Missing Letters: Seven stories and one novella

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MISSING LETTERS: SEVEN STORIES
AND ONE NOVELLA

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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The Thesis prepared by

David Winkler

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ABSTRACT

MISSING LETTERS: SEVEN STORIES AND ONE NOVELLA

by

David Winkler

Richard Wiley, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of English
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My MFA thesis, entitled MISSING LETTERS, consists of seven short stories and one novella. These pieces are arranged to reflect a variety of tone and style.

The first story, “Tale of the Ill Ook Ook,” is strictly comedic and serves as a parody of adult book stores. The emphasis is on humor rather than eroticism.

The second story is “Trouble on the Farm,” which is intense in its treatment of a troubled runaway teen with murder and vengeance on his mind.

Story number three, “The Romans,” is a children’s story, featuring Scotty, the protagonist who headlines my first published novel, SCOTTY AND THE GYPSY BANDIT. A sense of morality motors through this and story number seven, “The Lemonade Stand.” Both are constructed in a sparse, lean style that reflects the simplistic yet morally compromised world of childhood.

“Wanda Waits” is a dark, tightly structured tale concerning a hit man who would prefer a different line of work, but the money is too good for him to quit.

“Joie de Vivre” tells the story of a strained father/daughter relationship with a
dead mother as its centerpiece.

"Are We There Yet?" is a light-hearted satire of the Book of Exodus, with a considerable amount of wordplay and puns, featuring a Las Vegas setting.

The operative theme of my novella, "Odd Bodkins," is the dissipation of a marriage brought on by a third party. It strives for a more literary-like style.
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

For Joseph McCullough, Douglas Unger, Richard Wiley, Julia Winkler, and Martha Young

Three Kings and two Queens
Sunday’s want ads teemed with opportunity. None of it was anything I could do. Accountants. Loan officers. Diesel mechanics. Pet manicurists. Marriage counselors. Dental hygienists. Enough positions to populate a village. Then there was this, wedged between body builders and bus drivers: *Bookstore clerk. No exp. necessary.*

I hopped up off my bucket and dashed to the apartment next door.

“You,” said my neighbor.

“I need to use your phone.”

I snatched up the phone before he could stop me and dialed the number. A snarly voice answered. “Village Book Nook. Gooch.”

“Gooch? I’m calling about the position.”

He grunted out an address and slammed the phone down, but not before I heard loud talking. I pictured a lively debate about the world’s classics and suddenly felt intimidated. What did I know about the world’s classics? They were written by Greek guys. The only big word I knew was *onomatopoeia.*

“Lou,” I said, “you got any Greek stuff lying around I can brush up on?”

“Get outa here! And get your own damn phone!” My neighbor shook his fist in my face.

“Phone? Ha. I can’t even afford a newspaper...Oh. Here’s yours back. Thanks.”
“My Sunday paper!” he said. It was all mangled.

I returned to my apartment, which was really a mop closet the building super let me stay in, in exchange for mopping stairwells. I sat back down on my bucket.

What the heck. I’d only be a store clerk, right? Not an English teacher. How much did I need to know? The ad said no experience. I changed into my other shirt, clipped on my bow tie, wriggled into my Good Will jacket, and headed out the door.

The Village Book Nook was in my part of town, sandwiched between a liquor store and a place called Mad Manny’s Millions. A squad car was just pulling away with some guy bleeding in the back. I waved.

The electric sign in the window had missing letters. “ILL OOK OOK” blinked at me like a distress signal. Bounding in through the paint-cracked front door, I found myself between two tables of rubber penises. They looked like stalagmites.

“You the guy called?” a gruff voice greeted me. “You him?” The air reeked of cigar smoke. “Come round here, I’ll show ya what’s what.” Gooch spoke from behind a battered counter. I knew he was Gooch because the tattoo on his bicep read “Gooch and Lulu forever.” Someone had tried to scrub out “Lulu.”

When I went to join Gooch on his side of the counter, my arm grazed the plastic teat of an inflated naked lady whose tinny voice said, “Wanna party, big boy?”

Gooch grinned. “Like ’er?” I could see his tooth.

I glanced at her price tag, the only thing she had on: Miss Tillie Two Lips. $49.99. Her mouth was shaped like a napkin ring.

“What’s not to like?” I said.
“Our newest attraction,” said Gooch. He talked like he needed an enema. “Give ’er a poke.”

“Huh?”

“Go on, poke ’er.”

I poked Miss Tillie Two Lips with my finger.

“Wanna party, big boy?”

Gooch thought that was hilarious. “Poke ’er again.”

“Wanna party, big boy?”

At last. A job I could handle.

“Now pay attention,” said Gooch. “Here’s the cash register. Here’s the tokens for the video booths. Over on that wall’s yer straight stuff. On that wall opposite’s yer funny boys. Crap in the middle’s mixed. Videos’re on a rack next to the dicks. No refunds, no returns. Anyone under eighteen comes in, boot their candy ass out. An’ only one customer to a booth. Got it?”

“So I don’t need to know the classics?” I asked.

“Classics?” Gooch whipped out a magazine showing women’s breasts the size of beanbag chairs. “Them classic enough for ya?” He hoo-hawed and fanned the pages under my nose. “You’re on the clock.”

“But I haven’t signed anything.”

“I pay the end of each day. Five bucks a hour. Park yer ass here.” He patted a wooden stool behind the register. “All’s ya do’s sit an’ see nobody gets outa line. Know how to work a register?”

“I used to work in a grocery store,” I told him.
“That’s all this is. Groceries. Now mind the store. I got errands.”

“What? You’re leaving me?”

“We can’t both go,” said Gooch.

With that he left in a puff of smoke. The place was quiet as a church. Every wall was canvassed with pictures of nude bodies so twisted together you couldn’t tell where one left off and another began, but it was fun trying.

Suddenly I realized I wasn’t alone. A door to one of the video booths creaked open (they were lined up like toilet stalls) and out stepped two guys in business suits.

“Hey! One customer to a booth!” I yelled.

“Thanks for everything,” they said. I didn’t know if they meant me or each other.

No sooner were they gone than a pimply-faced kid in a stocking cap breezed in. He slapped a damp, wadded-up, five-dollar bill on the counter. “Tokens, dude. Be swift.”

“Are you eighteen?” I asked. He looked fifteen.

“I’m forty-two. Ask the Gooch dude.”

“Gooch dude’s not here.”

“Aw, man.” The kid waved his arms in the air. “New dudes. Why do I always get the new dudes?”

“Show me a picture I.D.,” I said. I was beginning to enjoy my job.

“Picture this.” He showed me his middle finger, snatched up his money, and left.

Soon a mousy-looking girl in a pale blue raincoat slid into the store like a shadow. Her eyes darted left, right. She floated over to the magazine section. I watched her fingers nibble at some pages. When two men swaggered in from the parking lot, she scooped up a magazine called Amazing Members then crept over to the counter.
“It’s for my roommate,” she whispered in a voice that was paper-thin.

“Uh-huh.”

“My roommate has this—well—problem,” said the girl in the raincoat. “I thought this might help.”

“Is your roommate a sword swallower?”

“She blows glass.”

“Ten bucks,” I said. She pocketed her change and hurried away like a thief, the magazine stuffed inside her coat.

Before long the place got lively. Church must have let out. A young man in tight jeans and Conway Twitty hair bought a fist full of tokens. “Psst—hey, man! Got any Kleenex?” he asked.

“The movies aren’t sad,” I assured him.

He went into a booth but was back in a jiffy. “Um. I was wondering. Can she come, too?” He nodded at Miss Tillie Two-Lips. “Just to keep me company?”

“This is a book store, not a dating service,” I said.

He shuffled back to his booth.

I winked at Miss Tillie.

A man with the look of a half-witted lumberjack dragged his feet up to the counter.

“How much fah da babe?”

“Da wah?”

“Da babe.” He jerked his thumb at Miss Tillie.

“She’s not for sale.” I stuffed Miss Tillie’s price tag in her mouth.
“Wunna pawty, bug bull?” she mumbled.

“How ’bout then I just rent her?” drooled the lumberjack.

“She’s not like that,” I said and wrapped my arm around her.

The man muttered words I couldn’t spell. To Miss Tillie I said, “You can do better.” Gooch returned with beer on his breath. He said he’d watch the register while I straightened up. But what was there to straighten? It all looked the same. Naked people doing rude things to one another.

I puttered around the place lining up magazines, fussing over this, that, and the other, but really not doing much of anything. Now and then I shot an arduous glance at Miss Tillie. Once when Gooch wasn’t looking, I blew her a kiss. Then to kill time, I rearranged the rubber penises. First I divided them into opposing camps, like Bengal Lancers. Next I shuffled them around to resemble the St. Louis skyline.

“Provocative,” commented an old man in a cheesy gray wig. A grin with loose dentures connected his ears like a wobbly footbridge. “And entirely original.”

I felt like the winner of a science project.

“Not to mention mouth-watering,” said the old man.

Suddenly Gooch instructed me to go check out Booth Number Four. “I got my suspicions,” he said.

I knocked on Booth Number Four and the door cracked open. A guy’s sweaty face peeked out.

“Yes?”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Can you come back in twenty minutes?”
All at once he lost balance, the door swung open, and four guys with their pants down to their knees toppled out on top of me. Gooch came stomping over. He snatched them up by anything he could get his hands on, tossing them left and right.

“Throw one to me! Throw one to me!” squealed the old guy in the wig, clapping his hands together and rearing up on tip-toes.

“Out!” Gooch booted their butts toward the door. “Out! Out! Out!” Then he hauled me to my feet.

I spit out a tooth, not sure if it was mine or someone else’s.

Gooch paid me my day’s wage and I started for home, tired after an honest day’s work. I stopped off to buy a sandwich and a soda. I thought about Miss Tillie Two Lips the whole while. Did I imagine it, or was there a wistful look in her eye when I left the premises? I went into the mop closet, took off my bow tie, and changed back into my other shirt. It felt great to be home. I stretched out on some mop heads and fell asleep. I dreamed of napkin rings. A terrifying thought entered my dreams. My eyes popped open and I was drenched in sweat.

“What if someone buys her!” I screamed.

I hurried next door. My neighbor answered his door in a bath robe, some slippers, and a frown.

“It’s an emergency, Lou. I have to confer with a colleague.”

I dashed past him and dialed the number. The night clerk answered.

“Village Book Nook. Frog.”

“Frog, is Miss Tillie there? Miss Two Lips?”

“Hah? The doll?”
“Is she there?”

“Listen,” said Frog.

“Wanna party, big boy?”

“Keep your filthy stinking hands off her, Frog!” I shouted into the phone.

“Simmer down, pal. Whataya, nuts?”

“Tell Miss Tillie—tell her—well, just don’t sell her, okay? I’ll buy her tomorrow.

Do you guys do layaway?”

“What name you want I should hold her under?”

“Name?” I said the first thing that popped into my head. “Wiley Unger McCullough. Esquire.”

“What kinda work you into, anyways?” my neighbor wanted to know.

“Don’t even bother to apply, Lou,” I told him. “You’d need a diploma.”

He kicked me out.

I went back to my closet but was too excited to sleep. I mopped stairwells instead.

What else do you do when you’re in love?

The next day when I got to work, religious fanatics were picketing the Village Book Nook. They carried huge white signs: “Down with porn. Up with the Lord.” They looked like a fleet of sailboats.

“Jesus!” I exclaimed.

“Amen, brother,” said a picketer. He handed me a sign.

I elbowed my way to the door and someone’s big hand snagged me like a claw.

“Brother, do you realize you’re entering the Devil’s den?” He had eyes the size of hubcaps.

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“Yes, but isn’t that what He would have done?” I met his gaze straight on.

The man dropped to the ground and folded his hands in prayer. “Bless you, brother. Bless you.”

“Onomatopoeia,” I said.

I hurried inside and the first person I saw was the old coot in the gray wig. He was still grinning at the penis colony. I grabbed the largest one—the skyscraper, I’d nicknamed it—and thrust it in his hands. “Anybody who likes them that much should have one of his own.” He looked like some ancient ballplayer stepping up to bat.

“So,” said Gooch. “Made it through the Holy Land.”

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“Happens. They shut one of us down, they earn tokens upstairs.” He motioned his cigar at the ceiling.

My eyes flashed over at Miss Tillie. She stood fresh as a daisy next to the register. Her mouth seemed to go “Ooooooooh” at the sight of me.

“You’re on,” said Gooch, who still sounded constipated. “Be back in a shake.”

“You’re leaving again?”

“Errands,” he explained.

“But what about those guys out there?”

“They seldom attack,” Gooch said. “An’ if they do, hit ’em with rubber dicks. They hate that.” He grinned, showing his tooth.

I glanced around. Besides the geezer, there were no customers. I spoke privately to Miss Tillie: “I don’t have the cash to pay for you just yet, but I’m working on it. So be patient.” I gave her a loving poke.
"Wanna party, big boy?"

"Do I ever."

The pimply-faced kid in the stocking cap rushed in. "Do I get free tokens for making it past the Jesus dudes?" He slapped down his sweaty five spot.

"Picture I.D.,” I said. It was the same routine as yesterday.

He whipped out a color photo from inside his jacket and held it an inch from my nose.

"That’s not you. It’s Ed McMahon,” I said.

Just then I heard a commotion out front. Cuss words and a scuffle. I looked longingly at Miss Tillie, who looked longingly at me.

"Hey, deaf dude! Howsabout my tokens?” said the pimply-faced kid.

Outside, I heard oof, urgh, and hi-ya-mat-chee! The clatter of signs bouncing off concrete. I pictured Jesus freaks flying through the air like spitballs amidst grunts of Gooch.


In the distance and getting closer were police sirens.

I grabbed hold of the token machine and shoved it into the kid’s arms. “Here. I hope this clears up your face.” I peeled off my Good Will jacket and draped it around Miss Tillie. I tugged her toward the exit. On the way out I plucked the wig off the old guy who stood fondling his gigantic penis. “With a dick that big you don’t need hair,” I said and plopped the wig on top of Miss Tillie.

Just as we got outside, three squad cars squealed into the lot. The pavement was littered with bruised and bleeding Bible-belters, some praying, some cussing. Gooch stood in the middle of them like Davy Crockett at the Alamo, swinging a sign and yelling
something about the Second Coming. The cops were on him in a heartbeat. I tried sneaking past, but a young cop said, “Where you think you’re going?”

“I came to fetch my mother,” I answered.

“Your mother?”

I wrapped a protective arm around Miss Tillie. “I don’t know how she gets into these situations.”

The cop eyed Miss Tillie in her tousled wig and ratty jacket. Her lips formed a perfect O.

“She looks scared shitless,” the cop observed. He gave her a gentle pat. “No place for a nice old lady.”

“Wanna party, big boy?”

“Mom!” I said.

The cop looked confused but had to go help sit on Gooch who, in the arms of the law, was finally moving his bowels.

We hurried up the street and didn’t stop until we reached my building. I’d hoped to make it into the mop closet unobserved, but the eyes of my neighbor were like the eyes of God.

“Hey. Who you got there?” he wanted to know.

“My mother. She’s here on a visit.”

We ducked into the closet and I shut the door. “Whew.” I sat down on my bucket and tried to make Miss Tillie feel comfortable. “It’s not much,” I told her, “but it’s home.” I began to relax. I cozied up to her. “Am I your hero?” I asked.

“Wanna party, big boy?”
"I thought you’d never ask."

We were pretty cramped. Miss Tillie’s breasts were the size of footstools—not that I minded. I opened the door a crack.

“No offense,” I said, “but what say we let a little air out of you. We’ll have a deeper, more meaningful relationship.”

I searched her anatomy for a plug. Every time I poked her she repeated her famous line. I could see how it might grow tiresome in a year or two, but for now all I wanted was that plug. It was on her toe. “This might tickle,” I warned. I eased the plug out and warm air sprayed on my knuckles. “Nothing like letting off a little steam.” I tried keeping her amused.

“Pssssssssssst,” went Miss Tillie’s toe. A jet of air zoomed up my nose and my fingers slipped off the plug. “Pffffffffffffff!” said Miss Tillie. She flew around the closet like a mad hornet then shot out the door. I watched her fly down the hall straight into the face of old Mrs. Gottlieb, the butcher’s wife, who was carrying a sack of groceries. All of them, Miss Tillie, Mrs. Gottlieb, and the groceries went tumbling down a stairwell, crash, bam, boom!

My neighbor saw it all. “I just seen your mother tackle Mrs. Gottlieb!” he shouted.

“It’s her medication,” I said.

We ran to the bottom of the stairwell, stepping over broken pickle jars, mustard, pigs feet, toilet paper, and two gray wigs. Old Mrs. Gottlieb wasn’t dead, but she was knocked silly. And bald. Miss Tillie was wrapped around her throat like a scarf.

“Holy!” said my neighbor.
I set to work untangling them. The old lady was groaning and Miss Tillie was hissing her last hiss. “Take from my neck zis crazy madwoman!” cried Mrs. Gottlieb. When I finally pried them apart, Miss Tillie drooped in my arms like a gutted fish.

“Your mother don’t look so good,” said my neighbor.

“She’s a little winded,” I said.

From up above we heard the clump-clump-clump of heavy boots and a blast of foreign cuss words.

“It’s Gottlieb, the butcher,” my neighbor cautioned. “I’ll bet he has his cleaver. He never leaves home without it. You better clear outa here, and don’t stop till you see Brazil.”

For once I took Lou’s advice. I clutched Miss Tillie and hightailed it out of the building. I didn’t slow down for many blocks. Finally I snuck into an alley. Since I didn’t have a hand pump, I tried blowing Miss Tillie up by mouth. It was a real chore. Everything on her sagged. And something was wrong with her voice. She sounded like Louis Armstrong.

“Miss Tillie!” I said. “Miss Tillie!”

“Wun-a-par-tee-beee-buuuu.” She was sounding less like Louis Armstrong and more like a sick cow.

“Um. Miss Tillie?” It was time to level with her. “The blush is off the rose.”

I left her there. Two small boys got hold of her and began arguing over ownership. One had her foot, the other had her head. They pulled in opposite directions. The last I saw of her she was half a block long.

“She’ll never be lonely,” I consoled myself by saying.
All I had to my name was a solitary token from the Village Book Nook. I tossed it to a kid selling newspapers and headed down the street scanning the want ads. Accountants. Loan officers. Diesel mechanics...

Anything but literature.
Griff awoke to bright sunlight and a man’s hard voice.

“You best come out and show yourself!” the voice commanded roughly. “I seen you!”

Griff reached for his canvas satchel with the knife in it. Through a crack in the shed he could see raggedy trouser cuffs drooped over muddy field boots. Like exclamation marks the prongs of a pitchfork plunged into the damp earth beside the boots. He tumbled out of the shed amid wet straw and corncobs. Once on his feet, he found himself looking into a face rubbed raw by wind and sun. The farmer made no gesture, just stood squinting at Griff through quizzical gray eyes. On his head was a frayed straw hat with the brim dipped low. Wisps of rust-colored hair straggled out over ears rubbery and red.

“You stay the night there?” the man asked. “In my shed?”

Griff narrowed his eyes against the morning sun. He nodded and brushed straw from his hair.

“And who might you be?”


“Tyler?” The farmer tightened his grip on the pitchfork. “Not one a them no ’count Coolidge County Tylers?”

“I ain’t never been to no Coolidge County,” Griff said.

“You sure?”

“Right sure.”
“Where you from then?”

“Down the Panhandle—Florida.”

“Why, you’re just a young-un. Mite too young, I’d wager, to be wanderin’ this far from home. Augusta’s just up the road.”

“I’m eighteen,” Griff lied. “And a half.”

The man tilted his head. “Runnin’ off, hm.”

“Hell, no! I’m takin’ me a trip’s all.”

“No call to blaspheme,” said the farmer. “Man gives me his word, I take it.”

Griff said, “If you’re in a fret about your shed, I didn’t take nothin’. It was rainin’ last night and I needed a place to get.”

The farmer’s eyes rested on the satchel clutched in Griff’s left hand. It contained clothes, money, and the knife. Griff switched it to his other hand.

“Yet?”

“What?”

“You et?” the man repeated.

“No.”

“Come up the house. Wife’s got breakfast.”

“I told you.”

“Man’s gonna travel, he needs something on his belly.”

There was no arguing with that, and Griff couldn’t remember his last mouthful. He just knew it was smart to keep moving.

“Ain’t another farm for seven-eight mile. Won’t be no stoppin’ off place, neither.

Gonna be a hot one, son. But. You do to suit yourself.”
Griff stared across the field and a rolling meadow to the skirts of a thick pine forest. Near the forest ran the endless strip of blacktop he’d traveled along the night before, careful to stick close to the trees. The day would be hot, all right. And long.

The farmer motioned for Griff to accompany him and they walked across a barren stretch of ground. It had been light for less than an hour, and the Georgia sun was already hot on their necks. The sky was a cloudless blue; only the wet earth that sank beneath their feet was tell-tale of the storm that raged hours earlier.

Before them was a two-story frame house that begged for paint. Thirty yards from the house stood a shabby red barn, the house’s poor relation. Next to the barn was a rusted-out Ford pickup mounted on blocks, weeds poking up from beneath its frame. Griff followed the man across a dirt yard. They walked past three scrawny chickens that looked like cheap lawn ornaments. The farmer leaned his pitchfork against a wall.

They stamped mud off their boots then crossed a sagging porch through a screened door into a spacious kitchen. Griff looked around. The plaster on the walls was chipped. In some places boards shone through. On one wall was a faded picture of Jesus. Beneath it were the letters “Blessings on our home,” faint and grease-spattered. It looked to Griff as if it read “---sin--- on our home” because of missing letters. The furniture had a rough, second-hand quality, but the room was warm and homey with the aromas of cooking food. A short woman with straight brown hair parted down the middle hustled about doing twenty things at once, or so it seemed. Her body hummed with wonderful energy. On seeing this new face enter her kitchen, she wiped her hands on an apron.

“Best put on another plate,” the farmer directed.
The woman brushed a strand of hair from her forehead. Her appearance was plain, almost homely, but her eyes were gentle.

"Name’s Joe Tyler," said her husband, then added significantly, "No kin to them cussed Coolidge County Tylers...Right?" He spoke sharply to Griff.

"Never been near there," Griff assured him.

"Them varmints swoop down on us time and again to cause commotion," the farmer explained. "Like as not, I’m no wheres near my shotgun when it happens."

"We’d be pleased to have you set with us, Joe," the woman said. Her voice matched her eyes for gentleness.

"Got a mind to wash up, son, pump’s outside. Me, I done washed," the farmer said for his wife’s benefit.

While outside splashing water in his face, Griff could hear the murmur of their voices but couldn’t make out the words. He felt sure they were talking about him and knew when he stopped pumping, they’d stop talking. He dragged a rough towel across his face, slicked his hair back with his fingers, then returned to the kitchen. His host was at the head of the table waiting to be fed, a tattered Bible by his plate. He was bare-headed, and his hair was plastered down where the hat had been. A boy and girl of about six and eight were lingering next to the pantry, watching their guest.

"I’m Gus Latimer. This here’s my wife, Dora."

Griff’s eyes met hers.

"And them two yonder’s our young-uns, Collie and Li’l Gus. Y’all come in and say hello!"

Griff looked at the two and nodded. He never knew what to say to kids.

Griff pulled the chair out and sat down at the table. He placed the satchel on the floor where he could feel it against his ankle. In minutes, Mrs. Latimer had finished preparing the meal. Griff saw before him what looked like a feast: buckwheat cakes piled high in golden stacks on two china plates, a basket of warm biscuits, sweet butter and currant jelly, a steaming pot of coffee, and a clay pitcher of buttermilk with a crack zigzagging down its side like a lightning streak. She called the kids to table, Latimer read a passage from Ezekiel, then everyone dug in.

“Gus tells me you’re from the Panhandle,” said Mrs. Latimer, buttering a biscuit.

Griff bunched some food into the side of his mouth. “Yes’m.”

“Anywhere near Panama City?”

“Closer to the Georgia line.”

“I’ve kinfolk in Panama City,” said Mrs. Latimer.

Griff nodded. He’d never been anywhere near the Panhandle, Panama City, or the Georgia line.

“How far you goin’?” asked Mr. Latimer. He said it leisurely so it didn’t sound nosy.

“Carolina. Visitin’ kin of my own,” Griff answered, wishing for a change of subject. He had a queasy feeling this man knew from the start who he was and what he was doing—that among other things, he’d stolen sixty-eight dollars from his uncle (all he could lay his hands on) and had run away in the dead of night two days ago. He searched Gus Latimer for a sign.
“Ain’t the coolest way to get around,” Latimer remarked, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Only a nigger’d be fool enough to cross the state without a hat.”

“Gus,” said Mrs. Latimer.

“Fact is, young-uns these days don’t got the sense God gave a nigger. No offense, son.”

The two kids giggled.

“I get by,” Griff said flatly.

“Gus.” His wife made no attempt to hide her disdain.

“All the same, you take a hat of mine ’fore you set out. Keep the sun off what’s left of your brain.” He winked at his wife to show no harm was meant, but she didn’t smile.

They ate for a while in silence.

Then Mrs. Latimer said, “My, but that certainly is an ugly looking gash on your neck. How in the world did you get that?”

She was referring to the wound he’d received some weeks back when his uncle brought the butt of his bullwhip down on him in a drunken rage. It turned his stomach to think about it.

“Horse threw me.” Griff said the first thing that came to mind. “Tossed me against a fence post.”

Mrs. Latimer clucked her tongue and looked sorrowful. Griff half-way expected her to reach across the table and dab butter on it.

Mr. Latimer squinted at the gash. “Lucky you ain’t dead. Had a stepbrother trampled by a horse once.”
“Squished his guts out all over the ground!” the Latimers’ son announced gleefully, and Latimer shot him a look.

“Sorry sack a manure use to date a Tyler,” Gus Latimer murmured. “So I ’spect it serves him right.” His shoulders hunched over his food and he sipped noisily from his cup. “What with them Tylers and the work load around this place, I just don’t know.” He glanced appealingly to his wife. “Makes a man wonder. I swear.” To Griff he said, “Looks like them hands seen their share of work. Don’t suppose you ever considered farm work.”

“Could be,” Griff replied; in fact, he’d had his mind set on farming all his life.

The kids, who sat directly across from Griff, were suddenly exchanging whispers. Pretty soon the girl started giggling and that set her brother off. The next thing, they were both covering their mouths with their napkins.

“Collie! Li’l Gus!” said Mrs. Latimer. “What ails you two? Sit up, for heaven’s sake. We have a guest.”

The boy stopped but the girl kept going. She couldn’t stop. Girls can never stop, Griff thought, even after you tell them. He thought of Dodie Wise, who’d worked with him on his uncle’s farm. Blonde and bouncy Dodie. She teased him unmercifully, until one day he threatened to drown her in the horse trough. “Just you try, Griff Bonner—see how long I can hold my breath!” Then she cupped his cheeks in her hands and whispered into his lips, “I can hold my breath longer’n any girl you ever met...Want to see?”

How many sweaty nights had he tossed and turned with Dodie on his mind?

As soon as she could stop giggling, the girl managed to say, “But it’s his nose, Mama—it’s on upside down!” And she laughed so hard she nearly fell off her chair.
“Colleen Latimer, you apologize. This instant!” snapped Mrs. Latimer, red-faced.

Her laughter was familiar. When Griff was eleven, he’d gotten into a hassle with some boys at school, and while they were grappling around in the dirt, swinging and gouging at one another, one of them sank his teeth into Griff’s nose, biting clear through the cartilage. Part of the nose had to be removed; it had turned him into even more of a scrapper.

“Collie!” Gus Latimer’s voice whipped across the table with the severity of Griff’s uncle, making him cringe.

“Sorry,” Collie told Griff, then added brightly, “even if your nose is on upside down!”

Her brother howled with laughter. Latimer’s hand lashed out and smacked the boy smartly in the mouth, but his head snapped immediately back into place and he went on eating his breakfast, used to it.

Griff never got used to it. The slaps, the punches, the put downs, with his younger brother Simon standing by grinning. “You can’t be like Simon, can you!” he could hear his uncle roar. “No, you gotta favor your goddamn pa in the state pen, damn his worthless soul to perdition! Well, we got the means to correct the situation...Simon, fetch my whip!” His brother, happy to oblige, would already have the whip in hand. Their uncle made it abundantly clear that Simon would one day inherit the farm, the farm that was promised to Griff by their father, now doing time for armed robbery.

Griff’s thoughts turned to the events of a few nights before, reliving them in slow motion, savoring each detail. “Come on, whip me now.” He nearly repeated the words
out loud at the Latimers’ table. “Where’s your tongue, huh, boy? Go on, Simon, fetch the whip, boy. Go fetch the whip, Simon. Go!”

“What do hummingbirds hum?”

“What?”

“What do hummingbirds hum?” Collie Latimer repeated the question.

Griff stared at his plate.

“They don’t know the words! Get it? They hum ’cause they don’t know the words!”

Griff stared blankly at Mrs. Latimer. Li’il Gus tried on a grin while Big Gus chewed seriously on a buckwheat cake.

“Do you know Glenna Simmons?” Collie asked.

“Who?”

“Dear, of course he doesn’t know Glenna Simmons,” said Mrs. Latimer.

“She’s in my class at school,” said Collie.

“I seen Glenna Simmons suck on a wart,” Li’il Gus blurted out. “It wasn’t even her own.”

“I wasn’t talkin’ to you!” Collie kicked her brother under the table. He cussed at her then ducked to avoid his father’s backhand, which swooped over his head like a low-flying bird.

“Glenna Simmons thinks she owns the world,” Collie explained morosely. “When she grows up she’s gonna marry a prince—only know what?”

“Collie,” said her mother.

“I ain’t marryin’ no foolish prince. I’m marryin’ a king! I’ll be a queen while ol’ Glenna Simmons is only a princess. Guess who’ll boss who around then?”
“Enough!” boomed Mr. Latimer in a voice that reminded Griff once again of his uncle. The smirk on the boy’s face made Griff think of Simon; made him want to lunge across and wipe the table with that smirk. He knew the kid was staring at his nose, dying to make a comment.

“Joe, will you help yourself to seconds?” Mrs. Latimer offered, and he felt her hand on his wrist. It was warm and unexpected and he withdrew it as if snake bit.

Nothing more was said until they finished eating. Gus Latimer belched and got up from the table. “Stay and set a spell,” he said. “I’ll fetch you that hat.”

Griff took that as a sign. He remembered somewhere in the house there was a shotgun. Before Latimer had gotten far, he said, “Ma’am,” throwing down his napkin, “that was as fine a meal as I’ve had.” He reached into his satchel. “Now I got a little something for you folks.”

The woman was easiest. The knife slipped into her so smoothly that he nearly expected her to thank him. As smooth as scooping his brother’s eyes out had been. Next he did a very smart thing. He gave the astonished farmer a deep slash in his right thigh before going after the kids. The boy was wiry; he put up a fight. It took more stabs than Griff would have imagined to keep him still. He could feel the strain in his wrist with every stroke of the blade. The girl ran out by the barn, huddled in a tight ball, screaming her head off. But what was the rush? He grabbed a handful of her hair and tilted her head back, as if for a kiss.

“Why do hummingbirds hum?” Griff asked and sliced off her nose, enjoying the look of surprise that filled her face. The knife slid effortlessly across her throat and she went down without a sound.
Back at the house, the farmer had crawled outside, leaving a snake-like trail from his ruined leg.

"Lookin' for this?" said Griff, reaching for the pitchfork.


Griff remembered how resistant the muscles in his uncle's back had been, what a chore it was to drive the knife in. So with a hard thrust of the pitchfork he pinned the farmer, squirming, to the ground. It tried his patience waiting for the man to settle down.

In the kitchen, Griff looked at Mrs. Latimer, who from her lake of blood stared with sightless eyes at the cracked ceiling. They reminded him of Dodie Wise's eyes as they stared at him from the bottom of the horse trough. She hadn't been able to hold her breath that long after all. It was Mrs. Latimer Griff liked best. She'd shown true kindness and deserved better than this hell hole. He covered her face with a napkin.

As Griff stood eating scraps of food off the breakfast table, his thoughts turned to those Coolidge County Tylers, who "swooped down now and again to cause commotion." In the future he would have to be on guard against them. He'd have to find that shotgun. The last thing he needed was trouble on the farm.
When Corky Perkins joined the Romans, I couldn’t believe it. Corky Perkins? A Roman? Well, if he could get in, why couldn’t I?

"Forget it." Corky crushed my dream at baseball practice. "You can’t be in sixth grade and be a Roman."

"You're in sixth grade."

"Yeah, but you’re forgetting. I failed a grade."

The Romans was a club started by junior high school kids. The leader was this guy named Lance Brando, a seventh grader. I don’t think Lance Brando was his real name, but so what? I wished I had a name like that.

"To be a Roman you have to be special." Corky tapped his chest.

"Oh, you’re special, all right," I agreed.

"Thanks for noticing."

Lance Brando and his men (other seventh graders) strutted around like they owned every street in town. And now Corky Perkins—a sixth grader like me—would strut with them. I couldn’t stand it.

"Big deal," said Ross Hooker. "A bunch of losers pretending to be tough. Ask me if I care."

Ross was Corky’s best friend. He tried to get into the Romans at the same time Corky did, but Lance and the others chased him off.

He cared.

"I hear they have a hideout," I said.
“So?”

“So. I think it’d be cool to have a hideout.”

“Then go hide. See if anyone tries to find you,” said Ross.

What made the Romans special was they didn’t take crap off anyone, not even high school kids. Or teachers. They were like Knights of the Round Table—always together, always helping one another out of scrapes. Lance was their King Arthur, deciding what adventures they would have. In order to get into the Romans you had to prove yourself by doing a brave deed. Lance himself had saved a dog from drowning. The dog’s owners gave him a reward and Lance was a hero. Kids started hanging around him, as if by doing that, they’d be heroes, too. Pretty soon he formed the Romans with guys his own age.

There were five or six of them.

“So what brave deed did you do?” I asked Corky.

“I can’t tell,” he replied.

“Why not?”

“Top secret.”

“Give me a break.”

“No, really. It’s against the rules,” said Corky. “And besides, it’d be like bragging.”

“That never stopped you before. And what about Lance? He saved a dog’s life then went around telling everyone.”

“The rules have changed since then.”

“I’ll just bet they have.”

Corky was the kind of guy who if he did do a brave deed there’d have to be something in it for him. Say if he tackled you to get you out of the way of a speeding car,
you can bet his hand would be in your back pocket lifting your wallet as the two of you rolled across the parking lot. That was Corky.

"Tell me something," Alex Banner said to me one day in the school cafeteria. "Do you really want to be in a club that has Corky Perkins in it?"

"It's not Corky, it's the club," I told him. "Those guys get respect. Plus they have adventures and do brave deeds—like knights."

"Then let's start our own club," Alex suggested, his eyes big and spooky behind his black-rimmed glasses. "A math or science club. We can carry slide rules in our belts like swords and help people do their homework."

I got up and moved to another table.

I thought, okay, so I'm in sixth grade. I could still be as brave as any seventh grader, if I tried. Watching all those cowboy and war movies, I knew what bravery was. The oak tree behind my house was filled with outlaws and Indians and pirates. I ran them off every Saturday. It was my job. Being brave was doing what you had to do when you had to do it.

