jones said. “Let’s put my truck in your truck and I can not drive and say I did.”

“Seriously.”

“Naw I ain’t going nowhere.”

“Where you staying?”

“Campsite.”

“Well,” the ranger said. “Don’t get eaten.”

“There are worse ways to get around, I figure, than in the belly of a bear.”

“No there ain’t,” the ranger said. “Trust me.”

Jones parked his truck on a dirt track off the road and got out. He walked after the circle of light from his flashlight as it advanced over the ground. He laid out his sleeping bag and crawled in. He had stopped taking his medication when he left the hospital and a complex brew of sensations, heady and ineffable, inhabited his body. He experienced himself as some
kind of enfolded cocoon whose inside and outside disappeared into one another, whose beginning and end were indistinct, something implicate.

In the middle of the night he wakes and yet is not awake. He is cold and wet with dew and his eyes are closed as though he’s not merely sleeping but deceased from the living, and through his closed eyes and through the middle of his forehead he sees the terrible and wondrous sky as black and deep a thing as could possibly be, reticulate with star lacings and clusterings like the skeleton of some monstrous but delicate creature so large that its true features cannot be seen. And the gravity that holds him to the earth like the soul of jealousy subtly shifts poles and is now a force drawing him to that coral skeleton in the vast black sea of the sky and he’s everywhere and nowhere, the beast and the not beast, the thing in which the skeleton resides and not and the aurora borealis begins to stream across the sky and infiltrate him, charge and inflate him like the breath of the sun warm and colored and yet cool as the moon, each vivid and glowing hue playing on his soul like the juices of tart fruits on the tongue of a child. He opens and sees and is seen.

The roar of the gunshot was so loud she thought that a crater must have opened in the earth. But the bullet made only a small hole in the floor of the tree stand and then rattled through the branches overhead. Before the silence could mend itself her ears rang, as though one long bar of ringing silver passed through her head and out both sides into the woods. She saw through the hole to the ground below and went dizzy. Her first thought was that her father had tried to kill her and she felt sad for him for the consequences of that and sadder still for his intentions. But then she heard his cry as he hit the ground and she looked over the edge of the tree stand and he was lying on his back in the snow with one leg folded up under him. The gun was lying in the snow with the butt end away and the muzzle near his head. The snow fell softly. Her ears rang loudly in her head.
Suddenly everything seemed without size, both frighteningly large and
trivially small, as though the world was a small thing wrapped in a far too large skin. She
knew she must go down but wondered how long she could delay doing so. She imagined
falling, diving from her perch to see if she would be captured by the small world or by its
large garment. It was no effort of hers that kept her from doing so. She lay her gun across
the floor of the tree stand, got on her hands and knees and backed to the edge of the platform
and stuck her leg out and felt her way to the first branch. She lowered herself to the ground
using branches and the small boards nailed to the trunk for footholds. His face was white.
She touched him three times before she realized there was no place she could lay her hand
that wouldn't cause him pain. He was like a stricken animal.

"Daddy," she said.

She saw how his beard lay against his face and the place where the whiskers stopped
growing on his neck.

"Daddy."

The word hung there in the amniotic atmosphere, hung there in counterbalance to him,
then was flipped away into recession as the weight of peril brought the tray of the scale where
he hung down with a thud. She removed her boots, exposing her feet to the cold so that he
wouldn't be alone in his suffering, and just as a senselessness began to numb her mind she
shook her head and rubbed her face and put her boots back on. The world snapped back into
its wrapping. She stood and looked around and walked a few steps in the direction from
which she thought they had come, but the sense that she herself was being abandoned was so
strong in her body that she had to return to her father. His eyes opened and she explained,

"You fell."

His mouth was open and he looked horrified.

"What should I do?" she said and she knelt down beside him. "You fell, daddy."
"Good God."

His eyes looked from one side of his torso to the other.

"Can you move, daddy?"

He shook his head.

At her father's instruction she made a splint by tying the two rifles alongside his leg with the rope they had brought to hang and dress deer. She cleared the snow from around him and pulled a small tarp from his pack and lay it over him, piling snow on it to insulate it.

They were lying together under the tarp and snow and he had to relieve himself and he told her he did not want to be humiliated any further. His urine turned the snow yellow. Her father lost consciousness and she knew he dreamt because of his mumbling and she felt she knew what he dreamt about. Then in his delirium he opened his eyes and they looked at each other. The silver bar grew fat in her head, pushing her to the margins, and she knew things would not be the same.

The end is often a long time coming. But then like anything, sooner or later it makes its way around. For Jones and Karla it came with this short conversation.

"Do you love me?"

"No."

"Then what am I doing with you?"

Jones was the cook at the bar called Bughouse Hill in Clutching. He had had other jobs since coming to Alaska seven years before. He had been a ski instructor at the resort in Clutching, he had driven heavy equipment, fished a little. But he kept coming back to the bar because he liked the work, he drank and ate for free. And he liked the aromas that surrounded him – brewing coffee, roasting meat, beer and whiskey.
He had come to Alaska from St. Paul, where he owned a taxi. The taxi was given to him by his adoptive father who had driven a cab his whole life. Jones studied social work in college for a couple years. He never had any real intention of being a social worker but he liked the reading material, and when he had read enough he dropped out and the old man retired and gave him the cab. Jones didn’t mind driving the cab and he liked the cold, but living in St. Paul had always been a little to him like being forced to wear a hat when you weren’t in the mood for one. The confining effect was subtle but it accumulated. It wasn’t anything about that city particularly; it was being stationary. Adopted children are driven to quest by nature and somehow or other he got the idea there was something to be found in Alaska. So he sold the cab to one of his mother’s cousins and hit the road.

Alaska made him feel like a can of soda that had just been shaken. All the time. While there was a lot to be said for the effervescence, there was the constant worry that at any moment someone would come along and pop the top. The first three years he hopped from town to town and job to job with seldom more than a hundred bucks to get him from one gig to the next. He had affairs with an assortment of native women and college girls. He met characters of every imaginable description in every kind of bar, shack and roadhouse and engaged in enough foolishness and impostering to stage his own farce. His perspective on the world became broad and then narrow and then broad and then narrow until this fluctuation was revealed to him to be his constant condition.

They had seen each other around town, Jones and Karla, and never paid much attention to one another. A couple times they were at the same gatherings of some loosely associated groups of people at the resort but they never spoke. Once she was with someone Jones had stopped to talk with, but she kept her face averted the whole conversation and did not introduce herself. She was an attractive girl by Clutching standards and he took note of her with a part of himself that was all glands and avarice. On any other level they were as alien as
east and west. There was not an ounce of magnetism between them, it seemed. But then one night there she was in the bar when he was cooking and the place was almost empty. It was winter and it had rained and then frozen and she came in looking just sure enough of herself to be overcompensating for something. She was lonely, he thought. Why else would she be going out to eat by herself?

He was wearing a long apron and he had his foot up on the edge of the sink behind the bar. There was a fire in the big woodstove in the middle of the room. Glass panes in the wall of the stove glowed orange with the flame. She sat with her elbows on the bar. He served her meatloaf and pinto beans and mashed potatoes. It was what he would eat.

"Mmm," she said as she closed her eyes and chewed. "It's good." He watched the lateral movement of her jaw as it came up and the throbbing it made at her temples. She breathed through her nose.

"Are you going to watch me eat?" she asked.

"Yes," he said.

"Good," she said. It was almost a whisper and she said it as though it would resolve some small dilemma.

She cut into the meatloaf and separated a piece of it on the plate.

"I love onions," she said.

He drew beer into a mason jar and set it before her. Her eyes were focused so intently on the meal that he knew she was studying him with all her other senses.

"Thank you."

He removed her plate when she was finished. She rolled a cigarette and lit it. She offered him the pouch and he took it and rolled one for himself and lit it.

"Are you skiing tomorrow?" she asked.

"Hadn't thought about it."
“I’m going up when it opens. Want to meet me there?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I do.”

“I’ll meet you up at the Roundhouse at eleven. How’s that?”

“It’s good.”

She was wearing crampons and when she crossed the room to go home her footsteps clicked on the boards like tap shoes. He watched her walk down the steps and make a stiff-legged approach to her car across the ice, her hips swaying slightly and her arms out for balance and the crampons making a ticking and scraping sound. She very carefully slowed and took a series of small steps to brake her progress and she stopped, opened the car door, turned and waved and sat into the car. This small series of movements, this image of her crossing the ice, stayed with him with an unaccountable persistence and caused a strong feeling to arise in him that he couldn’t quite grip. It would come when he least expected it and then be gone, as though using him as a medium on its way elsewhere.

