On the Come: A novel

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ON THE COME:

A NOVEL

by

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ABSTRACT

ON THE COME:
A NOVEL

by

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A creative, book-length work of fiction written at the end of the 20th Century, this dissertation invariably converses in narrative concerns common to contemporary fiction, such as character point of view, plot and theme; however, in a narrower focus, specific issues of story and story telling and their relations to personal identity are examined through the maturation of a protagonist. As members of any society, we witness events common to a percentage of the whole but the meaning assigned to the common event may vary for each individual. For example, an automobile accident is a single event; however, every party involved, whether it be the drivers, passengers or bystanders, has the opportunity interpret the event through the creation of a “story” within his or her
head. Although the initial event is the same, the meaning attached to the event can become extreme. Culpability and the recollection of facts may shift. These stories surrounding an event coagulate into a matrix of heavy interdependency, creating a general cloth of meaning. Hearing one story juxtaposed against another, or against a preexisting disposition, creates a new unique story; they become interconnected. In this sense, all stories are one. This dissertation examines the dynamic relationship between story and the ongoing development of identity.
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This creative dissertation is dedicated to my fiancee, Nina, and our daughter, Milena.
...to tell my personal myth, I can only make direct statements, only "tell stories." Whether or not the stories are "true" is not the problem. The only question is whether what I tell is my fable, my truth.

~C. G. Jung

My father complained about his arm, saying that he had slept on it wrong. The two of us sat on diner stools in The Tasty as we drank coffee and tried to ignore the four o'clock traffic that convulsed through Harvard Square. He was telling me he was having a heart attack without actually telling himself. And I held onto my coffee with both hands to keep from getting up and leaving because no one who has ever loved my father can believe a thing he says. "It's going on half a day now," he explained, his voice thin with the space that falls in between words. The late-afternoon sun shone through the window of the small diner, spilling bars of light and dark upon the counter and I watched as a new shadow leaned against the old man's shoulder like some kind of conspirator.

"You want to see a doctor?"
He shook his head and said with the confidence of a lifetime supply of plans and strategies, "I have bullet holes. One in the army, one outside the army." He pushed up his sleeve to expose a familiar thin and nearly hairless arm. Without embarrassment, he held it aloft to show everyone—the side-order cook and the woman with dark hair sitting two stools down and the hoodlum wearing Raybans and me, the last person in the world who needed to be shown the wound—a small and waxy dimple of white flesh on his bicep. He lowered his arm and frowned. The cook turned back to his grill; the woman looked away and only the hoodlum behind the sun glasses appeared interested. "Why would I want to see a doctor? Fielding, I've already been shot twice and survived." He eased his stool around to look out the window at the sidewalk full of people going home to places they belonged. "Hospitals are where you go to fold your hand. I got a good hard grip, thank you very much." The sun spilled down through his loose hair, illuminating his head in a corona of dull, dirty light. His name is Jim Greeley, and despite abandoning a family on at least two occasions, he's a strong man: tough and full of disdain for the little things in the world that don't protect themselves. A war vet. He has made a living hustling golf and poker and recently, when his legs turned against him, he began supplementing an Air Force pension he didn't deserve by betting on chess outside the Au Bon Pain. He's intelligent. I've always given him that. And he's my father and although I should now be in a chemistry class, I'm sitting here at this lunch counter but I suppose that says more about me than him. I watched as he re-straightened his sleeve.

"Your circulation just stopped, Dad. It'll come back."
He shrugged and stirred his coffee. "It's really not a bad thing," he said, talking louder than he needed. "This morning with my eyes closed I played with myself and imagined it was Angie Dickinson." The hoodlum laughed openly and my father released a single breath that could have been a laugh or a cough of derision. After a moment, he lined up three packets of sugar beside his cup to pull a fifty-cent bar trick from the old days when we lived in Las Vegas.

"I've got money. Don't do that."

He smiled. "You think I don't have money? We live in a prosperous time." He moved a water glass aside. It would take more than an act of Congress to stop him so I looked out the window at the April sunshine and thought about the million things I should be doing as the old man inanely manipulated the sugar packets so each stood atop the other, three high, like miniature square-shouldered Chinese acrobats. After clearing his throat he barked, "I've got ten dollars." He held a sawbuck up. "Ten dollars to anyone that can balance three sugars on top of each other like this. Ten dollars." He waved the dirty, bent currency. I had seen him do this particular trick at least a half-dozen times but always in a bar or at least a bowling alley. Here where I go to school, the shtick was embarrassing.

The woman two stools down pushed her plate away, buttoned her spring coat and walked past my father who stood with the money out stretched. He asked her if she wanted to try. "It's easy," he said but she continued out the door without looking back and the rumble of the world momentarily sneaked through the open door.
There were gaps in my father's presence. His voice was high and there was no sense of challenge. People in the diner took the opportunity to look away. You can't win them all. I made an opening for him to fold his trick gracefully. "It's my turn to pay, Dad."

"Shut up," he hissed. He motioned to the hoodlum. "Hey, partner. You think maybe you can do this? Balance three sugars?"

The man smiled and said, "Been drinkin', have you?"

That was enough. I stood and pulled from my pocket a twenty-dollar bill.

"You're not on today." I put the money down on the counter.

"You can't pay for me."

"No?"

"Not with this money," and he grabbed the twenty and told the hoodlum that he was now offering thirty dollars to balance the sugar. "Thirty bucks if you do it in five minutes, but if not, you give up a dollar for the coffee. Thirty-to-one? We got a bet?"

The hoodlum motioned at me with his chin. "What about him?"

My father frowned. "He's nothing. Don't pay it a second thought. This money here—and a whole lot more—is money he owes me. It's mine."

I shook my head. "Co'mon, Dad."

"Look at him! A big Harvard man."

The hoodlum smirked.

I took another bill from my pocket and handed it to the cook and walked toward the door.
“You wouldn’t know it to look at him in that sorry jacket, but I can tell you, he’s back on his mama’s tit. He’s got more money than his old man. More class, more outs and better friends. Bask in his brilliance. Goes to Harvard on a step-dad scholarship. Veritas, Fielding! Veritas!”

I opened the door. The light and noise of the Square shouldered me into the current of people swimming down JFK Street toward the T station. Swept along, the familiar soft lump of anger rose in my chest and I kicked his words ahead of me down the sun-warmed sidewalk to come up against them again, re-living the moment before kicking them anew. Bask in his brilliance. I crossed the street, cutting before the hot engines of delivery trucks and continued down Brattle toward the river. The cement of the sidewalk evolved to brick as the houses grew elite. Blue ovals posted on the clapboards boasted historic sanctity. It had been bad luck standing there in front of the magazine rack of Mimi’s when he came up. Two months since the last time I’d seen him but it could have been ten years. He said we live in prosperous times. It struck me that it’s sunshine, not rain that weathers most photographs. He looked washed out. The folds around his eyes had grown deeper, his face pale and blotched with the spades of age. A softness had bled into the emulsion. Stopping at The Tasty for coffee had been my idea and he had at first declined. "Sounds good, but I’m too busy," he said. When I asked what he was busy with, he hesitated then said he was talking to a "smart guy" at MIT. "I’ve got him working on a few things for me. Projects and stuff," he said. I asked a second time if he wanted coffee and he looked beyond me at the activity in the Square before relenting. Walking now under the spread of bare beech trees, I remembered him.
once explaining that it didn't matter how smart someone was—idiots and geniuses were all equal marks—what did matter was how smart a person thought he was.

Across Brattle Street from the yellow Longfellow mansion is spread a common that divides the meeting houses of the Quakers and Mormons. Old America meets new. Although the two buildings face one another they appear almost to be looking over the other's shoulder, as if unaware, or at least indifferent, to the existence of a neighbor. Between them, I walked the length of grass, crossed Memorial Drive and sat down on a green bench set before the Charles River. It was cool. Winter had slowly released its grip and despite the fickleness of April in New England, spring stood confidently. Before me on the river there was no movement, just a broad arc of glistening brown that could have been glass or stone, a thing here forever, and then a pair of gulls flew over, their ruffled twins below in the water. I closed my eyes. Let my breath out slowly. Pressures flattened and muscles relaxed. What can come from this? We like the edges. The common ground doesn't interest us; we could talk of a thousand things but we focus on the stuff that falls in between, the words and ideas that make us different. Twenty-four years old and a sophomore at Harvard. He's a jealous old man. I opened my eyes. The sun tarnished orange as it descended, revolving through the troposphere. It would be dark soon. Accompanied by only the hollow rhythm of the cars on the road, I continued to walk along the river. I was beginning to wish I had brought a heavier jacket when the flashing red lights of an ambulance approached on its way to Mount Auburn Hospital. Its siren scalded the air. The vehicle skirted the edge of traffic with a jarring stop-and-go hesitation, crossed the median below the hospital before climbing the back
entrance ramp of the emergency room. From where I stood I could see only the reflection of the pulsing lights against the side of the building. Despite being confident it wasn't him, I thought about my father and his arm and his heart. There was no way to know if he was ill or if his arm had just fallen asleep or if the whole thing was nothing more than another prank. And I guess it didn't matter. My father could take care of himself. He had bullet holes. And he certainly wasn't going to accept any help from me or anyone else. But I knew that in the coming weeks should the telephone ring in the middle of the night, I would be aware that I wasn't surprised.

I returned to my apartment off Mission Street in Brookline, a one-bedroom two-story with the use of a private brick courtyard in the back. On the answering machine my mother's voice ground on as she outlined her itinerary for the coming month. A trip to New York and another to Chicago to attend a dinner with Stephen. She asked how my classes were going. Made a joke about all the women in my life. She said she wanted to know how I felt about spending a week with Stephen and her on the Vineyard this summer. "I'm working on a guest list," she said. "And I need your support, honey. Those kids of Stephen's think it's some kind of tradition that they should all come to the island on their vacations. Without you by my side, I'll never make it. And please, please don't forget the get-together Friday, Fielding. I know how you are at remembering these things." I erased the message. From the refrigerator I took an Amstel Lite and drank it standing up, the coldness rushed into my chest like dancing, metal thimbles. I emptied the bottle, threw it away and took another with me to the couch. Four bottles remained. It was reassuring to think of them in the cold, in the dark, money in the bank. Instead of
studying or reading, I watched television and drank beer. Across the way, I heard my neighbors singing. They're newlyweds. She's a poet and he owns restaurants, I think in Mexico City. It sounded like an old song. Their voices lifting at the end of each chorus, as if asking questions that didn't need answers. I'm glad they don't do this every night. Still, it's better than neighbors who go crazy.

The next morning inside Brooks Brothers on Tremont Street, I studied the reflection of my worn canvas jacket with its reach of olive corduroy around the collar, water stained but passable and I figured it wasn't completely out of style even if only due to the way retro has become a style of its own. I would like to believe functionality can overcome trend. Several minutes passed as I stood atop a wooden block, the focus of three full-length mirrors before a salesman asked if I needed help. He stood, taut as a new dollar bill, and motioned for me to take my old coat off. A neon-yellow tape measure appeared and he began partitioning my limbs, separating arms from chest to neck to waist. Perhaps the jacket was out of style. I brushed hair off my forehead and felt uneasy. I looked older than I should but that wasn't what bothered me. There was something premature in the slackness under my jaw. A panic hid behind the dark eyes.

Two years ago, during a string of bad beats, I bought a camera and videotaped myself playing Hold'em. Just three of us, Mario, Jonathon and myself at the table. A camera trained on my face. When they came into the apartment they laughed at the tripod-mounted rig that took the place of a fourth player. "Don't trust yourself?" they kidded. "Afraid you might steal a pot?" I've heard of players who study video tapes aimed at opponents to psyche tells and flaws. It's just something I've heard. But I don't see the
point of it. If you're interested in tells, then I want to play you. You're thinking too hard.

Despite saying this, it's also true that there are only two things that your opponent can see that you can't. His cards and your face.

"How often do you plan to wear it?"

"What do you mean?"

The salesman caught my eye in the mirror then shrugged. "Every day, once a week, once a month, two or three times a year?" His hands moved across my shoulders, tugging the cloth of my shirt full with familiarity. The pressure of his touch against my body felt firm. Neither hot nor cold. The tape whispered.

"I want a good coat. Something heavy."

He nodded.

I watched his reflected hands slide down my sleeves. His breath came hot against my neck and I shifted away as he re-checked the collar. I don't like this sort of thing: a man I don't know in such close proximity, acting confident; his look assessing: forty-two long; hands running along the outside, pulling looseness out of places on the inside, all the while feigning distance, being aloof. He had already touched me more than anyone in my family during the past ten years. I counted back and realized it had been nearly three weeks. Nineteen days to be exact, since I had been touched for more than a moment. By anyone. She was a black woman and it was a Tuesday and had used her hands to position my head while cutting my hair, lifting my chin with the stroke of her finger, calling me sweetie and humming to herself as she leaned away from the barber's chair to align my sideburns with a squint and a quick nod.
"Is this going to take long?" I asked.

The salesman shook his head. "A moment."

He showed me dark Italian wool cut against patterns that were popular. "Good clean lines," the salesman said. I watched in the mirror as he draped loose swatches of chalked cloth across my shoulders. Wearing the oversized cloth made me feel small. In the mirror's reflection I could see the face I had had as a fourteen-year old. I could imagine the old haircut and the broad strokes of frustration and rage and resentment that churned within me from that time. It had been spring. My father had driven out from Nevada to take me back with him for the summer. I saw it clearly. He slid into Cambridge steering an Olds 88, the sound of the car heralding his entrance with the rhythm of eight cylinders burning leaded gasoline.

My parents stood on the front lawn of the Cambridge house, apart from one another but on the same property for the first time in eight years. Up until that time, my memories of my father had nearly all been generated from photographs. There existed an easy shot of him leaning within a door frame, a cigarette extending from his hand, smoke curling gently against the front of his jacket. Another picture I remember caught him looking out a window at something that made him smile. He was younger. Not brash nor innocent. Nothing stereotypic. Just younger. I studied the man who now stood on the lawn; I tried to match the moving pieces against the pieces in the photographs. Larger than I had thought; he stood wearing a navy-blue windbreaker and khaki trousers. His hair was combed back and held in place with a stubby rubber band just above his shirt collar. Having him there was both exciting and wrong. Each
movement changed who I imagined him to be. His voice was unexpectedly insistent, nothing like the comfortable voice at Christmas and on my birthday, mitigated over thousands of miles of wire. The words from this big man with a ponytail were dry and smoke burred. Father, I thought. And had I known the word ambivalence back then, that's the one I would have used.

My mother had fallen in love with a man named Stephen Riley who was a lawyer from out of Gloucester and represented Reverend Moon's interests in the fishing fleet, an unpopular position that had forced him to leave Annisquam and take up an apartment in Boston. She said she liked him because he was a good man who had suffered but remained unembittered. He didn't have strategies to even the score. Through a series of phone calls she had arranged for me to stay with my father in Nevada so she and Stephen Riley could marry and honeymoon in the Bahamas. They had negotiated this move for me. Things were given up and other things were taken. "For the summer," my mother had said and added, "Every boy should know his father."

Standing on the lawn, the two of them argued over a mirror. They spoke quietly. My mother stood in front, barring my father who carried the small wood-framed mirror in his hands. "I know what I said," she repeated. "But I've been thinking about it. They gave it to me. It was a gift."

My father smiled incredulously and shook his head. He said, "For Christ's sake, it's part of a set. Look, see the pegs here? They connect to the dresser. The dresser I have. That I've had for years. This isn't something separate. It was never intended to stand alone."
"It means a lot to me."

"You see the pegs, right?"

"It reminds me of good things."

"Honey, it shouldn't--"

"Don't honey me."

My father stood up straight. The two looked at one another and there was a moment when I thought he might just push through her and pack the mirror among the stuff already in the trunk of the car. But instead he sighed and said, "I'll trade, give you those two Windsors you like."

Mother concentrated on the blank windows of her house then shook her head; her arms were folded across her chest. Her dark hair reflected the struggling light of April.

"I will choose what I want in my life," my mother said.

Not far away, a siren caught hold and wailed with excitement. They paused from each other. Mother turned, walked toward me sitting on the front steps of the house. My father watched her back. With deliberateness he said louder than he needed. "You choose what you want in your life and what you don't want."

Without hesitation she continued. She lifted her hands. They were small. Small white hands without nail polish. They reached toward me. And she brushed the hair that was too long from my face. "Do you know what a Windsor chair looks like?" she asked.

I nodded, yes. The siren grew louder.

"It will be your job to be sure he sends them, okay, Fielding?"
The siren turned down our street. A blue police car with white trim sped past the house, past my mother leaning into me, past my father holding the mirror to his chest. Two blocks further down the street, the police car stopped. It was an intersection. My mother straightened and walked back to where my father stood. I continued to sit on the steps. The pain in my stomach grew. Together they peered down the street after the noise and flashing lights.

"Let's go see," my father said, still holding the mirror.

Mother looked first at me then back at him. "You feel the need to search out misery in others?"

My father laughed. It cascaded out. "Damn," he said. An object inside me, something hard, loosened. Its weight lessened. He turned to me and asked if I wanted to see the action. "Com'on, Fielding." My parents stood side by side and I felt a need to get up. I left the front steps and crossed the yard. Against my father's chest I stopped when I saw myself reflected in the mirror. The three of us were touching, together in the same place. My mother, father and their son. My father smiled. And I saw the boy who was held in my father's hands smile.

"I need you to stand up straight," the salesman said, speaking around a mouthful of pins. He pulled the crease true in my pant leg and adjusted the cuff, pinning it in place. "We're almost done." He followed the crease of the second leg and finished setting the cuff. A few more pins and stripes of chalk and he dismantled the suit. "One week," he said as I pulled my old pants back on and zipped my jacket. Before itemizing a bill, I had him add several shirts and ties. A sweater. As he wrapped them, I
contemplated my old jacket again in the mirror. It did look like something you might see on the side of the road.

I remember my mother had been surprised that I wanted to see the accident. She shook her head. "I raise you your whole life and in just a matter of hours he corrupts you." She said she would have nothing to do with such nonsense and she returned back to the house and its dark windows.

My father and I walked down the sidewalk under the branches of trash-barrel thick maples toward the commotion up ahead. "She's happy, isn't she?" he asked.

"Now?"

"No, I mean overall."

I wasn't sure what to say. "Sure."

He nodded. "It wasn't always this way between us."

The police car had parked sideways blocking traffic along a side street that emptied onto Mass Ave. Its blue lights flashed but there was no siren. As we got closer, we could see that two cars had collided, a blue Volkswagen van and a silver Mercedes. "Both German," he said. "If you have to be in an accident, they're as good as any. But I'll put my money on the Mercedes." A small group of people stood on the sidewalk watching; they talked quietly behind their hands. White steam hissed from the radiator of the silver Mercedes. The police officer was leaning into the driver's side window, his hands working inside.

"It doesn't look bad," my father said.

"You think they're hurt?"
"You wait here. I'll go see." He excused himself as he stepped in front of the people standing before the accident. The police officer told my father to keep back.

"Does anyone need medical help?"

"You a doctor?"

He shook his head. "I have nursing experience. If I can be of help."

The police officer pointed toward the van. "Over there."

A woman, a stranger that stood beside me, whispered, "Ahh, good. Everything's going to be okay."

He talked to the man inside the van and opened the door and helped the man out of the vehicle. With my father's aid, the man lay down on the asphalt. I watched as the two talked for several more minutes.

"Fielding." He motioned for me to approach. "Come here."

"Go help your father," the woman said, her hand suddenly on my shoulder.

The closer I got, the more things I saw. Beads of white-green glass on the ground. Strips of metal. And I heard the sound of the radio still playing in the Mercedes, a Peter Frampton song that was popular.

The man on the ground was old. He had white hair and a set of false teeth that sat, still glistening with saliva, on top of his suit jacket. "It's my son's car," the old man said, smiling. He appeared unhurt. He smiled without his teeth and his face looked loose. My father showed me how to prop the man's feet up to prevent shock using a box he found in the van.

"The ambulance will be here any moment," he told us.
I nodded.

"No pain?"

"Amazing," the old man said. "I feel strong enough to rip phone books."

My father smiled. "Adrenaline."

"I feel good."

"They're going to move you soon," my father said. "Put you on a gurney. We need to empty your pockets of keys and anything else that might be sharp, things that could poke you."

Still smiling, the man nodded. "I'm used to driving a Lincoln. I didn't see--"

"Don't say anymore," my father said. "Don't admit anything."

Together we took the man's shoes off and his tie. My father took the man's watch and placed it within his shoe next to him. We placed his wallet in the shoe and his keys and his teeth too. "What's in your jacket?"

"I don't know."

My father checked and removed a gold pen. It looked heavy and my father seemed surprised. Before putting it with the other things he held it a moment. A siren approached from Mass Ave. Good, I thought. The old man looked happy. He told us that his son would be upset and he laughed.

"Are you allergic to anything? Any medicine?"

"Penicillin."
"Fine," my father said. I listened to the siren come closer as he tore a piece of paper loose and wrote a note using the man's pen. "Help me pin this it to his shirt, Fielding."

A pair of ambulances arrived at the same time. My father and I stood back as they worked on the old man. We told them about the penicillin just to be sure and they thanked us and said he would be okay and that we had done a good job. They smiled and seemed relaxed. The old man called us over to where he lay. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you." I watched as they pushed him into the back of the ambulance on a gurney and shut the doors. We waited until it drove away, siren back on, lights flashing. The police officer then shook my father's hand and said, "Job well done." He shook my hand too and said, "Thank you."

People looked at us and smiled as we moved past those still watching. There was a murmur of approval. The woman who had placed her hand on my shoulder winked. We walked back the way we came. Neither talking. Our legs propelled us up the street under the maples. I couldn't wait to tell mother. I looked up at my father and he was smiling and I smiled and there wasn't another person in the whole world that I wanted to be with more.

Outside in the Boston sun on Tremont Street I carried the bags of clothes and pushed myself down the street, not at all sure where I wanted to go, but knowing that I needed to get some food. Beyond the small stores and boutiques I looked for a place
where I wouldn't need a credit card to get a sandwich or burger. The antiseptic
commercial brownstones with their hand-painted wood signs dropped away, replaced
with their grungier, leather-and-gum smelling tenement cousins. Places where people
lived. Trees grew along the sidewalks, their bare limbs forced to straddle the telephone
lines. A radio played from an open window above. The singer sounded confident as he
slurred through words and phrases without annunciating anything clearly, a song that
sounded Irish. The music swirled and slipped down to the building's stoop where a girl
danced. She wore a loose-fitting, sleeveless sweat shirt of purple and heavy chino
trousers, sandals on her feet. She looked Spanish and had thick dark hair and a beautiful
face. Sometimes it's bad when the going gets tough when we look in the mirror and want
to give up... I watched as she spun slowly, arms up raised and the light of the sun slanted
down across her face and back and then face again. Her armpits were darkened by
stubble. She smiled at me as I watched her. Sometimes we live, sometimes we die,
sometimes cry... Three other people, a woman and two men, stood on the edge of the
walk, watching too. Her grace and unabashed joy felt good and I smiled. The girl spread
her arms and held her hands to me, palms up for me to take. Shit. I shook my head and
moved to gain momentum, to walk past but she intercepted me, her hands weaving with
the music and her lips parted. She was shorter than me, but not much. Her eyes climbed
my arms holding the bags; her eyes slid across my face pausing a moment to make
contact. I nodded a smile to her, acknowledging her and looked away.

"Hey," she said.

I turned around.
She pointed down at my feet. A box was falling loose from my plastic bag. I pushed it back in and thanked her. She nodded. I watched her as the young girl began moving to the music again. Warm, I thought. She had a bottom lip that pouted, even when she smiled. I liked that. Heat spread from her, a feeling of easiness and comfort slipped the distance between us and I watched her dance to the music. She spun around and around. She closed her eyes and I felt the sensation of being released and I took the opportunity to leave. I was out of breath. Across the street I discovered an outside table under an awning and I sat down, putting my bags under the chair. I ordered some food. The Spanish girl continued to dance and I ate a bowl of soup, watching people as they gathered near her. A plate of turkey breast on toast, tomatoes and a thick slice of red onion was served by the waitress. She had her name etched on a black name tag: “Leona”. She asked if I was done with the soup. I handed her the empty bowl and nodded. "Good?" she asked. It was good and I told her so. "The turkey's smoked," she said and she hoped I liked it and then walked back into the restaurant. I was the only customer on the veranda.

Four people watched the girl dance. Her music washed ashore to me in gaps between the buses and trucks and sport utility vehicles. I watched the crowd watching the girl. Outside of the others a man stood with his hands in his pockets. Short and fat, the man pretended to be watching the girl, but wasn't. Like the first law of thermodynamics, people too tend to remain either at rest or in motion. He bristled with false starts. From where I sat I could see his face expressed a story of emotions: boredom and surprise and a lingering smile. Overplaying his hand, I thought.
pickpocket. On the sidewalk he slid behind a woman wearing a short skirt who carried a
macrame purse and watched the dancing girl. He stood perfectly still, eclipsing the
woman. Cars drove by and I craned my neck. In an opening of traffic, I saw the woman
standing alone. A bus rumbled between us. I nearly got up but then it moved on and
there was the woman as before and at her feet knelt the short, fat man. Maybe not a
pickpocket. He huddled in the woman's shadow, pretending to tie a shoe. A pervert I'd
guess. He loitered. Probably had a shiner in his hand, a piece of glass or metal that
helped him see up the woman's skirt.

Later that day when my father came to take me back with him to Nevada, I
remember the red sun stood large and imposing on the horizon. My father pointed the
big car into the glare and we sped along the concrete interstate, the toll coins on the
dashboard chattering as our tires leapt each expansion joint. It was warm in the car and
the air smelled strongly of tobacco and aftershave and something underneath all that,
something sweet like cotton candy. Dressed in his nylon sweatsuit, my father looked
tired behind the wheel. He laid his arm out across the back of the bench seat and sighed.
We rode beside each other, not talking. After a while I conjured the image of my mother
waving from the end of the driveway, her eyes clear, a thin white hand raised over her
head moving side to side, metronome steady. She wanted me to stay but also wanted me
to spend time getting to know my father. The father you never knew, she would have
added had I told her these thoughts. She had explained that she was getting married to a
man I didn't particularly care for one way or another, a lawyer, who, she said, had
touched her life forever. And when I expressed uneasiness at her plans, she took my
hands in hers and asked if I wanted her to be happy. Don't you think I deserve to be
happy? she said. Of course I did. And I told her so and she seemed relieved and we
hugged and she held me tighter and longer than was her habit.

"Are you ready to see some shit?" my father asked, accelerating past an eighteen
wheeler. He wore his hair in a stubbed ponytail with an open shirt and a gold Saint
Christopher medal nestled asleep against his chest. "Are you ready, Fielding?" In his
mirrored glasses, I saw the sun reflected, red eyes searching the world. We crested a
steep hill and he popped the car out of gear and the car slipped free of the Kalamazoo
transmission and surrendered to gravity. Down we coasted, picking up speed until the
whistling of air turned to a roar and then the vehicle shook with a ferocity that
diminished only after a half mile of straightaway. "You and me. Father and son. We're
on the road at last, Fielding," he said and he re-engaged the transmission with a tug of the
lever which jolted us back to speed. "Here," he said "I think we need to do something
about these." And from his jacket he took out a smile of false teeth. "They're a hoot," he
said and he placed the pink and white bridges on the dash next to the loose coins.

"They're his teeth?"

My father nodded and grinned. "A reward," he said.

I had never seen real false teeth up close.

I shook my head. "He gave them to you?"

"Gave them to us," my father corrected. "You and me for saving his life."
I pictured the old man as he lay on the ground, his feet up on a box. Maybe the teeth hadn't fit properly or maybe after a trauma, they would need to be re-sized. I looked at the ridged plastic and thought about the bones of animals that live in the ocean's depths.

"Know what we should do with them?" my father asked.

"No."

"I'll show you," and he pulled over to the side of the road where the gravel kicked up in an impatient staccato. Within seconds, the eighteen wheeler we'd passed earlier roared by, shaking us side to side. My father looked at the departing truck and shook his head. He then took the teeth and opened his door. "Be careful," he said and motioned for me to follow him to the front of the car. With a length of wire he bound the teeth together in a loose grin and through the hot grill of the Olds 88, threaded the wire ends and secured the plastic teeth to the front of the car. He had to step back a couple of times because of the radiator's heat but when he was done, the sight was impressive. The pink and white teeth aggressively leaned into the space before the car. They grinned at the world, at everything that was yet to come.

Into the night we traveled. My father's forearms appeared green in the reflected light of the instruments; his eyes were heavy and from his breathing I found a rhythm that covered the span of concrete with a stride more natural than the turning of an odometer. It was our second night in the car and outside the billboards of Missouri edged toward us then slipped by. "I need to talk," my father said. His voice was thick and slow and I listened to him and wondered how long he would push this drive before
stopping for sleep. "A year ago I drove up into the mountains of Utah for a poker game with four millionaires." He flopped his wrist on top of the steering wheel, making small changes in direction casually, almost haphazardly. "It was a cold night and I remember the stars looked close enough to touch, close enough to scoop up in my hand." He leaned forward and peered up through the windshield at the night sky. "I guess you'll just have to take my word for it. Nothing looks the same." He cleared his throat and shook his head. "Up past Cedar City there's a game that's been running probably two days. All hidden back in the woods in a cabin where there's no road except for a dirt track. It's John Handy's place and he's been a partner of mine a couple of times over the past ten years. A sharp guy, John's shit is setting up ring games of five or six business types who want a good time. Plenty of beer and steaks and a girl or two. Comfortable surroundings. And as a favor, he calls me in when the edge is knocked off these guys so we can reap a little of what he's been sowing. When I get up there, it's around two in the morning and there's a couple of those big Jeep Wagoneers in the drive, one with Oklahoma plates, and a Jaguar parked a foot off the road. All by itself sits a piece-of-shit Toyota and that's where I decide to put my piece-of-shit Olds. On the Toyota's bumper is a sticker that reads: Bitch. I smile thinking how that must go over here in the Beehive State. The cabin is lit up and I can hear voices and there's music in the way they're so loud and shit-faced, you know? I blow on my hands because it's cold and I know I'm not dressed right. Two and a half hours previous I was in Vegas where the temperature was eighty. Must be about forty there in the mountains. And I already told you about the stars.
"John Handy introduces me, saying I'm a developer in Wendover and it's a simple enough thing to say, neither one of us feeling more creative. Four guys sitting around a table nod at me, one guy with a cowboy hat honest to God touches the brim. They look hunkered down and they're either not sure what to make of me, or they're too tired to care. I shake hands all around and tell them I can't stay.

"That puts them at ease.

"This place is one of those ski type cabins: a big A-frame foyer with a loft and a huge river rock fireplace, lots of overstuffed leather furniture. On the sofa in front the fireplace are two girls reading magazines and they're sitting there one of them wearing just her underwear and the other a bathrobe emblazoned with the Reno Caesars Palace logo. The blonde in the bathrobe looks at me like maybe a cow would look at a passing car. Shit, I think. The brunette in the bra and panties doesn't even look up. Who the fuck do they...? And I smile because I realize they know exactly who they are. John points at them, 'That's Tiffany. That's Jessica.' We nod to one another and that's all.

"Standing beside John, I watch the poker game on a big table covered with an old Mexican blanket and I figure there's about twenty thousand in action. A sizable sum. Most of it's in front of a guy named LaVell Porter and the rest seems equally dispersed.

"It's Porter's deal and he puts twenty bucks in the kitty and spins the cards out to the others. They're playing Hold'em. You know how to play Hold'em, don't you, Fielding?"

I told him I didn't.
"Well, I'll show you when we get home. All you gotta know is that Hold'em is the Cadillac of poker games. Texas Hold'em."

I nodded.

He stopped talking and looked at me. "You never heard of Hold'em?"

I shook my head. My father thought about this then nodded as if he understood something that he didn't particularly like. It was a slow nod of his head and I felt a twist of shame in my stomach. "But I've played poker," I said. "In school I've played poker."

"Yeah?"

"Just not that game."

He smiled and told me that when we got home he'd show me how to play. "We'll turn you into a real shark."

I laughed and it sounded loud in my ears.

He lay both of his hands on the top of the steering wheel and gently guided the car over the concrete made white from the headlights. Fifty feet ahead there was only blackness occasionally pierced by the diamond-like reflections of mile markers and beer cans. Even the billboards seemed to have given up in those morning hours. It was dark and there was nothing out there.

"The girl was wearing only her underwear?" I asked finally.

My father laughed and he reached over to tousle my hair with his large hand.

"Just her underwear," he said.

"Wow."
"Her name was Jessica. A feisty girl but she got into something she wasn't ready for is about all I can say about her." He thought a moment, pursing his lips. "You know how people are when they're sick to death of being where they are, doing what they're doing?" He tapped his finger on the steering wheel. "Shit, I don't really know what she was thinking."

