

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Rowan Morrison for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 8, 2004.

Title: Down the Road.

Abstract approved:

Redacted for privacy

---

Marjorie Sandor

Down the road is a collection of short stories written in the post-Stonewall tradition of gay men's literature, which has focused on works that reflect gay experience and specifically autobiographical fiction; a desire to write for gay readers without having to explain circumstances or points of view to readers unfamiliar with gay experience and culture; and to write in language actually used by gay men. The stories in this collection were selected because of the picture of an evolution of gay consciousness they collectively describe. The narratives are situated throughout a progression of various stages of awareness and integration from a boy's first discovery of his sexuality in "Reception," to grappling with what that realization really means in world of compulsory heterosexuality in "Uncle," to the violence encountered particularly by those who have drifted further to the margins in reaction to their placelessness in a straight world in "A Little Split," to a state of assimilation into a formal gay community in "Etude," to a state of consciousness that has moved beyond those limitations in "Down the Road."

© Copyright by Rowan Morrison  
April 8, 2004  
All Rights Reserved

Down the Road

by  
Rowan Morrison

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the  
degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Presented April 8, 2004  
Commencement June 2004

Master of Fine Arts thesis of Rowan Morrison  
presented on April 8, 2004.

APPROVED:

Redacted for privacy

---

Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

Redacted for privacy

---

Chair of the Department of English

Redacted for privacy

---

Dean of the Graduate School

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

Redacted for privacy

---

Rowan Morrison, Author

---

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to express his sincere appreciation to:

His partners in crime 'Stine Loughlin, John Paul Jaramillo, and Kim Sharp without whom he would not have survived.

His most honored Frater and Soror of the Golden Dawn Quinn Mattfeld and Cassandra Schwanke whose long distance support has been more than invaluable.

Ann Yee without whom the author would be completing an MFA in Acting in a small town in Virginia.

Jennifer Cornell who has been a voice of reason, inspiration, and endless support, and without whom we'd all have given up long, long ago.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
The Reception .....	1
Uncle.....	11
A Little Split.....	39
Etude.....	69
Down the Road.....	76

## The Reception

From behind closed eyes Adam listened to the kind of quiet that only comes to busy streets or factory floors or social events like this one. White-noised silence. The sound of one voice over another over another, the shuffle of feet, a gentle hiss of paperware and plastic utensils. In his mind Adam tried to imagine the place he'd rather be. He wished the heavy wood of his chair would fall away beneath him and leave him there.

This was his secret.

After a few minutes, he opened his eyes, nudged his chair back another centimeter from the room's center, retreating further between the drape and his mother's fern. She had told him this would be something like a bar-mitzvah, but it reminded him more of a wake. A hundred faces around him, like porcelain masks suspended from the ceiling smiling the same, slight smile and Adam wondered, as he had done before, if they were all second cousins in Orem or something. Or maybe it was a Mormon thing, he thought. His mother and father were affecting the same subdued expression and they had only been Mormons for a few hours and weren't anybody's second cousin's. Not anyone's here anyway.

He wished Uncle Isaac were there.

On Thursday night, Adam had waited shoeless on the hall carpet without switching on the light and listened to Isaac's voice, a baritone like psalms and the scent of chamomile tea. Isaac had promised Adam's mother he'd come for the

reception after the baptisms on Saturday. He would come only because it was important to her and he was her brother, Adam had heard him say. But Adam also seemed to hear what Isaac had not said. Wasn't it enough that she'd married Adam's father (a Catholic)? Enough that she chose to turn her back to tradition? To let go of her family? Everyone but Isaac. Wasn't it enough? Did she have to renounce everyone and everything they had ever been to become, of all things, a Mormon? Adam would never have said so to his mother or his father but he wondered a similar thing.

Adam didn't like Mormons. Hadn't since his family had first come to this place when he was four. He recalled the circle of hostile faces, tribal and terrifying. Four and five and six year olds, they were beautiful. He remembered the sharp sting of the roadside. He remembered the sticky twang of the spring on the gate to his back yard and the latch too high for him to reach. He'd picked pebbles from the furrows in his hands for half an hour and tried not to drip tears into them. He did not leave his back yard again for months. In the eight years that followed, Adam had only learned to trust one or two of them, and still never in a group. Uncle Isaac had explained that there were other places in the country where people were mostly Jews or Catholics, and that they behaved as badly as the Mormons Adam had found here.

"They are not bad people," Isaac had told him, "that's just the sort of thing that happens when all those people get together, thinking the same way about so many things. So many things that sometimes they forget there is any other way to think."

By twelve, never having been to any of those places, Adam learned to imitate Mormons. He'd learned early on what to say and do and not to say and do. Their buzz-words, their slangs, their sensitivities. Learning to identify things like which neighborhoods belonged to which "wards". Nobody ever asked where you lived, they asked what ward you were in. And if you couldn't tell them, didn't even know what a ward was, everybody knew about it and the whispering and giggling would start. And explaining that you were a Catholic or a Jew, and Adam wasn't really sure that he was either one, could earn you a fat lip on the playground.

And if, during a game of baseball, some kid popped a fly ball in your direction and you lifted your mitt and looked up into the sky and the sun got in your eyes and you missed the ball and it hit you smack on the corner of your eye and gave it three week's worth of black and blue and green and you screamed "Jesus Christ!" they acted like you personally had driven one or two of the nails into His hands yourself.

He knew one cool Mormon, at least, one you didn't have to pretend anything around. One that was better than anything in the whole world. Adam wished again that he was somewhere else with that someone else.

As Adam's attention drifted from the room he gazed out the window, saw Isaac's black and silver head of hair crossing the street half-way down the block. Isaac wore a dark wool jacket over wide, squared shoulders—shoulders that Adam remembered riding on a hundred times before he got too big and Isaac too old. Adam remembered the time he'd gotten really, really sick in those piggy-back days. He'd spent several weeks in the hospital with meningitis and fevers that looked like sharks

on the walls and lumpy shadows that lumbered around the room half the night and felt as if the kind of plaster of Paris they used for making handprints for Mother's Day was stuck all over his body all the time. He had been afraid and unable to move his arms and legs or even lift his head sometimes and the memory seemed more like gauze on his eyes than anything else. Adam remembered only one thing clearly. Isaac's face on the other side of the oxygen tent, eyes rippling like water behind the plastic.

Adam's mother opened the door for Isaac and wrapped both her arms around his neck and kissed his cheek and wept big, quiet tears that she wiped quickly from the corners of her eyes. She was saying something over and over to Isaac and Adam realized then that she had been afraid he would not come.

Isaac was saying something back to her that Adam could neither read nor guess but from all the way across the room he could see the warm tones of reassurance that only his Uncle could give, humming like a lullaby off his skin, his shirt and tie. Adam watched it wrap around his mother like the edge of sleep and she smiled a simple, contented smile—all her tears dry. For a moment she was more beautiful than anything Adam had ever seen. Isaac could do that to you, Adam knew.

Isaac turned his head, looked past Adam's mother and Adam knew he was looking for him. He knew Isaac wouldn't come and sit with him and talk until after he'd been introduced to all his mother's friends and made enough pleasant chit-chat that he could slip away unnoticed and give Adam his undivided attention. But he always found Adam first with his eyes, nodding as if to say: it's you I've come to see.

With the turn of his uncle's head, Adam saw the kippah he wore today. Adam knew he wore one sometimes all day long on Saturdays, but the particular kippah Isaac wore made Adam look a second and third time just to be sure. He remembered how his uncle's voice had softened and thinned when he'd first told him the story, like the night-breeze in the eaves just out Adam's window. He did not quite understand the sadness in his uncle's eyes at moments like that, in the midst of stories about people Adam had never met and bits and pieces of lives lived out long before Adam's had even begun, but Adam could picture his uncle in that other world as Isaac talked. To Adam it was a place and time that felt a million miles from anywhere, those times before the war, times Adam could only imagine. Isaac was younger then than Adam was now, he'd told him as he stood holding the kippah in both hands. Adam could almost hear the crackle of the fire on that cold night—in February or was it March, yes March, Isaac had recalled. He had watched his grandmother's hands joining four white triangles of cloth with a needle and thread for her husband. A gift, who remembers what for.

Isaac pressed it into Adam's palms then without letting it go, absently fingered the braided pattern of gold thread embroidered in a delicate chain of trim all the way around. And Adam tried not to shake or cry or think that he was touching Isaac's soul or the soul of Isaac's father or Isaac's grandfather with the pads of his fingers, afraid he might leave prints in the rough of the weave. Isaac never wore it except on special occasions, the most special occasions, the ones when Isaac's eyes would deepen, grow

glassy and seem sometimes to leave this world altogether. Adam was more than a little surprised that today of all days might be considered such an occasion.

Their glances met at that moment and Adam felt the instant somewhere between his breastbone and his navel, like a tumbler dropping into place in a lock. And he knew he was going to tell his uncle today. Knew he couldn't keep it from coming out of his mouth.

His uncle turned away then to begin the introductions waiting at his mother's arm.

Adam stared at the wall, at the fern, at the floor. The sun cast the shadow of one frond over another, a pattern like the criss-crossing of cobweb on the floor. He could not help thinking about his secret. Really wanted to think of nothing else at all. They'd met on the first day of school in Mr. Healy's English class and hadn't stopped talking since. They talked in the cafeteria over cartons of milk and fish sticks, or sloppy joes, or mulligan stews. They laughed after school on the short-cut through Stratton's apple orchard, twiggy and soft-soiled and smelling of fermenting fruit. They rendezvoused two and three times a week at the Y, chased each other around the pool and drip-dried their upper halves on the shallow end with their legs still knee-deep in the water. On Saturdays, they rode Schwimms to the library and giggled in the stacks until the librarian told them to go home. They explored the old abandoned cannery and told each other things they'd never told anyone else in all their lives on the way there and back on Smoker's trail. Then two weeks ago, the kiss—sudden and

lingering on his lips and Adam knew he'd never be the same again. Didn't want to be the same. Not ever.

He'd been lost in his thoughts far away from the reception for a long time when it happened, just as he knew it would.

"So, Adam, how's it going?" It was his neighbor from caddy-corner across the street. "I suppose you'll be next in line in a few weeks or so, huh?"

Adam didn't bother answering him except for a guttural noise of disgust that rolled over his tongue, past his lips before he made it out of the room, and he remembered again how much he thought the word "convert" sounded like "invert" and "pervert" to him the first time he'd heard it used in that way. He was almost to the end of the hall, twisting the knob of his bedroom door, when he heard his uncle's voice.

"I can tell how much you're enjoying the festivities, Adam. Maybe you could tone down the enthusiasm a little."

Adam turned around and laughed. "I can't believe I have to be here for this," he said.

"It's important to your mother," Isaac replied.

"I know, I know. It's just..."

"Yes. It's a little like that for me, too," Isaac said. "You know, I'm very proud of you. Having the sheer unmitigated audacity and independence not to jump on the band wagon when your family has jumped before you, that takes something very special."

“It really isn’t that big of a deal,” Adam replied.

“Oh, I think it is,” Isaac said. “I have something for you.”

Adam felt the moment shift, as if he were watching seasons change in his uncle’s deepening eyes. He said nothing, waited for Isaac to fill the space curling like ivy over the seconds that passed between them. Isaac reached up then and took the kippah from his head in one smooth motion and placed it on the crown of Adam’s head.

“This is for you,” he said, “you are strong, strong enough to wear it. Your mother has forgotten, and she isn’t the only one. I’ve watched it over the years. More and more Jews marrying goyim. More and more children forgetting the traditions of their fathers and mothers. Maybe someday, in ten generations or twenty, there will be no more Jews and all of the generations before us will be forgotten. But that day isn’t today, Adam. This is for you. It’s your job, your gift to remember, just to remember, for this generation that we are Jews.”

For a moment Adam was afraid. Who was he? Who was he to remember? A Jew who went to Christmas mass, the son of Mormons, he could not read Torah to save his soul or the souls of the hundred generations and five thousand years of history that was suddenly his to carry. Isaac’s face cracked into a wide happy smile as if he knew what Adam was thinking. He laughed and Adam knew then that it would be all right and that whatever it meant to remember for this generation he could do it.

“Come on,” Isaac said. “Let’s get some punch.”

Adam walked to the dining room proud and happy and a little defiant, Uncle Isaac a half step behind him. A woman Adam did not recognize stood sentinel over the punch bowl and smiled at Isaac and Adam as she wielded the ladle. She stared at the kippah on Adam's head, but said nothing. Adam was grateful, a little afraid of the things he might have said back to her. Isaac took two cups of punch from the woman, motioned toward the glass doors behind her and Adam followed him out onto the patio.

The air was cool enough outside to keep his parents' guests in doors, but the sun was warm on Adam's skin and seemed to catch in the crisp orangine leaves of the elms as if they were made of stained glass.

"You know, Adam, I've been watching you this afternoon."

"Then you must know I'm bored out of my skull," he complained.

Isaac smiled. "No that's not the impression I got. You looked like you had a lot on your mind."

Adam felt his cheeks suddenly warm, took a long drink of bright red punch, said nothing.

"If I didn't know better," Isaac prodded, "I'd say you were a boy in love."

Adam tried to move his lips, but they did not seem to be working properly. He took another long swallow from his glass.

"Okay, Adam," Isaac laughed. "Who is she? Tell me her name."

"It's not a she, Isaac, it's a boy. His name is Travis."

There was no sound for a long moment and Adam looked up at his uncle.

There was only dead air on Isaac's face, as if he had been frozen in time, in a place where words were never breathed and thoughts had never existed at all. Then Adam caught the sudden sharp wince in his left eye as if he'd cut his hand on the edge of a page in his favorite book.

"I'm sorry," Adam said instinctively and for the first time since discovering his secret was afraid.

"No," Isaac said. "Never. Never be sorry."

But Adam could see the rabbinical dissensions of Torah and Talmud in his uncle's eyes. He heard the story of David and Jonathan interpreted and reinterpreted and he wasn't sure if the thoughts were in his own head or his uncle's. Adam was afraid. His vision blurred through the moisture gathering in his eyes like the ripples of a clear plastic tent. Isaac's soft, sad eyes on the other side. The Rabbis opined then and Isaac took him in his arms, close, closer than he had ever been before.

"Never be sorry," Isaac said again. "God has given all of us something to do, to be, and it is for no man to question what God has made for another. Never be sorry," he said. "I'm not." And Isaac sighed a long slow sigh and placed his hand over the kippah on Adam's head as if to say that is where it belonged.

## Uncle

Zack and I were debate partners, which was neither an accident nor a tactical pairing—not for the debate team anyway. It was our excuse. No. No, let's not mince words. Let's call it what it was. A lie.

You learn this skill early in life. Lying, dodging the interdictions of well-meaning parents who know danger when they see it coming, and Zack's parents seemed to have had 20/20 vision. I'd mastered the arts of silence and subterfuge many years before, navigating my way underneath the radar of my father's fits in front of the evening news. "Line 'em up against the wall and shoot 'em down like dogs!" he'd shout. Later in life, I understood this to be nothing more than my father's peculiar hyperbole, but when I was a kid all the pounding on the arms of the La-z-boy as if Mr. Cronkite might hear him through the glass left me with a clear vision of him loading up his 30.06. It was best, I was convinced at an early age, that he never suspected I belonged to the enemy's camp. Zack's parents were less prone to yelling and were keen observers of adolescent character. They required much subtler strategies, but we were up to the challenge.

That's where the debate team came in. In addition to the one hour of class a day it guaranteed us, it required endless after school prep sessions, perpetual library expeditions on the weekend, and hours and hours of travel to and from cities where we never had to worry about who might be around the next corner. We knew as long as

Zack's parents continued to believe that his debate partner was another freshman named Sean Miller (who had, in reality, been kicked off the team at the beginning of the year) everything would be fine.