They were strangers again in the light of day. He wanted to ski the south face but she was wearing telemark skis and wasn’t up to the challenge, so they skied on groomed snow and crossed each other twice. The first time was on open ground where they were carving symmetrical turns and almost ran into each other. The second time he lost track of her. He had skied up and over a large rise and she had taken a trail that went around it, and when he came over the top and turned to join the trail he went over a small jump and alit just as she came around the corner. He hit the ground just in front of her and she made a quick and graceful turn and avoided a collision, sweeping her rear leg right round to the front and dropping the other back, planting her pole and turning low.
When they were sitting on the chairlift she gave him a small lecture on safety, and he had the sense that it was something she had heard from some mountain authority who had impressed her and she was now repeating it word for word.

“İ’d rather be a menace,” he said.

“I’m serious,” she said.

“So am I,” he said.

“You could have gotten us killed,” she said.

“I still can,” he said, looking at his watch. “İt’s early.”

She looked off crossly to one side.

“Are you gonna get over it or what?” he asked.

The muscles in her jaw tightened.

As they approached the lift platform at the top the lift operator pointed at them and raised his arms abruptly twice. Jones pulled his shoulders up and looked at the lift operator and shook his head in confusion. The lift man pointed at Karla and made the same gesture again but more urgently. Jones looked at her. She was looking off to the side at the skiers underneath. Her skis were dangling.

“Get your tips up!” Jones said.

She turned toward him with her mouth slightly open and her face placid and looked him in the eye.

“Get your skis up!”

He reached down to grab at them just as she grasped the situation and pulled her tips up, barely avoiding catching them under the edge of the platform, and they stood off of the chair and skied off the platform with the lift operators shaking their heads behind them.

“How long have you been skiing?” Jones said.
“I can’t believe I did that,” she said. “I never do that.” She leaned on him and kissed him and started laughing.

She was obviously trying to outski him on the next run. But it was a lot of work getting those telemarks around for a turn, and in a small mogul field she lost control and came apart in a spray of snow. She was sitting, brushing herself off. Her hair was all full of snow. He gathered up a pole and one of her gloves and went over to her.

“That’s it,” she said. “I’m going back to my place and get my downhill skis.”

“You want to just hang it up for the day?”

“No way. We just got started.” He helped her up. “I should have known better with the rain and everything. I should have brought my rock skis and gone bonsai.”

“Looked to me like you were doing pretty good there until you hit that land mine.”

“You want to wait for me? I’ll only be a minute.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No really, I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll come.”

“All right,” she said. “If you feel like it.”

They stored their gear in the Daylodge and put on their boots and crampons and walked the half mile to her cabin. It was at the end of a little rising road that ran around the base of the facing mountain. A small A-frame nestled in the trees with a stack of firewood next to the door. She had started limping along the way and when he followed her into her cabin he felt the same mysterious something he had felt the night before, whether an urge or some profound recognition he couldn’t tell.

“Is it your knee?” he asked.

“My ankle.”
She sat on the futon and took off her boots and wiggled out of her ski pants. She was wearing men’s long johns and a fleece pullover. She got up and walked over to the wood stove and opened the door. One of her heavy woolen socks was pulled halfway off.

“There are still some embers,” she said. “Why don’t you stoke the fire and I’ll make us some coffee.”

He stirred up the ashes and got two nice birch logs from the pile outside the door and laid them in the stove and closed the door with the handle turned to prop it open slightly. The air lightly whistled through the stove and up the stack and the good seasoned logs caught fire.

The cabin consisted of one large room, half of which was the kitchen. There was a loft above one side of the living area with a straight vertical ladder for access, a small bathroom under the loft. It was well constructed and comfortable. There was electricity and running water, which many of the town’s cabins did not have. She boiled water and made coffee in a French press. She faced him holding up a bottle in each hand.

“Kahlua or whiskey?”

“What are you having?” he asked.

“Same thing you’re having.”

“Whiskey then.”

She turned and reached to replace the Kahlua bottle. The long johns were tight fitting and she had long firm legs. Her hair fell long and curly across her fleece top. Jones hung his coat on a peg and took off his ski pants. He looked in at the fire burning strongly in the stove, put one log up against the other with the poker and shut the door tightly.

She brought over two cups of coffee and went back for the whiskey.

“Pour,” she said.
He poured carefully from the bottle so the liquid flowed easily without sending air rising through the bottle and splashing from the neck. The coffee level rose smoothly along the insides of the cups. He took one and held the other out to her.

"How’s that foot? Looks like you’re not walking well."

"My ankle is tender. It’s not a big deal."

"Maybe you should soak it."

"Let’s drink these and you can draw me a tub of water."

She took a sip from her cup and held it before her with one hand on the handle and the other underneath. Jones took a big gulp and felt the two liquids partially cancel each other out. The burn of the whiskey was tempered by the coffee, the coffee’s bitterness rounded and fattened by the whiskey. The cabin seemed to twist itself into a finer focus. He noticed things he hadn’t seen—a small TV with a wooden incense burner on its top, a small canvas pouch, a Dutch painting on the wall, an elaborate spice rack in the kitchen.

"It’s hot in my stomach," she said. She threw her head back and closed her eyes and put one hand on her belly.

"You look pretty damn good in men’s underwear," he said.

She opened one eye and looked at him.

"So do you," she said.

He looked down at himself.

She held her eyes closed until the coffees were gone and she opened them and started to rise.

He said, "Don’t get up. I’ll get it."

"I don’t like chivalry," she said. "It’s a kind of control. If you want to be generous go over there and burn a smudge of sage. It’s in that pouch."

"You do that and I’ll get the coffee," he said.
He poured coffee and she lit sage and waved it in the air.

“Help me pull this futon out,” she said. “I don’t know if I’m going to feel like climbing that ladder.”

They moved the coffee table and opened the futon. She pulled her fleece top off over her head. She was wearing a “Head Skis” T shirt tucked into her long johns.

“Are you warm enough?” she asked.

“Plenty,” he said.

“Good,” she said. “I want to watch you take your long johns off.”

She limped over and hung a shawl over the long window beside the door. She got a sleeping bag from under the loft and pulled it out of the stuff sack and spread it on the futon. She lay down and scooted over near the wall. She held out her hand for her cup and he handed it to her. She raised her eyebrows and pointed at his waistband and motioned downward. He shook his head and smiled and peeled down his long johns.

“It’s alive,” she said.

He blushed and got into bed with her.

“Don’t forget your drink.”

He helped her out of her shirt and bra. He ran his hand gently over her stomach.

“When I was fourteen I was still proselytizing to my friends about God,” she said. “But by the time I was sixteen I was hungry for the world. God I don’t even remember now exactly when it happened. It’s all a fog. But it happened all at once it seemed, like the flip of a switch.”

He went under the covers and found the bruise on her ankle and stuck his tongue out and licked it.

“You know what I heard about you?” she said.

“What?”
"That you're an accident waiting to happen."

He poked his head out. "Aren't we all?"

"Don't be so sure." She pushed his head back down.

Later when he was rising over her she asked him to stir the fire one more time first.

"Let's hear it for chivalry," he said as he got up. He was fully hard standing at the stove. She motioned for his return. He crawled back in and on top of her. Her legs were together.

"Can you keep a secret?" she asked.

"Not for long."

She spread her legs and whispered, "Let's do it anyway."

The coffee and the whiskey shimmered through him and the smell of sage filled the room. He fell into the swallowing warmth and smoothness of her and became lost somewhere where a powerful darkness swept down upon his insides. Later when they lay separated he had his eyes closed and in came his breath and out went his breath. And in it came again into the darkness where he dwelled and out again from where it had come. And he saw an image of himself as a little boy on a rocking horse rocking forward and rocking back and rocking forward and rocking back and tumbling headlong over the mane and into space.

His peculiarities were reflected in the faces of her friends, in the responses they made to him. They were all professionals like her, but he didn't even understand exactly what she did. She worked for a public relations firm but he had no idea how she actually spent her time in the average day, what she did to accomplish her relating to the public. Her friends all lived in Anchorage. She was the only one among them who lived in Clutching and it was obvious to Jones that she kept herself apart to indulge an appetite for excitement, her hunger for the world, out of sight of her friends. She once told him that what Alaska meant was being in fear for your life, that it was not a hostile place, she thought, but a place where some elemental
force floated right at the surface of the land like a low-lying fog and a place that had
total and absolute disregard for humanity. "It's not cruel," she said. "It's indifferent."

"Why are all your friends trying to turn it into a mall then?" he said.

"They're idiots," she said.

"Why do you hang around with them?"

"Because," she said. "I can't look that indifference in the eye on a permanent basis.
It's too much. I can feel the danger of this place; I feel that it can so easily destroy me and I
crave that feeling like a drug. But like any drug it can kill you. So they're like a mixer.
They're the coffee for my whiskey."

"And what am I?"

"That's not for me to say."

"What am I to you?" he persisted.

"Think about what I am to you," she said. "You're the opposite."

They did not become inseparable. They were not like teenagers in love. Nor did they
have some staid and formal courtship. They played a game of elusiveness, of chance
meetings, of a peculiar estrangement. Each desired for the other to remain a stranger, a
foreigner, a member of some unknown tribe from some other uncharted jungle, alien to each
and his kind. Jones contrived circumstances where he could see her as for the first time, catch
a glimpse of her in the company of others, involved in some strange enterprise, and let the
image of her do what it did to him. She poured into him like some potion carried on the
daylight and sifted through the portals of his soul. He stalked her and she arranged
circumstances for him to do so. Then when the tension became unbearable they would
rendezvous and accomplish their mutual seduction.