He described the four men playing poker, explained they were millionaires or at least men who presented themselves as such. "Assholes," he called them. Porter was the guy winning and it wasn't a lucky thing, he was good. My father watched him and figured he wasn't as good as himself, but it was close. The visible flaw—there's always one, he told me—was Porter's pension to gloat. "Just a smile really, but you see it slide into view for a moment and then slide back behind his lips and even though you don't see it anymore, you know the smile is still there." When my father spoke about these things his voice slackened, he sounded almost unsure but wasn't. As he spoke I heard him probing the silence in front of his words, like there was more there, more good things to uncover if he could just find them. "After a while John takes his seat at the table and under pressure I agree but say I can only stay a little while. The others make room and I sit down to the right of the guy in the cowboy hat. His name is Steve. Jack something-or-other sits on my right. His name rhymes with Nogel or Sogel. He's a short, curly-headed son of a bitch and he's upset and bitter. Just a shade taller than a German Shepherd, he's got it into his head that he's some kind of Dirty Harry character and he's bought himself one of those oversized guns that he's holstered under his jacket. It's a certified penis thing. And to top it off, his friends here are calling him Old Lady on
account of how he complains after every beat. I figure it'll just take a nudge from me to push him on tilt. To the right of Old Lady is my friend John who's got a lump of dirty bills in front of him. Porter's next and the last guy at the table is William Franks who owns a muffler shop that's sorta famous in the area.

"Basically it's forty-eighty Hold 'em and I'm looking at the money on the table and I'm trying to get my head into the game. John comes in strong on the next hand and ends up showing down a pair of Jacks for the pot. Steve and his cowboy hat leans over to me and says, 'About an hour ago, he pulled one out of his ass.'

"Yeah?"

'Four people in the pot: the Old Lady, and Jack and Franks. I think that's all. And of course your friend. He calls a raise, the flop comes up something like Jack, rag, Queen. First guy bets; second guy raises; there's a re-raise and your friend calls. Everyone figures pair of bitches with an Ace kicker, maybe someone's on the come with a straight. Nothing much on the Turn. A Three off suit. Again, one bet, two raises and your friend just calls. River is a Seven. Check, bet, fold and your friend raises.'

"Trip Sevens?"

'Merry fucking Christmas.'

"You from Texas?"

'Do I sound it?'

"The hat."

'Oklahoma. Have a dry cleaning business. A chain really. Three stores.'
My father looked away from the road and grinned at me. "The man had a veritable dry cleaning dynasty. A chain he said. You gotta love it." And he continued his story about the four millionaires, describing the game and the people in the game as if it had occurred not a year ago, but only a day.

"An hour or two goes by and the Old Lady's losing along with Cowboy Steve and LaVell Porter's still the big winner but I'm not all that far behind. At this point in the action, there must be fifty thousand on the table. The Old Lady and Cowboy have been reaching deep. Just when I get a big pot going with both Porter and the Old Lady, Jessica, the girl on the couch gets up. She looks unsteady as she approaches the table. Stoned, I figure. I'm holding an Ace, Queen and got raised from Porter. I call and the three community cards we can all use called the flop comes up Queen, Ten, Ace, all offsuit. Jessica announces that she's bored and she says she can't fucking believe that anyone in the 20th century can live without a television. Standing there in her bra and panties I get my first good look and it crosses my mind we might have a problem.

'Your bet,' The Old Lady says to me. It's one of those moments when you wish you didn't have the good hand you have. Porter might have a pair of Aces which would give him Trips and that would sink me. But he might not. Might be kings with a shot at the straight. Another hand that's bothering me is the Jack-King which makes a Royal Straight. Also makes my Two Pair look like an ugly prom date. Now, listen to me because I'm going to teach you something. In a situation like this when you've got an almost-good hand, there are only two things you can do: bet or fold. So I'm pretending to think about this, but really I'm looking at an almost naked, almost-eighteen-year-old girl
standing stoned next to the table, and I figure there's not really much of a decision. I bet forty.

Jessica asks, 'Is that all real?'

'Is all what real, honey?' John says and I'm feeling sick to my stomach.

The Old Lady raises me eighty like I figured he probably would and Porter re-raises eighty which was really the only question. A hundred and sixty to me.

'Is that money real?'

John says, 'There's nothing funny about that money, honey,' he laughs.

"Send the girls home," I say. They look at me like I just shit in the chair.

We wait a moment or two, my words hanging above the table. 'You gonna call, Jimbo?' the Old Lady says finally and I already know I'm folding but can't quite bring myself to give him that satisfaction yet. The blonde's asleep on the couch and I don't know exactly what all happened before I got there, but I can tell from looking at these middle-aged farts that whatever it was, it ain't gonna happen again that night.

On impulse, I grab a handful of hundreds from the pot to give Jessica. "Here," I say.

'Stop!' the Old Lady shrieks.

Jessica looks at the money.

John says, 'Jimmmm,' slow and unsure.

'He can't do that,' the Old Lady says standing up suddenly. 'That's not his money! that's not your money. You can't do it!"

'Don't fuck the game up, Jim'
Even Porter and Franks are shaking their heads. Just to get one more scream from the Old Lady, I offer it again to Jessica who smiles because, well, because this is kinda like television I suppose. She's smart enough to know she's never gonna get the money, but the attention is still nice.

I put the money back in the pot and throw my cards in after.

Cowboy Steve commiserates.

The Old Lady's almost shaking he's so mad. 'Who the fuck do you think you are?'

I shrug.

'Your bet,' Porter says to the Old Lady.

Emboldened, Jessica chimes in, 'Your bet.' She laughs.

'For crying out loud, can't you see we're trying to play cards?' the Old Lady says.

'For crying out loud,' Jessica mimics and she can't stop laughing, her tits jiggling in their little bra.

The Old Lady caps the pot with another raise and Porter calls him without hesitating. Jessica's still laughing. 'For crying out loud,' she says again and now John's trying to keep from laughing. At times there's something contagious about laughter. Porter's smiling as he deals the Turn card. It's a Four. Jessica shouts, 'Four!' Without a doubt the Old Lady's holding the nuts, the King-Jack to give him a straight. What Porter's still doing in there I don't know. Sometimes when you're winning big, you lose focus and re-discover the excitement of chasing cards. John's now laughing openly with Jessica and everyone except the Old Lady are smiling ear to ear.

The Old Lady bets eighty and Porter—openly smiling—calls him.
'Shut the fuck up,' The Old Lady says to Jessica which only makes her laugh harder. John snorts and we lose it. Cowboy Steve has tears in his eyes, his hat's bobbing up and down and William Franks has his hands over his mouth. The Old Lady's looking around, furious.

After catching his breath, Porter deals the last card, the River card, none of us can believe it when it turns out to be a Queen. 'Queen!' Jessica shouts.

Although everyone but Jessica understands the import of this, and tries not to laugh, it's impossible because the Straight is worth shit and if Porter indeed does have a pair of Aces, he's now got a Fullhouse. The Old Lady's staring at the card dumbfounded. It's absolutely the funniest thing I've ever seen. We're all trying to hold it in but can't. A wave of laughter crashes against the table.

As if splashed with cold water, the Old Lady jumps up, chair banging to the floor. 'Queen!' Jessica shouts again.

He looks around the table, his fists clenched.

'Queen!'

'Jessica,' Porter manages to whisper, 'Shut up.'

'Queen! Queen! Queen!'

The Old Lady runs at the young girl and he stands before her, the two of them looking like some kind of Mutt and Jeff. She's gotta be six inches taller than the Old Lady; his face barely comes to her tits.

'Take it easy, partner,' Cowboy Steve says.
Jessica reaches out and smooths down a lock of the Old Lady’s hair. She gives him a pouty look, her eyes glassy and bright, and says ‘Little man’s having a hard day, huh?’

Bang! He pushes her to the ground and before we even have a chance to get to our feet, he’s on top of her, his legs pumping in the air like some curly-headed insect. She’s yelling and the blonde’s now up off the couch and the Old Lady’s fists are swinging like little hammers. Me and Cowboy Steve drag the Old Lady off her and he’s huffing and puffing, still trying to throw a punch or a kick. On the floor, Jessica’s lying on her stomach crying. John kneels down next to her and tries to coax her up but she’s not ready and she ignores him and then, unexpectedly, we hear her laughing. Her shoulders rise and fall with her laughing. The blonde has come over and she’s calling us assholes and has pushed John out of the way.

‘You fucking bitch,” the Old Lady yells.

Slowly, Jessica gets to her feet and in her hands she’s got the Old Lady’s overly-large Dirty Harry revolver. That shuts him up. The thing looks like a cannon in her small hands, the blue barrel accusing each of us. On her lip there’s a spot of blood and her panties have slipped off the sharp bone of her hip.

‘Back up,’ she says evenly. She points the gun at the Old Lady and none of us feel particularly courageous at the moment. She advances and we move back and the Old Lady’s mumbling under his breath. You get the picture? Can you see the blonde getting all their stuff together, putting their clothes in a bag and pleading for Jessica to forget about us shits and come with her to the car? Just like television.
And she does go with the blonde but not until after she walks around the table once, lifting the corners of the blanket we used as a tablecloth, and folding the blanket—complete with the money and the cards—into a little package that she could carry under her arm. She doesn't say a word.

'That's our fucking money,' the Old Lady says.

She nods and stays quiet. The big gun in her hand waves at us.

My father smiled and nodded. "That was a night no one there was likely to forget. The two of them left with the money and the gun in their beat-up Toyota and were never heard from again."

"You didn't call the police?" I asked.

"Well, they wanted to," my father said. "They sure as shit wanted to, but we got talking about it. Porter and Franks are Mormon. Big in the community, you know? And the more we discussed it, and tried to figure out just how old those two girls were, the less sure any of us got." He shook his head and smiled. "I don't blame them for not calling the cops. It's a tough position: rock and a hard place kinda thing." He continued to smile and in the dark of the speeding car, he re-adjusted the rear-view mirror. We were three days and nights in the car, rocketing across the country's flat heartland, over the hiccups of mountains in Colorado before arriving in Nevada; and over the majority of those miles, I listened to my father tell his stories while he taught me the rarified strategies of poker.
In the café, I pushed the half-eaten plate of turkey away. The young girl across the street had stopped dancing and was sitting on the stoop in front of the building. Through the sporadic traffic I watched and listened. She appeared to be waiting for something, for someone and I checked my watch—a little after two o'clock—but I didn't have any place I had to be. Everyone else had gone until it seemed like it was just her and me and the passing cars. A blue sedan finally pulled up to the front of the house. The car had been lowered and its windows blackened and from where I sat across the street, I could feel the thump, thump heartbeat of an over-powered subwoofer. The dense bass smothered the music from the building's open window. She got up and her purple sweatshirt caught above her waist, exposing a line of taut brown skin for a moment and she peered uncertainly. The thump, thump of the subwoofer washed across the street. She mouthed something, her lips forming the "o" of who but the dark windows hid the response. She smiled hesitantly and shook her head. The music pounced as a door opened and closed and the girl stepped back and her hands came to her mouth and I stood up to see better because the moment when nothing becomes something had occurred and while standing there on my empty side of the street, I suddenly felt close enough to be an accessory. The late afternoon light caught the speeding sedan's chrome, refracting sunbursts. Behind the transparent blue haze of burned rubber, the girl's head turned with the squeal of the tires, but, as if connected to some insurmountable weight, her eyes dropped back again to the curb. Down those ancient roads where nobody knows where nobody goes... She knelt next to the body, a body curled in on itself like a thumb in a fist.
I ran across the street. The sedan had turned a corner. The music from the upstairs window grew dominate and pushed something that ought to be a whisper into words louder than was comfortable. "Can I help?" I asked. She leaned over a young man, a teenager. "Do you need help?"

"Oh my God," she cried.

He was beaten, his face and hands raw. Drops of blood had blossomed on the collar of a white shirt. She looked up as I knelt beside the boy.

"He is moving."

"Put his feet up," I said. "Treat him for shock." She touched him. The boy-curl on his side, back round and knees latched-groaned and the sound of something larger than you'd expect from such a small person echoed inside. She looked at me and I said, "It's important."

With tears in her eyes, she whispered the name "Manny" and her voice unlocked the boy's body, as if the word from her mouth had been a key. The joints in his limbs relaxed and his jaw unclenched. "Manny," she said again. I straightened his knees, took off my old jacket and used it to elevate his legs.

"He's going to be okay," I said, not knowing what else to say.

"He is my brother," she whispered.

I nodded. A moment slipped by as the two of us sat over him, doing nothing more.

"He does not look good."
"No," I said. Doesn't look good was an understatement, I thought. He looked bad, really bad. He had begun shivering and his breathing had grown more and more ragged. "Get help," I said.

She looked at me and then back to the boy. Her bottom lip trembled.

"I'll wait here," I said. "I'll wait with him."

She shook her head. "He is my brother. His name is Manny." And she asked me to carry him inside. I thought we shouldn't move him, but saying so seemed worse than whatever might happen if we did. My father would know the things that could happen. The boy could die. A blood clot or a heart attack. Maybe be paralyzed. In the boy's face I saw the squandered time between running up to help and the present moment. His color had lightened. Tears streaked his sister's face. I looked for help but the sidewalk was deserted and the distant faces in the passing traffic felt a million miles away. So I slid a hand under the boy's neck and another under the crook of his knees and I picked him up and hugged him against my chest and detected the familiar but distressing smell of shit. "Inside here," the girl said as I carried him into the brownstone and the boy's limp hands knocked against my thighs. On a landing before a brown door, she jammed a key, turned a lock and we stumbled into the loud music. ...Why don't you dump it on the burning ground. Dump it down there. Yeah man, dump the ju— She clicked the stereo off and the boy hung in my arms, the empty space at the end of each breath growing longer. I searched the room for a place to put him down. The girl held her arms out but it was ludicrous, she was as small as the boy. "Please," she said and I wanted to give her
the boy, I really did, but I couldn’t. I’d made it this far and the boy’s stuff—his blood—was on my trousers, his brown face open in the cradle of my arm like a broken book.

“Call an ambulance,” I said.

“Give me my brother.”

In compromise, I knelt down and put him on the floor. I propped his feet up with a couch pillow and she stood over the two of us, watching closely. “He needs help,” I said and she nodded. “More help than I know how to give.”

“You call someone?” she asked and she pointed toward the phone.

I dialed 911 and told them the situation and asked the girl for the address. She continued to stand over her brother’s body, as if studying him. “What’s the address?” I shouted.

“Marlborough Street,” she said quietly. “Isabella Peña, 1441 Marlborough Street.”

I repeated the address and hung up. There was blood on the phone and I found it on my hands. “They’ll be here in a few minutes,” I said.

She sat beside him, touching his hair. “He is not going to die.”

“No,” I said. I wiped my hands clean on my trousers. “He’s not going to die.”

She looked up at me, looked me in the eye and nodded, satisfied. “He is alone in the world without me, and, I don’t know, he is my brother and he should be with me even if he doesn’t want to be.”

“Get a blanket or something,” I said. “He’ll be okay. He just needs help.”
We covered him and he looked, if not better, then no worse. Color began to come
back to his face and the small noises, the rustlings of unconscious pain, subsided. He lay
on the bare floor in the middle of the room, the disheveled couch the same color as his
shoes and the blood drops on his shirt collar drying into blotches like continents on a torn
map. She sat down next to him. “His breathing is better,” she said and it was true. On
his back, each breath sounded stronger and it would have been easy to imagine him just
sleeping if it weren’t for his face and, I guess, the blood. Looking past the boy, at the rest
of the apartment, the room reminded me of some kind of showroom in a furniture store.
It was all that Ethan Allen shit, stuff that’s supposed to look unique but you know is just
mass-produced copies of some museum piece representing the Forties. Dark wood
furniture with white lace doilies and crystal bowls everywhere and the couch that
matched the boy’s shoes wasn’t really a couch as much as a divan with a curved back and
narrow arms. She didn’t live here with the boy alone. Someone who thought they had
taste was in the picture. But damn, even with her face doughy from crying, she looked
graceful. That bottom lip was the sincerest thing in the room.

“My name’s Fielding,” I said, holding up a hand in a pathetic wave.

She paused a moment as if reaching for something. “Isabella.”

“It’s going to be okay.”

She turned away but I pressed. “I mean it.”

“Sure.”

“When you’re in the middle of something like this, it’s hard to–

“No,” she interrupted. “It’s not like that and you don’t even know.”
The steam radiator kicked on and rattled like a wood spoon against the bannisters. The scurrying traveled the room and settled in my throat. We waited in the stillness, the only noise coming from the breathing of her unconscious brother on the floor.

The paramedics arrived carrying large tackle boxes of equipment and with slow deliberation they asked the two of us questions while they examined Manny. Isabella answered the questions, turning to me occasionally as if we'd known one another all our lives. "Was he conscious?" "No," Isabella said and looked for collaboration. "Unconscious," I added. "We had to move him—we didn't want to, but we had to—and he groaned. His eyes never opened." "They never opened," Isabella echoed.

There was no judgement in the paramedics. They scribbled down our answers, hardly looking up. His breathing was red; he was outside maybe blue minutes; green is what I think; maybe yellow. And they copied the information and fit his neck with a brace and inserted a drip into his arm. "We also treated him for shock," I said and they wrote that down too, without a handshake or even a nod of approval.

"Only one of you can sit in the back," they explained as they negotiated Manny atop a gurney. "The other's gotta sit up front." It never occurred to me I'd go--already beyond the call of duty and everything--but Isabella was putting on a coat, having trouble with the zipper, and I felt that shadow about to come, the one from a door closing and I wasn't exactly sure I wanted to walk away yet.

Almost as if just testing the sound of the words, I said, "I'll go up front."
Isabella looked up from her coat and smiled. She didn’t say, “You don’t have to” or anything else, she just smiled and I gave a nod like it was a done deal. So together we walked down the stairs behind the paramedics and out onto the sidewalk where their orange and white ambulance was parked, the staccato strob of their emergency lights beckoning the interest of the passing traffic. They loaded Manny in the back where Isabella followed and I climbed up onto the passenger seat. Being up front in an ambulance makes you feel significant and fills you with purpose. There were clipboards and scraps of paper on the seat and used coffee cups littering the floor. I pushed the stuff aside and made myself as comfortable as I could. A radio and scanner blinked on the dash; a black box covered with electrical tape, marked with left and right abbreviations and toggle switches sat behind the steering wheel. The small compartment smelled of stale cigarettes. When the driver climbed in he didn’t immediately acknowledge me. He clicked the radio mike on and listed a bunch of numbers, waited a moment for a woman on the other end of the radio to squawk back and then said, “Mass General, E. T. A. Six minutes.” As we pulled into traffic, I spied the packages I bought at Brooks Brothers’ still under the café chair and my bundled old coat lying alone on the sidewalk, like a new piece of refuse. My things disappeared from view. It occurred to me that I also hadn’t paid my bill for lunch. “You ever drive with someone famous?” the driver suddenly asked.

I waited a moment, still thinking about my stuff abandoned outside then looked at the driver, “You famous?” I asked hesitantly. Despite being the only other person in the
cab, he didn't sound like he was really talking to me; he didn't look at me, or even

glance, but concentrated on where he was driving.

"Naw, not me. But earlier this morning I had Robert Redford in the car in front
of me. He was double-parked at the Ritz. You know, in one of them new limos they

got."

"You drove him?"

"No, no, I don't drive a limo; I said the guy was in front of me."

"But you saw him?"

The man nodded and paused. "Sort of," he said.

"Yeah?"

"I mean, it was him, Robert Redford, the actor and he was in the car right in front
of me. I was listening to the scanner and caught the Ritz's security guys talking about
it." The ambulance driver honked a horn that sounded like it belonged to a train to push
a car aside. "Asshole," he said. He tapped the scanner on the dash and said, "You'd be

surprised all the things you pick up with one of these puppies. All those people telling
stories on each other without ever knowing someone like me's listening. It's like you
can really learn what's going on."

"What did they say about Redford?"

"Nothing. They was just talking about how he's sitting out there and wasn't
gonna come in or nothing until some more looky-lews was there to watch him. That

kinda stuff. They was poking fun at him, you know?"

I nodded.
"Being just working stiffs like you and me, I guess they was jealous. I mean, Redford’s the man, right? Shit, he’s gotta have more money than all of us put together.”

The driver paused at an intersection and toggled the siren a minute to stop the oncoming traffic. I realized, he was humming to himself. After the traffic came to a stop, the driver pumped the accelerator and the ambulance dashed across the street next to Massachusetts General Hospital. “You ever see Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Remember how they jumped off that cliff in a river?”

“Sure.”

“Redford’s a lot older than that now,” he said and he pulled into the emergency entrance slip reserved for ambulances and parked the orange and white truck under a cement awning where two nurses were smoking cigarettes. With quick efficiency they pulled Manny from the back and I watched as Isabella climbed out behind her brother. Her face was pale and her eyes wet from crying.

“A police officer wants to talk to you,” one of the nurses said. “They need to fill out a report.” Isabella looked at me and she followed her brother’s gurney into the emergency room. A doctor spoke to the paramedics as they wheeled Manny in. They talked about rates of breathing and blood pressure and other facts that included numbers: age 13; the dosages of drugs administered; the minutes he’d been unconscious.

“What’s his name?” the doctor asked us.

“Manny,” Isabella said. “He is my brother.”
He asked what happened. Isabella described the blue sedan and the way her brother had lain on the sidewalk and the blood on his face. He then asked about Manny’s medical history. He wanted to know about allergies and illnesses and drugs Manny could be on. She told him what she knew and explained that Manny was basically a good boy, that she suspected he smoked pot, but was sure he didn’t do anything harder. “He smokes cigarettes too,” she added. “But not in the house, he’s not allowed to smoke in the house.”

The doctor said they’d do everything they could for Manny and a nurse ushered us out of the emergency room into a waiting area where the sound of a CNN broadcast dictated a slower pace and an almost-tangible sense of calm and control. The police officer that waited for us there was talking to a young nurse and didn’t seem to be in any particular hurry. “Be right with you,” is what he said as we sat down together on a couch.

“One day, I remember when Manny got lost,” Isabella said suddenly. “He’s maybe four or five and we lived in Cambridge on Pemberton Street. You know it?”

“Near Harvard Square.”

“Porter Square.” She nodded. “Manny had a dog named Rulfo who’s a mutt but very smart and very loyal.” She composed herself on the couch, pushed her hair back behind her shoulder and I could smell the lemony shampoo she used. “He is a good dog and Manny and Rulfo would play together in the yard for hours and hours. Always they were together. Manny would play with the dog more than children his own age. And then on that day, I am looking out the window and Rulfo is not in the yard and I think
maybe he's tricked me, broken the fence and run off and I think how sad Manny will be so I go outside to look for Rulfo. You know what's funny? There I am looking for that crazy dog and I don’t realize Manny is gone too!” Isabella smiled at me and I saw the earlier warmth come back to her face. “Can you imagine? Me calling 'Rulfo! Rulfo!' and my little brother is missing too. And I don’t know?”

“It’s funny.”

“Maybe now,” she agreed. “But I walked every street, yelling for the dog to come back and it’s getting dark and I feel sick because my father will be home soon and I have not made supper or done the many thing I had to do. But I have to find the dog. I feel in my heart that I must so I knock on the neighbor’s door and ask if they have seen Rulfo but no one say they have. One boy I play with say he will help me look and he goes to search in the little woods near our house, he say dogs love to play in the woods. I don’t think Rulfo is that kind of dog but he goes to look and I walk up and down the street again. Now it is almost dark and I sit crying on the porch. I am cursing Rulfo, the stupid dog because father is to be home soon and he will be mad that I haven’t done my chores. And then I hear the boy is running and I hear the boy shouting he has found Rulfo and he is okay. I run after the boy into the little woods and there is Rulfo, growling at the boy. On the ground under a tree is Manny, asleep; Rulfo was guarding him.”

“Good dog.”

“Sometimes Manny stayed at my aunt’s house and sometime I watched him. But I didn’t know he is missing! I carried him home and put him to bed. He had a fever and
when father came home. I did not tell him what happened; I told him only Manny is sick
and dinner is not ready because I watched him.”

“That’s a good story.”

She looked down at her feet.

“It’s just you, your brother and your father?”

“Yes.”

“Your mother?”

Isabella leaned closer and I felt her breath on my skin. “I am raising, Manny.”

“It must be difficult.”

“He likes to be alone.”

“Sure.”

She looked at me and I saw myself reflected in her eyes. Her bottom lip pouted
and she said, “He has no friends. All his life he wants only to be left alone.”

“Some people are just like that.”

“I don’t think he likes me.”

On impulse, I reached for her hand and took it in mine. It felt warm and slender
as if filled with minuscule bones. She didn’t pull away so I continued to hold it. “I’m
sure he likes you. Little brothers go through phases.”

“Not Manny. He does not like anyone. Not me, not father, not anyone.”

“Give him time.”

Isabella shrugged. She said, “He threaten us, me and father.”

“I’m sure it’s a phase.”
"You should hear the things he says."

I had watched my father through twelve states. A big man, he drove the car with one hand resting on top of the steering wheel with an ease that suggested a kinship between himself and the car. Above his high forehead, he swept his hair back and contained it in a ponytail. Wearing his khaki slacks and blue wind breaker, he looked like the kind of man who would be pleased to find himself in a lawn chair or relaxing at a bowling alley. His face was dark and sun burned and he studied everything. He slowed down to look at old bridges and pulled over at nearly every state line to take a photograph of the two of us before a sign saying, *Entering New York, or Entering Iowa, or Entering Wyoming.* Sometimes he'd point at things and tell me how they reminded him of other things he had seen or heard. After spying a giant golf ball in Nebraska, he told me that when he was fourteen he won the Connecticut State Under-16 Golf Championship.

"Fourteen is a tough age," he had said as we traveled along the Platte River Basin.

"You're in between a lot of things now, son." The road had quietly curved, crossing the river, weaving with it in a civil engineer's dance, and I remembered the word "son" he used and how it sounded like something fighting against the current.

The lights of Las Vegas shimmered in the night, vibrating like yellow hornets. My father pulled the car over onto the shoulder of Interstate 15 and with the key off and the windows rolled down, the residual drone of the car's engine sloshed in our bones. Father pushed against the steering wheel, flexing his arms and arching his back.
"Fielding," he said finally. "Here's your home for the summer." I searched the brightness and tried to imagine a house and a yard and a school and friends but was unable. The city lights lapped against the mountains, washing out the night stars. Where the streets and houses abruptly ended, the void of the desert spilled black. Father pawed his jaw with thick fingers and I leaned forward and rested my head against the dash of the car. I felt a wave of anger swell in my lungs, the heat burning my face. Reflected in the rearview mirror, a pair of head lights inched toward us, climbing then sinking, disappearing then reappearing. I felt a desire to make things stop, to put my foot down and prevent him from making me do what I didn't want to do. And it surprised me, this thought. I came of my own free will. Didn't I want to get to know the man, know his story? Even at fourteen I had recognized my continuity with him. I looked at him and he smiled at me and said, "You and I will live here." He reached over and clasped my shoulders and pulled me back into the seat. "You and I will make a go of it and we'll make things right." With a full-throtled roar of diesel, the headlights of an eighteen-wheeler bleached our car white, freezing an overexposed image of my father leaning back in his seat, his eyes half shut like an accessory from Chrysler. The truck's red taillights slid away, speeding to join an ocean of luminosity. Clearing his throat, father turned the ignition on then clicked the left-turn signal and rolled the heavy car back out onto the two lanes of concrete. Driving fast, we paralleled a floodlit parking lot littered with wood pallets and masonry blocks, stacked bricks and sorted field stone. Shadow pooled behind the half-made edifices, blacking out fingered sections of the land and in the distance, the casinos looked strung out like jewel boxes, immaculate and small under the milky night sky.
Exiting the highway, father leaned across the space between us and announced that my first meal in Las Vegas would be at Phillip's. He waited for a response which I didn't know how to give; I didn't recognize the name. "Well," he said, "a lot of musicians hang out there, acting like normal people." I was hungry and told him it was a good idea. He sat up straight and we continued along a residential street for a couple of miles then turned left in front of a building with a small, weathered sign proclaiming that we had finally arrived at "Phillip's Casablanca." On the dirt and gravel lot were parked a dozen cars, two of them Rolls Royces. White paint peeled off the cinder-block building and the dark front window was taped along a crack that ran its length. A trumpet bleated and we heard people within applauding and laughing. Father shepherded me into the building which felt small and claustrophobic. On a stage constructed of milk crates and plywood, a white man sucked a saxophone reed while two black men in charcoal suits pounded on a keyboard and guitar. A square-jawed woman wearing a sequined gown smiled at me. One or two other people looked up but no one said anything. Father pointed across the room and like a reflection, a fat man in a white tuxedo jacket and black pants pointed back at him. "Jimbo!" the man shouted and he waved us over. Father gripped my arm at the muscle and guided me toward Phillip. The two shook hands and like a stereotypic Bronx gangster, Phillip said thickly, "Knew you hadn't skipped out, Jimmy."

My father frowned. "Yep, I'm sure glad to see you too, Phil."

The fat man looked irritated but brushed it off. "Had two lunkers from Minnesota or some such place in here last night. Real class acts." He smiled and twitched his thin
mustache and his fat hands jumped in the air. "Would have been a good game for someone such as yourself."

"You know me, always a dollar short and a day late."

He narrowed his eyes and asked, "Everything work out in Boston?"

My father shrugged.

Phillip adjusted his bow tie with a thick finger. He looked uncomfortable, like a catfish asked to stand up straight. His dark eyes scanned the room and he leaned into my father and whispered, "You got the money?"

"Not now, Phil."

"None of it?"

"I said not now."

Phillip shook his head. "I don't know how you expect me--"

"Hey," my father said. "Not now." The two men appeared frozen. After a moment, my father smiled and slapped Phillip on his wide forehead. Stunned, the fat man looked at my father and blinked.

"I want you to meet my son."

Phillip's eyes went from hard to soft in a second flat. "Your son?" he grinned and took my hand in his sweaty one and said, "It's a pleasure."

"Sure," I said. "I mean, yes."

"You've got a deep voice; the spitting image of your old man's."

"Yeah?"

"You know what that tells me?"
I shook my head.

"Tells me you’re a fine, upstanding young man. That’s what it tells me. Looking at you makes me confident in the future." My father laughed because I guess maybe the joke was on him, and Phillip smiled. His small eyes continued to look at me, to assess something that made me feel uncomfortable and embarrassed. "You’re a trooper, ain’t you, Fielding?"

"I guess so."

"That’s a good boy." He looked at my father and asked, "He a good boy?" My father nodded and the two men looked down at me, both of them smiling. I remember how goofy it felt, that feeling. Like I was some kind of baseball mitt or something and they were admiring my lacing.

Phillip sat us down at a table. "Good to have the family at the Casablanca. Ain’t no specials tonight, not that you care, Jimmy. I swear your old man could live morning, noon and night on nothing but BLTs."

"Crispy bacon," my father said.

"You want the same?"

I nodded.

"A Greeley through and through."

He sidled into the crowd toward the kitchen, stopping to chat to people along the way. My father watched a moment, shaking his head. "Asshole."

"You don’t like him?" I asked.

"No, he’s fine. We know each other, there aren’t many surprises."
"He famous?"

"I guess if the world was a zoo, you could bet there’d be a lot of folks staring into his cage,” my father laughed. “I mean, he’s small change now; kind of a gangster, I suppose. But at one time he had bigger ambition and I almost made him a true millionaire. He worked at Caesars downstairs in the cellar, where they keep props and old statues, extra equipment like slot machines and stools mostly, but also a few roulette wheels they like to shuffle back into action every once in a while. And the two of us got to talking about what makes a roulette wheel biased. You know what that means, a biased wheel?"

I told him I didn’t and he explained how roulette wheels are things made up of wood and metal, all fastened together with glue and screws. If something should come loose or a bearing that keeps it spinning warp, then the wheel is no longer a perfect thing. "Goddamn it, they’re not made by NASA, you know? They don’t fly in Skylab. Things are going wrong with them all the time. Who the fuck knows what happens if a bearing burns, but when a screw loosens in a divider, what happens is, well, predictable. The noise you hear as the ball drops from the rim and gets pitched every which way—that clacking that reminds you of a car throwing a rod—that’s the ball hitting the dividers. Now when you got a loose divider and the ball hits it, it don’t bounce back like it should. The loose divider absorbs the ball’s speed and it falls into the first or second pocket in front. You got it?” He moved the salt shaker on the table, showing how it could careen off his hand. “The more the divider gives, the better the number in front is.”

“And they don’t notice?"
He smiled and shook his head. “It don’t happen all the time. Maybe the ball hits the divider a 100 times and goes in 3 times more than it should, you still got 97 misses. But three times in a hundred’s good to take the money. The odds are tight.” I nodded and he described how you could also substitute shorter screws in a divider to get more give, increasing the likelihood of the ball landing before it. He was animated when he talked about gambling, making big gestures with his hands. I watched him and felt caught up in his stories. He leaned across the small table and told me not a hundred people in the world understood the things he was talking about. “Even pit bosses don’t have a clue all the things that can go wrong.”

A half hour passed and a waitress brought over our BLT’s and a beer for my father, a soda for me. He continued to talk about his gambling theories. “I might not be the sharpest knife in the drawer, but one thing I recognize is a connection. Chum up to folks in the university, and they possess book smarts, but are woefully lacking in the common sense department. Making a connection’s what it’s all about.