It was a Saturday in October and that tournament trip began, as they all seemed to do, with a heavy-lidded bus ride in a pre-dawn chill. These times were my favorite. With strategic placement in a well-chosen seat I could hold Zack in my arms with no one the wiser, unless they stood directly over us. With just the right arrangement of our bodies, the slightest sleepy shift could restore the thin veneer of innocence to our "unholy postures" even then.

We had a history of bus rides, Zack and I. It was on a bus I first caught that look in his eyes as he gazed into mine over simple conversation—a wide-eyed, flush-cheeked, breathy engagement that neither of us really understood until it was far too late. It was on a bus that we had exchanged the only kind of promise we knew how to make to each other in those days: one day, when we were both grown and married, when we each of us had children of our own, we would teach them to call the other man uncle. It was a beautiful promise. It was a lie.

It was a lie like a lot of others we told ourselves. The lies about close friendship, about the things that "just happen" on some nights when you're alone together in the dark, the lies of accidents and just-by-chance that you tell yourselves don't really mean anything at all. Mostly, though, it was a lie that that was enough.

Neither of us knew that then, of course, in spite of the visceral suspicion that the end had long since happened somewhere out in space and was only waiting for us

to notice in order to secure a landing. But we didn't waste precious time thinking about that sort of thing. We worried about evidence, prima facie arguments, room numbers. There was a bright grid of morning sun mapped out on the floor of room 216 when we arrived. The desks and chairs had been cleared for the match that day, giving the room a wide open feel. It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day. A promising day. But for some reason I couldn't quite figure out, the two leather boxes I carried, full of index cards neatly tabbed and labeled, seemed heavier than they had been the day before, and letting go of their handles didn't seem to relieve the weight from my arms and shoulders. I started laying out our boxes for the easiest access during the round.

"Do you think I should get glasses," Zack asked me, arranging briefs and legal pads.

"You should get a clue."

"I'm thinking I should get glasses," he said leaning back in his chair.

"Why?"

"Like John Lennon glasses, what do you think?"

"You don't need glasses."

"So, I don't need a power tie either, but..." He swept his arms open in front of him, completing the ta-da! gesture with a flourish of his bangs.

"You know, buying glasses you don't need is a perfect example of the kind American excess and consumerism that—"

"Oooo, glad I brought it up. How 'bout them Sonics?"

“What?”

“I just wanna know if you think I’d look good in a pair of glasses.”

“Sure, why not.”

“Thanks, you’re a big help.”

The judge entered unceremoniously, stubbing the toe of his blue Keds as he came through the door. He wore chalk board grey polyester pants and a tight white oxford with the collar open. His hair was brown and greasy and he had large nostrils that looked too often picked. He chose a seat near the farthest wall, took out a pad of paper and a pen. His right index finger seemed to drift instinctively toward his nose and then as if remembering that other people were in the room he folded his hands on the desk in front of him and waited.

“Glasses would look good on you,” I whispered.

Zack bugged his eyes at me and made a twist of his head in the direction of the judge. I grinned a devilish grin at him and he giggled back at me. The team in the affirmative—a crisp, blond and beautiful boy and girl—came through the door as if they’d practiced entering rooms for weeks ahead of time. They smiled coy smiles and gave the judge polite upward nods like they’d just spotted him across the net at the country club.

“I thought we’d never find this place,” the young woman said, flashing a wide, white Pearl-Drops smile at the judge, at Zack, at me.

“Fashionably late,” the boy explained tipping his head toward us.

“Sorry,” the young woman quipped unapologetically. There was something

children-of-the-damnedish about the closeness in the hue of their hair and the etch of their cheeks and chins, something about the dye-lot perfection of their blue blazers and khaki skirt and slacks, something about the coordinated set of their shoulders as if they had shared a grandfather or great-grandfather with names like Rothschild or Carnegie. They laid their ox-boxes on the floor near their ankles, arranged their folders and legal pads in front of them with a casual deliberation. The young woman sat. The boy reached out a pale thin hand to draw open the black leather face of his folder, fingered the gold emboss of his school as he pulled the covers back, took in a single breath. We poised our pens.

“Last year,” the Carnegie boy began at lightning speed, “the federal government budgeted \$17.9 billion on drug control for interdiction, prosecution, international law enforcement, prisons, treatment, prevention, and related items...”

It was a familiar case, one we were well prepared to refute. Briefs and evidence on everything from attitudinal inherency to extra-topicality. These rounds were the best. No scrambling to construct pseudo-sophisticated arguments, no out of context quotes you’d hope no one would catch the fudge on, this was clockwork and it put the whole affair in the hands of style. These were the debates that turned on a particular cock of your eyebrow during a cross-examination, the lilted conclusion of a rebuttal. The trick now was to divide your gaze—keep one eye on the flow of ink on the yellow legal pad and the other on the judge. It was all in the read and play of his features. I caught Zack’s expression out of the corner of my eye—he was at it too, calibrating the judge’s tells as if he were a mark at a poker game.

Carnegie was putting on quite a show; he whipped his bangs out of his eyes at key moments, fanned the fingers of his left hand in quick flares to point up the “moral imperative” of his case, or snapped his fingernails against his folder on the first syllable of each word as he emphasized: “This was *43% of all highway fatalities.*” The little nods the judge gave as he watched Carnegie told me he was not wholly unimpressed, but I knew by the time he lifted his hand to signal the last thirty seconds of the first affirmative that Zack and I had read him far better than Carnegie had. Carnegie had missed the lean in, the sharpening of the judge’s eye; he didn’t play to the wrinkles that came and went on the judge’s forehead or the rise and fall of the sharp point in his left eyebrow. Carnegie’s voice pitched higher in a last fast push to reach his conclusion before time ran out, then he lapsed into the hauteur of a matador, one foot on the bull. There was a final flurry of ink, dots and crosses, then silence.

Zack took his time rising for the cross-examination; he gathered up his pad and pen with thoughtful consideration. On his feet standing next to Carnegie, he made no attempt to match the hubris of the boy, to challenge the privilege of his ancestry; Zack fell instead into an easy rhythm paced precisely to affect unnerving earnestness. His questions were simple, demure—shaped in the slow, round tones reserved for the old guy who lives next door, who leans a heavy elbow on the fence post Sunday afternoons, chats about gardenias, sparkplugs, the lawn mower.

“You justify your plan for increased freedom for law-enforcement agencies by claiming that crime increased 16% last year?”

“Yes, and not only last year; it has been a steady trend.”

“And the source of your evidence was?”

“The Boston Globe.”

“And where did the Globe get its figures?”

Carnegie consulted his notes: “From, uh, let me see. From the FBI. Yeah, from the FBI report.”

“From the FBI report. Thank you, we’ll come back to that later. Now...” and Zack wore away at him with his honesty, his unobtrusive authority, slowly setting him up for the onslaught that was to come.

Then it was my turn. I came off the bench like Joe Friday: modest moxie, non-sense rapid fire, and just-the-facts-ma’am. I launched into a spread of arguments so wide the affirmative team could not begin to address them all without sacrificing the buttress they’d need to withstand a second offensive on their plan. I was moving too fast, I knew, for any single point to be absorbed by the judge, but I could see that he was eating up persona and for now that was all that mattered.

When Carnegie got up again for the cross-ex he brandished a smile I almost found attractive, but there was a nearly imperceptible lift of the muscles beside his nose that gave the almost perfect curve of his lips a hint of smugness that I suspected even his mother would like to slap. I gave it up for him, though, let him feel like he was bullying me with his questions without surrendering an inch.

Rothschild was next. The nap of her wool blazer looked freshly groomed and she wore a fleur-de-lis pin in her lapel with a flat brushed-gold finish that matched the buttons down her front and on her sleeves. She paused for just a moment before she

began, ostensibly to confirm that she was not starting before the clock, but the hesitation was clearly intended to provide eye contact with the judge. It was, however, the casual twist of her head just then as she tucked a loose lock behind a tiny ear that revealed her mastery. A subtle, animal gesture—exposing the neck with an expressionless face, fingers lingering slightly against the lobe, the perkied tautness it drew across the bodice of her blouse. Her words were clipped and preened with surgical precision as she rattled through her speech. The rich alto rise and fall seemed to hint at things she would never dare to speak of. She went on and on like that, keeping the judge's eyes firmly in the grip of her own.

“While it is true that the additional powers granted to enforcement agencies could lead to abuses of suspects' rights, neither policy makers nor the courts are irrational and implementation as outlined by our plan would prevent any breeches of the rights guaranteed under the Fourth Amendment. To wit, subpoint C...”

Worse still, her polemics were flawless. I hated her. My only consolation was watching the seconds peel off of the clock one after another. Three minutes, two-thirty, two-fifteen. I counted my breaths. The arrhythmic careening of Zack's thigh against mine assured me that I was not alone in my nervousness. This was the defining moment in a spread and decoy strategy. A barrage of arguments barely touched on, too many to effectively refute, emphasis on large points we'd later concede in hopes of capturing and discarding whole chunks of the affirmative's time. If the feint was a success, we could follow up with a full scale assault on issues they'd have forgotten to address, strike hard with our best evidence, the meatiest impacts

sandbagged for rebuttals. Rothschild was good, very good, but she had been forced to pick and choose her arguments. Thirty, twenty, ten, five, time. She had taken the bait. I was careful not to gloat during the cross-examination.

Then Zack was on his feet again, a guileless smile on boyish, bumpkin lips. He, too, paused for a moment, made eye contact with the judge, the faint lift in the center of his eyebrows offering the kind of sincerity that no one else could come up with. He began the attack. I tried not to watch him as he spoke; I tried to watch the judge's reactions, the slow desperation I knew would be coming over Carnegie and Rothschild's faces. I tried to keep my eyes on the paper in front of me. But Zack was nothing short of brilliant. A medium conjuring up the dead—Pericles, Webster, Churchill. I couldn't help myself. It was the sound of his voice, the familiarity of its texture and timbre. Or maybe it was just overconfidence, a victory lap before the race was done. I watched the movement of his jaw, the curve of his neck, the camber of his chest beneath his shirt and let our arguments be forgotten—for a long while aware of little more than the redness of his soft lips. I sat that way a long time, listening to the cadence of him, following the flex of his hands in gesture, the easy jaunt of his hips, the gibbous pull of wool across his buttock. And for just a moment, I did not care about all the unspoken rules I'd spent a lifetime learning all too well. Those rules that made the lies easy to tell, easy to believe.

Then in the periphery of my attention I heard Zack prodding the judge "to consider one last, immutable fact," a favorite wrap-up phrase I recalled from nearly half the speeches I'd ever heard Zack deliver. That was when I remembered where I

was and why, and looked first at the legal pad on the table in front of me, then instinctively toward the man with the ballots and the watch. I'm uncertain what it was I thought I'd see, he was an adjudicator after all; it was his job to sit in judgment. Zack saw it too, of course; he must have seen the gavel fall somewhere in the middle of his argument as he watched the wave of recognition precipitate on the judge's face, an expression almost like a child swallowing castor oil, bad eggs.

The rebuttals were a bloodbath. I was the perfect hatchet-man, wielding ruthless and unmercifully cold logic. Carnegie's voice began to crack in the middle of his speech as he realized he'd been had; he lost his head somewhere in the second sub-point of his first contention and fell into a novice pattern: empty words, debater's jargon, repetition.

"There is simply no way the disad outweighs the clear benefit provided under our plan. There's just no way."

The debacle that followed would leave poor Rothschild with an extra member on the opposing team and she could not stand up against all three of us. The defeat was decisive, one for the books, and Zack and I both knew it meant absolutely nothing. The judge wouldn't even look at us on his way across the room. Rothschild saw it, too, though she probably didn't understand it, but she knew how to interpret the bashful smile the judged had aimed her direction as he crossed the room. She was careful not to smirk until he was safely out the door.

Zack didn't say a word to me on the way to the next round and I thought he was angry with me; I thought he knew I'd somehow queered the pitch. I bit my

tongue.

The second round was a disaster. I found myself debating like I'd lived my life till then without knowing it: full of conviction, of passionate logic, but unable to arrange all the evidence in front of me into any kind of pattern that revealed meaning.

I made no attempt to gather up our things when it was done. I didn't watch Zack as he did. I didn't care about the other team's disdain as they packed up their boxes and folders and files and strode out the door as if it were a sunset they could crook white hats against.

When they were gone, Zack sat on the edge of the table beside me, placed a warm hand on mine and toyed with the nails of my middle and index fingers with his thumb. "It wasn't so bad."

I tried to sigh, but it came out as a single small guffaw that broke dry and humorless on the air.

"C'mon man, you win some, you lose some."

I smiled, then began to laugh. It was such a stupid thing to say; Zack's face disintegrated into laughter. Still, a dark malaise hung over me. Neither of us really understood where it came from, but I think we both knew it didn't really have anything to do with the debates.

"Let's get lunch," he said and kissed my ear.

Outside, there was a vast migration of boys and girls toting ox-boxes and briefcases in the direction of fast food. Huddled bands tugged coats tightly around

themselves, but the endless gust seemed to know, in spite of all the layers, exactly how to find their nakedness beneath. We fell in several yards behind a group of kids whose animated conversation we couldn't hear through the wind.

Thick clouds made a cold near-dusk out of the midday sky, but I was happy anyway walking beside Zack. Standing shoulder to shoulder, I watched his sandy hair in the squall, a chill-pink gaunting his cheeks, beautiful. He caught me staring at him from the corner of his eye, tried to conceal an elfin grin, then broke into a chant of German verbs we'd studied together for Herr Meyer's fourth period quiz. It was a macabre singsong and I couldn't help but join in, its meaninglessness weaving a spell between us.

“Spüren, spürt, spürte, hat gespürt. Steigen, steigt, stieg, bin gestiegen.”

For a moment it seemed as if we were alone on the sidewalk, just he and I in the open wind swinging arms and legs in a senseless syncopation. On our way to nowhere fast and happier still to never reach it.

“Tragen, trägt, trug, hat getragen. Träumen, träumt, träumte, hat geträumt.”

The chant wound down into an intense whisper that ended just as Zack reached his hand out for the restaurant door. There was a last brief flash of wild, toothy smiles across the cold rush between us and we went in.

It was a madhouse inside, shouting and jostling without the slightest semblance of order. There were people shoulder-to-shoulder, wall-to-wall and the place reminded me of a documentary I'd once seen of cattle headed to auction. We were trying to elbow our way to what looked as though it might be the end of a line when a

familiar face thrust out a hand that flailed wildly in our direction. It was Rothschild in the middle of the madness and she was waving at us to join her in line as if we were old friends. We did not refuse.

She was, evidently, a practiced gregarian. She asked our names and laid a hand on Zack's shoulder when she repeated his back to him. Hers was Sarah Hale and she came from Edgewood High, played volleyball in season, hated Carnegie, cheerleaders, and being stranded on a bus for tournaments.

"Congrats on that first round, by the way," she said almost as if she meant it. "You guys really cleaned up on that one." Her pretense of humility left a tackiness in the back of my throat.

There was something intriguing about her, though, something about the division of her attention increasingly weighted toward Zack and the dilation of her pupils when he spoke. I had to admire the ease with which conversation came out of her mouth, the fullness of her lips when she smiled, the flush it brought to the face of boys around her. I wished she were dead.