She would come into the bar with a crowd of her friends and colleagues from
Anchorage and sneak a glance at him while he worked and never say a word to him. They
played their roles so well that during each separation the demons would take over
and torture his mind. He became privately jealous. He wondered who of this crowd of friends
she was sleeping with, what her plans were regarding him, whether the whole thing was a
dream. But when they were finally alone she gave herself completely to him and his battle
with doubt subsided.

She started cooking for him. She would leave notes at his cabin inquiring sweetly as to
when he would be free. Or she would show up late at the bar when it was closed and he was
cleaning up and tap at the back door. They faced each other formally and the air between
them filled with white noise.

“There’s my mystery man,” she said.

It was part of their unwritten code that they wouldn’t touch during these encounters.

“Hello.”

“I have a cordial invitation for you,” she said.

“Just say when.”

“Wednesday at my place.”

“I’m working.”

“What about after work?”

“It’ll be late. I’m closing. Thursday?”

“Thursday…” She furrowed her brow and bit her lip and her eyes roamed the floor.

“O.K. I’ll have to rearrange something but that should work.”

“O.K.”

“Good.”

And out the door she went, only to pop her head back in a moment later. “Come
hungry,” she said.
To him there was salt and there was pepper and there was garlic. He made pots of stew, roasts, gravies. Dumplings were about as fine an alchemy as he practiced. She on the other hand used many different herbs and spices when she cooked—tarragon and rosemary, curry. She made subtler dishes that went far beyond mere fat and salt to obtain their flavor. It was true that her concoctions were delicious but they were almost too mysterious to the sinuses and palate for him to abide. The smells were like rumors and they took the simplicity of the meal and turned it into something arcane, something that reached for a realm that was beyond the simple purpose of the meal itself. Eating should put one urge to sleep, he felt, not induce another one. While he was trying to simply fill his belly and satisfy his appetite these elements conspired in suggestion, coaxing his awareness toward some place beyond the table where he didn’t necessarily want to go. It was like eating the sacred smoke of incense. Her cooking set up an unidentifiable craving in him. The way these herbs worked on his senses got all mixed up with his sense of her. The shape of her mouth to his eye, the touch of her nails against his skin, the softness of her hair on his cheek, all combined with the suggestive aroma of these spices to make her seem like something slightly different than human. It expanded awe and desire beyond all proportion and made him feel he was losing control. It made him intensely aware that she was a woman and that made him feel stupid.

The morning was bright and both hard and shifting and it testified in a thousand voices to whoever and whatever the world was and the maker of the world. Jones opened his eyes to this place that was not to be known. So obviously an illusion but if an illusion then why was it here? And if the answer was contained in the question, as it must be, then why else would the question exist but to make the place real? With each wave of grass and fireweed in the wind it threw its question back and forth, revealed and hid itself, and in its vocabulary of chaos and
change swore to its own constancy. He walked out into the land away from the park road into the brightness of the world and the immensity of the sky and held his arms out and let it swallow him like Jonah’s whale. The flesh of the world, the mouth of the world, its ardent and pumping life, it pressed all around and inside him and off in the distance like Oz seen from the poppy field sat the great mountain Denali piled there so lordly and inscrutable like the sire of all faiths, like a pyramid built by God to honor some other deity.

Over tundra and grass and fireweed. Jones walked like a giant on giant’s legs across the ground swallowing it in great lengths stride by stride. The sun cast a harsh and authoritarian eye, the sky arced like a dyed silk flung high and belled upward by the air as it fell, the mountain presided cold and grave and the valley swept out on one side of him as he lay one foot before the other up a long inclining ridge. All day long the memory of the girl in JP’s story was with him, accompanying him over this ground. She was there like an apparition, a vapor that hovered in the conduits where emotion traveled and wouldn’t be teased into more substantial form but continued to float like mist over the dark waters of those inner canals. She teased at his mind like the crumbling lace of memory lost, and she almost came to him when he let the mists be and dwelled easily where he dwelled and let the mists ride within him.

The brightness of the day contrasted sharply with the twilight within and his shifting attention, when it was moved abruptly from one to the other by some stimulus, created a convincing illusion of passage from day to night and back again. A rustling sound and a quick movement in the corner of his eye was as assaultive as a crashing cymbal and he turned his head to the left and there a rabbit sat and twitched at attention to its fear. Its sides sucked inward and outward with its excited breath, and this image struck deep and fast at some primitive part of Jones’ brain and a strong mobilizing impulse inclined him toward this thing. All sense became one sense and the one sense devoted itself to this one thing and he could see,
feel, taste the softness of it, sink his teeth deeply into the belly of it, fill his throat with the fur of it. Food this was food this was food. The wordless instinct swelled repeatedly in his head. Then the rabbit hopped off with his desire reflecting off every detail of its hurrying shape. His attachment to it tugged a lump up into his throat and his mouth watered.

He first saw the bear far off on a hill and even at that distance there was something ominous about it, in its rounded shape and its solitude, in the blunt figure it asserted into that landscape. Jones walked toward this shape that seemed to beckon him, seemed to draw him on with an unfathomable resonance that vibrated in his heart. He crossed the space between them not knowing if he would have the power to stop himself, if he would have control over his own impulses, or if he was powerlessly obeying some force that reached out to him from the unknown, the darkness beyond the sky. And if he could stick a knife in that blue canopy and move it aside like the flap of a carnival tent would he see the master of his fate, the demiurge that held the subtle strings of his will like puppet workings? Or would such an egress to the occult reveal nothing but an even more inscrutable world? No cams, no wheels, no cogs. Just dark.

As he drew near enough to begin to distinguish the features of the animal he seemed to tower over the landscape and to float smoothly along the ground by some other means of conveyance than his legs. The bear was feeding on the carcass of a large animal, moose or caribou, and it took no notice of its surroundings but tore at the meat with one paw and lowered its snout into the gore and bared its teeth and fed. When Jones saw the bear’s fur ruffle in the breeze, whatever force impelled him brought him to a halt and he stood and watched the beast, then squatted and watched and felt in himself that the bear in its heart knew his heart, and if that were so he must also know the bear’s. Inside its great cage of bone hung a dark and beating heart and the beating of that heart and the beating of his own were of the same impetus, as were the hearts of all things and that of the world as well.
The bear raised its head from eating and twitched its nose at the breeze. Its eyelids closed and opened gently several times like a harmless thing and it lowered its head again and returned to feeding. A small humming sensation began at the base of Jones’ spine and radiated out through his pelvis and climbed up his back until his whole spine seemed to glow with a liquid that was at once hot and cold. His boundaries began to merge into his surroundings, like a painting whose brush strokes swept across its subject’s borders and mingled with the background. The bear’s haunches made a rounded figure that Jones felt he could hold in his belly like a gestating child. A strong impulse prodded him to rush the thing and put his arms around it but he refrained. He stood and began to circle it at a distance and the bear paid little attention except to raise its head from time to time and lick its chops. The wind caused the silver-tipped fur to stand upright and lay down again. Jones marched in a great circle and passed from behind the bear around to the front and full circle at about a hundred yards. Then he tightened the circle only slightly and walked just inside his original path beginning a diminishing spiral around the bear.

The thing at the center of Jones’ spiral had taken on form, become available for characterization. He was mesmerized by it, mystified at how or why it should be this thing with this shape, these features. He watched it and as he drew closer it began to watch him and then it stopped feeding and watched some seemingly arbitrary point in the air with dullard’s eyes and moved its big head from side to side and grunted full and resounding. He could almost feel the growl ruffle the air between them. Then the bear began to step from one front paw to the other thump thump thump and it stood on its hind legs and opened its mouth wide and bared its teeth and roared. Its lips curled and the atmosphere reverberated with the sound. The bear stood huge before the sun and a rampaging fear ran through Jones’ blood then turned into many hard stones that careened around through every nerve and bone like buckshot. He went stiff as a fossilized tree and the bear came down on its front paws and then lifted and
thumped them down again several times, rearing up and pounding down on the ground _thump thump thump thump thump_ and it burst into a full charge that cut the distance between them in half in three strides then skidded to a halt and roared again. It turned and galloped back to the carcass and swung its head around like a dog to look back at Jones.

It squared itself toward him again and huffed at him and swayed its massive head from side to side. The fear in Jones corroded the integrity of his being like an acid and the more he tried to fortify himself against it the weaker and more brittle he became until he was barely held together at all. The bear bounced on its forelegs again several times in quick succession and its body rippled and shook and it charged again, moving as swiftly and effortlessly as a thing built for flight. It pulled up short again ripping up a skid in the ground. It was eerie the way it moved, such a massive thing, as strange as if a boulder were to suddenly put down wheels and roll away.