“For instance,” he continued, “I’m pissing at the Trop one day and see the urinal cake there. Shit, I mean, how many times you see something like that? Cigarette butts and hair? And there’s this thing that looks like a bar of soap and I guess it keeps things smelling nice and I think maybe I’ll ask the janitor for one, to put in the toilet at home.” I laughed and he looked sheepish a moment. “I’m serious, Fielding. This is the way I think. I want you to follow the logic. It’s about making the connection, okay? So, the janitor thinks I’m crazy, but he gives me one of these urinal cakes, sealed in paper and I go back to the poker game. At home I open up the wrapper and look at it, it smells

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strong, like bleach but I don't put it in the toilet, I just leave it on the shelf in the kitchen above the trash can, it makes the whole room smell clean. And I forget about it. Maybe three weeks go by and I notice I don't smell it anymore. When I look for it, it's gone. Nothing left, nothing at all. You get it? It's there, solid as a rock one day and gone a few weeks later. So I'm wondering what happened to it, did it melt or evaporate or what?

"I remember some writing on the wrapper but can't find it, so I go back to the Trop and ask the janitor for another one and he's really laughing now. He says he doesn't know if he can give it to me. You know how it feels being reeled in? It's a joke but you're on the line and have to wait for it to play out? That's what's happening. I'm going to ask him if I can just see one in the wrapper, but fuck, wouldn't that make his day? The janitor calls his boss who comes down to the bathroom and the two of them are whooping it up. 'Are you a guest of the hotel?' the new guy in a suit asks me and—believe me—I'm only sticking it out because to fold now lets them win. 'I play poker here,' I say, 'in the Trop.' He nods and tells me he'll need to check out some things but will let me know. I go back to the game and play tight for a while, waiting for the nuts before entering a pot. Luckily there's a few loose guys splashing the pot who make it pay for me to play like this. An hour or two goes by and I've kinda forgotten about the urinal cake when the boss of the poker pit taps me on the shoulder. We've always gotten along good; he's a small guy with grey hair and he's carrying a cardboard box. 'Greeley,' he says smiling, 'The Tropicana Hotel knows you could play anywhere, Lord knows there a lot of casinos vying for your business, and as a token of our appreciation for your decision to play here, we're comping you these items of personal hygiene.' And he
stacks up on the poker table complimentary bottles of shampoo and soap and tampons and shower caps. The whole table's laughing. He takes out 12 fucking urinal cakes and the whole casino is roaring.” My father smiled and shook his head. “I pretty much became a celebrity in there after that. For a week or so anytime someone showed down a flush to win a pot, they were calling it a Greeley.” He took a last bite from his BLT and chewed it slowly. After a moment, he remembered the purpose of his story and continued, “Now here's the connection I was talking about. Those urinal cakes were evaporating. They're what's called a solid that changes into a gas. And after talking to a guy at the university, I learn you can make the stuff in any shape you want, you can put pressure on it, drill holes in it, and it'll look just like plastic, 'cept it evaporates in a few weeks. See where I'm going?”

I shook my head.

“I make a couple of shims out of the stuff, little strips that I can place under the screws of the dividers. The stuff can be painted to match the black wood. And when they're inspected, they look perfect. They're solid and tight, just the way they ought to be. But after a while, they evaporate...”

I nodded, “and the divider gets loose?”

My father clapped his hands. “And the divider gets loose! See the connection?”

I told him I did and my father smiled. “Me and Phil were all set to put my plan into action when he got fired from Caesars.”

“Yeah?”

“For vandalism. You imagine that?”
I shook my head.

"The shithead got to thinking of that cellar as his home away from home. He was even taking naps on a craps table and then outta no where, he decides he’s gotta carve his initials into something. For the life of me, I don’t know why he did it. I guess if you wait long enough everyone does something stupid for no reason whatsoever. He carved a big ‘PCZ’ onto the tits of a ten-foot Cleopatra statue they had stored down there. Didn’t take a detective to figure out who did it. Phillip Conway Zastoki. They pitched his ass out and I lost a chance at a million dollars.”

I wanted to say something, to commiserate with his loss but I was dying to pee and couldn’t figure out what I should say about his near-brush with wealth. He had finished his sandwich and was looking into space beyond me, his eyes heavy with the need for sleep. I cleared my throat and explained I had to go to the bathroom.

"Piss?"

I nodded.

"Just go out back," my father said. "Always a big line inside. Don’t go far, just piss off the wall and come right back, you understand?"

I searched his face to see if he was joking. Finally, he shooed me along, "Go on," he said, "I don’t have all night."

Outside the stars were shining and I heard what must have been coyotes in the distance, a yammering that climbed up and down the scales. The smoke from the kitchen stoves lifted from an old chimney and the air smelled like steak and garlic. In the back there was a low wall that looked out over the desert and I peed over the wall into the
shadow. After I zipped up, I heard a commotion near the dumpsters and moved closer to investigate. Two voices were whispering.

"Who's your friend?"

"I know, I know."

"Tell me. Humor me."

"But I told you already."

"Maybe you just don't understand?"

"I do, I do."

"That was true, we wouldn't be here."

"Please."

"I want to hear you say it." Phillip in his white tuxedo jacket leaned over a small man who sat on a wood crate. Under the backdoor light, neither of them saw me as I hid beside the grease drums in the shadow. Phillip shook his massive head slowly and his shoulders moved side to side. "Friends don't fuck friends over."

"I told you, I just had a set back."

"You think maybe I won't do this, Ace?"

The little man paused. "Phil," he begged.

"Truth is, I like it. Makes me feel alive beating the shit out a someone."

"You don't need—."

"How much you think five thousand's worth to me?"
The little man nodded. “Everything you’re saying, I know. Two days. I’ll have it in two days. It’s me, Ace. Beating me won’t teach me ‘cause I already know everything.”

“You don’t know shit,” Phillip said and he punched the man with his fist, knocking him off the crate into the dark. Almost before he hit the ground, Phillip commenced kicking him, the hard grunts of the man’s breathing resounding louder than the actual impacts. “Son--of--a--bitch,” Phillip said, highlighting each word with a kick. “You think you don’t have nothing to learn from me?” Curled on his side, the man protected himself with his hands as best he could. He looked small under the fusillade of Phillip’s legs.

“Until I tell you, you don’t know shit.”

I snuck back around the restaurant and through the front door. I was shaking. The live music sounded unwholesome, like it contained a will to destroy everything built up around it. My father sat smoking at the table. “Everything come out okay?” he smiled.

“I want to go.”

“You don’t look so good.”

“Just tired.”

“Five days in the car.”

“Can we go?”

“Sure,” he said. “In a minute. I gotta talk to Phil and we’ll go.”

“Now? Can we go now?”
"I said in a minute." He frowned and looked dark in his small chair. The music was loud and a cackle of voices filled the lulls. My father closed his eyes and the muscles in his face slackened. There was a pause of energy in the room, like a short intake of breath before a big exhalation. A muffled explosion rocked the building. Everyone, including my father, turned to look expectantly in the direction of the kitchen. Feedback from the microphones echoed in the silence. As if on cue, an Hispanic man in a dirty tee-shirt ran through the kitchen doors followed by a heaving cloud of smoke that boiled across the bar and expanded against the ceiling. Someone yelled fire. The smoke descended and the shouting became more ardent. My father grabbed my arm. "Hang on to me, Fielding," father said calmly. We had begun to lean into the crowd, to push for the front door, when an amplified voice boomed over our heads, "Yo! Tonight's special: smokened swordfish!" It was Phillip. The surge to the door slowed and someone close by in the dark asked if it was a joke. "You better keep movin', Swordfish. Keep movin'," Phillip boomed. "Don't hurt each other but we're burning down! Use your fins and tails and get out of here!" We ducked our heads, held on to each other and pushed our way to the front of the bar. The smoke grew thick around us as we coughed and waited, piled up, heaving, until we could finally squeeze out the door and into the cold night air. In the parking lot, men and women were holding each other. The tall, square-jawed woman had mascara smeared across her face. I looked up at father and he was smiling. "Shit, I'm glad I didn't miss this," he said. Around us people still clutched silverware. The last person to come out of the smoke was Phillip wearing his white tuxedo jacket and holding
a handkerchief to his mouth. In the lot, he turned his back to us and watched as flames appeared along the roof line.

By the time the fire trucks arrived, most of the restaurant was gone. People had moved their cars out of the parking lot, out of harm's way, but nearly everyone had remained to watch whatever was going to happen next. In the aura of flashing red lights and the background static of emergency, two-way radios, the old man with the saxophone began playing New Orleans Jazz accompanied by a trumpet player squeezing a red, rubber plunger. Around them, a few well-dressed people leaned against their cars, listening. Phillip stood with them for a while, his hands deep in his pockets, then turned and walked up to father and me.

" Fucking great night, isn't it?" he asked me.

I looked at him and thought about the man he had kicked and shook my head.

Phillip laughed. "It's the first legit fire I've had." He slapped my father on the back and stood with us as the firemen dragged a hose around to the other side of the building. "Wasn't really much of a place, you know? The roof leaked like a bitch," he said. "Now, we'll begin anew. Pouring concrete's always the best way to start."

I nodded.

With a wink, Phillip said he'd better go thank the firemen. "They've recovered two cases of scotch I can keep. He pretended to shoot us with his finger then walked toward a knot of men relaxing opposite one of the big pumper trucks. Phillip looked confident. He walked slow and held his shoulders back. Within a minute, he had the firemen laughing and nodding at a joke.
"You seen enough?" father asked.

"I want to go."

"Com'on then, let's get going. I feel like I could sleep a year."

Ten minutes later, we eased across the valley, the streets hemmed in by concrete walls and lamp posts. Over the radio, a song began low then grew thick and full with instruments. Father pointed at the radio. "Duke Ellington," he said. "You know what his real name was?" I shrugged. "Edward Kennedy," he said. "I shit you not. Duke Ellington's real name was Edward Kennedy." He shook his head and laughed.

We traveled through dark and quiet neighborhoods. The tic-tic-tic-tic of midnight lawn sprinklers replaced the sound of crickets. After a left and a right, turning slowly, father pulled the car into a driveway. A clay-tiled house stood squat and dim in front of us. Instead of a lawn, white quartz gravel landscaped the front yard. A single palm tree grew defiantly in a corner. Father shut the car down but didn't otherwise move. He rested his hands on top of the steering wheel in silence.

"You okay?" I asked.

"The weather's still warm." He glanced at his watch. "You know what day it is?"

"Friday."

"I've been away ten days." He breathed heavily, sucking air deep into his lungs. "I don't know if I'm going to be good at this," he said after a while. "You and me. The father-son stuff."

I nodded.
"Okay then," he said. "You've been warned." I climbed out of the car and stretched my legs. From the back of the car, father pulled out my suitcases and the large, wood-framed mirror. He handed me the suitcases and under his arm, he carried the mirror like an awkward child to the front door.

The living room was big and clean. It was wide and the ceiling was vaulted with a thick, stucco and plaster shelf running along the wall. On the ledge were clay Indian-made pots and an old Victrola with a shiny brass listening horn. Father dropped the books on a couch below the Victrola and motioned for me to put the suitcases down. "I've been renovating," he said, waving his arm. "It's a little rough, but it's getting there." Through a door in the back, he showed me my bedroom and the bathroom and where the towels were kept. "Take whatever you need," he said. The bedroom had a single window and a small closet. A brown-leather couch sat against the wall. "You'll like this," father said. "Move the cushions, pull this out here, and voilá! You got the most-comfortable bed in the house." He slid his big hands along the extended bed, straightening the blankets. "Sit down, sit down. Feel that? That's a firm mattress."

In the kitchen, he showed me where the cereal was kept and again told me to help myself to whatever I wanted. He said not to worry, that he'd go shopping in the morning and restock the pantry with all the necessities. I opened the refrigerator and saw a carton of milk, some yogurt, a jar of pickles and three six-packs of Diet Coke. "We'll go shopping tomorrow," he reassured me.

Father carried my suitcases into the bedroom, and standing in the doorway to the hall, he asked if I was tired.
"I'm exhausted."

He nodded. "That fire was something, wasn't it?"

"It was fast," I said.

"There one minute, gone the next,"

Father looked big, his hands held onto the wood trim above the door as if contemplating a few chin ups. He turned his body and began scratching his back against the frame. "Sleep in as late as you want, Fielding," he said. I sat down on the bed and bounced on the mattress, testing its resilience. "We've got the whole weekend to get you properly moved in."

I nodded.

"You want the door open or closed?"

"Closed," I said, adding, "Thanks."

He smiled. "Okay. Sleep tight," and he shut the door.

I laid back on the bed then kicked my shoes off and propped a sofa cushion under my head for a pillow. My hair felt dry and I could smell the smoke on my hands. In the dim light of the bulb next to the door, the walls appeared pale yellow. A filing cabinet and desk were crowded in a corner. I closed my eyes and felt the drone of the car unwinding itself inside me. Waiting a moment with my eyes closed, I realized I could still hear the cries of the man being kicked. I tried to imagine what the next few days were going to be like and tried to anticipate which of the new things around me would soon become familiar. I heard the door to the bathroom across the hall open and close and then the sound of running water. There was a hum in the wall.
I woke, startled at the ringing of a telephone. It was dark and it took me a moment to realize where I was. Still in my clothes, I was rolled in a ball on top of the made bed. After three rings, the phone stopped and then, a few minutes more, I heard someone moving around in the hallway, going in and out of the bathroom, flushing the toilet. My bladder ached. There was no clock in the room and I wondered what time it was. Father opened cabinets outside, moving things. The window above my bed rattled and I heard the front door open and close. It was quiet and calm and I felt the house relax. Getting up, I opened the bedroom door and hurried across the hall to the bathroom. The mirrors were steamed and the condensation on the tile floor felt cold against my bare feet. The room had the tangy smell of a stranger. I peed, took off my clothes and returned to my bed.

When I woke, the sun shone through the window and the house hummed with the whir of an air conditioner. I dressed and discovered father was still out. The house felt big and open as I walked from room to room. Keeping an eye out for father's return, I peered into his bedroom. The curtains were drawn and it was dark. Reaching inside, I flicked the light on. A water bed dominated the center of the room. There was a bookcase and a high-boy dresser across from the bed. An alarm clock and a phone were propped on a night stand. Going into the room seemed to mean something significant, a personal trespass. Warily, I stood outside the doorway and looked at the furniture and clothes and shiny objects inside. There were golf magazines on a chair with a suit jacket folded over its laddered back. I smelled lotions and colognes and something stale. A blue leather glove lay crumpled like a claw on the dresser. I quickly stepped inside. The
air was cold and dry. I sneaked up on the bed and breathed slowly. The blankets were
the foam rubber velour sort in hotel rooms. The sheets were wrinkled and twisted. On
the dresser, I touched his hair brush and smelled the bottles of aftershave lined up like
works of art. My mom used to talk about his smell. She had said he was earthy: tobacco
and bourbon. She said that after he had left, the smell of the house seemed to leave with
him. At Christmas, I would smell the packages he sent me, hoping to catch a scent that
had been forgotten.

Beginning at the dresser, I started opening drawers, looking at the carefully laid
out socks, shirts and trousers. Nearly all the shirts were bright and short sleeved with the
names of golf clubs stitched over the breast. At the bottom of the dresser, there was a
shoe box which contained letters and photographs from my mom. Most of the pictures
were of me. School pictures and pictures at Thanksgiving and Easter and weddings. I
wore a suit and tie in nearly all of them. In mom's handwriting, my name and age were
scrawled on the back of each. There was a picture of the house we lived in and a picture
of the old car, but only one of my mom. Taken before I was born, she was standing in
front of a door, leaning against the jamb, one arm curved above her head, the other
touching her leg. She wore knee-length shorts and a tee-shirt. A movie star picture, I
thought. Her hair was short, blunt at the shoulders and her lips pursed in a crazy kiss.
There was nothing written on the back. I returned everything neatly to the box. Pulling
the drawer out further, I found a stack of note books and behind that, a black revolver. I
studied the gun before picking it up. It felt slippery and cool. Turning the weapon
around, I could see the brass lip of a bullet seated in a chamber. There were bullets in all
the chambers. Standing up, I held the gun in both hands, pointing it at the mirror.

"Bang," I whispered. The weight of the gun felt powerful and perfect like choking down on a baseball bat. I tucked it in my belt to see how it looked. It looked good.

I searched through his closet, curious as to what else he might have. In the back corner behind something made to look like a clothes hamper, there was a steel blue safe with a shiny chrome handle and dial. It was the same size as his television set. I tried the handle but it was locked. Looking down on it, I could see that the safe was bolted to the floor. By turning the dial and listening to the minuscule clicking of hidden teeth, I tried to crack the safe like they do in movies, but it was impossible. I wondered what might be inside; it was big enough to hold maybe a million dollars, I thought. Maybe there were jewels inside. Maybe more guns. Eventually, I quit fooling around with the safe and looked elsewhere in the closet. Amid a bunch of paperback books on the shelf above his coats, I found a small stack of *Playboy* magazines. They were new, bought during the past year. I pulled down the top issue, checked the driveway through the window then carried the *Playboy* and the gun into the bathroom.

I hadn't been in there more than a minute or two before I heard a knock at the front door. It took just a second to put the gun and magazine back where I found them. Through the small window in the kitchen I saw a red Toyota parked with its engine still running. Another knock. I went to the door and looked through the peephole. A young woman with dark hair wearing jeans and a sweatshirt stood outside. She had a small red purse slung over her shoulder.

"Com'on, Jim. Open the fucking door."
“He’s not here,” I shouted.

The young woman paused and looked incredulously at the peephole. “Open it up, Jim.”

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“You fucking know what I want.”

I checked the lock to make sure it was secure. “I said my father’s not here.”

The young woman stared at the door, surprised. She waited a moment and said, “Are you Jimmy’s son?”

I didn’t say anything.

“Fielding, your name’s Fielding,” she said. “How would I know that if I wasn’t a friend of your father’s. My name’s Jessica, I really am a friend of your father’s.”

“You don’t sound like it.”

She smiled. “No, I guess not. But it’s true. I’ve known him a long, long time.”

She took from her purse a piece of paper and scribbled a short message on it. “Here,” she said. “Give this to your father, okay? He’ll know what it’s about.” She again waited for me to open the door but when I didn’t, she moved her hands to her hips, her body cocked to the side as if exasperated. “Shit,” she said finally. “Here,” she said and she plucked the gum from her mouth, wadded it up and stuck the message to the door. “Give him this and tell him I came by, can you do that?”

“Sure.”

“I don’t want you to go out of your way.”
“I won’t.”

It was noon when father came home. He pulled the car up next to the house with
a wide easy turn, one hand on top of the steering wheel, the other across the back of the
empty bench seat. I heard him walk across the quartz gravel accompanied by the click-
click of his spikes. He stood before the door a while then pushed it open and looked at
me. He had Jessica’s paper in his hand. His face was tight. He let his tour-model bag go
and it stood up straight for a moment before leaning over and crashing.

He raised an eyebrow and shook his head. "Short game went to hell."

I watched his hands.

He took a billfold out of his pocket and held it up. "Looks like an elephant sat on
it."

"What happened?" I asked.

"What happened was you can't win them all." He put the money in his pocket and
shooed the clubs back into the bag. “So, Jessica dropped by, huh?"

“A couple of hours ago.” I watched him pick up the bag, lifting it by its large
strap. “She sounded mad,” I added. “I didn’t let her in because I didn’t know what you
wanted.”

“You did good,” and he carried the bag of clubs into the kitchen where he hung it
on a hook beside the back door. He then walked to his bedroom. After a moment, he
said, "Fielding, Come here." I walked slowly to his room, my hands in my pockets, and
leaned against the door jamb, waiting. Father continued to untie his golf shoes as he
talked, "I spoke to a couple of the boys down at the club today and I got you a job with
the pro. Working as a mower." When I didn't say anything right away, he looked up at me. "You've got a problem working at the club?"

"It's just that I'm only staying the summer," I said.

"You think this is a career move? Just try it, see if you like it. At least you'll meet some people with pull. Maybe something else will come along."

I nodded.

"You can thank me later," he said.

Isabella and I finished talking to the police officer in the hospital waiting room. We each filled out a report on a clipboard, describing what we had seen. The officer didn't read them, he simply put them in a metal tote along with the pens he had loaned us. "You pick up the report in ten working days, County Records Building," he said and we each nodded. When he left, we sat back down and waited for the doctors to tell us what was happening with Manny. Isabella asked me what I had written in my report for the police and I told her what I had remembered.

"You say the car was blue?"

"It was blue."

She shook her head. "A lilac color."

"Yeah?"

She paused. "You say it was blue?"

"Perhaps it's the same."
She shrugged and drew her knees up onto the chair and hugged herself as if trying to keep from breaking. "Maybe it's an accident, lilac," she said and she began to cry. I looked at her small hands, her fingers intertwined and I desired to peel them open, to feel the warmth inside. I asked if she were okay.

"No."

She sniffled and a feeling of heaviness grew.

"My mother and father grew up in Texas," I said quickly. I wasn't sure why I was telling her this story, but I felt the urge to give her something of my past, to try to construct a bridge back to her. "They grew up in Yoakum, Texas but didn't know each other. An accident brought them together. My mom's always getting into car accidents; she doesn't have great vision and refuses to wear glasses because she says they give her headaches. She was younger than I am now when she met my father."

"You are twenty four," Isabella interrupted.

I stopped and looked at her. "You saw me write it?"

She nodded.

"So, how old are you?"

"You are old," she said, smiling.

"I'm not that old."

"As old as the hills," she said, pronouncing the word hills like heels. I laughed and she continued to smile. After I prodded some more she relinquished and told me she was nineteen.

"Nineteen?"
“Yes.”

“I think that’s how old my mother was.”

“She was nineteen in Texas?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m pretty sure she was nineteen in Texas.”

Isabella smiled and although she still hugged her knees to her chest, her feet were beginning to move to the rhythm of our conversation and the heaviness between us had lifted. “Your mother got into many accidents?”

“All the time.”

“She like them?”

I laughed. “No, she hates them. She says, ‘They bring misery to people.’ But she won’t wear eyeglasses and the accidents are never too serious, I mean, cars are totaled, but no one except a cow once has ever been hurt.”

“That is lucky.”

“The night I was born, she had an accident.”

“Maybe that means you are lucky too.”

“And she met my father in an accident.”

“Ahhhh.”

“She hit the bus my father was traveling on.”

“She hit a whole bus?”

“A city bus.”

“She could not see a whole bus?”

I paused. “She saw it but the bus made a surprise turn.”
"And she hit it?"

"Yes," I said. "She plowed into the back of the bus and the passengers had to all get off and they were upset at my mother who had made everyone late. One by one they climbed out to stand on the sidewalk and wait. My father had just gotten out when the bus driver, a really big black man, started yelling at my mother for being so scatterbrained and my mother took it, without saying a word until the driver ran out of gas and was quiet, and then she laid into him. She called him every name in the book and was so—I don’t know—ferocious, that eventually the driver was forced to seek refuge back in his damaged bus. My father said it was the funniest thing he’d ever seen.

"She’s not big my mother. But when she gets angry, she doesn’t take any prisoners. My father was the only person on the sidewalk laughing. He introduced himself and with the aid of a tire iron, he helped her unfold the crease in a fender that had punctured her tire. He changed the tire and she offered to drive him to wherever he was going but when he looked at the car’s old dents and scratches, he declined; however, he did ask her out and she did accept and after four years they got married."

"That’s nice."

"It didn’t last long. I was three when they broke up."

Isabella said she was sorry and I explained that it didn’t matter, that despite growing up so close to one another and appearing so similar, they were very different people and had nothing in common.

"You they had."

I nodded. "And a restraining order or three."
Isabella shook her head. “I still like the story.”

“That’s all there was. You wouldn’t believe the things I heard growing up.”

“Family stories.”

“My parents’ stories.”

“You told it good.”

I thanked her and I told her about my father and his arm that had gone numb and his penchant for lying and then the doctor came into the room with his green scrubs and he said he had news about Manny. “Manny’s stabilized but he was pretty badly knocked about,” he said. “Concussion and two broken ribs. His spleen, it’s inflamed. We’re watching him.”

Isabella listened without emotion as the doctor outlined the injuries and she only nodded her head once, when the doctor was done and asked if we had any questions.

“When can I bring him home?”

“If the swelling goes down, perhaps tomorrow. But probably it will be a couple days. We want to do a few tests; we need to observe him.”

She thought about his answer and asked, “He is okay, right?”

“We’ll know more later.”

“Can I see him?”

“For a while,” he said and he led us through a busy emergency room, past a row of gurneys and a large green-ribbed machine whose purpose was a mystery, into what he termed the annex. The room was lit by banks of flourescent lights suspended from the ceiling. On either side of Manny’s bed there were slender windows that looked out upon
a Mass General parking lot. Other than Manny, there were only two patients in the annex, a young woman fully dressed with a compress on her head and an older man in a hospital gown breathing through an oxygen mask. Manny was conscious and he gave a shallow nod of his head to acknowledge his sister. The doctor left but said he would return in a minute or two. In his absence, the room hummed with the sound of hidden equipment.

“Hi,” Isabella said.

Manny nodded again. He was propped up in the bed and wore a white paper hospital gown and had an IV taped to his forearm. The area below his eyes was puffy and had begun to darken. One side of his mouth was misshapen with swelling.

“You feeling okay?”

“I’m okay,” he said quietly.

“You scared me.”

“What’s wrong with him?” he asked, looking at me. “You in an accident?”

“He’s my friend; his name’s Fielding.”

I looked down at my shirt and trousers and noticed the dried blood. There was more than I remembered. “It’s your’s,” I said.

“Yeah?” He smiled and flinched at the pain.

“Fielding helped me get you to the hospital.”

“You look like you came from a movie.”

“I was worried about you; I carried you into your house.”

“You worried about me? You don’t know me.”
"He helped you," Isabella said. "He picked you off the sidewalk and carried you inside and called the ambulance." The two of us stood at the side of Manny's bed and the boy looked up at the ceiling then closed his eyes.

"You were in bad shape."

Manny turned his head to look at his sister. "I want to go."

"They need to watch you," I said. "You have a concussion and they want to be sure you're okay and won't slip into a coma. You could have internal injuries too."

"I probably could die right here, huh?"

"They just need to watch you." I said. "It's common procedure."

Manny looked at me. "You a doctor or something?"

"No."

"Watch a lot of TV, don't you?"

"Manny," Isabella interrupted, "He knows what he is talking about."

The boy turned his face to the wall and the background hum in the room grew louder. I looked at him in the big hospital bed; his dark hair was cut short and I could see the shine of his scalp. Crisscrossed on the back of his neck were sweat lines of dirt that seemed more appropriate on someone older and seasoned. The flourescent lights paled the colors of the room, leveling the subtlety. I felt the dull edge of aggravation grow and looked for something other than Manny to concentrate on. "You want me to open the window?" I asked.

The old man in the next bed spit into his oxygen mask. "Don't open," he said.

Isabella remained beside her brother. "What happened, Manny?" she asked.
The boy shrugged.

"Who are the boys in the car?"

"What car?"

She stood with her arms crossed. "I had to talk to the police."

"I don’t remember."

"Did you hear me, I said I had to talk to the police."

"I hear you."

"This mean nothing to you?"

"You had to talk to the police."

"Right."

"I heard you."

"And?"

"Leave me alone."

Isabella stood with her hands on her hips. "I want an answer, Manny."

"Leave me the fuck alone."

She nodded slowly and her bottom lip trembled a moment before she composed herself and sat down in the straight-spined wood chair beside the bed. She crossed her legs and leaned back, her hands placed demurely in her lap. "You are almost killed," she said quietly. "On the sidewalk, you are rolled in a ball and are bleeding."

Manny set his jaw.

"I want to know who these people in the car are."

He shook his head. "I’ll take care of it."
“They almost killed you.”

“Don’t worry yourself, Izzy.”

“You are just a boy and don’t know it.”

“And what are you?”

“Your sister.”

“If it makes you feel better.”

“Don’t do this, Manny”

“Don’t you do it.”

Isabella got up to stand beside me. “You see what he is like?”

“I’m tired,” Manny shouted. “I’m goddamn tired. Leave me alone.”

Isabella waited a moment or two in silence. In a deliberate voice she told her brother that she would be back. “The doctors are to watch you tonight and I will be back tomorrow morning before work, at nine.”

"He thinks this is a favor, but it isn’t," my father said unexpectedly. We drove fast through west Las Vegas toward his country club. Unshaven, in a nylon jogging suit, he scratched at his chin and steered the car over the empty roads. Cool air swept through the windows. The dusty burn of quartz cleared my head as the open spaces between the houses expanded. He rapped his fingers on the steering wheel then looked down at me. "He’s a grounds keeper and you’re the son of a member. He resents you." A small dog trotted across the street ahead of us and disappeared between parked cars. I turned
around in my seat to see if it would reappear, but it was gone. Father adjusted the rearview mirror. Studying the reflection, he turned to the side and rubbed his diamond earring with his thumb. He sighed. "You need to work hard for this man, do you understand what I mean?"

I nodded.

The green and white country club sign came into view and the car slowed. "I don't want him thinking he's doing me a favor. He's hiring a hard worker." The car's engine surged when we pulled into the parking lot. Already, there were at least a dozen cars parked up close to the club house. Big Lincolns and Cadillacs lined up under drip-fed pine trees. The smell of fresh-cut cedar bark and turned soil steeped in the air.

"Remember what I said."

"I'm not lazy."

He smiled at me. "I know."

We walked together up the gentle slope to the club house. The reflection of the sun burned in the windows of the cool white building. Father placed his hand against my back, halfway between my shoulders. His legs were long and I had to hurry to match his pace. Under a green awning, he held the door open and we went inside. There were several men huddled around a coffee urn in the front lobby and they each acknowledged my father with a wave, saying his name like offering a handshake. We stopped a moment as father eased into their midst. One man with a purple sweater and matching cap clapped father on the back. They laughed easily but spoke without looking at one another. As I waited, I studied the plaques and trophies on the wall. *Four-Ball*
Tournament Winner and Member-Guest Runner Up they said. I scanned the many names for my father's but didn't find it. The name Michael Fair was repeated over and over. He had won a lot and I wondered if my father was better or worse than Michael Fair.

"Fielding?"

Father motioned me over and introduced me to the men. I put out my hand and they each shook it. They talked fast and their words sounded light, as if they had been said many times before. The man in the purple sweater and matching cap tousled my hair with his hand. "Are you here to audition for a caddy job, Fielding?" he asked.

I shook my head.

Father rested his hand on my shoulder, reclaiming me. "He's gonna start on the grounds crew," he said. "There's a lot to learn cutting grass."

The man in the purple sweater stared at me then nodded as if he had just made up his mind about something. "When you get tired being a lawn jockey, come see me. Ask anyone around here, I'm a generous man and I'll pay to find out how your old man does his sumbitch tricks." A sharp burst of laughter came from the men. I felt a warm heaviness descend on my face like a thick cloth. My father's hand squeezed my shoulder.

"A man who lives a clean life can expect to get lucky now and again, Sully."

The men laughed at my father's words. Everyone smiled. The man in purple nodded his head. "It won't always be your turn."

"Clean living, that's the secret," father said.

We walked quickly through the foyer entering an area that opened up into a formal dining room. Our footsteps echoed in the room. Father leaned into me and said...
softly, "Sully's problem is he's always played it safe and now he wouldn't know an out if it fucked him in the ass."

I turned back to where the men had been standing at the coffee urn but they were already gone. His voice vibrated in my head. It felt good for a moment, like we were just two friends talking then the hiss of my father's nylon sweat suit started and I followed him across the hardwood floor under a glass chandelier that bloomed like something alive. He motioned at it and said the chandelier came from France and that it was worth more than the house we lived in.

Mr. McDermod's office was at the end of a hallway lined with old golf clubs. A large man with a loose beard that failed to cover his jowls, Mr. McDermod invited us into his office with an extension of his arm. "Home sweet home," he said. Photographs of golf courses were pinned on the wall behind a desk that was too big for the room. He eased himself down into his chair and nodded toward a leather couch. "I don't hang much on formalities. Get comfortable first, business second is what I say."

Father remained standing, his arms folded and relaxed, looking as if it just never occurred to him to sit down. "My son Fielding here wants a job on your greens crew, Rick."

Mr. McDermod smiled and his mouth puckered. "You want to work for me?"

"I'll work hard."

"You ever mow grass or rake traps?"

"Yes."

"Where?"
Father leaned forward. "I'll vouch for him."

"Of course you will, Jimbo." And he smiled again. "If your daddy says you're good, you're good. That's what I say." Mr. McDermod laid his large hands flat on the desk. "It's just that there are terms and such that need to be discussed."

"I think we probably understand each other."

"Maybe."

"My son wants a job."

Mr. McDermod looked at me. With his elbows planted on the ink blotter, he touched his hands together in front of his face and waited, as if savoring something he might eat. "That part I understand."

"And you need such a worker."

"Yes?"

"My son can help you."

"Are you saying it'll be a wash?"