But could I save a dog from drowning without drowning myself? I wasn't such a great swimmer. Plus I was afraid of water. I wondered how far out in the lake that dog was when Lance rescued it. Was it in the middle or close to the edge? That would make a big difference. I decided to find out.

"Why don't you ask the dog's owners?" said Chip Keller.

"Do you know who they are?"
"Of course. The Jamesons, over on Chesterton Parkway. My dad sells them a new Cadillac every fall. So here’s a hint. If you’re going to save somebody’s dog, make sure it’s somebody rich so you’ll get a reward."

After school I pedaled my bike to Chesterton Parkway. When I saw the shiny black gates and flagstone walkway leading up to a white porch so wide it looked like Thomas Jefferson should be sitting on it, I nearly turned around and pedaled home. But then I thought, where’s the bravery in that?

I marched up to the huge red double doors and lifted the brass knocker, shaped like a lion’s head, and pounded three times, hard. A colored guy in a white coat let me in. The Jamesons were having cocktails in a room big enough to be my house. They acted glad to see me even though they had no idea who I was.

“I’m sorry. I thought we paid,” said Mr. Jameson, setting aside his drink. He called out to a maid. “Marge, my money clip’s under the mirror in the hall. Will you please pay this young man?”

He thought I was the paper boy.

I said, “My name’s Scotty Hansen. I came to ask about Lance Brando.”

“Ah!” Mr. Jameson offered me a seat, and his wife told Marge to forget about the money and bring me a cupcake instead. “So you’re a friend of Lance’s?”

I wondered if by saying yes he’d let me move in.

Just then a girl of about eight skipped into the room behind a gray poodle the size of a fat mouse. The poodle had on a yellow-and-black checkered sweater and carried a rubber ball in its mouth. The sweater matched the girl’s dress. They both looked silly.

“Brittany, this is Scotty Hansen,” Mrs. Jameson announced. “He’s Lance’s friend.”
“So?”

“And this,” said Mr. Jameson, scooping the poodle up like an old sock somebody’d left on the floor, “is Mademoiselle Francine.” Her name was bigger than she was. Mr. Jameson kissed the dog’s snout. She still held onto the ball, which looked like a growth.

“Is that—I mean, is that who Lance rescued?” I asked.

“What we think happened,” Mrs. Jameson explained from a couch the size of an ocean liner, “is someone—some child, no doubt—tossed Francine’s ball in the lake and when she jumped in after it, she got tangled up in fish wire. Had it not been for Lance—”

She fanned herself with her cocktail napkin, as if the memory was just too hard.

I said, “So she was, um, pretty far out there? In the water, I mean.”

“Oh, yes. And would have drowned,” Mr. Jameson confirmed, “but for our hero.” He clucked his tongue appreciatively. “That Lance.”

“Are you writing a book, Handsome?” asked the daughter.

“Hansen,” I corrected her.

“Brittany,” said her mother.

“Well, he sure does ask a lot of questions, now doesn’t he?” Brittany said primly, and her father handed her the poodle.

“Well, I guess I am sort of.” I heard myself tell a lie. “I’m doing a report for school. On bravery.”

“Then you picked the genuine article.” Mr. Jameson winked a manly wink and took a sip of his cocktail.

“And such a well-mannered boy for being so—well—” Mrs. Jameson cleared her throat. “Anyway, isn’t it curious how a common child like that can make such an
enormous difference in the lives of people he doesn’t know?” She seemed to be staring off, as if the idea was still too new.

“How about putting me in your book, Handsome?” said Brittany Jameson. “I spell my name with two T’s.”

She hugged the poodle so tight its eyes bugged out nearly the size of the ball in its mouth.

All the way home I thought about what Mrs. Jameson said—how somebody like Lance Brando could do something brave, maybe even risk his life for somebody he doesn’t know. And I wondered if she was thinking the same thing I was—could I be that brave? Then it came to me: Corky Perkins was a Roman.

Instead of going to the library the next day after school as I’d told my mom, I followed Corky, knowing he was on his way to the Romans’ hideout. Corky was a good ballplayer, but he didn’t know squat about covering his tracks. If I was a wild Indian, his scalp would’ve been decorating my belt. Every now and then he looked back over his shoulder and I’d duck behind a tree or a parked car.

I followed him up Cantor Drive, through Jollyman Park, across Fuzz Creek, down Jack Sweet Boulevard, and into a neighborhood everyone called Blood Town because on Saturday night the people who lived there got drunk and stuck each other with knives. Blood Town was always in the news, and Mom told me I was never, never, never to set foot in there. So when I saw Corky marching right into the middle of Blood Town, I had second thoughts about being a Roman. But then I remembered that this wasn’t Saturday night, it was broad daylight. And my mom wasn’t around.

I took a deep breath and followed Corky.
A man in an undershirt came out of his house to empty some trash in a can, and I crossed to the other side of the street. Two boys were headed my way bouncing a basketball. I jumped into the middle of someone’s lawn and went into a low crouch, Indian style, and made a grr-ing sound in case they pulled a knife, but they went by as if I wasn’t there. I hurried to catch up with Corky, who’d just rounded a corner. A little girl with one pigtail shorter than the other rushed up and tugged my sleeve.

“You help me get Miss Sneed?” she asked.

“What?”

“She’s under that car.”

I poked my head under the car and, sure enough, a doll lay face down in a puddle of grease.

“I can’t reach her,” said the girl.

Some boys my age or older were playing three-way catch in the street. One of them yelled, “Hey, Goony Bird, who’s your boyfriend?”

“Shut up, Turd Nose!” the girl yelled back.

“Is that your brother?” I asked. “Why don’t you get him to get your doll?”

“He’s the one threw her under there,” the girl replied.

I looked around for Corky. He was nowhere in sight.

“Jeez,” I said.

“Please?” said the girl. “She’s my only doll.”

I grunted, lay down on my stomach on the curb, and reached under the car. My fingers could barely pinch the doll’s arm. It felt sticky. “Here,” I said.

But the girl was gone and I was surrounded by the three boys.
“You like playing with dolls?” said her brother, yanking me to my feet. He shoved me against the fender.

“Hey,” I said.

“Shut up,” ordered one of his friends.

“Who you think you are, nosing around in other people’s business?”

“I’ll tell you who he is—he’s a Roman!” said a fourth voice, and we all turned to see who had spoken. It was Corky Perkins.

“Who the hell are you?” asked the girl’s brother.

“I’m a Roman, too,” said Corky.

They laughed. “A what?”

The boys started walking toward Corky. He didn’t budge. Instead, he reached inside his shirt and grinned fiendishly.

“Watch out, men, he’s got a knife,” said one of the boys. They backed off.

Corky signaled me with his other hand. I went over and he whispered, “Remember last week’s game when you cleared the bases?”

I nodded.

“Think you can run that fast again?”

“Faster, if I have to.”

“You have to.”

We took off running.

For several blocks I heard sneakers slapping the pavement behind us and the sound of kids cussing. A rock sailed past my ear. Corky and I ran out of Blood Town, up Jack Sweet Boulevard, and across Fuzz Creek. We didn’t stop until we were in Jollyman Park.
We plopped down on our backs in some grass to catch our breaths, and Corky broke out laughing.

“What’s so funny?” I asked.

“Did you really think I’d lead you to our hideout?” he said.

“You mean you knew?”

“I could spot you a mile away.”

“Jeez.”

“Hey, look on the bright side. You made it out of Blood Town...alive. Thanks to me.”

“I heard you tell those guys I was a Roman.”

“Oh, that was just to give them a scare.”

“Yeah, I could see them shaking.”

Corky hopped up. “Let’s go find Lance and the guys.”

“You think you can get me in?”

“Oh, sure, especially with that thing in your hand.”

I flung the oily doll into some bushes.

“Close your eyes,” said Corky. “I’m going to blindfold you.” He tied a smelly bandanna around my eyes. “Now take off your belt.”

“What? No way.”

“Idiot. You think I’m going to hold your hand? I’ll lead you by your belt.”

We walked around for I don’t know how long, and I got the crazy feeling we were traveling in circles. I was afraid we’d end up back in Blood Town. When Corky finally yanked off my blindfold, we were in front of a broken down shack in some woods. The
shack had what was supposed to say ROMANS painted in red on the front, but some letters were missing because a couple of boards were gone, and what it said was OMAN.

Corky shoveled me through a creaky door that looked like a dirty band-aid clinging to someone’s arm. Inside it was dark, dingy, and smoke-filled. I felt about as safe as I did in Blood Town.

“Who’s the punk, Perkins?” asked a growly voice.

“Shut up, Jim,” said someone else. It was Lance Brando. He crushed a cigarette out under his boot and stood over me. My nose came up to his chin. “This the kid?”

“He made it in and out of Blood Town,” Corky revealed. “No sweat.”

So the whole thing was a set-up. Corky had led me into Blood Town just to see if I’d have the guts to follow.

“I had to beat up three guys to get him out.” Corky spit on the ground.

“Perkins here says you got a helluva throwin’ arm,” said Lance.

“So does that mean I can be a Roman?” I asked, looking from face to face.

“There’s a little something called initiation,” Lance answered slyly.

“But I went to Blood Town,” I reminded him. I heard some of the guys snicker. They were squatting around in a circle, smoking cigarettes.

“It takes more than a waltz through Blood Town on a sunny day to be a Roman,” said Lance.

“Hey, Lance, how many more of these snot noses we going to take in?” asked one of the Romans. “Why’n’t we just open a daycare?”

The others laughed and Corky made a fist. One look from Lance and they shut up.
“Thing is,” said Lance, “being a Roman’s like being a soldier. You got to take orders. We watch out for each other.”

“You mean like knights?”

“Yeah.” Lance laughed. “Like knights. Hear that, guys? Kid’s a thinker.”

“So what’ve I got to do?” I asked and hoped it wouldn’t have anything to do with dogs or water.

“You really think you’re that brave?”

“Just look at me,” I said and wished I hadn’t because suddenly they were looking at me.

“Okay, here’s what.” Lance told me what I had to do.

Afterwards, Corky blindfolded me and led me by my belt back to Jollyman Park.

“Think you can find your way home from here?”

I said, “I don’t get it. I thought I had to do something brave.”

“You do.”

“But what Lance told me sounds stupid.”

“Do you want to be a Roman or don’t you?”

“Of course, but—”

“Then quit bellyaching and do like you’re told.”

“And something else,” I said. “All those cigarettes.”

“Nobody said you have to smoke,” said Corky, whose breath smelled like cigarettes.

“You just have to follow orders.”

When I got home Mom was upset because I was late for dinner. She said, “Scotty, are you sure you were at the library all this time?”
"I have a big project," I told her.

"On what?" she asked.

"The Romans."

Late Thursday night, I snuck out of the house like Lance told me. I met him and the other Romans in a corner of the soccer field at Crosswaite Junior High. They were sitting around in the grass, looking bored.

"See? I told you he'd show," said Corky, relieved.

"You ready, Hansen?" asked Lance.

The other guys didn’t say much. One of them lit a cigarette and Lance swatted it out of his hand. "Asshole! You want the enemy to spot us?"

"Enemy? What enemy?" I said, looking around.

"Now pay attention—there's the school. You'll find a loose window down by the back steps, just over to the right. Use this." Lance handed me a flashlight. "Don’t turn it on till you’re inside. You’ll be in the furnace room. Find your way up to room 234. Kleiger’s room. Swipe something to prove you were there. And it can't be chalk or an eraser or dumb shit like that. It’s got to be something personal, like a radio."

"You mean you want me to steal?"

"Not steal. Borrow. To prove you made it in. Jim here’s got Kleiger’s class first thing in the morning, so he’ll put back whatever you take. Use chalk to write this on the blackboard." He told me something nasty.

"I can’t write that!"

"Nobody’ll know it’s you," said Lance. "You don’t even go to this school."
“I will some day. And anyway, what’s this got to do with rescuing people and saving lives and stuff?”

“Between me and you—” Lance put his arm around my shoulders. “There’s something you need to know. That teacher in 234? That guy Kleiger? He’s a Nazi.”

“He’s a what?”

“A Nazi. He killed people in World War II, and not on the battlefield like a brave soldier but in concentration camps. Innocent people. Jews. Some of ’em were kids. Kleiger murdered ’em in cold blood.”

I looked at Corky who nodded vigorously.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“I had a suspicion,” said Lance, “so I snooped in his desk one day and saw his diary.”

“You read a teacher’s diary?”

Lance snapped his fingers, and one of the boys tossed him a small, leather-bound book. “It’s all right here—thanks to our newest member.” He glanced at Corky.

“You mean you took it?” I said.

“It’s how I got to be a Roman,” Corky said proudly.

“Now get a load of this.” Lance read a page out of Kleiger’s diary, stuff so horrible I had to tell him to stop. “Anyway, now you know why we have to do our part to get rid of this piece of slime, before he gets kids thinking like him. That’s how Nazis do.”

“Jeez,” I said.

Lance snapped the book shut. “Now you got a job to do. It’s either that or run home to your mama.”

“I don’t know,” I said.
“Let me talk to him.” Corky jerked me aside. “Listen, you. You pestered me for weeks about being a Roman. Now here’s your chance. Lance said on the way over here that if you mess things up they’ll kick me out, on account of I vouched for you.”

“But, Corky, I didn’t know I was going to have to steal.”

“You heard Lance. Jim’ll put it back.”

“Like he put back that guy’s diary?”

“That’s different. It’s evidence. The guy’s a Nazi.”

“I don’t know,” I said again.

“And besides—you owe me,” said Corky. “I got you out of Blood Town, remember?”

“Yeah, but you didn’t beat up three guys.”

“Okay, so I exaggerated. I still you got you out.”

“Fine. But I’m not writing bad words on anybody’s blackboard.”

Before crossing the soccer field, I noticed they were all doing some kind of secret handshake.

The window Lance described was open a crack, just as he said. I hesitated before prying it wider, then slipped inside. There were hissing and whirring noises. It was hot in the furnace room. And smelly. My nerves were jumping so bad it felt like someone was popping popcorn under my skin. There in the dark, two furnaces looked like twin monsters with angry eyes. And it crossed my mind, what if that Nazi teacher guy was hiding somewhere waiting to capture the kid who stole his diary? He’d probably stuff me in a furnace like he used to do to Jewish kids in World War II. Did I want to be a Roman bad enough for that?
While I stood there trying to decide what to do, a voice called out and I thought I saw a hand reach toward me in the darkness. I made for the window.

The voice ordered me to "Stop!"

"I was just leaving," I said.

"I know where you live," said the voice.

If he knew that, he'd call my mom...and the police! But if he was the Nazi teacher guy, he'd stuff me in a furnace.

"Come over here, boy."

"No." I clicked the flashlight on but all I saw were shadows. "I took a wrong turn," I said. "I was on my way to the library."

"Come here," the voice said again, and it carried a sound I didn't like. "I could use some help." And suddenly I knew what the sound was. *Pain.*

I flashed the light over the furnaces.

"Down here."

Lying on the cement floor a short ways off was a man in dungarees propped up on one elbow like he was at a picnic. He had on what looked like an engineer's cap, so I couldn't make out his face.

"What're you doing?" I asked but stayed where I was.

"I need some help," he said again, and I saw him do something with his leg.

I took a few short steps, the flashlight aimed like a gun. I felt something sticky under my sneakers, like when somebody spills soda at the movies.

"I'm losin blood," said the man.
I looked for signs of a trap. Maybe he’d been ambushed by Nazis. Maybe he was a Nazi.

"Is your name—Kleiger?" I asked.

"Kleiger? Kleiger’s the history teacher. I’m the janitor."

I splashed the light over his face. Spokes of white hair shot out from under his cap. He waved for me to take the light away.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Gashed my leg on this infernal thing." He cocked his head at a furnace. "Was on a ladder bout to change a bulb when the blame thing slipped from under me." He put his hand on the hurt leg which I could see had part of his shirttail tied round it. "Got the bleeding stopped some, but I fear it’ll get bad again." His voice was raspy. "I need an ambulance."

"I’ll run home and make the call," I said.

"No time," said the janitor. "Go upstairs to the office."

"I can’t."

He surprised me by grabbing my ankle. "I didn’t stay alive sixty-three years to bleed to death in a school basement. Now go make that call." He told me how to find the office. The school was dark and spooky like a haunted house, and it was while I was creeping down the hall with the flashlight that I knew I wasn’t cut out to be a Roman. All I wanted was to be home in bed. I found the phone, dialed the operator, and gave her the name of the school. She wanted to know my name and I made one up. She said an ambulance would be along shortly. I picked my way back to where the old man was, half afraid he’d be dead, but he was where I’d left him, propped on his elbow.
“Dang fool,” he muttered. I thought he meant me, but he said, “Been climbin ladders fifty years, and now this.”

“Well, um, can I do anything else,” I asked, “before I, uh—” I poked my thumb at the window.

“Could use some company.”

“I’ve got to go,” I said. I watched him look me over.

“You’re a little young to be burglarin, ain’t you?”

“I’m not a burglar.”

“Oh, that’s right. You took a wrong turn.”

“I know my way now.”

“Which way’s that?”

“You’re going to be okay, right?”

“More’n likely. But I could still bleed to death before that ambulance gets here. Sometimes they stop to pick up other passengers. Another thing,” said the old man.

“Them bloody tracks don’t match mine. I’d be hard pressed to explain how they got there.”

I hugged my flashlight to my chest.

“Pull up a bucket. Have a seat. Might as well get acquainted...Name’s Howard Whaley.”

“I have to go home.”

“And where might that be?”

“You said you knew.”
A little smile creased the old man's leathery face. "You're bad as Gert. Sees straight through my fibs." Then he took a deep breath. "But go ahead if you like. Just keep in mind the law has ways of figuring people's tracks."

I sat down on an upturned bucket and rested the flashlight across my knees. Before he was done, Howard Whaley had fished the whole truth from me.

"Lenny Kleiger, a Nazi? Haw! Now I've heard it all," he said.

"Why's it funny?" I asked.

"It ain't particularly. Lenny Kleiger's Jewish."

"What? A Jewish Nazi?"

"He was in the camps. Poor soul lost his family there, so I'm told."

"How can that be?"

"If you ask me, the real Nazi's the one sent you in here. That boy—that Lance?—he's bad news. Lenny Kleiger went outa his way to help him get straight on account of a bad family situation. Kid turned on him like a mad dog. Wrote hate slogans all over his blackboard. He's been suspended ever since."

"But Lance read me some of Kleiger's diary," I said.

"Saw it yourself, did you?" asked Howard Whaley.

I shook my head.

"Boy's got imagination, I'll hand him that—twisted, but clever, which makes him all the more dangerous. Even his name's not on the level. Real name's Henry or Charles, Charles or Henry. I can't remember."

"At least he saved a dog," I said.
“I heard that one, too,” said Mr. Wiggins with a sniff. “What seems likely, he was tryin to drown the poor critter and got caught in the act, then just sorta flipped things round to come out lookin the hero. He was caught drownin kittens some years back.” The old man’s eyes met mine and I felt sick to my stomach. “Wonder could you han me my pipe.” he said.

“How do I know you’re telling me right?” I said.


I found his pipe.

“I ain’t one to complain,” the old man grumbled, “but that ambulance can get here any time.” He checked on his leg before lighting his pipe. “Gert,” he said.

“Who?”

“My wife,” said the janitor. “Helps to say her name.”

“So what do you think’ll happen?” I asked.

“Hard to say,” said Mr. Whaley. He snapped flame from his match. His wrinkled face looked a map of dry riverbeds. “Law takes a dim view of breakin in places.”

“But that’s not what I was doing!”

“You were on your way to the library. Think a judge’ll buy that?”

Suddenly I didn’t know whether to keep sitting on the bucket or to throw up in it.

“On the other hand,” said Mr. Whaley, “I doubt I coulda hauled myself up them steps. Jury’s bound to consider that.”
We stared at each other through the smoke of his pipe, which had a toasted cherry smell that helped make me feel calm—that is, until I heard sirens. I knew an ambulance was coming, but I didn’t count on a policeman and the assistant principal. Before I knew it, the furnace room was crowded.

“Jus don’t call my wife,” Mr. Whaley kept telling the two guys in white coats who worked on his leg. “She has a condition.”

The assistant principal and the cop roamed around with flashlights, like prospectors hunting for gold. I pretended to be invisible.

“You lost blood but you’re going to be fine,” said one of the ambulance guys. “Lucky we got to you.”

“Hadn’t been for my grandson,” said Howard Whaley. He motioned at me with his pipe.

“Let’s ease you onto the stretcher.”

On the way out to the ambulance, the assistant principal patted my shoulder. “Nice work, son. Looks like you’re a real hero.”

Just before they loaded him into the ambulance, Mr. Whaley said to the cop, “What say you give my grandson a lift home? Hate for his folks to be in a fret.”

“Sure thing. What’s your name, son?”


The old man and I exchanged glances.

I told the officer where to drop me off. He waited until I was up to the front door, then I turned and waved and he drove off. Once he was out of sight, I crossed the street to
my real house. I climbed up over the back porch and through the window into my bedroom.

The hardest thing I had to do was get up for school the next morning. I felt like a zombie. Staying awake in class was harder than usual.

At lunchtime Corky Perkins came charging up to me. "Coward! Lily-livered, chicken-shit coward!"

"Whoa, lay off," I said. "You guys never said anything about a janitor."

"Big deal. Some old coot who sleeps in the corner. I snuck right past him. But not you! Oh, no, not you! You had to wake up the whole town, cops and all. Lance and the others kicked me out. I hope you're happy!"

Corky stomped off before I could remind him I was the bravest Roman of all.
The diner shone like a beacon in the night. Two of its electric letters, the N and the R, were missing. The remaining ones cast a splintered reflection on the wet pavement, like shards of glass.

Coulter was early. The faces of four or five customers turned toward him like sleepy cows as he stood dripping rain and stamping his feet inside the entrance. The air was grease-laden. Everything gleamed.

Coulter removed his jacket and took a place at the counter between two other men, a beefy-jowled truck driver and a teenager. Between each of them was an unoccupied stool. Coulter ordered coffee and cake. The waitress, in her early twenties, though distracted, did her job with spunk and energy. She served him coffee in a chipped enamel mug. It had a chicory flavor, but Coulter didn’t mind. He savored its warmth. Someone slipped coins into a juke box at the end of the counter. A dull, muffled sound emerged, the vocals and instruments straining to be heard.

“1963,” said the teenager. He didn’t look up from his plate of fries.

“What?” Coulter wasn’t sure he had been addressed, but there was no one sitting on the kid’s other side.

“The year that song was popular,” the kid explained. “A good year.”

“That so?” said Coulter.

“Hell of a lot better’n this one,” the kid insisted. “This year sucks the big one.”

He didn’t look more than nineteen. Probably didn’t know his history. Possibly a high school dropout.
“Not so good for the country,” Coulter surprised himself by saying. He had no wish to be drawn into conversation. “Kennedy was assassinated. JFK,” he added for the boy’s benefit.

“I wasn’t talking about the country, dickhead, I was talking about me,” came the boy’s surly reply, which had the effect of amusing Coulter. Took his mind off things.

“You weren’t even born then,” he said.

“My whole point.” The kid still didn’t look up. “My whole fucking point.”

Coulter finished his coffee and signaled the waitress for a refill. He looked at his watch then at the clock above the pastry rack. Maybe Brody changed his mind.

“Things’re always better then,” the teenager two stools down announced in brittle syllables.

“When’s that?” Coulter was losing interest.

“All those years before you’re born.”

Well, some days that’s true, Coulter felt like saying but didn’t want to encourage more talk. He glanced around the diner. An elderly couple sat in a booth, looking out at the rain. Though they were not conversing, their hands were linked on top of the table.

At the end of the counter, opposite the old people, was a bald man in a loose tie and rumpled suit, possibly a salesman. He was scanning selections on the juke box. When he read the titles and the names of the artists, his lips moved. Sometimes he smiled and nodded.

“Wanda Waits,” said the teenager.

“What?”

“Wanda Waits,” the boy repeated.
Coulter craved a cigarette. He reached for his pack. There was one left, damp with rain.

“Hadn’t been for her—” The kid balled a napkin up in his hand, leaving the sentence unfinished.

“It wouldn’t be such a bad year?” Coulter finished the sentence for him.

“You got it.” The kid looked at Coulter for the first time. His eyes reeked of sorrow. He felt inside his jacket, which boasted a varsity letter, and offered Coulter a cigarette.

“Thanks.”

The kid lit one for himself then slid the matches over the counter. “Sorry about the dickhead remark,” he said.

“Forget it.” Coulter lit the cigarette.

“It’s just—I mean. How’s it possible for one woman to make your whole life go so totally fucked?”

“You’re young,” said Coulter, which sounded like something a dickhead might say. He added, “There’ll be other women,” which wasn’t any better.

“Not for me.”

“You say that.”

“I’m thinking of doing something,” said the boy with the varsity letter.

Coulter’s eyes went back to the clock. Where the hell was Brody?

A cell phone went off. Everyone at the counter exchanged glances. Coulter said, “Oh.” He slid off his stool and hustled over to where his coat hung on a rack, shedding water. Reaching into a pocket, he said to no one in particular, “My wife got me this. I’m still not used to it.” He remembered what buttons to push. “So where are you?... At the
diner, where else?...Oh...the rain...yeah...sure. But hurry. Cake’s good, but the coffee leaves a lot to be desired.”

He returned to the counter and the truck driver got up. “You got it right about the coffee. Tastes like shit,” said the big man and tossed a bill onto his plate before shuffling out into the wet. Coulter was glad to see him go.

The old people were still in their booth. The salesman fiddled with the juke box.

Coulter tapped his mug with a spoon to get the waitress’s attention. She was on her cell phone delivering instructions to someone about a stuck video.

“Not only is the coffee bad, you have to wait forever to get a refill,” he said to the kid sitting beside him.

“I’ll make a fresh pot this very instant,” the waitress assured everyone with gum-snapping urgency, then spoke rapidly into the phone, “Whatever you do, don’t pry it out. Remember last time? Hey, I gotta go.” She broke the connection. To the customers she said, “Sorry.”

“Did you hear what I just said? I’m going to do something,” the kid stated between clenched teeth.

“Whatever you do to yourself, it’s not my business,” Coulter told him.

“Who said anything about doing it to myself?” the kid replied. “She broke off the engagement!”

“Maybe she had her reasons.”

“Oh, I see how it is. You’re taking her side.”

“I came in to wait for a friend,” said Coulter, keeping his voice even. He looked straight ahead, not wishing to rile the other.
“I have a gun in my pocket,” confided the boy in the varsity jacket. When Coulter didn’t respond, he said, “I guess you’re thinking you should call the cops.”

“I’m thinking I shouldn’t have come in here,” Coulter replied.

“Fate,” said the boy. “You can’t stop fate. It was your fate to come in here, man.” And he added, “Know what’d be funny? If the papers printed her name with an e in it. Wanda W-a-i-t-e-s. She hates that...There’s no e.” He cocked an eyebrow. “I’m talking about her obituary.”

“So I gathered.” His eyes on the clock, Coulter said, “Here’s an idea...Go home and sleep it off. You might feel different.”

“You trying to start something?”

“I’m just waiting for a friend.”

From the end of the counter, the salesman spoke up as if he were on chummy terms with everyone in the place. “Hey—any of you know which of the original Temptations is still alive?”

“Otis Williams,” the teenager answered without giving it a thought.

“Otis Williams—thanks.”

*My Girl* was playing.

“Sounds like you know your music,” Coulter remarked.

“My job. I’m a deejay for an oldies station—or was.”

So he was older than he appeared. To kill time, and to get the boy’s mind off shooting his girlfriend, Coulter said, “So what’s it like, playing the oldies?”

“It’s a job.”

“But you get to listen to music. And get paid.”
The kid looked at him as if he were nuts, then reached inside his jacket. Coulter spun around on the stool, ready to defend himself if necessary. But the kid pulled out an inhaler. "Relax," he said. "Unless you’re the guy whacking Wanda, I got no beef." He used the inhaler then put it away. "Weather fucks up my breathing." He hadn’t touched his food. "I quit tonight," he said, stabbing out his cigarette.

"Smoking?"

"My job. Sitting there night after night, taking lame requests. Boy loses girl. Girl dumps boy. It’s like pouring salt on a wound."

As if to prove his point, the juke box grunted out Since I Lost My Baby.

"It’s that guy down there I should shoot," the kid declared. He jabbed his thumb at the salesman who fed more money into the box.

The waitress was back on her cell phone. "What do you mean it’s all sticky? It wasn’t sticky when we rented it."

"You going to eat those?" Coulter asked.

"A broken heart slays the appetite...Knock yourself out." The deejay nudged his plate of fries toward Coulter.

Coulter popped one into his mouth. He got up from the stool and, still chewing, walked in the direction of the men’s room. The rain assaulted the windows of the diner. The old couple stared at it as if it were a light show. The man wore a hearing aid. Coulter leaned down close. "Want me to call you a cab?" he asked.

Their heads turned jointly, first in confusion, then in polite realization. "Thank you, we have a car," the woman answered pleasantly.
After using the urinal, Coulter examined his reflection in the mirror. He didn’t seem much altered from earlier in the day, just baggier under the eyes and in need of a shave. His skin had taken on an unhealthy pallor, but he attributed it to the light. Diners were always too bright. Made you look bad; especially after midnight.

He thought of Jenna, home in bed. And the kids, lulled into dreamland by the rain. Jenna was always encouraging him to eat right, to take better care of himself. He checked his cell. Knowing he wasn’t technologically competent, his wife made “how-to” instructions, which included the VCR, their home computer, and now the cell phone, which she posted strategically around the house.

Jenna. Did anyone know him better than she did? What would he be without her? For a fleeting, self-destructive second, he tried putting himself in the place of the ex-disc jockey sitting at the counter, wringing his guts out over lost love. In that situation, how would he himself behave? Without Jenna, he’d be lost, utterly adrift. Perhaps he, too, would plunk his sorry ass down on a stool in a diner at the end of the world at two in the morning with a gun in his pocket.

But the boy was young. Maybe not a teenager, but young. He didn’t know yet about the Wandas that lay in wait, how life was a banquet of surprise, mystery, danger, occasional joy. Nor did he understand that there are worse things, far darker things, to lead you to a diner at the end of the world.

Coulter was thirty-seven, too old to be losing love or taking chances that would slam the lid on his future. It was too late to start over, yet the cost of living and the low salary at the hardware store demanded a supplemental income.

He glanced at his watch. 2:35. If Brody didn’t get here soon...
He left the men's room and saw that the rain had slackened. A light drizzle accompanied a crescendo of thunder and lightning. He was about to say something to the salesman when the latter paid his check, put on his coat, and picked up his briefcase. He flashed Coulter the kind of amiable, good will smile exchanged by strangers in diners past midnight.

For the second time, Coulter leaned down close to the old couple, who still held hands. He spoke loudly. "Radio says there's going to be flash flooding. Thought you might want to know."

Husband and wife looked at each other and broadcast some worried oh's over their tea cups. They thanked Coulter as he helped them on with their coats and shepherded them toward the door.

"You're a regular Sir Galahad," noted the deejay snidely when Coulter returned to the counter. "There's no flooding. Ground's too level. Why'd you tell them that?"

"They're old," Coulter explained. "Rain let up, so I figured it'd be a good time for them to drive."

The boy shook his head. "Nothing like a good deed to cap off the night."

"Speaking of which," said Coulter, swallowing the last dollop of coffee, "it's time for me to go home. Maybe you should do likewise."

The kid's sneer intensified. "You heard me say I have a job to do." He gave the lumpy lower pocket of his jacket a pat.

Coulter took a chance. "You don't have a gun."

The kid rose abruptly off his stool. He was taller than Coulter imagined. While sitting, he'd been slumped over his plate in a tragic pose. "Want to make a bet?"
“Not really.”

“Come on, Mouth, make a bet.” His hand was on the pocket. “You’re so smart.”

“It’s just that if you’re going to do what you say, why advertise?” Coulter wished he had another cigarette, so he took another chance. “By the way. Got any more smokes?”

“Fresh out,” said the kid, steely-eyed. He returned swiftly to his favorite topic.

“Maybe I want to go out with a bang. Put my name above the credits for once.”

“Don’t let me spoil your party,” Coulter said wearily and motioned to the waitress for his check. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the boy reach into the pocket of his varsity jacket. “Keep in mind if you shoot me, you’ll have to shoot everyone else in here. Her, the cook. And you won’t last to shoot what’s-her-face.”

“Wanda.”

“You won’t last to shoot Wanda. Isn’t that what you want?”

A tight, mirthless laugh escaped the boy’s lips. “I get it. You’re not the do-gooder you make out. It’s your own sorry ass you’re worried about, my right?”

The waitress appeared opposite them, her expression wide with pleasure. “Oh, hey! That song? Reminds me of my late Aunt Gracie. We use to sing it on our way to the beach when I was, what? Fourth grade?” She attempted to sing along. “‘Oooh, baby, baby, what a price to pay, da da da, something, something, ooo-ooo-ooood. ’ God. Seems like ages ago. More coffee, anyone?”

The ex-deejay dug into his pocket and produced a bill which he smacked down on the counter. “The food here really stinks. So’s the music.”

Coulter waited for what would come next. The kid acted as if he weren’t sure. Then with a snort he turned on his heel and was gone.
“He majored in music,” Coulter said, more out of relief than in an effort to be funny.

“All that stuff’s before my time,” the waitress admitted, “but if you’re going to work here, ya gotta love it, know what I mean? Although some days I think if I hear Good Vibrations one more time, I might have to go out and lay down in traffic.” She laughed.

“How about a hit for the road?” She swished the coffee around in the pot and Coulter shook his head.

He paid up and was about to depart when a gust of wet air produced another customer, a thick-bellied man in a gray windbreaker. “Fucking rain,” he said and breezed up to the counter as if late for a date. “Coffee.”

The waitress poured him a cup.

“Luigi here?”

“In back,” she said.

“Get him.”

“Who should I say—”

“Get him,” the man repeated. He blew steam off the cup, took a slow sip, then made a face. “Christ! You’re right.” He set the cup down on the counter.

“Cake’s better,” said Coulter.

“Forget cake,” said Brody. “Watch the door.”

“I thought you weren’t coming.”

“I told you. The rain.”

Coulter went and stood by the door. In the parking lot, dimpled by rain, nothing stirred. A car with a low roof sat by itself, a sodden, miserable-looking creature. Coulter
decided to walk out. Then he heard Brody speak to a man who’d just emerged from the kitchen.

“Luigi?”

“Who wants to know?”

“Think back. The races?”

“Races. What races?”

The cook, a swarthy man with a shadow of whiskers, wore a mixture of confusion and annoyance. The waitress stood by holding her main prop. She spoke appealingly to Brody, “Maybe you’d prefer tea. Or hot chocolate?”

An impatient man, Luigi’s arrogant face grew more arrogant still. He said, “Look, I don’t know nothin’ about no races. If this is a joke...”

“Please don’t mention the races,” the waitress interjected. “My boyfriend spends every last cent there. He can’t even operate the VCR.” She cleared the counter of dirty plates and cups.

Brody turned to Coulter. “Anything?”

Coulter squinted out at the rain. He was thinking of Jenna, home in bed. Pictured himself beside her.

Luigi said, “If you’re one of them goons from downtown...”

Brody said, “You know, you’re right about the races. Let’s forget it.” Like magic he produced a small, chrome-plated handgun which he appeared to offer to Luigi as a gift.

“What the hell,” said the cook and took a step back.