Maybe it was the volume of all the voices around us at that particular moment, or maybe it was too few hours of sleep the night before. All at once my ears gave way and I couldn't hear a thing. Somewhere inside of me I thought I ought to panic, to pound the sides of my head, to shriek until blood burst from the drums of my ears, but I didn't care. Instead, I found myself looking at the two of them and wondering if it would be her one day, or someone like her. I watched them that way for a very long time, like a silent matinee.

Sound washed into my head again just as we reached the counter.

“Gimme a quarter-pounder and a Diet Coke,” Rothschild was saying. I watched her count money into the cashier’s hand with her peculiar poise, a nod, a showing of polished teeth, then she made a sideways movement like the steps of a crab and waited for her food. Zack ordered for both of us without asking what I’d have. I watched the puzzle of it catch in Rothschild’s eyebrows; her glance darted briefly back and forth between us before she gathered up her tray and shouted over the din: “I’ll scout out a table for us.”

I must have looked frightened, or maybe Zack just knew the way he sometimes did because he turned to me then, smiled the faintest smile—a certain softness in his eyes.

“Hey,” he called to the kid behind the register without looking at him, “can we get that to go?”

The storm had gathered an awful momentum while we were in the restaurant and it looked as if there’d be a surly burst at any moment. We started back up the street, leaning into the wind. A half-block from the school grounds the rain finally broke. We tried our best sprint through the downpour. As we reached the edge of the parking lot I felt Zack tugging my arm. He was trying to pull me in the direction of the double row of buses that were parked only a few feet from us and easily fifty yards nearer than the school. I decided he had the right idea. It took us more time than we’d figured to find our bus, and when we got there we hadn’t counted on the door being

closed.

“Come on,” I said, turning back toward the school.

“Forget that,” Zack said. “I’m not running any farther in this crap.” He executed a flying kick worthy of Kwai Chang Caine right at the door’s edge that succeeded in popping it just far enough for us to pull it the rest of the way open. Inside, we laughed and swore and pushed the door shut against the cold. We lugged our things toward the back of the bus and hefted them onto the seats and plopped down across the aisle.

“That was nuts, man,” he complained, shaking water from his head like a cocker spaniel. We laughed and dug out our lunches, surprisingly dry inside wet bags. Zack took off his long coat and spread it in the aisle like a picnic blanket and we kicked off soggy shoes and settled in as if it were an August afternoon. We opened paper cartons and stabbed straws out of their skins and into lids, talked over each other’s words and mouthfuls of burgers and Cokes. I didn’t know where the words came from when I said it, wished immediately I’d swallowed them along with the pickles and onions and sesame seeds.

“So what’d you think of Sarah?”

“Sarah? That girl?” he said. “I don’t know. What do you mean, what’d I think of her?”

“You know... did you like her?”

“Did I like her?”

“I mean, she seemed really into you, and all...” A French fry slapped my

cheek, tumbled into my lap. “What the hell was that for?” I said.

The second fry struck me square in the nose.

“Knock it off.”

“You knock it off.” A third stuck in my hair.

“Stop it,” I said brushing the top of my head.

“You stop it.”

“You stop it.”

“You.” I threw a fry toward Zack’s face. His jaw darted and snapped and the end of the fry stuck out of his teeth for a split second like a rodent’s tail. He gave it a quick, exaggerated chew, flashed a Cheshire grin. “Yum,” he said like an idiot.

“Pfff!” I dismissed him.

“You’re such a girl sometimes.”

“I’m not a girl sometimes. I just...”

“Course, that’s not all bad.” He gripped my nipple between his thumb and forefinger hard through my shirt.

“Ow, you son-of-a... stop that!” I slapped furiously at his hand.

He laughed.

“I think she’s the culmination of an Aryan eugenics program.”

“Who?”

“She and whatssizname, too. Didn’t they look a little too related?”

“Maybe they’re cousins.”

“Or pod people. They’re the wave of the future. The dream of the Third

Reich.”

“Don’t do that,” he said.

“What?”

“That stuck-up, bitchy Statler and Waldorf thing you do.”

“What’s Statler and Waldorf?”

“You know, Statler and Waldorf. The old guys in the balcony. You know, the muppets.”

“I hate the muppets.”

“You hate the muppets, how can you hate the muppets? What kind of person hates the muppets?”

“I guess the *stuck up* kind.”

“C’mon man, you know what I mean.”

He chewed his burger. I pulled a fry from its carton tossed it in his direction.

“Don’t,” he said, so I didn’t.

“You and Rach going to Sadie Hawkins tonight?” he asked, and maybe it was as innocent as he tried to make it sound.

“Next week,” I said flatly.

“You sure? Matt and Ursula’ve been talking about it all week.”

“It’s next week,” I said again.

“I don’t think so.”

“It’s next fucking week, okay?”

A full minute passed before he spoke again. “You guys fighting?”

“No,” I said, and it was true, or kind of true. We were speaking at the moment, which is what he really wanted to know. We hadn’t really ever fought, Rachel and I. Everyone knew Rachel was my “girlfriend,” and we did have regular bouts of not speaking to each other (which could last sometimes two, sometimes three weeks at a time,) but these episodes never once started with an argument. It happened more like this instead: one day Rachel would come up to me in the hall or in front of the school and I would pretend she wasn’t there or I’d see her but be too indignant to speak. If she dared to ask why I was behaving like that, she’d get nothing but a look of pure disgust as if it was *too* obvious what she’d done to deserve that kind of treatment. Of course, I would never deign to name it. She would know the episode was over when I would acknowledge her presence again off-hand and out of the blue several days later. We didn’t talk about it; we just pretended it hadn’t happened.

It wasn’t that I wanted to punish her for the unbearable weight of expectation that her just existing in the world meant for me. I just didn’t know what else to do. I just didn’t know how to get away from the inevitability of it all without tipping my hand; it was the only thing I could come up with to make some tiny space to breath in until I could face another day—like a firing squad.

The bus seemed very cold then and my burger suddenly tasted as if it had turned between bites. I dropped it back into the bag with a moist thud and leaned back against hard bench legs. The rigid steel pushed against my ribs until it hurt; I didn’t move. After a few minutes, Zack gathered what was left of the wrappers and cartons and crammed them down into his cup until he could recap the lid. He knelt up onto

his shins lining up his right kneecap down the center of the aisle with a kind of dwarfed strut that I knew was meant to get my attention. In one fluid motion, he cocked both hands up just above his forehead holding the cup with his fingertips, and released the shot in a long arc toward the front of the bus. He held the pose of his follow through just long enough for the packed paper cup to bang hard against the inside wall of the small waste basket by the driver's seat, then he gripped the air hard in both fists and gave it a good shake.

"Money!" he said with gritted teeth.

I said nothing.

"Rough crowd," he said. He settled in next to me then, took my hand. "I didn't mean that stuff I said before, about being pretentious."

"I thought I was stuck up."

"I was just giving you a hard time."

"It's okay," I said. "It's the truth."

We sat there on the floor of the bus for a long time without saying a word.

"Third round will be starting soon," he said at last.

"I... I don't want to go," I said.

There was a faint electricity in his reply: "Me neither," and he twisted his chin around mine, found my lips with his. He pushed me down with gentle, insistent hands and I offered no resistance, gave way to the weight of him in the cold, the salt of his skin, the breath between us. It always began as a tenderness, that untamed, unchristian thing we kept falling into, but it always worked itself into a kind of rage, a fury like

Picts at war.

In the aftermath, we lay braided together in the aisle, the rattle of heavy rain on metal and glass everywhere around us, its patter unable to drown out the thumping in his chest against my ear. There was an excruciation in me, a joy or an ache of bones, I could not tell. I tried not to think; I tried to stay in the moment instead, there with him where I always wanted to be. But the terrible sadness overwhelmed me, currents from too deep, the ugly pang of his loving me. As if it were natural, as if we were born to it, as if it were the way things ought to be. As if it were real and not some game boys play 'til they know better, as if it were right, my being there in the corners of his flesh: warm and at home and unalone and suddenly weeping for a different world.

“What’s wrong?” he asked me again and again, but I couldn’t make words, and finally he resigned himself to comforting me with his body, rocking and patting and caressing. I lay clinging to him, pressing into his flesh, dumping out hot tears and mucous, unable to see or hear beneath the implosive force of my own skin. It must have been terrible for him.

By the time the driver and the rest of our team arrived we were long since dressed and respectable again, and everybody accepted my depression as just a bad day of debating, and Zack’s refusal to remove his arm from around me was interpreted as nothing more than the determined compassion of a friend. I made the long ride home in silence, feeling tattered and halved.

When we stopped in front of our school two hours later, Zack finally let me go, responding to the sudden instincts of survival. He would have to beat the rush for the

door; he would have to be safely taxied off by his mother or his father or his brother before an impatient bus driver forced me into the open.

We worked a practiced protocol of liftings and heapings and tuckings and he was off. But he turned without warning in the aisle where we'd made love, a ferocity in the set of his eyes, and for a single, terrified moment I thought he would kiss me there in the open for everyone to see.

"I love you," he spat through tightened teeth and palsied lips, trying desperately to be heard and not heard in the chaos of the bus. Then turning suddenly, was gone.

"I love you," I whispered back to the space where he had been and waited for the bus to clear.

At home, I sat on the floor of the shower that I'd run hot without turning on the light. I waited for steamy tears, for gasps in the dark, for snotty sobs, but found only exhaustion. I might have stayed there all night, drifted into sleep until the shower ran cold, or drowned in teaspoons of water. But there was a familiar door-pounding that could only belong to my mother.

"Hey, are you in there?" she cried. "Rachel's here! Aren't you ready yet? There are people waiting in the car."

"What?"

"Hurry!"

"Okay, okay."

I shut off the water and stood in the unlit stall, listening to the dripping off my skin. Zack had been right, of course, tonight was Sadie Hawkins.

In the car it was worse than I had imagined. We were tripling with Rachel's friend Liz and Liz's friend Darcy. Junior girls who, in hopes of climbing into new social strata, had asked out certain senior boys, who had accepted in hopes of climbing into them. We freshmen were just along for the ride.

Elizabeth Loew was driving her mother's station wagon with Dean Evans cozied next to her trying to cop a feel around her shoulder and Rachel tucked in next to the passenger door. I shared the backseat with Darcy Donnelly and Parker Kirkpatrick who were already making out as if last call for spawning hours had just been announced.

Rachel was talking in a long unbroken string of words fueled by nervousness and Tab. She talked about everything. About the jeans and halter she'd borrowed for her outfit from a neighbor who listened to country and western on the radio. She talked about a Barbara Cartland novel she'd read and how she'd heard that Barbara Cartland didn't actually write her books but dictated them on cassettes in her study while petting poodles, two and sometimes three books in a week. Talked about the dark brown circles around the new school secretary's eyes, giving her a sickly, aged look because she obviously didn't know how to use shadow and so probably shouldn't try. She talked about Pat Benatar being trained as an opera singer, the uses of Top Ramen, and Mr. Bixby's boils. And many more things I could never have imagined

coming from the lips of a girl I knew dreamed of being the first woman on the Supreme Court and who had the wit and will to pull it off, too, if someone didn't kill her before we reached the restaurant another four miles down the road.

Waiting for a table at Shari's meant Parker and Dean taking over the conversation, discussing games they had seen on television or in person or had played in or something-or-other and involving balls of some sort, the exact variety of which I had not gleaned. Liz and Darcy, all the while draped themselves like epaulets from the boys' shoulders and set about lowering their I.Q.s to half of what I knew them to be. Rachel tried in vain to mimic the poses of her friends and I nodded and smiled and thought a lot about a television show I'd seen years before in which Leonard Nimoy talked for nearly an hour about spontaneous human combustion.

We were seated beside a family of seven who looked like they were dressed for Sadie Hawkins too. Looking around I saw one other pair of daters from our school. The rest of the room was filled with families: thirty and forty-somethings with 2.5 children, or 3.8, or 4.3, but always the same model over and over. Mother, father, daughter, son. And I recognized the familiar pattern at our own table—boy-girl, boy-girl, boy-girl.

A waitress in maroon polyester arrived like a sketch artist at a crime scene, scratching at the details with pencil and paper as we described our food. For Parker it was a steak, medium well, and fries; Dean, spaghetti and garlic bread. Darcy asked for a chef's salad with blue cheese; Liz, a French dip and a cup of noodle soup; Rachel had a fish and chips basket. I ordered chicken fried steak because it was Zack's

favorite.

Murdock High was new that year and boasted the district's only tandem regulation sized basketball courts as if two games played at once might become the sporting standard. They had been decorated with hay bales and corn stocks and a string of paper lanterns along the bleachers that were neatly folded up along the walls. The only light came from four spotlights reflected in a hundred chips off of a disco ball that twisted slowly in the middle of the room and the strings of tiny white Christmas lights that lit the paper lanterns from inside.

The music was being spun a bit too loudly from a mid-court table by a senior named Randy Bobo who I recognized because he was a friend of Zack's brother. I had heard him brag once (while riding in the back seat on the way back from a water park in the days before Zack's parents had forbidden him to see me) that he had the D.J. market pretty much sown up on our side of town. And I remembered Zack that day, bronzing in summer sun, smelling of chlorine and hot skin, a sting along my shoulders from one too many hours out-of-doors that I could not have cared less about riding next to him.

Next to me, Rach was dancing and smiling, and I seemed to be dancing from someplace inside of me I had never found before. An *Elmer's* factory where the hooves and heels of living things were ground into paste, thick and viscous. A barbiturate slow place that made everybody else's face look manically happy and deranged. Then Rachel was yelling something I couldn't make out over the stridence

of *Blue Monday* on the speakers. I shrugged, shook my head. She leaned in so close I could smell the apricot of her shampoo, the cucumber of facial scrub. She shouted toward my ear.

“What’s the matter, are you mad at me?”

“No, nothing’s wrong.”

“You sure? I haven’t heard your usual Howard Cosell blow-by-blow of the evening and it’s starting to scare me.”

“I just had a really long day today. We got creamed at the tournament.”

“Alright,” she said, but I could see she was doubtful.

If it had been Zack there instead of me, he would have known what to say to make it better, and if he didn’t know the words, the tenderness in his tone, the softness behind his eyes would have balméd the moment. All I could do was stare.

“C’mon,” she said and took my hand in hers, a hand so unlike Zack’s in mine. We followed a trail of yellow paper footprints taped and already fraying on the floor that led along the south side of the gym toward the dance studio where the Sadie Hawkins photos were being shot.

There was a line of boys and girls in the stairwell and we ended up behind Todd Zellerbach and Anna Sprengel who’d gone to the same middle school as Rachel and hadn’t seen her since. I leaned against the wall, listening enough to nod or laugh or interject oh-yeahs and reallys in the gaps they’d most likely fit into.

I looked back up the stairway, a sliver of the high school swarm dancing in the doorway. I thought of Zack, for a moment saw the two of us up there in the crowd.

The way the perspiration would have gathered along his hairline, his giddy, boyish grin as he realized and failed to give a damn how stupid he looked dancing to a rhythm his body could never keep. My own face reflected in the blue iris of his gaze. We lingered there for a moment, the two of us on the precipice of might have been, and then were gone, replaced by Noah's two of every kind.

Inside the studio, a photographer had set up an Ozark backdrop and a jungle of umbrella-ed lights. Someone on the student council, probably the same person who'd come up with the paper footprints, had the idea that the standard dance pictures would be more in the spirit of fun if we all pretended they were hill-billy wedding photographs.

Mr. Garber, the Ichabod-looking algebra teacher, had turned a white dress shirt backwards and pinned the lapels of a black suit jacket together to create a clerical collar. He added torn blue jeans, a straw hat, and eyeliner on his teeth for the rustic touch. Beside him, coach Maughn stood barefoot and wearing bib-overalls with no shirt underneath. He held a long strand of wheat in his teeth, and a wooden rifle slung on his shoulder like a golf club.