When Jones could no longer summon any strength to fight his fear, when his mettle went limp from exhaustion and collapsed, he ceased resisting and opened to the fear and it turned into a brilliant and sizzling white energy that rushed through him like a silver wire and burst from his head. He was like a cello string vibrating between heaven and earth and he read in the hum of its tone all that he might know. He saw knowledge with his heart as vividly as if it were in pictures—his own narcissistic desire to make himself prey to the bear as an avoidance of some truth, the bear's desire to be challenged that he had interpreted as only territorial aggression, the love for the girl in JP's story who was as real as the world itself, and the brown and insulating interruption to the pure tone that was the thing that drew him to Karla and she to him, their dedication to sin carried into the world from some other life or other universe. He knew the mind of the bear, that it would tear him open and leave him to bleed into the earth if he stood mute and allowed one more charge. He raised his arms and turned his face to the sky and opened his mouth and from his belly the white energy leapt and
from his throat came a bellow and he became larger and larger and the bear became smaller. The bear froze with its nose to the wind and ears at attention and Jones roared again and became bigger yet. The bear raised up on its hind legs and its eyes blinked and it held its front paws before itself limp at the joints like a kitten. The power of the earth infused Jones, he displayed all his bigness before the bear and all his power and all his might and the sound he made was thunderous. The bear took a leg of the caribou in its mouth and began dragging it backward over the crest of the hill and on down the other side. Jones moved forward in a slow and bear-like gait and when he reached the spot where the bear had been and looked down the bear was watching him from the other side of a stream and it had dropped the carcass there. It opened its nostrils and read the breeze and it pawed the carcass halfheartedly and looked around, as if disappointed to be left with only this dead thing.

Was it a game or was it not a game? She became harder to catch but then when he did catch her she became steadily sweeter. In bed all her hard edges disappeared and she became a warm and purring thing, lovely and then lovelier. Obsession crept into his bones like a dark fluid and for days on end she possessed his mind. Then he would awake one day and for no apparent reason the obsession had cleared and she seemed a peculiar and irrelevant force. He could not identify the entity or energy driving this cycle regardless of how many times it repeated itself.

The times when his desire for her ebbed it left a clean hollow space in which he found no trace of the substance of this alchemy, no residue to explain his obsession. He resolved to parlay this respite into a permanent abstinence but whenever he did so she would appear as if on cue, but seemingly by coincidence, regardless of where he was. He rode this seesaw
through the winter and by Spring Carnival he could hardly remember a time when he had not known her.

With the days getting longer and the ice breaking up he experienced a partial release of that effervescence, that surplus of spirit whose pressure he had felt since first coming to Alaska. It was not the first time. Each spring after the long coldness and dark of the winter he went through a release of some kind, had a susceptibility to exuberance, and for weeks he would be unable to sleep. He would be uncharacteristically outgoing. He had an optimism that was nearly pathological. The natural world spoke to him in voices he could almost transcribe. But this time, whether primed by this highly charged winter with Karla or owing to some wholly other rhythm, the phenomenon was acute.

The salmon were running. They went down to Emerson Creek in waders and the fish came upstream in numbers. In the shallows where they lay their eggs they darted along in crosswise bursts and thrashed the water, their backs out of the water and their bellies in the gravel, like they were being driven to evolve into land creatures. Jones felt a giddiness he almost couldn’t stand as they went shooting through the water between his legs and all around him.

“My God look at them!” Karla said.

They were so beside themselves they could barely calm down enough to rig their lines. Once they did they went to a bend in the creek where the water was deep and cast their lines with the treble hooks baited to obscurity with pink eggs. They could feel the big fish swimming all around them and he felt no separation whatsoever between himself and them.

“I want to get right in there and swim upstream,” Jones said.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, baby,” she said.

She looked over at him and winked devilishly. She wore no makeup and her hair was tied back and her cheeks were ruddy.
"I'm serious," he said. He was smiling so widely his head felt in danger of turning inside out. "I don't want to catch one, I want to be one. I am one." He laughed like a lunatic.

She took a couple steps downstream away from him, her eyes locked to the place where her line entered the water. He pulled his line from the water and squatted on the bank. Fish and water and grass and air. Snow and mountain. Sky. What more could be said? He was full to bursting.

"Fish on!" she yelled.

The rod was bent almost into a hoop and it quivered with the life transmitted down the line, jerked so hard it looked like it was she who had been caught by something from down below and was resisting being pulled under.

"Keep your tip up," he said.

"Get the net," she said. "Make yourself useful."

She was walking downstream and turning the crank of the reel in fits and jerks.

When the fish broke the water Jones and Karla looked at each other slackjawed and bigeyed. Not a word passed between them. Jones jumped in and got a few steps ahead of her and watched the water. It moved in the water like a snagged crocodile and he knew he had to get in there fast or they would lose him. He motioned to her to head back upstream and keep the rod tip up and when he saw the fish come even with him he slid the net under it and yelled, "Pull up hard!"

The net was too short and he used it to lift one end of the salmon while he got a hand under the belly and Karla pulled the hooked mouth upward. They hauled him to the bank and it almost flipped itself free but Jones gripped it hard to him and tripped just as he wrestled it to the bank, losing his footing and coming down on top of the fish with all his weight and gashing his cheek on the gill. He rolled over on the bank holding his face and the body of the
thrashing fish slapped against him. He stood up and the fish lay glistening in the grass working its angry mouth and thumping the ground.

“Christ look at the size of that thing!” Karla said. “Is that beautiful or what?”

“Look at him,” Jones said. “He can’t breathe.”

“God’s sake though, look at him. He’s longer than your leg.”

Jones looked at his hand. “I’m bleeding,” he said.

Blood dripped from his face and into the gill and into the eye. She put one hand on his chest and pushed him back a step.

“Don’t you dare bleed on my fish,” she said.

They drove home with the salmon still in spasm in the bed of the truck, pounding on the metal bed and arching itself so violently Jones was afraid it would launch itself right over the rail. Its strength and determination were frightening but Karla kept watching it through the window with glassy eyes saying, “My God! I got that prick didn’t I? My God! Look how big he is.”

He had wanted to put the fish back in the water, let it fulfill the last act of its natural life, but Karla refused. “You think I’m going to trade that thing in for nothing but a fish story? It’s not going to happen. I want eye witnesses. I want documentation. Then I’m going to feed a house full of people something to remember me by.”

He held one hand to the cut on his face as he drove. When they got back to her cabin Jones refused to filet the salmon.

“I wish I hadn’t helped you catch it,” he said.

“Don’t kid yourself. All you did was handle the net. Badly.”

There had only ever been little doubt on his part as to whether it was a game they were involved in or not. But exactly what kind of game, this was where he was clueless. They had painted their charade into a corner not knowing how it would react.

“Do you love me?” she snarled.

He was holding a hand over one eye and looking at her with the other.

“I have no idea who you’re asking,” he said. “Me or the character I play in this game.”

“It’s a simple question,” she said. “Yes or no.”

“It’s a ridiculous question.”

“With only one right answer. Now which is it?”

“The answer is the whole reason for us being together. Don’t you think I know that?”

“Do you or don’t you?”

“Of course not,” he said.

“Then what am I doing with you?” she spat.

“Who says you’re with me at all?” he said.

“Yes, who!” she said.

The next day there was a slight tightness in his heart and a vagueness where his feet met the earth. As the day progressed, however, he noticed if he wasn’t careful he would sink into the earth up to the ankles and he would walk in the earth. It took a certain diligence to keep himself on the surface where all other humans walked, neither floating on the air nor merging with the ground. But then something seemed to explode in his chest. He was hiking up Bird Ridge, marching strenuously for what seemed a small eternity without turning to survey the view. He kept his eyes where he stepped and as he rose higher a simmering anticipation began to lick at a sweet tender spot in his innards and the next thing he knew he was falling in
love—with the ground beneath his boots, with the air, with the vegetable life all around him. His boundaries seemed to expand and he merged with creation. He knew the origin of waters, saw through the soul of rock like glass. When he reached the top he closed his eyes and listened to the roar of his own breath in his head as his lungs filled over and over. Sweat trickled down his back. He turned around and the view was almost too much to take. Turnagain Arm was lying like a huge plate of hammered silver under the sun, the light shining off the water like constellations of fire, and eagles soared high on the thermals and far across on the opposite shore, almost too small to see, were a man and a dog walking toward the village of Hope. He inflated with feeling for his fellow creatures with emotion of such weight his heart was like a bloated wineskin. It seemed that it would burst and he moaned aloud a great rolling moan from the bottom of his being, up from the ground and out his throat, stretching him like a brass horn.

He strode back into Clutching like some pied piper with all the dogs in town collecting behind him and following along. It was Horse and Mitch who spotted him from the bridge standing down in Clutching Creek sermonizing to all the dogs splashing around him. They coaxed him into the Jeep and on the way to Anchorage he saw the belugas in Turnagain Arm, their backs curving out of the surface of the water as white as the clutching fingers of some underwater God.