The waitress, in her own world, was busy wiping down a milk machine and humming along with the juke box.
“Did you know some letters are missing off your sign?” Brody asked. He shot Luigi in the chest, once. It sounded to Coulter like a cap gun. Luigi didn’t say a thing, just dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, his arrogance evaporating like steam. A blossom of red widened on his grease-stained shirt.

The waitress gasped. Her mouth hung open and you could see her fillings. She stared down at Luigi, who lay on his stomach. “What’s his problem?” she asked.

Brody shot her in the eye. She let out a squeak, like a door opening fast. Her head jerked back in one comical motion then everything went out of her and she landed with a plop on the floor in a puddle of coffee.

“Touch anything?” Brody asked.

“The cup.”

Brody pocketed the cup Coulter indicated.

“Anything else?”

“I went to the john, but I wiped everything down.”


In the men’s room, Coulter got a surprise. The kid, the deejay, was sitting in one of the stalls with the door open. He looked up when Coulter entered. “I wish I could die,” he said. His eyes were wet.

Coulter went back outside, muttering “Christ” under his breath. He said to Brody, who was by the door, “There’s a guy in there.”

“You were suppose to empty the place,” Brody reproached him.
“I thought he left,” said Coulter, and Brody was already peeling off his gloves and handing them over. Coulter pulled them onto his hands reluctantly. He wasn’t in the mood for this. His stomach felt sour.

Brody gave him the gun.

“Make it quick,” Brody said.

Coulter considered handing it back, but he knew better. This was the thing he’d agreed to do. His job. He entered the men’s room again. The kid was still sitting on the toilet. Like a mantra, he spoke the words over and over. “Wanda Waits, Wanda Waits.” He revealed a face full of misery. “I figure if I keep saying her name I’ll drive her out of my heart. Like an old song.”

“I thought you left,” Coulter said accusingly. He held out the gun.

“Whoa,” said the kid, arching his back and lifting his hands. “I don’t have a weapon, that was just a joke.”

Coulter felt his hand shake. He was afraid he’d miss, even at this range.

“Hey, man,” said the deejay. “If it’s something I said. I’ll get my job back and dedicate oldies to you.”

Coulter steadied his gun hand by grabbing his wrist with his other hand. He stepped inside the stall.

“A little privacy would be ideal.” The kid’s mouth and eyes opened wide and Coulter pulled the trigger.

*Pop!* Like that. The bullet disappeared in the kid’s mouth. When Coulter walked out, he was propped on the toilet seat, his face twisted into a smirk. Coulter kept hearing his voice. *Wanda.*
“Done?” said Brody.

Coulter couldn’t make himself respond. Brody reminded him to get his coat and at the same time slipped him an envelope thick with bills. They left together. Brody instructed Coulter to pitch the gun in a trash barrel outside the door. It was a piece that would never be traced.

“Walk,” Brody advised. “See you in a month.” He himself walked at a brisk pace across the parking lot, through the rain, out of sight.

Coulter’s temptation was to run, but remembering Brody’s instruction, he walked in the opposite direction, swiftly, head bent against the rain.

He felt the envelope inside his coat. It was worth it, he told himself. Worth it.

The rain gave no sign of letting up. He walked faster, as if to outrun it, as if to outrun everything, including the kid’s voice: Wanda Waits.

Again, he touched the envelope which held his future: A necklace for Jenna; braces for Shirley; basketball camp for Ron; no more city transit. No more day job. In time.

A shiver embraced his body like an icy clamp. His stomach began to settle. He hurried toward home, envisioning the warm bed that awaited him, her breath against his cheek, her arms around him, everything.
Traffic on I-75 between Cleveland and Cincinnati labored south under slate-colored clouds. Ed weaved from lane to lane like an ambulance driver.

Amanda cautioned him to slow down.

“You want to get home, don’t you?”

“In one piece.”

She gazed out her window. Ed eased up on the accelerator and fell in behind a cherry red Nova laden with Christmas presents. The Nova traveled at the rate of a blood clot. Its poky progress annoyed Ed. He pressed on the brake as if to hold down his temper, then glanced at his daughter. Amanda neither smiled nor nodded at his compliance with her wish to slow down but sat stony-faced as she had since leaving Cleveland. Ed expected a reaction to the things he said and did. They often were geared to get a rise out of people.

“Tell you what.” His tone implied a camaraderie they’d yet to achieve. “How about we stop, get something to eat?”

“I thought we were in such a god-awful hurry.”

“Well, we have to eat, don’t we? And what kind of dad would I be if I didn’t feed you?”

Pasted on the skyline were the Golden Arches. “Mickey D’s?” When she didn’t answer, Ed said, “Nah. We’ve done enough burgers on this trip. Let’s get real food.”

Once past the Nova, Ed took an exit marked Food. Fuel, Lodging.
The restaurant was family-oriented. Its walls and ceilings were festooned in holiday fare. Green-uniformed waitresses hustled in all directions, armed with platters of food and steaming coffee. Ed and Amanda sat in a booth facing the freeway.

"Can you believe all the people?" Ed tried making conversation. "Where are they going?"

“It’s like, two days before Christmas?” His daughter spoke as if to someone mentally deficient. Confirming her report, The First Noel descended from somewhere overhead.

“True, but where are they going?” Ed persisted. “What is their mission in life, their higher purpose? Do they believe in God? In Santa? What?”

“You’re boring me,” Amanda said.

Ed began to hum along with The First Noel. “Feel free to join in,” he told her.

“Please,” said his daughter.

A waitress buoyed on synthetic cheer appeared with their menus. Ed ordered coffee. Amanda wanted only a sticky bun and a Coke.

“A sticky bun and a Coke?” her father echoed. “How do you expect to reach fifteen on that kind of diet?” He appealed to the waitress, whose face expressed polite amusement. Amanda fidgeted. She hated when he drew attention to her in public. He knew that, but frequently forgot. “Oh, and an English muffin.” Ed completed the order. The waitress scurried off. “So,” he said, fishing a cigarette from his shirt pocket, “here we are, ho, ho.”

“Tell me you’re not going to smoke.”

“Why? Was the air in here purified by the Pope?”

Amanda rolled her eyes and Ed put away the cigarette.
His daughter’s face was as implacable as the December sky.

He remembered when everything he said and did was for her an act of hilarity. She would laugh so long and hard that the sound of her voice carried into distant rooms and parking lots, bringing smiles to the lips of strangers. “Oh, Dad-deee!” He could still hear her squeals of glee, the mock complaint. “Mommy—Daddy made me pee myself!”

_O Holy Night_ descended upon them, a hurtful reminder that this was indeed Christmas, and they were going home to no one.

The waitress came back to drop off a pot of coffee, which helped lighten Ed’s mood. “Do you want to talk?” he asked.

“About what?” Amanda stared at traffic.

“Anything.”

“No particularly.”

What he really wanted was a cigarette. He excused himself because he also needed to use the men’s room.

“If you elope with someone while I’m gone, leave a forwarding address so I’ll know where to forward your CDs.”

On his way to the men’s room, Ed spotted one of those machines that records your rating as a lover when you insert your finger. The ratings were sizzling, hot, tepid, cool, and stone cold dead. He recollected the time, in some other restaurant, in some alternate universe, when he, his wife, and Amanda saw one of those machines and Amanda urged him to try it out.

“Oh, honey, I can’t,” he told her seriously.

“Why not?”
“Well, it’s like this. I’m forbidden by law.”

Her eyes awaited the joke while his wife regarded him with mock disapproval.

Ed said, “I’ve destroyed hundreds of these things in my time, Mandy. They’re not programmed to go above sizzling, and whenever I stick my finger in one, it explodes.”

He glanced sheepishly at his wife. “Right, hon?”

That was how long ago? Four years? Five? Eternity.

Ed studied his smoke-clouded reflection in the men’s room mirror. A haggard face with matted hair and three days’ growth of whiskers stared at him through poached eyes. He hadn’t been taking such good care of himself, and the reflected image looked older than its thirty-six years. He took a final drag off the cigarette before extinguishing it under the tap.

“Jane,” he said.

“Beg pardon?” an elderly man standing beside him said.

Ed hurried out of the men’s room.

Amanda was nibbling at her sticky bun when he returned. She hadn’t touched the Coke.

“Anything earth shattering happen while I was away?” He sat down to his muffin.

“Santa sightings? Reindeer droppings?...Hey, those are the same cars from fifteen minutes ago. They must be moving backwards.”

Something in her posture, the provocative angle of her chin, provided Ed with a glimpse into his daughter’s emerging womanhood. She no longer was the child he was accustomed to, but a burgeoning replica of his late wife.

“Tell me truthfully,” he said on impulse. “Are you having sex?”
“I’m eating my sweet roll.”

“I meant—”

“That waitress reminds me of Mom.”

“What? Where?”

“Three tables down.”

A girl in her twenties, a full decade younger than Jane, was serving a table of four. At first Ed saw no resemblance and was about to say so, when something in her manner—the way she used her hands, the easy flow of her laughter, the petite body that hummed with energy—evoked memories of Jane. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment before turning back to Amanda. “Wrong hair,” was all he could say.

“Not her hair.” His daughter spoke testily.

Ed spread jelly on his muffin.

“You mean you really can’t see it?”

“Finish up. We have miles to cover.”

She peered over his shoulder. “What it is, I think, is her sense of humor.”

“You can’t hear what she’s saying.”

“I don’t have to.” She spoke in a near whisper.

Another jolt of recognition, taking him back to something he would rather have forgotten. It was years ago. He and Jane were parked in a grove of trees overlooking a moonlit lake during their senior year in college.

“He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad,” Jane murmured in Ed’s ear.

“What? What did you just say?”
"The opening sentence of *Scaramouche* by Rafael Sabatini. It reminds me of you."

"Then I guess I should feel flattered."

"You’d damn well better feel honored. It’s my favorite novel by my favorite author. It’s filled with—" Her eyes reflected the moonlight as she searched for a word. "*Joie de vivre.* That’s French for joy of living. It’s how I think of you, Ed. It’s how I think of us."

At age twenty, they both aspired to be writers. Brimming with enthusiasm and good looks, in their discovery of each other they were discovering a world fresh, new, and brimming with creative possibilities. Life was an endless banquet of smoke-filled bars, moonlit lakes, and nights that never seemed long enough. "Listen," she used to tell him, "I’ll read you Keats, I’ll read you Shelley." He didn’t much care for Keats, couldn’t fathom Shelley, but for Jane he pretended to like both. It wasn’t really in Ed’s nature to be a writer, but because he’d cleverly manipulated lyrics by the Doors, Clapton, and Van Morrison and slipped them into her English lit. book under his own name, Jane concluded he was a poet. It worked once, so he kept on using the same ploy, with different artists. What he lacked in poetic vision, he made up for in charm. She believed in him.

By the time they graduated, Jane had him buying into the notion that with sustained effort, they could become the contemporary versions of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, neither of whom he’d read.

When he wasn’t making love, Ed was writing about it in a feverish succession of derivative poems and bloated stories whose endings, though they seldom matched their beginnings, were nevertheless his own.

"It was a little like," his roommate remarked after wading through one of them, "witnessing a giraffe’s head being grafted onto a pig’s body."
“And that’s all you have to say?” Ed was peeved.

The roommate gave it some thought. “I liked the girl in the laundromat. The one who kept asking everybody about the identity of God. She seemed real to me. But she wasn’t in it long enough.”

Ed snatched the manuscript out of his roommate’s hands. “You don’t know the first thing about literature.”

His roommate, a chemistry major with a preference for science fiction, shrugged and said apologetically, “I guess you’re right.” Ed never offered him another story, and the roommate never asked for one.

“Many writers fail or give up due to lack of support from family and friends,” Jane consoled him. “The important thing is to believe in yourself and hang in there.”

Together they continued writing their hearts out, and not once did it dawn on them that only one had talent. In her senior year, Jane won a school-wide short story contest with something she’d written for her creative writing class. Eventually, the same story, heavily revised, found its way into a university press, her first commercial success.

Privately, Ed assessed the piece as over-the-top sweet, but it gave him the courage to keep up with his own efforts.

Painfully etched in Ed’s memory was the exact moment he’d proposed to Jane. It was their senior year. They were seated at a table in Feddelman’s Bar, enjoying a second pitcher of beer, when Ed felt the call of nature. A line was waiting to get into a men’s room the size of a phone booth. Some guys were using the sink, a time-honored custom at Feddelman’s. Ed stepped out back to pee in the alley. As he zipped up, he noticed a young man staring at a water tower that rose hundreds of feet into the air. The tower was
enclosed by a chain-link fence. Just for laughs Ed said, “That’s gotta be the fullest bladder in town.”

“See the steps going up the side of that sucker?” said the kid, flicking away his cigarette. “I’m gonna climb it.” And he made a mad dash for the fence.

“Hey,” said Ed, but the kid was already scaling the fence with the agility of a monkey.

“Think of the view!” he shouted from the other side. “Think of the fucking view!”

In the next instant, and with no thought to Jane, Ed was climbing the fence as well. Half way up the ladder, which was rust-flecked and narrow, Ed heard the voice above him say, “Watch out, man, I’m going to hurl.”

“Aw, Christ.”

“No shit, man, I’m going to lose it.”

“Then climb faster or jump, because if you puke on me, I’ll personally throw you off.”

They made it to the top. The view was spectacular. They could see for what looked like a thousand miles in every direction.

“I feel like I’m at the Grand Canyon,” Ed said.

“Grand Canyon don’t have lights.” Flame sprouted from a match in the kid’s hand.

“I thought you were feeling sick,” said Ed.

“Can’t take a joke?” He offered Ed a cigarette. “Torch up, man. Have yourself a blast.”

One puff and it was Ed who threw up.

“Over the side, over the fucking side!”
Ed lay down on his stomach, his head lolling over the edge of the tower. He felt like he was vomiting into a bottomless pit. Afterwards, he rolled onto his back.

“Personally?” said the kid. “I’d write a note of apology to that fool down in the alley.”

Ed was exhausted. Engulfed by a starry sky, he let his eyes droop shut before attempting the climb down. When he opened them again the kid was gone and it was hours later. Huddled next to him in a cozy bundle was Jane. Like a flower unfolding its petals, her eyes appeared gradually. She stretched, yawned, and said dreamily, “Hail to thee, blithe spirit.”

“How’d you get up here?” he asked, incredulous.

“Is coffee on?”

“No, seriously.”

“You think only guys can climb water towers? And speaking of guys—I’ve had guys cut out on me. But this? This is a first.”

“Christ, Jane, I’m really sorry, I—”

“Shh.” She threw her arms around him. “You more than made up for it during the night—Romeo.”

“Oh, God. You mean that wasn’t a dream?”

His shoes were no where in sight, and her panties were tangled around his ankles. Jane’s cheeks were rosy with whisker burn.

“Wanna do it again, Sparky?” she said in a husky voice. Here at the top of the world, in the first glimmering of dawn, she was gorgeous: A waif-like creature with enough pluck to scale a water tower and spend the night.
“Better not,” he told her. “Sun’s up.”

Jane’s hand slipped into the front of his trousers. “Among other things.”

Ed glanced around. “I just don’t think we should.”

“Where’s your *joie de vivre*?” She skinned his undershorts down to his knees.

Afterwards, she said, “I always wondered what water towers were good for, now I know. Know what else? I’ve always had an urge to howl at the sunrise, but the timing was never right...How about you?”

Ed watched for helicopters while struggling back into his clothes. Partially dressed, they faced east, holding hands. He couldn’t believe such a tiny body could emit such a powerful howl. The barbaric yelp, she called it. In the next instant, under the sun’s *approving gaze*, he was on his knees proposing. They were married in less than a year.

Born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad. Jane had used those words to describe *him*, but it became increasingly clear, with the passage of time, that the line applied to her. Every romance novel that bore her name bore also that spirit of *joie de vivre*, while his own efforts became increasingly flat and lifeless. Except for some freelance film reviews for second-rate journals, Ed never published a thing. He was eventually consumed by his wife’s popularity. By the end of their second year of marriage, the year Amanda was born, he no longer made the effort to write at all. As time passed, he really didn’t have to do much of anything. Jane’s royalties paid the bills, and until jealousy reared its head, Ed enjoyed what amounted to a sustained adolescence.

“Something about her,” Amanda was muttering about the waitress. “The way she moves.” She appeared energized by the observation, which stirred in Ed a profound sense of sorrow.
“If you’re not going to drink your Coke, let’s go,” he said impatiently.

“Sheesh, what a grump. And right before Christmas.”

“I’m not a grump, I just want you to finish.”

Amanda pouted.

Ed said, “Mom’s gone, Mandy, you’ve got to get past it.”

Her face softened. “I was only—”

“I’ll go pay.” He walked briskly to the register, as if the check were something toxic.

The waitress who reminded Amanda of Jane took his money. Nothing in her appearance resembled Jane in the least; yet some vague quality did invite a mild comparison. Ed noticed the way she tossed her hair back as Jane did before delivering one of her saucy one-liners. The girl handed him his change and Ed surprised himself by saying, “My daughter thinks you favor her mom.”

“Really?” She took in his grizzled appearance.

“Well, you do sort of—and that’s a compliment.”

The waitress did not appear complimented. She smiled vacuously, very un-Jane-like, and snapped her gum. Ed was miffed. He wanted something more. He felt an urge to hurt her, as he’d often hurt his wife.

“She’s dead,” he said in a hard voice. “Killed in a senseless accident. But you sure do favor her.”

Back on the freeway, a frozen gulf separated father and daughter. Ed turned the radio on in time for a Joni Mitchell song. “Oh, hey,” he said, “listen to those lyrics.”

“That stuff’s so lame,” Amanda complained, and switched to a rap station right in the middle of Joni. She turned the volume up full blast and Ed turned it back down.
“I don’t want the neighbors to shoot at us,” he said.

She folded her arms and crossed her legs. “What exactly did you say to that waitress?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I could tell by her face that you said something. Probably something rude, like you do.”

“I told her she reminded you of Mom.”

“What else?”

“Mandy, stop.”

“I know you. It’s one of the reasons Mom’s not here.” She turned her face to the window. “I wish I wasn’t here.” Her voice sank into a lower register. “I wish—I wish I could see her, just one more time. Just—” She couldn’t finish.

He had an aching desire to touch her, to pat her on the knee...something. But he didn’t dare. Words failed him. He felt like a fisherman about to lose a catch, not sure how to reel it in. Above all, he craved a cigarette, but Amanda was allergic to the smoke, or claimed to be. He suspected it was another way she had of punishing him.

Their two days in Cleveland were miserable. After settling Jane’s estate, which turned her assets and book royalties over to Amanda, they’d made the obligatory visits to relatives (none of them liked Ed), then he’d offered to take her to the zoo.

“The zoo? What am I, six years old?” she whined, and he wanted to smack her. He realized she was fourteen and that’s how fourteen-year-olds sometimes acted, but he still wanted to smack her.
His hardest moment came right after the funeral, six months ago. Throughout the service, Amanda was stoical and reserved, but as they drove from the gravesite she burst into tears. She sat, small and vulnerable, arms wrapped around herself; through sobs she said, “If not for you—” She stopped in mid-sentence. Every atom in his body agonized with the truth of what she wanted to say. Had he and Jane not quarreled, had he not said such harsh and hurtful things, the accident wouldn’t have occurred.

They were looking at a review of her latest novel. As usual, the reviewer hated it, criticized its florid, over-wrought prose as emetic. The only people who liked Jane’s stuff, it seemed, were the book-buying public. But Ed had sided with the reviewer. He told her she should “be ashamed to sign her name to such undiluted crap” and that her readers were “a pack of low-grade morons.” Ten years down the line, Ed predicted, none of her drivel would be in print. Then he carried it a step further. He said she not only stank as a writer, she was lacking as a wife, always chained to her computer, cranking out more garbage.

Jane fled the room, hands flailing in protest. In minutes, Ed and Amanda heard the angry hiss of the shower, the insistent roar of water that could cleanse but did not heal, followed by the heavy thud that would resonate throughout both their lives. In agitation, a heedless slip of the foot on a soapy surface—that quick—and a life ended. She who would howl at the sun on the perilous lip of a water tower, dead in the shower at age thirty-five.

After Jane’s death, Ed experienced, to his surprise, an exhilarating melancholy. Heartbroken and guilty on the one hand, he felt absolved—though not entirely—from her dissipating shadow on the other. The royalties had been one thing; the excruciating
reminder of her fame, another. There was just no having it both ways. Now he would have to get out and apply himself, a task for which he was ill prepared but not unwilling to pursue. He’d never thought of himself as indolent, exactly; yet Jane’s wealth made it easy not to lift a finger. Truth to be told, she’d enabled him in the early days by insisting that he sit down at the computer and type something grand. That wasn’t going to happen. He had neither the talent nor the inclination. By the time this truth became evident, the pattern had been firmly established. Ed was a kept man, though no one in the household used that term.

_He was born with a gift of laughter and a sense that the world was mad._

The words stung Ed like winter wind.

The sky closed in around them. Vehicles in all lanes switched on their lights. To Ed, the taillights were swarms of angry eyes. He tried not to see Jane’s accusing stare in the ones in front of him, which belonged to the same red Nova from earlier. It featured a personalized license tag with the letters “EDSCAR,” ironically.

“Jesus, can you believe this guy? I think he’s following us.”

“How can he do that?” Amanda said crossly. “He’s out in front.”

“Ten million drivers, and I get behind the one on Valium.”

“You take everything so goddamn personal.”

Ed ordered her to watch her mouth.

He tried pulling around the Nova but was hemmed in by a solid wall of traffic. With its festive cargo, the Nova resembled Santa’s sleigh. Ed imagined its occupants singing along with Bing Crosby, oblivious to people who were in a hurry. He was tempted to give it a slight bump, something that might possibly have amused Jane. Hadn’t she fallen in
love with a wild man who thought nothing of scaling water towers to howl at the sun?
Later, she actually wrote that scene into one of her novels.

“But it was your idea to howl at the sun!” Ed roared above the pounding rhythms of hip-hop.

“What?” said Amanda, who was trying to concentrate on Snoop Dogg while Ed concentrated on the Nova.

Oh, Jane... You wanted a poet and all you got was me. It was a case of mistaken identity.

Ed leaned on the horn to blot out memories. He came within inches of the Nova’s bumper. They were doing sixty.

“Daddy,” Amanda cautioned.

You want madness? You want joie de vivre? I’ll show you madness, I’ll show you joie de vivre!

A hole appeared in the right-hand lane and Ed swerved into it. He pulled opposite the red car and glared through its passenger window. A middle-aged man in a woolen cap was hunched behind the wheel. Sitting next to him was a blond-haired boy, eleven or twelve. Ed lowered his window and signaled for the boy to get the man’s attention. The driver—presumably named Ed as well—waved and smiled, thinking he might know the man in the other car, or that perhaps a friendly motorist was wishing him Merry Christmas. But when Ed extended his middle finger and mouthed the words “Fuck you,” the driver’s face underwent a change. Ed didn’t stop there. He made a crude gesture at the boy, then hit the accelerator. Amanda, gazing over frosted fields, saw none of this.
Ed felt lousy. Jane did not approve of, much less laugh at, acts of cruelty or crassness. Her idea of a maverick act toward motorists was to toss kisses or rose petals. To flip someone off was never an option. Ed’s mood darkened along with the Ohio sky, which pummeled the windshield with snow.

“Daddy, why is that man shouting at us?”

“What?”

That he was neck and neck with the Nova didn’t faze Ed. Its passenger window was rolled down and the driver hurled invectives past the bewildered boy. “Pull over, asshole!”

“What’s his problem?” said Amanda. “What did you do?”


The Nova’s horn was a hostile blare. The man’s face turned the shade of his vehicle. The kid’s face was ashen. Ed could catch only fragments of what was being said: “...gets away with... in front of my son...” The wind swallowed most of it, but the words “pull over” and “asshole” were unmistakable.

“Wow, is he ever pissed,” said Amanda. She was alternately thrilled and horrified.

“You must have done something.”

“All I said was Merry Christmas,” Ed told her.

“That boy’s kind of cute. But young.”

“I’ll get his number.”

At this she smiled—a touch of the old magic, the old Amanda. “So, like, what are we going to do?” she asked.

“About what?”
“About him!” She pointed at the Nova, which further infuriated its driver. “Oh, look, he’s pissed at me now.”

“He’ll get over it.”

By intent or accident, the Nova grazed the side of Ed’s car and he momentarily lost control of the wheel.

“Oh, sweet Jesus!” Amanda cried, splaying her fingers against the dash.

In the next instant they shot down an exit ramp in swirling snow at seventy miles an hour, the Nova tight on their tail. Ed recovered the wheel and lightly touched the brake. A red light blinked at the bottom of the ramp. Amanda covered her face and screamed

“Sweet Jesus” over and over.

“Hang on. Everything’s fine,” Ed assured her. Deep inside he heard a voice yell

“Yee-haw!” He felt in touch with some primal spirit and imagined Jane sitting beside him, applauding and cheering, the wind rioting in her hair. The car stayed on track, never leaving the road, and every instinct told him they were safe.

The Nova was less fortunate. In the rearview mirror Ed saw it careen off the ramp. The driver’s hands grappled with the wheel as the vehicle charged an embankment then rolled onto its side, the packages tumbling like colors in a kaleidoscope. The personalized tag sailed through the air like a Frisbee.

Ed eased over to the side of the road. Amanda leaped out. Other headlights were coming down the ramp. Several people were already racing toward the overturned car, shouting into cell phones. In seconds a highway patrol car appeared, lights flashing through the swirling snow. Amanda breathed relief on seeing movement inside the Nova. The blond-haired boy scrambled for an exit, the toe of his sneaker mashed against the
driver’s nose. The man was swatting Christmas presents out of his face and swearing. On the ground by her feet was the mangled licensed tag, with the letters partially obscured by snow: “SCAR.”

“Stand back, stand back!” A loud speaker barked instructions from the patrol car.

Amanda felt a firm hand on her shoulder—her father’s.

“It’s all right,” he said, “I’m here.”

“I was so scared,” she said.

“I know.”

“Should we,” Amanda shivered, “should we make a statement? That man—he wanted to hurt us.”

Ed took her in his arms. He stared at the Nova as if it were a scene from a movie. Man and boy were clearly out of danger. The officers were extricating them from the wreck. “No, sweetheart.” Her closeness, the honeyed fragrance of her hair, made him tremble. “Those people have suffered enough.”

Ed guided his daughter back to the car. He opened the door and helped her in, then fastened the seat belt around her as he’d done when she was a child. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Her teeth chattered. He couldn’t resist kissing her on the forehead, just beneath the hairline. She met his gaze with something like gratitude. For a fleeting second Ed saw in that face both his wife and daughter, a face from which, once upon a time, he could always coax a smile.

He made a vow to the snow-filled sky: Before this day is over, I will make her laugh. I must hear her laugh. It’s all the Christmas I want. It’s all I have left to give.
Whose idea was it to open a lemonade stand on Lake Queen Mary? Chip Keller took credit for it, naturally, but Chip took credit for everything. It was part of his plan to get rich.

The summer before seventh grade, Chip and I went to Lake Queen Mary to pick up pop bottles that people threw on the ground. We put them in a burlap sack which we hauled to Dwayne’s Grocery where Old Man Dwayne paid three cents apiece, then we divided the money between us. I socked mine away for movies and ball games. Chip socked his away and never touched a penny.

The lake had a paved path that wound around it like a hatband. On summer days the path was crowded with walkers, bicycles, and members of a track team.

One day in early June we were scouting the grass for bottles when some guy in a soggy T-shirt charged by and leaned against a tree. While he wiped his brow we heard him say, “Man, what I wouldn’t give for a cold glass of lemonade.” Then he hurried off.

Chip and I looked at each other.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I said.

“Yeah, only I thought of it first. Listen, Scotty, can you get your mother to give you some lemons?”

“I can ask.”

“And sugar? Because if you can get lemons and sugar, I can get water and ice. It's what’s known as a division of labor.”

“What do you know about making lemonade?” I asked.
“How hard can it be? My sister makes it all the time. And she’s a retard.”

When I told my mom what Chip and I were up to, she let me have six lemons and a cup of sugar. She said, “Do you know how to make change?”

“I’m going to be in junior high.”

“Yes, but do you know how to make change?”

Back at the lake the next day, Chip said, “Only six lemons? It’s ninety degrees! People are dying.”

“Okay, fine. Next time you bring lemons,” I told him. “Bring a hundred, if you like. And anyway, where’s your ice?”

“It melted,” Chip admitted.

“Just what the world’s been waiting for. Hot lemonade.”

“What about your sugar? It’s got dirt in it.”

“It’s not dirt, it’s bugs. They flew in on the way over.”

“What we need,” said Chip, “is a better plan.”

Once we made our plan, things improved. We each made thermoses of lemonade that night. Plus, I had a cooler full of ice cubes, lemon slices, a basin of water, and a sealed container of sugar. Next day, I pulled it all the way to Lake Queen Mary in the red wagon I’d had since third grade. Chip brought his in a Cadillac driven by his mother. We used my wagon for our stand. Chip tacked a sign on a tree that read “Lemonade five cents.”

I said, “What if we run out of water?”

“See that lake over there?”

“And what if we have to pee?”
“See that lake over there?”

Chip had it all figured out. With the money we made from lemonade, we’d start a pumpkin patch at Halloween. Then with the money we made from the pumpkins, we’d open a Christmas tree stand in December. Then...

“Let’s just worry about selling lemonade,” I said.

No sooner were those words out of my mouth than some guy with sweaty armpits came puffing up. He had on shorts and no shirt.

“What a deal,” he said, and yanked a nickel from his sock. “Gimme a cup.”

“Cup?” Chip spoke the word as if he’d never heard it before. “Cup?”

We’d forgotten cups.

But fast-thinking Chip unscrewed the cap off his thermos and poured the lemonade into it.

The guy with sweaty armpits looked suspicious. “Who’s been drinking out of this?” he asked.

“You’re the first,” Chip told him.

We watched the guy chug down his drink. A second later he was spitting and cussing.

“Haven’t you punks heard of sugar? Gimme back my nickel!”

“You mean you didn’t use sugar?” I said after our first customer staggered away.

“My sister made it,” said Chip. “Didn’t I tell you she’s a retard?”

“You’re the retard for letting her.”

“Who you calling a retard?”

“You, you retard.”
Chip grabbed my shirt, and I grabbed his hair. We tumbled onto the wagon. Lemon slices and ice cubes flew everywhere.

“Boys! Boys!” An old man in a straw hat and watery eyes clapped his hands over us. He looked like my Great Uncle Walter, only with teeth. “Is that a way to behave? The sun is shining, the sky is clear, the birds are on the wing. Why not give praise you’re even alive?”

We stared up at him, an old kook in a bow tie and a starched white shirt in ninety-degree weather.

He said, “If my Marvin were here, he’d know how to behave. Oh, yes, he would! Now, come on, boys, get up and shake hands.” We were so surprised that we did what he told us. “People fight over mysterious things, then afterwards they ask themselves why. Why? All my Marvin wanted was to play the violin. Instead he ended up in Korea.” The old man wandered off down the path, muttering the word “Korea.”

“What a weirdo,” said Chip.

“Come on,” I said, “let’s clean up this mess.”

The next day I brought a box of Dixie cups. Chip brought plastic ones. “Dixie cups you have to throw away and buy more,” he said. “These we can use over and over.”

“How will we wash them?” I asked.

“See that lake over there?”

We used a slab of plywood for a counter, propping one end on a tree stump, the other on a cinder block I swiped from a construction site. We decided that at the end of each work day we’d hide the stuff in some bushes.
On our first real day of business, we had eleven customers. One man said, “It’s about
time somebody put a lemonade stand on this lake. Wish I’d thought of it myself.” He
gulped down two cupfuls.

The air hanging over Lake Queen Mary was hot and sticky, and on days when there
was no breeze it was like breathing syrup. People got thirsty. They bought our lemonade.

On the second day we made a dollar forty-five. I even recognized some of the
customers from the day before. But after the fourth day, our suppliers pulled the plug.

“Scotty, do you see lemons growing in our back yard?” my mother asked.

All I saw was the old oak tree where McStew’s and my tree house used to be.

“No, Mom.”

“Neither do I. Now I’m glad you’re earning money, but we’ll need to make some new
arrangements.”

Chip’s mom had pretty much the same talk with Chip. So the next day he tacked a
new sign on the tree: “Lemonade seven cents.” The extra two pennies went to our
suppliers.

“If you expect to stay in business, you have to be thinking all the time,” Chip said.

“Didn’t this used to cost a nickel?” our first customer of the day complained.

“Prices are up everywhere,” Chip replied. “Blame the government.” He was repeating
things he’d heard his father say. Mr. Keller was a hot-shot Cadillac dealer.

Of course, not everyone bought our lemonade. The track guys didn’t stop for
anything. They were too busy getting into shape. People on bicycles didn’t stop, either.

Our best customers were old folks and guys walking with their girlfriends.
A pimply-faced teenager treated himself and his pretty date to two cups. When they walked away, Chip said, “That’ll be some day.”

“With pimples?”

“No, moron! With a girlfriend!”

“I’ll bet you get pimples first.”

Suddenly a voice said, “Aw, man, is this your idea of lemonade?” It was a snotty eighth grader whose face always looked like it smelled something bad. He bought a cup from us every day but never had anything nice to say. We nicknamed him El Stinko. He asked, “Which one of you peed in it this time?”

“We took turns,” I answered.

“Too much sugar,” said El Stinko, smacking his lips. “Not enough lemon.”

“We figured you were sour enough,” I told him, and Chip jabbed me with his elbow.

“It’s not worth seven cents, that’s for sure. Plastic cups are a mistake, too. They don’t bring out the natural flavor.” He drained the cup and ran his tongue around the rim. “See you girls tomorrow.”

“What’s the idea of jabbing me?” I asked.

“Seven cents is seven cents,” said Chip. “Let him say whatever he likes.”

Chip’s motto was the customer is always right. My motto was that some people are jerks and deserve to be pinched. Even so, our first week we made a grand total of $5.95!

“On Fourth of July we’ll jack up our prices,” said Chip.

“You want to work on the Fourth?”

“Well, of course. It’s the busiest day of summer. Everybody’ll be out, and they won’t care what they pay. We can go as high as a dime—maybe more. Trust me.”
My idea of fun on the Fourth of July was to swim, eat hamburgers and hotdogs, then stretch out on the hood of my mom’s car while sucking on a creamsicle watching fireworks.

Chip said, “Only trouble is, we might need help.”

“I can get Corky Perkins,” I said.

“Are you crazy? Corky Perkins’ll want to get paid. No, I’ll get my retarded sister. She’ll work for free.”

In all the time I’d known him, I’d never met Chip’s sister. I’d just seen her from a distance. I knew she was a year older than us and went to some special school on account of something was wrong with her. Chip said she had the brains of a dishrag. I wondered how much help she’d be.

Then one day a miracle happened. One of the track guys stopped and bought lemonade. He was doing deep knee bends in the grass and spotted our stand.

“Which of you little geniuses thought up this idea?” he asked.

“Me!” Chip and I both answered at once.

“I’m pretty thirsty, so I’ll take two cups.” The track guy unknotted a handkerchief and plunked down a nickel and a dime. “Keep the penny,” he said. Chip had a mayonnaise jar with “Tips” written on it.

Just then we got another customer—a blonde-haired, teenaged girl in tight red shorts, white blouse, and skin that could’ve been poured out of an Ivory soap commercial. When she smiled, it was like a second sun coming out.