Father started to mumble something then probably thought better of it. He rubbed the back of his neck and shook his head slowly. "Okay," he said. "I have a son who needs a job. If you think you need a worker, we'll be even."

"That's all I wanted to hear, Jimbo." The big man hauled himself out of the chair. "Shit fire, I've been a course superintendent for fifteen years and if I know anything, I know human nature." He held his hand out first to my father then to me like a paw to shake. "When does your son want to start?"

"He'll start today."
Mr. McDermod drove us down to the parking lot in an oversized golf cart that had his name painted on both sides in gold letters. I sat on a fender, holding onto a steel roof support, half in—half out as we rattled toward father's car. The day was warming up and the wind raked my face.

Father told me he would pick me up at five. "Hang in there," he said. "Nothing's so bad as the first day of anything." He climbed into his car and rolled down the window. "Don't forget, five o'clock." The car squealed when he turned the wheel. He traveled down the drive, his brake lights flaring before swinging left onto the main road.

"Your old man's wound a little tight," Mr. McDermod whispered.

I sat next to him but didn't say anything.

With pink fingers he jabbed at a telephone installed in the cart. Against his large face, the dark plastic looked inadequate. "Shit," he said. "Garvey's never where he's supposed to be." He put the phone back in its cradle and drove across a fairway toward a building surrounded by sunlit cottonwood and tamarisk. As we approached, a flock of starlings lifted from the ground, their dark wings vibrating against the sky. The birds twisted and turned, then settled in the trees. Half-a-dozen boys lounged in the shadow of the building, the small red eyes of their cigarettes glowing. "Mike Garvey is the foreman of that lot," Mr. McDermod said. He leaned his paw against the horn button.

Topped with short and thinning red hair, Mike Garvey jutted his chin toward us and half-heartedly waved. Slouched against the side of the building, he wore a sweatshirt that said Bowdoin and plaid shorts that ended just above his sunburned knees. He straightened up and walked toward the cart, his hands plunged deep in his pockets.
"Morning, Mr. McDermod," he said.

"Big night last night?"

The young man shrugged. He gazed down at the ground and smiled. "Wasn't a big night, just a late night."

Mr. McDermod looked at the other boys now standing awkwardly in the lee of the building. "What about them? They all have late nights too?"

Garvey didn't say anything. He just stood with his hands in his pockets.

"I don't see it written anywhere, Garvey, that you have to be the boss over them, maybe one of them would like a chance giving the orders. You understand that, right?"

"We're heading out now."

"Yeah?"

"The greens need to dry before we roll them."

Mr. McDermod swung his legs from the cart. "I got someone here I think you should meet. Him and his old man were just in my office pleading for a job. I bet you can't imagine someone wanting to work?"

He scratched his red hair and grinned. "I'm sure it happens."

"Meet Jim Greeley's son."

The young man paused then looked at me. "Greeley?"

Mr. McDermod laughed.

"No shit?"

"This boy's here to mow and rake traps."

Garvey nodded. "I'll find a place for him, so long as he's not particular."
"He's a hard worker."

"Yeah?"

"He told me so himself."

The young man laughed. "I've already got a couple son's of members doing shit for me now. It'll be good to have a hard worker."

Mr. McDermod patted me on the shoulder. "Garvey's just razzing you, Fielding."

His hand felt heavy. "You go with him and he'll set you up."

I nodded and climbed out of the golf cart.

Mr. McDermod turned the vehicle around and headed up to the clubhouse.

Walking quickly, Garvey led me to where the other boys were standing but didn't introduce me. They relaxed, settling back down in the shade. "Give me a minute," he told them then motioned for me to follow. Behind the building, we walked without a word spoken. A path of chipped bark wound through mesquite trees surrounding a clearing that served as a place to dump sand and raw soil. Green beer bottles glittered in the pile of dirt.

"I'm going to let you work with Santiago. He needs help in the equipment garage," Garvey said, pointing at a dilapidated building.

Settled in a depression not seen from the club house, the equipment garage sat, squat and wide, holding together broken pieces of machinery. Garvey led me down the gravel drive into the structure. The air washed cool inside. A hum of operating fans blocked out the sounds of birds and wind. "Santi's around here someplace," Garvey said, striking through the piles of PVC piping, fencing, toppled wheel-barrows, shovels, and
broken golf carts. There was a pungency of petroleum lubricants and diesel in the building that grew heavier the further in we walked. "It's pretty much a mess in here," he said. From a work bench lined with mower blades and honing stones, Garvey picked up a steel shaft as thick around as his arm. He knelt down on the floor and thrumped it twice against the concrete.

"What do you want?" a voice echoed from somewhere on the other side of the building.

"Where the hell are you?"

There was silence and then a small man wearing a beige shirt, jeans and a red baseball cap stepped out from behind a disassembled back hoe. His arms were dark with grease to the elbows. "Is that you, Garvey?"

"Hello, Santiago."

"She won't be ready for at least a week. I told McDermod."

"Is it the injectors?"

"The diaphragm ruptured. I back ordered the part."

Garvey nodded. "Com'ere, I want you to meet someone."

"I need to finish up."

"This boy is to help you."

"Again?"

"This boy is to help you."

"No."

Garvey laughed. "Yes. Come here and meet him."
Reluctantly the little man walked over. He wore a harness on top of his beige shirt. Two small boxes the size of cigarette packs were strapped to his chest. White wires looped up from the boxes and attached to a pair of hearing aids that lay nestled like large cashews behind his ears.

"I don't need help."

"It's McDermid's idea."

"I still don't need help."

Garvey shrugged. "Fielding, this is Santiago, the man in charge of all our machinery, and, if you listen to him, the only one around here who knows how to cut a green properly. Santiago, this is Fielding, our newest employee."

I tried to shake hands but Santiago lifted his grease-covered arms like a surgeon. He turned toward Garvey and shook his head. "I have a lot of work and no time for this."

"Take it up with McDermid," he said and walked away.

We watched in silence as the redhead traversed the room, crossing the threshold into the bright sunlight. Santiago looked at me and sighed. "Nothing personal."

I nodded.

"I didn't catch your name."

"Fielding."

He squinted at me, his brown face twisting. "Again?"

"Fielding."
He shook his head. "Hold on." He retrieved a shop rag from a hamper and rubbed the grease from his hands. "Here," he said, handing me a narrow notebook and pen from his shirt pocket. "Write your name please."

He studied the paper.

"Do you play golf, Fielding?"

"No."

The small man looked down at his hands. A hum rattled in his throat, a sound that carried a moment, vibrating with the intake of breath. He made the sound two more times before he lifted his eyes.

"But my father plays," I said. "He loves golf."

Santiago smiled. "Your father loves to play?"

"Yes."

"I don't play," he said. "But I love golf."

I nodded.

He dropped his head to the side, waiting for something. The light that came through a row of small windows shadowed his features. The sharp edges of the machines and equipment gleamed behind him. Santiago pulled down the bill of his cap then walked into the darkness. He knelt next to a cab-yellow back hoe and began working on a dismantled housing, disconnecting a half-dozen hoses, their brass fittings new and shinny. I followed and sat next to a notched workbench. The deaf man's shoulders rolled and flexed under his shirt, his fingers pulling loose a dark sheath of plastic. The straps of his hearing aid harness formed a cross on his back. Blue-grey from the grease, his
fingers worried a nut from a bolt, thick knuckles twisting, cheeks sucked with effort.

"Shit," he said as the nut escaped and spilled to the ground, ringing against the concrete.

He squatted on his short legs and peered in the wrong direction. I watched for a moment then eased off the bench and retrieved the fastener from where it had run behind the tractor's tire.

Santiago nodded as I held the nut up in the air.

"If I'm not looking, I can't find them when they fall," he said.

The noise of the fans throbbed in the air. The small man took the piece from me then pushed across the floor a case of brake fluid and indicated I should sit down. "Look at this," he said. "You might learn something."

He worked on the engine, taking small parts off the block, lining them in rows on a piece of cardboard. With his dark hands, he pointed first at the bolt he wanted to loosen then at the wrench he needed. I handed him the wrench and neither one of us talked. After ratcheting free a bolt, he held it up in the shaft of light from the window and his fingers turned the bolt and sometimes he paused to clean its thread with a brush. He ran his hand along a seam which bisected the metal engine like a hinge. There were eight bolts lined up on the cardboard in front of us and eight small, dark holes in the case. A smile etched his face and he nodded. "Keep pressure here," he said, his voice dry. The metal was cool to the touch as I grasped the iron torso. We leaned forward then pushed up and the case clicked open. Half an engine fell loose, heavy in our arms.

The phone rang. Santiago followed my gaze and shook his head. "I think maybe I know why McDermot wants you here." The phone rang four more times then stopped.
The small man nodded toward the work bench and with a groan we placed the engine on
the wood. "There's a rag over there to clean your hands. It would be nice to spend the
rest of the day outside, away from here."

After I was done with the rag, Santiago took it and cleaned his own hands. He
twisted his fingers with the cloth, as if tightening them. "Have you ever been on a mower
before?" he asked.

"No."

"Have you ever been on a sailboat?"

I looked at him and smiled.

"I'm serious."

"A sailboat?"

"Have you?"

"Once," I said.

He nodded then walked slowly toward the open door of the garage. The sun was
bright, a breeze ruffled the small places between the building and trees. Leaves stirred,
staggering and running. "It's a beautiful day, Fielding. It's good to be outside."

He approached a blue and silver mower. The wheels were small but wide and
supported a broad, circular platform to which a chair, steering wheel, instrument dash
and engine were bolted. "No headlights. Simplicity." As if reading a line of print,
Santiago ran his finger in front of the instruments. Satisfied, he turned a key, pressed a
button and the mower burst into a fury of hot wind and noise. He looked back at me and
smiled.
"Climb up," he shouted.

On the heavy machine my legs looked small and unsteady. The noise carried up from the engine, reverberating through my shoulders and teeth. "It's easy," Santiago shouted. His UNLV baseball cap was drawn low across his eyes. He pulled against the apron housing the blades, testing the give and indicating the places where my feet should be. "One arm is throttle. The other lifts the cutter." His brown hand reached for the lever that controlled the blade height. When he pulled back, the engine noise roared higher and then evened out smooth and clear. The whisper of intaking air pitched into a whine. He nodded and said something I could not understand.

"What?"

He grinned and put his finger to his mouth. "You don't need to yell at me." He laughed. "It doesn't help. I said it's not good."

The engine noise grew. A coldness expanded through my feet. So softly that I could not hear myself say it, I asked, "How does it stop?"

He pointed toward a hand caliper on the steering wheel. "Brake," he shouted.

"And to shut it off?"

"Here," he shouted. He leaned across me, brushing his hand against my arm. He pushed a yellow button. With large, slow dying heartbeats, the machine sputtered then stopped. Quiet rang in my ears.

"You get used to it," he said.
I climbed off the scythe and my palms felt tight. On the ground around the mower the grass tousled, its length caught by the wind. The belched odor of diesel thinned, replaced by the smell of mulch. "You said it's not good. What's not good?"

Santiago knelt down. He pulled loose a tuft of grass. "It grows out to be healthy and we cut it back to be healthy. If we were not here the grass would go to seed in maybe a month, become brittle and dry. By keeping it cut, we keep it young. It never really gets a chance to live." The small man then stood up and laughed. The grass in his hand slipped free.

"I don't like mowing," I said.

"But you haven't mowed yet."

I shrugged.

"Some people have a talent for mowing," Santiago continued. "Like artists, I think." He pulled the key out of the ignition. "They learn the big picture and understand the reason behind the decisions." He pointed toward a white golf cart whose back end had been converted into a flat bed. Five-gallon pickle buckets were secured on the platform with a length of yellow, nylon rope. "Come with me."

He climbed behind the wheel and I sat in the passenger's seat, my foot outside on the running board. The small engine in the cart was silent compared to the mower. It hummed as we jostled up the small hill, past the mounds of dirt with their green-bottle eyes. Golfers stood beside the path, waving to us, saying good morning.

"Perspective is everything in golf," Santiago said. We stood on the second tee perched above a fairway that curled behind a copse of pine. It was cool in the shadow
and a breeze sluffed through the rice grass. "See the different cuts in the fairway and rough? They're lines of demarcation, Fielding. Without them, they might as well be playing in a field." Like a pale green river, the fairway turned against the dark banks of rough. Saplings grew within the longer grass, planted at strategic points. "They're markers," Santiago said. "On every hole there are a pair of conifers exactly one-hundred-and-fifty yards from the green. Nothing you see is arbitrary."

We walked back to the flat-bed cart. A lone golfer stood behind us and waved. "How-dy, San-ti-a-go," the man shouted. The greens keeper smiled and waved back. The golfer was an old man, perhaps in his seventies but he moved quickly. On the tee he addressed the ball then chopped down hard, as if he was pouncing on something small. The old man smiled at us after he hit and Santiago gave him the thumbs up sign. He trekked after his shot and disappeared over the rise. Santiago got out of the cart. Over his shoulder, he said, "Dr. Frank plays every day, rain or shine." He trudged up the slope and retrieved a clump of sod, carrying it back to the tee where he dropped it upon the ground, tapping it in place with the toe of his boot. "Another person who loves to play golf."

In the cart we rode under a thin canopy of tamarisk. A dry stream bed of sandstone meandered against the path we followed. White stucco homes with red tile roofs fell in at attention on the other side of the crushed stone bed, their windows blank stares over the green of the fairway. The sparkle of wind chimes carried on a current of air. "A friend of mine in Indiana used to take me sailing," Santiago said. "I was young and he was an associate of my uncle's. Mander grew blind and I think we must have
made a funny pair. A blind man and a deaf boy out on the gray water of Lake Michigan."
He paused a moment to point at an immense house with three levels of terraces. "A big
movie star lives there. I'm not sure which one, but I've heard he's very good. Very
popular." We looked at the house but didn't see anyone. Half-a-dozen blue umbrellas
leaned with the wind and the water in the Olympic-sized pool rippled. "In the desert,
mowing is as close to sailing as I've found."

He stopped the cart and got out, stretching his arms over his head. "I want you to
steer, Fielding." I eased across the bench seat and took hold of the wheel. The seat was
warm. "If you desire to go in a straight line, it's necessary to sight an object on the shore.
Take a tree or a lighthouse or something and aim for it. Ignore the waves. Keep your eye
on a single point."

"And you mow this way?"

Santiago grinned. "Usually I'm trying to avoid people or sprinklers or sand traps.
But the premise is probably the same. And if you have a job where you're forced to mow,
this isn't a bad way to think about it."

I nodded.

"See that soaptree over by the fourth fairway?"

"No."

"Thin trunk, about ten-foot tall, all spiky and sharp looking?"

"That's a soaptree?"
"Yucca elata," he said, nodding. "They grow naturally here, but we paid three-
hundred dollars to a nursery which probably stole that one out of Red Rock. Sight on it
and we'll pretend this is a mower."

He smiled then asked me if I knew the difference between starboard and port.

“No.”

“There’s a story behind everything,” he said. Starboard means right and port
means left. That’s what remains, but if you know the story, you understand something
larger than a fact.” He rubbed his hands together and talked slowly. “Used to be many
centuries ago that big sailing ships didn’t have a tiller like today, you know, in the middle
of a boat’s stern. The steering device was more of a board attached to the right side of
the boat. And when one of those boats came into port, the sailors had to be sure the left
side of the boat or the side without the steering board rested against the dock. You see?
Steering board evolved into starboard—the right side, and the side against the port—the
left. There’s stories about everything, Fielding. About everyone. You learn the story
and you learn a bigger piece of the truth.”

“But stories aren’t always true.”

“Not true?”

I shook my head. “Sometimes a story about a person is wrong.”

Santiago smiled. “Maybe they’re like a dream?”

“How?”

“You dream about your dog catching a rabbit, is it false?”

“It’s just a dream.”
“Yes, it’s a dream. But your dog is in it and it’s your dog. There’s no denying that it’s your dog, Fielding. And maybe in that way it’s true. Your feelings for your dog are there? That’s true. What you dream about maybe contains truth about you. In the same way a story can illuminate truth about the teller.” Santiago clapped his hands to signal the end of our conversation. “Back to our sailing,” he said and he sat back in the golf cart and let me drive.

After an hour of steering the cart to port and starboard, Santiago pronounced me ready to sail. He started the mower up, sitting high on the prow and he powered it over to a vacant strip of grass and weeds which ran parallel to the 15th rough. In its wake, I walked in the warm fumes. It was only midday. My shadow fell hard on the ground and the cool breeze which had been pushing to the South all morning was dried up, leaving the air feeling dull and the two-stroke noise of the mower in front of me sounding heavy. Golfers walked past me, both men and women. They occasionally stopped, standing just behind the spot where their ball came to rest and looked forward, down the green sweep of grass, searching and measuring. One woman smiled at me. She was slender and had long, straight brown hair cut across the middle of her back. She carried a green bag of golf clubs over her shoulder and when she came to her ball, she didn’t drop the bag, but threw it onto the ground. That was when she looked over at me and smiled.

Santiago pulled the key out of the ignition then climbed down. He dusted off his pant legs. "Here, captain," he said, handing me the key. "Stay in the practice range. Make tight turns. When going straight, keep your eye on a single point. And please," he said quietly, "please don’t run anyone over."
"Okay," I said.

"I'll be in the garage."

The mower was hot and the engine ticked as I climbed onto the seat. I pulled back the lever that controlled the height of the blades. I held my finger before each of the instruments. Everything looked good. When I turned the key, the engine caught quickly. Vibrations shot through my legs and the noise settled like salt around my head, warm and still, battening the world outside. The machine lurched when I released the brake.

Thick clots of wet grass spilled from the mower. An animal-like smell escaped the new cutting. Over the lots where dry weeds spread, the mower raced and whistled, a lightness pinged in the engine and I felt as if I was coasting. The machine plunged ahead and I concentrated on the cupola above the clubhouse, aligning myself with its thin weather vane. The sun felt hot on my face. I braked then turned around. A column of pale grass narrowed behind me in a straight line, extending over the smooth knolls. The mower's noise settled, a rhythm that rose and fell. Using care, I turned the scythe back parallel to the first run and cut a twin in the opposite direction. Half-an-hour later, six identical stripes lay across the practice range.

I set the brake and let the engine idle. The rough along the 15th fairway looked uneven in places. When I eased the heavy machine down through the same opening Santiago had used to enter, I saw the grass was indeed overgrown. The direction of the last cut was obvious from its lie. A foursome of men strode past me, walking down the fairway toward the green. I watched a moment then lowered the blades and throttled the
engine in small increments. The tires rolled through the dark, wet grass and the cuttings pitched as they should, away from play. The level of the cut looked correct and I continued.

When I ran over the sprinkler head, the mower shrieked and a burned smell overpowered the mulch. Shielding their eyes from the sun, the men on the green stared back at me. I pushed the lever which raised the cutter and gunned the engine. Time felt wounded. I leaned forward then back and the mower lurched off the sprinkler. An insistent wop-wop-wop-wop came from the blades as I steered the machine back to the equipment garage.

Santiago pulled a file along the length of the blade and I heard the sharp bite of metal upon metal where he encountered the damage. Again he straightened his back then ran his fingers against the blade. His face fell serious and he bit his lower lip. "Not too bad," he said slowly. "I've seen worse."

"I'm not smart."

The little man looked up at me then shook his head. "Again?"

"I said I'm not smart."

Santiago nodded his head. His large brown hands put the file down on top of a tool box. I watched him as he took a cloth from the work bench and wiped his forearms carefully. He smiled at me then indicated I should sit down. "Did you get angry when you hit the sprinkler and did you then kick the sprinkler, breaking it off, flooding a fairway?"

I shook my head.
"You did not?"

"No."

"Then you are smarter than me, Fielding. I kick sprinklers after running them over. I kick them with steel-toed boots and I get so furious I cannot remember my name." He pursed his lips together as if to say something more, but instead got up from where he sat and walked to the rear of the machine shop. A dark Y of sweat showed through the back of his khaki shirt below the hearing aid harness.

The morning after Manny's injury, I ran into Isabella outside the hospital. If she was surprised to see me, she didn't show it. After saying "Hi, Fielding" in her timid voice, she told me that she'd called her brother last night, but that he had been asleep. Isabella looked tired; her hair was pulled back from her face with a piece of red cloth and her work clothes were wrinkled under a big coat that hung limply from her shoulders. "My father is away in California on business and I left a message. He phoned last night when he got in. It was very late." She told me about her father's job in management and the necessity of his traveling to California and New Mexico and sometimes Texas. A trouble shooter, she called him but I misheard her and thought she had said, "a double shooter." Despite his frequent trips, she spoke of him in generous tones: "He is so busy, but always he make time for me, for his family."

Manny was downstairs getting an ultrasound and we waited for him in his room. Sitting there, Isabella asked about my mother, "The one who likes to get into accidents,"
she said, and she wanted to know if we were close. I explained that she had remarried
and I told her the story of going to Nevada for the summer and my father and the
accident at a card game and my trip into the desert to catch snakes. I told her about my
mother's new life and the get-togethers she organized and the theme parties she hosted
with her friends.

In response, Isabella told me about her mother's parties. "Grandes partidos," she
said. "Mother ordered sides of beef from the butcher and everyone in the city came to
the house to sing and dance and drink. Then she was the most popular lady in Quito;
men gave her flowers in the street." Isabella looked at me and her eyes contained the
suggestion of sunshine and an echo of an ocean breeze. "In the attic is a trunk that
belonged to her and inside is her wedding dress. Until I got caught by father, I used to
wear the long veil. Father got so mad he forbid me to open the trunk again; he said the
dress is valued at thousands of dollars. There are photographs too."

"Of your mother?"

"She was very beautiful."

I wanted to ask what happened to her mother, if she were dead or still in Ecuador,
or if her parents were divorced but the way she looked as she told her stories prevented
me from suggesting anything that might clip the wings of her flight back to what
appeared to be a happier place and time.

"Always she was dressed to the nines. Long gown with fur and pretty, pretty hats.
A big party was thrown in her honor and the generals came with princesses and more.
She told me these things."
“Yeah?”

“She went on the television to fight for the medicine the orphans in my country need to grow up strong. A newspaper say she is a hero.”

“I would like to meet her.”

“Oh,” she said. “She died from Leukemia.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Isabella shook her head and said it was okay. “I have my stories and the newspaper and the box of photographs and I think of her all the time.” She straightened a wrinkle in her skirt and examined her nails a moment. “She died when I was twelve and I miss her sometimes but I know where she is and I talk to her.”

“That’s good.”

“My father came to this country after she died. He was an officer in the army and got a job here with a Latin insurance company and he was very much in love with her. When she was sick, father quit his place in the army and stayed always with mother at her bed. He became friends with the doctor and nurse and ate meals with them and they talked about the disease inside her and then they talked about the books they read and the local Quito politics and he came to think of the doctor and nurse as his friends. They would let him stay in her room overnight. At home with the two housekeepers, I took care of Manny and on Sunday we got dressed for church and visited mother and father at the hospital. Father had dinner brought in and the three of us ate like a family on folding chairs around her bed.” Isabella appeared distant a moment and then, as if coming back
from another place, she looked at her watch and frowned. "I've waited too long, Fielding. I need to catch the T or I'll be late."

"He'll be here soon."

"Manny will come back and I will be gone."

"Stay a few more minutes and I'll drive you."

"No."

"Please, Isabella, it's not a problem. I want to." When I said her name, I realized it had lain heavy in my mouth since meeting her. Saying it aloud lightened me and seemed to create a bond that now couldn't be denied: she using my name, me using her name. I watched for a reaction but she looked lost in thought.

"My job is in Arlington. I am a bookkeeper."

"I have a car and I'll drive you; it'll be faster."

"It's no problem?"

"Isabella, I want to."

She smiled. "You are a good person, Fielding, but it's far."

"It won't take more than fifteen minutes to drive to Arlington."

"Thank you," she said. "But only if I can do something for you, too."

"For me?"

"Tonight, you come to dinner? I take you to an Ecuadorian restaurant I know. Is very good food and you will like it. I promise. I want to thank you for the help you give me and my brother."
I smiled and the hospital room where we waited for Manny felt suddenly distant and out of focus, as if the hardness of the chrome bed rails and pieces of mechanical equipment had been softened and even the sharp, ubiquitous hum behind the walls now resonated with a melody not unlike ocean waves collapsing on a beach.

Isabella turned her head to the side and looked at me. “Yes?” she asked.

I nodded. “I would like that.”

“Good,” she said and I noticed she was swinging her legs back and forth under her chair and we both smiled but didn’t say anything more. Then I remembered my mother’s get-together that night, the ten-year anniversary party she had been planning, and I felt like a four-reeled slot machine whose wheels had clanked to the stuttering conclusion: Jackpot, Jackpot, Jackpot, Lemon.

“I’m sorry,” I said. My mother has a party tonight. It’s her ten-year anniversary.”

“Oh.”

“But I want to go with you.”

“To her party?”

“What?”

“You are asking me to come to your mother’s party?”

I heard a heartbeat of chimes on the hospital intercom and a woman’s soft and caring voice page an orderly to Post-Op. It was a surprise: Isabella at my mother’s party.

“Sure,” I said. “If you want.”

“That would be good.”

“Yes.”
A few moments later, Manny in a wheelchair was rolled into the room. The nurse pushing the chair was a young woman with blond hair and she brightened when she saw us. “Look, Manny,” she said. “Your family’s here.”

Manny’s expression didn’t change. He hardly looked at Isabella or myself as the nurse helped him into his bed and tucked the sheet and blanket up against his collarbones. The nurse smiled at us in a way that suggested an apology. “Won’t be more than a minute and I’ll be out of your way,” she said. With a practiced eye, she checked the IV attached to Manny’s arm and she was done. “If you need anything, dear, just buzz.”

Manny rolled his eyes and turned away from us. I noticed the back of his neck had been washed. Isabella looked at her watch again, I thought more for Manny’s benefit than her own. “I’ve only a minute or two. But I want to know how you are feeling. Did you sleep alright? Would you like me to bring you something from home?”

Manny grunted that he was okay.

“Anything at all?”

He turned over and looked at his sister.

“You want something?”

“Smokes.”

Isabella arched her eyebrows and shook her head. “No. Absolutely not.”

The boy shrugged and turned back to the wall.

I asked, “How did the test on your spleen go?” But he didn’t respond. “An ultrasound?”
“Manny? Manny, we’re talking to you,” Isabella said. “Look at me.”

“Leave me alone.”

“We have to go.”

“Good.”

“I want to know if you’re okay.”

“Ask the doctor.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

“Did he say something?”

“He said a lot of things.”

“Manny.”

“He said you should be ashamed of yourself.”

“Stop.”

“He said you’re not fit.”

I took Isabella by the arm. “We should go.”

“I’m your only sister, Manny.”

“Thank God for that.”

That evening when I picked Isabella up at her home, she was waiting for me on the front steps where we had first met. She was wearing a dark red dress and her hair was up in a bun. She looked beautiful and I thought about the way things can happen so
quickly, without warning. I know people say slow and steady wins the race, and I guess on some level that's probably right, but I doubt if it's how the big things work. Evolution doesn't happen the way most people think. The slow progress we expect, like a conveyor belt of time pulling everything excruciatingly toward the horizon, to a new and improved whatever doesn't add up. It's not a gradual thing, this evolution. It's hard and unexpected, like silence broken by a shout. The great changes occur on the backs of earthquakes and catastrophic floods. The slow expanding plates of the earth's crust suddenly buckle, vomiting new mountains skyward and sinking existing plains under red magma. The landscape is recast and unrecognizable in literally minutes. What we are familiar with is the dull span between the cataclysms.

The two of us talked about Manny for most of the drive to my mother's condominium. Isabella had been on the phone with the doctors and they explained to her that the boy was out of the woods but still had an enlarged spleen that they couldn't account for.

"Two more days," she said. "The doctors want to keep Manny two more days."

"Better safe than sorry," I said and Isabella nodded. I caught the short distance of the Pike to Route 1 and headed north, exiting before the Callahan. The traffic surged around us and we discussed Manny's treatment and Isabella looked concerned.

"He's okay," she said. "But I asked what could be done about his attitude."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe he could talk to someone."

"A psychologist?" I asked.
“They have good people and father’s insurance will cover it.”

I thought about this and felt uneasy. I wanted to tell her that Manny was just a kid, like any other kid his age, rebelling against his family, but it sounded argumentative and the bridge between us wobbled with the weight of each proposed word.

“You look beautiful,” I said finally. “I like your dress.”

“Yes?”

“A red, red rose.”

She smiled and thanked me. “Your suit is nice too, Fielding.”

“You like it?”

“Handsome.”

“I was buying a suit yesterday before—when we met.”

“This suit?”

“A new one. Something different.”

“Oh.”

As we entered the unlocked door of the condo, I placed my hand on the small of her back and even through her coat and dress and whatnot, the excitement of being in such close proximity made me feel things. I looked at her, expecting to see her beam up at me, aware of the pounding of my heart, but she was too absorbed with the inside of my mother’s place.

“Cool,” she said.

I nodded.
The foyer is ostentatious: mute red walls and a blue ceiling with Nineteenth-Century woodwork and a huge, gold-framed portrait of my mother, Stephen Riley and myself. It had been a gift for my mother and she absolutely adores it. Lit from the high ceiling, the portrait of the three of us leering at every guest as they enter has always been a source of complicated superfluity. It's not exactly a Polaroid on the refrigerator.

"Here is your family."

"My mother and step dad and me."

"You look so serious."

"Stephen, my step dad, took photographs he liked of each of us, sent them to a painter who put them together to make this. In the original photograph my mother was in Florida on the beach; Stephen's was taken maybe ten years before, some place in Europe and mine is from a cousin's wedding I had to go to. If you look carefully, you can see the light's hitting each of us a little different."

"But you all look happy together."

"Yeah."

"That's what matters."

"Probably you're right."

"What happened really is maybe not important."

My mother approached from the living room, her voice lifting, heralding her arrival in the room with a flourish of enthusiasm. "I'm coming!" she said around the corner and then she threw her arms around me and we hugged. Her hair was pulled back exposing an angular face, brown from sun and tennis; her skin looked tough. I told her
she looked great, and, as her habit, she laughed and settled into her accustomed place as
the perfect host. “And whose this lovely creature?” she asked.

I introduced Isabella and my mother hugged her too.

“Isabella.” my mother said. “What a beautiful name.”

“Thank you.”

“Fielding, she’s absolutely gorgeous.”

I looked at my mother without expression. She does this sort of thing and I
should have been prepared, but it’s still embarrassing. “Yes.”

“You are making me blush, Mrs. Riley.”

“Please, dear. Call me Mary.” And she took Isabella’s arm and escorted her into
the living room like an old friend. Aside from my parents, there was only one other
couple at the party, John and Anna Ziejack who owned a pair of restaurants in the North
End and a shopping mall in Woburn. Mother introduced Isabella to Anna. Stephen, who
was talking to John, handed me a cold Amstel.

“She’s cute,” Stephen whispered.

I nodded. He took a sip of his scotch and smiled. His white hair and ruddy
complexion gave him a comfortable, cheerful air that made him easy to like. “How’s
business?” I asked.

“We’re busy paying the piper, Fielding.”

John shook his head.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Don’t be. It was a good, long dance.”
"Read something in the *Globe* about it," said John.

"About two weeks back?"

"Made it sound like all Gloucester’s hanging up their nets."

"Said drug smuggling’s the new boom."

"Nothing new."

"No?"

"Import, export. The trade of the sea." Stephen took another sip from his drink and motioned toward Isabella, talking with the women. "She go to your school?"

"Not exactly," I said and I started to tell them about how we met. The words felt slippery as I described the events; their meanings spread and I found myself over explaining what I was doing eating lunch, watching her from the café. The more I talked, the more I sounded like some kind of stalker. John laughed.

"It wasn’t like how it sounds," I said.

"No, no. I like it," John said. He smiled through the rough of his beard and a feeling of patronization caused my stomach to shift. "Since when is watching a pretty girl a crime?" he joked.

"Right," Stephen said.

"I know it sounds odd."

Stephen laughed and shook his head. "Go on, Fielding. Forget about it."

I looked at the men and laughed myself. "It’s hard to tell right."

Stephen said, "Because you’re too close to it."
“Obviously, it’s something you’re too intimate with.” John said and they laughed again.

My mother looked up from her conversation with Anna and Isabella and asked if we were hungry. “Ready to eat or do you boys want to spend the whole night telling your stories?”

Over a dinner of steak and baked potatoes, we toasted the success of my mother and Stephen’s ten years of marriage. Stephen lifted his glass in response, thanking each of us and apologizing for the absence of his two daughters currently away at school in California. “Mary and I talked to them last night and they both wanted to be here with us, to be among their family on this special day, but they’ve got exams.”

My mother of course smiled and nodded.