While the photographer set up and snapped off scenes of Hazard-county bliss with one couple, preacher Garber and the stand-in Pappy to every girl in school warmed up the next. We watched improvised shot-gun weddings played out one after the other, complete with threats and rifle-wavings and Bible-thumpings, and couple after couple whooping and laughing and playing along .

When we got to the front of the line there was a basket of gold painted rings

whose ends did not meet so they could be bent smaller and larger as needed. Rachel, who'd feigned condescension to the whole juvenile thing when we first came in, snatched up two rings with an ardor that surprised me less than it made me aware of the souring contents of my stomach. She sized her ring instantly and when I fumbled with mine she tisked and giggled and did it for me.

It was our turn then and Coach Maughn poked the barrel of his gun into my ribs. He snarled and drawled about 'desonerin his dawder.' We were forced to kneel in front of the preacher like a mob execution while he cracked jokes about marriage and exchanged banter with Rach's Pa. Around Garber's hip and broken by dance bars, I could see my reflection in the stretch of mirror running the length of the wall.

I knelt with my bride's hand in mine, rings on our fingers, a Bible in front of us and a gun at our backs, and I knew this was my future. Wasn't it everyone's after all? I found in my head a mantra whose words I did not understand but clung to anyway: this will all be over soon, this will all be over soon. But I saw endless nights before me of climbing into a bed in which I could do nothing more than sleep. Looking each morning into Rachel's eyes searching for Zack inside. A playing along without mercy and without end.

I swooned, and the air was suddenly motor oil, thick and dark, dripping into my eyes, blackening my vision on every side, snugging it to a point. A line on skin. A pore. A single hair. I felt a recoil in my body then, like the snap at the end of a rope, and recovered my sight.

"Ya'll kin kiss the Braaahd," I heard him say, and turned and laid my lips

against a wall called Rachel, knowing it was like stealing the blood from her veins, the air from her lungs. The Prince's kiss reversed. A senseless killing. And when we stood I could see that the wet on my cheeks impressed them all with how much we were in love.

## A Little Split

I met Jason at the Salt Lake Roasting Company back when it was still down b6+ the courthouse, before the fire. They had good coffee. I was a connoisseur of good coffee in those days; Jason was just a beginner. I could tell by the way he'd sip his coffee, dump in cream and sugar, sip again, dump more cream and sugar in, slurp off the top without picking up the cup. Wrinkling his nose until the liquid level was reduced enough to dump in more cream, more sugar.

Mormon coffee. That's what he was making. See, Mormons didn't taste it at 13 and realize coffee was coffee. Bitter. Robust. A hard drink drunk black to put hair on your chest. Yeah, the good stuff. No, they grew up drinking Ovaltine, Swiss Miss, shit like that, and they were always surprised when their first cup of coffee had less in common with hot chocolate than motor oil.

I offered him a smoke. Now this part was always good. See, this particular variety of Mormon was the sort that would get the fire of rebellion in his loins and be ready for anything. You know, the down and dirty stuff: coffee, alcohol, Jesus, even cigarettes, but just before the point of no return you could always watch this flash of terror go off behind their eyes like they were about to slit their grandmother's throats or something. Like, for smoking. It was un-fucking-believable. I smoked Djarum Internationals in those days. Cloves, filterless, and I watched Jason baton it two or three times in his fingers trying to figure out which end to put in his mouth. I lit it for

him once he figured it out. The coughing was instantaneous. I didn't laugh. Didn't even smile. I explained to him that I had asthma and had developed my own technique for smoking that maybe he should try if he was going to do it.

"Okay," he said and asked me how it was done.

"See, the secret is to part your lips just a little bit and take in fresh air at the same time you inhale from the cigarette. Whhhhhhhhhhh. Take it directly into your lungs without holding it in your mouth first. Puhhhhhh. If you hold it in your mouth, then the smoke has time to condense. Whhhhhhhh. Too thick, too harsh. Puhhhhhh. Normally, smoke would be too hot to take directly into your lungs, but you've just sucked in cool air with it, whhhhhh, see, puhhhhhh, smooth as a bong."

He took a drag.

"Hey, these are good," he said, let out a hard cough, and took another drag.

"Strong, but good."

I asked him if it was his first cigarette. He aimed a bashful smile out the side of his mouth and nodded.

"First cup of coffee, too?" He laughed, nodded again.

I picked up my coffee, my ashtray, my smokes and moved over to his table without asking if he minded. He didn't. I could tell.

"I'm Teddy." I stuck out my hand. "My friends call me T."

"Jason," he said. He had just moved to Salt Lake, was staying in a friend's sister's basement in Sugarhouse until he could afford his own place, was looking for a job. He'd moved from Provo but grew up in Lehi. When I winced he agreed and

joked about Lehi's only claim to fame being the location for the shoot of "Foot Loose", the great American classic. There were some guys who graduated from his high school a couple of years before he got there who were extras and he'd heard that one guy got paid an extra hundred bucks 'cause they used a shot of his bare butt in the locker room scene (which was actually shot at Payson High School, not in Lehi, and was technically illegal 'cause the guy was only sixteen at the time.)

"Provo, huh? You go to BYU?"

"Yeah, yeah," he told me. "Two-and-a-half years."

"Didn't work out, huh?"

"It was okay, it was actually pretty good, but I, uh... I kinda got kicked out."

He told me things had been a little rough since then, not exactly kosher on the home front. He'd probably have to work six months, maybe a year before he could get back to school (at the U this time) 'cause his parents refused to help him out any more with college. They were pretty ticked off.

"I mean, they wanted me to go on a mission, like, a year-and-a-half ago and I convinced them I should wait till after I graduated. Now, I think they know why I didn't want to go." And I have to tell you, I was surprised the guy was so comfortable, you know, creeping up on the subject like that. "Mom won't even talk to me right now and my dad just yells and quotes scripture and crap like that."

"That's so messed up," I said, too much like I knew exactly what he was talking about, I guess, 'cause his apparent comfort dried up like Utah County on a Sunday morning. His cheeks went completely Clorox and he grew this moustache of

tiny wet beads.

“Anyway, it’s not a big deal, you know,” he said, getting real interested in the cherry of his cigarette.

“Yeah, I know.” I nodded. “So did they catch you, or did somebody turn you in?”

“What?”

“Jesus, you didn’t tell them on your own, did you?”

“No, I didn’t.” He was utterly horrified. “Listen, I didn’t say what I got kicked out for.”

“C’mon man, who’re you kidding? It obviously wasn’t for drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes.”

“Look, maybe I just didn’t believe in all that stuff anymore.”

“Sure,” I said, mock-somber as hell.

“Listen, you don’t *even* have any idea what you’re talking about!” And he’s getting this flinty thing going on in his eyes. So I shrugged, kicked back, reached for a smoke.

“I’ve been around long enough to know what goes down with wayward saints.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He was just the right kind of insulted.

“It’s okay, you know,” I’m saying over the top of my lighter like it’s *so* not a big deal. “You’re sure as fuck not the first boy in Zion to lose the straight along with the narrow.”

“What?”

“I ought to introduce you to some ex-missionaries I know,” I said. “Steve-o, I should introduce you to Steve-o, course he’s kinda tripped out, but I bet you’d like him, anyway.”

“I’m not gay,” he said quickly.

“Me neither,” I told him.

“What are you going on about, then?”

“Wait a minute. What time is it?”

He checked his watch. “9:45.”

“Okay, yeah,” I said, “then I guess I am.”

That stopped him for a couple of seconds and he looked like he was trying to decide whether to just hang with it or if he was going to have to kick my ass. Then he sort of let out this string of light chuckles and shook the end of his cigarette at me.

“You’re a funny guy.”

“Funny, ha ha, or funny *funny*,” I asked, tipping my hand back-and-forth like a plane waging its wings.

“Jeeze, you’re a freak.”

“Does this mean we’re not gonna sleep together?”

“I’m not gay,” he insisted.

“So what? This is Utah.”

“Yeah,” he said, “what does that have to do with it?”

“Nobody’s gay in Utah.” I shrugged. “So you wanna fuck?”

“Whatever, dude,” he said, starting to get up.

I put out a hand, grabbed his elbow. “Hey! Hey. It’s cool, be cool. I’m just giving you shit.”

“I’m not gay,” he said again, a little too loud.

“I didn’t say you were.”

“Well, you keep acting like I am,” he huffed. The busboy had just arrived at the table next to ours and was getting ready to wipe it down.

“Tracy,” I demanded of him, “am I acting like he’s gay?” Tracy and I had torched more than a spliff or two on top of the parking structure next door and I knew he’d go along with anything.

“Never,” he said.

“See,” I said.

Tracy leaned over the table with this kind of wise bartender’s voice. “Just sleep with him and get it over with,” he said to Jason. Jason’s jaw went totally slack and it was way too much for Tracy and me. We both busted up, I mean really lost it.

“Okay, okay, real funny,” Jase said. “I’m glad I could amuse you.”

“No,” Tracy said, recovering himself, “he really is gay.”

Jason steamed. Stared at me then for nearly a full minute, said, “You’re just giving me shit, right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m not gay.”

“T-boy there is as queer as the day is long,” Tracy reassured him and walked away. Jason looked at me curiously for a very long time, that grandma-slayer look

filling his eyes. He really wanted to talk about it, I could tell.

“Do you mess with everybody like that?” he finally asked.

“No,” I said. “So, what was his name?”

“Who?”

“The guy at BYU?”

“I told you I’m not gay.”

“I know. Of course not,” I said. “What was the guy’s name?”

Jason shot an exasperated look from one side of the room to the other, like he was looking for a way out, like there wasn’t one to find. I let the silence do its work. Finally, almost inaudibly, he said: “Peter.”

\* \* \*

I never met Peter, although Jason did show me a couple of pictures of him once. I could see how Jase would’ve fallen for him. He was stunning. Tan, lithe, a hint of melancholy visible beneath this mod-long sweep of bangs. An artist’s eyes. Eyes you’d want to protect, even if you could never look into them again. It’s funny that he’s the one that came to me in my dreams. Just a trace of what had to have been a smile still kind of stuck around his mouth, his eyes.

He only came once while I was still in the hospital. He was dressed as a rabbi. You know, the orthodox kind with the long coat and black hat to cover the teffelin. He stood there for the longest time just moving his arms back and forth with his palms up like he was trying to get me to back up or go away or something. I finally figured he was trying to get me to look behind me and when I turned around there was this

huge table with this head on a serving tray. I couldn't quite make out the face. It might have been me, might have been Jason, might have been anybody, I don't know. A big red apple in his mouth. God, I thought to myself with a kind of desperation that I never totally got, he'll never be able to talk with that thing in his teeth.

He came again a couple of days after I went home, the night after the first time I tried to visit Jason and his parents stopped me in the hall by the waiting room and asked me if I hadn't already caused enough trouble. He was naked by the sea. Just standing there against the hot sun, the copper waves. And I just stood there and stared until my kidneys hurt because I wanted him so bad. But he just kept staring at the sea and I just kept staring at him. I threw up for half an hour when I finally woke up. I don't know why.

He showed up a lot after that. Sometimes two or three times a week. Sometimes two or three times a night. I always remember he never cried. I mean, not that he was supposed to or anything. I don't know, I just sort of remember thinking that meant something or something. Of course, he never spoke, either. Well, once he sort of did, but he was talking in French jibberish. I don't speak French, but I always knew what he meant.

\* \* \*

The night Jason hooked up with Paul I was pretty far gone. I'd smoked some really sticky shit with Bobby Kimball in the parking lot behind Steve-o and Dave's place a few minutes after we arrived and I was afraid it would make me too dopey to party as hard as I was wanting to that night, so I got Eric-the-Viking to sell me some

cross tops. He always had the real thing too, not that caffeine and ephedrine sulfate shit you buy in the back of magazines. We're talking pharmaceutical grade Dexedrine. Pure, simple speed to take the slop off your dope and put an edge in your step. I was feeling pretty good, but keeping track of time and people wasn't exactly my strong point. So I guess, in some ways, Paul was my fault, really. I mean, if I'd gone back in and tracked Jason down right away so he had somebody to hang with, or if I'd gotten a beer into his hand before the God Squad showed up so they'd have left him alone, or maybe if I'd stopped Dave's little brother from trying to beer bong Jack and Coke it might've all worked out differently.

The God Squad's what we called this particular clique of Affirmation guys that showed up together at everything. For the most part they were okay guys (even if their misguided allegiance to a religion that hated them made about as much sense to me as a Black chapter of the KKK) but Paul was the real holier-than-thou asshole among them. He had delusions of being part of the Mormon intelligentsia because he used to hang out with that closet case that ran Sunstone Magazine and supposedly blew a friend of Mark Hoffman's in the locker room at the Deseret gym like a week before the pipe bomb went off in his car.

I was never really exactly sure why Paul showed up at the Lesbian Gay Student Union meetings—where we all knew him from. I mean, it's not like he ever seemed to be having a particularly good time. He always seemed pissed off about something. And he was fucking lucky Steve-o let him into the apartment that night without kicking his ass after the religious out-freakage he'd had over spring break the

year before. Paul had thrown a fit that utterly redefined the word conniption.

I don't know. I guess he'd never been witness to one of Steve-o's famous performances. Steve-o had been three years ahead of me at East High and I remembered him as one of the hardcore wavers who'd kick your ass outside of Maxims if he thought you were looking at him funny. He was actually the first guy I ever made out with on the dance floor, but I don't think he remembered it. He told me once he was frying pretty hard that night.

During the summer between my Junior and Senior years I ran into him at Trolley Square and he was all dressed up like a young Republican. I almost didn't recognize him with only one color in his hair. He told me he was going on a mission because his parents offered him five thousand dollars if he cleaned up his shit and talked up Joe Smith and Jesus. They sent him to Alabama in September and he was back home by Christmas. His parents were furious and he didn't get a nickel out of them, but I don't think I ever met anybody who gave less of a shit.

It was after that he got really out-there. His loss of control was kind of a turn on to a lot of people at first, I think. But it can get old fast, too. Anyway, he was always pulling something. It was in those days he started doing his legendary party performances with Kyle Hanks in the bathroom of his apartment. They'd get all fucked up and put on shower caps and bathrobes and hang towels from their waists and cut a hole in the shower curtain and do this kind of Rocky-Horror-Picture-Show version of the Mormon temple ceremony. He must have gone through forty shower curtains before they finally started taping them up with duct tape. If he and Kyle got

really fucked up they'd give each other hand jobs over their clothes through the hole in the plastic while screaming some shit about healthy navels and bones and loins and posterity and shit like that over and over. It was pretty funny stuff to most of us. Every once in a while you'd get somebody who freaked about it the next day or something, but Mormons are prone to do that sort of thing almost anytime after they've had a good time, so nobody really paid any attention to them.

When the novelty withered after a while the performances got less and less common. I'd say it had to have been a good six or seven months or so since I'd last seen it on that night during spring break when Paul showed up at Steve-o's party, the one the year before he and Jason met. I think he thought the crowd around the bathroom door was some kind of peep show on a couple of guys too drunk to know everybody was watching them get it on, and at first I even thought he was upset because he didn't get to see any dick. But maybe that's because I was pretty drunk too and thought he was making some weird reference to scrotums when he started yelling about sacrilege.

The whole thing quickly escalated into a yelling match between Steve-o and Paul that only ended after Paul tried to call the cops and Steve-o ripped his own phone out of the wall and threw it through the window and cut his hand on a shard of glass and Paul ran out of the apartment screaming about AIDS (which Steve-o doesn't have) and won himself serious asshole points with everybody there. If you want to know the truth, I think he even pissed off the rest of the God Squad who were kind of on his side 'til then.