She said, “Hi, fellas. One cup, please.”

We gawked at her.
“Yoo-hoo. Fellas?” She waved her dime in our faces, and Chip and I bumped heads reaching for a thermos.

“Here,” the track guy said eagerly. “Take mine.”

“Are you sure?” The girl smiled her lovely smile.

“I have two—see?” His hand shook when he handed her the cup.

The three of us watched the girl drink. A thin line of lemonade trickled down her chin and into her blouse. “Mmmm,” she said, “that really hit the spot.”

Did it ever.

She set the cup on the counter and pushed a strand of hair from her face. She said, “You sure have gorgeous eyes.” Then she turned and walked quickly off down the path.

The track guy let out a growl and took off after her.

“Did you hear what she said about my eyes?” asked Chip.

“She was talking to the track guy,” I told him.

“Get out of here. She was looking at me.”

“But she was talking to him. Don’t you have mirrors in your house?”

We were about to get into it when somebody said, “Isn’t that the same lemonade from yesterday?” It was El Stinko. He slapped down a nickel and two pennies. “I just hope it doesn’t make me sick again. I’m tired of going to have my stomach pumped.”

Chip scooped up his seven cents and threw it in the lake. I couldn’t believe my eyes.

El Stinko stood there with his mouth hanging open.

“You threw away my money!” he squawked.

“You know where to find it,” Chip told him.

“In other words, go jump in the lake,” I added, and the eighth grader made a fist.
“Better not! Scotty’s father’s chief of police,” Chip lied. “Are you sure you want to
tangle with us?”

“You—you guys are going to pay!” said El Stinko, and he stomped off down the
path.

“I can’t believe you threw his money in the lake,” I said.

Chip opened his hand, and El Stinko’s seven cents dribbled into our money jar.

“Those were only lemon seeds. Do you really think I’d throw away money?” He grinned,
pleased with himself. “The hand is quicker than the eye. The brain is quicker than either.”
He was quoting his father again.

The week before the Fourth, we did our best business yet, taking in a total of $15.12.

Chip came up with a new plan.

“Let’s do away with our mothers.”

“What?”

He said, “The more independent we are, the better off we’ll be.”

From then on we rounded up pop bottles and traded them at Dwayne’s Grocery for
lemons and sugar. Old Man Dwayne gave us every tenth lemon free, in exchange for a
cup of our lemonade.

“You’ve got to keep your suppliers happy,” said Chip. “That’s how you stay in
business.”

Every now and then the blonde-haired girl in the tight red shorts streaked past.
Sometimes she stopped, other times she just smiled and waved. Chip nearly threw his
arm out waving back. Once he even blew her a kiss.

“She’s sixteen,” I said. “Old enough to be your aunt.”
"I appeal to older women," Chip told me.

That same day, two old people showed up. The man used a cane, and the woman wore a hearing aid.

"Now this isn't too awfully sweet, is it, young man?" asked the woman in a loud voice.

"Oh, no, ma'am, it's just right," Chip answered. "You'll love it."

"I just hope it isn't too sweet...Herbert, pay!"

"What the hail I need with lemonade?" the old man grumbled. "I gotta pee as it is."

"Oh, you always have to pee," said his wife.

The man handed Chip a crumpled-up dollar bill.

"We don't have any change," Chip lied. "Sorry."

"Of course we don't have any rain," said the woman.

"Change!" her husband hollered in her ear.

"Oh, quit your yelling," she told him.

"Will you please hurry up? I got to pee!"

"His bladder's the size of my hearing aid," the old woman complained.

"Do like we do," said Chip. "Pee in the lake."

"What did this young man say?" the woman shouted.

"He said we should pee in the lake!" her husband said with a grin.

"Well, I don't approve of that kind of talk. Not only that, you lied! This lemonade is way too sweet. I'll probably come down with diabetes." She set the cup, still full, on the counter and faced her husband, who seemed to be looking for a bush to go behind. The two hobbled off, arguing loudly.
“You weren’t kidding when you said you appealed to older women,” I said to Chip.

“What happened to customer courtesy?”

“Old people give me the creeps. They remind me of my grandparents...Well, at least
we got a dollar out of them.” He poured their drinks back into the thermos.

To my surprise, Chip wanted to work only half a day on the third.

“We need to prepare for tomorrow,” he explained. “Sometimes you have to spend
money in order to make money.” Then he said, “Look, here. I got this plastic red, white,
and blue tablecloth at the five-and-dime. Your money paid for half. Also, I got my lame-
brain sitter to make a sign...see?”

Chip showed me the sign. In neat red and blue lettering stenciled onto a white
background were the words, “Treat yourself to the drink Thomas Jefferson drank on that
first Fourth of July.”

“Is your sister really retarded?” I asked. “Or did you make that up?”

“I told her what to write and spelled it out for her,” Chip answered. “She’ll be here
tomorrow, so you can judge for yourself. Just remember to talk slow.”

“The letters on this sign are awfully neat. I don’t think a retarded person...”

“They have special talents,” said Chip. “My sister’s is that she can doodle while she
drools. Big deal. We’ll get her to wash cups and slice lemons. Let’s just hope her fingers
don’t end up in the lemonade. What we need now is a flag. My dad has ’em down at his
dealership. I’ll grab a few tonight.” Suddenly he stared into space. “I just hope she shows
up.”

I knew who he meant. “Forget it,” I said. “She’s off with the track guy.”

“She’s off thinking about my gorgeous eyes,” said Chip.
I rolled my own eyes.

“Listen, Scotty. I have a plan. You and I will be in costume.”

“We what?”

“You know that silly coat you wore all last winter? The red one with the puffy sleeves? I want you to wear that. You’ll look like one of those British guys. I’ll wear my Daniel Boone hat, then when she shows up, I’ll chase you around the tree a couple of times and pin you to the ground with my BB gun.”

“Are you nuts? It’s a hundred degrees out here! And you want me to wear my winter coat?”

“Just for a little while,” Chip begged.

“I’m here to sell lemonade, not get you a girlfriend.”

“Now that I think about it,” said Chip, “a little stage show might boost sales. You have to think creatively if you’re going to succeed in business. Think about it.”

“Jeez,” I said.

Early the next day I pedaled my bike to the lake—twice—pulling my red wagon behind. Chip said we’d need extra stuff. He expected half the town to stand in line for our lemonade.

I was busy setting things up when a car the size of a Thanksgiving Day float braked close to the bike path. A tag on the front read, “Keller Cadillac.” Chip’s mother was at the wheel. A cigarette dangled between her lips. Her hair was up in curlers. She was hollering at Chip.

“Just look! Lemonade all over the upholstery! Your father will have a stroke!”
Chip ignored her. He was busy dragging things out of the front seat. “Don’t just stand there, Scotty, give me a hand,” he ordered.

“Don’t expect me to do this again, do you hear, Chester? Ever!” Mrs. Keller’s cigarette wagged at him like an angry finger.

Chip stuffed towels, cups, lemons, and a shower curtain in my arms. “The flags are back there,” he said.

That’s when I saw his sister. She sat in the back seat with three small American flags and a drawing pad on her lap.

“Give Scotty the flags!” Chip yelled at her as if she were deaf.

“I can manage,” said the sister. She squirmed out of the car with her pad and flags under one arm. I notice the metal brace on her leg. She used crutches.

“Whatver you do, don’t drop those flags,” Chip shouted at her, “or you’ll end up in state prison for the rest of your life.” He looked at me and winked.

“I’ll bet your mother didn’t drive you here, did she, little boy?” asked Mrs. Keller. She could never remember my name, even though she’d known me since first grade.

“I rode my bike,” I said.

“There, see? Not everybody gets limousine service. Chester, if it weren’t for Trudy, you’d walk home.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” said Chip, whose mind was on business.

“I’ll pick you both up at five. Not a minute later.”

The Keller Cadillac zoomed off like a rocket.

“Okay, everybody hop to it!” Chip clapped his hands. He was in a nasty mood. I wished his mother would come back for him right away.
We spread the tablecloth over the counter then put up our signs and flags. Chip even had a life-sized cut-out of Uncle Sam which he pinned to the tree with the stenciled words "Drink the drink of Americans." We looked like an army recruiting station.

Chip’s sister dragged her leg over to the water’s edge. She said, “Those clouds remind me of the mountains in Heidi.”

“Forget Heidi,” Chip scolded her. “We’re here to sell lemonade.” He put on his Daniel Boone cap and shouldered his BB gun. “Scotty, where’s your red coat?”

“My mom put it in storage,” I lied.

“Aw, man, there goes our stage show.”

“Like you said, we’re here to sell lemonade... Chester.”

Chip scowled at me, leaned the gun against a tree, then spread the shower curtain over the ground. It was bright green with pictures of yellow birds. “I couldn’t find a red, white and blue one,” he explained.

“Uh. Why do we need a shower curtain?” I asked.

“Help me sling it over that branch and you’ll see.” We threw the curtain over the low branch of a tree, and it made a kind of shield between the lake and the stand.

“This is where you’ll be,” Chip told his sister, “on the other side of this curtain. That way no one will see you washing cups in the lake. And don’t even think about coming out.”

It looked as if we had enough lemons to sink a rowboat, but Chip was afraid we’d run out. He told me to go help his sister slice up a few dozen extra, just in case.

“Is he this bossy at home?” I asked her.

“He’s always himself,” she replied.
“I don’t know how you stand him.”

“He’s my brother.” She handed me a knife. “And you’re Scotty. Chester’s junior partner.”

“Junior?”

“To Chester, everyone’s junior,” she said, “except our father.”

Over by the path, Chip in his Daniel Boone cap was shouting, “Step right up, folks, and treat yourself to the drink invented by George Washington! Quench your thirst with the choice of the Founding Fathers—only thirteen cents a cup! A penny for each of the thirteen colonies!”

“Look at him. He’s in his glory,” I said to Trudy Keller and tried not to stare at her leg brace.

“A chip off the old block,” she said and hacked a lemon in two. She was surrounded by a dozen thermoses, bought at bargain price at the five-and-dime.

“Do you really think we’ll sell all this?” I asked.

Trudy shrugged. I watched her lift two plastic containers of sugar from the bag.

A few customers appeared, but Chip said I should keep helping out his sister until we got really busy. He’d memorized the first few lines of the Declaration of Independence, which he quoted to people whether they were interested or not.

“I’m surprised he didn’t try to get me to sing The Star-Spangled Banner,” I said.

“Oh, do you sing?” asked Trudy.

“Sometimes I hum.”

“At my school we sing every day. Our music teacher, Mr. Ivan, says that when you sing you become—what was that word he used?—exceptional. Do you believe that?”
“Some people should never sing,” I said. I watched her measure sugar into thermoses.

“We learned some Irish ballads. Want to hear one?”

“Not really.”

“Oh, come on. I need the practice.” She cleared her throat and began singing *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*. She was right about needing the practice.

“Hey!” Chip shouted. “Knock it off back there!”

“Oops.” Trudy covered her mouth. “I guess it’s un-American to sing Irish ballads on the Fourth of July.”

I laughed.

She said, “My brother’s going to be a millionaire.”

“That’s what he keeps telling me.”

“Well, it’s true. I mean, it’s his dream. At my school they say you should always follow your dream, and you should help others follow theirs.”

“He doesn’t treat you very nice,” I said.

“But he’s family, and you should always stand by family,” said Trudy, and she grew thoughtful. “Sometimes he does get out of line. Like when he sold my charm bracelet.”

“Your what?”

“My grandmother gave me an expensive charm bracelet when I was six, and last year Chester sold it. But it was for a good cause. He needed tires for his bike, or he couldn’t do his paper route. Even so, I miss that bracelet. I miss my grandmother even more.” She let out a long breath as she finished up with the sugar. “So, anyway, Scotty, what’s your dream?”

“Me? I want to play baseball.”
She nodded. "Then that’s what you’ll do."

"Thanks."

Just then Chip’s voice rang out. There was a line forming at the stand. Folks were in a good mood, it being a holiday, and no one seemed to mind paying thirteen cents for lemonade. Some carried picnic baskets, others wore bathing suits.

"I just hope we don’t run out," Chip said.

"Are you kidding? Your sister’s made enough to flood the state. If you want to worry about something, worry about those dark clouds over there."

"Oh, it won’t rain. Today’s my lucky day."

"Are you sure?" I said. "Take a look."

Coming along the path was Chip’s “dream girl.” She was dressed in yellow, like she’d just stepped out of a sunbeam. Holding her hand was the track guy. When Chip saw them together, he poured lemonade all over a customer’s wrist.

"Hello, men! Glad you’re here," said the track guy. He was all smiles. "I’ll take a whole thermos worth. If it wasn’t for you two, Lisa and I wouldn’t be together." He kissed her on the cheek. I gave him a full thermos, and he handed me three bucks. "Keep the change," he said.

Chip wouldn’t even look at them.

"So where’d you get them? From your mother or your father?" the girl asked me.

"Huh?" I said.

"Those eyes. They’re gorgeous—like the sky."

I glanced at Chip to see if he’d heard. I wanted her to repeat what she’d just said, but she and the track guy turned to go.
Here—go wash these.” Chip shoved some dirty cups in my hands. “Just make sure Idiot Child stays behind that curtain.”

Between the lake and the curtain, Trudy Keller was in her own world. She was sketching in her pad and humming.

“The master wants these washed,” I said.

“See those clouds rolling in? This day could be spoiled,” said Trudy.

“I hope so.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry, but I’m sick of this. And I’m sick of your brother.” She got a hurt look in her eyes. “I don’t like being bossed around.”

“Don’t take it personally,” said Trudy. “He’s only anxious for things to go right.”

“You mean he’s anxious to make a ton of money.”

“Scotty—hey, Scotty! Haul your lazy butt over here!” Chip called to me through cupped hands. “See those people getting out of that station wagon? Looks like a family of—seven, eight, nine—ten! Holy cow! Grab those extra thermoses! I’ll start pouring!”

Trudy, who’d overheard, gave me three fresh thermoses while Chip got the cups ready.

“Hi, fellas!” said a red-faced man with a toothy grin. He held a picnic basket in one hand and a little girl’s hand in the other. His wife held the girl’s other hand. A troop of different-aged people were lugging baskets, blankets, and kites. The girls played tag in the grass, and the boys punched each other while a white-haired lady shouted for them to stop.
“Great day for a picnic, huh?” said the man. “Just hope the weather holds.” He squinted at the sky. “Let’s see. We’ll take—”

Chip was way ahead of him. “Ten cups. A buck thirty.”

“Hey, kids!” the man called to his large family. “Come and get it!” He handed a cup to his wife and one to the white-haired lady. The kids crowded around and began slurping their drinks.

The next scene was straight out of a horror movie. The whole family doubled over, hacking, coughing, and making faces as if they’d been stabbed. The white-haired lady’s false teeth fell out on her shoe. The man’s face turned even redder.

“This-has-salt-in-it!” he sputtered.

“What?” Chip cried.

“Salt,” the man gasped. “Salt!” He kept repeating it, as if it were a word he’d learned.

“Salt?” said Chip.

“Let me punch him, Dad,” said one of the boys.

“No, let me!” said another.

“Leth all punth him,” said the toothless old lady.

“Give me back my money, you little—!” the man shouted.

People gathered around to see what the commotion was about, and the family warned them that our stuff was poisoned. The boys tipped over our stand and ripped down the Uncle Sam cut-out. Letters scattered across the grass. Some blew away. One kid grabbed Chip’s BB gun and shot a hole through a thermos before running off with it.

Chip looked like he’d been electrocuted. “I don’t get it,” he kept saying. “I don’t get it.”
Then something dawned on him. He went over and tore the shower curtain off the
tree branch. His sister sat there humming.

“You—you did this!” Chip accused her.

“Did what?”

There were two sugar containers. Chip snatched up one of them and dabbed his finger
inside. He took a taste. “Just as I thought. Salt!”

Trudy looked surprised. “I thought sure it was sugar.”

“Here. Taste it yourself.”

“No, that’s okay, Chester, I believe you. If you say it’s salt, it’s salt. Because you’re
always right,” said Chip’s sister and went on humming.

“There, you see?” Chip hollered at me even though I was standing right next to him. I
told you she was a retard!” He was close to tears. “Wait till I tell Dad...Scotty, hurry
down to Dwayne’s Grocery. We can still save the day.”

“But it’s going to rain,” I said.

“Then you’d better run.”

“Run there yourself.”

“I thought we were partners.”

“I just retired.”

“Fine! I’ll go, but you’ll take a big cut in profits...oh, and, uh, can I use your bike?”
I just laughed. Chip cussed and took off running. At the same time I felt raindrops.

“He’ll get soaked,” I said. “And so will we.”

Chip’s sister wrapped her drawing inside a cloth.
“This weather serves you guys right,” I heard a voice call to me from the bike path. It was El Stinko.

“Here.” I tossed him a thermos of salty lemonade. “A going-out-of-business present from me to you.”

At first he looked confused. “Really?...Thanks!”

Fat drops splattered the ground around me. The sky looked spooky.

Trudy Keller used the curtain for a cover. “Come on,” she shouted. “There’s room under here for two.”

While other people scattered toward their cars, I scrambled under a green shower curtain.

“Thirsty?” Trudy offered me a sip of lemonade.

“Not for that.”

“Oh, this batch is fine,” she said. “I made it separate. No salt.”

The rain hammered down, and we tucked the edge of the curtain under us so water wouldn’t seep in. We used one of her crutches for a prop. I felt her metal brace press against me and hoped it wouldn’t draw lightning.

“Listen for my mom’s car,” said Trudy.

“What about your brother?” I asked.

“What about him?” she said, and we both laughed.

I said, “So how long to you think this rain’ll last?”

“Long enough for me to teach you a tune—want to learn?” She began to sing. I felt her breath in my ear and could smell whatever soap she used.
Outside, the rain fell hard and steady, but huddled under the curtain, we stayed dry.

By the time Trudy's mother roared up in her Cadillac, the sun was peeking through the clouds and Irish eyes were smiling.
ARE WE THERE YET?

*a lost diatribe of David*

(an Appendix for *Exodus* appears on the last two pages of this document)

"Mose...Mose...wake up, Mose! It’s time."

"Hah?"

"It’s time, Mose," Zipper* repeated. "Aaron and Miriam* are here, the van is gassed up, the kids are raring to go. Have you forgotten?"

Of course he hadn’t forgotten. His entire family had been reminding him for weeks. It was the day he’d promised to drive them all from Vegas across the desert to Disneyland. Now here was his wife reminding him for the fortieth* time.

"Forty winks," Mose mumbled into his pillow. "Just forty more winks."

"Oh, no you don’t, Mose," Zipper protested and pulled the pillow out from under his wizened but not yet wise head. "If I give you forty winks you’ll take forty days. I know you."

"Oy."

"Never mind oy. Get up."

About then, many of Mose’s children came romping into the room, excited as all get-out about their trip. They tugged at his beard, tousled his hair, hopped up and down on the bed, until Mose had no choice. He reluctantly rose while quoting a latter-day cowboy hero: "A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do."

"That’s the spirit," chirped his trusty wife Zipper. "Now, come on, kids, let’s go prepare some manna* while your father performs his ablutions."
They weren't sure what ablutions were, but it didn't sound like anything fun, so they tagged behind their mother into the kitchen, where their Uncle Aaron and Aunt Miriam awaited feeding.

Aaron said to Zipper, “Did you remind Mose that he promised to take along all our friends and relations?”

“That’s your job,” Zipper replied. “I can’t do everything.” She rolled up her sleeves and set to work making manna, with Miriam’s assistance.

When Mose emerged from the bedroom, fresh and spry, Aaron reminded him about the friends and relations.

“Oy! Did I promise that?” Mose asked irritably.

What sounded like a swell idea five weeks ago now sounded like a plague upon his house.

“Admittedly, you’d had too much to drink,” Aaron pointed out. “We polished off every last bottle of Rolling Rock in the house, and you, in your perky way, called up each friend and relation and said, ‘Wanna go to Disneyland? I’m driving!’”

“Why didn’t you stop me?” Mose asked.

“It was partly my idea,” Aaron admitted.

The two brothers loved Rolling Rock beer. To them it was the manliest of lagers. In fact, Aaron, the wittier of the two, was fond of calling it a real he-brew.

Zipper, ever the resourceful one, had refilled the Rolling Rock bottles with water to take with them on their trek across the desert.

Mose, a man of his word, agreed that, okay, fine, he would take along the friends and relations. Whatever. The only problem was, they worked down at the Luxor, and he
wasn’t certain that their boss, Fay Rowe,* would permit them time off to go to Disneyland.

“Every time I talk to Fay Rowe I get tongue-tied,” said Mose, who had a slight speech impediment.* It made him sound vaguely like a cartoon character.

“Don’t worry,” said Aaron, “I’ll go with you and sweet-talk the lady. Maybe I’ll even wow her with a few of my many magic tricks.”* Aaron was an amateur magician who had a job on the Gaza Strip.

Some of the kids hadn’t finished their manna, so Zipper packed it up to eat along the way.

“But what is it?”* asked Simon named Peter, her youngest (when he was born, Zipper wanted to name him Simon, while Mose preferred Peter; loving couple that they were, they compromised).

“Never mind what it is,” said Zipper, who wasn’t quite sure herself. “Just be glad we have any.”

Whereupon they set about loading the van, gladly, gladly.

“Before we go I need to call Rod at the plant to make sure they can get along without me,” Mose announced, and he picked up the phone and dialed.

His plant supervisor, Rod, answered. “Yay, Mose, all is well.”

“You’re sure? Everybody got to work on time?”

Rod said, “They got here an hour early and are now singing—just listen.”

Sure enough, in the background Mose could hear a rousing chorus of “Onward Christian Soldiers.” He hung up the phone and made a joyful sound. “My Rod and my
staff, they comfort me.” Then he turned to Aaron and said, “Let’s go to the Luxor and deal with Faye Rowe. We’ll take your car.”

“Can I go, too, Pop?” asked one of Mose’s sons, Agassi.

“Nay, son. Stay and help your mother pack.”

Whereupon Mose and Aaron headed down to the Luxor.

As expected, Fay Rowe was loath to let the people go. She hardened her heart against Mose, telling him that she needed every last worker for the weekend. When Mose was reduced to pleading in his stuttery way, all she did was bare her fat ivory teeth at him. Then Aaron in his charming way attempted to distract her with a few clever card tricks. But no dice. Speaking of dice, he turned every die in the place into snake eyes,* but Faye Rowe was unamused. Her heart remained hardened.

The final straw came when Mose observed one of Fay Rowe’s shift leaders, who walked like an Egyptian, insult one of his friends and relations. In a burst of fury, and much to Faye Rowe’s displeasure, Mose struck down the Egyptian.* Again, she bared her teeth at him, at which point Aaron unleashed the niftiest of all his tricks. He afflicted Fay Rowe’s teeth with ten kinds of plaque,* which even the sturdiest of dentists could not remove.

She pointed to the door. “Go! Out! All of you! Now!” she commanded, then scurried off to floss vigorously.

Mose and his people piled into Aaron’s economy-sized car and away they sped in a flurry of jubilation, with great certainty that the desert was the best place for them. Some of them even chanted “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

Back at the house, Zipper and Miriam and the gang were ready to go.
And so they went.

Not too far out of town Zipper said to Mose, "Did you remember to bring the map?"

"Not to worry. I can find my way with my eyes closed."

"In other words, you forgot the map."

Mose gave Zipper a reassuring pat on the knee. "Any problem that arises, we'll transcend it."

"That’s the spirit, Pop," chanted one of their sons, Ralph named Waldo, from the back seat.*

"Are we there yet?" asked another son, Pequod.

"Will someone please turn on K戈D?" asked one of the daughters.

"Why, why, why, Delilah?" Mose asked.

"Because I hear David has a new psalm in the Top Forty," Delilah replied.

"Ah, the Top Forty," Mose rhapsodized.

"So does Madonna," said Bob called Bob, another son. "And let me assure you, its conception is immaculate."

"Hey, who is it back there who smells so bad?" demanded Zipper, holding her nose.

"Did you take a bath, Sheba?"

"Oh, Mom. That’s my frankincense and myrrh you smell," Sheba told her.

In the rearview mirror, Mose observed Aaron and Miriam following closely, Aaron at the wheel, nibbling on calf livers, in disdain of manna, as always. That was Aaron for you—a good old boy at heart, but still his brother’s keeper.

That night they slept in the desert because Mose got lost.

"I knew it, I just knew it!" said Zipper, her voice rife with dismay.
“Patience,” said Mose, reaching into his haversack for a Rolling Rock. He always carried a haversack when he went to Disneyland. “I’ll have us there by tomorrow.”

“Ah, the stars, the moon, the night sky!” Ralph named Waldo rhapsodized. He said to one of his brothers, “Let’s go for a nature walk, shall we, Henry?”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather walk alone,” said Henry named David and, hearing the beat of a distant drummer, marched off to find a pond. It was the last they saw of him for quite some while.

The next day, bright and early, Zipper awakened her husband. “Mose, Mose. Take a look outside the tent, Mose. Tell me what kind of day it is.”

“Hah?”

“Mose!”

“Oy,” said Mose and poked his head outside the flap.

“Well?” said Zipper.

“Is—is—” Sometimes Mose had trouble getting words out, especially first thing in the morning.


“Is real light.”

“Is what?”

“Is real light, is real light,” Mose repeated.

“Oh, Mose, you and your speech impediment. You forgot the pronoun. I hope you don’t talk that way all the way to Disneyland.”

Well, they ate some manna and some unleavened bread, then off they went—in the wrong direction.
“Are we there yet?” asked Pequod. “I have to pee.”

“Go behind the Joshua tree,” Zipper advised. “But not on the Joshua tree. Never on the Joshua tree, do you hear, Pequod?”


It was right around this time that Mose was attacked by a dark spirit, a winged, clawed creature set loose in the sky, no doubt, by the nefarious Faye Rowe, from the Luxor.* It would have killed him dead if his beloved Zipper hadn’t leaped into action. She whipped out her trusty flaying knife (Zipper was wont to carry a trusty flaying knife in those days) and grabbed hold of her son, Agassi, who had a penis the size of a tennis racket. She cut part of it off, knowing he could easily get through life without it, and swatted that dark spirit into oblivion, just in the nick of time.*

“Thanks, Zip, I owe you.” Not one for overt displays of affection, Mose blew his wife a tame little kiss.

“The lesson here,” said Zipper to her daughters, who’d gathered round to admire their brother’s foreskin, “is that you don’t need a hundred of these to satisfy your needs. Get one good one and use it to your advantage. Are you girls listening?” She waved Agassi’s bloody foreskin in their faces and they all nodded obediently—all except the twins, Jezebel and Salome, who made sexy grrring noises deep in their throats.


“Yes, yeah, like, whatever,” said Jezebel and Salome, eyes rolling, gum snapping.

“Oy,” said Agassi, for whom forty-love now meant something entirely different. And so off they went—somewhere.
"If only you’d remembered the map," Zipper nagged at her husband. "And, hey. What’s that I see up ahead?"

Their way was blocked by a strange sight indeed—hundreds of librarians wandering around in the desert, reading, reading, reading. A monstrous wind storm, perhaps sent by Faye Rowe, had blown down their libraries.

"Their heads are stuck in books," Mose observed. "They don’t even see us." He honked his horn but to no avail. The librarians would not budge.

Said Zipper: "Oh, they see. The read see very well. The well-read see even better, thanks to books. Always remember that, kids. The read see!"*

"Reading and communing with nature simultaneously! Oh, how lustily—no, make that chastely—I approve!" commented Ralph named Waldo, who added, "I’m about to have one of my atypical orgasms."

"Do tell," said Jezebel, and Salome snickered.

Just the idea of an orgasm made Agassi wince with pain.

Nevertheless, the expression caught on—as pet expressions often do in families—and they nicknamed the gathering of librarians the Read See. But there was still the problem of what to do about them.

Aaron, amateur magician extraordinaire, cunningly devised a trick. He transformed certain desert flowers into dewey decimals and scattered them across the sands. The horde of librarians couldn’t resist. They marked their places, parted company, and scampered after the decimals, as was their lot, and scooped them up by the bushel, thus allowing Mose and his entourage to pass through effortlessly.

"Hey, way to go, Aaron," his sister Miriam praised him.
“Nothing, nothing.” Aaron tossed off the compliment but was secretly pleased. He had a built-in applause track which he heard constantly. But even in a dust storm he dutifully followed behind Mose’s van, never losing sight of that mysterious license tag of Mose’s with Heston written on it, which even Mose was at a loss to explain.*

Up ahead was a road sign: “Mount Sigh, Forty miles.”

“I say we stop and ask directions,” Zipper flatly insisted.

They were good and lost, miles and miles out in the desert. By now, Mose was no one’s favorite camper. The radio station, KGOD, was full of static, yet Mose imagined that he could hear his name being called over the airwaves.

“Is Mount Sigh nigh?” asked Pequod.*

“Soon,” his mother answered him. “Very soon.”

“Because I have to pee,” said Pequod.

“Hold your pees. All of you,” said Zipper.

Somehow Mose got lost on the way to Mount Sigh, and the friends and relations became impatient. “We were better off at the Luxor,” was their constant lament. “We were better off with Faye Rowe.”

“I’m tired of manna,” said Hanna.

“No more unleavened bread,” said Ned.

“I want a corn dog,” said Bob named Bob.

“At least I no longer have to pee,” said Pequod, relieved.* Delilah, sitting next to Pequod, scooted as far away from him as she could get, so that she was practically in Samson’s lap, sitting on his long beautiful tresses.

“The hair, Delilah, mind the hair,” Samson cautioned her.
At long last they arrived at the base of Mount Sigh, where they parked their vehicles. The going was rough, anyone could see that, but at the very top was a dwelling of some sort. Mose said, “It was me who got us into this, so I’ll climb up and ask directions.”

“You just do that,” said Agassi, who was beginning to lose patience, and Miriam stood by him.

With Zipper’s blessing and a handful of manna, Mose began to climb.

“Transcend, Pop, transcend!” Ralph named Waldo cheered him on.

By the time he reached the top of Mount Sigh, it had begun to storm, and Mose was plumb tuckered out. He wished he had a bottle of Rolling Rock. He entered the dwelling and saw that it was good. But to his surprise, the only article of furniture was an unplugged TV set. And there were no people inside.

Just then Mose was startled when a lightning bolt struck the dwelling, and the TV came on, even though it was unplugged.

“Whoa!” Mose said, extemporaneously.

And who should appear out of the grainy, horizontally impaired tube but none other than G.W. Bush. Bush began to speak, and it was clear to Mose that he was addressing, not the union, but Mose personally. He recognized the voice as the one trying to reach him over K GOD.

“Listen carefully, Moose…”

“That’s Mose,” Mose corrected him.

Bush proceeded to say something about Canada, but Mose had a hard time understanding. The reception was poor (no cable) and Bush’s manner of locution left a lot to be desired. Noun-verb agreement was a chief culprit.
“And people say / talk bad,” Mose thought, but he kept it to himself.
Again Bush mentioned Canada. He seemed to want Mose to go there.

“But I’m going to Disneyland,” Mose informed him, barely able to subdue the whine in his voice.

Bush said, “Forget Disneyland, Moose. I want you to go to Canada.* I want you to spread my word. I need all the support I can get from our northerly neighbors. Your people will find contentment there.”

“Are you sure?”

“It’s the Promised Land. In the meantime, there are a few things I want you to do.”

Suddenly ten tablets clattered onto the floor by Mose’s feet. They were covered with Bush’s handwriting. His handwriting wasn’t any better than his oral directives, but Mose was loath to say so.

“Any other instructions besides these?” Mose asked. He was anxious to get back to his friends and relations.

“Yes,” said Bush. “Keep your people off this mountain. Also, keep yourself clean and don’t have sex.”*

“You don’t have to worry about that. I’m a married man,” Mose told him, and Bush grinned from ear to ear, heh, heh, heh.

“Good one, Moose. But seriously. Don’t break beer bottles in the desert. If you need water, just kick a rock.”*

It sounded to Mose like Bush must have cracked open a few bottles himself.

“And don’t forget to take your tablets,” Bush reminded him. “Kerry on. I mean, carry on.” He started in with “Onward Christian Soldiers,” when all at once lightning struck
and the TV was consumed by flames...just the TV, not Bush himself, who’d gone off the air.*

Mose gathered up what tablets he could (they were rife with misspellings and misplaced commas; the infinitives were split and so was the message). He scrambled back down the mountain, thinking of how to share this breaking news with those below.

He decided to take a positive approach.

“Oh, there you are,” said Zipper on spotting her husband. Her toe was tapping.

“Kids. Friends. Neighbors. Gather around.” Mose spoke chummily, as if he were about to break into a campfire song. “Good news! Instead of Disneyland, we’re going somewhere even better...Canada...Ta-ta!”

With that, their faces gathered into a collective grimace which clunked onto the desert floor so heavily you could have heard it in Zion.

Then the weeping and wailing began.*

“Oh, Mose,” said Zipper.

“Do not despair,” Mose told them. “I shall lead you.”

The weeping and wailing intensified.

Zipper commanded him to “Quit acting silly and take us to Disneyland like you promised.”

“Change of plan,” Mose informed her. “We’re going to Canada, and that’s that. Climb aboard, troops...*oops...almost forgot something.”

They had to wait while Mose made several more trips, huffing and puffing, up Mount Sigh to collect the remaining tablets Bush had bestowed upon him. It occurred to Mose to wonder why Bush couldn’t have written them all on one tablet. But then he remembered
that Bush worked in strange and mysterious ways, sometimes sending entire masses of people off to foreign deserts for no apparent reason other than "I said so. It is my will."

When a few of Mose's friends and relations offered to accompany him up the mountain, Mose said, "I'll handle this myself; just hang loose, I'll be back."

They just shrugged their shoulders and stood around wating for Mose. Everyone was exceedingly wroth except for Ralph named Waldo, who insisted that everyone's self-reliance would soon kick in and all would be well.

"You just had to go and marry Mose," one of Zipper's sisters complained, and Zipper became doubly wroth.

"Can't you talk to him? He's your brother," Miriam said to Aaron.

"Why don't you talk to him? He's your brother, too," Aaron replied.

"Don't remind me," said Miriam.

Thoroughly bushed from the effort, Mose had at last gathered together the ten tablets. Now they could get under way.

"What are these big heavy things?" Zipper wanted to know.

"Don't ask," Mose replied.

"Well, whoever wrote them needs to have his eyes examined," Zipper observed, squinting at one of the tablets. "Something about a laxative for boweevils."

"Actually, I think it's axis of evil," said Mose.

"Whatever," said Zipper. "I think half of them are missing letters. How are we supposed to understand?"

How indeed.
So off they went, amidst a continuing melee of the aforementioned weeping and wailing.

“So which way’s Canada, Mose?” Zipper asked.

“Don’t ask,” Mose told her.

After a day’s meandering, they arrived unto a village and, lo, the village had two motels—the Bull Rush Inn and the Golden Calf. Mose and most of his horde checked into the Bull Rush Inn, but when it became filled to capacity, Aaron and Miriam checked into the Golden Calf.*

Before going off to sleep, Mose said to Zipper, “Did you happen to notice my speech impediment went away?”*

“Along with your sanity,” Zipper observed.

“I think it was the air up on Mount Sigh.”

“So why are we suddenly going to Canada, Mose? What’s up with that?”

Mose explained unto Zipper how he had been chosen by Bush to lead them all to Canada to spread his word. He also explained about the tablets.