It was a particularly comforting method of assessment for Jones, his evaluation at the hospital. The doctor held out his hands and said, “Place your hands in mine.” Jones placed his palms down on the doctor’s open palms and the doctor peered closely into his eyes while weighing Jones’ hands, lowering and raising his palms with the weight of them, evaluating their heft. The doctor’s hands were not damp enough to betray anything unsavory, not dry
enough to be slippery like paper, but were warm and just tacky enough for there to
be traction where their skin met. And while he must have detected some frenetic vibration
from Jones' hands, Jones sensed a grounding presence in his.

"I am Doctor Pareem," he said. He spoke with an accent. "I think you will stay with us
for a few days. Hm?"

In the hospital, removed from her and dulled by lithium, Jones fell in love with Karla,
and the doctor fell on Jones like a foe in some athletic competition. Jones' state of mind was
the enemy and the doctor strutted into the room like he was entering a wrestling ring and
pummel that state of mind with his learning. He would ask Jones some leading question to
draw him out, then beat him stupid with a psychotherapeutic issuance.

When Jones was seen to be obsessed with food, the doctor pounced: "You talk about
your feelings for her and food. Food food food! What is nourishment to her perplexes you. It
makes her seem exotic. And anything that seems strange to the neurotic mind, it gives birth
immediately to the word enemy. It just happens. It springs out of the field of potentiality like
a newly spawned particle. It coalesces into a blastema and grows a heart of its own. What
would you say to her now if you could?" the doctor asked.

"I'm not sure," Jones said.

"After all," the doctor said, picking up Jones' train of thought. "Any perspective is
only one perspective. How can you know when you have arrived at one that will endure?
You want to speak to her, but you fear that if you say something that is not absolutely true,
something that is driven by your pain or your need, you will lose her. How can you get a
perspective that is more than perspective, that is the soul of perspective and not some lesser
derivative? How can you be sure you won't be betrayed by a revelation of tomorrow or all of
the tomorrows to come? There seems to be a built in latency in the structure of things against
the point of view. As though God frowns upon the intelligence gathered by the eye in favor of intelligence of some other derivation. This is how you think."

Another time the doctor asked, "What does she symbolize to you?"

"Why should she be a symbol?" Jones said.

"We are all letters in the alphabet of the language of creation!" the doctor preached indignantly. "Everything is metaphorical!"

Mitch dropped in on him once a week and brought the papers and sat with him and talked.

"I hate to tell you this," he said during Jones' third week in the hospital. "But Karla's playing kissy face with a different guy every time I go to Bughouse Hill."

"Don't feel obligated to keep me informed," Jones said.

"I thought you ought to know."

"I already do. The thing is I wish I didn't."

At first the meetings with the doctor seemed to be building toward something. Then in a short time they became commonplace and acquired the same monotony as the rest of life.

"There are things lurking in you," the doctor said. "But you don't know what they are. They are like rumors. The people who come to visit you they tell you things about your girlfriend, about she is doing this, she is doing that. These rumors become your obsession. But it is not the rumors that hurt you. The rumors are the visible symbol and these symbols resonate with those things that lurk in you. They are like two poles of an axis. As one end wobbles so the other end wobbles. This axis turns and it makes a spiral in your consciousness and into this spiral you must go to face the opposite pole of these rumors of yours."

"How do I do that?"

"Don't worry," the doctor said. "We will get to that."
But they never did. After sixty days Jones signed himself out and left in the clothes he had walked in with.

The last thing the doctor said to him was this: “We have guilt because guilt keeps us from acting, it is a prison that steals from us our freedom. Because if we don’t have freedom we cannot get away with anything. If we don’t get away with anything, we need fear no retribution. Well I say to you this: One thing you don’t have to worry about is getting away with anything. After all, the world is full of judges.”

“You’ve got it all sewn up,” Jones said. “I wish I was you.”

“I wish I was me!” the doctor said, large eyed.

This statement hung there in the air between them like a Zen koan. Having thrown the knockout punch, the doctor turned and left the room.

Two girls were standing on the porch of the roadhouse not far from the Denali park road when Jones pulled up. They wore jeans and hiking boots. One wore a lined flannel shirt and the other wore a fleece top. They were facing each other and each held a water bottle in one hand and they were laughing. Jones got out of the truck and walked up the steps to the roadhouse feeling in their laughter the most beautiful and heartbreaking thing in existence. Beautiful because joy is beautiful. Heartbreaking because if you were sensitive to your losses, it made you feel more deeply than anything how great the losses were.

He was hungry. He bought salami and bread and buttermilk and was sitting on the tailgate of his truck eating when JP came walking up the road looking haggard. He had his bandana on his head. He walked up and sat on the tailgate. Jones held out the salami.

“What the hell is that?” JP said, pointing at the carton on the tailgate.

“Buttermilk.”
JP picked up the carton and peered down the spout with one eye, put it to his nose.

"Yeesh!" he said.

"What kind of tattoo is that?" Jones asked, pointing.

"Which one?"

"Why how many do you have?"

"Just this one."

Jones rolled his eyes. "What’s it say?"

"Vine."

Jones shrugged and shook his head. "Better stop making sense before you lose your self respect."

"Too late for that," JP said. "What are you on anyway? Your pupils are the size of dimes."

"I wish I knew."

JP took the salami. "I don’t normally eat meat," he said.

"Nothing normal about today," Jones said.

"That ain’t no bullshit."

JP laid slices of salami on the bread.

"You got any money?" JP asked.

"What are you stupid?"

JP slapped him on the shoulder.

The girls came down the porch steps and got into an old Subaru wagon. The engine started and they pulled out, the wagon leaning and shaking in the potholes.

"You hear that?" JP said, looking at the Subaru.

"Transmission is wearing out its last bearing," Jones said.
“Yup. Bad place to have car trouble too.”

“Is there a good place?”

“At the dealership, right after they trade that puppy in.”

Jones nodded.

“We seen your truck,” JP said. “Didn’t see you though.”

“I was out.”

“That Joyce Shaganaw, she ain’t got no shame.”

“Like you do,” Jones said.

“I hate to say no is what it is,” JP said. He paused and continued in a meeker voice.

“We’re in her tent in the campground and this grizzly comes in there in the middle of the night. Flattens a couple tents, including ours, before some guy starts blowing off rounds with his forty-four and scares him off. Swear to God it’s like a Hitchcock movie here this season.”

“You get your job back?” Jones asked.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Season’s almost over. Everything is closing.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Any work down where you’re at?” JP asked.

“There will be as soon as the snow flies.”

“You wanna give me a lift?”

“Do I want to?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to get bent?”

“No.”

“Well then...” Jones tied the bread bag and stood up. “Move your butt.”
JP got up and Jones closed the tailgate.

"Seriously though. Can I get a ride?"

"Where to?"

"Down where you’re going."

Jones spit.

"Get in the truck. Weirdo."

In the truck JP held out his hand. "Look at that," he said. "I’m still shakin."

"It’ll pass," Jones said.

"I never saw anything so huge. I swear to God it was like a planet. I thought my race was run."

"What about Joyce?"

"You know her. If you saw her today you’d say she was the same girl you knew last night. But I tell you what, last night when that bear was in our camp she wasn’t."

JP slept almost the whole way back. He woke up when they were on Turnagain Arm around Beluga Point. He sat up and rubbed his eyes and looked at the moon hanging in the sky.

"What does being alive feel like to you?" Jones asked.

"It used to feel like my own personal playground," JP said. "Most of the time."

"Well I tell you what," Jones said. "Whenever you come up over that hill? There’s gonna be a bear there waiting for you."

"Oh yeah?" JP said. "What hill is that?" And he closed his eyes again.

As the road followed the ragged shoreline the moon seemed to swing across the sky and hang first over one peak and then another. The bear was with him but thoughts of the rabbit were even more persistent. Its fleeing image remained in his mind’s eye and it conjured memories of Karla walking across the ice that one night, unstable and looking like prey. That
was the hunger her image planted in his eye, the urge to consume her. The desire ached in him, and he felt the need to confess this to her.

They pulled up to Horse's cabin and the door was standing open. They got out of the truck and Horse emerged from the cabin holding a pint of blackberry brandy. He looked at JP, at the bandanna on his head.

"Well if it isn't hanky doodle dandy," he said.

"I ain't in the mood," JP said.

"Whoop-dee shit." He looked at Jones. "It's therapy just bein' around this guy I bet."

"Tell me about it," Jones said. "Can he pitch a tent behind the shack for tonight?"

"I don't give a shit," Horse said. "You want to come in? Me and Mitch are makin' hand loads."

"Not right now. I gotta go face the music. Maybe I'll come back down later, make a stew. You in?"

"I'm in."

"What about Mitch?"

"Mitch you in?" Horse said, ducking his head into the cabin. "He's in. What about Hanky? Hanky you in?"

JP just glared at him.