Anyway, I guess Steve-o saw him come in that night at the party, the one where he and Jason met, but it had been almost a year since the spring break thing so I guess he decided to be cool about it. It was a fucking shame. I mean, maybe it would have all worked out differently if Steve-o had just kicked his shit out of the party to begin with. But, you know, Steve-o's really not like that in spite of his perpetual mania.

I was arguing with a couple of guys about I don't even know what when right in the middle of it I looked across the room and saw Jason sitting there looking all candy-eyed at somebody who was talking to him, but I couldn't see who the guy was 'cause he had his back to me. I thought I should probably get back over there just in case. Just in case of what, I didn't know. It wasn't like he was completely new to the scene, but I did bring him to this thing so I felt like I had some responsibility.

It was Benny like an hour or two later who clued me in. We'd gone out on the balcony at the end of the hall and were just lighting our smokes when he told me.

"I think your new friend, Jason, is in trouble."

"Fuck, I knew I should have kept an eye on him," I said. "Is John-Juan trying to paw his inseams out or what?"

"Worse," Benny laughed. "Hey, you okay?" he said to some kid behind me. I turned around and saw Curtis trying to keep Dave's kid brother from falling on his ass or over the rail.

"Fuck you," the kid said.

"He'll be okay," Curtis added.

“Worse than John-Juan,” I said to Benny. “Jesus, what’d he do, hook up with Paul Young?”

“You got it,” he said.

“No fucking way, you’re shitting me, right?” But he just shook his head and laughed. “Oh, fuck me! Fuck! Not Paul-fucking-Young!”

And the more I wiggled about it, the more Benny laughed at me. Just then Curtis’s usual whine was taking on enough sharpness to catch both of our attentions. Dave’s little brother was all hunched over the rail, kind of bobbling his head up and down, and it didn’t look like he was breathing. Curtis kept shaking his arm hard and kind of repeating hysterically are you okay, are you okay, but the kid wasn’t answering and we were, all three of us, starting to get pretty freaked. He started this kind of spin sideways then and I could see his eyes all fluttery and starting to roll back in his head. We didn’t know if the kid was having some kind of a seizure or if he was choking on something or what, but he was getting all kinds of purple and we had to do something fast or he was a dead man. I didn’t really think about it, you know, it’s just one of those things you do in a situation like that without thinking. I just stepped up behind him and grabbed him around the gut and jerked my fists hard into his diaphragm. Sure enough, something bright and hard came flying out of him and cracked against the wall.

It was an ice cube. A fucking ice cube. And I wondered to myself how drunk you have to be to choke to death on a ice cube.

He was crying then, bawling like a four-year-old and I didn’t know what to do.

I was still holding on to him and he collapsed sideways against the rail and starting heaving over it. And I mean bad. It went on for a long, long time, too. I asked somebody to go get a cold towel and a glass of water while I held him up against the rail. There was a lot of liquor coming out of that boy and I was thinking it was probably good he choked on the ice cube so he didn't die from alcohol poisoning instead.

When Benny brought back water and a washcloth, Dave came with him and Steve-o too. The kid was still sobbing in between stomach launches and Dave tried to comfort him as much as he could.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," the kid kept crying to his brother.

"It's okay, Mikey," Dave crooned and helped him hold up his head as the poor kid brought up another vinegary mouthful.

"What happened?" Steve-o asked me.

"Ice cube." I said, spreading the washcloth across the back of the kid's neck.

"T Heimlich'd him," Benny offered. "It was freaky."

"No shit, T?" Steve-o said. "Where'd you learn that, man?"

"First Aid merit badge and the complete destruction of my gag reflex were the only two things I took away from six years in the Boy Scouts," I explained. "That fucking merit badge had to come in handy at some point in my life."

There was an appreciative round of laughter.

"Ahhhh," Steve-o said skeptically, "I think T was just trying to get of fistful of high school meat."

Another round of laughter.

"I'm serious, man," Steve-o chided. "You better watch your little bro around that chicken hawk."

I flashed him my middle finger. Dave slapped my arm, frat-boy style.

"Thanks man," he said, punctuating it with a sharp upward nod.

"Shouldn't somebody take him home?" Of all the fucking people at the party, it was Paul behind us in the hall. Jason, too, just behind him, and we all turned to stare at them.

"No," Dave replied with more than a little irritation. "He's crashing here tonight."

"Figures," Paul huffed.

"What the fuck's that supposed to mean?" Steve-o said.

"I'm just saying it shouldn't be any surprise that you let him stay here and drink himself to death, that's all."

"First of all, he's finished drinking for the night," Dave said, "so don't get your Jesus Jammies in a knot, and second of all, you self-righteous fuck, why don't you mind your own fucking business."

"He's just worried about the kid," Jason offered from behind him.

"No, Jase," I replied. "He's not. He's being a judgmental asshole, like always."

"Oh right, I'm the jerk," Paul was going off again. "It's not bad enough you drink and drug yourselves into apoplexy, you've got to take a fourteen-year-old down

with you.”

“He’s fifteen,” Curtis offered from the corner.

“Oh, well, that makes it alright,” Paul quipped.

“Fuck-off, Paul,” I was just starting to say when Steve-o shook his Guinness hard with a thumb on the mouth and then let it go in Paul’s face. Benny followed suit and Curtis tossed what was left of the Captain Morgan’s in his cup into the spray. Paul was shaking all over with his eyes and his mouth all wide like Munch’s *Scream*, hyperventilating so hard I thought he might pass out. We were all laughing our asses off at him and I was wishing real bad I had a beer too and Paul started to shriek.

“You pigs,” he screamed. “You filthy, filthy pigs!” And he turned and ran down the hall toward the stairs and was gone, Jason two steps behind. We all just kept on laughing and laughing and the whole thing even seemed to be doing Dave’s little brother some good ‘cause I got him to drink some water.

“I guess this means we’re all going to hell,” Benny said.

“No, man,” Steve-o said. “There is no Mormon hell.”

“You’re thinking of Jews,” I corrected him. “There is no Jewish hell.”

“There’s no Jewish hell?” Dave asked.

“Mormons have a hell,” Benny said. “I know, I was raised Mormon.”

“Oh, and Steve-o wasn’t?” I said.

“Jews don’t go to hell?” Dave asked again.

“Depends on who you ask,” Steve-o said. “And Mormon hell doesn’t really count ‘cause it’s impossible to get there.”

“It’s not impossible,” Benny explained, “you’ve just got to walk and talk with Jesus Christ and then deny him.”

“You’re Jewish aren’t you, T?” Dave pressed. “You guys don’t go to hell?”

“See, that’s my point,” Steve-o said. “If there really was a Jesus and you actually, like, hung out with him, what would be the fucking point of denying his existence?”

“I don’t know,” Benny said. “But it’s supposed to happen in the millenium or whenever.”

“Maybe he’s got a little dick,” Steve-o chuckled, pleased with the response to his own question.

“Jews rock,” Dave said.

“Ted!” I heard a harsh voice behind me. “Can I talk to you?”

It was Jason and he was looking a wee bit miffed.

“Sure.” I smiled as casually as I could and followed him down the hall to the top of the stairs. “What’s up?”

“We need to take Paul home.”

“Who the fuck’s we, man?” I said.

“He’s completely soaked and he lives like five miles from here,” Jason explained.

“So, let him get one of his little Affirmation buddies to drive him home.”

“They came in Greg’s car and he took off and isn’t coming back til late,” Jason explained.

“How’s this my problem?” And I was really starting to get mad.

“I think it’s the least you can do after what you guys did to him.”

“Are you kidding,” I said. “He’s lucky somebody didn’t fucking *hit* him with one of those beer bottles. Don’t go feeling all sorry for him, Jason, you don’t know him. He’s a prick.”

“Maybe *you* don’t know him, T,” he was saying in that same bitter-smarm my mother used to use when she thought I was ‘getting too haughty for a boy my age and experience.’ “None of you guys have ever bothered to get to know him at all. You treat him like a pariah, pull stunts like this and then wonder why he’s so hard to get along with.”

“You know what?” I said, getting more than just a little bit of my bitch face on. “You’ve been chatting up that self-righteous, self-loathing, homophobic little asshole for all of ten minutes. I’ve been watching his shitty little antics for two fucking years. If he’s all-the-sudden so goddamn important to you, you drive his tight ass home.”

“I would,” he said, genuinely pissed now, “but I don’t have a car here.”

I yanked the keys out of my pocket and threw them down the stairs.

“Well, now you do,” I said and stormed back in the direction of my *real* friends.

\* \* \*

Even though Jason’s parents wouldn’t let me near him, I got to see him six or seven times while he was still in the hospital before they took him back to Lehi. Dave’s older sister was a nurse on the ward and snuck me in whenever she could when

they weren't around. I'd tell him about what the guys were up to, or what we'd talked about at the last LGSU meeting, or maybe something I'd heard about the Jazz. And he'd listen and nod most of the time, like he was really glad to hear it. Sometimes his eyes would get real glossy and full and he'd take my hand and hold it against his cheek like he was trying to say something back to me. But sometimes, when I tried to say some things, some things about being sorry, about wishing it had been anybody but him, things like that, it was more like I was the one with the jaw all wired up and plastered shut, 'cause I was pretty sure I was liar. I didn't want to be. But I was. I was pretty sure I was.

\* \* \*

Long before Paul ever entered the picture, Jason used to talk about Peter all the time. Especially in those first few weeks that I knew him, but I didn't really find out what happened until he came to stay with me for a while after his parents pulled that shit to fuck him out of a place to live. He was hysterical on the phone and I wasn't really sure what had gone down, but I got that he needed a place to stay and I told him that, of course, he was always welcome at my place. He arrived fifteen minutes later with a duffel bag and a Walkman, which is, I guess, all he'd had with him in the unfinished basement he'd been staying in since the last round of shit went down with his parents.

His cheeks and his nose were so red I thought he must have dragged them on the asphalt the whole way over from Sugarhouse. I don't think I ever saw anybody's eyes so thoroughly hurt and betrayed. He kept trying to thank me for letting him crash

at my place until he could figure something out, but halfway through the sentence his face would start to knot up and spasm and he'd have to wipe furiously at his cheeks and his nose to try to regain some semblance of composure. I finally couldn't take it anymore and just grabbed him and held him against my chest and let him wail.

He told me eventually that his shit was sitting on the front lawn that afternoon when he got home, to the place where he'd been staying. When he went to pick it up, Carol, his friend's sister whose house it was, came out of the house and screamed at him and called him a sick pervert and yelled at him to stay away from her and her kids. He didn't know what the fuck was going on. He finally called his friend Shawna, Carol's sister, who'd helped him set up the arrangement to begin with after his parents kicked him out.

Shawna said that Brother and Sister Pratt (which is what she called Jason's parents even to Jason) had phoned her sister and told her that they had kicked him out because he was queer and that he'd been kicked out of BYU for the same reason, and that if she had any kids she should kick him out too, because they'd walked in on Jason's thirteen-year-old brother masturbating in the bathroom and no thirteen-year-old boy would do that sort of thing unless he'd been abused or something and if the kid had been abused it obviously had to be Jason who'd done it because he was gay and so they thought she ought to know so that she could protect her own children, and so she'd freaked because she had two boys, 4 and 6, and had to protect them.

Jason was pretty freaked and I had to agree with him that that was pretty fucked up shit for your own parents to say and do, but I didn't say that it didn't really

surprise me. It didn't really surprise me 'cause I'd never met Mormon parents who wouldn't sooner dump their own children in the Great Salt Lake than have them turn out to be anything other than the perfect, cookie-cutter reproduction of Mormon perfection, let alone be gay. Mormons were really into perfection and they didn't seem to give a shit who had to pay the price for it.

We slept together that night. Not like anything sexual. It was never like that with me and Jason. He just needed a safe place to rest and the warm pocket I made with my body and the weight of my arms might not really have been any protection against the world, but sometimes the illusion is all it takes for a good night's sleep.

It was the next morning over biscuits and bacon and hot coffee that he told me what had really gone down at BYU. He and Peter had been meeting for a long time. Jason was pretty in love, but Peter was always freaking out about the whole thing, talking about going on a mission and getting married and all that shit, and Jason wasn't sure what any of it meant or where it was going, but for all their confusion they kept getting together for as much sex as they thought they could get away with.

They'd gotten careless playing around one Saturday in the showers at the Richardson P.E. building after a swim. Didn't even know that some kid from Jason's freshman dorm two years before had seen them. The kid couldn't identify Peter, but he reported Jason to standards that afternoon. Monday morning the shit hit the fan.

They didn't kick him out right away. That would have been too easy. Too little pain. No, there was a full month of daily meetings and interrogations. If he'd cooperated with them they said he could have stayed, but that meant reparative

therapy and helping them to identify other homosexuals on campus and, in particular, to give up Peter.

He'd run into Peter on the sidewalk between the bookstore and the Harris Fine Arts Center the Wednesday after he'd been called into standards. Peter must have heard rumors about what was going down because he pretended not to see Jason and Jason was pretty sure that was the best way to handle it. I mean, he knew it meant they'd kick him out, tell his bishop, his parents, fuck, they'd probably announce it on the news—the cancer at the Lord's University exposed and cut out. But he figured it was too late for him no matter what. They'd never let him live another day of peace anyway. All he could do now is try to protect Peter. And who knows, maybe someday, some place else they'd run into each other again, maybe it would all be different then.

\* \* \*

Things were always a little off between me and Jason after he hooked up with Paul. Maybe I was afraid it'd rot his brain or something. Mormons do that shit to each other.

Or maybe I just thought they did.

I mean, it was never like that with Jason, even after he started hanging out with the God Squad. Jason was never like that. He was always trying to get me and Paul to buddy up to each other. He used to tell me all the time that if I really got to know Paul I'd feel differently about him. But I figured, what the fuck was there to get to know, you know? I mean, what was I supposed to think? What was I supposed to think?

Anyway, Jason used to try to get the three of us together at least once a month in some pathetic attempt to do I don't know what. It wasn't like Paul and I were ever going to be friends, was it? I guess it was like that that night, too. I was just sick of it, or something. We usually met at Café Trang or the Roasting Company or someplace like that, but that night I said I already had plans to go out to Back Streets, which was a lie, but I figured it would discourage them. It didn't and they said they'd meet me there around nine-ish.

I got there about fifteen 'til and started hitting the Collinses pretty hard. If I was going to have to deal with anybody from the God Squad I wanted to be as fucked up as possible. I don't know, maybe I was already feeling the drinks too thoroughly by the time they got there or maybe I was just really, really sick of the whole thing, but I started in on them right away. It was just little off-the-cuff remarks at first, little throw-away jibes. But by the time we racked up the pool table I was going full bore. I told the one about why Jesus doesn't like M&Ms and why you always take two Mormons fishing instead of just one, and the one about why Mormon women don't fart until they're married, and what you call a trip to Baskin Robbins or four hours of begging. I told the one about the Bishop's skateboard and why Mother's Day was the most confusing day in Utah, and the one about Brother Adolf and Sister Eva. And, I guess, eventually, Paul had had enough.

"Look, I know you're drunk but you're really starting to tick me off," Paul said.

"It's a bar, Miss 'Tude, get over it."

“Paul, just let it go, okay. Maybe we should take off,” Jason said.

“No, I’ve had it, Jase. He’s always going off about Mormons and the Church and the gospel and I’m really sick of it. You know? I’m a Mormon.”

“A Gay Mormon?” I laughed.