“Leave it to you to be chosen by a Republican,” said Zipper, whereupon she was filled with woe and lamentation.

“Oops—almost forgot,” said Mose, hopping out of bed. “Got to take a shower. He told me to stay clean.”

“After your shower come back to bed, big boy,” Zipper purred seductively and she showed him a bush never mentioned in Exodus. “I’ll help you forget about Canada.”

“Oh, um—about that,” said Mose, and he made sure the shower was extra cold.
The next day (call it Weeping and Wailing Part Two) they headed in a zigzaggy motion toward Canada. Mose was no more certain of its location than he had been of Disneyland’s. And he was miffed at Aaron and Miriam who, while staying at the Golden Calf, had contacted the Democratic Party for counsel.

“That’s not in the tablets,” Mose admonished his brother.

“!@$# the tablets!” Aaron exclaimed, at which point a burst of fiery static erupted from KGOD to reduce Aaron’s rod to ashes. Never again would he pee standing up.

“Which reminds me,” said Pequod. “I have to—”

“Don’t say it,” said Mose.

By midday, everyone was parched clear down to their toenails. The problem was that the heat had sealed tight the caps on the Rolling Rock bottles filled with water.

“That’s easy to fix,” said Mose. And instead of striking a rock, as Bush had commanded, he told Zipper to line up the bottles and proceeded to break off their tops.* Water gushed forth from the Rolling Rock bottles and everyone had a drink. It was good. But as thirsts were sated, hostile static sizzled from the radio, which, incidentally, was not even turned on.

At one point during the journey, Mose glanced in the rearview mirror and noted that Aaron and Miriam no longer were trailing behind. In their discontent they apparently had wandered off on their own—they of little faith.*

When at last they reached Canada there was modest rejoicing. But at the border, Mose and Zipper were barred by a formidable-looking guard who had a name tag with “Angelo” written on it.

“But why can’t we enter?” Mose asked.
“Did you break beer bottles in the desert?” Angelo asked.

Mose tried to change the subject. He showed the guard some card tricks left behind by Aaron, but Angelo would not be diverted. “Well? Did you?”

“Uh. Well. Kind of.”

“Sorry. You and the missus are denied entrance. Only these others may enter.”*

Whereupon their kids, friends, and relations skedaddled across the border into Canada, which was green and verdant and plentiful, and they did so without even so much as a thank you or faretheewell for Mose and Zipper, who watched them make a beeline for a restaurant called the Milk and Honey.

“Here, Pop, I’ll take these off your hands,” said Ralph named Waldo, who relieved Mose of the ten tablets. “Me and my self-reliance will figure them out.” He was gratified moments later to spot his long lost brother, Henry named David, who had somehow made it to Canada on his own.

“I merely simplified the journey and walked directly here,” Henry named David informed him. He glanced at one of the tablets and said, “If we don’t agree with these things, we don’t have to obey them, you know,” and to underscore his point, he threw one on the ground. “It’s what I call civil disobedience.” Whereupon he and Ralph named Waldo made a series of transcendent sounds.

It was getting dark.

“Well,” said Mose when he and Zipper were alone.

“Well,” said Zipper.

“I guess that’s that.”

Suddenly they didn’t have a blessed thing to do.
“There’s still Disneyland,” Zipper tried to console him.

“I’m sorry things didn’t work out,” Mose said. “The kids and all.”

“Oh, pooh. We’ll have more kids,” said Zipper with a flap of her hand.

“But we came all this way and you didn’t get to see the Promised Land.”

She just squeezed her husband’s hand and said, “Mose, anywhere you happen to be, that’s Promised Land enough for me.”

Mose smiled a good smile. He tilted his head toward the night sky and winked at the bright full moon, for Mose was pretty damn sure that the bright full moon had in fact just winked at him.

Appendix to ARE WE THERE YET?

- Zipporah was the actual name of Moses’ wife
- Aaron and Miriam were the names of Moses’ brother and sister
- “Forty” is a mystical and recurring number throughout Scripture
- Manna is food provided by God/Yahweh
- Pharaoh kept the Hebrew people in captivity in Egypt
- According to the Book of Exodus, Moses had a speech impediment
- Aaron is an amateur magician
- “Manna” literally means “what is it?”
- Aaron attempts to charm Pharaoh with mild but amusing tricks; Pharaoh is not impressed
- Moses strikes down an Egyptian whom he observes mistreating a Hebrew
- Aaron brings down ten kinds of plague on Egypt, whereupon Pharaoh orders them all to go away, just get out
- Moses is attacked by a dark spirit, literally sent by Pharaoh to thwart him
- Zipporah saves Moses by cutting off the foreskin of one of their sons and driving off the dark spirit with it
The Red Sea/The Reed Sea or Red Sea or The Sea of Reeds

Aaron, the dutiful brother, follows Moses everywhere

"Mt. Sigh nigh'Mt. Sinai

The Israelites complain stringently throughout Exodus

Canada/Cannan – The Promised Land

Actual command given by God/Yahweh to Moses about cleanliness, abstaining from sex, and staying off the mountain

Still another command given by God, concerning extraction of water from rock

Indeed, there was much weeping and wailing among the Israelites

Aaron incurs God’s wrath by sacrificing a golden calf, with Miriam’s assistance

Upon departing Mt. Sinai, Moses’ speech impairment miraculously vanishes

In Exodus, Aaron and Miriam go their own way, shortly after the golden calf incident

Moses and Zipporah are denied entrance into the Promised Land due to what God perceived as their transgressions in the desert
A certain young man used to come into the book store and we would make up stories
around him. We'd speculate about his life until finally we had a whole mythology built
around the poor soul which presumably had nothing to do with his actual existence. He
always came in alone and he never smiled. He invariably headed for the reference section
where sometimes he'd stand for up to an hour jotting things down in a dog-eared
notebook before slipping out without a glance or a nod to anyone.

My wife had a pet name for him. She called him "Chekhov," because to her he
looked Russian, and the books he pored over were full of publishing information. She
said that if he spent as much time writing books as he did learning about how to publish
them, he must have authored entire libraries by now.

Chekhov was just one of our "odd bodkins," as Sandra was fond of calling them—
people who drifted into the store and demonstrated peculiar character traits, to put it
mildly. They are less strange than the oddballs who frequent the public library, who in
turn are not so bizarre as the ones who hang out at the city bus depot with their heated
warnings not to travel to Iowa or some such place. There is an entire sub-culture of such
individuals, and when I suggested that someone should write a book about them, Sandra
motioned in Chekhov's direction. "Maybe someone is."

Besides Chekhov, there was Cluny the professor. Junius P. Cluny, Ph.d., who
addressed everyone as bonhomie and taught a course in 18th century French history at the
junior college. Every Monday, just prior to his evening class, he'd amble in and treat us
to half an hour of lecture. Danton, Robespierre, Marie Antoinette—we’d hear it all as Professor Cluny strutted about flailing his arms in angry defiance of the Court of Louis XVI. He virtually reenacted the Reign of Terror, which occasionally stirred terror in the hearts of customers (we tried passing him off as an advertising gimmick). Heads rolled, bayonets gleamed; I heard the deadly plunge of the guillotine and the rousing cries of the sans-culotte as they stormed the walls of the Bastille. Finally Professor Cluny would vanish like an actor at the end of a play, brow swathed in sweat, eyes bulging with the fury of revolution, causing Sandra and me to wonder how he could possibly sustain all that passion through two hours of class time.

It was a couple of months after he began making these strange appearances that we discovered that Professor Cluny wasn’t a professor at all, wasn’t even remotely associated with the college. He was an out-patient with the Charity of Hope Mental Ward who gloried in all things Gallic. We were assured by authorities that he was perfectly harmless—unless he suspected you were a member of the French aristocracy.

It was Sandra’s idea to open a book store. After four years as a legal secretary, her degree in sociology indefinitely shelved, she inherited a tidy sum from her grandmother and was offered the lease from a realtor friend of her father’s, the same realtor who gave us a cozy deal on our house. I was unemployed at the time, so she “hired” me to put up stock, arrange window and floor displays, and perform what handy-man tasks needed doing. On the day of the grand opening, I was there to pour champagne, greet customers, and generally keep things lively; in other words, do whatever the occasion called for. Afterwards, I stuck around to run the cash register. In that way I became a book store
clerk—not my preferred occupation (I was a non-practicing English major). But while trying to decide what my next move should be, the book store kept me busy. It also helped out Sandra—kept her from having to hire strangers to train in a field she barely knew herself. Not to mention my labor came cheap. It gave us a project we could work at jointly—a pep rally, so to speak, for a marriage that was in no need for one. In those days we were still getting along. Eventually, I stopped circling ads in the classifieds, and my trips to the employment agency vanished. I soon knew as much about retail as she did; in fact, we learned together. What started out nominally as her enterprise was in reality ours.

The name of the store was The Turtle’s Triumph—not the expected name for a book store, admittedly, but after considering a list of alternatives, this was the one we decided upon. “Sounds more like a pet shop,” observed a dubious friend.

“The Turtle’s Triumph?” scoffed Sandra’s pragmatic father, whose comments always took a circuitous route around me to get to his daughter. “What the hell kind of name is that? Try something sensible. Sandy’s Books.”

Fortunately, his wealth did not depend on his wit.

Sensible or not, The Turtle’s Triumph was the name we stuck with, and the logo on our sign, as well as on our bookmarks, featured a bespectacled turtle snug and secure inside his shell as an anxiety-ridden world races past. We derived the name from an incident in our college days, the very incident, in fact, that had brought Sandra and me together. We named it that on the assumption that what had launched a successful romance would launch a successful business.

Though we worked hard, the first year saw us barely breaking even. During the second we began realizing a profit. Of course, there was never any real danger of going
under. The store became a tax shelter for Mr. Russell, Sandra’s father. We were solidly backed from the start. Should we find ourselves in a bind, the old man’s checkbook was there to bail us out. Sandra and I seldom discussed this. We—well, she more than I—preferred to think of ourselves as entrepreneurs, and the knowledge of that paternal safety net was an unsettling reminder that this was not strictly the case. Nor did we talk much about the goals we’d made back in college—she impassioned with a desire to correct some of the world’s wrongs, I bent on instilling literary values in young minds. It seemed we had snatched up our diplomas and a marriage license simultaneously then settled with ease into the cradle of her well-to-do family, all the while comforting each other with the notion that it was only temporary.

As the years passed, the image of myself as a high school teacher paled while I fluttered about in a profession (sales) for which I was mostly not suited. When I made the ironic observation that, by opening a book store at age twenty-six, we were each a step closer to our respective goals—she to sociology, I to literature—she smiled wanly.

I remember we had a game we used to play. When an interesting looking customer came in, we’d try to predict, simply by watching, what sort of book he or she was likely to purchase. Naturally, this game applied to the slow and careful shopper. If someone made a mad dash, say, for Astrology or immediately started fingerling through cookbooks, he’d be disqualified. But sometimes the customer would thwart us. “Health and Fitness,” I’d predict. “Arts and Crafts,” Sandra would counter-predict. The suspect would snoop around and then leave without buying a thing, leaving us in the lurch. When we first laid eyes on Chekhov, we knew at once. The bullet-shaped head, massive
eyebrows, heavy jaw line and shaved skull prompted Sandra to exclaim, “Horror and the Supernatural,” at the same time I declared, “Science Fiction.”

He headed straight for the reference section, never to depart.

Sandra was better at this game than I. She generally knew her man, including the one she married. When I was laid off at my job at Kincaid Pumps and Accessories, after four years’ service as a sales representative, my self-esteem plummeted. As much as I wanted and needed to be employed, my spirits flagged and I momentarily lacked the drive to sell myself elsewhere. And while it was generally agreed that I’d at long last start to work on my teaching certificate, I needed to be doing something to earn an income. So when Sandra opened the book store and persuaded me to lend a hand, I never dreamed it would become permanent. But as the weeks passed and I devoted more time to the store and no time taking classes in secondary education, it struck us both that I was not so temporary as either of us imagined.

Plainly stated, I liked the store and I liked being around books. I enjoyed the customers and I loved working with Sandra. You could say I was her odd bodkin.

II

One of the odd bodkins, Wheat Warren by name—a big gangly adult of indeterminate age who always wore a red baseball cap with the brim hiked up like the flag on a mailbox—would sit in the Children’s Corner in the rear of the store and read aloud from *The Golden Treasury*, Dr. Seuss, the *Babar* series, and whatever else snagged his attention. Children would gather around on the floor by his feet while Wheat held forth in a wicker chair narrating with gusto *The Tales of Uncle Wiggly*. On completion of a story,
and sometimes during it, Wheat would clap his hands together over some happy detail, and it didn’t seem to matter whether children were present or not. He loved reading aloud. Then he’d leave the store with the same dreamy, self-satisfied look on his face that people get after having great sex.

The oddest odd bodkin by far was a character we knew as Hello Harry. Hello Harry was a man in his mid-forties who was always nattily dressed. His standard attire was a tweed jacket, a crisp melon-colored shirt, plaid bow tie, wing-tipped shoes, and a fedora. Except for a pencil-thin moustache, he was clean shaven. Perched on his substantial nose were thick tortoise-shell glasses that magnified his eyes into a spooky 3-D. He could have been anything from a bookie to a Bible salesman. As a matter of fact, he was crazy as hell. He would enter the store as if on fire, race manically around the place tagging the spines of books with his fingertips, all the while muttering things no one could understand. When Sandra or I greeted him with “Hello, Harry,” he’d snap “Hello, Harry” back, then shoot out the door. Someone first alerted me to his phenomenon when I was grocery shopping. Hello Harry was dashing up and down the aisles tagging canned goods. “Say ‘Hello, Harry’ to him when he goes by,” I was told. Seeing the man approach, and feeling a tad silly, I murmured “Hello, Harry,” and he quit muttering long enough to bark “Hello, Harry” then kept going, as if he were the March Hare.

It was some weeks after that that he found his way into The Turtle’s Triumph. I began to doubt my own sanity because I actually looked forward to his visits, just so I could say “Hello, Harry.”

“I wonder who dresses him,” I remarked to Sandra.
If there was anything objectionable on the parts of any of these folks, it was Chekhov’s tendency to scratch his crotch while in the reference section; not just scratch, but dig and gouge. At first we laughed, but Sandra worried that customers would see him and become offended. I assured her that he was unobtrusive and, besides, the reference section was tucked into an alcove where few besides him ever ventured.

“But, Jed, if he keeps it up you’ll have to make him stop,” Sandra insisted.

“Of course,” I promised, but couldn’t quite picture myself advising a stranger to stop scratching his balls. I said, “Maybe if I put up a sign.”

Chekhov came in on the average of once or twice a week, and he appeared always to be rubbed all over with old newspapers. I reasoned that he probably was in need of a scrubbing, and that’s why he itched.

“Well, if he keeps it up, he’ll have to go,” Sandra insisted, implying that the role of bouncer had just been added to my job description.

Poets and odd bodkins became the hallmark of our marriage. Besides learning the book business, I rediscovered the joy of reading, a pastime which, while not thoroughly abandoned, suffered a sharp falling off after college. Sandra and I were privileged to borrow from our own stock. Evenings found us—supper done, dishes put away—reading to each other the verse of this or that favorite poet over a bottle of wine. I preferred dipping into previous centuries, while Sandra’s leanings were more contemporary. In response to my overheated renderings of Blake and Coleridge, she served up cool portions of Louise Bogan, Elinor Wylie, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Millay’s lines “Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies” made me think of Wheat Warren.
Quite often Sandra and I made the discovery of writers neither of us had read before. Then afterwards, fueled by verse and vino, we'd engage in some on-the-spot lovemaking, seldom making it to the bedroom. We were partners in work, partners in play. They were the best years of my life.

III

It was a Saturday in mid-summer toward the end of our second year as shopkeepers which I put down as a turning point in our marriage. The strange thing about turning points is they rarely reveal themselves at the time they occur. It's only in retrospect that they assume their true identities.

We were doing summer inventory, a chore I hated. Some maintain that unloading stock is worse, but that at least is physical and there is the reward of discovering new titles. Ripping into those freshly minted cardboard cases is like Christmas, and nothing is more exhilarating than the scent of a new book—unless it's the scent of a very old one. Inventory, on the other hand, assumes no such charm. Sandra and I would quarrel good-naturedly over who would do what. Neither wanted to do Romance—it was like being force-fed cotton candy. Nor were we much inspired by categories like Westerns or Auto Maintenance. Our agreement was to rotate these undesirables.

It was a rain-filled afternoon, the sky a resolute gray. On such days customer traffic is unpredictable. The weather may drive people on mad shopping sprees in consolation of a spoiled weekend, or it may inspire them to stay home and keep dry. On that afternoon, they chose to keep dry, which was fine with me. We were able to get through inventory without a hitch.
During a coffee break I said, "You know something? We never go on vacations."

Sandra said, "We went to the Booksellers' Convention in May. Remember?"

"That wasn’t a vacation. That was business."

"Oh, but I thought it was fun," she said. "We got to meet authors. And that night in
the lounge we danced—"

"Fun, yes. That’s my point. We need to have more of it. A real vacation is what I’m
getting at, without the worry of books."

"Oh," said Sandra.

I took a sip of coffee and packed my pipe while waiting for her response. She had an
amusing habit of weighing fresh ideas as if they were proposed amendments to the
Constitution. A gentle crease appeared in the middle of her forehead. When she took too
long to answer, I voiced what was really on my mind.

"Why don’t we give some thought to hiring someone?"

"Hiring someone!"

You might have thought I’d suggested we romp naked in the rain.

"Think of it this way. If we had a child, we wouldn’t sit home night after night, would
we? No. We’d hire a sitter. This store is like our child. We need a break from it now and
then, and it probably could use a break from us."

"A child, did you say?" The crease in her forehead deepened.

I held up my hands, palms wide, not having meant to steer the conversation in that
direction. "It was an analogy," I said quickly. "The subject is The Turtle’s Triumph. The
way it stands, we rarely have time to go to the movies, much less start a family. Am I
right?"
She said, “Why don’t we sit on it for a while.” It was a statement, not a question, meant ironically, because she knew that was the response I always gave on the subject of having a baby. Though I never came out and said it, at age twenty-eight and with no established career, I didn’t feel confident about bringing a dependent into the world.

All I wanted was a vacation.

In any case, by the time August rolled around, Sandra relented, and we placed an ad in the paper for part-time help: “Mature, responsible person to clerk book store. Experience helpful, but not necessary. No teens.” Our idea was to hire and train someone by October, when we wanted to take our vacation. That person would know the store well enough by then to operate it in our absence. I was plugging for a whole week off, Sandra was holding firm to “several days.”

We had an impressive number of applicants, many of them in their twenties, most of whom attended the junior college. While some seemed promising, we had an older person in mind, a widow or widower or possibly a retiree; someone with solid attributes whom Sandra could trust well enough that she wouldn’t be calling long distance every five minutes while we were away. We’d decided on a Bahamian cruise, I having finally browbeat her into taking a full week off. “You can’t take a cruise in three days,” was my argument, “unless you do it on a pond.”

One of our surprise applicants was Wheat Warren.

“At least we know he can read,” I said to Sandra.

“But that’s all he can do,” she replied. “Jed, discourage him without hurting his feelings.”

“The smell.” Wheat sniffed the air appreciatively, the brim of his cap standing up like a radar device.

“Yes, but do you know anything about the actual job? Its requirements?”

“Everything,” Wheat guaranteed.

“Oh, really? How?”

“By watching you,” he said.

“You think what I do is easy?”

Wheat snapped his fingers. “Nothing to it.”

“Well, think about this. You won’t get to read out loud anymore.”

“Why not?”

“Do you see me reading out loud?”

“No.”

“That’s why.”

His smile dwindled.

“Think of the kids who come in here.” I drove my point home. “How they’d miss that.”

Wheat gnawed his bottom lip.

“We need you to read to the kids, Wheat,” I said, patting his arm. “It’s what you do.”

“I’m sorry, Jed,” he said after a while. “But you’ll have to find someone else for the position.”

“I understand,” I told him. “No hard feelings.”
“No hard feelings,” said Wheat.

He shuffled away and in less than a minute I could hear him in the Children’s Corner reading *Green Eggs and Ham* to no one. Before tossing aside his application, I noticed that his real name was Warren Wheat.

“Tell me the truth,” I said to Sandra. “Do you think I could be replaced by Wheat Warren?”

She grew serious. “In everything? I’ll have to check him out,” she said and poked my stomach. “I’ll get back to you.”

After three days of interviews, we decided on Mrs. Eleanor McElroy. She all but completely filled the picture of whom we had in mind. Though not widowed, she was an ex-school teacher, having for most of her adult life taught English to junior high school students. She had a fervor, as I was to discover, for British Victorian poets—Browning, Arnold, Tennyson, Hardy, Hopkins, that crowd—especially Browning. On her application she stated she was “civically-minded with an aim for bettering the community through useful causes, with an emphasis on today’s youth” and went on to list the various committees and organizations she had either previously or currently was serving on. Mrs. McElroy put down as her hobbies “reading, gardening, baking, and playing piano, which I teach to beginners.” Her husband was a former nursery attendant who, due to a spinal injury, was no longer working. He was on some kind of disability. While they were “making ends meet,” she noted, they could use an additional income.

A Founding Father and a co-signer of the Declaration of Independence was how I originally perceived the woman, and while keeping the thought to myself, I never did
shake the impression that her stony countenance, framed in steel-rimmed bifocals, could easily have inspired John Gutzun Borghum's handiwork on Mount Rushmore.

"I must do something not merely to earn a paycheck," I heard Mrs. McElroy explain to my wife. "It must be work in which I believe." She glanced approvingly at the neat rows of books like an inspector general, while sitting stiff-backed on the edge of a wooden chair.

I watched Sandra nod in time to Mrs. McElroy's perfect diction. She instantly struck me as one for whom the English language is not just a vehicle for communication but a carefully oiled machine, each part as great as its uncompromising whole; one to whose ears the double negative is as grating as fingernails on a chalkboard. You can take the teacher out of the classroom, but you can't take the classroom out of the teacher, I reflected as the interview droned on. I wondered how many of Mrs. McElroy's former students had recovered by now from the tasks of identifying dangling participles and split infinitives, knowledge they'd never be called upon to use in their lifetimes.

"A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?" was one of Mrs. McElroy's favorite quotes by Robert Browning, and I was to hear it often in the days to come. Here was a no-nonsense personality from chiseled chin to relentlessly tapping toe, a trait I associated with certain old biddies from my own school days as they awaited an answer, usually wrong, to spill from the lips of ill-prepared students. Exactly the kind of teacher I didn't want to be, if I ever got around to it.

"Now, I can be available on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursday afternoons, and Saturdays. Certain Fridays will be acceptable if I am sufficiently notified. I never work Sundays. I hope that will be acceptable." Mrs. McElroy dictated to Sandra.
“Oh, yes, quite,” Sandra replied in a phrase so uncharacteristic that I nearly laughed out loud. Whether the quite slipped out of its own accord or she meant it ironically, I couldn’t tell. She said, “The hours may vary, but we’ll arrange for as much structure in your schedule as possible.”

“Thank you,” said Mrs. McElroy as she signed her W-2 form.

“Can you begin on Monday, say, at ten o’clock?”

“Monday at ten,” Mrs. McElroy repeated crisply. She wished my wife a good day, pivoted, and marched out the door with barely a nod in my direction.

“Well, what do you think?” Sandra asked brightly.

“A bit stuffy, wouldn’t you say?”

“Would you prefer someone with cap and bells? Wheat Warren?”

“There’s a vast untapped middle ground,” I reminded her, a little miffed that she hadn’t consulted me before hiring the woman.

“But, Jed, I think she’s perfect. We need someone we can rely on. Someone dependable.”

“I’m sure she’ll be all of that,” I had to agree.

Dutifully at ten o’clock on Monday morning, Eleanor McElroy stepped across the threshold of The Turtle’s Triumph, smartly but conservatively dressed in tones of gray (she frequently created the impression that every morning right before breakfast someone in her family had passed away), a spiral notebook in her hand for note taking. Sandra began by showing her where everything was, giving her the “lay of the land,” so to speak, and explained how we kept things categorized. While I worked the register, Sandra showed Mrs. McElroy the list of publishers, instructed her on how to special-order, and
demonstrated the use of the computer. The woman already knew how to operate the register, and by midday was speaking confidently to customers.

“She’s a real find,” Sandra rejoiced. “Better than we expected.”

“I’m not sure what I expected,” I confessed as I watched Mrs. McElroy scurry around in the history section.

“Does that mean you don’t like her?”

“It means I wish she’d lighten up. I can count the number of times she’s changed expressions since she got here.” I formed a zero with my thumb and index finger.

“She’s busy learning a new job. She doesn’t have time for frivolity,” Sandra said in our new employee’s defense.

“Who said anything about frivolity? A smile would do nicely.”

In all fairness, Mrs. McElroy proved to be an industrious worker—punctual, competent, quick to catch on. In fact, she became a real asset, allowing Sandra and me time away from the store. For the first Saturday in nearly two years we went out to a restaurant then to the theatre to hear a symphony. The best part was Sandra seemed reasonably relaxed, resisting every impulse to call the store. From the outset, Mrs. McElroy instilled in her the deepest confidence.

“It’s intuitive,” Sandra congratulated herself. “There are people you know you can trust even when you haven’t known them very long. Do you know what I mean, Jed?”

Of course I knew what she meant. She was correct to trust Mrs. McElroy, who was as upright and true as a portrait of Abraham Lincoln. Intuition had little to do with it. She was exactly what she appeared to be, and that’s what had me bothered. The only time I saw her express anything resembling mirth was when she spoke to customers about
classical music. She seemed especially warm toward Bach, and I recalled from her application that she played piano, although I had a hard time imagining her playing anything but dirges. She was also (for her) peppy when it came to English literature, a subject I might have enjoyed discussing had it not been for the barrier between us.

I recall our first inevitable run-in. It was early September and students appeared with their dreaded reading lists on which Mrs. McElroy sermonized to deaf ears. I would hear her lecturing on various rhyme schemes, leaving me to wonder why she gave up teaching. It wasn’t enough that we had “Professor” Cluny coming in on Mondays to lecture about the French Revolution; now we had Mrs. McElroy holding forth on sonnet forms. I remarked to Sandra, “Maybe we should start charging tuition.”

From several shelves over I could hear her admonishing an acne-cheeked ninth-grader on the ills of reading Cliffs Notes instead of the actual text.

“You’re afraid of the struggle.” She wagged her spindly finger at his pimples. “You want your answers spoon-fed. Well, it’s not that simple! Go home and read. *Dig* for knowledge. Forget these notes. Surprise yourself!”

“But,” protested the boy.

“Let your reach exceed your grasp,” advised Mrs. McElroy, and snatched away the kid’s Cliffs Notes on *Julius Caesar*.

“Excuse me,” I intervened.

“Well?” Mrs. McElroy snapped at me as if I were someone who’d spoken without raising his hand.

“If this young man wants to buy that book, then that should be his privilege,” I said sweetly.
“I do, I do!” exclaimed the boy. “We have a test!”

“Well, of course. In that case.” Mrs. McElroy’s tone was frosty as she handed him back the book, which he hugged to his chest like a talisman. “You know what is best, I am certain.” She regarded me with what I imagined were the same looks Julius Caesar encountered on the Ides of March. I said nothing more, just turned and walked back to the register where I sat and cleaned my pipe. From that moment on, I knew it was war.

The irony is that I disapprove of Cliffs Notes as much as Mrs. McElroy did, but that wasn’t the point.

Afterwards, we seldom spoke. I believe we inspired in each other a mutual dislike from the start; whether it was inborn or not I couldn’t say, but it became very well developed in the days ahead. At first I was darkly amused by her stiffness and solemnity, privately pegging her as a harmless old witch stewing in her own poisons. But in time I realized there was more to it than a mere clash of personalities. I found the woman objectionable in spite of the efficiencies Sandra extolled. Even her smallest gesture rankled me, calling to mind a line from her beloved Browning: “Grr—there go, my heart’s abhorrence!”

For one thing, she was chronically fastidious. If a book was two inches out of place, she’d rush over to straighten it, after which I would wiggle it out of place again. Nothing drove her to distraction quicker than a volume placed where it did not belong—say, a mystery in with the cookbooks. I noticed she took special pride in the religion section, pampering the Bibles and their high-born kinsmen as if they were a row of saints.

Something about this compulsion for orderliness irked me, and I delighted in slipping The Joy of Sex in with the New Testaments then waited for her to discover it. I’d watch
her seize the text as if it were sin incarnate and restore it to its rightful rack when I’m sure what she really wanted was to toss it into the nearest dumpster. Sometimes I’d beef up her outrage by sneaking in *The Joy of Gay Sex*. I finally stopped this foolishness when I sensed she was getting wise. The fourth time out she barely batted an eye, just primly removed the sex manual, all the while watching me as a teacher watches a pupil she suspects of cheating.

“What have you been up to?” Sandra asked one evening as we were driving home. We each had our own car but drove together when our hours were the same.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you tormenting Mrs. McElroy?”

“Of course not. What an accusation.”

“Then why is she so angry?”

“Some people are born angry.”

“She says you deliberately provoke her.”

“Then she’s not just angry, she’s paranoid.”

“She thinks you’re trying to get her to quit.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“But she says she’s above being harassed.”

“Bully for her.”

“I realize she can be irascible,” Sandra allowed, “but that’s no reason to harass the poor woman, if that’s what you’re doing. If you don’t care for her, that’s one thing, but she’s a good worker and we need her. Jed, I’d appreciate it if you’d stop.”

“How can I stop something I don’t know I’m doing?” I lied.
"Remember," said my wife, "it was your idea to hire someone."

The truth was, Mrs. McElroy did nothing to me personally which I could object to. It was the woman’s aura that vexed me, and while I knew it was wrong to loathe someone who’d done me no harm, I couldn’t seem to help myself. And just when I thought I’d worked my way through it, just when I thought I could manage to be civil toward her, the sight of those steel-rimmed glasses passing through our door threw me into immediate relapse. I learned to relish her days off. By the end of September I was secretly willing for an avalanche of books to land on her head, which I would take my sweet time picking up.

Naturally, I never revealed a breath of these sentiments to Sandra. She wouldn’t have understood, and it would have only stirred up useless arguments. After all, there were other things to think about, such as planning our vacation.

It wasn’t until the second day aboard the cruise ship bound for the Bahamas that it dawned on me why I disliked Mrs. McElroy. The trip was going perfectly, exactly what the doctor ordered. After setting sail, neither Sandra nor I gave The Turtle’s Triumph a moment’s thought. There were too many shipboard activities to keep us occupied, things which provided the relaxation we both desperately needed. After the noonday meal—a sumptuous spread of roast veal and steamed vegetables accompanied by gourmet coffee and raspberry sherbet—we took part in a backgammon contest. Following a short nap, we participated in a high-spirited volleyball tournament on an upper deck, during which Sandra slipped and skinned her knee. I helped her to a deck chair. As I was painting the wound with iodine obtained from a First Aid station, I glanced up to make sure she
wasn’t experiencing too much discomfort. Her sun burnt face was peering down at me, trustingly, patiently, a lock of damp hair looped over one eye. Something about the way the sun caught her hair and highlighted its auburn tones, silhouetting her against the canvas of Atlantic sky, made me think of our senior year in college when we were busy falling in love—the beach weekends, the drive-in movies, the illicit after-hour rendezvous when she would sneak out of her dorm to be with me. And my heart raced ahead of itself, happily, unexpectedly, the jar of iodine poised motionless in my hand. She must have felt it, too, for without speaking, she leaned over and kissed me on the mouth. We rose and walked hand in hand to the stern where for many long minutes, under a flurry of impassioned seagulls, we watched the churning white water in the ship’s wake, the din and hilarity of the volleyball tournament fading at our backs.

The weeks in the store since Mrs. McElroy’s arrival had been deprived of their customary joy, not just on the job, but in Sandra’s and my private moments. Besides being a job, the store for me had always been a pleasure. Not a day passed without a sense of fun. Our kidding of each other as we learned the ropes kept the business from becoming drab or tedious. But with the advent of Mrs. McElroy, the fun seemed subtly but perceptibly to dissipate, and I couldn’t understand why. I only knew that there were more and more days when I longed to stay home. But now, suddenly, I knew. It had to do with Sandra’s changed attitude toward me. Something had gone out of her touch, something essential and dear. And while this was no time to bring it up (I wasn’t about to impose Mrs. McElroy’s chilly image on our tropical mood), I hoped Sandra would know it, too. She had felt, along with me, the renewed wonder of our touch, almost mystical, on
the stern of that ship, and perhaps would sense through my love for her this other thing as well.

I held her very close.

At trip's end—a Sunday—we descended the gangway, a *tableau vivant* of homebound tourists. Sandra’s mother took a Polaroid snapshot whose salient features were our matching paisley shirts, ruddy cheeks, and a stuffed Panda bear Sandra had won in Nassau. “Oh, aren’t you two the sunshiny ones!” Mrs. Russell cooed, squeezing Sandra’s neck. As I loaded the luggage into the hatchback of Sandra’s mother’s car, I felt a surge of renewal, a Golden Bough-like sense of rejuvenation. On the drive home, Sandra up front, me in the back, with Sandra’s mother at the wheel chattering non-stop of countless domestic details (you’d have thought we’d been gone a decade), I gazed out the window in silence, counting the cars on the highway as if they were my life’s individual blessings. The hum of the radio punctuated by Sandra’s mother’s laughter; the whine of the tires beneath us; the protective blue sky; the sun-bleached tips of my wife’s hair grazing my bare knees—I began to tear up. I wanted to preserve the moment forever.

I was bound and determined to sustain this feeling of good fellowship all the way into the book store Monday morning. Neither Mrs. McElroy nor the store itself found their way into Sandra’s and my conversation until after we arrived home and unwound with a glass or two of Chablis, and then it was to discuss minor details. I went to bed that night, nestled snugly in my wife’s embrace, dozing off with perfect confidence that nothing could unmoor me from my new-found euphoria.

IV

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Monday morning. The store’s aroma was a warm welcome. The shiny spines of books invited me to touch them. Wheat Warren was right. The place smelled good, and I was never more sharply aware of this than when I returned. The combined odors of brewed coffee, Sandra’s perfume, my pipe tobacco, the books themselves—these gave The Turtle’s Triumph an identity sustained by scent alone, so that if you were led in there blindfolded, you’d know precisely where you were. Just breathing the air put a smile on my face.

Mrs. McElroy had already opened when we arrived, and she appeared genuinely pleased to have us back. Running the store alone, even with abbreviated hours, may not have been quite the treat she imagined. She even had a civil word for me. The place was clean, orderly, and sales from the week we’d been gone were respectable. Sandra gave me a nod on behalf of our employee which, in the name of good sportsmanship, I returned. The woman clearly had proven her worth. She assured us that “Everything ran like a Swiss watch in our absence.” Then she explained what books were on order and took the rest of the day off, leaving Sandra and me to buckle into the new week. After checking to make sure The Joy of Sex and related volumes were in place, I went about my duties. I was glad to be back; glad to be working with Sandra; glad to greet our customers. I especially looked forward to seeing some of the odd bodkins. I hoped one would saunter in, though it was a bit early to be putting up with Hello Harry.

“Maybe Chekhov will drop by,” I said. “If he does, I think I’ll ask him what he’s been researching.”

“Oh, you won’t do any such thing,” Sandra challenged me.