The conversation turned to the fishermen in Gloucester and Reverend Moon’s fishing fleets. Stephen told us a story about a Korean family who had their boat burned to the waterline after fishing limits were again lowered. “It’s plain, old frustration,” Stephen explained. “Some of those Yankees have been fishing five generations and it’s the only thing they know how to do with any grace. They’re good at fishing. Gloucester fishermen are some of the best in the world. And now with global warming and pollution and the over harvesting, they can’t make a livelihood. It’s galling to be told by a politician that you can’t do what your father and his father and his father’s father did. There’s continuity breaking. A lot of these men come from fishing families. That’s what they call themselves, fishing families. And now with the Korean fleet driving the price of what they do catch down, they take it as a personal attack on their heritage.” Stephen
sipped his scotch and poked at the meat on his plate. "I don’t blame them, but burning a man’s boat down and beating up his kids at school, what kind of answer is that? The problem isn’t Moon’s fleet, it’s the fishermen of Gloucester. After so many generations on the sea, they can’t imagine another way of life.”

“But why should they?” John asked.

“Nothing lasts forever.”

“You’re Moon’s lawyer.”

“I’m one of them.”

“And you’re spouting the company line.”

Stephen looked at John and shrugged. “It’s not just the company’s line; it’s the universe’s line.”

“What is?” I asked.

“Change,” Stephen said. “Motion. Look at Nature and you don’t see anything static. Rocks are eroded, mountains are lifted up into the sky. And not a thing on the planet aside from man expects it to be any other way. Seems to me the minute you begin expecting the status quo, you’re doomed. Things change. Shit happens.” He looked at Isabella and apologized.

“But I like what you say,” she smiled. “It has been my experience.”

Anne said, “The other day I saw a bumper sticker that said, ‘Life is a Terminal Disease.’”

“You live, you die.”

“All things are becoming something else.”
My mother nodded. “I know the moment I think I’ve got it figured out, someone changes the rules on me.”

“Well, that’s how the fishermen feel.”

“And Moon represents this inevitable change?”

“I don’t know what he represents,” Stephen said.

“How do you go through life not expecting things?”

Isabella said, “Maybe you want, but do not expect.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

Stephen nodded. “You know in poker, when you’re trying for something? What do they call it when you’ve got four cards to a straight and you want a fifth to make your hand? What’s that called when you’re waiting?”

“A draw,” I said.

“No, something else. Sounds like it’s almost dirty.”

“On the come,” I said.

“That’s it.”

I nodded. “But it means more than just waiting.”

“How?”

“I doubt anyone really wants to hear this stuff.” I looked at Isabella and everyone else around the table and they all seemed interested. Even my mother smiled.

“Come on,” Stephen prodded. “It’s not every day we get to hear from an expert.”

Isabella studied me.

“I’m not an expert.”
John laughed. "You are according to the stories I've heard."

Smiling, Isabella asked, "Like in the Wild West, you are a big poker player?"

"No, no. They're making it sound, I don't know, worse than it was. I played a long time ago. It's been years."

"You're being modest," Stephen said.

"No," I said. "I only played for a little while."

"But you made a living at it in Vegas. I don't know many folks that can say that."

"Not a good living."

"Did you lose?" John asked.

"I kept my head above water is all. There's nothing romantic about playing poker like that. You put your hours in at the table and grind out whatever money you can. It's depressing."

"You make it sound almost boring," Anna said.

"In a way."

"Stop fooling," said Stephen

"Really, it's like anything else, pretty soon the shine wears off and it's just a job."

The table fell quiet and I looked at Isabella. "A lot of people are addicted to the action, but I didn't get caught up in that. I mean, sometimes in an exciting hand I did, but mostly I was playing the percentages. There's a lot of math involved in poker and that's what interested me. Standard deviations and weighted odds: the strategies of playing not against humans, but with numbers. There's an old expression in poker: getting the best of it. Unless you have a specific reason not to do so, you want always to play
mathematically correct. That's what I was trying to do. Let the other guy make the
mistakes."

"Not to interrupt you," Stephen said, "but you were just about to tell us what 'on
the come' means?"

I waited a moment, thinking how Isabella probably already thought I was a
degenerate. "It really is more than just waiting," I said. "You're right saying it's going
for something, like a Straight or a Flush and it could also be Two Pair on the come for a
Fullhouse. But in a big game with good players, you have to figure out some way to
disguise what you're going for. If they know you're on the come for a straight, then
they're going to try to knock you out of the pot with heavy bets. In Hold 'Em on the
River with one card left, your chances of catching an open-ended straight are about 6 to
1; if you've got a flush draw, the odds are better but still almost 5 to 1. With those odds,
you don't want to bet a lot because you're going to lose your money eighty percent of the
time. And your opponents know this. If they suspect you're on the come, they'll try to
make you pay; they'll bet and raise so much it isn't worth staying in the game. It's about
pot odds."

Anna laughed. "Greek to me."

"So what do you do?" John asked.

"Instead of playing it slow and alerting everyone to the fact that you're on the
come, you bet big, maybe you even raise. That way people can't finger you on the come
and they're less likely to bet into you."

"It's a bluff."
"A kind of bluff. Being on the come’s complicated. It’s about creating a context for the cards you’ve been dealt. Like everyone else at the table, you have your hand. Being on the come is playing your hand in such a way that no one knows what you’re holding. Your actions tell a story."

"A false story," John said.

"I guess in this case it is."

"That’s deeper than I’d go with it," my mother said. She thought it was amazing to what extremes men will play games. “After all,” she said. “That’s all it really is, a game.”

"I take it you’ve never played," John said.

My mother shook her head. “I’ve played. Only unlike you, I didn’t let myself get carried away.”

"I think it sounds very exciting," Isabella said.

"Don’t let them fool you," my mother said.

“How did you learn poker?” Isabella asked.

Stephen smiled. “Fielding’s biological father is an honest-to-God gambler. Makes his living at it.”

“And you learned from him?”

“ Mostly," I said.

“And this is the father who you saw the other day?"

I nodded.

My mother looked away and pretended to clean her fork.
After a moment, Stephen asked, “You saw Jimmy? How’s the old codger doing?”

I shrugged. “It was only for a minute or two.”

“Knee deep in trouble I’ll bet.”

“His arm is bothering him,” Isabella announced. “Fielding, you said maybe he is having a heart attack.”

My mother looked up from her polishing.

“I don’t know about that,” I said quietly. “We were in Harvard Square and I just ran into him, you know? If I remember right, he said his arm had gone numb, that it had been tingling for a couple days. But who knows?”

“His left arm?” John asked.

“I think so.”

There was a pause at the table and then my mother said, “If you think for one second I’m going to get sucked into worrying about that son of a bitch, you’ve got another thing coming. He’s played all of us for fools on more occasions than I can count. And I guarantee you there’s not a damn thing wrong with his arm. I won’t vouch for his heart, but I know his arm’s as fine as the day he was born. Jim Greeley will bury all of us. Nothing can kill him.” We looked at her and she got up from the table. “I’m not apologizing. That’s just the way I feel about him,” she said and she went into the kitchen.

“Are you okay, honey?”
My mother said she was getting dessert, that she was fine and that if we wanted to talk about Jim, then that was our business but she didn’t feel the need to participate.

“My father’s a con artist,” I explained to Isabella.

He’s what you might call a colorful character,” Stephen said. “You remember *The Sting* with Paul Newman and, you know, what’s his name?”

“Robert Redford,” John said.

“Did you see that movie?” Stephen asked.

Isabella said she had but it had been a long time ago.

“Well, Jimmy Greeley’s a lot like those guys,” Stephen said. “He’s always got something cooking in the fire and there’s always a pot of gold waiting for him around the corner.” He gulped his scotch. “I don’t know him like Mary and Fielding, but he’s always been consistent with me.”

“You mean you can tell he’s lying because his lips are moving.”

“No, Fielding, I mean it. Granted, I’ll never forgive him for the ways he hurt you and Mary, but I admire the fact that Jimmy never plays it safe. He’s always knocking his head against the world, looking for the big pay day.”

“At the expense of everyone around him.”

“Absolutely. He hurts a lot of people, but there’s something courageous about living your life like that. Taking chances all the time.”

“To me he’s just a jerk,” I said. “I guess I’m more invested than you are.”
“Of course you are. I didn’t mean any harm,” Stephen said. “I was just thinking out loud, I guess. I can’t imagine living like that, always going for broke.” He got up to refill his scotch. “Anyone ready for another?”

John sat quietly, buttering a roll. “I’m good,” he said. “You know what I can’t get over? That trick he told you, Stephen, about selling football picks.”

“I still think it could work.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“The scheme where he mails five thousand predictions of a football game, you hear that one?”

“No.”

“He wanted me to help fund it; he sought capital. Of course I told him no out of principle, but I thought it was pretty brilliant. The plan was to get a mailing list from a casino operator he knew. A list of guys who have a history betting football. Well, the first week of the season, he picks just one game, say the Rams against the Seahawks. Of the five thousand predictions he mails, half of them predict the Rams to win and the other half pick the Seahawks to win. Say the Seahawks do win—after all, someone has to win—he then makes a new list of just those people who received the right prediction. To these people he sends the prediction of another game, again half getting one team and the rest their opponent. From those receiving the winning prediction, he makes another list. You see how this works? Pretty soon there exists a handful of guys who have received eight absolutely correct predictions of football games. They figure Jimmy’s a genius. I mean, he sends them a prediction long before the game starts and—as far as they’re
concerned—it’s always right. Up until now, Jimmy hasn’t asked for money, he says he just wants to prove that he knows how to pick football games. But now he charges them a thousand dollars for the next prediction. He says never before in his life has he been so confident of a game’s winner. It’s a sure thing, he says.”

“And this is legal?” Anne asked.

Stephen nodded. “I’m sure it’s fraud, but all the same, there’s something beautiful about the symmetry.”

“Reminds me of an old idea,” I said.

“Yeah?”

“Except for the part about football, it feels like something that goes back to the Greeks or Romans. One of those guys like Pythagoras talks about it.”

“Would it work?” John asked.

I nodded. “Tout services do something like that today, only they disguise it a little better. When you get right down to it, even the casinos are working both sides of a game, it’s how they make their money.”

“Jimmy wasn’t shy about taking both sides.” My mother came back into the room with a tray of fancy cookies and a coffee pot. She put the cookies on the table and began pouring coffee. “Would you like some, dear?” she asked Isabella.

“Only a little, it keeps me up,” she said.

“I can make decaf.”

“No, no. It smells wonderful.”

“You’re bored to tears, no doubt.”
Isabella’s pouty lip disappeared in a smile. “Before, when my family lived in Ecuador and we always had uncles and aunts and cousins over the house, I remember eating and listening to everyone tell stories. It is something I forgot about. It feels very nice to hear about these things.”

Anne agreed, “I know what you mean, I miss the stories my grandfather used to tell. They were comforting, like bedtime stories.”

My mother asked me, “Do you remember the two of us reading before bed?”

“I remember you telling me the story about the night I was born. The accident and the things you said to the cow.”

She smiled. “That was a long time ago. I haven’t thought about that in years. Do you recall the books we read together before you fell asleep?”

“I remember your voice, but not the words.”

My mother smiled. “We never missed a night.”

“It felt good,” I said. “I know I looked forward to them.”

“And it didn’t matter what I read.”

“No?”

“If you’d had it your way, we’d have read Maurice Sendak’s Little Bear a million times. But I get bored easily, so I read to you whatever I happened to be interested in.”

“Like what?”

“When you were two, we read most of the Dr. Spock book on raising children. I recall you loved it.”

“That explains a lot,” John said and everyone laughed.
Stephen popped a cookie into his mouth. "Some stories aren't comforting."

"No, some stories aren't."

Around the table we each drank our coffee. John and Anne talked about their restaurants and their employees. They told a funny story about a waiter who stripped "jay-bird naked" after being accused by his co-workers of stealing tips. "He was full of righteous indignation," Anne said. "But everyone knew he was as guilty as sin."

"People like that think they're pulling the wool over the world's eyes."

"They get caught up in the lie they're living."

"You really think so?" my mother asked.

Anne thought a moment and said, "You hear something enough, you begin believing it. I suppose if you say something long enough, you also believe it."

"Maybe."

Reflected in the cover of a chafing dish was the chandelier above; crowned in the spread of light I could see myself, misshapen but smiling. I thought about my father and I wondered about his arm. In my mind, I could hear his voice shouting through a screen door. "Come here you worthless piece of shit! Look at my arm! I want you to see what your stupidity has done. A bullet through my arm. I've been shot, Fielding and it's your fault. Come here! I want you to see this." It had been a warm night and I had stood on the porch of my father's Las Vegas home, looking through the screen door at him sitting on the floor. His back was against the kitchen wall and his arm was pinned against his chest. Blood pooled on his trousers, darkening the linoleum beneath him. I thought I heard a shrill siren approaching.
"When I saw my father the other day in Harvard Square," I said, "he made a big
deal about the bullet hole in his arm."

"How long ago was the shooting?"

Stephen thought a moment, "Almost ten years exactly."

"And he's not over it yet?" my mother said.

"Means a lot to him."

"You'd think he'd be ashamed of it."

I shook my head. "He showed it to everyone in *The Tasty* like it was something
he was proud of. Like he'd earned it."

Stephen said, "I can understand that. The scar's a souvenir."

John leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed against his chest. He asked how it
happened. "I've heard bits and pieces, that's all."

"Tell us again," Stephen said.

I told them I didn't want to. "I don't remember it all."

"Nonsense."

"Really."

There was a pause in the conversation and Stephen said, "I'll tell what I know."

My mother looked disapprovingly.

"Shit. It's as much my story as it is anyone else's. Didn't I have to cut my
honeymoon short in the Bahamas on account of Jimmy Greeley's great adventure?"

Stephen motioned toward me and winked. "Fielding didn't get the wool pulled over his
eyes."
“Saved the day, I heard,” John said.

Isabella smiled and I again felt uneasy with what was about to unfold. There were a couple of stories about what happened but I hadn’t heard Stephen’s version and although he certainly liked me and got along well enough with my father, I wasn’t confident how it would come out. Stories change a lot. I mean, not just because different people are telling them, but because they evolve. A story can’t help it. And stories change when different people hear them too. I looked at Isabella.

“The way I heard it,” Stephen continued, “there was a game at some country club in Las Vegas where all these big-time gamblers and mobsters hanged out. Jimmy’s as thick as thieves with them, you know, a real character. The money that Jimmy was using had been put up by the mob. They loaned Jimmy about thirty thousand dollars and expected to take the lion’s share of the winnings. This particular game had been designed for Jimmy to fleece some out-of-town businessmen from Hong Kong.” He looked at me for confirmation and I nodded. “The Chinese guys had been wined and dined and they even played golf with a Wayne Newton look-a-like. You might say, like sacrificial lambs, they were ready for the altar.

“Enter, Jimmy the knife,” John said.

“That’s the plan, but something isn’t working right. Jimmy doesn’t beat the guys like he’s supposed to, like the plan calls for. The Chinese are throwing in huge sums of money, and they’re all drunker than baboons. One of them, a guy name Xing, is catching such good cards that even when cheating, Jimmy can’t beat him. Pretty soon all the money’s in front of the guy. In Chinese, he’s bragging to his friends about how lucky he
is, talking about all that numerology that they believe in over there. And I don’t mean to put them down about that stuff, either. The Koreans I know believe in something similar and the way I figure it, it’s no worse than believing in Lent or the Holy Communion.

And in many ways, it’s better. When it comes to superstitions, they’re more consistent than us, practicing them daily; whereas, we practice our superstitions on big holidays or maybe, if we’re particularly religious, on Sundays. The Lord works fine and dandy in church but when we’re in the-quote, real world, unquote—forget about it. We leave our beliefs at the front door. The Koreans and Chinese I know, don’t do that. It might sound like a bunch of hocus-pocus, but I think there’s something refreshing about their numerology.” Stephen drank the rest of his scotch and shook the short glass to make the ice inside ring like coins.

“That night just before dawn, Jimmy returns home to get some sleep. He’s lost all the mob’s money and everything that belonged to himself too. He knows he’s got hell to pay, but figures there wasn’t a whole lot he could do about it. I mean, the guy got lucky, right? Really, all anyone can say is that Jimmy isn’t a good enough cheater. So there he is in the kitchen getting ready for bed and Fielding’s been asleep all night in his own room when there’s a knock at the door.” For emphasis, Stephen knocked on the table top. “Jimmy knows it’s no good, but he opens the door and there on the doorstep is a mob enforcer: a big guy without a neck or a sense of humor. He’s all steamed about the money they lost and he says he’s there to collect. They mix it up a little. Jimmy gets bounced off the refrigerator. Pretty soon the mobster’s got a gun to Jimmy’s head, demanding that he give the money back and Jimmy’s explaining over and over that all
the money was lost in the poker game. I mean, the mob guy knows this, he was there to protect his investment, but he’s not ready to give up. He figures he’ll shake Jimmy down for whatever he can get.

“And as you’ve no doubt guessed, Fielding wakes up and sees the gangster on top of his father. Without thinking about consequences, Fielding grabs a golf club and whacks the guy on the back of the head. Pow! And as the man falls, his gun goes off—Bang!—nicking Jimmy in the arm.”

“That sounds like a movie script,” Anne said.

Stephen agreed. “The mobster’s unconscious and Jimmy’s screaming in pain. Fielding wants to call the police but of course his father’s against that idea for obvious reasons. It doesn’t take more than a minute or two for Jimmy to bandage his arm and scrape together what he can. As Fielding is putting together his own things, Jimmy sneaks out the back and abandons the boy.”

“He just left you?”

I nodded.

“How horrible,” Anne said.

Isabella shook her beautiful head. “Why?” she asked.

Shrugging, I told her I didn’t know.

“The fight or flight response,” Anne suggested.

“I suppose it could have been that.”
“Well, Jimmy ran,” Stephen said. “He ran and left Fielding to deal with the unconscious gangster and with all the problems he had made. He left the boy in a city he didn’t know.”

“What did you do?” Isabella asked.

“I left the house,” I said. “I ran into the desert to get away.”

“The desert?”

“It wasn’t so bad.”

“By yourself?”

“I met people,” I said. “There are a lot of people living on the fringe, between the suburbs and the desert.”

“How old were you?”

“Fourteen.”

“Jesus,” said John.

My mother, unusually quiet, just nodded.

“How long were you running?”

“A few days, that’s all.”

“We flew back from the Bahamas the minute we heard,” My mother said.

“That’s right,” Stephen said. “Caught a flight to Vegas and picked Fielding up. All things considered, he was in good shape. He weathered the storm like a man.”

Anne began talking about the statistics of abandonment in America today and I listened to her explain the cyclical nature of parent-child abuse. She spoke with an authority that no doubt came from lots of reading and perhaps volunteer work in clinics.
As I listened, I thought about that night ten years ago when I had woken and heard my father arguing in the kitchen. Phillip was yelling at my father. The sound of his voice reverberated in the walls with the expanding violence of a hammer on steel.

“You’re not getting away with this,” he screamed.

My father responded with calmness and there was something about him that felt reassuring, as if just below the surface, a joke existed that he was dying to tell. “Phil, you’re talking to me, Jimmy. This isn’t something to worry about. We’ve been through stickier situations.”

“I know guys buried who’ve done less than you.”

“Look at you. Look at me. We’re two of a kind. I know you as well as I know myself and this is an act you’re putting on right now. You’re playing the hard guy. Why can’t we just talk like friends? This is a small problem and I’ll bet between the two of us, we can reach some kind of solution.”

“Don’t insult me, Jimmy. You don’t know me.”

“You’re getting worked up over nothing.”

“I could have sent someone else here,” Phillip said. “But I didn’t, you know why?”

My father didn’t respond.

“I didn’t send anyone because I want the personal satisfaction of hurting you, Jimmy. You’ve had it coming a long time.”

“Phil, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re a wise ass.”
"You don’t have to do this, Phil. I know you—"

"You know me?" Phillip interrupted. "You fucking think you know me?"

I quietly climbed out of bed as Phillip yelled at my father. I crossed the hall into my father’s bedroom where I slid open his dresser drawer and removed the cold, blue-steel revolver. It felt almost light in my hands as I carried it out of the room and down the hallway. Under the bright flourescents in the kitchen I saw Phillip leaning over my father who sat in a chair, his arms folded across his chest.

"You made a deal with that Chinaman, didn’t you?"

"He got lucky."

"No one gets that lucky."

"You think I’d pull a stunt with your money?"

With the back of his hand, Phillip struck my father across the face. "I don’t want questions, I want answers."

"He got lucky."

"Ain’t buying that one," he said and again he hit my father.

I cleared my throat and Phillip turned around. When he saw the gun, his face became rigid and then, in less than a heartbeat, his eyes softened and he said quietly, "Son, put the gun down."

"Get away from him."

"Goddamn it, Fielding," my father said.

Phillip looked at my father and said, "Tell him to put the gun down. Don’t make this uglier than it needs to be, Jimmy."
My father didn’t say anything, but he got up from the chair to cross the room.

“Fuck that,” Phillip said and he pushed my father back down. “You take me for a complete moron?” He shook his head slowly. Under his brow and thin mustache there were beads of perspiration. His small eyes bulged a little.

“I didn’t put him up to this, Phil.”

“Tell him to lay the gun down.”

“Fielding, listen to me.”

I shook my head.

“You’re in a dangerous situation,” he said. “Don’t do nothing rash, okay?”

“Let my father go.”

Phillip smiled. “We’re just talking.”

“No,” I said. “You’re hurting him.”

Phillip took a step toward me. “Your father and I have been friends a long time.”

“Are you okay?” I asked my father.

From his chair my father shrugged. He said, “I don’t know what you’re doing, Fielding.”

“I’m helping you.”

He shook his head. “Not this way. You can’t help me like this.”

“Listen to your father.”

“I’ve seen what he does,” I said.

“No.”
“At the club. I saw him hurt a man.”

As Phillip took another step toward me, my father edged off his chair. “Me and Phil are old friends. He’s not going to hurt me. Not really. He’s in a tough place and he has to make it look good or they’ll take it out on him. Fielding, put the gun down and later we’ll all laugh about this.”

“Listen to your old man,” Phillip said. He took another step and his eyes became hard.

I really don’t remember the next moment. Three things had to happen and the order isn’t clear to me, nor is the impression of individual cause and effect. I pulled the trigger of the gun and a bullet howled from the barrel. The report didn’t echo, but rang out, knocking every other noise into silence. Phillip had lurched at me to take the gun, I presume. My father had left his chair and with a golf club, had swung at Phillip. The three of us met in the middle. My bullet, shot from the hip, missed the gangster and struck my father in the arm. The golf club bounced off Phillip’s skull. I stood in the doorway of the kitchen and listened to the heavy silence expand and then dissipate. The sound of my father’s voice swelled in pain. I recalled him spinning from the force of the bullet, spinning around on his toes before he fell against the kitchen wall. Phillip was unconscious at my feet. Still and quiet.

“You son of a bitch,” my father said to me.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

“Look at me.”
Our eyes met and he was another man all together. I saw nothing in him I could recognize. The photographs I knew earlier were of my father, but not this man before me. He spit.

I held onto the gun tightly.

"I'll kill you," he said.

Stunned, I stepped back and my father again spit at me.

"I'm sorry."

My father grit his teeth as he moved his arm.

"It hurts a lot?"

"My arm's not the big problem."

I shook my head.

Looking at Phillip, my father said, "When he wakes up—if he wakes up—he’s gonna kill us. If he doesn’t wake up, someone else will do it."

"Let me help you," I said.

He turned his head away. I looked at my father against the wall of the kitchen and I smelled the acrid burn of the spent bullet and I tried to imagine the moment before everything had fallen to pieces when I had been asleep on the pull-out sofa and he had been preparing for bed after a long night of losing at cards and, as hard as I tried, I couldn’t put the shards of that memory together into a narrative that sounded true. He sat on the kitchen floor with blood on his trousers. Phillip lay quiet and still.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

"You fucked up big time."
“What do you want me to do?”

“Com’ere,” he said.

I hesitated a moment then stepped carefully over Phillip and saw blood on the linoleum behind his head. My father had propped himself up against the wall and pushed himself into a crouch. “Com’ere,” he said. Behind my father I saw where the bullet had left his body and gone through the oven door, puncturing the white enamel with a black-circled hole. He motioned for me to help. I offered him my arm. “Let me lean on you,” he whispered. When I bent down to support him, he moved—quick as a snake—and caught my throat with his good hand. He choked me. “You son of a bitch,” he spat. “Look at me! You’ve ruined my fucking life.”

His fingers clutched my throat, they wrapped around it, bruising me to the bone. Pain burned behind my eyes; stomach acid coiled in my stomach, arching its way into my chest. Although I still gripped the gun, I had forgotten about it. I didn’t hit him. I didn’t even try to get loose.

Finally, he just let me go. He pushed me away from him and I fell to the floor next to Phillip. A wave of white sparks washed across my vision. Hot oxygen filled my lungs and I breathed clumsily, my neck a ring of fire. “You’re pathetic, Fielding,” he said. I couldn’t see him; I didn’t want to. But his voice sounded strong: “You won’t even defend yourself. What am I supposed to do with you?”

“You get a bad piece of meat?” Stephen asked me.

I looked around the table and shook the memory clear of my head. “That story you told still bothers me.”
My mother said it was no wonder. “I should have pressed charges,” she said and I watched her wring her hands together as if to get at something that lay within. She stopped when she saw me looking, and I wondered what it was she was thinking. Accidents, perhaps. A long line of accidents.

After dinner, I drove Isabella home. She sat quietly in the passenger seat, her peaceful face dark and distant. “Did you have a good time?” I asked.

She said she had. “I like your family.”

“It was a strange night,” I said.

“They love you.”

“Sure.”

“Stephen too.”

I nodded.

“What is strange is how he likes your father.”

“Yeah?”

“I think he sees something, he wants you to see too.”

“About my father?”

“Maybe.”

We were quiet for a while as I steered the car across two lanes of traffic to take a left turn. She asked if the story Stephen had told about the shooting was true. “Did it happen like that?”

“Mostly it’s true. There’s a lot I don’t remember. Sometimes it feels like what I do remember is mixed up.”
"I think the big things are like that."

"The big things?"

"In life," she said. "Big things that happen to us. They are not so simple that they can be figured out easily. So they feel mixed up sometimes."

"I guess."

"You can trust me on this."

I smiled. "You’re smart."

"Not just another pretty face, huh?"

We laughed and I thought the sound of our laughter together was good.

She asked if my father and I had ever talked about what happened.

"After that mess in Vegas, I knew I never again wanted anything to do with him."

Isabella smiled.

"What?"

"I was just thinking," she said. "Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think you are a lot like him."

"My father?"

She nodded.

"If you knew him, you wouldn’t say that."

"Maybe."

"We’re very different."

"Why did you go back to Las Vegas?"

"What do you mean?"
"You went back, right?"

"Four years later to play poker. I was eighteen."

"Where your father was."

"Vegas is the only place in the world you can make a living playing poker. The fact my father lived there wasn't an issue. Except maybe once or twice, we never even bumped into each other; it's a big city."

"But you went back."

"Where else could I go?"

"I don't know," she said.

Looking like Japanese lanterns, the streetlights on Marlborough Street shown through halos of inclemency. Fog had moved in. The traffic around the Common moved slowly as we negotiated the narrow streets. "I don't know either."

"It is okay if you want to talk about something else."

"Me and my father, we don't get along."

"I know."

"And I'm okay with that. Things are the way they are for a reason and over the past ten years I've learned a lot about myself. I don't need the aggravation that my father brings to my life. I don't hold any grudges. But, equally, I don't feel the need to seek him out to heal his wounds."
Manny stared up at the ceiling and his chest rose and fell. His face and head, roughened and scratched, bobbed to an unheard rhythm on the sheets and chrome of the bed. He lay against the white, an island of warm imperfections.

I cleared my throat.

He closed his eyes and fell still.

“Your sister should be back in a few minutes.”

No response.

“I guess you’re tired.”

Again, the same. Nothing. He looked as if he were attempting to blend into the white coldness of the bedding. His presence in the room slipped. I thought about the need I felt to confront Manny and wondered what might be behind it. If he were to have gotten up then and shook my hand and just looked at me with something that could be construed as thanks, I thought I would have told him it was nothing and would have left the hospital room forever. But that wasn’t what I wanted, not thanks. Maybe it was just his touch. After all, I had touched him, had felt the intimacy of his odor in my nostrils and the weight and heat of his body. What kind of reciprocity was this? I looked at Manny and felt the echo of his pulse. A boy. I remember being a boy and hearing a story about a priest or rector or someone who was phoning members of his congregation during an icy rain storm in an attempt to get someone to help him fix the leaking church roof. He was desperate because the water was damaging the church and every member in good standing was unable to come for whatever reason: kids needed to be watched or they had work that needed to be finished or something just as pressing. And so the priest
calls on a man who lives nearby who isn’t a good member. A tough man who cared nothing for the church. He had been someone the priest had unsuccessfully tried to fellowship and the thought of asking the bitter man to spend his night on the church’s roof in the freezing rain felt insane and the priest realized it would certainly polarize the man against the church forever. But he did call and he did come to work on the roof and eventually he did return to the congregation. After freezing on the roof through hours in the rain, the man rediscovered the pattern of the faithful. Through sacrifice he had earned his place; he had committed himself through work. It’s a deep logic not easy to see coming.

Who told me that story?

Cons use this same unexpected attachment to string a mark on and on and on. The barb in a good scam isn’t always something positive, like easy money or sex. A negative can work, so long as it’s perceived to be voluntary. Manipulate the mark into a cause where he believes he’s going the extra mile, and you’ve caught him fast. Don’t make it easy for him. Make him sweat for that opportunity to provide capital for your phony start-up company. Maybe, depending on how you look at it, that priest was unintentionally setting the bitter man up, placing him in a position to volunteer and, lo and behold, he’s now splashing the collection plate every Sunday. Don’t think for a minute religion’s above that kind of thing.

“Go away.”

Manny’s eyes were open again but he wasn’t looking at me.

“You okay?” I asked.
“It’s hot in here. Open the window.”

“It won’t open. You want me to tell the nurse?”

“Let it go,” he said.

By the side of his bed there was a tray with what was left of his breakfast: eggs and toast and a coffee cup with a creamer and several sugar packets. “They let you drink coffee?”

“My father’s paying for it. Why shouldn’t they?”

“Money makes the world go ‘round, huh?”

“My world it does.”

I nodded. I took the sugar packets and his ice water and brought them to the table that swung over the bed. “I want to show you something.” After moving the water out of the way, I placed the sugar packets end to end, one on top of another, three high. They balanced there on his table. “There,” I said.

Manny asked, “So?”

“It’s a trick I know.”

“That it?”

I nodded. “You want to know the secret?”

Manny shook his head but I told him anyway.

“You wet your hands,” I said. “Look.” I showed him how I got my fingers wet from the condensation on the glass and used the moisture to dampen the bottom of each sugar package. “When they’re wet, they stay balanced.”

“Kinda lame,” he said.
“Yeah, I know. But it’s the only trick that comes to mind right now.” I stood at the foot of his bed and studied him: little head and a thin brown arm with an intravenous line attached to it, sticking out from under the clean white sheets. I asked him to tell me about his father. The father who was paying all the bills. But he shook his head. “Shit,” he said.

“Just wondering, is all.”

“I don’t have a father.”

“That so?”

Manny nodded. “Maybe I was dropped from the sky.”

Dropped from the sky. Nothing one moment, there you are the next. I’d overheard one Native American say something derisive about another once, he said that the man probably just fell out of the sky. It was in a casino on Route 93 near the Arizona border and the Indian was among a group of at least a half dozen. They all laughed at the saying and although the words were new to me, I suspect to them they were a cliche. You know when you listen to strangers talk and you hear the words and also the irony? Even if you don’t know what it means, you understand the tone. It was the same in that casino with the Indians. “Well, you know him; he just fell out of the sky,” he said. A break from continuity, perhaps. There you aren’t: there you are.

“What are you scared of?”

Manny looked at me with more incredulity than a thirteen year old had the right to muster. After a moment, he smiled for the first time. “What do you want from me?” he asked.
I shook my head. "I don’t know."

"I can’t help you."

"Can’t help me how?"

"You know."

"No," I said.

"With Izzy."

"With Izzy?"

Manny nodded. "You’re trying to get to her through me, right?"

"No."

"I think you are."

"She’s my friend."

"And that’s it?"

I nodded.

"You want me to tell you that she likes you?" I paused and Manny smiled

openly. His teeth were wide and his eyes bright. "You want me to tell you how she talks

about you? She has hopes for you."

"She said that?"

"Wouldn’t you like to know?"

I shook my head. "That’s not why I’m here."

He laughed. "I said I can’t help you."

"I don’t understand."
He rubbed the wound below his eye and continued to smile. "I don’t know anything about her."

"Your sister?"

"I don’t know who she is."

"You’re saying you have amnesia?"

"Fuck you."

I told him I was sorry.

"I don’t know word one about her. Ask me her favorite color and I couldn’t guess. She’s a blank."

"What happened?"

"Nothing," Manny said. Since he could remember, it had always been like that.

"People drift apart," I suggested. "Even family, sometimes."

Manny coughed. "It don’t matter to me."

"You don’t care?"

"That’s what I said."

I told him I understood. "There are people in my family like that."

"Do you care that you don’t care?"

I thought about it a moment. "No."