“See, that’s what I mean,” Paul went off, all indignant. “The Church is an institution, you know. Institutions take time to change, to grow. That doesn’t mean the gospel’s not true and it doesn’t mean all Mormons are jerks.”

“Please, let’s just forget about this ‘til tomorrow, okay?” Jase was trying again.

Neither of us were listening.

“You’re always going off about how screwed up Mormons are,” Paul was ranting. “How narrow minded we are, how we’re always judging you, trying to push all our ideas on you, but that’s exactly what you’re doing to us all the time.”

“You better back the fuck off, buddy. You’re moving into territory you know shit about.”

“Don’t give me that crap. You’re such a freaking bigot—”

“I’m a bigot? Yeah. I’m such a bigot that I kick people out of college because they’re straight.” It wasn’t really fair of me to go after Jason like that. I don’t know why I did it. Maybe I thought Paul would put it together better if I used one of his own as an example. Maybe I just wanted to hurt somebody and didn’t care who.

“Yeah, I’m so close minded I throw my own kids out on the street and then do everything I can to make sure they don’t have anywhere to go so they’ll have to come crawling back ready to lie about who they are and be exactly what I want them to be.

I'm so closed minded I won't even talk to my kids or else I tell them every chance I get how much they've disgraced their family." I shoved Paul then. Hard. "Yeah, that's sounds like me, you fucking asshole." I shoved him again harder.

"Knock it off, Teddy!" It was Jason between us shouting at me, keeping me an arm's length away from Paul, but I didn't really give a shit, I just kept shouting. I shouted about growing up with Mormons. Having to talk the way they talked, having to dress the way they dressed because those were the rules every-fucking-where in Utah. Mormon rules. Having to pray at every school function that ever was, just like the Mormons pray, Supreme Court rulings be damned. Yeah, I screamed, that's the kind of bigot I was, huh? The kind that tells kids every day of their lives that they're sick and perverted and that God says they should be killed. The kind that only turns the other cheek in order to look the other way when some kid slams your head into a locker or knocks you around (just a little, builds character) or spits on you or with a couple of buddies forces you into some dark corner behind the gym 'cause they know you like it that way.

"Yeah, motherfucker! I'm a bigot! I'm a big-ass, mother fucking bigot, and you're a piece of shit Mormon no matter how many dicks you suck, a God-damn saint, so fuck you. FUCK YOU!"

And I was out of there. Left my coat sitting on the back of a chair. I think I threw the pool stick at the wall when I left. Well, they sure as hell wouldn't let me back in there. But what'd I care, huh? I fucking hated Back Street, anyway. I fucking hated all of them. I fucking hated every Mormon I ever met. I fucking hated Paul.

But, most of all, at that moment, I hated Jason. I hated Jason because I loved him and he was my friend and he did what they all do when the shit goes down. He let the self righteous motherfucker have at me. Fucking Mormons.

\* \* \*

It was Dave's sister who phoned me about Jason. She'd kept track after he left the hospital. He'd been sick off and on since he'd gone home five months ago. Was having a rough recovery. Dialysis, since the kidneys were so badly damaged. The surgery and physical therapy with his hand not as successful as they'd hoped. But, she was pretty certain nobody could have seen it coming. It was his intestine. It was pretty fucked up. Contusions. And it was supposed to have healed up alright, but she guessed it hadn't. It was just a little split in the tissue. But it was enough to leak the toxins from the waste into his bloodstream. Enough to poison him from the inside. And so that was it. That was all she wrote.

I wanted to turn myself in. To be locked away for the rest of my life.  
Bludgeoned by guards, shived in a cafeteria line.

\* \* \*

I was sitting on the curb on one of those post-apocalyptic streets that pop up in urbia between heavy industrial and old commercial zoning. You know, the kind that looks like they slapped on salvage after the warehouse was shelled in a war. I had my head between my legs. My stomach felt an awful lot like it had been punched, but I wasn't sure if that was from all the Tom Collinses, or the adrenaline that had long since ditched me on the side of the road, or if maybe Paul or somebody had actually

gotten a knuckle off in my gut.

I thought about trying to walk to Denny's for coffee or something. You know, the Gay Denny's on 6<sup>th</sup>. If it was after closing time at the bars I'd run into somebody I could get a lift home from, no problem. But I really didn't know what time it was, and I wasn't sure which way I'd gone when I left Back Street. North. I thought. Maybe. I'd gone North. But, you know, who the fuck really knew? I must have started to doze or something then because I didn't see Jason's Rabbit at all. Didn't hear it, either. It was like I just sort of lifted my eyes and he was there. Idling in the middle of the street, hanging his head out the window.

"You left without your coat," he said. I ignored him. He pulled off the road, crossed the street to where I sat on the curb. Tossed my jacket at me. I let it fall into the gutter by my feet.

"I'm sorry, T. I don't know what else to say. I shouldn't have tried to make you two try to be friends." I didn't say a word, didn't move. Jason picked up my jacket then, wrapped it around my shoulders and sat down next to me.

"I'm sorry, you know, Paul has issues, that's all. He... he doesn't mean it. It's just so fucking... confusing and scary... you know. I mean, you talk about it all the time. The programming. He's still sorting all that out, you know, which part's him, which part's the Church."

I kept my focus firmly on my toes.

"Goddamnit, Teddy, I'm trying to apologize, okay. I should never have let this happen. I should never have let either of you say those things to each other. I should

have... I don't know."

"I don't hate all Mormons." I said.

"I know," he said back.

"They'd deserve it if I did, though."

"Probably," he agreed. "T?"

"What?"

"Did all that really happen to you?"

"Yeah, yeah, it did."

"You never told me."

"No, I never did."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

He tucked me into the crook of his arm then, tight. Rocked me gently. Like everything was going to be alright. Like everything was going to work out fine. That's when I heard the car. Maybe, if I'd had less gin in me I'd have heard it from farther off. Or maybe if the sleeves of his coat hadn't been against my ears. Or maybe it's just one of those background noises that only gets important when you're looking backwards in time. Or maybe somewhere, deep down, I knew what was coming and I thought he deserved it. You know, like maybe they all deserved it. I don't know.

And then there was this laughter, you know. Laughter that sounds like a mob, even when there's only five of them. The way the laughing gets all mixed up in your

memory with the sound of the engine, the chump-chump of car doors. Boots on dry concrete. It's sounds you don't forget, you know. Wet paint sounds, or the sound of a button, for a second strangely louder than all the other sounds in the whole world as you watch it land top-side-down on the sidewalk in front of you. Or the hollow, low-pitched thud that bellies make at the end of a boot. I didn't know bodies could make those kind of sounds. I mean, not before. Or the sound of your own voice. And you say stupid shit, too. Things like: Please, and don't. Or things like Oh God, Oh God, O God, over and over as you hold up his head so he doesn't choke on the blood he's coughing up after the car is gone. Those are sounds you don't forget.

I'd like to believe I was a victim, that it was bad guys on a rampage. That it was the Mormons. That it was Paul. That it was Brother and Sister Pratt. But I think I know better. I mean, I was there, saw it from the inside when I came to. Just like... just like an old television tube warming up. The little dot in the center with a halo. The pain was terrible and I could barely see out of my right eye, the one farthest from the cement. That kicking thooob, thooob over and over, harder and harder, but it wasn't me anymore. They'd stopped kicking me. It was then that it happened, right then, in a wave of nausea, the scalpel sharp shooting sensations, the paralyzing throbs—the taste of peanuts, juniper berries, liquid metal. I saw it. I understood it. I wanted to be a better person than that then. You know, a chicken-soup-for-the-soul kind of guy. Somebody who'd give up their chance at college to protect a lover. Somebody who'd give a guy a chance and get to the good stuff inside of him even if everybody else thought he was a real schmuck. Somebody who'd drive around the shitty part of town

until he found the stupid drunk that'd been acting like an asshole all night. That was the kind of guy I wanted to be. But, I wasn't like that. No, I wasn't. I was glad. I was glad it wasn't me.

## Etude

It was being one of those weeks. And the lady in front of me at the grocery check out looked like I felt. Worn out, tired and in desperate need of a cigarette. She was in a hurry, or she would have asked for plastic. Or maybe the paper bags stood up better in the Rubbermade garbage bin under the sink. She hugged a sack in each arm and was just turning to leave when the checker stopped her.

“Hey lady. Your change.”

She turned around, must have squeezed just a little too hard and I heard the paper give. Not a nice clean in-two sort of tear, but a long jagged rip all the way from the front crease to the seam at the bottom. The Vlassics hit the tile first, burst like a spleen, seeping brine from all its sides. Dills jumping like salamanders over wonder bread to lap up the entrails of eggs, speared on shards of sharp glass.

I stared at the bag, the fray of brown fibers along the tear. *Sucks to be you*, I thought. A sack. Full and steady one minute and then, suddenly, the fabric of you, all of your meaning torn out, crumpled, empty.

“Shit,” is all she said. I could tell by her face she meant it. I left the milk on the counter. I just didn’t have time for this.

All week I’d been pushing back the covers of my planner like a steel trap. But there’s something about an overbooked schedule that begs for more.

I had a book review due for *The Underground*, a big feature on the Desert and Mountain States Gay and Lesbian Conference for a Denver pulp and a travel piece that should have been turned in the previous Tuesday. I could have lived with that, if it just hadn't been deadline week for the April issue of the *Triangle*.

On Monday, I got a fresh stack of press releases from NGLTF and *The Blade* in the mail and there was shit coming off the net like a lav on a Greyhound full of Iowans in Tijuana. Meanwhile, my most productive writer decided to pick that week to have an existential crisis and move back to his parent's home in Boise to experience some Van Santean self actualization.

"*Triangle*, this is Thomas."

"Clark Kent hard at work, huh?"

"Hey babe, what's up, don't you have rehearsal?"

"Well, maybe. I was thinking of calling the guys and telling them I can't make it."

"Why?"

"Well, Mr. Kent, I was hoping I could entice you into dumping the *Daily Planet* for the evening and finding a secluded phone booth with me somewhere, maybe check-out the S's."

"You can't imagine how much I've got to do tonight."

"It can wait. Let's go to the Sun, dance our asses off, have a good time. I'm feeling restless. I'm bored. We're becoming my parents."

“Your mom's not that well hung.”

“Jesus!”

“Alex, I was just joking.”

“I know. I'm sorry, I'm just... I went by the hospital today.”

“Oh.”

“It just left me wanting to participate in my life, to have a good time.”

“He's not doing very well?”

“He asked about you, again.”

“Tell him I said hi.”

“Nobody ever goes up there anymore. We could go now. C'mon, we can pick up a couple of sandwiches at Marconi's on the way, just for a minute—smuggle him a sandwich.”

“I really, really can't. Not tonight.”

“Sometimes you're a real dick-head.”

“Look, I've got deadlines coming out of my ass. What am I supposed to do? Just say, fuck the magazine.”

“Why don't you just fuck yourself. You didn't have those deadlines last week, did you? Where were you then?”

“You're right. I know. I'm an asshole. I'll go see him.”

“When?”

“What?”

“When, Thomas, when will you go see him?”

“C'mon man, this week.”

“Will you?”

“Do I need this? Jesus Christ, I'm under so much pressure here I can feel my nuts in my throat and I've got you giving me this shit?”

“You are such an asshole. I can't believe I've stayed with you for three years.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

Oh yeah, I handled that one great. I called him back 10 minutes later to say I'd go, but he had already gone to rehearsal.

When I got home the lights were out, only the blue cast of 2:00 am catching in the curtains for me to make my way across the floor. Alex slept facing his side of the bed, away from mine and I knew he'd gone to bed still angry. For a moment I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at his back, pale in the moonlight. Etched flesh. So much definition, so much character running the length of a single spine.

I crept to the kitchen, bibbed Mr. Coffee with a paper towel and felt tip pen: “I was a jerk. I'm sorry. Let me make it up to you. Lunch? I'll pick you up at noon.”

I put my cheek against his shoulder blades. Warm. Wrapped an arm around his waist and slept.

My alarm rang at seven and I thought I'd die before I reached the coffee pot. It was a little burnt already and Alex had left a reply on the back of a two-for-one pizza coupon. "It's Tuesday. I'm working."

Shit, what had I been thinking? He worked at the piano store on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and here I was offering him a kiss-and-make-up lunch on a day when I knew he couldn't accept.

I got to the shop just before closing, roses in hand. As I crossed the street I saw him framed in panes of leaded glass. He sat in front of the big grand, his body a legato sway as his hands weaved Rachmaninoff out of the keys, through the glass, through me.

He was beautiful. He was music. A felted hammer rapping me over and over, a single note along a spiral wire. He was music and he made music of me and I knew at that moment that I would never want anything, love anything in all my life as I would love or want that one note. Alex.

I stood there a long time on the walk, watching him until he was finished. He paused at the piano listening to its wood. He must have caught me out of the corner of his eye then, looked up. There was a moment of surprise on his face and I was trying not to make an idiot of myself. A tear-eyed faggot with a dozen roses blocking the sidewalk. He smiled that sweet, sad music at me, and turned away. A moment later he was standing in front of me, said nothing and kissed me on the street.

The next morning I turned the computer on in my office at 6:05am, Fedexed the Conference piece at eleven, called out for delivery a little after one. Alex called at three,

wanted to stop by the hospital for an hour or so before the gig. I said we'd go, I'd pick him up at four.

"Great," he said. "I love you."

I thought about my best friend as I drove, about Alex's best friend, about that night three years ago now. He was waiting out front when I got off work that night. He was silent behind the wheel of his car while we drove. Didn't say where we were going. We ended up at the docks on the lake. He walked the line of planks to their end, and just sat down, legs dangling off the wood over the water. I sat beside him, didn't know what else to do.

We sat there a long time just watching the moon rise—stretch silver across the water. The wind came light and cool off the lake and smelled of reeds and pine and catfish.

I watched the black streak of bats over the water, the sudden, almost mechanical shift of their flight at the nearness of gnats, mosquitoes. Blind birds, flying by instrumentation alone. A sharp, short cry in the dark.

"My tests came back," he said.

It was eighteen after when I pulled up to the apartment and I knew Alex was going to be antsy. I expected to find him pacing in the entryway. Instead I found quiet behind the door. Silence like the humidity of an August storm. Thick air.

Alex sat in the center of the sofa on the edge of the cushion, phone still in hand. His beautiful face looked as if god himself had stepped down off a cloud and pulled the

insides of him apart with a sharp crack. A wishbone broken exactly in two. Dry, marrowless.

“Last night,” is all he said, all he could say.

I thought of paper bags. Sacks filling themselves with milk and meat. With bacon to bring home. Daily bread. Who expects, anticipates that moment when the fibers give, making them all utterly useless.

“Shit.” I said.

## Down the Road

Edward felt himself droop ever so slightly before his knees and torso jolted, pulling in on the small of his back and pushing his butt against the rear of the car seat. With the underside of his arm he nudged at the plug that wasn't there on the door, as if locking it would make a difference. If his elbow had actually encountered something, he would have remembered that the Lincoln had power locks and nothing was *supposed* to be there, but there was only ever smooth leather or metal so the thought never occurred to him. He shook his head at the open window and sucked in a nose-full of night air. He blinked, blinked again. Sticky, he thought of his lashes, while ignoring the sallow tug at the top of his intestine. He squeezed the pie crust grooves of the steering wheel a little tighter, relaxed again.

"All roads lead to the same place," Max said beside him.

"Rome?" Edward asked, knowing that if Max was around, sleep was much closer than he'd suspected.

"You don't pull over soon and you're sure to find out."

"I'm fine, really."

"If you wreck my car I'm never going to speak to you again."

"It's not your car anymore."

"I won't speak to you again."