“How much?”
She shrugged. “Name it.”

“All right. But if I win, he’ll have to do his research somewhere else, because you and I will be busy doing other things, if you catch my drift.” I waggled my eyebrows, Grouch-style.

“And if I win,” Sandra murmured in her post-Bahamian voice, “the terms will be likewise.”

We both lost. Chekhov did not put in an appearance; however, old times had returned to the book store.

Since there were things that needed doing at home, Sandra left the store after my supper break and I worked through the evening alone. It was a slow night, and I looked forward to a fresh installment of the French Revolution the way other men look forward to Monday Night Football. But I was disappointed. “Professor” Cluny did not come in, and I filled the slow-paced hours reading Dune Messiah, satisfying an infrequent urge for science fiction. I closed up and went home.

The following morning, Sandra opened the store early with the intention of giving the place an autumnal look, and I stayed home to rake our first major crop of fallen leaves. “Want me to bring some in and dump them over the books?” I jested. “You can’t get much more autumnal than that.” I finished my work at a leisurely pace, taking my time scooping debris out of rain gutters. I cleaned up, ate my lunch, then drove to the store an hour past noon. There were a couple of browsers in fiction. Sandra and Mrs. McElroy were sitting behind the counter buzzing at each other like heads of state. Their conversation came to a halt when I entered, which annoyed me. It was as if they were conspiring: two thieves plotting ways to cut the third thief out of his share of the booty. I
know it was irrational, even childish, but I resented the hush-hush manner they adopted whenever I was around.

I said to Sandra, “I thought you were going to start on the autumn thing.” I couldn’t edit the accusatory tone from my voice.

“The morning was hectic,” she said simply. “There wasn’t time.”

I glanced around to imply that it wasn’t hectic now. The browsers looked content merely to browse. “Autumn will be over,” I pointed out, “before the first leaf goes up.”

“Well, Jed, you know where the stuff is,” my wife directed, “if you want to get started.”

I didn’t miss the glint in Mrs. McElroy’s eyes, so I said in a futile attempt to lighten the mood, “Nah. I spent all morning raking leaves. I don’t think I’ll spend the afternoon pinning them up.” I retreated to the back of the store and lit my pipe. Their buzzing resumed. After a while I shuffled forth in an effort to make conversation. I said, “Oh, Sandra, guess who didn’t come in last night? Professor Cluny.”

“Oh?” Her voice reflected little interest.

“First Monday he’s missed in, God, I don’t know how long.”

“Oh,” interjected Mrs. McElroy. “Are we speaking of the loud, boorish gentleman with the black whiskers and obese frame?”

Surprised, I said, “Professor Cluny, yes. Do you—”

“Well,” she said, directing her comments to Sandra. “I took the liberty last Monday of instructing him to vacate the premises. He was disturbing the customers.”

“You what?” I exclaimed.
"Those outlandish gestures of his," Mrs. McElroy declared contemptuously, still addressing Sandra. "Do you know that with one fell swoop he knocked over the gift display? Fortunately, nothing was damaged. But do you think he offered to pick any of it up?"

"You kicked out Professor Cluny?" I said, aghast.

"Then in an effort to depict some half-imagined battle scene, he stepped on a little girl's foot," Mrs. McElroy revealed, "with apparently no sense of having done so. Naturally, the girl's parents were outraged. So what alternative did I have but to insist that the man remove himself at once?" To me she said with the icy air of a judge passing sentence, "I feel confident he will not return."

I pounded my fist on the counter. "Who the hell gives you the authority to throw out a customer?"

"Oh, but he was not a customer," Mrs. McElroy coolly corrected me. "He never made a purchase. All he did was rant and rave and step on a little girl's foot." Something in her manner implied that I might be next.

"Rant and rave?" I threw my arms in the air in imitation of "Professor" Cluny. "I'll show you rant and rave! The French Revolution was nothing—"

"Jed!" Sandra said sharply, motioning at the browsers. "You're making a scene."

"But don't you get it?" I fired back. "This woman throws out poor, harmless Professor Cluny—"

"I already told you. He was not harmless. He stepped on a little girl's foot," Mrs. McElroy repeated.

"He's been coming in here ever since we first opened. He never hurt a soul. All he—"
“Jed,” Sandra said, lowering her tone, “it’s not worth all the fuss.”

I just stared at her, disbelievingly. Mrs. McElroy’s studied calm riled me even further. Sandra’s presumably siding with her was the coup de grace.

“No, Sandra said with a modicum of uncertainty while clearly showing her allegiance. “He wasn’t helping business, it’s true, and—”

I didn’t stay to hear the rest. I stomped out of the store, and for the first time since being stranded on a stormy day in a North Carolina coastal town during my junior year, I spent the afternoon in a tavern guzzling beer.

“You know, you’re acting awfully foolish.” Sandra cornered me that evening at home.

“Oh, you think? Well, I guess we see who makes all the big decisions around here.” I spoke through fumes of Bud Light. “I used to mistake us for a team.”

“Jed, that’s not fair. Mrs. McElroy acted in what she thought was the store’s best interest. And quite truthfully? I can’t say she was out of line.”

“You can’t?”

“Well, no. I mean, that Professor Cluny—who I don’t need to remind you’s not even a real professor—comes in week after week spouting opinions on an event that’s over two hundred years old. Not only that—”

“Yeah, yeah, he stepped on a little girl’s foot. I heard.”

“Do we really need that?”

“It didn’t bother you before it bothered Mrs. McElroy.”

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"It didn’t exactly thrill me, either," said Sandra. "And what about you? The way you carry on, you’d think that man was your brother."

"That’s not the point. He’s a harmless old eccentric who gets his kicks talking about French history."

"Then let him do it at the library. We have a business to run."

"That sounds like a McElroy quote. Is she writing your scripts for you now, too?"

Sandra fled from the room. I fled after her.

"Sandra, wait—what’s happening to us?"

"You tell me!"

"We never used to fight. I mean, dammit, I just don’t see how you can be taken in by that, that witch!" Before she could retaliate, I said, "And it’s not just that she threw out the professor. It’s that she can’t tolerate anybody different."

"And that’s what’s got you so riled?" Sandra asked.

"I don’t care for her Gestapo approach. It’s not natural—well, not to anyone who’s not a Nazi. Her compulsion for straightening things—it’s completely in keeping with her thinking, which if you ask me is pretty damned militant."

"Oh, so you’d rather see the store look like a garage sale?"

I said, "Again, you miss the point. It’s not any one particular thing she does, it’s her overall demeanor. And something else—I’ve never been able to trust someone who doesn’t have a sense of humor."

Suddenly Sandra was scrutinizing me as if I were a faulty sentence. "She has a case against you, too, you know."

"I don’t doubt it."

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“She says you hide from your own life. You use the book store as a means of denying yourself the opportunity to grow."

I felt the back of my neck prickle. “Oh, she did! Perfect. And you’re telling me you buy into that line of shit? I mean, Christ, Sandra, this woman—this fucking stranger—walks into our lives, takes a few sniffs around, and decides—”

“She meant it constructively,” Sandra insisted.

“Then I suppose I should go thank her. Ask Madame Freud if there’s anything else I should work on to improve my character.”

Sandra shook her head.

“What about you?” I asked. “Do you have any back-to-the-womb theories about my occupation? If so, I’d like to hear them.”

She glared at me. “I don’t! And you’re fine! Okay?”

“Because if this woman’s put it in your head—”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Jed, if you keep this shit up, I wish to hell you would go back to the womb, or some goddamn place!”

Suddenly we were both laughing. We’d become that ridiculous. Still laughing, I said, “Sandra. God. I’m sorry, I just—it’s just that—”

“Never mind,” said Sandra, waving her hand. “If it helps, I admit she can be a tad rigid.”

“A tad?”

“But you don’t see everything. There’s a positive side to her that you’ve overlooked.”

“You know, you’re right,” I said. “I’ve completely overlooked that side.”
“She has a very keen social consciousness,” said Sandra. “She’s involved in things that matter.”

“Such as?”

“Well—lots of things. Social and political issues. Do you remember when there was that move to rezone the Chippington Park area in order to make it entirely commercial? All those stately elms and oaks would have been ripped out of the earth to make way for—well, anyway, Mrs. McElroy headed up the committee to get that move vetoed. She also serves on the Advisory Board for Concerned Parents and is still active in school-related matters, even though she no longer teaches. Besides that, she’s sponsoring a local candidate who—”

“Okay, fine,” I interrupted. “So what’s she doing working in a book store? How does that fit in with saving the whales and what not?”

“God, you can be so obtuse at times,” Sandra reproved me. “Those things I mentioned don’t pay her anything. She does them because she cares. Good Lord, Jed, the woman has to live. She has a husband in a wheel chair.”

“Poor bastard. He can’t escape.”

“You’re impossible, do you know that?” Then she said, “And do you know something? That’s not even the main thing about her.”

“So what’s the main thing?” I asked, not sure I wanted to know.

“Mrs. McElroy has opened my eyes.”

“To what?”

“To myself, mostly. I really don’t do much, you know. I mean, I work at the store and I come home. I work at the store and I come home. That’s what I do. That’s my life.”
“And that’s not enough?”

“It’s next to nothing!”

“But I thought we were happy.” Sensing we had entered onto dangerous ground, and feeling more than a trifle threatened, I was trying to extract from her how she thought my perceived failings might enter into this.

“Oh, we are,” Sandra said tentatively. “But it’s important now and then to put forth a little effort beyond your own front door.” An unfamiliar sorrow filled her eyes. “Jed, I’m twenty-eight years old and if I were to make a list of all the things I’ve done to improve the lives of others, or even to make a modest difference in the world, the list would be practically non-existent.”

“Well, for one thing, I’d like to think I’d be on that list,” I said, feeling a little wounded. “You improved my life just by marrying me.”

She smiled and touched my sleeve. I took that opportunity to hold her.

“You would be;” she said softly. “But you’d be there by yourself.”

“Well, as long as we’re together,” I whispered into her ear, “alone isn’t a word.” I inhaled a breath of her perfume and felt her tremble. I kissed her hair.

Sandra said, her words partially muffled by my shirt, “I just don’t want to go through life being one of those people who reads the newspaper, clucks her tongue and mutters, ‘Isn’t that too bad,’ but does nothing to make things better. So far I’ve been one of those people.” She lifted her face from my shoulder, eyes glistening. She said in a throaty voice, “Sometimes I feel I’ve strayed so far from my own life I don’t even know I’m in it.”
Those words had a frightening effect on me. I held her for a long time, not at all sure what to say. I knew only that so long as we were friends, so long as we behaved as a team, I could help, and there wasn’t anything I wouldn’t do. I privately wondered if this was the price I had to pay for denying her a child.

Finally, I mustered up some words. “Well, it’s a bit late in the day for you to become a Girl Scout—” I gently cupped her damp face in my hands and pressed my forehead to hers, “but not too late to tie new knots.”

That night we made love more tenderly and sweetly than we had in weeks. It was one of the last times I can remember.

But now that I had a fuller understanding of the kind of hold (if that’s the word) Mrs. McElroy had on Sandra, I felt better equipped to deal with it. Without conceptualizing it as such, I felt the woman—the witch—had posed some actual threat or spell on our marriage, as though through some strange alchemy Sandra was gradually being wooed away from me. Nothing is worse than perceiving a danger that has no face. Now I knew, or believed I knew. It was not Mrs. McElory, per se. It was what Mrs. McElroy stood for—community involvement, civic responsibility, social consciousness—things which aroused in Sandra possibilities and aspirations which, if they hadn’t completely vanished with her youth, were lying dormant, a constant reminder to her of what might have been.

So, fine. As her husband I could easily endorse those things. For her to start helping out some of the world’s casualties—I was all for it. What’s more, I would do whatever I could to assist, even though I myself have never felt so inclined. By nature I’m an introvert, a chronic non-joiner and a man of a few basic pleasures. I prefer spending my leisurely hours at home with a book, listening to good music, rather than spending time in
the company of others. That millions might be starving is an intellectual worry, but my conscience isn’t panged to the point I’m going to figure out ways to feed the masses. This is a sour admission, akin to the idea of one who would never dream of butchering a steer but thinks nothing of gorging himself on beef. Apathy, disinterestedness, call it what you will, but the irony is, I’m sympathetic toward most humane causes and will stand cheering on the sidelines while the crusaders risk everything to push back the night. If it should turn out that Sandra was such a one (her original ambition, after all, was to become a social worker), she would find in me a staunch supporter.

With this fresh perspective, I breezed into The Turtle’s Triumph at a little past eleven the next morning, my mood aglow with a Robert Browning cheeriness which I bestowed upon Mrs. McElroy, the first person I saw.

“Good morning, Mrs. McElroy!” I hailed her, stopping just short of quoting from Pippa Passes.

“God’s in his heaven and all’s right with the world.”

“Good morning,” she warily returned my greeting, as if to say, “What have you got to be so happy about? You didn’t do your homework.” I couldn’t shake the idiotic notion that ours was essentially a teacher-student relationship. But no matter. Today I would not be daunted. I was a man with an agenda. Sandra was in back reviewing invoices. There were several customers in the store, including Chekhov, who was at his customary station in the reference section.

Without giving it a thought, I sailed up to him and said, “Ah, Chekhov, my friend! Have you seen that new book on how to publish your own manuscript? We just got it in on Monday.” He scowled at me from beneath moustache-like eyebrows that shielded his
face against intruders. I cleared my throat, embarrassed, and gestured at a shelf. “It’s, um, right here, in case you, uh.” Chekhov turned back to his notebook, in which he scribbled some information with his snub-nosed pencil. I made a hasty retreat to the back.

“God,” I gasped. “You won’t believe what I just did.” Sandra was bent over some paper work. “I called Chekhov Chekhov.”

“Hmm?” She was in the midst of tallying figures.

“I called Chekhov Chekhov,” I repeated. “I mean, that’s obviously not his name, but we’re so used to referring to him that way—he probably thinks I’m as nutty as he is.”

“He wasn’t scratching his balls, was he?” Sandra asked.

“He was writing in his notebook.”

“There are customers,” Sandra stated archly and was as pre-occupied as Chekhov himself.

“I wonder if he really is Russian,” I murmured. “We’ve never heard him speak.”

“By the way,” said Sandra. “I hope you won’t mind closing tonight. I’ve been invited to a meeting.”

“What meeting?”

“Mrs. McElroy is campaign chairman and she’s asked me to come along.”

“You’re kidding. You’re actually going to attend a meeting with Mrs. McElroy?” I felt my stomach churn. “What is it, the Neo-Nazi Party of America?”

“That’s not one bit funny. You said you wanted me to get involved.”

“Yes, but not with—” I grasped for an inoffensive noun.

“Watch yourself.” She aimed the tip of her pencil at me.
“Sandra, listen. I found some things in today’s paper. The SPCA is looking for volunteers. Apparently the city’s cat population is way out of control.”

Sandra shook her head. “Cats? Jed.”

“Okay, so what’s this meeting about?”

“It’s a political rally to help elect Ada Fawning to City Council.”

“Ada who?”

“Fawning. Surely you’ve noticed her posters around town.”

I had. Every few blocks it seemed motorists were hit in the eye with rigorously remindful slogans. “A New Dawn With Fawning.” “Give Your Aid To Fawning.” Etc. It was an election year. Posters were in profusion.

“So what about her?” I asked morosely.

“She has some innovative ideas for the public schools which I’m curious about.”

Sandra shook her head self-critically. “The things I’ve taken for granted. Do you know there are drugs running rampant in our schools? Not just junior and senior high, but elementary. Nine- and ten-year-olds smoking marijuana. When we were that age, we didn’t know what the stuff was. Well, I didn’t, anyway.”

“That’s because your parents planted you in private school where hang-nail and halitosis were the only social ills.”

“Don’t kid yourself,” said Sandra, then returned to the topic on hand. “Mrs. Fawning has succeeded in enlisting the Sheriff’s Department.”

“How so?”

“By proposing a routine check be made of the schools every month or so through enlisting those specially trained dogs that sniff around lockers—students, too, I suppose.”
“Oh, wonderful. Just great! Why not have a military police brigade stationed in every homeroom? That should nip the problem in the bud. Literally.”

Sandra’s eyes narrowed. “Jed, if we had a son or daughter—which we don’t—wouldn’t you want the schools to do their best to insure they weren’t drug influenced?”

“Of course. But having drug sniffing dogs prowling the halls sounds stupid. Why not put the emphasis on drug education and find out where the stuff is coming from? Check out the suppliers? Arresting nine-year-olds won’t accomplish a thing.”

“You’re not getting it. What I’m speaking of is only a fraction of Mrs. Fawning’s overall plan. Before now nobody has gotten the full cooperation of law enforcement. A child might be arrested or hospitalized after the fact, when it’s too late, but Mrs. Fawning has persuaded the police to become preventively involved. I think that’s saying a lot, don’t you? If she’s elected, there will be students trained to work undercover. And as for drug education, naturally her plans call for that as well.”

“So what are you going to do?” I asked. “Get a bumper sticker?”

“I’m going to that rally to hear Ada Fawning speak,” Sandra answered. “The election’s just around the corner and I don’t have much time to get informed.”

I lit my pipe. “I can’t imagine how anything Mrs. McElroy supports can be too wonderful.”

“That’s a hostile thing to say. And even if I don’t go in for her total brand of politics, she’s at least opened my eyes to the issues. She has a lot of viable concerns.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, even if these viable concerns have a humanistic thrust, what bothers me, Sandra, is she doesn’t seem particularly humanistic. I’ve watched her making the rounds out there on the floor like a prison guard, not a store clerk. At this very instant I’ll
bet she’s daring some fool to shoplift so she can kick the crap out of the bastard. That’s how humanistic she comes across.”

Sandra sighed. “I don’t believe you’re on her list of favorites, either.”

“Break my heart.”

“I have to finish these invoices,” Sandra said wearily. “Go out there and try to be nice. Okay?”

I wanted to ask her, how is it possible to be nice to The Book Store Clerk from Hell? But instead, I returned to the front of the store, my Robert Browning sanguinity replaced by Hamlet-like gloom. Mrs. McElroy didn’t speak, so I took my place behind the register. As she stalked among the shelves, straightening books and advising customers, I wished for “Professor” Cluny to make a sweeping entrance, armed with an animated tale of the French Revolution. Watching Mrs. McElroy, I also wished for a well-oiled guillotine.

As if on cue, the front door swung open and in dashed Hello Harry in all his tweedy insanity. He scurried about the place, tagging books with his fingers as if performing some sacred ritual, all the while spewing syllables that were indecipherable. Mrs. McElroy’s face took on an expression of undiluted horror. I half expected her to try and tackle him, but of course Hello Harry was too fast. He circuited the store, flew past Chekhov who paid no attention, then sped past the counter. I said, “Hello, Harry,” and he said, “Hello, Harry” then shot out the door. Mrs. McElroy appeared on the verge of speech but, thinking better of it, returned to her patrolling while I enjoyed a good laugh.

Sandra came home late that night, peppy and rosy-cheeked over the rally. As she essayed between bed- and bathroom, she spouted words like progressive, inspirational,
and *courageous*, as if she’d just returned from a moon landing. I’d had a busy evening at
the store and was propped up in bed, barely concentrating on *Dune Messiah*. If she was
really determined to let Mrs. McElroy point the way, I was determined to step aside.
“...will make a terrific impact” were the last words I heard her speak before I dropped off
to sleep with Frank Herbert’s arid planet spread open on my chest.

It would be an exaggeration to suggest that I lost my wife to the campaign trail,
although she did spend less time at home and more time out garnering votes for Ada
Fawning, whose face began to emerge regularly in our house on various pieces of printed
literature. “Your vote adds up with Ada” and so forth. A decal bearing her name appeared
on the front door of The Turtle’s Triumph and, predictably, on the bumper of Sandra’s
car. Except to quiz Sandra occasionally on her candidate’s merits, I avoided the subject.
Chronically non-partisan, I couldn’t criticize much because I’d be rebuffed with the not-
unreasonable “You’re not registered to vote so how can you talk?”

But if I *had been* registered, it was a cinch I’d vote against Ada Fawning, whose
politics struck me as radical and right-wing. Before long one could handily predict what
stance she took on every issue: She was pro-life (i.e., anti-abortion), pro-nuclear
armament and pro-capital punishment (which eerily contradicted pro-life), pro-taxation of
any non-Christian sect such as Moonies, Scientologists, and white witchcraft (again, a
contradiction; she and her tribe *were* witches, by my estimation); but as alarming as
anything was her proposal to ban certain books from school libraries—books which were
deemed by her conservative constituents to be “deleterious to the moral construction of
youth.”
At this juncture I had to speak up. "Do you mean to tell me you’d vote for someone who’d deny a kid’s reading *Huckleberry Finn*?" I grilled Sandra during one of our infrequent meals together. "We sell that book, for Christ’s sake!"

"Nobody said anything about *Huckleberry Finn,*" she countered. "Leave it to you to get the facts twisted."

"Okay, then—*Catcher in the Rye. Slaughterhouse Five.* I heard mention of those."

"Jed, certain books bear material which—"

"Sandra, I read *Catcher in the Rye* when I was in ninth grade. It’s what turned me on to reading. And you’ll notice I turned into a healthy, normal adult." Her eyebrows lifted, and I said, "Okay, never mind. The point here is censorship. How long before Shakespeare’s plays are banned? They get a little steamy in places, you know. And what about the Bible? Certain parts of that make *Catcher* look like *Hans Brinker.* Is your candidate going to censor Jesus and his buddies?"

"You know what your trouble is, Jed? You only see the tip of every iceberg. Ada Fawning is not out to deny children their education. She merely wants to put it into a healthier perspective."

"Ah! Stated like a true politician! Healthy from *whose* perspective? Her own? Or Mrs. McElroy’s? Or is there even a difference?"

I had no difficulty associating Eleanor McElroy with this line of thinking; it was all of a piece. But my wife? I couldn’t imagine what cruel metamorphosis had swayed her toward such skewered lines of thinking. Although until now she’d been no more politically involved than I, her leanings were distinctly liberal. It was astonishing, then, to witness this piece of brainwashing going on under my nose. Whenever I approached her..."
on the subject, her response was that she previously had never delved deep enough into the issues to know how she felt; therefore, her opinions couldn’t count. Then she offered this elaboration: “Until you become sensitive to your community’s needs, your opinions can’t count.” I didn’t say to her that in my opinion (which didn’t count), one’s politics should derive from the heart and be guided by the brain, and one’s choices should be made accordingly. I saw nothing in Sandra’s choices that reflected what I knew to be in her heart. But I said nothing, knowing that November was within reach and this madness would soon end.

In the meantime, things continued on about the same as always at the book store. It was late October, and we were already preparing our lists for Christmas. Mrs. McElroy and I continued avoiding each other with strained diplomacy. There could be no meeting of the minds, a truth the three of us quietly acknowledged. Sandra blithely tossed off our differences as a personality conflict, but I suspected otherwise. For one thing, I believed Mrs. McElroy hated men. As far as I could tell, she hated people in general, men especially, and me in particular. She was one of those who is perpetually angry and seeks to rectify things by striking out at a multitude of enemies, real or imagined. To one such as herself, everyone else is at fault and deserves punishment: The old sinners in the hands of an angry god syndrome, as I thought of it. The idea of Mrs. McElroy imposing her influence on anyone, much less school children, made me shudder; the idea of her influencing my life’s love made me nauseous. However, I felt limited in my actions. As an employee she was unimpeachable; as a citizen she apparently was beyond reproach. On the surface no one could object to her at all. But beneath the surface—if one dared look that deeply—was an all-abiding wickedness. I was sure of it.
I soon found myself, instead of ignoring her as planned, plotting against her. This entailed much more than slipping sex manuals in with the New Testaments. The stakes were too high. What was at stake, incredibly, was my wife’s loyalty. For as I saw it, Sandra’s relationship with Mrs. McElroy bore an uncanny resemblance to an extramarital affair. I grew obscurely jealous.

In time, I concluded that if Mrs. McElroy’s credibility could be undermined, then she herself would lose whatever sway she had over Sandra. There are people whose moral crusade is not so much for the sake of correcting a wrong as punishing the wrong-doer. Such a crusader was Mrs. McElroy and, by extension, Ada Fawning. If only Sandra could see her for what she was, then all would be well. Toward that end, I surreptitiously set about checking into the woman’s background. She was fifty-two years old and had recently quit the teaching profession—a relatively early age for retirement.

So I wondered, given her need to instruct people, why wasn’t she still in the classroom? On reviewing her application, I saw she had taught eighth and ninth grade English at Garner Junior High for ten years, and before that, at various public schools since her early twenties. She’d cited “personal reasons” for terminating her employment with the school district. Sandra and I had checked her references and confirmed her past profession, but beyond that were not motivated to dig deeper.

I now felt motivated.

V

Halloween. Brisk, breezy, light jacket weather. Perfect for vanquishing a witch. I took my time driving to the book store, savoring my rehearsed lines and the reaction they were
bound to receive. It was late afternoon. Sandra and Mrs. McElroy were rearranging the
Children’s Corner and talking conspiratorially, as usual. Both looked to see who had
entered and, realizing who it was, went back to what they were doing. It was my
impression that the crease in Sandra’s brow, always so endearing, had recently achieved
the same severity as Mrs. McElroy’s. Moreover, her speech was beginning to assume the
taut edginess of her mentor’s. There was no denying that her manner toward me had
cooled. When we made love, which was seldom, I felt no sweetness in her touch, little
generosity in her embrace. These things burned in me with the glare of a jack-o-lantern’s
eye.

Sandra said almost accusingly, “Where have you been? You were supposed to be here
an hour ago.”

Mrs. McElroy said nothing, denied me even her customary grimace. I felt like an
assassin. I said cryptically, “Trick or treating—early.”

“The stock in the back needs straightening,” Sandra stated.

“As do so many things.” I directed what I intended to be a menacing grin at Mrs.
McElroy. “Is there any coffee?”

“This morning’s,” said Sandra.

I set about preparing a fresh pot then stood waiting for it to brew. Except for the
percolating pot, a ghostly silence hung over the store.

“Ah, nothing like a hot cup of coffee on a cool afternoon,” I called over to them.

“Anyone care to join me?” I leaned against a table of sales volumes and sipped noisily. It
was good there were no customers. “Oh, Sandra,” I spoke off-handedly. “I have a
question regarding your Mrs. Fanning’s view on a certain something.”
“Jed, there’s work to be done. I’m in no mood for smugness,” Sandra replied. She attempted to shift some unwieldy pumpkins. I set my cup down and went to assist her.

“This isn’t smug, it’s serious. I’m curious to know where your candidate stands on—Christ! Did these pumpkins grow overnight?” I hefted the last one to where my wife directed and resisted the impulse to drop it on Mrs. McElroy’s toe.

“So what is your question?” Sandra’s impatience floated above her words.

“Child abuse.”

“Pardon me?”

I propped my foot on top of a pumpkin.

“You want to know Ada’s view on child abuse?”

“That’s right.”

“Well, she’s against it, naturally.” She looked hopelessly at Mrs. McElroy, as if to say, “Can you believe I married this guy?”

“More specifically,” I said, and returned to my coffee, “abuse in the schools, perpetrated by a paid official.”

Sandra looked confused. “Oh, you mean paddling.”

“No, I mean abuse. More to the point, let’s say a teacher becomes provoked to the point that he or she administers his or her own brand of punishment by grabbing a kid and thrashing him, leaving marks. How would that conform to your candidate’s proposals for reform?”

Mrs. McElroy had turned her back to me. I tried envisioning the look on her face.

Pestered by the thought that I was up to something, Sandra said, “Jed, what exactly are you talking about?”
“What I’m asking is, is it right for a teacher to bruise or scratch a child for any reason short of protecting her person or the person of another child?”

“I think you know the answer to that.”

“What about you?” I asked Mrs. McElroy. “What’s your opinion on this delicate matter?”

My victim’s face turned toward me, slowly, mechanically, and I had the eerie impression that her head swiveled witch-like, 180 degrees, without benefit of bodily movement. She spoke in a voice as steely as her eyes. “I am not convinced that you are interested in any opinion other than your own.” Even under the gun she refused to be rattled.

“Yes, well, maybe opinion isn’t the right word,” I allowed. “Let’s try facts. Let’s say I know of someone—a teacher in this county—who lost her position because of deliberate mistreatment of a student. Let’s say this teacher, this trusted public servant, imposed upon youthful minds a fascist authority. And let’s say, while we’re at it, that when one of those minds refused to yield under her iron-clad rule, she sank her claws into his skin.” I drove this last point home with the vigor of a prosecuting attorney, half expecting those very claws to sink into my own skin.

When she spoke, she did so in a voice not thoroughly a whisper, “The trouble with people like you—the trouble with people like you—you are filled with miserable half truths. Your thinking is hostile and self-serving and therefore dangerous. You refuse to recognize any reality except for the one that best serves your needs.”

“Is that so?”

“What is this?” said Sandra, looking from me to her. “What’s going on?”
"Better ask her," I said, nodding at Mrs. McElroy. "If she won't answer, try calling up Clinton Stewart at Garner Junior High, where this woman used to teach. He's principal there. He has a tale ripe for Halloween." I stared victoriously at Mrs. McElroy, who walked stiffly to the front of the store. Sandra trailed close behind.

"Eleanor?" Sandra asked breathily. "What's he talking about?"

But Mrs. McElroy wouldn't talk; just stared out at the parking lot.

"What is he saying?" Sandra repeated her question.

"Evidently your husband has all the answers," she replied finally.

"I'm asking you."

Our employee wheeled around and spoke sharply to Sandra. "I owe no explanations to anyone. Either I have done an acceptable job here or I have not. There should be no other contingency." She clutched her purse in her hand and faced my wife. "You can mail me what you owe."

Sandra urged her to stay.

The door swung open just then and in came two hefty middle-aged women requesting a new diet book just out on the market. In contrast to the mood of the store, the women were jovial and good-natured, making fat jokes at their own expense. Sandra rang up the sale. As the two were on their way out, Wheat Warren breezed in with an entourage of costumed kids he'd met up with in the parking lot and whom he now led, Pied Piper-like, to the Children's Corner. Sandra barred their passage.

"Aw, why can't we stay?" Wheat's thick red suspenders drooped below his knees.

"Please?"

"We're closing," Sandra told him.
"Closing? But it's only—" Wheat tried to figure out what time it was.

"We have to dust," I heard Sandra tell him. "People have been sneezing."

"Oh," said Wheat, easily convinced. He made his exit. I watched his gangly self lope across the parking lot like some mismanaged marionette, his band of banshees in tow.

Sandra locked the door and placed the Closed sign in the window. She said, "Now, please. Let's discuss this."

"There is nothing to discuss," Mrs. McElroy replied resolutely, still clutching her purse. "I told you. I owe nothing to anyone, least of all to him. Your husband has acted reprehensibly toward me ever since my first day here. I will not tolerate another moment of his—calumny!"

"Try speaking straight English," I retorted. "Just because we're in a book store I don't want to keep rushing for the dictionary. Using contractions might help, too."

"Sarcasm," said Mrs. McElroy. "The strongest defense of a weak mind is sarcasm."

"Stop—both of you!" Sandra ran her hands through her hair. "Not another word, Jed, I mean it!" She appealed to Mrs. McElroy in a leveler tone. "You're right. You owe us nothing. You can walk out, that's your privilege. But...you've opened my mind to so many—well, my God, Eleanor, if anything, I owe you."

I saw Mrs. McElroy's features soften, or become less severe, as she considered my wife's plea. She appeared to debate with herself whether to stay or go. I willed with all my heart for her to walk out the door and not look back. She shot me a bruising glance which Sandra interpreted.

"I can ask him to leave," she said.
“No.” Mrs. McElroy had made up her mind. “If I am to speak, he needs to hear. As I have said, there is nothing more dangerous than half truths, and his head is crammed with them.”

Before I could protest, Sandra silenced me with her eyebrows. She said to Mrs. McElroy, “Do whatever you feel is best.”

Having regained what little composure she’d lost, Mrs. McElroy began her story. She and Sandra were in the front of the store. I remained leaning against the sales table. I could hear well enough from there. She had that kind of voice.

“He is correct about one thing. I was dismissed from my position at Garner Junior High...Have you heard of a seventeen-year-old boy named Angus Whitney?” Sandra shook her head. “You will,” Mrs. McElroy guaranteed. “It is only a matter of time before his name will be entered onto the Ten Most Wanted List—or the obituaries.” I rolled my eyes. Here it comes, I thought. The big cover-up. I reached into the pocket of my jacket for my pipe and tobacco, prepared to be bored shittless.

“Angus Whitney,” Mrs. McElroy repeated, as if the name itself had diabolical significance. “I suppose there are boys like him in every school. The laws of nature provide them with fiendish regularity—a fraternity of F students who, when they do show up for class, languish and rot in the back row.”

I inferred that she was mentally assigning me to that metaphorical row.

“It would not be so bad,” Mrs. McElroy continued, “if it were only themselves they affected, but that is hardly ever the case. Because they cannot or will not learn, they utilize their energies toward violating the status quo.”
The status quo, the blessed status quo, I thought. Come on, lady, have your say and get the hell out of our lives.

"Angus Whitney is a born leader," Mrs. McElroy attested. "I am as convinced of it today as I was back then. Of course, in time he will cause a significant amount of harm. He has already caused his share. In my mind I can see his stubbornly defiant face, the recalcitrance, the—the arrogance of the boy showed up in everything he did."

As she spoke, I felt myself privately warming to the personality of Angus Whitney.

"And to think," said Mrs. McElroy, "I once considered him my pet project. In spite of the anger he carried around inside, a fierce perceptiveness shone in his eyes. You would have to be blind not to see it."

"Anger, you say?" said Sandra.

"Oh, yes. That kind of child is always angry," Mrs. McElroy confirmed. "Black, white, dull, bright, the common denominator is anger. Angry with parents who are not together, angry with authority, angry with themselves. Angry with God. They flaunt it like a banner. It shows up in their every action. Breaking through that anger is the key for anyone who hopes to deal with them. And that is what I attempted to do. The slouch, the sneer, the attitude—he wore them like a uniform." Mrs. McElroy shook her head at the memory. "The fact is I took an immediate dislike to the boy. I admit it. For you see, he seemed to take special delight in disrupting my class with his antics and remarks.

"One day I was giving a lecture and I noticed that Angus Whitney, who was sitting in the back as usual, was paying not the least bit of attention to anything I had to say. He was reading some unassigned material. Perhaps I should have been grateful that he was at least keeping quiet, but I objected to this fresh show of insolence. He had already spent
the week making a mockery of my class, now here he was blatantly reading. I might add that boys of that stripe are oblivious to trips to the office. They are like a kind of germ that mutates against vaccine, and the teacher is left on her own.

"But there sat Angus, reading to his heart’s content—and I was furious. I think the sight of his contentment was what irked me most. I stopped in mid-lecture and before he knew it, I was there. I snatched the book from his hands. Until that moment nothing ever fazed him. Chastisements, trips to the office, letters home—none of it. But this got to him. I had his attention.

"'That’s mine!’ he practically whimpered.

"'You will get it back at the end of the school day,’ I told him and returned to the front of the room.

"The book turned out to be *Two Years Before the Mast* by Richard Henry Dana, Jr. Now it was my turn to be taken aback. I was amazed that Angus Whitney should be reading a book of that caliber. A glimpse at the binding revealed he was better than half way through. I had two class periods to consider what I should do. I decided to change my approach. Instead of punishing him, which would have produced negative results in any case, I would talk to him about the book. That was my strategy. I hoped he would not fail to come in, and he did not. He wanted his book back. I remember handing it to him. His face, characteristically hostile, expressed—what? Surprise? Unease?