As Jones came up the hill to Karla's cabin there was smoke coming from the chimney. Something would be cooking on her stove. The sound of men's voices resonated from the cabin like bees in a bongo drum. The moon shone a light on his desire and showed it for the thin and brittle thing that it was. He stood there pondering what it was he wanted to tell her. Once she had said that what he was to her was the opposite of what she was to him. And if he wanted to swallow her this could only mean she wanted to spit him out.
The dogs of Clutching barked in the distance. That spinning axis stirred a cauldron and in the cauldron mists swirled. From the mists the girl in JP’s story appeared and faded, appeared and faded, insistent but indistinct, pulling on something deep in him that he saw but couldn’t see and saw but couldn’t see, rounded at the edges and tinged with some dark color, like a rumor.
Greektown

This happened after I had been back from the wilderness for a while, during that period when every time I turned around it seemed that something violent happened, like I couldn't avoid it to save my life. There were at least five different times in six months or so where violence happened right next to me! I was a nervous wreck. Constantly. Every time I went out of the house I was looking over my shoulder. People make up stories like this, people who think that piercing your face means you know something about mystery, people who think that pretentiousness and eccentricity are the same thing. But this is true.

My parents were still alive back then. I was living out on Scully Road (where a woman was murdered and they found her in her barn under hay bales a month later and it turned out the guy who did it was a guy I had passed walking on the dirt road once who was homeless and living in the park at Independence Lake). I had just about started feeling comfortable in the world. I worked for Tri-County Credit Unions in Systems Management with that guy Matt Ujain-Dalla. We're the guys responsible for the nightly tape dumps and maintenance of the computer system for a dozen networked branches, working the afternoon shift, coming in at four and harassing the tellers to reconcile their drawers so we can bring the system down and
get our work done as soon as possible, then go drink coffee and watch videos the
rest of the night down in the basement break room. The tellers all had manicures and blue eye
shadow up to their hairlines and stiff hair that was terrorized into designs that could make
sense at absolutely no other moment in all of history except right now. If you were anywhere
in their perfume perimeter you couldn’t help but pick up on their petty competitiveness and
the futile obsession to merge with their favorite magazine and TV idols, those kind of girls
that seemed to blow out of high school into the wind like dandelion spores, still hanging on to
the cheerleader dream and wondering if it wouldn’t have been more fun to go to beauty school
instead of doing what they were doing now. They knew exactly who they wanted to be but
didn’t even have the area code of the people they actually were. When they talked to each
other they were always glancing down at each other’s mouths, tits, jewelry. Just that quick
their bright eyes flicked, the way little sparrows jump from twig to twig in a bush. Their
eyebrows were plucked into acute arches leaving the edge of the occipital ridge bald so that
they looked like little blind creatures who had not fully developed, like puppies before their
eyes open. They drove off every night in their new Ford Escorts headed for the Full Moon
tavern to hunt for husbands among the brokers and lawyers and it was hard even for me not to
be disgusted. For Ujain-Dalla it was reason enough for anarchy. That was just the way he
was. Pissed off about everything and absolutely positive that somebody owed him something.
Who could blame him?

The Grunge thing had started but it hadn’t hit the airwaves yet. We used to go see
bands all over the place—the Blind Pig, upstairs at the Heidelberg, Saint Andrew’s Hall, State
Theatre, wherever. I had no idea where Ujain-Dalla gathered his intelligence, but he had all
kinds of cheap little bootleg tapes of bands I had never heard of and pamphlets from The
Church of the Sub-Genius and other weird literature that you kept getting sucked into reading
on the chance that there was going to be some magical little bit of esoterica you needed that
would change everything, something you'd been searching for forever but couldn't name. I felt like I was getting a little old for all that, being the kind of full-time fanatic that it seemed so necessary to be in college. But I'd been away those few years and everyone I'd known before was still doing it, still fulfilling that dedication to hip. They made it seem so important so I went along.

Ujain-Dalla had this stuff lying all over his bungalow, piles of it sliding off the couch and every chair, stacks of it on the floor, layers of it on canvas cots in the spare bedroom. It was weird. There was nothing in his place but music stuff and this weird literature, underground music rags. There was nothing hanging on the walls anywhere. *Nothing.* Almost nothing in the kitchen—a couple plates, a fork, a can opener. In the living room there was a long van seat for a couch, a couple of vinyl chairs like you might have had in your rec room as a kid, a Roland piano, a Gibson SG, a conga drum, recording equipment, then a stereo and all this other shit. Records, tapes, the literature. Some of it was schoolboy Marxism, some of it conspiracy shit, lots of "legalize drugs" crap, the-Holocaust-never-happened nonsense. All just *pure garbage!* He was a piece o’ work but, you know, back then I wasn’t quite ready to let all that go. He lived in this little place on a dirt road out near Pinckney in that little town called Hell. It’s a thirty or forty-minute drive just to get to work. There’s *nothing* out there but a post office and the Dam Site Inn. But he wants that credential—the return address: Hell. So that gives you an idea.

"My goal is to attain total slack," he used to say. It was a slogan from one of those pamphlets, The Church of the Sub-Genius. He was angry even when he told jokes, and how could you argue with that? He seemed like he knew something important and he had credentials, not the least of which was his looks. He was tall and he was black. Not black like African American. He was some kind of Aborigine, or at least part anyway. His folks were from the Australian outback. But he was born in America and he had Anglo features except
for his skin and his hair, which was black and kinky. But even that short time ago
the whole multicultural thing hadn't gotten sexy yet, and he was so black the girls didn't know
what to make of him. Who knows where people come from, but it was clear that for Ujain-
Dalla the primary betrayal in his life was about his looks. He was so American, he was so
from here, his looks seemed to him like a malicious trick that had been played to keep him
from the feast.

So we go downtown and we're at Saint Andrew's and there they all are, all the wieners
in their mysterioso credentials. There was the vampire girl making herself visible in the lobby
with her black lipstick and the leather vest that pressed her tits together and made cleavage a
mile long and half a mile deep, the nose ring and the tongue stud, the white face and the dark
makeup, the black nails. She wore spike heels and she never smiled. There were the punks
with the big spiky Mohawks and safety pins through their cheeks, the Doc Marten boots and
the huge leather wallets with heavy chains hanging down their legs in a loop. A girl who
looked like Annie Hall and one who looked like Madonna in Desperately Seeking Susan. All
over were the Cindy Laupers and the Mad Max extras all pretending they were from some
world, any world, other than the one they were actually from. They all wanted two things: to
say fuck you to somebody, and for other people to want to have sex with them so that they
could say no. They pretended these were not uniforms they were wearing, as conforming as
the cop uniform or the business suit. Unlike the tellers these people never examine each other.
People talk to them and they look the other way.

Into the middle of this I went, looking like Mathew Broderick, plain and white with no
hairdo and no tattoos, with Ujain-Dalla who likewise had no tattoos and no strange clothes but
who was tall and black and Aboriginal but carried himself like John Travolta in Saturday
Night Fever, like the place belonged to him. He went straight to the vampire woman who he
had absolutely no chance with whatsoever and started talking to her the way he would talk to
anyone, to a programmer, shifting from foot to foot, very matter of fact, as though
he had never even heard of such a thing as seduction. From my side of the lobby it’s clear
he’s ruining the fantasy she’s trying to create. She’s in a one-woman play and he has marched
right up on the stage and gotten in the middle of it. She can’t be suave with him standing
there being obvious. He’s like the cleaning guy who has accidentally wandered out from
backstage.

As usual I went for the bar. Echo and the Bunnymen were on the PA and the place was
full of smoke. The music was so loud you could feel it vibrate in your chest and there were
girls dancing out on the floor vibrant and unselfconscious, some energetic and athletic
dominating large areas of the room, stitching together steps of sensuality and elegance,
alluring in their youth and their pointless conviction. It was sexy and I leaned against a pillar
and watched them and got drunk. It was all a kind of profane theater; some of them realize
this and most of them don’t and those who do have made the mistake of thinking that theater
means something. They come from the suburbs. They go from one safe place to this other
safe place where they can disdain each other without their parents around to make them self
conscious. This seems dangerous to them and what they don’t know is that it actually is.

In these kinds of places, places like Saint Andrew’s, I’m always thinking about the
straight and narrow, the eye of the needle. And about sex. It makes for a complicated interior.
You’re like a traffic cop in a hurricane. There is a place out where Ujain-Dalla lives where
Hell Creek and a tributary form a confluence of waters. At that place the two waters are in a
free for all so wild that no mathematics can describe it. You look at it. You can’t take your
eyes away. And yet from Ujain-Dalla’s window you can see the placid reedy finger of a lake
across the way. Someone rows peacefully by in a scull.

A month earlier, I had gone to Chicago to see my friend Fischer, an old drinking partner
from school. We started drinking at a bar on State Street at eight-thirty in the evening. It’s a
friendly town, Chicago, in a menacing way. They don’t discriminate with their friendliness. You go to a bar and people talk to you. But then you read the crime statistics in the paper, all that murder. You get the feeling that with all that talk they’re hiding something. Who is it that’s doing all that killing? You have to keep your eyes open. You have to wonder.