"Yeah, yeah."

Edward did not remember pulling off the road and dreamed of endless asphalt, a long brackish, sandpapery stream caught in the yellowed spill of vintage low-beams. He worked diligently in his sleep to decipher the code of thin painted lines, long and unbroken, or dashed evenly in the middle of the road. He almost didn't remember Max telling him that someone was coming, but somehow it was there in the back of his head like everything Max said to him.

"Hey, man, you okay?" he heard the voice say.

"What the...?" He opened his eyes; his head pounded.

"You hurt?" The voice seemed to belong to a head of black hair sticking through the driver's window that Edward could not quite bring into focus from the passenger side.

"No, no I'm fine." Edward lifted his head from arm rest, extracted an ankle from under the seat and sat up.

"Do some drinkin'?" Edward could see what had caught the guy's attention. The Lincoln sloped off of the road like a fedora worn too low over one eye. The right hand side of the hood was pushed a good three feet into the high grass on the road side and Edward wondered if he really had just drifted off the road the night before.

"I've got to take a leak," he said, climbing out the passenger door and facing into the grass.

"Nice ride," the black head called out over the Lincoln's roof. "They used one of these in *The Matrix*, didn't they?"

"Did they? I don't remember."

“Sure they did. You know, when they pull that thing out of the guy’s stomach.”

“Yeah?” Edward said without really listening.

“1961?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he said focusing on the tuck and zip more than the conversation.

“That’s the one. Nice ride. Later.” The guy hefted a backpack from the ground beside him and started to walk away. Edward watched him go for a moment, surveyed the long, empty road ahead. He knew it probably wasn’t a good idea, but called out anyway.

“Hey!” The kid turned back toward him, and Edward could see then that he *was* only a kid. Nineteen, maybe twenty. He was broad shouldered with high cheek bones and brows, sharp in the nose and jaw. “Where you headed?”

“Down the road,” the kid said squinting.

“I think I might be going there.” The head of black hair turned left, then right, inspecting the horizons. “No place in particular in mind, huh?”

“Sure, I got all kinds of places in mind, just no place you can get to from here.”

“From 26.”

“Not exactly.”

“A philosopher.”

A gust of tepid air blew out of the grass.

“Did you want a lift?” Edward asked.

“Where to?” He toed the dirt at his feet.

“Well, I plan to end up in Cleveland for a couple of weeks, I’ve got some friends there... I hear Atlanta’s nice, though. I suppose I’ll have to go back to Seattle eventually. I’ve got all summer so just about anywhere you want to go I can probably get you there or close.”

Edward waited for the kid to respond for much longer than he intended, but something familiar in the James Dean jaunt of his head and flutter of bangs in and out of his eyes left Edward feeling like he might just wait him out.

“Cleveland works.”

Edward opened the trunk for him.

“Jesus, you couldn’t just fit a body in there, you could fit the whole morgue.”

“Well, that’s just about what I’ve got in here.” Edward knew there was plenty of room in the trunk, but he’d have to shift things. He hadn’t thrown his things in the car without any organization. He’d tried to keep the case of Fast Breaks and the Diet Pepsi on the side of the trunk with the bottled water and the gas can on the other side with the toolkit and the box of household miscellany he’d dragged along. His suitcases were pushed toward the back, originally, but everything had migrated back over the stack of blankets in the center of the trunk. Edward readjusted the lot of it with three or four good shoves. The kid tossed his pack inside with more than enough room to spare while Edward nabbed a six pack of sodas for the road.

“There’s some bagels in that bag in the backseat there if you’re hungry.”

Edward indicated the direction with his head while he maneuvered a pair of cans out of the six pack rings with one hand and the steering wheel with the other.

“Yeah, sure,” the kid said accepting the cola from Edward’s hand and reaching over the seat for the grocery sack on the floor.

“You want to give me one of those?”

The kid fished out a plastic bag, wiggled its gather free of the tab that held it closed. The first bagel went directly to his mouth; he sank in his teeth to free up his hands, dipping into the bag again. He held a bagel out toward Edward.

“Thanks, uh, what was your name?”

The kid tore the bagel in his mouth and chewed hard, moving the mouthful to one cheek.

“Jared,” he said, punctuating his name with a small spray of crumbs.

“I’m Edward... Mortensen.”

Jared brought the cola to his lips, threw back his head, swallowed fast and hard.

“Are you from around here?”

“Your friends call you Ed?”

“Edward.”

The kid shrugged, focused what Edward thought was an unnatural amount of attention on the bagel. Edward continued to drive. When Jared was done with the

bagel, he finished the rest of the bag, another cola, and a brown banana Edward had forgotten was in the bottom of the grocery sack.

“Radio work?”

“A-M. You’re welcome to listen to it if you like.”

“Nah, nothing but backwood Jesus-screechers out here. Those fuckin’ guys. Jesus is Low-ard! He kun make the blind wa-wulk and lame see-ya! Uh-Jesus loves ya even though you’re a piece a shit and he’ll love yuh even mo-wer if you send me twenty bucks so I can tell everybody in the whole wo-ruld how much uh-Jesus loves them even though they are all pieces of shit.”

“Entertaining.”

“Me and my buddies back home used to call those fuckin’ guys up all the time and give ‘em shit.”

“Where is home?”

“Assholes. Being saved is nothing but a Sunday excuse for all the shit you do the other six days of the week. Know what I mean?”

“You talk like a preacher’s son.”

“There’s no such thing as saved if you ask me. Whatever you do, you gotta live with the consequences. That’s the only gospel I know.”

Edward wondered about consequences for a very long time before he finally tried to start up conversation again. “Where did you say you were from?”

“You ask a lotta fuckin’ questions, you know that?” The kid pulled a Winston box from his shirt and drew out a cigarette. Edward was faintly amused that his

passenger did not ask him if it was all right to smoke in the car, deftly shook his pack a second time instead, forcing a single filter to protrude above the rest and held it out in Edward's direction.

"No thanks," Edward said.

Jared lit his cigarette with a Bic from his pocket and Edward marveled that he managed to get an ember burning on only his second try in spite of the air rushing in through the window.

"Don't smoke, huh?"

"I quit about seven years ago."

"Your loss, I guess."

Jared turned toward the inside of the car, leaned half his body against the door. He stretched his left leg, bent knee, across the seat, one arm draped over the back, the other holding the cigarette to his lips. He dragged heavily, held it for a long moment then turned his head over his shoulder and puffed toward the window with exaggerated lips. He tipped back his head, let his hair blow in the wind, then lifted it, bringing his fingers to his lips once more. Edward watched his hands—long-fingered and heavily veined, strong hands but with something delicate about the weathered skin, like bone china too often scrubbed. They were hands that Edward wanted to take into his, to open with gentle fingers in order to reveal their palms' intricate folds and convexities. Edward fixed his eyes to the road.

"So, what, you just drive around the country for kicks?" Jared asked tossing his butt out the window.

“Sort of.”

“You rich or something?”

“I wouldn’t say that. I’m doing all right I suppose.”

“All right enough to spend your whole life drivin’ around all the time. This your vacation?”

“I’m uh... on leave.”

“You get canned, huh?”

“Kind of, temporarily.”

“You fuck up?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I lost someone very close to me and I guess the folks at the office didn’t think I was handling it as well as I thought I was. They invited me to take a leave of absence.”

“So, you’re just drivin’.”

“I’m just driving.”

Jared tucked his legs up against his chest on the seat, drew his arms over his stomach, let his head loll back on the seat and stared into the sky. Edward watched the road, a stand of trees, a farmhouse that left him with the sneaking suspicion no one had lived inside for years, even though it had been newly painted. When he glanced back at the kid he saw that he was asleep.

After an hour or so Edward noticed a tiny thread of drool lining Jared’s chin and a dark spot growing on his T-shirt. He groaned, clutched at his mid-section but didn’t wake. After a fourth or fifth series of moans, each louder than the last Edward

focused his full attention on the kid. Jared's cheeks and forehead looked pasty to him and they were covered with a thin film of perspiration.

"Hey," Edward said, giving him a nudge. "Are you okay?"

The kid grimaced, blinked, moaned.

"I... I don't think I feel so good," he said.

"Do you need something?"

"I don't know. Shit. My stomach hurts. I think I'm going to puke."

"Do you need me to stop?"

"I don't know, maybe." His whole body jerked then and he thrust his head out the window with a terrible sputtering and choking. Then he fell back against the seat, wiping at his cheek and chin with his fingers. "I think I just painted the side of your car, dude."

"That's what car washes were made for. You okay?"

"My fuckin' gut is killing me."

"Your stomach or lower, in your intestines?"

"I don't know. My intestines, I guess."

"Cramping; sounds like you might have food poisoning."

"Give me some bad bagels?"

"I don't think bad bagels can do that to you, but even if they could it takes longer than that for food poisoning to effect you. It had to be something you ate last night or early this morning."

"You a fuckin' doctor?"

“No.”

“Then how the fuck would you know?”

“It’s just one of those things you learn.”

“Well, do me a favor, ‘Dward, and play doctor on somebody else.”

“What did you call me?”

“Oh fuck, stop the car, right now! Stop the fucking car. Jesus. Hurry!”

“Okay, okay, I’m stopping.”

The kid was out of the car before the shocks had rebounded from the stop. He leapt over a small ditch and into a tangle of wild grown bushes nearby. Edward put the car in park and waited. He looked at the long road behind them in the rearview mirror, tried to recall how far back the last town was, tried to imagine how far up the road the next one might be. Neither exercise produced anything vivid enough for him to bank on. He switched off the car, leaned back and waited.

After more than a quarter of an hour Edward started to wonder if something hadn’t happened to the kid. He climbed out of the car and headed toward the bushes.

“Jared.”

“Yeah?”

“You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m okay. Listen, dude, I’m not doing so good, maybe you could just leave my pack for me, huh?” His voice had developed a reediness, and something in its frailty made Edward pause.

“You sure?”

“Yeah.” Edward detected the faintest wobble in the baritone this time, and he knew he wasn’t going to leave him there.

“I don’t think I’m okay with that.” There was no reply. “Why don’t I come give you a hand?”

There was sudden desperation in the kid’s voice: “No, don’t come back here, man.”

Edward waited, unsure what to do. A slow realization drifted over him.

“You didn’t make it, did you?” Again there was no reply. “Hold on.”

Edward went to the trunk of his car, gathered an armful of items and headed toward the Jared’s spot in the brush.

“Don’t come back here,” the kid yelled. “This is bad enough as it is.”

“That’s okay. I won’t come back there. I’m just going to leave some stuff here close by.” Edward began to unload his arms onto the ground. “There are two garbage bags, so you can double bag your clothes. There’s water and paper towels for you to clean up and some hand sanitizer you should probably use all over when you’re done. There’s a pair of flannel pajama bottoms that’ll probably be a little large for you, but they’ve got a draw string. I’m going back to the car.”

At the car Edward took garbage bags and blankets from the trunk. He lined the backseat, carefully tucking in a layer of plastic then a layer of cloth. After a while, Jared came gingerly to the car looking wan and weak and red-eyed and Edward suppressed the instinct to brush back his hair, lift his chin and tell him that everything was going to be all right.

“You can lay down in back. I’ll leave the window open but there’s an extra garbage bag if you think you’re not gonna make it that far. Scream if you need me to pull over again.”

Jared said nothing, climbed into the back seat while Edward gathered everything up and put it in the car. They stopped five miles down the road, stopped again in another twenty-two, once more twelve miles later and a fourth time just before they reach the thirtieth mile. Edward pulled on the road for the seventh time that day wondering if they would ever make it to another town at all. Fifteen minutes later Jared sat up and Edward was certain it was time to pull over again.

“Where’re my clothes.”

“In the trunk.”

“Can you stop? I need to get my smokes out.”

“No. Are you kidding? That’s disgusting.”

“I need a cigarette.”

“No you don’t, it’ll just make you vomit.”

“Fuck you, dude, I need a smoke!”

“Well, you’ll have to wait until we get to the next town and buy a new pack.”

“Look man, I feel like shit, my gut is killing me and I need a fuckin’ smoke.”

“No.”

“Goddamnit!”

Edward jumped in his seat, startled by the sheer volume of Jared’s voice. He stared at the mirror. Edward caught only the briefest flash of Jared’s face before he

dove for the window and wretched. It was the kind of expression Edward would have expected on the face of a bull chewing habañero peppers—red, wide eyed, wide nostriled. And Edward was acutely aware of the adrenaline leap in his own veins, the catch of his breath, and wondered if he shouldn't be more than a little grateful that the kid had a bad stomach just then. Jared pulled his head back through the window, collapsed onto the seat and began to weep.

“Look, I'm sorry. I'll buy you a pack of cigarettes as soon as we get to the next town, okay?”

The kid didn't answer. Eventually, he fell asleep.

Edward had already registered at the desk and carried in suitcases and Jared's backpack before he decided to wake the kid. Jared was groggy and unsteady on his feet and Edward kept a firm grip on his arm.

“Where we goin'?” the kid asked trying to work the stickiness out of his gums.

“I got a room.”

“You fuckin' what?” Jared said, pulling away from Edward with such force he nearly went over onto the asphalt.

“A double... separate beds.” Edward held up his middle and index fingers in a hard V for emphasis.

Jared pinched his nose and eyebrows at him.

“Are you saying you couldn't use a decent night's sleep in a real bed and a hot shower?”

His dubious expression did not relax.

“If you’re that freaked out *I* can sleep in the car.”

Jared swayed gently forward and back, forward and back.

“No, no that’s okay. It’s cool, you’re cool.”

By the time they reached the room, Jared was steady enough on his feet to manage without Edward’s assistance. He sat on the edge of the bed nearest the bathroom, while Edward went to the sink for glass of water. Jared dropped his face into his palms.

“Fuck,” he said.

“Sip it,” Edward said holding out the water. “You need to get some fluid back into you.”

Jared took the glass, did as he was told.

“There’s a diner across the street. I’ll see what they’ve got that won’t get your stomach going again,” Edward said and headed for the door.

“Do you have chicken broth?” Edward asked the waitress.

“Is that your car?” Dark roots showed beneath over-sprayed hair.

“Yes it is. Do you have any chicken broth?”

“I saw you pull up, that’s a real nice car.” She blinked blue mascaraed eyes.

“Yes it is. I need to get some broth if you have it and herb tea and any kind of juice you have, to go.” She pouted her lips.

“Prune juice?” She smiled.

“Anything else?”

“Orange and Apple.”

“How about apple.”

“Sure thing. It looks pretty old, but you keep it real nice.”

“It’s vintage.”

“What?”

“It’s old. Can I get that broth?”

“Sure enough.” And she smiled and wandered away.

When Edward got back to the motel Jared was propped up on pillows on his bed wearing a pair of threadbare boxers and wielding the remote. His hair was wet and clean and he smelled of soap and acorns.

“We got cable.”

Edward nodded. “You’re looking a little less green around the gills.”

“I’m still a little woozy but my guts aren’t crampin’ up like they were.”

“Maybe you got whatever it was out of your system.”

Edward set a small box of Styrofoam containers on the nightstand beside him, pointed out the contents of each.

“Smells good,” the kid said opening the broth.

“Sip,” Edward reminded him. Jared nodded. Edward watched him drink, sanguine lips pressed to wide white curves. Edward watched the remote, restless in

his hands—he watched the flush return in nearly imperceptible stages to his chest and arms.

“I’m going to find a market, maybe a laundry mat while I’m at it. I’ll be back.”

“Sure,” Jared said, eyes never leaving the screen.

Edward did not look back over his shoulder before closing the door.