"I asked him how he liked the Dana book and he grudgingly owned that it was *okay*. I wanted to know what about it pleased him. He eyed me with skepticism but admitted he enjoyed reading about the sea because his grandfather had been a ship's navigator. He said that *Two Years* held his interest even though some parts were slow going. I asked
him what other books he had read and he mumbled some titles I did not recognize.

Science fiction, I suppose. I promised him a slot of time when he could read whatever he pleased, provided he completed his lessons first. I went home that day feeling progress was in the making. I even remarked something of the sort to my husband.”

Here Mrs. McElroy paused. She moved a chair out from behind the counter and sat down, maintaining perfect posture. She is the one person I’ve known who looked no different sitting down than standing up.

“The very next day I prepared a surprise for Angus Whitney. From my personal library I selected *Pitcairn Island* and an abridged edition of *Moby-Dick*. Unfortunately, I committed the error of presenting them to him at the start of class instead of in private. I suspect it mortified him that his teacher—the enemy—should pass out favors in full view of his classmates. He never thanked me and in fact never mentioned the books. The small bit of ground I had gained was lost. To offset this ill-timed gesture, Angus tried out some of his worst behavior, causing me to send him to the dean’s office just to get him out of everyone’s hair. Still, I was determined to succeed. I refused to be defeated by this one setback. The back row I had long viewed as a stockpile of interchangeable parts. Boys came and boys went, they came and they went. Who knows what became of them? Oh, I suppose they grow old and die like everyone else, but only after wreaking havoc in who knows how many lives?

“Just one, I told myself. Let me save this one! And this one was so bright. Even the way he disrupted class, I have to admit, bore the earmarks of intelligence. Rubber bands, paper airplanes, obscenities scrawled on scraps of paper—none of that for Angus
Whitney. Saucy one-liners and inspired witticisms popped out of his mouth routinely—all of them inappropriate, naturally. But still there was this—oh, this **distinctiveness**. Of course, I could in no way condone it, but neither could I overlook the difference between him and the usual run of back-row hooligans.”

At this point I noticed Sandra sitting on a stool, her legs drawn up under her chin with the same rapt attention that children gave Wheat Warren when he read out loud in the Children’s Corner. I got the impression, too, that like Wheat Warren, Mrs. McElroy was so absorbed in the tack and twine of her tale that it didn’t matter whether anyone was listening or not.

“I determined to try fresh tactics,” she resumed. “If I was to win this boy over, subtlety would have to be the order of the day. During my lectures on literature I made certain to insert what I hoped were provocative comments about authors and their work. I did this chiefly with Angus in mind, all the while keeping a furtive eye on him to see how the ploy was working. I would attach an anecdote about Joseph Conrad—another author of the sea, a Pole by birth and a master of ships—how he had taught himself English principally by reading newspapers and went on to become one of the great prose stylists in the language. I mentioned various works by Conrad—**Typhoon**, **Nostromo**, **Lord Jim**—careful to emphasize their themes of loneliness and alienation, hoping to arouse Angus’s interest.

“Now, most of the students appeared nonplussed with this information, but I told myself that with Angus it was taking hold, however disdainful he appeared. By conquering this boy’s rebellious spirit, you see, two things would be accomplished: his energies would be purposefully re-channeled, and I would regain control of my class.
There were boys who looked up to him, boys far less gifted but who nonetheless chose him as their model.

"Now I must emphasize here," Mrs. McElroy said in a slightly modified tone as she leaned importantly toward Sandra, "I must emphasize that in my career as a teacher I had, ironically, a trace of Angus Whitney in myself. I was not rebellious of authority, certainly, but I was often critical of its lackadaisical attitude toward education. There are teachers and principals and guidance counselors, too, who blithely graduate students who can neither read nor write proficiently, much less reason. Unacceptable! Such was the sad case at Garner Junior High. All that hodge-podge about social promotion—rubbish! Either you can read a poem like Poe's *The Raven* and eke from its lines a personal understanding and appreciation or you cannot. Either you can place a verb in agreement with its noun or you cannot. You either are capable of writing a legible, coherent sentence or you are not. If you score negatively on these counts, then you do not deserve promotion, short and simple. Yet teachers around me—my colleagues—were passing students who had not earned their stripes, scooting into a higher grade those who could barely communicate."

Mrs. McElroy shuddered at the thought of this abomination. "Unacceptable," she said again. "I was simply not of that ilk. It is not why I became an educator. And the students were not to blame. The system was! Students could not be held accountable for the failings of their instructors, but in my class they would be accountable for each and every effort. They had eyes, they had ears, they had brains. And they would work, by God, or they would not pass! I swiftly alerted them to that dose of reality on the first day of classes and proceeded to award F's as promptly as they were earned."
“Oh, I was not the darling of the administration, nor was I in danger of winning popularity contests with the faculty,” Mrs. McElroy declared with infinite pride (her lack of popularity I could easily imagine). “I was doing the job I was hired to do—or otherwise, why teach?”

The question was rhetorical, but I heard Sandra murmur, “Why indeed?”

“Yet there are teachers, just as there are people in every profession, who exist primarily to collect paychecks rather than instruct students.”

*But at least they are still teaching,* I thought. *They are not fired for abusing their students.*

“How public education came to be in such a muddle I cannot imagine. Thankfully, we have individuals such as Ada Fawning who, with our collective effort, will help put the academic engine back on track.”

“What does all this have to do with beating up a kid in your class?” I couldn’t prevent myself from asking.

Four reproving eyes sniped at my question, as if to say, “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

Mrs. McElroy cleared her throat. “On top of the bureaucratic pressures, I could not allow myself to be badgered by the likes of Angus Whitney. I had the choice of putting up with him all year or meeting him head on. I opted for the latter. Toward that end, I resolved to take as positive an approach as possible. I had discovered his interests, now it was a matter of pursuing them. Theoretically, this seemed feasible, but in practice it met with abject failure.
“Oh, he picked up some Conrad, all right. One day I had to step outside the room, briefly, to tend to a matter in the hallway. In my short absence, a full-scale brawl commenced among some of the boys. It required the assistance of two male staff members to pull them apart. During the fracas a female student’s ear was kicked. In moments I discovered what had caused it. Angus Whitney, who was not fighting, had brought to class a book by Joseph Conrad, ‘Nigger’ of the Narcissus. He made sure the title was openly shared with everyone, notably a racially-minded white boy named Gleason Harley. Operating on the premise that since the word nigger was used in the title of a classic work of literature, Angus suggested to Harley that it must therefore be acceptable. This motif was whispered around the room amid titters and taunts until finally it reached the ears of two black students who naturally reacted. ‘Nigger of the Narcotics’ was how Conrad’s title was transmuted as it completed the circuit of the room. ‘Who you calling narcotic?’ one of the offended students demanded. ‘Who you calling nigger?’ the other pitched in. ‘It says right here.’ Gleason Harley triumphantly held up Angus’s book. ‘Nigger of the Narcotics. It’s just calling a spade a spade.’

“And of course that did it. Mind you, Angus Whitney never struck a blow, in fact remained deliberately uninvolved, while the others were suspended. One of the black students was brought to the attention of law enforcement because it was he whose foot kicked the girl’s ear.

“Now this is a typical Angus Whitney story,” insisted Mrs. McElroy. “He is what was known in my day as a coat holder. Someone who provokes trouble and then offers to hold the coats while others fight.”
The phone rang and I jumped. Sandra spoke into it briskly. "Yes, we do...no, it's not in paper...not until spring."

During this interval, I thought about how Mrs. McElroy cunningly shaped the lead character of her piece into an unrepentant villain, so that by the time she arrived at the climax, Sandra and I would presumably be primed to whoop and cheer as she kicked daylight out of the luckless bastard, making us wish we'd been on hand to get in a few licks of our own. I'd read too much cheap fiction not to realize this.

Sandra settled back onto her stool, and I took a long pull on my pipe. Sandra said, "Eleanor, would you care for a cup of coffee?" Mrs. McElroy agreed that coffee might be just the thing. I was thinking that a double scotch on the rocks might be just the thing. "Jed, would you mind?" I nodded and went about pouring coffee for the three of us. I imagined I was performing some odd ritual. The spoon swirling around inside each cup filled the store with an ominous tinkling sound. It was late afternoon; the books were caught in webs of shadow. Sandra had turned off the lights when she put the Closed sign in the window. I served them their coffee and for some seconds we blew steam at one another.

Mrs. McElroy picked up the thread of her story. "I made it my business to go to the guidance office one day and peruse Angus Whitney's cumulative file. When you get a problem student, it is wise to learn as much about his background as possible. I was not surprised by my findings. His stanine scores were high, but past grades were low. He lived with a divorced mother, and while there was no man on the scene—no father figure, that is—there had been a series of stepfathers. There was a report of physical abuse on the part of one of these men toward Angus and his younger brother when Angus was in
fifth grade. The natural father's whereabouts were unknown. The mother had been on welfare but was making efforts to stabilize her family by holding down two jobs, which left both boys to their own devices. Not surprisingly, truancy became an issue. Angus had repeated one grade which, according to what I read in his file, was one grade less than he deserved to repeat.

"I sent a steady stream of notes home to Mrs. Braxton, Angus's mother, requesting a conference. She never responded, although it is likely that Angus never delivered them. Next I mailed a letter expressing my concerns for her son but that, too, went unheeded. There was no home phone so I called her at one of her jobs, a convenience store. At first she sounded testy with me for bothering her at work, but at least it ended with her agreeing to come in for a conference the following week. At the last minute, however, she canceled—something unexpected, she claimed. So we rescheduled and she canceled that as well. When it became clear that she never intended to come at all, I offered to go to her. Well, there were a thousand reasons why that was not an option. Finally, I quit making the effort and concentrated exclusively on Angus.

"One day around Thanksgiving of last year I had an idea. I overheard Angus giving instructions to one of his classmates on the best method for home growing marijuana. I felt certain he was looking for my reaction, so I gave him one. I called him over to my desk and suggested that since his thumb apparently was so green perhaps he would like to turn it toward making money. When he asked what I had in mind, I told him my husband needed part time help at the nursery between Thanksgiving and Christmas. I said I was sure he was willing to hire someone who could work after school
and on Saturdays. Angus looked as surprised by my offer as I was by making it. He said he would have to think about it.

“That night I mentioned this proposal to Frederick, who said he would have to think about it. So they both thought about it. In the end, Angus accepted the job, muttering something like ‘Sure, if your old man needs a hand, why not.’

“He consented to work, and that is what mattered. I considered that this would be good for Frederick as well. We never had children, you see, and having a boy to instruct—” Mrs. McElroy quickly bridged this gap, careful as always not to divulge anything terribly personal. “Angus started at the nursery the first week of December. Frederick began by showing him the different plants, advising him on their care and maintenance and having him perform such minor tasks as watering and weeding and potting. I made a point of not being present whenever Angus was on the job, even though our house is situated directly opposite the nursery. Frederick reported his progress to me. He said that Angus always did as told but seldom had much to say and rarely asked questions. My husband is the silent type, you understand, and I really could not expect much by way of discussion between the two, but I suppose I was expecting—well, what exactly?—that they might warm to each other?” Mrs. McElroy appeared to purse her lips against this expectation. She said, “I had only one contact with Angus’s mother during this period, which was when I called to get her consent for him to work. She was typically curt, always in a rush, stating that, yes, it was fine with her, just mind that he did not steal. I hung up the phone convinced that the woman did not care what her son did so long as it did not interfere with her life.
“At first all went well. I noticed during class that Angus was more subdued than usual and except for an occasional off-color remark, he made no effort to act out. This was definitely an improvement, but I knew enough by now not to comment on it. Giving a boy like that praise is anathema. You might say he thrived on reprimands. I kept my distance and sought no contact beyond the academic requirements—which occasionally he met. In the meantime, he continued working afternoons at the nursery, and I noticed on some days he would come to school dirty, having not bothered to bathe after his job. Now I deplore personal uncleanliness, but I suspect it was an immature stunt to get my goat—in the same vein, say, of slipping sex manuals in with the Bibles.” Mrs. McElroy paused for dramatic effect.

“Then one day after class, Angus loitered around until the other students had gone away. He plopped the copy of Moby-Dick on my desk that I had lent him and which I never expected to see again. I asked him how he liked it. He muttered something about Queequeg and his intention of getting tattoos all over his torso. When I inquired what kind of tattoos, he grumbled that they would most likely be ones that would get him suspended or arrested or both. When I told him that while tattoos were not illegal, they were against the rules at Garner and, depending on their visibility, would indeed get him suspended—even one featuring his mother.

“Now I meant this to be ironic, but it turned out to have been entirely the wrong thing to say. Angus spun around and fled the room, but not before I could see—what? Contempt, I suppose. But for whom? Me? His mother? I never found out, because it turned out to be one of our final talks.
"That evening I asked Frederick how Angus had done on the job. He said that business was so brisk that not much was said, but that the boy seemed distant and glum. Frederick was frequently concerned that Angus might not be getting adequate sleep. His eyes were constantly red. For a man steeped in horticulture, my husband was woefully unenlightened about the effects of marijuana.

"The next day I wanted somehow to make things right but had no idea how to go about it. It turned out to be a moot point because Angus did not show up at school—nor at his job. It occurred to me then, if I had not suspected all along, what keen sensitivity must lurk beneath all that posturing, and I could only wonder at what his home life was like. I actually began to fret that he might never return to school—as if it were anything unusual for Angus Whitney to miss a day.

"But two days later, there he was, his usual insolent self, and I admit to a sense of relief on seeing him. I cannot begin to tell you," said Mrs. McElroy, but decided not to follow that train of thought.

"It was the week prior to Christmas vacation and school was about to break for the holidays. Normally during that time, I assist Frederick in the nursery. A retiree or two also shows up to lend a hand in those busy times. To my surprise, Angus asked to put in additional hours and Frederick was amenable. I took this as an excellent sign. Angus was coming around. He clearly was eager to earn extra cash for Christmas. It seemed that my prayer was being answered. I was actually on track for saving one of the boys in the back row." Mrs. McElroy paused, and from where I sat, I heard her release a long breath of air, as if in utter amazement at what was to come next.
“Given what time was available, Frederick tried teaching him something of the business each and every day—not just manual labor but a deeper respect and understanding of plants—pruning, grafting, fertilizing, soil content, nitrogen. As I have noted, Angus had an alert and capable mind and caught on fast. What he learned from my husband began to take root—to capitalize on a metaphor. I requested of Frederick that he bring Angus into contact with customers, let him answer their questions, guide them in their selections. In that way, you see, we could adroitly work on social skills as well as keep him gainfully employed.

“During these days I continued to stay in the background, helping Frederick only on Angus’s days off. Heaven forbid that any of his friends should wander in and find him working alongside his teacher! Angus apparently had never had a strong male figure in his life and, as I have mentioned, I had glimmerings of some sort of bond forming between him and my husband. Frederick’s involvements outside the nursery were few. He was a self-contained man who kept largely to himself. And though he would have been the last to admit it, he showed a marked enthusiasm which went beyond the business of plants. I attributed this to the presence of Angus Whitney.”

I noticed, curiously, that Mrs. McElroy spoke of her husband in the past tense, as if he were deceased, when in fact I knew the man to be confined to a wheelchair.

“One night Frederick told me that Angus had requested to drive the pickup truck. He told him that he would need to obtain a learner’s permit. Judging from the boy’s response, Frederick concluded that he had no means of achieving this since there was no vehicle available to him, and it was doubtful that his mother would have cooperated, in any case. So my husband gave it some thought and agreed to give him instructions
himself, provided Angus would help clear away some tree stumps in order to create room for an additional shipment of Norfolk pines. A bargain was struck and the lessons began.

"As with everything else, Angus effortlessly mastered the fundamentals of clutch and gear and in no time was driving as though he were born to it. And you could see it!" Mrs. McElroy spoke in an elevated voice which caused Sandra to sit up. "The change. It was his first real accomplishment, I am convinced of it. Which is why it is so difficult—"

She reached for her coffee cup, lifted it to her lips but did not drink, then set it back down. "The day before the stumps were to be cleared, my husband gave Angus a holiday—advised him to go home and get rested for the task that lay ahead. Frederick himself turned in early while I—well, I remember staying up to read Dickens in preparation for January. I always assigned my class *Great Expectations*, you see, right after the holidays. I suppose, too, I might have been forming some wistful association between Pip, the boy in the novel, and Angus Whitney, the boy in the back row. Waif and wastrel. Both make good. Something of that sort. At least I was warm toward the idea when I got into bed that night.

"I do not know what awakened me—an irregularity in my husband's breathing or the cranking of an engine. It turned out he was awake, too. Perhaps we awoke together, stirred by the same noise. For a while we just lay there listening. At first I thought it was a car down the road, but it sounded too close. And then a familiar grinding of gears told me what it was.

"'Hot wired, by God!' Frederick's voice alarmed me more than the sound. Without switching on the light he was out of bed and into his trousers which he kept on a
post at the foot. When I realized he was going out, I said, 'Call the police,' but he was already out the door.

"I turned the lamp on and reached for the phone which in my haste I dropped. No sooner had I alerted 911 than I heard the crash, knew the pickup had gone into the chain link fence which enclosed the compound. By the time I threw on a robe and got out there, I could not see a thing. The single overhead light which was in the center of the property had been extinguished.

"Then I saw the truck. The headlights were on. A vapor of steam emerged from beneath the hood, which was bent. Both doors stood open. I did not have time to wonder why whoever it was did not just drive the truck away instead of leaving it idling in the gateway. Only afterwards did I understand that they had no intention of stealing the truck but had merely used it as a battering ram to get through the double gates, which were padlocked. The task of scaling the fence a second time, which was how they had entered, proved too arduous, burdened as they were with stolen goods. So this was how they made their exit. The police later scorned the action as unprofessional, the work of panicked juveniles, an assessment which was no comfort to Frederick and me. The damage was irrevocable.

"I found him on the ground, some distance from the shed where he kept his gardening tools. I suppose he had gone after a rake or a hoe or something to use as a weapon. At first I thought he was unconscious. He was not moving. I thought, oh, Lord, a heart attack—or worse, they struck him down! But when I touched his shoulder—he was lying face down—and called his name, he tried crawling away. He did not know who I was. I saw blood. He was clearly in shock and I could not determine where the blood was
coming from. Like a fool I called after those demons—shouted for them to come back. The police arrived shortly and radioed at once for an ambulance. Naturally, I rode with Frederick to the emergency room while the medics worked on him. There was a fair-sized gash on the back of his head, which explained the blood. He had struck something on the ground when he fell, but that was only minor compared to...While running, you see, he got tangled up in some hose, lost his balance, and landed on his back on a sprinkler, one of those that broadcasts water over a wide area and is equipped with a metal spike to anchor it into the ground. Somehow the spike was turned upward, propped against something, as if lying in wait. It entered his lower back, causing injury to the spinal column. He managed to roll over onto his stomach before I reached him.”

I watched Sandra cover her mouth as Mrs. McElroy pronounced judgment on the “unholy terrorists,” as she called them. She said in a voice cutting and cold, “I believed then, and am convinced now, that they saw him go down—knew he was in trouble. They had to have known. It was a quiet night, his shouts were heard, they saw him coming. I can forgive them their thievery, look past their hoodlum ways. But I ask you—I defy you to tell me—what sort of person it is that will leave a man lying on the ground in that condition, in pain, the very life leaking out of him for all they knew? You tell me.”

Her command seemed directed at me. I set aside my pipe and sucked in a deep breath. Before I could muster a reply, which was bound to be inadequate, Mrs. McElroy said sharply, “Thirty dollars! That is how much Frederick had put in the till that night for making change in the morning. They took it, naturally, that and some liquid nitrogen. Will someone explain to me why they needed liquid nitrogen? Two pocket calculators, some knives, wire cutters, packets of seed, a couple of small potted plants they must have
supposed were valuable. All they could carry. I am positive they were out for money, but not finding much, helped themselves to whatever else they could lay their hands on.”

“Your husband,” Sandra spoke solicitously. Shadows engulfed the store. I could barely make out her profile.

Mrs. McElroy’s voice shrank to a whisper. “You can restore a man’s legs, but how do you restore his spirit? All this was nearly a year ago. Frederick remains confined to a wheelchair. He undergoes therapy twice a week. The prognosis of his walking again—” The whisper graduated into a rasp. “But there must be something more than therapy. There must be a will.” I saw her fist rise briefly in front of her face, then drop like an apple off a tree into her lap. She said, “Although he could still be of use in the nursery, he wants nothing to do with it, nor with much of anything else.”

For one macabre moment, I half expected Mrs. McElroy, the ex-teacher, to make reference to my vegetable love, that line from the Andrew Marvell poem; and the chilly image of Frederick McElroy sitting among his untended plants was one that would stick by me for days, though I’d never laid eyes on the man.

Sandra said, “And the people who broke in—?”

“Angus Whitney was taken into custody the next morning,” Mrs. McElroy revealed. “He and Gleason Harley were booked into juvenile detention on charges of burglary, grand theft auto, destruction of property, and petit theft. I all but pleaded with the arresting officers to include an assault charge but there was no indication that they had gone anywhere near Frederick. He had tripped over a garden hose, you see. I was assured, however, that the district attorney’s office would take into account my husband’s incapacitation.”
At this point, Mrs. McElroy surprised me by standing up. She smoothed the front of her dress with a sweep of her hand and walked to the door where she stood looking out at the darkened lot. I could hear the clickety-clack of a bike’s loose kickstand passing by. Against the door’s glass pane Mrs. McElroy’s gray hair was caught in a cocoon of fading twilight.

“It was a complete travesty of justice.” Her head shook from side to side, casting off the twilight. “Placing Angus Whitney in lockup was a formality. The court in its wisdom appointed a public defender to the case, set up an arraignment, then released Angus and Gleason to their respective families—something about their previous records did not justify time in detention which, according to the judge, was overcrowded as it was. On top of that, I learned that the grand theft auto charge was dropped because they had not actually stolen the truck, mind you, but had merely misappropriated it. It never left the property.

“Mis-ap-pro-pri-a-ted!” She repeated the word with a viperish hiss. “I was forewarned by our attorney not to expect great satisfaction from the court’s decision, that in all probability those boys would receive some form of probation and be made to report to a court-appointed counselor. Restitution would be required, naturally, but realistically speaking, what sort of restitution could be expected from the likes of Angus Whitney and Gleason Harley? And what kind of restitution will pay back a man’s life? Restore his legs?”

Mrs. McElroy turned to face the cave-like room. “Christmas passed with Frederick still in hospital. And then New Year’s. School was back in session and for practical purposes, so was I.
“I had never given it a thought, never once imagined that either of them would be so brazen as to show up at school, much less in my classroom. And had I imagined it, I would have expected the administration to have the good sense to transfer them to another teacher, if not to another school. But it was the first day after vacation, you see, and no one else gave it any thought, either. They purposely made their entrance ten minutes into the period, strutting through the door like proud victors, taking their customary seats in the back row. Angus first, then Gleason. I doubt if they attended any other classes that day—were waiting exclusively for mine. I further doubt that Gleason Harley would have been there at all, had it not been for Angus’s coercion. I remember he sat like a lump, eyes cast down at the floor, trying to appear manly but losing confidence. The damp armpits told me he’d rather have been anywhere else.

“But not Angus. Angus sat like some sort of self-satisfied King Herod just back from drowning new-borns. The expression on his face said, ‘Well, here I am. What are you going to do about it?’ I can still see him—a portrait of sheer malice.”

I had the uncanny sense that Mrs. McElroy was at that moment constructing upon my own face the face of Angus Whitney.

“When they entered the room,” she said, “I was reading aloud from Great Expectations. I looked up from the text and such a hush fell over the class, it was unnerving. Well, of course I could not permit that to continue, because, you see, for that one instant those two were in control. I resumed reading, never lifting my eyes from the page after that.

“You will recall the scene. It is set in the graveyard where Pip first meets up with the convict, Magwitch, who threatens to take his life if he fails to bring provisions. The
passage, if read properly, should produce an element of terror, not only in Pip, but in the heart of the reader.

"I read the words of Magwitch, who has Pip bent backward over a gravestone, threatening to tear out his heart and liver. And as I read, I walked, growing all the while closer to Angus Whitney, who never stirred a muscle."

As she spoke, Mrs. McElroy moved towards me, slowly, deliberately, through the store's inky stillness which, in its Halloween trappings, resembled a graveyard. In my bones I felt the expressed horror of Pip and the unexpressed horror of Angus Whitney. I wanted to appeal to Sandra but couldn't take my eyes off Mrs. McElroy. I gripped my pipe like a knife.

At that moment, Sandra chose to switch on the lights.

"He-did-not-know-what-was-to-befall-him," Mrs. McElroy said between clenched teeth, and her carefully spaced words had the icy effect of a convict's fingers tightening around my throat. "In all truthfulness? Neither did I. I kept reading, I kept walking. Reading and walking. And at the precise moment where Magwitch again threatens Pip with tearing out his heart and liver, I arrived at Angus Whitney's desk. I could see over the edge of my book that he had grown pathetically small."

I squeezed my buttocks together and braced myself while clutching my pipe.

"All at once the words went blurry on the page," said Mrs. McElroy, "and the book slipped from my hands. Precisely what happened after that is also blurred, but my hands were on him. He could not get away. I was on him, I tell you, bearing down hard. I do not believe he cried out or made even a sound. Perhaps the shock was too great. I knew only that I wanted to hurt him, possibly destroy him. My hands were busy, but I do
not know what they were about. Insofar as hands can become weapons, mine were weapons. I was dimly aware of the other students—the dementia of terror in their eyes, the stunned disbelief. It crippled the room. How many hands eventually tore me away I cannot say. What happened to the children and who finally cleared the room are lost to me, except for a vague recollection of two or maybe three adults carrying Angus Whitney out and someone forcing me to sit down in a chair. It was many minutes before I realized a lens in my glasses was cracked and there were spots of blood on my blouse.

"Naturally," said Mrs. McElroy, returning to her place in front of the store, sparing me the fate of Angus Whitney, "I did not tear out his heart and liver. Some scrapes, some abrasions—nothing iodine and bandages would not make right. The greatest damage was to his ego—being beaten up by his teacher, a woman at that.

"His outcome ceased to interest me. I had Frederick's and my life to patch together. So far as I was concerned, court was adjourned on the day I was dismissed from Garner Junior High and the teaching profession."

Mrs. McElroy pinned me in her sights. She said, "I don't suppose Clinton Stewart, in his effort to enlighten you, happened to mention the break-in at the nursery, did he? Or how my husband lost the use of his legs?"

My voice sounded strange to me. "He said there were mitigating circumstances," I admitted.


I said, "But that doesn't excuse—"
“Of course it doesn’t!” Her voice raked the air between us. “There can never be an excuse! It was a huge and costly error for which I will continue to pay. No half truth there! But if nothing else, I have learned never to lose control. The Angus Whitneys of this world will continue to appear and multiply like the vermin they are, along with the miserable half truths most people persist in worshiping. And of course the Gleason Harleys will continue to tag along, unless the education system is radically revised, not with words, but action.”

It was the word radical that resounded in my ears like the toll of a bell, and on this Halloween night I imagined the shades of Machiavelli, Spencer, Nietzsche, Captain Ahab, Jonathan Edwards, and the jury of Athenian councilmen who condemned Socrates to death floating down from their shelves to rally around the impassioned figure of Eleanor McElroy, their kindred spirit. Her voice carried a mixture of tragic elements—vainglory, outrage, vengeance, bruised ego, along with such a critical absence of humor that the truth, whatever that was—if it did exist—could never be arrived at, not by her, not by me, or by anyone else. In my eyes she had become a breathing testimony to the very thing she condemned: half truth. And in that moment I pitied her even as she repulsed me. Had my wife not been present, I’m convinced that Mrs. McElroy would have squashed me as she had Angus Whitney, in spite of her declaration never to lose control.

To Sandra she spoke in a tone less impassioned. “Condemn me if you must. I suffered a weak moment, but that is my cross to bear. Just do not forsake the values we discussed. If you have lost faith in me, do not lose faith in them, or in Ada, and especially in yourself.”
I watched Sandra walk over to her. She didn’t have to speak, didn’t need to say a word. I easily guessed her thoughts. The membrane between us was that thin. Reaching her hand out and placing it on Mrs. McElroy’s arm, she said, “I do understand—probably better than you know.” And those few words for me were more painful than all of Mrs. McElroy’s combined.

Before leaving the store, Mrs. McElroy turned her gaze on me one last time, the fluorescent light bouncing off her glasses. “I am responsible for a critical lapse in judgment,” she said. “But at least I have a cause. I stand for something. What do you stand for?”

VI

I felt the stillness of the book store follow me into the car. A specter of sin (whose, I wasn’t quite sure) settled into the seat beside me. Sandra and I arrived at the house, one behind the other, and were relieved of speech by a tribe of candy-seeking pygmies.

While I held a coven of K-Mart gremlins at bay, she rustled up a bounty of candy corn. I was grateful for the distraction. It helped lighten the mood fostered by Mrs. McElroy’s story. I felt my temples throb while doling out handfuls of sweets, and suddenly I craved a drink. Sandra must have read my mind, or had an identical craving, for as I closed the door, she appeared out of the kitchen bearing two scotch and sodas.

She handed me both drinks. “Happy hour,” she said and returned to the kitchen to make herself one.

“Lord knows I could use a happy hour,” I called after her, but I don’t think she heard.
I collapsed onto the sofa and kicked off my shoes. As I set both glasses on the coffee table with loud clunks, Sandra’s voice admonished me from the kitchen to “use a coaster.” I slipped a copy of New Republic, one of the magazines she’d recently subscribed to, under the drinks. She came in and joined me, taking the chair opposite the sofa, our stockinged toes nearly touching.

I lifted my glass in a toast. “Here’s to—” But my mind went suddenly blank.

Sandra furnished the toast. “‘Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.’”

“Did she teach you that?” I asked.

“As a matter of fact, you did. The last line from Lycidas. John Milton.”

Until recently, we would sit home of an evening and read poetry to each other, exchanging favorite lines, discovering new ones, sharing a bottle of wine.

It felt like ages ago.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and I think I meant it.

“Why? It’s a beautiful line.”

“No—I meant—”

“I know what you meant.”

The doorbell rang and Sandra got up slowly. “I’d hate to see you annihilate anyone with that breath.” She’d not yet taken a sip of her drink. “The Kersey kids,” she reported on her return. “Dressed up like hobbits. Real cute.”

I patted the sofa beside me.

“Can’t,” she said. “Got to fix supper.”

“We can eat candy corn.”

“Cold cuts are what I had in mind,” Sandra said flatly. “Ham and cheese?”
“Here’s to cold cuts.” I lifted my glass.

The hell with supper, I wanted her to stay and get drunk with me. I was thinking of our college days, the time we nearly got suspended for sneaking into the chapel for a midnight repast of wine, cheese, and Omar Khayyam. We nearly blew it but were lucky; the night watchman, an older man with rheumy eyes, remembered what it was like to be young.

I stumbled into the kitchen, enacting an inebriation I’d not achieved but could see coming.

“Grub’ll be up in a sec,” Sandra said, and I didn’t care for her detached tone.

I reached for the bottle of scotch. “Man can’t live on grub alone. He needs a little yohoho.” I replenished my glass, two parts scotch, one part soda.

“Didn’t I already fix you two of those?” Sandra asked.

“‘Ah, my Beloved, fill the cup that clears today of past regrets and future fears,’” I said significantly. “Remember?”

“It was ages ago.”

“‘The bird of time has but a little way to fly—and lo, the bird is on the wing.’ So here’s to the bird!” I belted down half my drink.

The doorbell again.

“Are you capable of getting the door, or should I go?” Sandra asked as she paved the bread with slices of ham.

“Prob’ly more hobbits,” I predicted and sloshed scotch on my hand.

“Betcha can’t tell I switched meat in the sandwiches while you were away,” I told her.

“Do you want lettuce?”

“Lettuce be lovers, we’ll marry our fortunes together...How’s ‘bout another d-d-d-drink.”

She shook her head.

“Aw, c’mon. For ol’ time’s sake. ‘Come fill the cup before life’s liquor in its cup be dry.’”

“I don’t want another drink, Jed,” Sandra repeated and sullenly placed the tops on our sandwiches.

“You know the old saying. Friends don’t let friends drink alone.” I poured more scotch, this time forgetting the soda. “Oh, Christ, what could I be thinking? Drinking’s prob’ly on the list of things ol’ whatzerface wants to stamp off the face of the earth. What is that old bat’s name? Eat An Awning. Isn’t that it? Eat An Awning.”

“Ada Fawning,” said Sandra, unamused.

“Close enough.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked with a plaintive look in her eye, then the doorbell rang.

“I’ll get this one,” I said.

“You’re in no condition——”

“I refuse to miss my turn.”

She didn’t move. I went and flung the front door open to two small ghosts who hopped back at the sight of me.
“Trick or treat!” I shouted. “Gimme all your candy!”

They took off running, one of them tripping over his bedsheet.

“Happy haunting!” I called after them.

I closed the door and Sandra was behind me.

“Jed, you frightened those children.”

“Oh, you can’t frighten today’s kids,” I reminded her. “They’re all pumped up on coke and acid. Isn’t that what Eat An Awning preaches?”

Sandra darted back into the kitchen. I darted after her, knocking over an end table on the way and narrowly retrieving a lamp.

“Hey,” I said, “let’s go trick or treating.”

“Leave me alone.”

“We’ll have a blast. Remember that one Halloween, in Stan Polley’s Chevy Impala? You were Doc Holliday and I was Wyatt Earp. We ended up treating each other in the back seat of Stan’s car, ha, with Stan and that girl with the green hair passed out in front. Doc and Wyatt making it together. Now, that’s what I call an OK Corral.”

She turned from me, arms folded tightly.

“Oh, be a sport. We’re not too old. You can go as Simone de Beauvoir and I’ll be Jean-Paul Sartre. We’ll wander the streets spouting existential absurdities to trick-or-treaters. Whadaya say?”

She didn’t answer. The sandwiches sat untouched on the cutting board, sad and forsaken. The kitchen smelled of booze.

“I’m serious,” I said with a belch. “Let’s let loose for once.” I reached out to touch her and she pulled away.
“Don’t.”

My arms went limp at my sides. “Does that mean you don’t want to?”

“I think you’ve done enough tricking for one day.”

“Meaning?”

“It was cruel what you did. You purposely went and dug up all that dirt then threw it in her face.”

“I wanted, the, you know, truth.”

“Half truth, you mean.”

“No—truth! She hurt that kid. I vaguely remember it being in the paper.”

I don’t know if my vision blurred or if her eyes filled up with water. “You don’t care about any kid. You care about yourself. You wanted to hurt her. And then you go and hide behind this, this bullshit. This utter lie.”

I tried to speak but couldn’t. My lips and tongue suddenly felt numb. I plopped down on a chair. My elbow knocked over my glass and a solitary ice cube went skittering across the table onto the floor.

“You’re drunk.”

“Ya think?”

Suddenly Sandra was gone, leaving me alone. I tried to stand up but sat back down. I’d drunk too much too quickly. I reached for the bottle of scotch but laid my head down on my arms at the kitchen table and closed my eyes. I intended to stay that way for only a minute, until I could get my bearings, but when I lifted my head and looked at the clock it was midnight. The house was still and the doorbell was dead.