Manny smiled; he appeared happy with my answer. "I don’t care about anyone. Not Izzy or my father or my cousins or anybody. If someone were to tell me that they all died in a big plane crash, I wouldn’t shed a tear. I couldn’t care less. That sound strange to you?"
"You might not mean it."

"If I said it, I mean it."

"I'm just saying it's hard to know what you think until something happens. You can say you don't care, but it might be different when you get the phone call."

Manny knocked over the three packets of sugar. "I don't care," he said.

"You fell out of the sky."

"That's right. I fell outta the sky."

"Tell me something."

"No."

"About Izzy."

Manny laughed and pointed a finger at me. "Told you."

"It's not like that."

Still laughing, he held his hands against his sides. "Shit, you're making me hurt."

"Tell me what she was like as a little girl."

"I don't remember."

"Com'on, a story."

Manny shook his head. "I don't have one."

"She said in Ecuador she took care of you."

"I don't know about anything but here and now."

In the lull of our conversation, Isabella came in. She smiled at me and approached Manny's bed, in her hands was a shoe box. "I brought something for you."

In the box was a care package of chocolate bars and comic books and baseball cards.
Manny looked at the items blankly. "I knew you must be sick of hospital food," she said as if explaining.

Manny said he was tired and Isabella seemed relieved. "Maybe we should go?"

"You just got here," I said.

Manny looked annoyed. "I said I need my sleep."

She nodded. "I will be back tomorrow. Okay?"

"Whatever."

I waved goodbye to Manny and he acknowledged me with his chin.

"Izy?" he said.

She turned around in the doorway and Manny sang out, "I think Fielding wants to get in your panties."

She closed the door on him and we walked to the elevator in silence. "He is empty," she said finally. "I am sorry. There is nothing in him but rudeness and shame."

"It's okay," I said. "The two of us talked a little while, and I almost thought we made progress."

She said, "He pushes everyone away."

"I think he's running from something."

Isabella disagreed. "He has been this way for as long as I remember. If he were running, as you say, he would have reached wherever he was going a long time ago. No, Manny is empty. He will not let anything inside him."

"He's young."
She looked tired. "He is not so simple, Fielding. My brother grew up with only me and two housemaids. Father was away all the time and there was no one there to show him how to even play. No playmates his age. You see, he has been alone all of his life and he tries to fill himself with himself, but that can not work. He is very smart. They test him and his mind is great. But he does not care. He does not care about anyone or anything."

"Like he fell out of the sky."

Isabella shook her head. "Sometimes you talk like him."

"I would like to know him better."

"You can not know Manny."

"I think I already know him a little bit."

"You are only pretending."

My father left the house, his arm slung against his chest. I remember standing on the porch, watching him lumber from room to room. He bellowed at me, "As jackpots go, this is a big one." When he approached the screen door, I got off the porch and he shook his head. "You’re not my son, Fielding," he said and he got into his Olds 88 with the pair of dirty false teeth still wired to the grill. The car’s engine roared. In the distance, I heard the sound of a siren grow stronger and then dissipate. I waited a few minutes and listened to the dull breathing of the wind in the palm tree. I still held the gun in my hand.
I took a rucksack from my father's room and filled it with some clothes and what food I could find, mostly candy, and slipped the gun into the bag between a pair of trousers and a sweatshirt and carried it on my back. It felt heavy and secure. The last thing I did was call Santiago's number at the garage. The phone rang and rang and the answering machine picked up and I knew someone other than Santiago would be listening to it and that part felt odd to me. Calling a deaf man. But I heard his recorded voice tell me to leave a message and I told him that I was in trouble. I didn't explain, I just said I needed help. I hung the phone up and looked at Phillip lying on the floor. His chest moved up and down.

I lost the whole day walking. It was dark when I got to the country club and the lights were off in the garage. I climbed through an open window. When I stomped my feet against the concrete to get the feeling back, the noise echoed in the room and the commotion lifted the dead fumes of diesel and mulch into the air. Low-hung cutting machines watched in the shadow as I rifled through the deaf man's tool chest. I pulled awls and files from the red cabinet and spilled drawers of sockets across the floor, their brilliance disappearing like silver coins under the lawn mowers. On the work bench, Santiago's dungaree jacket was heaped in a barrel and the mercurial light from a lamp outside reflected off a button, shining and recasting the metal into something valuable. I put the jacket on, rolled up the sleeves then went through the pockets. Tucked inside was thirty-two dollars wrapped in a rubberband. I unrolled the money and found Santiago's business card with the phone numbers of the garage and his home. He had scribbled, "Keep sight on single point," across the back of the card. On the course, the tic-tic-tic-tic
of the sprinklers cut swaths in the night. I buttoned Santiago's jacket against the spray and walked out, following the step of rough toward a runoff that ran behind the fourteenth hole. The Bermuda squeaked under my boots and the earth felt soft and almost forgiving as I walked down the par four. Light from the casinos reflected off low clouds, bruising the sky yellow. Below the pulse of the sprinklers, a motor whirred and grew, a car negotiated a curve and a throb of light panned across the openness. I pressed my stride, making for the road.

Over my shoulder I carried my father's rucksack. The weight of its contents and the bite of the nylon strap against my shoulder hardened the impression of immediacy in me. There was a space I was aware of, a transitional moment when the worst had already occurred but the consequences had yet to follow, like tumblers ready to drop in a lock. Reaching the road, I pried my way through the irrigated tamarisk growing on the shoulder and waited, ready to hail the next car striking out of town. It was late, past ten, and I waited beside the darkness of the golf course, my fingers feeling the cold. When an aura of light expanded above the crest in the road, I stood on the center line and waved down the approaching car. The driver stopped but didn't pull off the asphalt; he stared at me, his engine idling high.

"What's wrong?" the man asked, cracking the passenger window.

"I need a ride."

"You hurt?"

I approached the open window and said, "I need to get out of here."
"I ain't a taxi." Cocooned in the green light of the dashboard, the man looked pleased by his words. He nodded and smiled at me. "You better get on home if you know what's good for you."

"Give me a break."

"You're running from something?" he asked. The man looked to be in his mid-thirties. The pale skin of his face was drawn tight across his skull, making his eyes appear large. His thinning hair was wet and I saw the shine of his scalp. "You are running from something, right?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Just this place."

"Las Vegas ain't shit," he said.

"Yeah."

"I mean it, it ain't shit. You want to talk about a real city? Chicago's got at least ten million people and they know how to drive in Chicago. You don't have assholes going thirty miles an hour on the highway. If someone tried that, they'd get run off the road and no one would think twice about it. In Chicago, people are smart."

"Here, people are idiots," I said.

"You're not from here?"

"I'm from Massachusetts."

"That's cool." He pointed at himself with his thumb and said, "Personally, I grew up in Chicago."

I nodded.
He looked up with a bird-like quickness and asked, "What the fuck are you doing in the middle of the road?"

I shrugged.

He opened the door and leaned across the Honda's small console, his hand outstretched to shake. "We both come from big NBA towns. My name's Billy Stott."

"I'm Fielding," I said, taking his hand.

The dashboard in the car was covered with sports logos and half-clad girls, pictures cut from magazines and glued together. I sat down in the broken seat and looked at the artwork, not saying anything. There was a musky, animal smell coming from somewhere inside the car. Billy kicked at the accelerator and the night rushed over us. He steered the car with one hand, the other on the stick, energetically shifting gears.

"Your name's Fielding?" he said. "I've never heard that before. I like it, it's got weight, you know?"

"Thanks."

"Where you going, Fielding?"

I held the rucksack on my lap and shook my head. "Maybe Mexico."

"No shit?"

"That's what I've been thinking."

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen," I lied.

He looked at me and nodded. "You've got the spirit of a wanderer, huh? Like you can't hold up in one place for long?" He pointed at himself and added, conspiratorially,
"That's exactly how I am too." He pushed the hatchback through a series of turns, accelerating the small car, its headlights illuminating vacant washes and long abandoned piles of bulldozed dirt. "I'll take you to the freeway if you like. There you can probably catch a ride."

"Thanks," I said again.

"I envy you, Fielding. Being on the road and all."

We continued the drive down into the city where the scarred emptiness reluctantly gave way to newly constructed neighborhoods. Cultivated in large blocks, the red-tiled houses grew indistinguishable from one another, like stucco monoliths raised under a calcified sun. Here and there, a new framed structure stood ready to bloom. The only ones on the road, Billy catapulted the car over the hollowed-out storm concourses, the asphalt skinning sparks off the car's muffler. I held onto the topless women of the dash with both hands while we barreled past the dark buildings, all the while experiencing the sensation of watching a fire flare out of control for no good reason.

Just as I was about to ask to be let out, a thick and hollow buzzer sounded in the car. An unmistakable alarm. Billy looked in the rearview mirror and slowed down.

"Shit," he said. The noise appeared to come from the back. He pulled the car over onto the shoulder of the road and shut off the engine but left the lights still on. I climbed out of the car when the rattling got louder to watch from a distance.

"What is it?" I asked.

He took out a pair of white, five-gallon buckets from under the hatchback and held them out away from his sides, as if they were emanating heat. "The fuckers are
awake," he announced. He carried the buckets to the front of the car and placed them before the headlights. Through the white plastic I saw shadows moving. "Coon tail rattlesnakes," he said. "The heat from the car woke them. I guess racing around didn't help."

"Rattlesnakes?"

He nodded. "I'm a snake broker. I buy and sell snakes."

I shook my head.

"You know, I hire guys to go into the desert to find snakes and I sell them to the Mexicans here in town who make belt buckles and boots from them. There's a lot of money to be made in the snake racket."

I looked at the arm-thick shadows move in the bucket. "You ever get bit?" I asked.

"Naw," he scoffed. "You know, I was the first guy to do this. When I started, I'd go up into Red Rock and down by the dam to search for the snakes myself. There were big ones back then; eight footers as big around as your thigh weren't uncommon. And I knew where they were too. I've probably caught more big snakes than anyone else in the history of the world. I know what you're thinking, but it's true. I've got a knack for it."

"You ever seen anyone get bit?" I asked. I put my hand against the side of the bucket and felt the vibration from the droning rattle. Unexpectedly, the noise sputtered then stopped.

"Careful," Billy said. "You don't want that top to come off. Even if they don't bite you, they can still spit. You get hit in the eye, you're blind for life."
"Yeah?"

"I shit you not. I've seen it happen." Billy put the two buckets of snakes back into the car and laid a blanket over them. He then crossed in front of the headlights and his shadow lurched down the road. "You aren't in any big rush, are you?"

"The sooner I get going, the better."

"You got any money?"

I stepped back and wished that I hadn't left the rucksack in the car. "Nothing much," I said.

He climbed into the small car and motioned for me to do the same. I hesitated, then followed. We shut the car doors and Billy continued down the grade toward the lights of the city. "I got an idea," he said. "I'm going to help you in a way I wish someone had helped me when I was your age. You and I, we think the same way. I can tell just from talking to you." He flipped down the vanity mirror in the visor and looked at himself. "I'm thirty-three years old, Fielding. My hair's going, my blood pressure's too high and I haven't been laid in over a year. You believe that?"

I nodded, not knowing what to say.

He laughed. "You've got good instincts. My whole life I've banged my head against the wall, trying to break through into something better, you know? I've got the drive; I've got the ideas and I've got more hustle than Larry Flynt. The only thing that's eluded me my whole life is a fucking break. Just one break, a twist of fate in my direction. I see so many sons of bitches on the news who become honest-to-God
millionaires because they were in the right place at the right time and had the correct change. It fucking sickens me."

The car picked up speed and we raced under the low clouds down into Las Vegas. We passed suburban malls and hospitals and a store proclaiming to be the world's largest gift shop. Billy turned onto the Strip and we fell behind the throng of traffic. "I'm going to cut you a break," he said. "I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Something that will change your life." I looked at him and nodded as casino marquees towered over us, their light rippling across the city like stones thrown in a pool of embers. Hollywood entertainers with fifty-foot grins smiled down on thousands of Japanese tourists milling below. "Football," Billy said. "Monday Night Football." He pointed at a sticker on the dash in front of me and asked what team logo I saw.

"The Redskins," I said.

He nodded. "Did you know they almost always cover the point spread?"

I shook my head.

"I've made a science of it. A young person like you could learn a lot from me."

He continued driving down the Strip and then turned into the parking lot of the small and poorly lit Boardwalk Casino. "Castle Burgers," the sign out front announced, "Three For A dollar."

"Wait here," Billy said and he climbed out of the car, leaving the engine running. "I'll be just a minute. There's something I need to do in here." He paused as he looked down at the car then back at me. "Fielding?"

"Yeah?"
"Don't let anyone steal my car, okay?"

"Sure."

He started to walk toward the casino but turned back around again, "You like Gangsta' Rap music? Hip Hop? Prince?" He pointed at a pile of cassettes stuffed in the center console. "I've got everybody who's anybody. Coolio, Snoop Doggy Dogg, Ice Tea. They're all there."

"Great," I said.

Billy smiled then walked briskly toward the casino. He was wearing a long dress coat over a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt. From the back, he reminded me of an old-time cowboy as he entered the Boardwalk. There was a stiff-legged quality to his gait, his back looked straight and tense.

Once he left, I turned around and removed the blanket that lay on top of the snakes. There was a muffled drone of scales against plastic as something moved within. I made sure the tops were secure then replaced the blanket. Even with the engine on, the car felt cold. I looked around and figured it would be best if I just got out of there. The heaviness of my father's pistol in the rucksack was comforting and it made the making of decisions easier somehow, as if explanations were no longer an absolutely necessary thing. I reached over, turned off the ignition and the lights and looped the keys around the radio knob.

I had only made it down the Strip about a block when Billy pulled up in the car beside me. "Where you going?" he asked.

"I need to get back on the road," I said and kept walking.
He pulled off the Strip a head of me and waited in the dark. When I approached, he got out of the car and stood leaning against it, his arms folded. "What did I do to you?" he asked.

"You've helped me a lot. I appreciate it."

"And you show your appreciation by what?--Skipping out? Giving some nigger the chance to steal my car with the keys in it?"

I didn't answer and started to walk around him.

"Hold on, I got you something," he said. He took out of his pocket a red piece of paper that looked like a store receipt. "You have a five-dollar four teamer. My treat."

"I didn't ask for that."

"Don't act like an asshole, Fielding. Just take it. If it hits tomorrow, it's worth fifty bucks. That kind of money goes a long way in Mexico."

He handed me the ticket and I said thanks.

"You going to at least read it?" You should know what teams to be rooting for."

He moved behind me and pointed at the four match ups on the ticket. "The Cowboys giving seven's a steal. We should feel guilty for even thinking about betting them. Steelers getting three and the hook? Count the money, I say. And what's this, the Bills at home against who? The Dolphins? The Bills won't need the five, they'll win outright, mark my words. This last game, however, is a glass of warm milk before bed. The Colts versus the Patriots. Always take any team above Pop Warner that plays the Patriots. Period. That's all you need to know to make fifty dollars."

"Just these four wins and I get the money?"
"Simple, isn't it?"

"And that's it?"

"Pretty soon you'll be making so much money we'll need to hire you a body guard and an armored car for protection," he laughed.

An impulse to create space between Billy Stott and myself came over me. He kept saying we were alike and I knew it wasn't so. "I already have protection," I said and I immediately regretted having said it.

Billy looked at me and grinned. "Yeah?"

All the power I associated with having the gun dropped away. I stood there in the dark, far from the light of the big casinos and imagined that I could hear every small and unimportant sound uttered in the country, every word that meant nothing and had no repercussion. All of them perfectly good and unused by me.

"You packing?"

I shook my head.

"It's not like I'm going to turn you in or anything," Billy said. "I just want to see it."

"It's not a big deal."

"Hey, you don't see me making a big deal about it."

"It's just for my protection."

"I know."

"Okay."
Billy looked at his watch then shifted his weight from foot to foot. "I doubt you're going to Mexico at this hour, anyway. Right now, I've got an appointment to pick up more snakes and I could use the company. Why don't you hang around with me for a couple of hours? I'll take you down to the highway tomorrow and you can make a clean sweep of it. What do you say?"

"I should probably just keep going," I said.

"After we pick up the snakes, we could stop at Denny's. You gotta be hungry."

"I ate earlier; I've got money."

"I'm just trying to be a decent human being."

It was past midnight when we turned off Route 95. Up a narrow trail just after the National Forest sign, Billy opened an iron toll gate with a key he kept in the glove compartment. The track up into the high country was rutted and the underside of the small Honda bottomed out frequently. Tall Honey Mesquites grew over the path, shadowed in our headlights and crowning the saddle sprawled great bouquets of rice grass. There was a coolness in the air from the vegetation; there was a moisture that reminded me of the Atlantic Ocean. The wind passing through the grasses and trees sounded like waves breaking on the sand. I leaned out the window and looked up at the stars in the sky. They stood clear and unblinking in the high elevation. I rolled up the window and said, "It's cold up here."

Billy nodded. He had a full-length dress coat on over his tee-shirt and jeans. The fan from the car's heater whirred with more noise than air so he punched at the vent and the noise faltered and stopped for a moment. "I get maybe two minutes of peace in my
life every day," he said and, as if on cue, something inside the vent clicked and the whir came back. Instead of lashing out, he blew on his hands to warm them.

"There's something you should know about this Black Jack guy," Billy announced after the road leveled off. "The nigger lies. When I found him three years ago, I taught him everything he knows about catching rattlesnakes and believe me, that's the only reason he's alive today. He drinks a lot and his mind's going south on him. I can almost forgive him for forgetting about all the things I've done for him, because he's senile and all. But it's still galling. You work hard for a guy, get him back on his feet, and he rewards your kindness by slandering your good name."

"What's he said about you?"

"Stuff you wouldn't understand."

The thick trunks of conifers surrendered to the desert plants atop the mesa and the double ruts of the trail filled in with sand. The headlights illuminated Popeye-armed Joshua Trees in the night, their strangled shapes looking like tortured men. We came out on the crest of a steep hill and ran along its ridge, snaking down under the cornice, the path following the contours of the range.

"Why did the guy come up here in the first place?"

Billy ran his fingers through his thin hair as if thinking. "The guy was a bona fide prospector at one time. When I first met him, he showed me a gold nugget as big as a baby's fist and he claimed it was worth ten thousand dollars. I offered to take it to an assayer for him, you know, to get it appraised but he wouldn't have anything to do with it."
He'd rather die of hunger than part with that rock. Said it was for a rainy day. If the nigger's fucking name was Noah he'd still hang on to it."

"It's his choice to live out here?" I asked.

"It's not like I'm asking for his last dime or anything either," Billy continued. "I set him up with a job where the snakes practically come to him. He catches as many as he wants, I pay him, and even deliver his groceries to his motherfucking door. And what's he say? Thank you? He'd rather die first. I've paid my dues, man. I don't need this shit."

We topped a rise and a small light glowed in the distance below. Billy rode the brakes down the hill, past a new Eden of old cars. In disarray, they lay gape-mouthed in our headlights amid the tangle of arrow weed. Rusted and bleached, the heaved automobiles appeared like toppled tortoises left to die in the desert. Across from the abandoned hulls, a small light shone from a school bus. Billy beeped the horn twice and we pulled through the loose sand to park next to a sway-backed truck. We got out and walked toward the bus.

I heard the slam of a screen door and then the bellowing of an old man in pain. "You fuck head!" a deep voice yelled. "Billy Stott, you fuck head!" Something big whistled past my shoulder and smacked against the hood of the car before careening into the shadows.

"Stop it, Jack!" Billy shouted. He then yelped in pain and ducked behind the car next to me, holding his elbow at his side. Billy's eyes were large, his breath heaved in short bursts. "Get me your gun," he said.
"What's he doing?"

"We'll shoot the fucking nigger."

I crawled to the back of the car and peeked through the glass of the hatchback at a tall but thin silhouette standing in a lit doorway. "You fuck head, Stott!" the man yelled hoarsely. He then threw something at the car and I ducked. There was a bang and I saw a small, red can skitter out into the sand. "Stott!" the man yelled again.

There was silence before Billy finally shouted back at the man, "What?"

Another can bounced off the car with a bang close to where Billy's voice had come.

"What's wrong, Jack?" Billy shouted from his hiding place.

The silhouette screamed, "You don't know nothing, Stott!"

"What did I do?"

The two men paused and I watched the shadow in the threshold as he hefted a can, gauging its weight. "You told me you were a college man. Is that right?"

Again, there was silence. "Southern Illinois," Billy shouted back.

"You graduated from college but you can't read a fucking label? Is that what you're saying?" I maneuvered closer to the silhouette and from my angle under the car, I could see he was eyeing another shot. Winding up like an old-time pitcher, the man hurled the can at Billy but over shot. He knocked himself off balance and stumbled first forward and then backward into the light of the school bus. I was startled to discover that he was white.

"This old guy's white," I whispered back to Billy.
Cowering behind the car, Billy looked at me uncomprehending. "No shit."

The old man sat down on the bottom step leading out of the bus. He looked tall, his knees bending nearly into his chest. He had a sparse white beard that climbed high on his cheekbones and on his head he wore a tom up hat that might have one day been a Stetson. "What kind of milk did I tell you to get, Stott?" he asked, resigned.

Billy peeked over the hood of the car, expecting a trick. "You're lucky I don't come over there and kill you, old man." He watched for some kind of response and when none came, he stood up. "What's wrong with you, throwing shit at my car?"

Black Jack shook his head and held up a small, red can. "You told me you knew the difference between condensed and evaporated milk. You promised me you knew the difference."

"What are you moaning about? You forget I brought them here, no delivery charge. You get to stay up here on top of the world and I have to lug everything you need to your doorstep. And for this you're going to crucify me? You're lucky I don't cap your ass!"

"What the fuck's cap my ass?"

Billy Stott looked over at me and shook his head. "Com'ere, Fielding. You gotta meet this old, old coot." Swaggering, Stott climbed the rise of loose sand with the tails of his black duster folded like the wings of some kind of Jiminy Cricket. The darkness of the night thickened. The old man on the bus's stoop straightened to meet Stott. He dropped the red can of evaporated milk and it clanked hollow against the wood step.
"You must either be a relative or someone he just met, 'cause no one pals around with this illiterate idiot after getting to know him. I've known Billy-boy five years now and not a day goes by that I don't rue the moment he first set foot in my camp trying to sell me something that ran on electricity when it's plain as spit on a mirror that I don't have no electricity."

Stott and I stayed with Black Jack several hours and I fell asleep and when I woke up, Stott was gone. I was in the front of the bus and it was morning but dark with storm clouds. Black Jack was outside, sitting in a wood chair.

"Morning," he said.

I nodded. In my arms I held my bag, the hardness of the revolver cold against my chest. "Where's Stott?" I asked.

Black Jack scratched at his head a moment. "Had to go. He was going to say bye, but didn't want to wake you. He left you your bag."

"He just abandoned me here?"

"I've got a truck if you have to go some where," he said. "Stott told me about your plans for Mexico and we got to talking and in a lot a ways, being back here's as good as Mexico. You want, I can teach you to catch snakes. It's not a great life, but it beats running to some place that might be worse."

That morning Black Jack showed me around his camp. He showed me where he kept the snakes he caught for Stott and where he had made a latrine. Under the shade of the bus, he removed a steel plate from the sand and pointed at a cache of beer and soda.
"I got maybe two weeks of groceries. You could earn your keep by working around the camp. Maybe catching snakes."

I told him I could only stay a little while. He nodded as if he understood and said it was just until I got back on my feet. "This ain't a handout. You'll work for your room and board." He laughed when I reached out to shake his hand.

There was a pause after the lightning. Black Jack listened, his finger tapping on his knee. When it came, the thunder barreled hard, rolling out from the southern sky like the tearing of thick cloth. "Maybe five miles," he said. The dark clouds continued to build. "I had an older sister," Black Jack said. It was nearly four o'clock and we were sitting outside under the green awning of the school bus, Black Jack sipping a dark bottle of beer and me drinking a Coca-Cola with the wind gently tugging at our clothes. "She was a big woman," he said. "Elizabeth was hard working and took things head on, solving problems with strong hands and speaking her mind when she saw something off kilter. Before she died, she took on the school board and made them take the Tom Sawyer books off the shelves on account of the word nigger written in them." He looked at me and winked. "Course they put them right back where they belonged the minute she left the building, but still, the books were removed. That's something." Another splinter of lightning bridged the sky. We listened at the silence. Nine seconds. "Because of who my sister was, they took them down."
The wind picked up a piece of corrugated tin, lifted it on its edge and spun it, dancing the piece of metal across the camp, drunk and fast. The old man smiled, then asked if I had put a rock on the snake pit cover. I told him I had. He asked if it was a big rock. I looked in the direction of the pit that lay out of sight behind the bus and wondered.

"My sister Elizabeth never married," he continued. "She was nineteen years older than me and got saddled with most of the work that needed to get done. Not that she'd complain. But when I look back, it seems somehow wrong."

A drop of rain knocked on the aluminum skin of the bus.

"She never got married and as far as I know, never in her entire life had a boyfriend." He looked at me to judge my reaction. "She was hefty. A big girl. But she wasn't ugly. She had opportunities."

The rain started to come down. The air smelled of nitrogen and ozone and from the south, the thunder brayed angrily. I got up to check on the snakes. If their cover was blown off, the rain would drown them. Black Jack nodded, reading my intentions. Remaining in his chair he swung his boots in a semi-circle, creating a dike in the dry sand to keep the water at bay. He pried another bottle of Guinness from its cardboard quarters. I ducked my head into the cold rain and ran quickly. The sand was already heavy and my shoes hissed as I dodged the clumps of Cholla before the pit. Turning the bend, I saw that the plywood cover was still in place over the up-turned culvert and the anchor rock was big enough. I walked the last remaining yards to the pit, giving in to the
wetness, enjoying the feel of the rain as it slid down my arms, spilling off my fingertips onto the ground.

I leaned against the cement tank, the rough texture of its walls pressing into my palms. The coldness stripped a layer of toughness from my hands, leaving them raw and wonderfully sensitive. I could feel the wind curl around my fingers.

"They okay?" Black Jack shouted through the drum of rain. His voice carried as if from a long way away. I walked slowly back to the bus. The earthy smell of sage rose up, and as I walked, I felt a cold rivulet of water streak under my shirt, down the center of my back, sending the hair on my arms on end.

"The snakes, they okay?" he asked as I approached. I nodded. "No water getting in?" he asked. I told him they were dry. Using his thumb, he scratched his jaw, bristling the white beard. He listened to the rain. "Today would have been Elizabeth's birthday," he said matter-of-factly. "Where ever she was, she had to have lobster on her birthday. Can you imagine? We'd fly the damn things in from New England, use tools--wire cutters and pliers--to crack the shells. We'd suck out the pink and white meat." With a clap of his hands, he started to get up but relaxed before vertical, falling back into the chair. The rain petered out. A last gust of wind, as if afraid of being left behind, rushed through the camp, lifting a covey of tumbleweeds in the air and silhouetting them, black on grey, against the swollen clouds.

"My mother was sick, Elizabeth took care of both of us and in a way she became more of a mother to me than, well, my mother."
I smoothed my hair back and sat down in the lawn chair next to the old man. A cold shiver bristled me. My jeans stretched wet at the knees. "It's good you were close."

"Not so close. I had a problem following straight courses back then." He stared down at the small trough he had dug in the dirt. Sand clung where the soles of his boots gaped from their uppers. He appeared to tally events in his head.

"Back then," I said and smiled.

He smiled too and ran his tongue along the inside of his lower lip. "When you're young, you do things to see what will happen. Put things in motion just because you can." He asked me if I knew what he meant. I told him I did. "I'd kill for her now," he said earnestly, his hands gripping the wide arm rests of his chair.

He started again to tell me about his sister, Elizabeth. "She lived the last ten years of her life in the city, just down from the Union Plaza where she worked part-time in a shelter for women. Elizabeth was a good woman. Strong." From his lawn chair under the bus awning, he looked across the wet desert. A bank of cloud the color of wet newspapers slowly dissipated, a chance opening and the sun appeared momentarily before being covered again. The light remained in my eye as Black Jack continued.

"She had been standing on the sidewalk when a car left the road and hit her. Eighty-two years old." He nodded his head. "The driver of the car claimed she had walked in front of him. Said she appeared drunk. The insurance company demanded an autopsy and they got one."

"But she hadn't been drunk," I said.

Black Jack said, "No, she was sober."
"Good."

He waited a moment then said, "Remember she was a big woman. When they performed the autopsy, they found inside her, inside her womb, a stone baby. A fetus they said. A baby that had been calcified." He opened another bottle of beer and took a long drink.

"Yeah?"
He nodded. "A four-pound stone baby."

"Dead?"

"Made of stone. Been riding inside her who knows how long."

Under the awning stretched out precariously from the bus, and in the shadow of the setting sun, Black Jack sat; he slumped like a dusty heap of denim clothes under a hat in his Adirondack chair. He listed to his left, his drinking side with a hand resting on a sweating bottle of Guinness Stout. From under the brim of his hat he watched as I carried another snake into camp with the fireplace tongs.

"You better remember what I told you about getting bit," he shouted.

"I get bit; I die."

"You got it, buster." He lifted his beer in a mock salute. "You get bit; you die. Those are true words." The old man drank a mouthful, put the bottle down and checked with his hand to make sure it remained upright. He took his hat off and raked his fingers through a thick crop of white hair.
"Bring it over here," the old man said, sitting up. He pried the lid off the big Coleman cooler and submerged his arm in the cold water through the ice and brown bottles that lay suspended inside. Motioning with his other hand, Black Jack pointed to a five-gallon white bucket. "Put it in there," he said. I released the snake into the bucket and a brisk rattle thundered hollow, amplified by the tub walls. "Watch," he said. Withdrawing from the cold water, Black Jack briefly held his arm over his head, the water staining the edges of his shirt dark. The snake droned, its scales churning against the plastic. With his hand wet and his eyes open, Black Jack reached into the bucket and pulled the snake out. Neither the old man nor the rattlesnake moved and then, as if being grounded unexpectedly, they both leapt. The man released the snake and the snake struck at an empty space.

"Put him with the others," Black Jack said, pinning the reptile into the dust with his boot. I lifted it with the tongs and carried it out back. Behind a rusted, windowless Chevy truck, decayed and pocked with bullet holes, there was a section of cement well conduit, tipped up like a barrel, open to the sky, four-feet high and as much again around. I dropped the snake into the enclosure and listened to the dry, cicada-like rattle. Standing on a kicked-up mound of sand, I peered into the well, careful not to allow my fingers to stray over the lip. Inside the cement tank writhed a belly-full of snakes, dark and withdrawn, moving deliberately, breathing like a single creature. My last capture twisted atop the coiled mass, searching for escape. It licked at the circling wall and climbed halfway up before falling back into the heaving embrace of its neighbors. I figured I had fifty-feet of snakes, three days work, worth maybe forty bucks.
I pulled a warped sheet of plywood over the well then sat against the far side of
the concrete in the shade. The land sloped to the east; its uniformity broken by sun-
blackened stones and greasewood knolls. Between the cluster-root and shadscale I
searched for movement. The coppery light gave the illusion of watching the world
through kerosene. I smelled the tips of my fingers and inhaled the musky odor of snake.
As the sun set behind me, the blunt shadow of the tank pushed beyond my feet. The sky
to the east turned a milky shade of blue-black.

After a while, the old man began walking in the camp and I listened. From my
pocket of shadow, I heard him attempting to be quiet, trying to keep his feet close to the
ground as he approached. Just on the other side of the tank he called out, "Little
partner!" Not moving, I wondered how long he'd been drinking. A soft slur in his voice
rode the back of his breath. He stepped side to side, crunching sand, and then, without
warning, he toppled the plywood onto me. The snakes erupted. I felt their angry
vibrations through the cement. He grunted a wheeze. Hidden under the wood, I saw
Black Jack climb onto the lip of the cement tank and stand upright, his hands out at his
sides like a girl on the tarmac starting a drag race. His shadow stained the red-hued grit
and sand. I held my breath under the wood, waiting for the sun to finish going all the
way down.

He shouted once again for me and then rested his shadow hands at his sides. His
voice hushed low against the rattle of the snakes, "Be good," he said.

Black Jack opened two cans of soup and with a wood-handled ladle, he divided
what was in the pan into a pair of bowls. Extinguishing the flame, he took the crusted,
empty pan off the burner and strolled outside, away from the bus, where he kicked the pan half-full of dry sand and with the heel of his hand, kneaded the gravel, folding it against the sides of the aluminum pan, eroding the crescents of tomato. I carried my bowl of soup under the awning and placed it upon an overturned 55-gallon drum where I ate and watched the night condense on the eastern horizon.

In the growing dark, Black Jack sat nearby on a clot of used tires, still radiating warmth. He sat high on a bald tractor tire, worn smooth from countless miles, and with his big hands planted firmly on his knees, he spoke to me, projecting his voice out into the desert where everything was gray and cooling.