We drank until four o’clock in the morning, Fischer and I. The next day I was so hungover my brain was translucent. I could feel sunlight traveling in one ear and out the other. We took the El from his place to the Loop where it ended underground, and from there I was going to walk to Union Station. It was a Sunday morning. We get off the train and as soon as I step onto the platform I see a couple black guys come down the stairs onto the platform, one to the left, one to the right. They’ve got parkas on and they don’t look like they’re there to catch a train. There’s an old guy ahead of me, he’s maybe sixty years old, wearing an overcoat. He looks like one of these guys from the old country, he looks like one of my uncles. I pause and turn, waiting for Fischer, and he comes out of the train and we head for the stairs. The old guy goes up the stairs, the two black guys fall in behind him. By the time me and Fischer hit the steps they’re about halfway up and this is what I see: the old guy seems to have fallen backward into the arms of one of the black guys. His feet are still on the edge of a step and he is pumping his legs repeatedly like he’s trying to launch himself backwards down the steps. Me and Fischer both have the exact same thought at this point, that the old guy is having a seizure of some kind. But it’s only half a second before I realize what’s going on. Fischer runs up the steps and reaches around and sort of over the guy holding the old man, like he’s trying to wedge them apart. I freeze in my tracks and drop my duffel bag and I’m trying to scream at him, but I can’t remember his name! I can’t remember Fischer’s name and that image of him extended that way, reaching over with his entire belly exposed is burned into my mind because I’m sure I’m suddenly going to see a knife appear and plunge right into his gut. Fischer reaches up and in one more time to pry them apart just as he’s realizing that he’s
 gotten in the middle of a mugging, and I back down a step and he sort of slips back from his position and retreats toward me. We ease back down to the platform and now the old guy is yelling, “Hey! Hep! You son of a bitch! They got my wallet!” I’m on one side of the stairs, Fischer is on the other, the two black guys come down the stairs, nostrils flared, huffing like animals, mean looking, big, looking down the platform and walking. They don’t even look at us. They just blow right by and the old guy comes after them hollering, “They got my wallet! You sons of bitches!” We run up the stairs, we look left, we look right. It is bright in the air and cold. There is no one in sight. No cops, no nothing. Downtown Chicago, Sunday, not a soul in sight. We look at each other. Thank God the old guy wasn’t hurt. Thank God there were no guns.

Back at Saint Andrew’s Hall, at the freak show, Ujain-Dalla said, “That chick always blows me off. It pisses me off.”

“The vampire chick?”

“Yeah.”

“What are you, nuts?”

He looked off like I hadn’t said anything. This is the way he is, he never acknowledges what you say. I can’t figure out if he’s just that arrogant or if he’s deaf or both.

“The opening act is this songwriter from New York.”

The MC came out. He was some guy from a radio station, one of these guys you would have envied as a kid. Now you just wonder how people get like that. He said something that had to do with something that people were supposed to care about, or something about how this was their place and no one would ever be able to hold them down. They had tried and failed. Something like that, and everybody cheered. One girl I saw showed her tits. Yeah,
that was just what I needed. You’d think a world where girls show their tits would be a better world. But as it turns out it’s not.

The lights were already dim and couldn’t go any dimmer. Out came a guy carrying a guitar and I was prepared to not like him right off the bat. I don’t know why. Just because he had figured out how to get up there and I hadn’t. He had an unusual name, not an attractive name at all, not a stage name, and he came out and sang a bunch of songs and he was good. Really good. I can’t remember anything specific about any of the songs except that the word responsibility was in one of them. What I do remember is how natural they sounded, how thoughtful they were, and how they made you think, Oh yeah, geez, that’s how you write a song. I should be able to do that. They were like conversations. It made me wonder how many of these guys were floating around out there, guys with real talent who nobody had ever heard of.

The place was not very crowded and I kept walking around the big empty floor and to the back and up the stair around the balconies, drinking beer and looking at girls and staying away from Ujain-Dalla. I hated watching him try to pick up girls. It was embarrassing. I hung out in the lobby drinking a beer and a bouncer told me I had to take it back inside. I looked around and saw other people drinking in the lobby. I looked at them, I looked at him. He was wearing a leather vest and no shirt. He had tattoos and a ring in his nose. What could I say? I didn’t have any rings in my nose. I went back inside.

Then the headliner, Pere Ubu, came on and they were really good too. The lead singer is this big fat guy named Dave Thomas and he punctuated his songs with unusual hand gestures. They were like the gesticulations of a heartbroken Italian mother in an old movie. Then he would point at the stage at some imaginary thing and walk over to the point where he pointed and stomp on it, like some lunatic trampling bugs that weren’t there. The music was surreal and harmless and catchy and so was he. I walked around the big wooden floor
listening to the music from different vantage points and smiling. I didn’t mind when
it ended except for the fact that they brought the lights up. Ujain-Dalla and I stood in the
lobby and the keyboard player from Pere Ubu wandered out there and somehow Ujain-Dalla
knew him from somewhere, or knew somebody he knew. This guy used to play with Frank
Zappa, so Ujain-Dalla went up to him and said, “Hey I know your buddy so and so.” And the
guy goes, “Really, no kidding? Well how is he?” and off they go. So I’m standing there and
before I know it we’re talking about Frank Zappa and he’s telling us how Zappa was a real
control freak and this and that and then at some point the whole band and the guy from the
opening act come through the door into the lobby and they’re surrounded by bouncers and
they head up the stairs. The keyboard player turns to go, we go with him, staying real close so
it looks like we belong there and the next thing I know we’re backstage. Backstage is this
huge room upstairs with hardwood floors and big windows. I walked in and up to Dave
Thomas, and he was standing there in an old suit barefoot and he turned and walked across the
room crooking his finger at me over his shoulder saying, “I’m not walking away from you
I’m just getting a beverage” like he was some Broadway star or something. Very theatrical.
He kept talking and walking away for like a long time. No psychological problems there at
all. I asked him a question or two, told him I liked the show, but he was not interested in
having a conversation so I left and sat on a big sofa with Paul Zlegtad. I introduced myself.
We shook hands and when he told me his name I asked him to spell it. He spelled it and said,
“It rhymes with bad egg.” I asked him to spell it again. He did. He told me what it rhymed
with again but it didn’t make any sense. It was like he was reversing the vowels. And the
consonants too. All night long he kept introducing himself in the same way. He’d say the
name then say, “It rhymes with bad egg.” Embarrassing. I told him I liked his songs and
asked him about his influences. I specifically remember him saying, “Every New York Jew
of my generation was influenced by Bob Dylan.” Then he asked me where to go in Detroit.
He, like everyone else in the country, had heard all the stories about the murder capital. I said, “From here you can walk over to Greektown or you can walk down to the bar across from the Greyhound station or over to Jefferson. But don’t just go walking around this town. It’s not safe. It’s not like New York.” I didn’t know if this was true or not, but I believed it was. I always told people to stay away from Detroit.

The vampire girl was talking to Dave Thomas and she came over and sat on the couch and introduced herself to the guy. He told her his name and said it rhymed with “bad egg.” I didn’t see how it could, considering the way it was spelled, and I kept wishing he would stop saying it. It was asking you to make a bigger leap than you were willing to make. Every time he said it I liked his music a little less. Once you’ve been to the wilderness things change. You can’t spend time in bars or credit unions any more or with people whose names rhyme with “bad egg.” You just can’t. And you can’t just get drunk anymore either, but I did. Ujain-Dalla came over. He was following that vampire girl around like a puppy dog. I stood up and talked to him for a while, told him what I had told the folk singer. I told him the music was good but the people were nothing to write home about. When it came time to leave I was drunk, but not as drunk as I could have been.

The whole congregation was out there on the front steps and milling around on Congress giving as much air time to their costumery as possible before going home to their parents’ houses to eat baloney sandwiches and drink milk before crashing into unconsciousness, resting up to face yet another gothic day. I was standing on the sidewalk smoking when Ujain-Dalla came out the front door, paused, stuck his chest out, looked left, looked right, still like he owned the place. What in the world am I doing here, I wondered. “Let’s get out of here before this girl’s makeup jumps off her face and creates a biohazard,” I said. I started walking.
He bounded down the steps and fell in beside me. “I love these fucking people,” he said.

“You’re in worse shape than I thought you were,” I said.

My uncle owns a bar right down the street and I was tempted to go there and have a beer, see if maybe I could catch my old man there. But it was late already and we started walking up Beaubien, heading back to where I had parked at the other end of Greektown.

“None of my friends in Ann Arbor ever come down to Detroit,” Ujain-Dalla said. “They’re all afraid. They think they’re gonna get killed if they cross Eight Mile Road. If you have half a brain and know how to carry yourself, nobody’s gonna mess with you. You can go anywhere you want to, unless you’re an idiot.”