When he came back to the room, he was grateful to find Jared sleeping. He showered, cracked a Diet Pepsi and looked for something to read. His search turned up nothing but Gideon's Bible. He briefly considered stashing it in Jared backpack, remembered the cigarettes, decided against it. Jared was curled around a pillow, arms and legs tucked into themselves like a kitten in the sun, a single hand poking out still clutching the remote. Edward placed his knees on the edge of the mattress, leaned his upper body over as far as he could, his fingers touching, but not gripping the remote. He could feel the heat rising off of Jared's body, a scent like warm rain. At last he got hold of the thing, plucked it from Jared's fingers, and stepped away.

He kept the television low watching Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon in drag on a train with Marilyn Monroe. They went to Florida, played music at a resort by sea. His eyelids sagged under the weight of the day and the bed was soft and warm and seemed for a moment to be somewhere else altogether. At last he fingered the remote, watched the screen flash and dim. He stretched beneath his covers, closed his eyes. Marilyn's image lingered on the back side of his lids and he listened to her voice in his head.

“Goodbye to Spring,” she sang, “And all it meant to me / It can never bring /  
The thing that used to be...”

He felt Max on the bed next to him. A familiar weight. A weight like going  
home.

“She’d be in her seventies by now, you know. If she’d lived.”

“Yes, she would.”

“Do you think she’d still be beautiful?”

“In a different way, yes, very. And happy, I think she would have finally been  
happy.”

“You think she killed herself because she was unhappy?”

“I don’t know that she killed herself at all, a lot of people think she was offed  
by the Kennedys, though I doubt it. It was probably an accident. I don’t know. Why  
do you suppose people do it?” Edward waited a long time in the dark. “They lose  
hope, maybe? They’re alone? They fall and there’s no one there to catch them?”

“Is that what you’ve been thinking?”

“Maybe,” Edward said.

“I think... I just think there are some feelings that are so fucked up, so  
confusing and messy and unfixable that you’d do absolutely anything to stop feeling  
them.”

“I’ve felt that way before.”

“Yes, you have.”

“I didn’t kill myself.”

“No you didn’t.”

After a very long while Jared stirred in his bed, sucked in hard, then settled back into the gentle rasp that Edward knew would develop into a snore in, say, four maybe five years.

“He’s beautiful,” Max said.

“He’s young,” Edward replied.

“Young and beautiful. That’s bad?”

“I know what you’re getting at.”

“So?”

“I’m old.”

“You’re not in your seventies.”

“I’m old enough.”

“He’d do it.”

“He’s sick, Max.”

“He’ll be better in the morning. He would, you know.”

“Maybe, but he wouldn’t mean it. Besides, young and beautiful is great when you’re young and beautiful but you want different things when you get older.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“And what do you want, Eddy?”

“What do I want?”

“Yeah.”

“And you think you’re so smart.” He swallowed hard, rolled onto his side, tucked his eyes beneath his arm, sniffed involuntarily at the faded bleach and mothball scented motel sheets and went to sleep.

Edward woke suddenly, thinking he'd left the television on. There was dreadful gasping, a groaning of mattress springs and an arhythmic slapping of skin against skin. Then he recognized the low male drone as Jared's, perhaps huskier than the day before, maybe a touch more vibrato. He did not recognize the high female whimpering. Edward pretended to sleep, waited for them to finish, but it seemed to go on and on and on for such a very long time. It finally came to an abrupt finale in a furious, tortured invocation—oh god, oh god, oh jesus, oh god—half buried in a pillow. Only a dual pant remained as evidence that they were still there at all.

Then there were whispers and giggles and Edward heard the flint of Jared's lighter crack and smelled the rich, brown aroma of tobacco in the air.

“I gotta piss,” he heard Jared whisper, then bare feet padding across the floor, the catch of the door in the frame, the long, low drizzle of urine and the whoosh of a toilet. After a minute he heard the shower begin to spray. All the while the heavy drag and blow of a cigarette continued in the bed beside him. Edward turned over and sat up. It was the blue mascara he recognized first.

“Oh, hey, you’re up.”

“I’m awake,” he said. “What are you doing here?”

“Well, your friend come over for a cup-a-coffee just about the time I was clocking off a double and we got to talking and just sort of hit it off.” She took another drag from her cigarette. “He’s a real nice fella.” Edward didn’t say a word.

“He’s a real nice fella,” she said again. “You known him long?”

“He sorta reminds me of this fella,” she said after a while, “that I used go with just outa high school. Real dark hair like Bobby there.”

“Bobby?”

“Bob, Robert, whatever you call him. He was a real sweetheart, that one.”

Edward stared. She nubbed her cigarette nervously into the ashtray beside the bed.

“Well, maybe I ought to get going. My daughter’ll be getting up soon, anyway.”

“Maybe, you’d better.”

“Well?” she demanded.

“What?”

“Turn around.”

Edward turned. He listened to the tug and rustle of clothing, a sharp zip.

“Tell Bobby I had a real nice time, will ya?” she said on her way out the door.

Edward said nothing, checked for his wallet after she had gone.

In the car, Jared lazed and smoked. Neither of them said a word for nearly an hour.

“Thanks for takin’ care of me yesterday. I felt pretty much like shit,” Jared finally said. Edward did not reply. “I’m feeling a hundred percent better today.”

“Apparently.”

“Must have been a one day bug or something. Or maybe food poisoning like you said.”

“I guess so.”

“Are you pissed at me?”

“Am I pissed at you?”

“You know, for fucking that waitress? She said you talked to her yesterday when I was back sick.”

“That’s where I got the soup.”

“I didn’t mean to move in on your make or anything.”

“What? Oh God.”

“I knew you were pissed.”

“Actually, I was a little angry about it.”

“I knew it. I’m sorry, man. If I’d have known I wouldn’t have gone near her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If I’d known, you know, that you had a thing for her.”

“I promise you I had nothing, oh boy, much less than nothing ‘for her’!”

“What are you pissed about then?”

“Well, for starters I was trying to sleep.”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, we tried to keep it down.”

“Well you weren’t as quiet as you thought. And what were you thinking dragging some complete stranger into the room in the middle of the night?”

“It was seven in the morning.”

“You don’t know her. She’s just some... waitress you picked up. You don’t know what kind of person she is. You know nothing about her.”

“You don’t know me.”

Edward stared at the road.

“No, you’re right, I don’t know you.”

There was a long silence. Edward tried to fit the pieces together, but the fragments of the thoughts that had been going through his head, the sensations of wrongedness and betrayal all seemed to come from a different jigsaw’s box.

“Why’d you pick me up back there?”

“What?”

“Why did you?”

“I don’t know. Company.”

“What kind of company?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means. Why’d you rent a room?”

“Didn’t we do this once already?”

“You brought me soup. Washed my clothes.”

“And I’ve paid for food and gas and I’m taking you to Cleveland, what’s your point?”

“You’re jealous.”

“What.”

“You’re jealous I fucked that waitress.”

“Believe me I had no interest in the waitress.”

“I’m not talking about the waitress.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Edward, you want me.”

Edward began to laugh.

“That’s it, isn’t it? You’re a ‘mo.’”

“That’s not why I wanted your company. Or anybody else’s for that matter.”

“Edward’s a ‘mo.’”

“I realize that it’s probably pretty easy for somebody who screws a waitress within the first half hour of meeting her to assume that everyone is as thoroughly motivated by their genitals, but—”

Jared slid across the bench seat. “Fess up, ‘Dwardie-baby, you want to ride the wild J-stick.” Jared nuzzled ungently at Edward’s neck, tongued the flesh along the jaw beneath his ear, caught and twisted a nipple through his shirt.

“Stop it!” Edward demanded, tried to pull away. “You’re going to make me wreck the car.”

Jared tugged at him fiercely, took hold of Edward’s hand dragging from the wheel, pushing it against his inner thigh.

“Admit it, motherfucker!”

Edward retrieved his hand with a forceful jerk and slammed on the Lincoln's brakes. The tires squealed furiously and the Continental's tail just began to drift to the left when they lurched to a stop.

"I said, 'Stop it.'"

Jared leaned over Edward's chest, placed his mouth firmly over Edward's. His lips were warm and a taste of salt and cinnamon lingered on his tongue and the kiss seemed to Edward to go on for a very long time. Jared pulled away, smiled a funny wolveren sort of smile that Edward thought could be invitation or threat; either notion teethered at his instincts of fight or flight. He threw open the door, stalked to the back of the car and opened the trunk.

"Okay, dude, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to freak you out."

"Get your things." Edward nodded his head at Jared's pack.

"I was just trying freak you out 'cause I thought you were a homo."

"Just get your things out of my car."

"I admit it. Maybe I went too far. Ya know? I'm sorry. It's not like I'm gay or anything." Jared leaned in, wrapping his hand around his backpack and hefting it out of the trunk and onto the pavement.

"I know you're not, but I am."

"What?"

"I said, I am."

"Okay, so. Well, I was just messing with you, man. Don't take it so seriously."

“Are you kidding? Did you really think the prospect of doing it with you on the side of the road, or in some cheap motel while you were puking was going to inspire some kind of excitement? Did you really think I needed to be put in my place for giving you a ride, making sure you had a bed when you were sick, or was that strictly because I'm queer?”

“Look, man, I didn't fuckin' mean anything by it, okay? I'm fuckin' sorry.”

He was shouting now.

“You're sorry?” Edward shouted back.

“That's what I said, now leave me the fuck alone!”

“Well, I'm sorry!” Edward faced off Jared's fierce, hard expression for nearly a minute. “Now, put your stuff back in the car.”

“What?!”

“Just put your stuff back in the trunk and let's get going.”

“What the fuck is the matter with you?!?”

“Nothing. You're sorry. I'm sorry. We're all sorry so let's just get back on the road.” It was then that Edward saw the trembling in Jared's shoulders and head.

“Fuck that! You're fuckin' crazy! What the fuck's the matter with you? You just like fuckin' with people's heads. Huh? Is that it?”

Jared kicked the bumper hard, leaving a heel sized indentation in the chrome.

“Stop that!!”

“You don’t wanna fuck *me*, you just wanna fuck with my head? That what gets you going, buddy?! Huh?! Huh?!” Jared kicked at the bumper again.

“Leave the car alone, damn it!”

Jared gave the Lincoln's bumper another solid hack with his heel. Edward let go a wild slap that landed on Jared’s cheek with a hard pop like the bursting of a balloon. There was an instant of absolute silence and a sudden ferine contraction in the hazel irises of Jared’s eyes. Edward saw Jared’s hand drop into the trunk of the car and the black flash of the tire iron in the air, but the synapses in his brain did not connect them to the sudden blind-white burst of pain before the world erupted with a single terrific crunch and went black.

There was a loud insect buzz in his ears when he woke, a bee maybe, or a fly. Only one eye came open when he looked up, and he discovered a dry crust over the other when he explored it with his fingers. His head throbbed and his stomach felt like a buoy loose of its anchor. He tried to remember where he was and how he’d managed to get there while he picked at his eye, but nothing really made much sense to him. He remembered driving away from the motel and Jared’s long silence. And where was Jared? Where was the car? He tried to sit up, to look around, but the world spun wildly and his stomach flopped inside of him like salmon on a dock. He spit up a mouthful of bile and let himself roll onto his side.

The light of the sun was harsh and hot, and it somehow made sense to Edward that he would want to be in the shade of the grass along the roadside and off the gravel

of the shoulder where he lay. He pushed with his legs and bent and pulled with his upper body until his head was covered in the grass. He threw up again. He lay panting into the wild-weed aroma of the field, feeling a haze drift over him.

Edward felt a cool breeze tracing the planes of his face, a gentle breath on moist skin. He could hear a rustle of grass and the harmonics of crickets, and there were a million million pinpricks of light when he opened his eyes, as if someone had up-ended a bowl of them into the sky.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” Max said tucking his hands behind his head.

“You forget how many stars there are out here.”

“You forget a lot of things,” Max reminded him.

“This is like that summer we slept every night on the roof.”

“Sleeping bags and wine.”

“And you showed me all the constellations?”

“Mmm.”

“And you told me the story about Cygnus?”

“I remember.”

“Do you think he ever finds Phaethon?”

“They don’t ever tell you that part of the story. They just tell you that Zeus took pity on him, turned him into a swan and set him in the stars.”

“Why don’t they tell you? Do you think they’re hiding something?”

“The Greeks? Probably.”

“Do you think it could have turned out differently?”

“I don’t know. We make the choices we do. Things don’t really make sense, Eddy, we just make sense out of them. Shit happens and you live with it or you don’t.”

Edward stared into the swan’s open wings watching him drift with a sea of stars across an indigo sky.

“I’m tired, Max.”

“It’s been a long day.”

“Dward?!? ‘Dward?!?” His eyes fluttered. He focused on the gaunt of the cheeks, the green of eyes. “I’m sorry, man. I’m... fuck! I didn’t mean it. Okay? You okay?” Jared was pulling on one of his shoulders propping it up with an arm. “I didn’t mean it. I... I just get... angry sometimes. I just... I didn’t mean to take your car. I mean, I was pissed... I wasn’t thinkin’. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I can’t believe you came back.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not some kind of a psycho or something,” Jared said, tugging at Edward’s chest and arms until he had him in the air, Edward’s feet dragging.

“I missed you.”

“Yeah, yeah, me too, can you make it to the car?”

“Where’s Max?”

“You got me, buddy, where is he? Come on. Yeah, right here, I gotcha. It’s just a couple more steps.”

And Edward was leaning against the cool metal of Max's car.

"We're gonna be okay, 'Dward, just fine." But dark viscous liquid was beginning to puddle and run along the roof of the car.

"I think my head's bleeding again."

"Oh fuck!" Jared lifted his T-shirt over his head and bunched it in his hands.

"Moving around must have—"

"Hold this."

Jared eased him onto the back seat, lifted Edward's legs into the car.

"It's gonna be okay, man. I promise. I promise."

Edward lay on his side; he listened to the car door slam and the Lincoln's engine roll over and roar. The car leapt onto the road; the sensation of skidding sideways stayed with Edward for a long, long time after he knew they had to be driving forward again. The seat buzzed and Edward tried to calculate their speed by the pitch of the engine, but no matter how hard he tried he could only come up with fast. Edward could hear a series of faint whimpers from the front seat of the car and had the impulse to sit up and check for a wounded dog, but there was a terrible tiredness in the Lincoln's back seat and he decided not to bother. Then there were fingers in his hair. Gentle fingers stroking the side of his head.

"That's nice," he said to Max.

"Sssshhhhh."

Edward was so tired.

"I'm never going to forgive you, Eddy."

Edward opened his eyes in alarm, tried to lift his head: "What?"

"Look at this. You've ruined the upholstery of my car."

Edward rolled his cheek back onto the car seat and laughed. "Shut up," he said.

Then he fell asleep. Edward dreamed that he had driven a hundred thousand miles in just one day. He'd passed old farms with fields of ripe wheat and barns spilling out chickens and cows and horses, sheepdogs and geese. He drove over rivers on rickety wood bridges near enough to the water to make out the breed of fish and he pattered through one-traffic-light burgs and crossed bayous and forests and fields and fields of dry grass. He dodged wild-eyed drivers on eight-lane interchanges in cities with huge metal and glass buildings on every side and so many layers of Freeway you'd lose your sense of direction and have to depend entirely on the signs. And he dreamed that Marilyn Monroe was riding in the passenger seat beside him with a leg propped up on the door and a bare foot sticking out in the wind. She laughed and told him stories about Joe Dimaggio and Arthur Miller, and joked about the endowment and performance of Jack compared to Bobby and they laughed and laughed together, and smoked Indonesian cigarettes through open windows at a hundred miles an hour.