"My grandfather said that he once shot a buffalo. The kind that used to roam wild out here." His voice was loud, puffed out on Early Times and stout, and when I looked up, he appeared silhouetted against the cloudless sky, his hat tilted waggishly on his head, his legs straddling a behemoth of docile, sun-baked rubber. "They used the big-caliber guns back then; barrel as big around as a hamfoot's cock and an easy twenty pounds of stock and steel. The slug they used could have buckled the knees of an elephant. You couldn't fire a weapon like that without feeling it for days." Black Jack slapped at his shoulder with an open hand. There was a pause in his talk and I heard the thin whisper of metal on glass, the unscrewing of a bottle. "But, the old man was a liar," Black Jack continued. "He didn't shoot buffalo. I doubt he ever even saw one. There weren't any buffalo down here to shoot. Even in '60, when they scratched gold north in the Esmeralda, there weren't any buffalo here. What's one of them going to eat?" He drank from his bottle and after a while, he asked, "You want to sit up here on top of the
world?" I shook my head. The old man wiped his mouth and beard with the back of his hand. "Suit yourself," he said. A misshapen moon began rising to our left; its hollow light heralding its presence even before we saw it. Not quite full, it seemed wounded and sickly. I hugged myself, feeling the chill of the desert settle in. The black tire I sat on still felt warm from the sun, but the air had cooled and I could feel goose bumps on my arms. As if bothered by the silence or my lack of sentiment, Black Jack continued on about the buffalo and their habits. He talked about how hunters, both white and red, rim-rocked the animals over precipices, whooping and hollering as they drove the beasts and their momentum off bluffs and into the empty air. "But, I'll tell you what killed more buffalo than man ever dreamed of," Black Jack went on to say, "And that's lightning. Plain, every-day lightning. For eons, lightning's been striking buffalo. Standing five foot at the point of the horn, those fucking prairie cows never stood a chance. One bolt, and a dozen would be lying on their sides, eyes rolled in their skulls, their tongues smoking. And talk about thunder, can you imagine a hundred-thousand animals stampeding? After a good storm, you'd smell the carnage 'til Christmas. What happened to buffaloes was pretty much inevitable. Man might have sped up the process, but it wasn't much of a feat."

Above us, the moon floated in the pitch, warped in the sky. Its bleached light reflected off the sand and rock.

Before dawn, when a stillness clung over all the things I would need to touch and pack, I sat up on my mattress, listening. A dusty, silvery light came through the rips in the aluminum foil on the windows. In the back, Black Jack gulped air like a fish. I
waited for my eyes to acclimate and then began moving around in the bus, stowing my
day's provisions in a dirty-green rucksack, duct-taping tabs of linoleum to my shins and
filling my pockets with gum and jawbreakers. I picked up the bent fireplace tongs,
carried them across my shoulder and quietly sidled down the steps and out the yellow
bus.

The air felt cool. Thin, salmon filets of cloud were layered on the eastern horizon
and behind me Angel Peak caught the first pink-born rays of sunlight. Walking across
the gray-colored camp, I looked in on the snakes, lifting their plywood cover. They had
congealed in the bottom of the dry tank; their dusty, limbless bodies wrapped tight
against the night's cold. I prodded them with the tongs and a single rattle sputtered. I
replaced the cover. Brushing back clumps of white horsenettle, I walked east into the
sun and down toward the Lucky Strike lead mine and its runoff. The nettle stalks and
mauve flowers hissed against my linoleum-armored pant legs. Mourning doves cooed.
Set before the expanding sunrise, the land appeared to lose its strength, a horizontal
lethargy spread north and south. The independent pinnacles of the mountains relaxed,
reclining into broad, red-hued benches of rock. As I peered into crevices, I stirred the
leaves and empty seed casings with the fireplace tongs. Already, with the sun only just
crowning, the air was warming and the birds grew still.

Up on a spine of sandstone, I chewed gum and pried clumps of brittlebush loose,
sweeping the tongs under the bluish-green foliage, listening for an abrupt rattle. Later, a
little lower in the ravine, I came across a small rattler coiled quietly in the sun. I
watched as its blue, vein-smooth tongue quivered, darting quick as flint, tasting the
morning air. Its head lay flat, an arrowhead, serene in the sun. From my rucksack, I pulled out a burlap coffee bag, a product of Kenya, and propped it open in the branches of a creosote bush, being sure the bottom of the bag dragged on the ground. The snake appeared oblivious. I walked up to the reptile and carefully pinned it with the fireplace tongs just behind its muscled head. As if shocked by the black iron, it convulsed, coiling its body back around, savagely rattling. Holding the tool firmly, I leaned over the creosote bush and shook the snake loose into the waiting bag. The reptile boiled with fury.

I caught two more further down in the wash, one as thick around as my arm and twice as long. The sun climbed higher and I settled down upon a shadowed ledge on the east side of the gulch, resting my back against the cool rock. I popped open a Coke, drank it and chucked the empty can into the rocks. Overhead, a raven wheeled north, heading toward the strong thermals above the Sheep Range.

It was just before noon when I discovered the pit outside the abandoned shacks of the Lucky Strike Mine. Near a dune of tailings, a dark, dry crack opened below an outcropping of stone. Leaning against the tongs, I squatted in front of the fissure and saw, on a sandy shelf an arms-length down, three rattlesnakes, coiled like giant range burners. Like an ancient living thing, the penetrating odor of many more snakes eased from the crevice.

Black Jack steered the truck over the dirt road into town. I sat next to him in the cab and watched a wedge of dark cloud move imperceptibly across the southern horizon, raining on a landscape perhaps a hundred miles away. Outside, the air felt dry and hot.
"You know how old I am?" Black Jack asked.

I watched his big hands on the steering wheel and shrugged. He wore silver bracelets on his thin wrists. His knuckles were thick and his fingernails broad and horny, almost round.

"You believe I'm 72?"

I shook my head. He smiled, tipped back his dog-chewed cowboy hat and laughed. "I got all my own teeth, a tree full of hair and enough smarts not to listen to the government talk. And I'll tell you something, little partner. Nobody knows your business better than you. No priest, no professor, no boss, and especially no highfalutin government man. You remember that, and you'll live okay." From his shirt pocket, he took out a package of gum and offered me a stick. Wrapped in silver paper, the gum was black and tasted like licorice. The old man steered the big truck like a boat. Turning his attention back to me, he asked, "You doing okay?" Watching the cool rain smudge the land, I thought about it a moment. "Yes," I said.

"I figured you were."

Almost reluctantly, the truck left the dirt, crossed the clanging cattle gate and heaved up onto the fresh black tar of the town road. The tires hissed on the asphalt.

Another twenty minutes and we drove past the Callville library and pulled onto Center Street that ran the length of town. Weathered store fronts lined either side of the narrow road. The only polished spot of new color observed was a coin-operated laundry mat, its large, ocean-blue sign proclaiming "Industrial-Size Driers—50 Cent Loads."
Black Jack slowed the truck as an old woman wearing a plastic head scarf readied to cross the street in front of us. From the sidewalk, the woman stared into our truck and set her jaw, determined to stop us by sheer will. Braking slowly, Black Jack motioned for the woman to cross but she stood planted, clutching a snap purse to her chest. Without warning, Black Jack honked the horn and the old woman jumped. As we passed her, safely back on the sidewalk, Black Jack tipped his hat and blew her an exaggerated kiss.

"Our business ain't nobody else's business. Are we straight on that?" I nodded and he looked at me hard, measuring my insides. "Good," he said. He pulled the truck into a diagonal parking space in front of the Spic & Span Diner.

Sitting in a booth, Black Jack leaned over the Formica-topped table between us, elbows in close at his sides, and asked again about the snake pit. "It's got sand in it?"

"Think so."

"Rock's better," he said, and then, as if talking to himself, continued, "Maybe it's just blown sand, and rock on the bottom. Holes fill up with sand natural here. You want sand? Just dig a hole and wait." He looked around and motioned for the waitress. The diner was small, three booths against the wall, a couple of tables and a counter with a dozen or so stools. High above the counter was a menu, of which half was an emblazoned Coca-Cola banner. A pair of slot machines stood in a far corner with two stools bolted before them to the floor. Across the small room, next to a door leading to the bathrooms, was a juke box, looking like a huge plastic and chrome beehive. Our waitress nodded as she folded the newspaper she'd been reading, tucking it behind the
ketchup and steak sauce in a rack, ready with a menu. About fifty, the woman wore a pink-striped apron over a pair of faded jeans and a blue cotton blouse. On her way over to our table, she poked her head into a rectangular opening in the wall, announcing our presence, perhaps waking the cook from his afternoon siesta.

"Hello, Jack," she said, smiling. She wore her dark hair piled high; wisps around the temples had pulled loose from bobby pins and floated against her neck, softening her features, making her look carefree.

"Howdy, Terry. You're the prettiest thing I've seen all day."

"It means a lot coming from a hermit like you, Jack" she said, laughing. Her bright voice sounded like a full sack of pennies spilling open. She filled his coffee cup. Putting her hand on my shoulder, she asked what we'd like, adding that the tuna fish was fresh. Black Jack ordered a slice of rhubarb pie for himself and a plate of french fries for me.

"How about I sneak a little pot roast on the boy's plate? Maybe he hasn't given up on good nutrition?" She reached over and plucked Black Jack's sorry hat off his head and hung it from a coat hook on the booth.

Black Jack snorted, smoothing back his white hair. "Two orders of pot roast with mashed potatoes and rice. If you think that'll make men of us."

"I wouldn't wish that on my worst enemy," Terry said with a grin. She walked over to the opening in the wall, handed our order to a man and sat down at the counter, taking up the newspaper she had folded, and began to read again.
Satisfied she wasn't listening, Black Jack joked about how when he was younger, he was once married to a woman like Terry. "There's nothing more satisfying than getting divorced from the smartest goddamn woman in the world," he whispered. From his jacket pocket, he took out a flask of bourbon, broke the seal, and poured a shot into his coffee. "I have about as much use for a good woman as I do a whole week of Mondays. But give me a bad woman, and I'll find a use or two." He laughed and he put his coffee cup down to keep it from spilling. "Yes, sir. I could still find a use or two for a bad one."

When the food was ready, Terry carried the platters over on a tray and placed them down in front of us. She refilled Black Jack's coffee cup and gave me a tall glass of milk. "I had some peas put on the plate so you wouldn't get scurvy or anything," she said. Looking at me, she asked, "You like peas, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said.

She looked me up and down and nodded. "You're a polite boy. No relation to this old codger. Where did you come from?" she asked.

"He's my son Karl's boy," Black Jack said evenly, striking into the conversation. "The boy's mother flew East and thought it might be nice if he got a chance to visit with the black sheep of the family."

Terry nodded. "Have you got a name, son?" she asked.

"Fielding," I said.

"Fielding," she said. "You having a good time with your grandpa?"
"Goddamn it, Terry. Pull a chair and join us if you're so full of questions. Fielding and I would be honored."

Holding the empty tray at her side, Terry said, "I'm just making conversation. Only wanted to get to know him, is all. It's not everyday that someone as handsome as your grandson comes into my place." She smiled and knelt next to me. "When you're done with your supper, Fielding, I got a big piece of pie waiting for you with ice cream. You just give me the word."

Giving up on conversation, we ate our pot-roast dinners. Black Jack chewed his beef thoroughly. Like a train's furnace making noise, he forked new pieces of meat into his mouth before swallowing the old. I watched his white beard bob and his cheeks move in and out as he attempted to suck loose the meat stuck between his teeth.

"Get to it, little partner," he said, his mouth full, "we've got a list-full of things to do."

Attacking my food, I ate fast, but I wasn't any match for the old man. He pushed his empty plate away before I was half-way through. Finally finishing, Black Jack offered me a stick of the black, licorice-tasting gum and paid Terry for the food with crumpled, one-dollar bills. He gave her some gum too, and they both talked about the weather and how rain was supposed to again be coming. Terry put two pieces of rhubarb pie in a cardboard box. "There's plenty for both of you." Before leaving, Black Jack asked if he could borrow some ice. "It's not for me, you understand. Hell, I wouldn't know it if the bus caught fire. But Fielding, I think the heat bothers him, not that he'd complain."
Terry showed us the ice machine and we filled two large, burlap coffee bags full and packed them in the back of the truck. The sun was swinging to our left as we pulled out onto Callville's quiet streets and drove north toward the edge of town, down over the cattle guard and onto the dirt road that led to camp. With his bottle of bourbon clamped between his thighs, Black Jack unscrewed the top and told me how he used to sell chickens to the Spic & Span Diner to pay the electric bill. "John Vincent, Terry's father, ran the place. That was back when Callville was a real town with a movie theater, a two-story school and permanent fire station. Eisenhower lived in the White House."

Black Jack down-shifted the truck to climb a hill overlooking a flat-bottomed wash. A rabbit scurried across the dust; its ears looked red and translucent in front of the sun.

"I enjoyed the town back then," he said as we coasted down the leeward side of the hill. "Me and my wife, we had a place on Oak Knoll and I raised chickens which Mr. Vincent bought. We had a front porch, a garden and a black dog named Tosaw—that's Paiute for bear, you know. He was a big dog and he ran me out of the chicken business in a single night." The old man pushed back his cowboy hat and shook his head. "Tosaw was a damn too curious for his own good. It was late one August, and a skunk was making off with my pouls. I'd set traps for it, but skunks are a shade smarter than a piece of spring and steel and for two nights, the animal sprung the traps, taking a chicken for its trouble each time. Finally, I put Tosaw out on the porch and told him to earn his keep."
The truck slowed down and Black Jack negotiated a narrow bridge that spanned a ten-foot drop. Safely across, he gunned the engine back up to speed and drank from his bottle.

"Three in the morning, Tosaw starts barking and I leap from my bed, grab the over-under, and run outside with the back door of my long-johns flapping in the wind. As I approach the hen house, I'm holding the shotgun at the ready, keeping low to the ground, crouched over, prepared for anything." Black Jack paused, then spoke slow. "I was going to blow the skunk off the planet. I was ready for just about anything, anything but Tosaw putting his fucking cold nose up the back flap of my long-johns and sniffing my ass! I jumped three feet in the air. Shot both barrels straight through the chicken coop, ripping the door off its hinges and killing every chicken I had."

Pulling into the oily, barren spot adjacent to the bus, Black Jack turned the key off and the truck's engine coughed a moment before dying. He climbed down out of the cab, tucking his bottle into a pocket. "You can't hold onto anything forever, little partner," he said as he walked unsteadily toward the bus. "Tosaw died in a fire. I guess some dogs are luckier than others. You'd think if a person could escape a fire, a dog sure could, but I never saw him again." I watched Black Jack enter the bus. From under the truck's front seat, I retrieved the cardboard box of rhubarb pie. It tasted cold and tart and I shoveled the first and then the second piece into my mouth, crumbs flaking against my shirt. My jaw tired and my eyes teared as I chewed, trying to swallow the thick pie. Finally down, I wiped my mouth with the side of my arm and knocked the crumbs off me. In the sand at the side of the road, I buried the cardboard. The world was quiet as
the heat of the day rose from the packed earth. Although dusk was still several hours away, the light already fell flat, exhausted and resigned. Looking down into the valley, I saw darkness massing, rain clouds building. On the slopes above the bus, the land looked purple and bruised. Black Jack reappeared with a coil of clothes’ line over his shoulder and in his hand he held his bottle out, balancing against the weight of the dirty rope. The embattled sun glinted off his bracelets. "You bring that tin barrel over here, and I'll help you get it onto the truck," he said. He leaned over the sidewall of the pickup and put his thin hand on one of the wet burlap sacks of ice. "We still got daylight and I'm planning on making the most of it."

Taking the gypsum road, he drove the truck down the broken slope toward the bottom of the basin, thick with chalk. To the west, the country reared up in a single, hard ledge, a mute reminder of how the landscape appeared before the blades and hammers assailed it. Cold shadow hung under the crag, draped in tailings. Black Jack's beard writhed as his jaw clenched. "Me and the dog were up once north of Callville, walking along the Eureka tracks when he struck out for a trot. Tosaw used to love to run and bark. He was tearing up clumps of grass with his big, oversized paws, all the while, keeping an eye on me, making sure I didn't get lost." He drank again then clamped the bottle between his thighs. "We heard the rattle at the same time and both of us looked up."

Taking his eyes off the road, he watched me a moment before continuing. "I'd take it back now if I could, but at that moment I was curious. Tosaw had killed rattlers before, he had laid their bodies on the back porch, but I had never actually seen him do the killing, so I urged him on. I climbed up the cinder crest next to where Tosaw stood. Just
out of reach, a three-foot rattler lay coiled in the grass, looking scrubbed it was so bright. The snake's tail buzzed alarm. The noise of the rattler's agitation lifted up, swinging slowly back and forth, keeping us at bay. My shoulders tightened and I saw the hair on the back of Tosaw's neck stand straight, his ears lock. 'Go on, boy,' I whispered to the dog. The snake swayed and Tosaw began barking, the sound of his teeth clicking like electricity." Letting go of the steering wheel, Black Jack pinched his fingers and thumb together to look like a snake's head. "There's mathematics involved," he said, stabbing at the air with his hand. "A snake can't jump worth shit." He laughed then stretched his snake-demonstrating hand behind me, laying it on the back of the benchseat almost against my neck. "You see, it's not supposed to be able to strike any further than its body length. If a snake's three feet long, that's how far away you're supposed to stand." The truck slowed down at a crossing of two dirt roads and the barrel in the back rocked, creaking against the steel of the truck bed. Although there was no stop sign, nor any other sign to be seen, Black Jack set the parking brake in the middle of the road. "When that snake struck at Tosaw," he continued, "it looked to be the dog backed up on its hind legs, just ahead of the snake, making it miss. After that, the two animals locked on each other. Tosaw circled and the snake reared higher, its head level and serious. I called for the dog to come to me and clapped my hands, but he continued to circle the snake, goading it. Again, the snake struck and missed, but this time Tosaw lunged at the extended rattler, catching it in its jaws halfway between head and tail. Immediately, Tosaw began shaking his head, ears flapping, the snake whipping side to side with such fury that it bust apart." Black Jack looked out the windshield after he finished speaking.
watching the sharp lines of the excavation in the region. All the while, he clamped between his legs his flat-sided bottle of bourbon. On the seat behind me, I felt his hand brush up against the hair on the back of my neck. His arm stopped moving and he didn't say anything for a while. He just sat there watching the clouds build up in the South.

I scooted up on the seat as if my leg had fallen asleep, rubbing my calf with my hands. "Was the dog okay?" I asked.

The old man sat a moment then removed his arm from along the top of the seat and unscrewed his bourbon. He took a long drink and the hot, thin smell of the liquor filled the truck. "Eventually he was," he said. "I never saw it happen, but the snake had bitten him on the boney part of the muzzle." Black Jack tucked the bottle back between his legs and put the truck in drive, the barrel banging hard against the tailgate. Pumping the gas and swearing at the knocked-tooth transmission, he brought the truck up to thirty miles-per-hour and at the next dirt-road intersection, he swung a left and headed west up toward the Lucky Strike. He started to talk again and his words fell carefully as if he expected them to be examined. "We were about three miles from home and Tosaw trotted, waiting only for me to catch up when I lagged. Twice, he scared up deer along the tracks, but he wasn't interested in anything but the beeline he was following. When we got up to the house, me wheezing—feeling close to death—he headed straight for the laundry basket in the kitchen where he used to sleep. He just lay in his basket, his breathing rasping and slow, his legs quivering as if eager to get up but unable. I tried to feed him scraps of chicken from the ice box but he wasn't interested, and as far as I know, he didn't eat any of his food for the next two days. Where the snake bit him, there
was a swelling about his muzzle, but it was his eyes that took the brunt of it. They swelled shut and bloated, making me think he would likely go blind or worse. After a day or two, I placed a pan of cool roast drippings on the linoleum next to his basket and he struggled out and lapped at it. Finished with the drippings, he went back to his basket and laid down. Later that afternoon, he pulled himself out, stiff-legged onto the porch where he stayed until it got dark. The next day he was back to normal."

The wind blew up from the south, bending the Indian rice grass to the ground, dusting the truck's windshield with talc. A blue-grey bank of clouds hung motionless in the southern sky, as if waiting on the sun to leave before lunkering in. Black Jack rolled up his window against the wind and re-secured the beaten-up hat on his head. "I think we got time," he said. "The hard rain won't come for another hour or two." He scratched at his jaw as he drove, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to the south. The gullied road climbed back west, up the slope toward the bench that rode the shoulders of Angel Peak, winding itself into a pale chalk line against the burnt earth and rock.

A vein of numbness traveled through my body as Black Jack pulled the truck up the rough grade in front of the Lucky Strike Lead Mine. A gateless cement post stood alone, marking the entrance. In the tarbush and creosote, a bleached no trespassing sign lay reclined, its lettering more guess than fact. The dust we unloosened billowed up, blocking our way a moment before dispersing into the sky. Black Jack eased the truck past the dilapidated buildings and rusted machinery. What little glass remaining in the blank windows was caked with dirt. On a porch corner, under a sagging eave, dark, skeletalized tumbleweeds rocked uneasily in the wind.
"Where is it?" Black Jack asked. I pointed up past a slumped tin shed surrounded by scattered lumber. "Over there," I said. The loose gravel crunched under our tires as we neared the shadowed maw in the rocks. The opening looked smaller than I had remembered and as we approached, I expected to see knots of snakes making their escape, forewarned of our intentions by the creaking of the empty oil drum in the back of the truck.

Parking near the opening, Black Jack got out. He tucked his bottle into a jacket pocket and retrieved an aluminum flashlight from inside the cab. Without waiting for me, he walked with big strides up the gentle grade of tailings and stopped only when he was about five feet from the pit. He stood absolutely still, as if listening to something happening far in the distance. The gusting wind tugged at his clothes and pulled loose a lock of white hair from under his hat, but he didn't otherwise move. After a while, he pointed the flashlight into the dark opening and stepped closer, slow and specific. He crouched at the dry gash in the rock and shone his light up and across the lip and ceiling, taking his time as he studied it out. I walked up, careful not to startle him. Like an opening in a stone curtain, the hole in the rock spread wide at the base but at waist-level, closed to a narrow fissure; further up, beyond reach, it petered out into a crack no wider than a hand. The rust-hued threshold of stone appeared worn smooth, as if from running water. Beyond this, the bottom of the pit dropped down into a natural basin, looking twice as deep as a bathtub and wide enough to hide a fortune in gold or a wanted desperado from a posse. "You see that one?" Black Jack asked as I stood next to him. He plied the yellowed circle of light along the ledge just inside the pit. A snake lay
curled against itself, it's head motionless and unaware. "He's a good four-feet long if he's an inch." Black Jack said. He turned the flashlight off and the snake, nestled in the heart of the rock, became another indistinct silhouette, a shadow that could have been anything if you didn't already know what it was. Handing me the flashlight, the old man picked up a fist-sized rock of white gypsum and tossed it into the darkness, like a shout in the night. Hitting bottom almost instantly, the rock brought only silence. We waited, listening for the rattling, but it didn't come. Black Jack placed his hands above the opening and leaned against the rock, his eyes closed. "You can smell them, can't you?" he asked. Even in the resolute wind, the heavy odor, reminiscent of the fresh cut rinds of watermelon, escaped from the pit, "Yes," I said and he nodded.

We went back to the truck and dragged the empty 55-gallon oil drum to the opening in the rocks, digging it down into the loose sand to keep it from tipping. Studying the inside of the pit again with the flashlight, Black Jack said, "Except for that big one, the others must be down below. Probably, they can feel the rain coming and are moving." He spit into the pit then straightened his back and stretched. He took a long pull from his bourbon and started to fit the bottle back into his pocket but thought better of it and offered me a drink. I looked at the bottle a moment before taking it. He smiled and nodded then headed for the truck. When the old man turned, I wiped the bottle's mouth with the cuff of my shirt and took a drink. The warm liquor scalded the back of my throat, and when I tried to swallow, my chest seized then heaved the bourbon up, like venom, wracking me double. Entertained, Black Jack shouted, "Mind the bottle." I held the bourbon in the air to show it was unhurt as I tried to catch my breath. After a
moment, the old man again stood beside me. He had a wet burlap sack of ice slung across his shoulder like laundry. The cold water stained his shirt dark and rivulets ran off his boney elbows. Kneeling down, he eased the bag from his shoulder onto the sand where it slumped with the thin rustle of shifting ice. Gusts of wind snapped at the cuffs of his trousers. "Give me a hand," he said. I returned to him his bottle then propped the bag up, untying the wet knot. Free of my hands, the piece of twine scuttled across the rocks. We poured the ice and slush into the darkness of the pit and a din of angry rattling started up and then died. No motion showed down through the ice. The old man walked back to the truck and yanked loose the second bag, heaving it up onto his already wet shoulder. Pausing a moment to push back hair that had fallen out from under his hat and into his eyes, he shifted his weight then trudged up the slope, dropping the sodden bag at my feet. We poured the second bag's contents onto the first and stood quietly, admiring our work with the flashlight, watching the translucent cubes reflect the yellow light onto the walls of the pit.

"Give it a minute, then we'll go in," Black Jack said.

The wind eddied across the ice, melting and distorting it. Following the old man back behind the truck, pocketed in the lee of the weather, I pulled on a moldered, oversized orange jumpsuit that zippered up the front, crotch to sternum. Black Jack balled up single sheets of newspaper from the cab and stuffed them like eggs, one at a time, down through my sleeves until I looked thick-armed and muscled. He used duct tape to fashion gauntlets and secured heavy-duty leather gloves to my hands. Taking my arm at the elbow, he escorted me up the tailings to the snake den. He looped the
clothesline around my chest, hitching it twice and tying it off between my shoulder blades. With twitching fingers, he pulled the leader high around an outcropping of stone above the opening. The nylon rope bit into my armpits. Black Jack leaned against me, his breath lapping against my neck and he said, "Scoop them up. Make us rich."

Carried on the wind, the first rain drops came down while I was on my knees, and although the heavy storm cloud was still far to the south, the drops were large and they pushed deep into the sand where they fell. I smelled sour bourbon on my breath and my stomach twisted like a thing alive and separate from myself. The wind bawled in my ears as Black Jack tied the rope taut, allowing me with my knees on the lip of the pit, to lean into the opening and stretch parallel over the ice. Kneeling behind me, Black Jack held onto my calves just below the knees, anchoring me to the rock. With his ballast, I leaned further into the pit. The stench of rattlesnake under the dark crown of rock was thick and palpable and clung to the wetness of the inside of my mouth. I held my breath, imagining a hundred pair of dry, unblinking eyes on me. The nylon rope bit against my chest as I pushed into the cavern. Searching the back of the pit, I re-discovered the four-footer we had spied earlier, its body now wound tightly against the rock in a position that kept it just above the wet and cold. I released my breath and the diamondback raised its fist-like head the smallest of degrees, tasting the air.

"I see one," I said.

Black Jack's hands climbed the back of my legs, grasping my thighs. He yelled above the noise of the wind, "He can't hurt you."
The air grew hot under the mountain of rock. I scooped up a handful of the dwindling ice and threw it at the snake, hitting the reptile squarely. Scales ground against scales as the rattler tightened its coils, burrowing into itself, attempting to become smaller. Trusting the entirety of my weight to the rope, I reached out and up and grabbed a hold of the snake's girth, dragging it down through the slush and ice. The animal felt muscled in my hand. Thick and torpid, the rattlesnake constricted around my wrist.

"Got him," I shouted.

Black Jack slid his hands down my calves. "Soon as I let go, throw it out," he instructed. I pried the snake off my arm with the butt-end of the flashlight, splashing the light against the ceiling. When the old man released my legs, cool air from the storm washed across my body, accompanied by the wet smell of sage and ozone. The snake struggled against my glove. I swung the rattlesnake behind me, underhand, watching it over my shoulder as it unwound and spread wide against the dark storm clouds, free of my hand. Black Jack retrieved the snake with the fireplace tongs and deposited it in the barrel.

Almost at once, I felt the old man's grip back on my legs, his weight pushing me against the rock and dust. "Keep searching," he said. I ran my arms down into the ice and water and raked the bottom of the pit with my gloves, probing the hidden pockets and corners. The wind picked up and a gust of hot air swirled past my shoulders, entering the enclosure with a moan. "Dig deeper," Black Jack urged. His hands climbed the back of my thighs as I leaned into the dark. "They're in there," he said. Like
grapeshot, another wave of rain came down from the unbroken clouds. Large drops spat cold on my naked back where my shirt had ridden loose of my pants. On the sand and rock, my trousers were soaked through at the knees. The rain swept down, diagonally, howling.

Working the flashlight along a narrow ledge, I searched for more rattlesnakes but found none. The rock and stone enveloping me began to sweat in the downpour. Caught half in-half out, I imagined that I could feel the internal tension and weight of the mountain swelling, the horrific shearing of stone slabs inside the elevation above me, an imminent collapse of the cavern.

"There's nothing in here," I shouted.

Black Jack climbed onto my back, his bracelets grazing cold my wet skin as he reached for the collar of the jumpsuit. His full weight propelled me further into the rocks. The rain beat down in a roar. "Get off me!" I shouted. My newspaper-muscled arms were splayed against the walls of the pit. The old man's voice rose quick and accusing above the storm, "You're not looking," he said. His hands pushed down on my shoulders. His legs straddled my back, his pelvis pinning me down as he thrust his head along side mine in the dark. An inward stab of vulnerability entered me. I felt the change in his pocket as he ground his hips. His shabby hat came off suddenly and his hair spilled out across my face, whipped by the wind, wet by the rain. I smelled tobacco and the suggestion of urine. "Get off me!" I shouted. The smooth rock shuddered from the noise. With our combined weight, the rope cut deep into my flesh. Terrified, I fought against the obscene rhythm created by the old man as his hands pawed my
shoulders and neck, his boney fingers slithering across my torso, tracing the line of the jumpsuit's brass zipper.

Falling forward, I swung my muddy hand at Black Jack, catching him awkwardly and weakly in the soft part of his neck, interrupting his attention. He coughed raggedly and spat hot saliva on my neck. After a moment, he worked his fingers down my arm, following the crook of my elbow to the wrist. From my closed hand, he wrenched loose the flashlight and illuminated the walls of the cavern, pausing the shaky light over the shadows. On the floor, all that remained of the ice was a muddy puddle. Black Jack stopped moving and I felt the heat of his body on top of me, his sour breath hissing in and out.

"Shit," he whispered.

"Get off me," I said.

As if just made aware he was laying on me, he laughed. He hesitated, then moved, saying, "Sure, little partner," and he climbed off me, the weight of his hand trailing the contour of my back and ass. Untying the rope, he tried to help me out but I refused his hand. Pulling myself up from the pit, I stood in the downpour with my back against the rock, watching him. The stain of mud on his face dissolved in the rain. His long white hair lay plastered to the sides of his head. He smoothed down his clothing before stooping toward the mouth of the pit to retrieve his hat. He held it tight against the wind as he looked it over, slapping at the dirt and sand with his hand. He positioned it on his head with care, then motioned to me and smiled. "A sad story, all this trouble for but one old snake," he said, shaking his head.
"Don't touch me," I shouted.

He looked sideways at me and shook his head. "What's in your bonnet, little partner?"

"Don’t come near me," I shouted.

Black Jack laughed. "Com'ere, boy," he said.

"Stay away!"

He shook his head slowly. "No one's hurting you."

"I'm leaving," I told him. "You try to follow me and I'll kill you."

After the hospital, Isabella sat beside me in the car on the way to her job in Arlington. It was Saturday and the weather was nice. She told me she worked six days a week to make ends meet and the money her father earned was good, but she wanted to save her own money to go to college some day. We didn't talk about her brother's comment; we pretended that it had never been said. "One day," she explained, "I came home and all the furniture and clothes in Manny's room were gone. He had taken everything off the shelves. The small bed was gone and so was the desk with its chair and everything else that could be carried away. In the hall there were marks on the walls where the furniture had been wrestled around corners and down the stairs. I had thought that he had run away, but when I looked out the backdoor, Manny was in the yard, standing beside his bed and clothes and books and desk. He even had his bicycle from the garage. Everything was piled together on the grass and he smiled up at me."
“Sounds ominous,” I said.

She nodded. “It was bizarre. He had placed everything he owned in the world on the grass in the back yard and he stood next to the pile, looking up at me. I can still see his face and the satisfied look that had come over him.”

“How old was he?”

“Eleven maybe.”

“Just a couple years ago?”

She nodded. “He had matches and was trying to light the pile on fire. I ran outside and, of course, took the matches away from him. A small fire burned but I stepped on it and put it out. Around the edge of the pile I could see places where he had set earlier fires that had not caught.” She shook her head and I watched her face as she recreated the events in her mind. Isabella balled her hands together in her lap. “I yelled at him and even hit him. I was so angry I wanted to hurt him, to teach him not to do a thing like that ever again.”

“Did he say why he did it?”

“No. He said he didn’t know. He just shrugged and even when I had hit him, he did not seem to care. I really hit him, Fielding. He was only eleven and I hit him hard.”

“You were upset.” She began to cry, softly at first and then harder. I pulled the car over and put my arm around her. “He was putting himself in danger and you love him,” I said. “Getting angry is natural.”

“But not hitting. Not like that.”
I comforted her and she placed her head on my chest and held my hand against her own. Cars roared past. I wiped away the tears on her cheek with my finger and felt her warm, humid breath. "It's okay," I said.