I stopped dead in my tracks and he kept on walking and talking until he noticed I wasn’t there. He did a double take, spun around and said, “What?”

I just looked at him. He shrugged his shoulders and held his hands out like, “What the hell, dude?”

He walked toward me; I walked toward him.

I said, “You don’t know what the hell is going on half a block off this little tourist path we’re on, under the porches and in the burned out garages and the alleys. You don’t have a clue! This place is not safe! It is not safe here! How can you not know that?”

He snorted disdainfully, his eyelids sort of coming down and his eyes going off to the side. Well, that just said it all. What can you say to the superior look? There’s nothing you can say. Adolescence is a terminal disease for some. He knows ORACLE; he knows the ODBC standard like the back of his hand. He knows C and C++, COBOL, all the skills I don’t have, the languages I don’t know. He navigates both worlds: the PC and the mainframe, the corporation and the underground. He knew the Internet inside and out before it was the Web, before it had a graphical interface, when you had to navigate the whole damn thing.
through the command line. Can you imagine that? A big blind world of endless black conduit and he could navigate all of it from a dumb terminal with those little green letters. I blunder through batch jobs, copying script from a code book, introducing bugs in the metadata. One time I crashed the whole Tri-County mainframe system. The terminal went totally black and then this message appeared: *The HOST will not be returning.* Freaked me out. The deposits and withdrawals of all those thousands of people lost, all that accounting ruined, the balance upset. We had to call Tech Support in Palo Alto to bail us out. Thank God for the time difference or we'd have been up the creek. But I felt like an authority on this one particular matter and I saw how ignorant he really was, even with all the stuff he knew. It pissed me off that he wouldn't take my word for it.

I walked away and left him standing on the sidewalk. I was going to my car and I was going to drive home and I didn't care whether he came or not. When I turned onto Monroe I could hear him walking a few steps behind me. All the bars were letting out and the street was packed like it was the middle of the day. The sidewalks were elbow to elbow. It's a one-lane, one-way street with parking on both sides, and cars were stopped bumper to bumper just trying to get through those couple blocks on Monroe and get to the freeway. After the freak show at Saint Andrew's I had no patience left for crowds, so I stepped off the curb and into the street, walking between the line of cars parked at the curb and the idling cars trying to make their way down the street. I had my hands in my pocket and was putting the leather to the pavement. All I wanted to do was get out of there and go somewhere and think about where I was and where I wanted to be. I didn't want to go back to the wilderness but I sure didn't want to be here. So where?

I was almost there. I was about three storefronts from Saint Antoine when all hell broke loose. I was walking in that narrow lane between the parked cars and the cars in the middle of the street looking straight ahead, and right in that little corridor ahead of me I see two guys
come off the curb out of the crowd on the sidewalk. One was moving backward and the other was moving forward toward him, and they were in that posture like when guys are slap boxing, like their hands up loose in front of them and the one guy is sort of skipping backward. They came off the curb and glided right across that space directly in front of me and then all of a sudden bop! bop! bop! bop! bop! I saw the gun of the first guy leveled right at the second guy, just like he was reaching out to shake hands. And I saw the second guy spin to the side and draw himself in. The whole place erupted. People started screaming and running in every direction. I ducked behind a car idling in the middle of the street, and directly across the street from me an undercover cop wearing jeans and a tight T shirt was running down the street from the other end of the block, his gun raised in the air and him yelling, “Police! Get out of the way, get out of the way!” I remember thinking, Where in the world had he been hiding that gun? I stood up and walked toward the shooting. Somehow I knew the shooting was over. Cops converged from every direction in impossible numbers and they were throwing people onto cars left and right, anyone who was near the shooters, guys going, “Hey what are you doing, man? I didn’t do anything!” The one I had seen spin was sitting on the curb with his legs stretched out in front of him, staring with huge fixed eyes at the street. His right leg was quivering uncontrollably and there was blood all over his thigh and puddled where he was sitting. The blood was so thick there were actually strings of it that dallled between his hip and the pavement. A cop was attending to him, and I crossed the street in front of him. On both sides of the street there were women screaming and crying, one staring at the middle of the street and collapsing into the arms of her friends, the circle of people around her seeming to yield like tall grass, fanning out in a semi circle, supporting her as she alternately collapsed and tried to pull away, her legs giving way under her, her face contorted and screaming, “Oh my God! Oh my God! Richard! Richard!” Right in the middle of the street in front of Hella’s in Greektown lay the other man. He was wearing a
white suit with a red carnation in the lapel. There was a small hole right in the middle of his forehead and a splash of blood on the front of his suit. Other than that he was laid out as peacefully as if he were sleeping.

I walked within a foot of his head. Police on horseback galloped down Saint Antoine converging on the scene and into the crowd. As I crossed Saint Antoine toward the parking structure, there were two female cops in the middle of the street looking like they had absolutely no idea which way to go, pointing toward some feigned obligation, talking loud to cover their uncertainty, going “Yeah, uh, okay! I think it’s this way. Okay I’ll do that and you go over there,” as though they were a couple of warehouse workers trying to cover up the fact that they didn’t know where to find a particular shelved item. Even death can’t escape the indignity of the incompetent functionary.

We climbed the stairs and stood beside my Malibu in the parking structure. We could see the dead man perfectly from there, five floors below, lying in the street all dressed in white. I could almost see my uncle’s bar from there too. My legs were starting to quiver. I could barely hold myself up. It felt like I had no knees. I was freakin’ out now but in the moment I had not been scared. The whole thing had been so much like watching TV. You’d think that seeing someone get shot would cut through the miasma, that the adrenaline would turn the brain into a bright little diamond at least temporarily. But I was still in the gooey coagulated brain space of fat Dave Thomas and “bad egg.”

“I have family!” I said to Ujain-Dalla. “They’re right down there. Look! I can point to them just like that with my finger. See? I can walk over there right now and go inside and they’ll be there. And the blood in their veins will be the same as the blood in my veins. I’ll stand there and they’ll know who I am and I’ll know who they are. Do you get what I’m saying to you, man!” I was fit to be tied.

Ujain-Dalla said, “You gonna unlock the door or what?” No expression whatsoever.
We had to take a detour to the freeway to go around the chaos at the murder scene. It was a long ride home. I wanted to say, “What the hell just happened? Why did a guy just die in the middle of the street in front of us?” I wanted to have a conversation about it, about what meaning it might have in his life and what meaning it might have in mine. Because how could a guy die right in front of you and nothing happen? You know what I mean? I said, “A lady was murdered on my street. Last month a guy got mugged like right next to me! Every time I dare to think that the world might be a safe place, something happens immediately. Like the very next day. Every time.”

“And you think that this is the universe telling you something,” he said.

“Well, yeah!”

There was nothing else for us to say.

I only heard from Ujain-Dalla once after that. He called the next day and asked if I wanted to go eat something at the Pullman Diner, but when I went to meet him he never showed up. The Pullman is built like a railway car or an Airstream trailer, made of aluminum, shiny and rounded, but cheap like a tin can and barely large enough for a dozen people. I was sitting elbow to elbow at the counter drinking coffee and eating eggs and to my right in the wall there was a little aperture, a pinhole of light where a rivet had come loose or someone had drilled through. The sun came right through it sharply and hit the corner of my eye. It was like a stab, every time I turned I felt it in the corner of my eye. I looked toward that hole—it was actually right through the wall—and through this tiny hole you could see the blue of the sky and the light of the sun on the other side all those millions of miles away. It was all out there: the bars, Hell, the wilderness, the whole universe accelerating under the rastering eye of God. Something about the pressure of that light squeezing through made that little hole like a fulcrum and there it all was in perfect balance. On the other side of the hole was everything, and on this side of the hole was everything. At a certain point in a drinking career nothing is
more transcendent than the hangover. I'm turning thirty soon and the zero in that number scares me somehow. It's a rictus, it's that mouth from which the universe springs. It arrives announcing some edict and I hear it but not clearly.

The door opened and a gust of wind blew in and a little girl entered with tiny shuffling steps, her eyes squinted with the eyelids fluttering and her head angled upward, hands held out in front of her just above her face and her fingers dancing as if she would snatch at a butterfly just out of reach. I don't know if she was a little girl or a woman with some sort of ailment or disease, because she was so small. She turned and I knew instinctively that she was coming for me. She shuffled daintily toward me and I turned to her and she stood on her tiptoes, reaching up with her little clutching hands scratching lightly at my temples and cheeks, like a blind person trying to decipher my features. From the corner of my eye I saw her keeper coming toward us, a look of horror conquering her face. She led the little one away, peering back with an accusing eye, as though I was some corrupter. Between the girl and that little hole in the wall I didn't know exactly where I was suddenly. It was like I was dreaming and I thought, If salvation comes to the world it will be in a little greasy spoon like this one, among the chatter and the clink of the china. It will be where people know each other and where the strangest of delicate little things can happen. I never told Ujain-Dalla this. After all who am I? I can't save Ujain-Dalla. I can save myself. I believe that. But I must admit I don't know how.