We sat together in the car perhaps ten minutes and Isabella said she didn't want to go to work today, that she had sick days coming and would use one. "Can I make you lunch?" she asked and I thought that would be nice and told her so. "You don't have to go to class?" I reminded her it was Saturday. She smiled and we drove to her apartment.

We climbed up the stairs and she used her key to open the front door. Inside, there was a coolness in the room; the drapes over the windows were still closed and what light that did slant in through the sides was muted. "Make yourself at home," she said. I looked about at the furniture and the photographs on the walls. They were black and white seascapes. Strong photographs done in high contrast. There was nothing on the rug where Manny had lain to suggest anything out of the normal had ever occurred. She took my coat and hung it on a hook behind the door. "I will make you chicken from my country," she said. "It has potatoes and sauce. You will see, it will be the best that you have ever had."

I laughed. "I'm sure it will be."

"You want some music?" she asked.

"It won't disturb anyone?"

She looked puzzled. "Who?"

"I don't know, your father?"

She smiled. "He is not due back for a week. What do you want to hear?"
“What was it you were playing the other day? When you were dancing on the sidewalk?”

Isabella covered her face. “You saw me?”

“I thought you were beautiful. You’re a wonderful dancer.”

“I am so embarrassed.”

“Don’t be.”

“But I am!”

We laughed and I told her I would like to hear whoever it was she was playing that day. She said she didn’t remember. In the stereo, she found a tape and it was from someone named Van Morrison. “Do you know him?” she asked.

I shook my head.

She smiled and said, “You should.” She turned the stereo on and lowered the volume. “Sit down,” she said, gesturing at the divan. “I think you will like this. His words tell a story for me. I also like the way he sounds, his voice adds something that is not in the words. A lot of what I feel is not found in the meaning of words.”

I told her I knew what she meant. “I think there’s meaning in places other than words. You listen to a song and it reminds you of a time when you were happy or sad or when your friends were close by. The words in the song carry meaning but the memory in you also carries meaning.”

“And perhaps what you hear talks to what is in you, creating something new.”

“Maybe,” I agreed.

She smiled. “I would like to think so.”
“Memories and stories are all around us.”

“What you see is not the story, Fielding; the story is what you make with the—I don’t know—the experience. You and I share many experiences, but the way we think about them is different. Common events, but different stories. Yes?”

She was amazing. Much more than just another pretty face. “You’re saying we see things differently?”

“And think things differently.”

“Yes.”

“My mother always said we are in complete control of our lives. There is no such thing as fate, she said. When something bad happens it is only bad because we believe it to be so.”

“Your mother was named Confucious?”

Isabella shook her head. “She believed it. Events do not matter because they have no power. Bad things happen to everyone, but the story you make about the event, that determines your destiny.”

“Like what I said at the anniversary party about being on the come.”

“Only the story has power.”

She nodded her head for emphasis and smiled. I didn’t say anything as she returned to the kitchen to cook. On the divan, I heard the sound of a cupboard opening and closing and the ringing of a pot being taken out. What she said was interesting. It surprised me a little. She was smarter than I thought. A lot smarter than I had thought.
Behind her, I leaned against the refrigerator as she stirred the sauce on the stove. The bridge of tendons in her arm flexed and relaxed. I could smell the tomatoes in the sauce and Isabella’s own warmth that reminded me for some reason of the red, papery-thin skin between the meat of a peanut and its shell. I leaned across her shoulder with my chest as if to inspect the sauce and she made a small noise of approval and turned into my arms. We folded against one another, a piece of paper in a protective envelope. I felt the heat of her body. My hands searched out the gentle curve of her spine and I held her tightly. After a moment, she pushed me back and I looked down into her radiant face and we kissed. Without talking, she turned the stove off and led me into the living room. Beside one another on the divan we kissed until the unseen but always felt forces within shifted and we found ourselves reclined, our loving more involved. Her hands climbed the shirt on my back, palms open against my shoulder blades. I moved my hands down to the waist band of her jeans and held her tightly as we enjoyed the slow kneading of our bodies. I pushed my leg against her pelvic bone and heard a gentle intake of breath. “Here,” she said and she guided my hand. I removed her shirt and I brought my mouth to her breast. Her eyes closed and her head fell back.

I woke in her bed when the phone rang. The light in the room was still on. Isabella leaned across me, her dark nipples grazing my chest as she reached to get the phone from the night stand. It was a short conversation and when she put the receiver back, she sat up. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

“The hospital can not find Manny.”

“What do you mean?”
"He has run away. I am not surprised."

The walk from the snake pit into Callville took three hours and I felt tired and beat in the rain. A fever wrapped my face in heat. Soaked, my clothes chafed my thighs. When I reached the diner, it was growing dark and I was beginning to lose the yellow line down the middle of the road in the black asphalt. The diner was empty and Terry laughed when she first saw me and then grew angry. She gave me clothes to wear from the lost and found and a coat that belonged to a long-gone trucker named Dan. I ate hot soup in the kitchen with Hector, the side-order cook, and had three bowls before I felt enough at ease to let go of the spoon in my hand and relax my shoulders and arms. Terry called whoever she had to and explained she was closing early. The cook nodded his understanding and she brought me home where I slept without dreaming.

In the morning, the Rhode Island Reds on Terry's farm covied under the sharp-toothed Joshua Trees; they panted like dogs; their yellow eyes blinked in disbelief. Under the dark bank of cloud, stones danced on the highway outside Callville and rambled across the half-dozen houses, ringing the corrugated tin roofs with sharp impertinence. I listened to the noise from my bed and felt the vibrations travel down through the walls of the small building. Terry stood at the kitchen sink, looking out the window with her hands on her hips. The light played tricks on me, bruising the woman's face as she reacted to the knocks on her house with flinches. "God almighty," she said to no one in particular. The storm hammered down and she gradually grew more resolute.
and strong in front of the window, her thumbs hooked firmly in the waistband of her apron.

"Fielding?"

I had gotten up from the bed she had fixed for me. The barrage of pebbles slowed down and I crossed the kitchen to join her in front of the window. Terry had her name tag from the Spic & Span Diner pinned on her blouse and a cigarette in her mouth. She repeated my name and asked if I was feeling fit.

"I'm good," I said.

She put the back of her hand against my forehead and looked past me into her battered yard. The winds had shoveled the clouds out into the desert where the flat sands would absorb their energy. "I'm glad you aren't out there," she said. "A person could be knocked silly in a storm like this."

"Thank you."

She waved her hand to dismiss the thought. "It's none of my doing. If God wants you, he'll take you. No fifty-year-old waitress is going to make a particle of difference."

Terry tapped the ash of her cigarette into the sink where it hissed. "Remember, I could tell that you were a gentleman even with the company you were keeping." She touched my hair, rearranging a sleepy lock and pressed me with her eyes, pulling for a response. I looked at a saucer and cup in the sink but didn't say anything. Her hand slid down to my chin and tipped my head up to meet her gaze. "You're going to need to talk to me about what's going on."
"Sure," I said and stepped back beyond the length of her arm. Her fingers remained in the air a moment then came to rest against her side.

"I'm just a little tired right now."

She nodded. "The wind makes us so."

There was a rustling under the floor of the house. Terry extinguished her half-finished cigarette in the sink and lit a new one, sucking the smoke into her lungs. Her dark hair was roped in a bun and her eyes were shadowed with makeup. She blew the smoke out across the room and the strength I saw during the storm shifted into a conscious determination that seemed less genuine.

"Kirsten?" she called.

I listened but heard nothing.

Terry walked into the middle of the kitchen and studied the clean wood floor. She tapped her foot and called again, "Kirsten?"

A reedy voice broke from under the floor. "Who's here?"

Terry knelt down and touched the wood with her hand. "Are you feeling any better, dear?"

"Who's here, mom?"

She looked at me and appeared confused a moment. "He says he's the grandson of old Black Jack who lives in the desert. After a silence, she added, "I think he's a nice boy."

"Is it still hot?"
The woman pried loose a countersunk handle in the floor and hoisted open a door the size of a small card table. Made of the same planks as the floor, the door had been cut by someone who understood how to balance wood against hinges. Terry crawled awkwardly on the floor. She settled down after some effort with her back to me, her legs dangling in the darkness. "It's still hot enough to boil eggs in the shade," she whispered. "That storm didn't bring no relief. I don't know how people are expected to live around here if it doesn't rain for six months and when it finally does, all you get are rocks." She pulled on the cigarette and blew the smoke toward the ceiling. With her hand she dispersed it further. "Would you like me to get you some water?" she asked.

"You gonna do a rain dance?"

"It wouldn't hurt you to come up and join the living."

"Some living."

Terry looked over her shoulder and motioned for me to approach. Behind her hand she whispered, "The chemotherapy makes her cranky. She can't keep anything down." I edged closer to the hole in the floor and saw that a ladder led down into a root cellar. Surrounded by shelves of canned food, a thin bald girl lay on a cot. She wore sweatpants and a sleeveless tee shirt.

"Come to see the freak?" she asked. Her dark eyes peered large and sunken from her white skull. "What are you, a boy scout?"

"He got caught in yesterday's storm," Terry said. "He's our guest."

The girl smiled at me but there wasn't anything friendly in it. "You live in Black Jack's school bus?" she asked. Her voice lifted at the end of the question like bird song.
"I'm just visiting," I said.

"Do you know what the word *catamite* means?"

"Kirsten," Terry reproached.

She looked up at her mother. "Please, mom. Don't pretend *you* know what the word means."

"It's teasing and I won't have it under my house."

The girl pulled off the draped Afghan and sat slowly up in the cot. Her arms were thin, her shoulders round as candlepins. Terry extinguished her cigarette against the sole of her shoe and placed the butt in an apron pocket. "You want help, dear?"

Kirsten smiled something lopsided as if her energy were waning. "An escalator would be nice."

"You want mother to come down and help you?" Terry asked, heaving herself with effort back onto her feet. She stood with a shoe on the first rung of the ladder. "All you have to do is ask, sweetie. I'd do anything for you."

The girl looked at her hands then brushed dust off her arms and legs. "You know what I dreamed last night?" she asked.

"Come up," Terry said. "Let your poor mother help you out."

Kirsten ignored the appeal and looked directly at me. She spread her fingers like a pair of fans and wriggled them in front of her face. "I dreamed the house was on fire," she said. "It burned down on top of me: first the roof, then the attic, then the ceiling, then the stove and furniture and refrigerator and then finally this big heavy floor." She
touched the rafter over her head and examined the dirt on her finger. "The fire crackled and I heard the nails hissing at me."

"It was a nightmare."

Kirsten nodded her head. She raised what would have been an eyebrow then smiled fully. I stepped closer to the opening and watched as she put first one hand and then another on the ladder and began slowly to pull herself up out of the pit without help. When she emerged from the hatchway, Terry placed an arm around the girl but was shrugged off. In the light of the kitchen, the girl with no hair looked like a visitor who had come to judge us all.

"You having a good time?"

I nodded.

"Could you be anymore sweet?"

Kirsten eased across the kitchen and rested at the sink. "Did my mother tell you about the time she burned our house down?" Terry pursed her lips but didn't otherwise acknowledge her daughter. They stood on opposite sides of the room. The air between them hot and dry.

I turned away to watch the chickens through the open door that led out onto the porch. The Rhode Island Reds were large birds colored like Irish Setters. They walked with a distinct head-checking motion, each strutting, pulling the trigger of a pistol loaded with duds.

Terry came up from behind and put her hands on my shoulders. "Manna from Heaven," she said. "Look at those chickens peck at the stones." They were spread out
across the dust of the yard, pecking feverishly at the white pebbles. We watched and then Terry asked me to forgive her daughter and herself. "God gives everyone easy and hard, and we're doing hard right now." She paused and looked back at her daughter who appeared preoccupied with the nails of her left hand. "I'll be going," Terry said. Waiting for a response that didn't come, she turned and walked out onto the porch steps where a rooster stood on the roof of her car. Protected under the sun-bleached carport, the animal appeared statuesque, a prophet taking responsibility for all it perceived.

She gently shooed the bird off the car and Terry got in behind the steering wheel. I stood outside and watched as she checked her makeup in the rearview mirror. "You're welcome to come to the diner with me," she said, mouthing an old envelope to take the shine off her lipstick. "Maybe teach you a trade?"

"Can I stay?"

"I won't be back 'til nine."

"I'm tired."

She nodded her head. "I'll bring you back some pot roast. More rhubarb pie?"

"Thank you." I smiled.

"You're a polite boy, Fielding. That will get you further than most people realize." She waved goodbye and backed the car down the narrow concrete drive onto the pavement that led to town. In the west, the sun had dropped a notch and it occurred to me that where my mother and Stephen were in the Bahamas, the same sun was in their sky. I sat down on the granite block that served as foundation and sole porch step. There
was a calm in the air. The spring sunlight slanted through the dispersed storm clouds, washing the hard Toiyabe Range to the north in sepia.

Kirsten waited a few minutes after her mother had driven out of sight then came out onto the porch. In her hand she carried a can of Diet Coke. She stood leaning against a post and put the unopened can to her neck. "It's hot out here," she said.

I nodded.

"My mother really did burn the house down."

I watched the chickens peck. They seemed to congregate around the same areas, competing with one another for insects and gravel needlessly. They looked larger than regular chickens and I wondered if these storms were a common thing around here.

When they flapped their wings, dust billowed up from the ground like smoke.

"I was once in a fire," I said.

"Yeah?"

"My father had just driven me out here to Las Vegas and the restaurant we were eating in caught fire. People were pushing each other to get out."

"Anyone die?"

I shook my head. "It was bad but not that bad."

"Did the roof cave in?"

"The whole thing burned down. The firemen were standing around with my father and me and the man who owned the restaurant, and we were all just watching with everyone else. When you said you heard the nails hissing in your dream, I knew what you meant. The fire at the restaurant hissed and screamed."
Kirsten sat down next to me on the step. She handed me the can of soda and asked if I could open it. "My fingernails hurt," she explained. When I returned the can, she only sipped at it then put it down.

"Where's your papa now?" she asked.

"He had to go."

"Your papa leave you?"

"It's complicated."

"My Papa's gone," she said. "He left me and my mom."

I nodded.

Kirsten closed her eyes and breathed in the dry, loamy smell of the desert. It was still warm and the sky had not yet flattened out for the evening. The thermals rising off the elevated plains of the Sheep Range kneaded the clouds, rolling them with ease. I could taste the burnt quartz and the huskiness which the wind leaves in the air after disturbing the dust of the sand and scrub. Kirsten arched her back and the muscles of her face went taut in a grimace. Through her tee-shirt, I saw the contour of her small breasts sway against the cloth. As if sensing my attention, she leaned forward and hugged her knees. The knuckles of her spine stood pronounced and painful.

"My Papa told me you're all grown up—really grown up—when you stop wishing things for yourself and start wishing things for the people you love." The girl spoke plain, holding her knees just below her chin. Something like an opening appeared inside her, a relaxation that made her seem softer and less tightly bound. "You know what I wish for, Fielding?"
I shook my head. "Things for other people?"

She smiled. "What do you think I wish for?"

When I told I didn't know, she stood up and things closed down again. Her toes were long and gripped the granite step. Around her ankle, she wore a beaded bracelet of red and blue and when she moved, I noticed a faint sourness that caught me. I leaned into the space she had just occupied and tried to take in the scent again. She put her hands above her eyes to look out into the desert where the heat shimmered. The granite step I sat on was warm.

"I'm not going to die," she said after a minute or two.

"I know."

She shook her head. "I'm not just saying that to be brave. The doctors told me I'm not going to die. At least not because of this." She motioned at her bald head.

"You're out of the woods?"

She sat back down beside me, her legs stretched out like fence posts. "I'm not going to die," she said.

"That's good."

"You know what I wish for?"

I shrugged.

"Sometimes after chemotherapy, your hair grows back white." She put her hands on her knees and rocked against the porch. "I hope after this is all said and done, there's something changed in me. Something I can see. More than just a story."

"White hair?"
She smiled. "Doesn't have to be that."

She sipped again from the *Diet Coke* then offered me a drink. I took the can from her thin hand and hesitated a moment.

"You can't catch cancer."

"That wasn't it," I said, but she laughed.

I took a long drink from the cold soda and Kirsten asked if I wanted to know what the single best thing about chemo was. I told her I couldn't imagine anything good about it.

She smiled, her eyes bright in her bare head. "Smoking pot in the house."

"Yeah?"

"My doctor suggested it."

I nodded.

"Do you?"

"Do I what?"

"Smoke pot."

I shrugged.

"Either you do or you don't." She looked at me, leaning in close and I smelled the sourness again.

"I haven't," I said, not sure what was going to be expected of me. Kirsten took a joint from the pocket in her tee shirt and held it up for me to examine.

"All my friends grow it," she said. "You're looking at the biggest cash crop in Nevada."
"I'm sure."

She put a twisted end in her mouth and smiled. "I don't care if you do or don't."

"I know."

After lighting it, she held the smoke in her lungs for a few moments then let it out softly. She passed it to me and I pinched it, careful of the burning end. I pulled and held the smoke as long as I could, mimicking everyone I'd ever seen smoking marijuana, then emptied my lungs in a sincere fit of coughing. It tasted oily, acrid and overly ripe. She took the joint from me and smoked the rest without offering me anymore.

For a few minutes, we watched the chickens as they fought with one another over the corn cobs then she stood up and walked back into the house. I had the feeling of being cheated, a disappointment that settled in the bottom of my stomach. Her name I silently mouthed. It felt familiar. The sky was slowly clearing, the sun setting with clouds departing for the east. A redness the same color as plums before they fully ripened edged the bottom of the western-most clouds. The temperature was dropping and I was glad for the warmth of the step I was sitting on.

Kirsten returned from the house with a sweater around her shoulders. She walked gingerly down the steps. "I'm going up to the barn," she said. "If you want to stay here, that's fine. Or, if you want to come along, that's okay too. It's just an old barn."

She took small steps and I walked beside her up the worn path. There were clumps of Desert Holly and Bur Sage where our shadows fell and I pointed them out to her, explaining their names and what poisons would kill them if they should appear on a golf course. At the large door of the barn, she showed me how to unlock the chain and
padlock without a key by unscrewing the bolt. Creosote bushes had grown up against the
door and I kicked them down. The quick pulse of pigeon wings greeted us as we entered
the cool and still building. On the far side of the barn above a work bench stacked with
wood scraps, a pale figure stood nailed like a trophy to the wall. Kirsten walked toward
the back then paused a moment to lean against me. Her thin arm felt dry against the skin
of my neck. As if moving under water, her momentum slowed. She stumbled forward
then caught her balance and alighted on the nearest fender of an old tractor. She smiled
up at me in a reassuring way.

"I can take you back," I said.

She shook her head. The sallowness of her skin disappeared in the darkness of
the barn. Grace developed in the lines of her skull. The curve of her smile and lashless
eyes testified of a beauty that was dependent on neither makeup nor hair. "This is my
favorite room," she said quietly. Emotions flitted across her face and she cast her eyes
down at the boards in the floor. "My Papa said this place is sacred."

"Like a church," I said.

"I think only barns make me feel this way."

High-ceilinged, braced with thick crossing timbers, the structure felt safe and
large enough to withstand anything short of a tornado. Cracks between the weathered
planks allowed motes of light through, illuminating the rusted farm equipment in a
golden hue. I turned away from Kirsten who sat apparently content and walked toward
the back of the barn with steps slowed out of some deference I wasn't able to name.
Bisected in a square of framed sunlight, the broken remains of a Catholic crucifix shown like a flame against the dark wood. But as I got closer, it changed.

"Do you like it?" Kirsten asked from the tractor, her voice hushed.

It was broken. Something had happened to it.

And like an epiphany, it ceased to be a crucifix and became a swan. The bird hung on the wall without a head or legs, but its long, graceful and painfully thin wings still seemed capable of carrying the sins of the world. From the wings, a fitful spread of white feathers clung below, like a ratted shawl.

"Where did it come from?"

I heard her steps behind me, sparrow feet walking on the heavy floor. Kirsten stood beside me and together we gazed up. "Papa said he found it in a dry wash. Even though it was already dead, he recognized it as the most beautiful thing in the world. When I was ten years old, Papa nailed it to this wall for me."

"It's strange," I said.

"They say swans mate for life."

I stepped back from the apparition. Its featherless, brown-skinned torso was the same size as that of a small child's. Black nail heads showed through the dried flesh of its wings. I didn't know what it meant. I felt like I probably should know, but I didn't. Looking at the bird, a piece of something no longer whole, made me feel sad and I wondered about the places it had been, the things it had seen and the stories it could have told.
"It's against the law to eat swans almost everywhere in the world. They're universally admired," she said. "I think this one must have gotten lost."

We sat on a cold, bony stack of iron pipes that ran nearly the length of the barn's big room. Strapped with wide ribbons of blue steel, the pipes lay straight and inert. She again hugged her shins against her chest, her fingers intertwined and her small button chin perched on her knees. The soft three-note coo of a mourning dove came down unseen high in the rafters. I looked at her and turned away. "You can look at me," she said. "I'm a freak."

"No," I said.

"I'm okay with people looking."

"I don't."

She smiled. "You don't look?"

"No." I shook my head. "No. I mean you're not a freak."

"I'll be sure to recommend a merit badge."

My eyes felt heavy.

"Look at me, Fielding." The filtered light in the barn was soft and golden and deep; atop the thick cross members above hid the lives of doves and deer mice and things smaller that had perhaps never ventured out of this barn. I continued to stare down at my feet, and could feel her eyes on me. The sound of her breathing unexpectedly stopped and I looked up. She was smiling at me, her cheeks puffed out. "Got ya!" she laughed. And I found myself laughing too, the sensation catching hold of a knot inside me, pulling...
things loose. Above in the dark the cupped wings of a pigeon beat down and among the
cadence, the softer notes of a scrub owl dislodged by the commotion.

After a moment, I carefully asked what color her hair was before the cancer.

"Blonde."

"Like your mother's?"

"Like my Papa's. Case you hadn't noticed, my mother's hair is brown. Limp
without body. My Papa's hair was vibrant. People were always telling him he should be
one of those head models that you see from the shoulders up. Shampoo commercials and
cologne ads in magazines. His hair was good, he could have been a great actor. I mean,
if he'd wanted to be. He didn't." Kirsten nodded and pursed her lips, weighing a
decision. She appeared to enjoy the play. Her voice lifted. "Wig makers were always
following him."

I laughed again. Giggling tumbled from us. She smiled and sat up straight. The
joy pooled in her eyes. As if caught in between something, she appeared to struggle,
against what I didn't know, and then she looked up at me, surprised to discover the two of
us in the barn.

"You okay?"

"Tired," she said.

I nodded. "Want to go?"

She shook her head.

"Can I ask a question?"

"Shoot."
"You don't get along with your mother."

Kirsten smiled. "That's a question?"

"I was just wondering."

"It bothers you."

"Not really."

She gauged me and nodded. "My doctors say it's a kind of defense mechanism. I push the people who love me away because I think I might die and disappoint them. Of course they don't say it like that, but, you know, that's what they mean." Her hands extended out, palms up as if she were showing how dirty they were. "It's wrong."

"What is?" I asked.

"Treating her that way."

"It makes sense what they said."

"So what? It's still not right."

"Then why do it?"

Kirsten shrugged. "Do you like your mother?" she asked.

"Sure." And without planning to, I began telling her the story about the night I was born. The pieces slipped together, running into one another, bridging facts I had heard a hundred times with scenarios imagined while lying against rolled-up carpets in the attic dormer, looking at photographs of my mother and father. My mother had told me about the events of my birth night. She labeled it the most important moment in her life and the words she used to describe the experience soothed and calmed me. I imagined the scenes as I spoke and reinforced the thin places with wrought images from
my own head. It was a game I would play. While retelling the story I saw everything laid out before me. Things I hadn't thought about in years became sure. The events of the night were broken up into a series of clear, strong images. My mother was driving fast in her car, late at night. Between distant lightning, headlights reflected off mile markers to give shape to the land. She knew the plains stretched as flat and broad as a cookie sheet, but the sensation she felt, enclosed in the warmth and darkness of the car, was one of riding down a steady decline, her speed increasing by natural forces beneath the road, strengthening a conviction that this trip back to the town she came from was good, like the movement of water.

My mother peered through the windshield toward Yoakum and a tightness drew across her pregnant abdomen. A wire of lightning seared the horizon. She rolled up her window. Muffled thunder rose then passed. The AM radio hissed the twang of Patsy Cline, both voice and accompaniment pocked by the empty template of each lightning stab. The rain would come later, she knew. Perhaps she would be in town before it hit full. She readjusted the seat belt for what felt like the tenth time in as many minutes.

My father was waiting for her in Yoakum. He lay on a cot in his parents' living room and listened to the same thunder and the argument of wind against casements. Three wheat-hued suitcases stood lined against the hall wainscoting. A writing tablet lay on the floor under the cot. Words written in black ink. Three names circled: Alexander, Fielding and Janice. After a time, he left the cot and walked to the window that overlooked the broad stroke of orchards. The sickle curve of route 111 shone beyond under a lone street light, a surface worn smooth by the tires of heavy trucks.
White-faced Hereford stood frozen like ghosts in the high beams before being whisked away, lost in the darkness behind her. Soon she would be in Yoakum, Texas, the place where she and her husband had grown up and he would be waiting for her and the two of them would be enough to put things right again and this thought eased the tightness. The baby moved: a punch perhaps. She slid her hand down through the looseness between the buttons of her blouse and touched the place her baby pushed. Her other hand rested atop the steering wheel, maintaining direction. The car sped into the blackness. A moment only of recognition—a familiar voice saying the word "cow"—before she hurtled into the broad ribs and legs of the animal.

Not a noise, but a sensation from within, woke her in the dark. Crying. The wind sighed and the crying stopped, nothing but memory remained. My mother breathed deeply and felt no pain. Cold fingers in the dark slipped across her back. When the crying returned, she looked down, down at her legs for the source of the noise. The darkness nuzzled against her cheek. She listened to the wailing; her hands held hard against the familiarity of her spooned, still-full belly. Lightning opened the sky laterally like a phosphorescent scar. A world bleached clean. She saw in the branded image that no windshield remained and the car's roof had been peeled back. She was upright, still strapped in the seat. The wail rose, deep and full of pain.

"I'm here," she yelled. "Stop crying. I'm here."

Below the groan, the wind rustled dry stalks of milkweed and ringstem against the car. A hand pushed back the hair from her face. The acidic sweetness of scalded antifreeze walked over her, a smell containing safety in the memory of her father and
brothers and their old cars. "Please don't cry. I'm here, honey. I'm here." She listened to
the sobbing ebb into thick, wet breathing. Just behind her, she thought. Back there.

"Everything's going to be okay," she shouted. "I'm here. We're okay."

In the blackness, lightning burned photographs upon her eyes. There was no
sense of direction. She turned her head but the storm determined her view arbitrarily:
finites, shots grey-scaled and stark, fading almost immediately.

The breathing sped and lunged into as deep lament. My mother called out but
there was no answer. "Hush," she said. "Hush, hush." Within moments, she felt the
touch of rain. Although icy, she was thankful because it stifled the heart-rending noise
and cleared her head.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Behind her in the dark, she listened to the breathing of the animal struck down in
the road. Its cry rose, a call for help, for attention. It sounded scared and alone. She
tried to unbuckle the seatbelt but its layout eluded her, something must be twisted, she
thought. The buckle isn't where it ought to be. I shouldn't have worn the device. No one
she knew wore the belts, but being pregnant underscored the responsibilities of I should
have done this or that, the internal cross-examining after a breach of common sense. I'll
give up the cigarettes, she promised. She would wear her glasses. Moisture slid down
her back, raising the hair on her skin. Coldness pressed against her collar bones, seeping
down her arms to where her fingertips throbbed in concert with the heart inside her chest,
trying to communicate, to soothe another heart pittering madly in her uterus. The baby. I
can't let anything happen to the baby. She craned her neck to look back at the cow but
the peeled debris of the car's roof prevented her from seeing where she had come. I need
to get out. Jim is waiting for me, probably worried to death.

My mother gripped the steering wheel before her and shook it with all her being. The circulation improved in her arms and the exertion, although unproductive, assuaged a degree of guilt. She never wore her eye glasses and had endangered her baby. She shook the wheel again and relaxed. The skin of her face heated. She listened to the great breathings of the cow. It was comforting not to be alone, she thought. Three of us here tonight in the rain, hurt but alive.

"Fielding," my mother said as she caressed her belly. "How are you doing? I want you to know everything will be okay and we're going to be fine. You. Me. Even the cow. We're all going to be just fine." More lightning slashed across the horizon, licking hot tendrils against the night sky. Things searching for things, she thought. Negative ions searching for positive. Jim would find them. He was a man of action; and although sometimes foolish, no one denied that Jim Greeley contained a source of energy where uninhibited action sprang; Jim would act, only his direction and focus were in doubt. She smiled and the thought of Jim was something she could focus on. His mad energy. A man with a plan. This trait had attracted her when they first dated. She was working at Lead's Dress & Apparel for the summer before starting college. Her family came from cotton and money wasn't an issue, but the appearance of productivity had been deeply ingrained in her by a father who frequently said, "If unpicked, time rots in the field, never to return." Her father had been against Jim from the get go. He objected to the way my father squandered his money on clothes and European cigarettes. But Jim
centered his enthusiasm fully on Mary, presenting flowers, candy and dime-store romance magazines to her at work until she agreed to go out with him. The weight of that attention had been intoxicating to a slightly heavy girl—however rich—who fastidiously brushed her hair 300 times each night before going to bed and although almost always alone, never missed a Friday opening at the Bijou on Third and Main. Even on that rainy night at the age of 31, when my father turned his eyes on her, she felt the presence of hope, as if all things were possible and that she was married to the man who could single-handedly make anything come true.

Kirsten watched me over her chin, eyes unfocused. "Shit. Your father found her? On the road?"

I shook my head. "No. Not my father."

That night the rain let up. In the wind, she listened to the quieting sobs of the animal behind her. Even trapped in the car my mother was beautiful. Her thoughts altruistic, compassionate: thinking of me and the cow. She sat there nearly an hour until slowly the road ahead grayed out of the black. A light reflected off the chrome strips of the broken windshield. Behind her, a truck's engine whined, its transmission heaving as it down shifted to a stop. My mother prepared herself. She fixed her wet hair, tucking it behind her ears. At the sound of a door opening and closing, the cow began bawling again. The pain in its voice hung across the wreckage.

"You okay?" the trucker asked. He wasn't my father but he was straight and true, backlit from the high-beams of his rig. "Jesus, this is a mess," he said. After radioing for help, he stayed with my mother, holding her hand. She asked about the cow.
"Dead," Kirsten interrupted.

I shook my head. "It was still there."

"Been dead since the accident. Died on impact."

"No."

"The crying cow was in her head."

"No."

"That would be a better story."

"But it didn't happen that way."

"I doubt it happened the way you told it either."

I thought about what she said. How things happen and I wasn't sure what difference it really made. Layers of story had been built up around the accident and I knew that there was something to it. I wanted to keep going with the story. Tell it again and again and again until there was no doubt left.

I stayed two days with Kirsten and her mother. She told me stories about her family and I thought a lot about that swan she had nailed to the wall of the barn and how it was really just a dead bird, but somehow, after hearing her talk, the swan had become something more to me. There was peace in the swan. Not like a crucifix peace, but like a connection to something natural. Swans mate for life, she said. I liked the sound of that.

My mother and Stephen flew into Las Vegas to pick me up and the next day we were back in Cambridge. Terry had called them.
I was asleep in my apartment when I got the telephone call and I realized I was indeed surprised. My mother’s voice on the other end quietly explained that he was in the hospital and was resting. It had been a stroke, not a heart attack that felled him and the prognosis wasn’t good. “The doctor said it’s unlikely he’ll fully recover. They’re not sure he’ll even survive.” In my mother’s voice, I heard the reluctant loosening of something which had been tightly wound. “I don’t know, Fielding. He’s your father and maybe this is an opportunity for closure.” I listened to the buzz of emptiness on the line. My mother’s words echoed somewhere between the phone and my head. I knew if I went to the hospital to see him, there would be the usual awkwardness that the two of us had developed over our lives and maybe his pallid face would turn when I came into the room and maybe he wouldn’t say a word and maybe that would be fine. But probably not. No one who loves my father can believe a word he says. “Shouldn’t wonder if you never want to see him again,” my mother continued. “And heaven knows you’d be justified in whatever you decide, but this could be the last time, and whatever you might think now, those thoughts could change.” Her voice trailed off and I listened to the sound of the water running in the apartment below. The darkness loosened in all but the corners of the room as my eyes acclimated to the lonely dark. I wanted my mother’s voice to continue talking forever. Like pebbles, her words made me wince but they were a connection to something that came before.

We hung up and I thought about the lies my father told and what Isabella had said about stories being interpretations of events and their power to shape and form our
identities and as I thought about these things, I pictured my father back on the front lawn of the Cambridge house with my mother by his side and me, his son, held firmly in his hands. He was smiling and I saw myself smile and as I thought about this and tried to remember more, I thought I could feel the warmth of his hands.
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