192
Without shutting off the kitchen light, I padded into the living room. The trip upstairs proved too complicated so I settled onto the sofa without removing my clothes.

The next thing I knew there was a flood of sunshine pouring into the room and a shaft of it struck me across the eyes like a weapon. I stretched awake and tasted a coal mine inside my mouth.

I managed to trundle up to the bedroom. Sandra was just coming out of the bathroom, one wet towel wrapped around her torso, another swirled around her hair. Tentacles of steam trailed after her.

"You’re up early." I tried sounding casual.

"It’s not early."

She selected an outfit from the closet, then lined up jars on the vanity. She rubbed her hair with the towel.

"Sandra," I attempted, "listen, I’m sorry, I—about last night, I mean. I was way out of line and I apologize."

"No need," she said.

"Oh, but there is. I said things that sounded stupid even to me. I feel awful."

"You’re forgiven," she said simply. She was busy frowning at a skirt she’d yanked from a hanger. I watched her exchange it for another. I wanted her to set aside these activities and pay attention to me.

I said, "It’s just that, when things start piling up I get a little overwhelmed. I say rude things to keep from dealing with it. Yesterday had that effect."

She gave me her sideways glance.
“Anyway. Why don’t I go down and put on some coffee? I can make us French toast.”

“I’m going in. We left the store yesterday without closing out the register. And there’s a shipment due this afternoon.”

“Right. Okay, then. I’ll shower and drive in with you,” I offered.

“Take your time. Come in when you’re ready.” She passed me on her way to the bathroom and I could smell the fruity fragrance of her cream rinse. I reached out and drew her to me; the towel slipped onto her shoulders, and wet strands of hair pressed against my cheek. She didn’t return my embrace.

“Jed,” she said. “You’re just you—that’s all. Just you.” And there was no mistaking the sorrow in her voice. She turned from me and went into the bathroom. I sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the sound of the blow dryer. I tried to imagine what being “just me” meant to her now. There was a time when I knew exactly what it meant.

“I’ll have coffee at the store,” Sandra said as she was on her way out the door and waved goodbye with the passion of someone punching a time clock.

I stood watching from the window as her gold-colored sports car (a gift from her father on her twenty-eighth birthday) backed out of the driveway and experienced the unsettling sensation of watching her back out of my life. I found myself, once again, slipping into an earlier time, into that mystical place where our hearts first touched.
Sandra and I met when we were second semester juniors, and although until that year we’d glimpsed each other on campus and shared a class together (I was an English major, she a sociology major with an English minor), we’d never spoken.

But then came that fateful, sultry April afternoon when six of us piled into Herb Manley’s Ford convertible to attend a rock concert in a neighboring town. Sandra and I were at that time formally introduced. Her date was a Dave somebody, and mine was Glenda Fremont, the on-and-off romance of my junior year.

After the concert, we stopped at a store and bought six-packs of beer to share on the drive back. No one felt any pain. The radio was at full volume, the top of the Ford was skinned back, and the aftershock of percussion, electric guitars, and synthesizers reverberated in our collective blood streams. Blasts of spring air made it feel as if we were driving ninety miles an hour—which, for all I knew, we were. I was jammed into the back seat with Glenda and Sandra, while Dave and Herb’s date, whose name I don’t remember, sat up front with Herb, the girl in the middle. All of us were guzzling beer. To add to our euphoria was the promise of an off-campus dance that night.

I first became aware of the car swerving when beer splashed into my lap. We were charging along in the opposite lane. I thought we were going to crash. Herb’s date squealed, I couldn’t tell from pleasure or fright; then suddenly we were back in our own lane and everyone up front was laughing. The guys were hooting and Herb was playing a rebel cheer on the horn of his car. Then we swerved again. I felt a thump under the left rear tire.

“Way to go, Herb!” shouted the Dave somebody Sandra was with. “Ten points!”

“Make it twenty!” Herb cried out, and he saluted the air with his beer can.
“That is so gross,” said Herb’s date, and Herb playfully attempted to place a hand over her eyes which she slapped away. “Don’t,” she said, laughing.

Then I saw what was going on. We were tooling down a country road, a supposed short-cut back to campus, and there was next to no traffic. The road was flanked by woods and cow pastures, much of it fenced off by wire. There were no houses in sight. On the road was an occasional turtle, sluggishly passing from one side of the asphalt to the other, its gray-green mound poking along.

“What’s best,” Herb Manley announced above the rush of wind and FM rock, “is when you just barely clip the sides of their shells and they go spinning like tiddlywinks. Watch!”

Herb swerved to hit another turtle and I could hear a crunching sound beneath the wheels.

“Oops,” said Herb, and threw his back and laughed uproariously. The guys clearly thought this was great sport, but Glenda looked bored and disgusted. Herb’s date acted brainlessly amused.

“Stop!” someone shrieked, and it was Sandra. “Stop the car! Stop the car right this minute!”

The command was so shrill that Herb eased off to the side of the road, probably thinking she might be ill. The vehicle hadn’t come to a halt before Sandra threw open her door and leaped out, ripping her dress in the process.

“You—” She could barely find her voice. “Are all morons!”

“Sandra,” said Dave, good-naturedly, his hands outstretched. “Whadaya doin’, hon, come on, get back in the car.”
“Not on your life.” Her face was robbed of color and a wisp of hair fell over one eye.

“Get back in the goddamn car!” Dave said, and this time he wasn’t playing.

“Thank you, I’ll walk.”

“The fuck. We’re miles from nowhere,” said Dave, and for some reason this was unaccountably hilarious to both Herb and his date. Glenda and I just sat there.

“I’ll walk,” Sandra said again, and there was no compromise in a tone that I was to hear many times over the years.

“Aw, now, come on, Sandy, we won’t run over any more of your little friends if that’s what’s got your panties all in a bunch,” promised Herb Manley, popping open a fresh can of beer. His date giggled.

Sandra just stood there, arms folded. When they understood that she was in earnest, the gaiety inside the car subsided.

“You can’t be serious,” said Dave.

Sandra started walking. For her the matter was settled.

“I’m not believing this.” Dave spread his hands wide against the sky.

Herb let the Ford tag along beside Sandra, and even Glenda tried coaxing her in, but she wouldn’t be coaxed—wouldn’t even grant them a response, just walked with her eyes fixed on the road up ahead.

I pried myself out of my seat and scrambled over the side of the car, not bothering with the door. One unapologetic sneaker smacked Dave in the back of the head.

“Christ, give me a concussion next time!” he shouted.

“You are a concussion, asshole!” I shouted back.

“You gotta pee, Jed, make it quick,” said Herb.
“I’m walking, too,” I told him.

“You’re kidding,” Herb said.

“I’m keeping my fingers crossed there’s a six thousand-pound turtle up ahead and he squashes the shit out of all of you.”

“Jed?” Glenda’s eyes were wide with appeal. She asked me to please get back in. I felt bad for her since she seemed genuinely appalled by the turtle massacre.

“Walk with us,” I said, and offered my hand.

“Through wilderness?” She made a face.

Dave looked confused. He half rose out of his seat, a finger pointed at me like a pistol. “Hey, man, you’re not going anywhere with my girl.”

“I’m not your girl!” Sandra spoke with ferocity. She was walking fast, and the Ford bumped along beside her. There were no other cars on the road.

I trailed behind Sandra, keeping a careful eye on Dave, who I figured was about to fly out of the car at me. On the one hand his code of honor (such as it was) required it; on the other, I sensed his heart wasn’t in it. He couldn’t have cared less if Sandra walked alone, or if I or anyone else walked with her. But his friends were watching, and therefore his self-image demanded something stronger than a mere “Kiss my ass.” Luckily, it was Glenda who unwittingly salvaged his image and my hide, because in a real fight I doubt I would have been any match for Dave, who was on the varsity crew team and would’ve left me looking like the turtles Herb had run over.

“Oh, what’s it matter?” Glenda told him, leaning forward and touching his bicep. “I mean, it’s a free world, isn’t it? They want to walk, let them.” Her eyes passed over me like a mowing machine.
That was all Dave needed. He showed me his best Bud-you-nearly-got-your-face-broke sneer and squeezed Glenda’s hand. “You’re right, babe,” he said. “They want to walk, fuck ’em. You know what I mean? Takes a lot of brains, right?” He glanced at Herb for approval, then back at me. “So long, pussy.”

“But it’s ten miles!” Herb looked at me like I was an idiot.

“Ten miles, twenty miles, it’s all the same to us turtles,” I said.

Herb’s date squealed inanely, which she’d done all during the concert. I decided it was worth the walk just to get away from her.

The Ford took off down the road, stopping after fifty yards or so to honk and wave. I motioned for them to drive on, which eventually they did.

Once they were gone from sight, I said to Sandra, “Real nice guy, that Dave. And what a romantic.”

“I didn’t ask for a hero,” she retorted and picked up her pace.

“Who’s a hero? I just happen to like turtles.”

“I was hoping to be alone.”

“Well, be alone...I hope you don’t mind if I walk down the same road. There don’t seem to be any others.”

“It has two sides,” she pointed out.

“The attraction between you and Dave is beginning to make sense,” I said.

Just then I felt what I’d been dreading: that awful tell-tale churning of the stomach—the gastric fulminations which precede the quake. I barely made it into the ditch.

“Hey—are you all right?” I heard Sandra call to me as I retched up the last beer in the six-pack.
My face was stuffed into some foul-smelling weeds; I was down on my hands and knees. “You go on,” I managed to say. I knelt in the ditch until I was sure I was done, then stood up on wobbly legs, eyes watering, the knees of my trousers wet with mud. In my mouth was the after-taste of vomit.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” Sandra repeated in the manner of someone who would have preferred being anywhere else.

I tried sounding casual. “I’m only this way when I see bad things happen to turtles.”

“Look,” she said, “I didn’t mean to be rude. It’s just—I was upset.”

“Those guys are assholes.” I pulled myself out of the ditch.

“I said morons, but assholes is better.” She laughed.

“Do you still want me to walk on the other side?”

“Now especially,” she said, holding her nose, then added, “Well, maybe if you walk downwind.”

I noticed her eyes drop to my crotch, which was beer soaked; on top of everything, it appeared I’d pissed my pants.

“God, are you ever a mess,” Sandra observed.

“Well, I didn’t start out this way,” I said.

In spite of my predicament, I was starting to feel better. It’s astonishing how something that feels as bad as throwing up can make you feel so good once it’s over, especially if there’s no audience. I took in a deep breath of country air and readied myself for a hike.

Suddenly Sandra wanted to talk.

“So what are you doing running with that crowd?” she asked.
“They’re not my crowd. Glenda’s my girlfriend. She knows Herb, who has wheels. We had tickets to this concert and my car’s in the shop, blah, blah. Simple as that.”

“His car’s in the shop and his girl’s at the hop—with someone else,” Sandra quipped.

“Very funny. But what about you? How do you fit in with that crowd?”

“I guess I don’t very well,” she admitted, and gave me her sideways glance. “I’m a sucker for muscles. Hunks turn me on. You should see my room—wallpapered with beefcake. And would you believe it? I went after Dave. I did. I’d see him in the cafeteria or working out with the crew team and I’d go positively orgasmic. Well, you saw his biceps.”

“The only one that really stood out was the one between his ears,” I said.

“Jealousy’s a terrible thing,” Sandra chided me and chuckled. She no longer was the harpy who’d leaped out of Herb Manley’s car full of righteous indignation. “And the real clincher is? I’m a sociology major. My heroes are Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. I’d give anything to accomplish a fraction of what they did. That’s my goal in life. But who do I have on my wall? Lifeguards! Go figure.” She seemed to be waiting for my response.

“Well, I don’t know,” I said. “Gandhi abstained from food. Maybe you abstain from intellect.”

“Oh, look who’s talking. That Glenda what’s-her-face. She’s not exactly my idea of William F. Buckley.”

“She has a sweet spirit,” I maintained. I was actually enjoying myself.

“I’ll bet that’s not all she has that’s sweet.”
“Now, now. You have your beefcake and I have what I have.” For the first time I was legitimately beginning to live in her curiosity. We were shuffling along the side of the road, gathering burrs and stickers in the legs of our jeans. I tried maintaining a respectful distance, although what etiquette dictates as respectful in such situations, I couldn’t imagine.

I had jumped out of Herb Manley’s Ford on God knows what gallant impulse, thrown up in front of someone I barely knew, lost my girlfriend, and was now facing a stretch of road that looked interminable. Humor was the only recourse.

“You must really love turtles,” said Sandra.

“All things great and small,” I acknowledged, and with my eyes on the darkening distance, began to quote: “Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road/the long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.”

“Whitman, right? My minor is English,” she announced, and it was as if we were suddenly out on some leisurely tour. “You and I had a class together. British Lit. 424. Remember?”

“Dr. Freeney.”

“Dr. Freeney, God, yes! He of the odious polka dot bow tie collection.”

“And Jerry Lewis speech inflections—especially when he got excited.”

“What a riot! I nearly failed his class due to suppressed laughter. He’s what my grandmother used to call an odd bodkin.”

“A what?”

“An odd bodkin. It was her pet phrase for anyone who has peculiar habits or characteristics but manages to be lovable in spite of them—maybe even because of them.
Whenever I'd criticize my friends or anyone else? Granny’d look at me and say, ‘Now, Sandra, before you take too hard a turn, go and stand before the mirror and see what a real odd bodkin looks like.’” Sandra smiled at the memory. “My grandmother,” she said fondly. “What a fine lady.”

“Her definition could apply to us all, I guess.”

“No, not all,” Sandra said resolutely. “It can’t apply to people who deliberately run over animals. People who are intentionally mean. They aren’t odd bodkins because they’re not lovable. Granny would have had another name for them.”

“I believe we used it,” I pointed out.

“We did. It’s not what my grandmother would have used, but it’s what she would have meant.” We both laughed, and I was aware that she had closed the distance between us. She said, “Maybe I needed a hero after all.”

“I feel more like an odd bodkin.”

“Even better.”

She linked her arm in mine.

Before being given a ride by a home-bound farmer in his mud-spattered pickup truck filled with barley hay, we talked of many things—her childhood, my childhood, favorite authors, past loves, future plans—what two people meeting each other for the first time while ambling down a country road are likely to talk about. The farmer, noticing our wretched conditions, drove out of his way to deposit us safely back on campus and wouldn’t accept a dime for his effort. Gratefully, we noticed no turtle carnage en route. The three of us sat snug in the burlap-scented cab of the pickup. The driver, a crusty old geezer with a bulbous nose, was missing two fingers on his left hand, including his ring
finger. "Wear it on my heart," he said, referring to his wedding ring, and I felt Sandra’s hand slip into mine.

We parted company on campus, she to go to her dorm and I to mine. Nothing was mentioned about a future get-together. I’d been about to ask her to go to a movie since our plans for the dance were spoiled, but at the last minute lost my nerve, which I know was stupid since she seemed to like being with me. Holding me back, I suppose, was the fact that I was nobody’s idea of “beefcake.” Glenda used to tease me about my scrawny physique, and I kept imagining the pictures tacked on the walls of Sandra’s bedroom. It didn’t occur to me until afterward that she’d probably be content to sit in the dormitory lounge munching popcorn, watching TV, and laughing. One of the things that attracted me to her was that she laughed at the same things I did. Its being Saturday night, we would’ve had the place to ourselves.

“Jerk,” I kept repeating as I stumbled into the dorm. At age twenty and with only two girlfriends to my record, I hadn’t arrived at that enviable plateau of self-assuredness. I required prodding. After taking an epic shower, I plopped onto my unmade bunk with the memory of whatever perfume she wore still clinging to my nostrils. Terribly erotic. For some minutes I conjured up her smile, her voice, her curious way of glancing at me out of the corner of her eye as we scuffed along that road, and I developed a most wonderful erection on her behalf.

At some obscure hour I was awakened by my roommate, a lustful guy named Kojermitz from New York City, who came in rumpled and ruined from his night’s adventure and bearing the spoor of untold wickedness. Kojermitz was the kind who returned from the hunt with a trophy—a crumpled brassiere, some ripped panties, a used
condom twisted into obscene knots, which he gladly stuck under my nose. “Tell me what

*that* smells like!”

Barely conscious, I glimpsed him setting something on my chest and swatted it away
as if it were a tarantula.

“For you, Romeo,” he said, picking the object up and handing it to me. “It was
propped against the door.”

It was a box of those chocolate-covered pecan caramels in the shape of turtles, to
which a note was taped: “For my favorite odd bodkin. To triumph over life’s adversities,
we turtles must stick together. A picnic Sunday?”

All I could do was smile.

That’s how Sandra and I began. After our semi-marathon walk together, we more or
less *knew*—and the funny thing was, others knew it, too. I was not faced with the
awkwardness of breaking off with Glenda. Somehow it was understood that it was over.
As for Sandra and Dave—they had never really begun. Their first date was their last.

Shortly after we began going out, I embarked on a series of impassioned love letters,
which I continued to write to Sandra on a nearly daily basis right up until the time we
graduated, even though we were practically joined at the hip. She squirreled them away
in a mahogany case on her dresser, as if they were her heart’s treasure.

At the start of summer vacation preceding our senior year, I got to meet Sandra’s
well-to-do family, the Russells. We were invited to a supper party hosted by them at their
elegant beach house. I remember little of the event and its numerous guests, only that it
was semi-formal, brightly lit, and dull. An elderly lady who was present and presumably
unattached, went around after the meal furtively scraping leftovers off everyone’s plate
into a roomy handbag she carried for that purpose. The lady was emaciated, shabbily
dressed and, it turned out, uninvited. No one quite understood how she’d gotten in. She
quickly became an object of derision and, before being shown the door, was audibly
ridiculed by the Russells’ guests, causing the room to ripple with laughter. When she left
with her unprivileged victuals, her head was held high, and she walked with queenly
stature, as if she were royalty being escorted by a court favorite instead of an intruder
being booted out by the butler. I also remember that neither Sandra nor I laughed. To us it
wasn’t funny, and some shared instinct told us that what was at stake was not some
fractured social ethic but the dignity of a hungry human being.

You might say that old lady was our first odd bodkin. You might also say that it was
the night we knew we were truly in love, brought together by perhaps the strongest bond
of all: empathy.

Turtles, odd bodkins, and bag ladies—not a likely debut for a romance, but not
such an unfavorable one at that.

VIII

Those were the things that weighed upon me as I stood at the bedroom window
gazing down at Sandra’s sports car, boasting its “Vote For Ada” bumper sticker. It
jumped into gear and disappeared around the oak tree at the corner. I could picture her at
the first red light adjusting the rearview mirror to inspect her hair and makeup while
changing radio stations. Riding with Sandra meant never hearing a song all the way
through. Without notification, A Horse With No Name might leap into Papa’s Got a
Brand New Bag, which in turn might segue into I Shot the Sheriff at the thrust of an
artificial nail. I used to tease her about this and other habits, back when we were still teasing.

And isn’t it strange, I thought, as I stood staring at the spot where I’d last seen her car, that while most of the outward properties remain in a marriage, the splendor that made it feel special should fade. That golden, giddy feeling vanishes, leaving nothing in its wake but a dull vapor of sorrow. That’s where I was.

I resolved then and there that nothing was worth the dissolution of my marriage—certainly no political issue, and least of all Eleanor McElroy. Rubbing my sandpapery jaw, I headed into the shower with the line from John Milton singing in my bloodstream. The road behind us might be blotched with dead turtles, some which I’d metaphorically run over myself, but the road ahead would be paved with hope.

*Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.*

The morning was bright and mild, and the way to the store was variously marked by last night’s spookings: trees festooned with tentacles of toilet paper, the occasional mailbox drooping on its post. I shuddered to see a small dog, a terrier, I believe, lying at curbside, a splintered jack-O-lantern at its head. As I braked to investigate, the dog scrambled to its feet, shook itself, sniffed the ruined pumpkin, then slunk off in search of breakfast.

The morning was rife with signs, all of them positive.

The book store was surprisingly active for that hour. There were seven or eight customers, and Sandra was behind the counter, the jingle of the register a happy sound.

Wheat Warren rushed up and seized my hand. “Good job!” he said, pumping it vigorously.
“What are you talking about?”

“The dusting,” said Wheat. “Not a speck anywhere. And no one’s sneezing. Good job!” He gave my hand four more syncopated beats before scurrying off to the Children’s Corner. To my new-found optimism was added the Wheat Warren Seal of Approval.

Business remained brisk. Customers were in and out all morning. I enjoyed talking to the folks, helping them make their selections, wishing them good day. The happy hum of voices, the murmur of book talk (always mollifying), even the exalted sound of Wheat Warren reciting *Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You?* filled me with a sense of well being that I’d been missing for days. I doubted that even the improbable specter of Mrs. McElroy could have robbed me of my euphoria. Sandra and I were where we needed to be, doing what we liked best. Halloween was over.

When at last we had a breather, I said, “Whew! Where’d they all come from?”

“Beats me,” she replied. “I’d just finished with yesterday’s figures when in they came. They must’ve come on the same bus."

“Hungry?” I asked.

“Now that you mention it.”

“Pizza?”

She glanced at her watch. “It’s not even noon.”

“It has to be noon for us to eat pizza?”

She granted me a smile. “Pizza,” she said.

Eating pizza in a book store has its liabilities. Pasty fingerprints on the merchandise can make for lousy sales. But after two years, Sandra and I—veteran pizza consumers—
had devised a system that had become an art, but only at the expense of numerous paper towels. Whichever of us was less pizza-fied would wait on customers.

“That last piece is yours,” I said, licking my thumb.

“I think you should know,” said Sandra, dabbing her lips with a damp towel. “I called Mrs. McElroy.” We were sitting in the back, listening for the bell above the door.

“Who?” I said.

“Jed, she wants to come back. We talked for a long time this morning before the store got busy. The way things ended yesterday—well, it wasn’t good for any of us. Bad feelings all the way around. The way I see it, what’s past is past. Surely she’s paid the price for whatever wrong she did, don’t you agree? It’s just not right that people should go on suffering for their mistakes.” I could see by her double-purpose expression that I was magnanimously included in her statement. “Putting myself in her place and looking into the face of that hateful boy—I can’t say I’d have acted any different. Can you?”

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully.

“So I guess we can’t afford to judge,” Sandra concluded. “And besides, all that had nothing to do with the store.”

It crossed my mind that Mrs. McElroy certainly had judged. After all, Angus Whitney had not yet made a plea to the court before she launched her attack on him. But by now that was a moot point.

“So what do you think?” Sandra watched me out of the corner of her eye while nibbling on a coin of pepperoni.

“What do I think? Hmm.” I chose my words wisely. “I think that of all the odd bodkins, she’s the oddest, or at least just a hair above Hello Harry.” Sandra explored my
face for sarcasm, so I quickly added,” I mean that in the sense that your grandmother meant it. We’re most of us odd bodkins, locked inside our own half truths, as Mrs. McElroy would have it.” Then I said, not without reluctance, “She’s an odd one, all right—but anybody who likes Charles Dickens can’t be all bad.”

“Does that mean you’ll accept her back?”

“Do I have a choice?”

“I prefer to have your...approval,” said Sandra.

“You nearly said blessing, didn’t you, but decided that was a bit steep.” I let out a long, slow breath. This was a no-win situation, but I was determined to use it to my advantage. “What the hell. If it means that much to you.”

Sandra said with genuine relief, “Thanks, Jed.”

“Want to know something else? I love you, Sandra, and that’s no half truth. If I sometimes do odd-bodkiny things, well, that’s why.”

She smiled and tenderly touched my arm, leaving a faint smudge of tomato paste. The bell above the door rang. “You go,” I said, “I have tomato paste on my sleeve.”

She hurled a wadded-up paper towel at me.

Mrs. McElroy didn’t return to work until Saturday, so I had plenty of time to prepare myself—plenty of time, that is, to “screw my courage to the sticking place” prior to the arrival of Lady MacBeth. She must really have been ripe to return, because I remembered she originally didn’t care to work Saturdays. Like a pre-adolescent I went about murmuring “I will be nice, I will be nice,” under my breath as the fateful hour approached. I was not so benighted as to believe everything would be hunky-dory from then on just because all the cards were on the table. We still didn’t like each other, and no
amount of reasoning or philosophizing would change that immutable fact. Philosophy is fine, but it’s no match for chemistry. I did, however, hope for détente. We were both adults, intelligent, and presumably capable of mature behavior. We should at least be able to treat each other civilly. As a result of my agreeing to take Mrs. McElroy back, Sandra and I seemed to be on the mend, and that was all I cared about. The brief nods of affection that passed between us were preludes, I hoped, to a much greater intimacy. I was prepared to make the necessary compromises.

On the morning of Mrs. McElroy’s return, I said to Sandra, “I have a great idea. Why don’t we expand the Children’s Corner?”

“Expand?” Her eyes drifted uncertainly to that part of the store.

“Not geographically, but activity-wise,” I explained. “For instance, let’s think about having an official storytelling hour, say, on Saturday or Sunday afternoon.”

“Yes? And who will be the storyteller? Wheat Warren?”

“I will. I know tons of stories and, if I do say so, I have a certain knack for oral narration...and Mrs. McElroy here can read.”

At mention of her name, Mrs. McElroy’s eyes dilated to the size of marbles; her back arched like a cat anticipating a spray of water. She’d been in the store for less than an hour, and I had received her snappish “Good morning” with equanimity. Her manner was guarded, as if she couldn’t forget who it was that had dredged up her soiled history and was now up to something equally foul. But I said to her in the same cheery tone, “I was thinking about how you used to read Great Expectations to your class. Why not do it here? Everybody loves a good story. And how many kids get read aloud to these days? If
I’m not mistaken, in Dickens’ day whole families sat around reading to each other by the fireplace.”

Mrs. McElroy allowed that indeed they did.

“Oh, then. Why not revive a lost tradition? I can tell stories and you can read them. What do you say?”

“Oh, I think that’s a marvelous idea!” Sandra, ever the peace keeper, championed the notion. “We could put a notice in the window and advertise in those little circulars that go around. While children are listening to stories, their parents will shop.”

“Exactly what I had in mind.” I rubbed my hands together.

I watched Mrs. McElroy’s brow furrowed. “You will remember I do not work on Sundays,” she said.

“Fine. Saturday, then. I mean, if that’s okay.” I was ready to shoot down any and all objections.

“Eleanor?” said Sandra, hopefully.

“Oh—I suppose it sounds all right. Until recently I gave piano lessons on Saturday afternoons, but—well—hmm—children do learn by listening, certainly. It forces them to use their imaginations in the way TV cannot.”

“Right,” I said, heading off a possible lecture. “We’ll be performing a service at the same time we strike up new business. It’s already the weekend, so what say we set our sights on next Saturday. Eleven o’clock? Eleven-thirty? Plenty of time to prepare.”

“And what do you propose I read?” asked Mrs. McElroy.
“Whatever you like,” I answered, and resisted urging her not to read about Pip and Magwitch. “We can do unrelated stories and poems or we can develop a theme. The options are endless.” I all but went into a merry jig.

“Of course, we must consider the age group,” Mrs. McElroy sensibly advised.

“Oh, absolutely.” I was eager to second anything that sounded positive.

“You could even split the hour into two age groups,” Sandra suggested.

“Great idea,” I said. “I’ll take the high school dropouts and you take the remedials.”

When no one laughed, I got serious again. “Who knows? In time we may be putting on skits. I can see it now—The Turtle’s Triumph proudly presents *The Night of the Iguana.*” I was tempted to add, “**Starring Mrs. McElroy as the Iguana,**” but quit while I was semi-ahead.

That evening at home, Sandra said, “Well, I suppose you’re feeling pretty pleased with yourself?”

“And why not?” I answered, flourishing my pipe as if I were Professor Higgins.

“Jed, I’m proud of you,” said Sandra.

Despite the surface glitter, I was under no delusion. To Mrs. McElroy I was irrevocably one of the boys in the back row, a modified version of the village idiot; that look in her eyes had not gone away. My conviction remained that anyone too radically out of step with her own brand of thinking was a potential Angus Whitney. To her we were all back-row hooligans in need of reforming or eradicating. Election day was growing nearer, and the discussions between her and Sandra during their breaks became increasingly peppered with such pithy catch-phrases as “educational reform” and “critical measures.” And while they quickened my pulse, I managed to remain silent. It seemed
more than ever that my original thesis was on target: Mrs. McElroy worked in the book store for the principal purpose of winning over Sandra to hers and Ada Fawning's poisoned politics. But no matter what, I wouldn't interfere, having learned from experience that it would only work against me.

On Sunday (we closed at five), I said to Sandra, "How about a movie?"

"Oh, Jed, I can't. Tomorrow's the big rally."

"Another one?"

"All of Ada's supporters are gathering for one last hurrah. The election's on Tuesday."

"But what do you hope to accomplish at this late date?"

"You'd be surprised. Any last minute votes we garner could tip the scales. You keep on campaigning right up through the eleventh hour."

Thank God for the eleventh hour, I thought. Regardless of the outcome, the election would be over and some semblance of normalcy would return to our lives. Although word in the community was that Ada Fawning couldn't expect to win, her campaign had picked up steam lately thanks to headline news of a major drug bust in one of the junior highs, spearheaded by a "Friends to Ada" contingency. One of her chief slogans was "If you're a friend to Ada, you're a friend to public decency," implying that in the public mind, "decency" (whatever that was) and Ada were equated. Like Mom and apple pie. Certainly such a blow against vice as she vouchedsafed would help expunge many community ills: drugs and alcohol in the schools, pornography, delinquency, child abuse and neglect, as well as educational slackness. It was an ambitious program, all right. In and of itself, it might not have been so bad if her tactics had been less fascist. Removing
“objectionable” books from school libraries, introducing police surveillance in the hallways, devising “honor” systems by which undercover students would rat on their peers—all of this under the banner of a monstrous American flag that swayed heroically behind Ada Fawning whenever she spoke.

I remember my final comment to Sandra on the topic: “It’s a little like tenting a house before you remove the family. You kill off the roaches and termites and whatnot, but guess who else?”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures,” was what she came back to me with, and I thought of another catch-phrase from American history, penned by Thomas Jefferson: *Patriotism is the last refuge of the coward.*

The community at large must have shared my sentiment, because Ada Fawning lost the election. I will add that I wasted no time during that proverbial *eleventh hour* in getting myself registered to vote—for the first time ever.

It was by no means a landslide victory for Ada’s opponent, who was also the encumbent (I was voting *against* someone rather than *for*), but there was a wide enough spread to show clearly where voters stood. Possibly if she’d had a few more drug busts under her belt she’d have narrowed the gap, who knows? After listening to Sandra and Mrs. McElroy rhapsodize about her for two months, I’d assumed she was the next Messiah. My hunch was that the public was ready for a stronger hand in local government and a firmer control over tax-funded institutions, but not to the point where they would turn the reins over to the likes of Ada Fawning, whose machine-gun tactics were extreme even for the Moral Majority.
Her physical description was no bargain, either. I'd never seen the woman in person, happily, but I'd seen plenty of pictures, most of them in my own home: a super tidy, middle-aged brassy blonde with a nose so sharp it could open envelopes. Her mouth was consistently set in a line hard and cold, like a prison door. Someone must have advised her that smiling lost elections. I failed to comprehend how Sandra, of all people, could have been so deluded by anyone that dogmatic, although I was constantly assured that she was a galvanic speaker. So, of course, was Benito Mussolini, but that was one of the many thoughts I'd learned to keep to myself.

The election taught me a powerful lesson. I would continue to vote thereafter, if only to keep the Ada Fawnings out of office.

Following Ada's defeat, "there was no joy in Mudville" so far as the book store was concerned. Sandra took the matter in stride, carrying on as always. Mrs. McElroy, on the other hand, called in to say she would not report to work that Wednesday, that she would stay home to care for her ailing husband. I pictured her sitting in her house making bombs, or at the least writing hate mail to those she suspected of not voting her way. With any luck, she was somewhere impaling herself on a sword. It was hard to assess how much the election meant to her. It had consumed so much of her time and energy, you'd have thought she was the one running. In a dark moment, I wondered if she'd made some sinister pact with Ada Fawning—"I'll do what I can to help get you elected if you'll have Angus Whitney rubbed out once you're in"—something of that nefarious sort. I would have loved to discuss the issue with Sandra, but for the time being she was non-conversant about anything but business, wisely sensing that such a discussion would lead us onto thin ice.
Not until the end of the day, shortly before bedtime, did I broach the subject. I put a conciliatory hand on my wife’s shoulder and said, “I know how much this thing meant to you, and I hope you won’t stay disappointed.”

“Not at all,” she responded with an upbeat. “There are plenty of other causes. This one just opened my eyes, got me thinking.”

“Which I guess is a good thing,” I acknowledged.

“It is. Anything that alerts you to the world around you and challenges you to become accountable is good. Ada might have lost the election, but I could only win. For me it’s a victory. A beginning.”

“Do you think she’ll run again?”

“No idea. And it really doesn’t matter, does it? What matters is that I continue to grow. I cut my teeth on this one. I can’t say I agreed with all of her policies, but even in disagreeing I was made to think. For that I’m indebted.”

It needed not to be mentioned how doubly indebted she must have been to her mentor and original cause, Eleanor McElroy.

Mrs. McElroy showed up on Thursday as flinty as ever. She spent the morning, while not waiting on customers, savagely straightening stock as if preparing for an inspection by the Foreign Legion. For close to an hour, books snapped into place like pistol shots, their glossy spines standing in soldierly rows. Whenever our eyes chanced to meet, I thought I saw in hers a scarcely concealed “Go on, say something. I dare you.”

Naturally, I had at the tip of my tongue all sorts of inspired witticisms about the election, but ultimately I wanted to keep my tongue.

At one point I confided to Sandra, “You’d think she was blaming me for the loss.”
“Don’t take it personally,” Sandra advised. “She hasn’t had much to say to me, either.”

“So what does that tell you?” I leaped at the opportunity. “What it tells me is she’s an embittered old hag.”

“Jed, you’re regressing.”

“Not regressing. Coming out of remission. I’ve tried acting friendly and it gets me nowhere. It’s like trying to kiss a shark.”

“Well, you never did apologize to her for what you did.”

“Apologize? You think I should apologize?”

“I think it would be the decent thing, yes. After all, you did go out of your way to get her out of here.”

“And with good cause! I was afraid she was making me lose you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” said Sandra.

“Is it?”

“Because no one can accomplish that but you.”

The fact was I couldn’t apologize, and it’s not that I was too proud; it’s that in order to do it effectively, I had to sense in the other party a willingness to accept part of the blame and at least a minor concession to human frailty. A contriteness, as it were. But Mrs. McElroy could not forgive herself for losing control that day in her classroom. With that incapacity, how could she forgive others or expect forgiveness? I wasn’t about to apologize.

Sandra said, “Did I blame you when you lost your job at Kincaid Pumps?”
“I was laid off because of lousy sales, not fired for strangling someone,” I reminded her. “I believe there’s a difference.”

“I just wish you’d show a little empathy.”

The appeal in my eyes must have been huge, for Sandra met my gaze straight on. What I actually wanted from her right then was an embrace, a full-bodied hug which said, “Don’t worry, things have been knotty for a while between us, but they’re going to be fine because I love you.” But the bell above the door summoned us to go and attend to a smiling family of Czechoslovakians who were seeking books on American slang and usage. I thought what a splendid idea it would be to send Mrs. McElroy home with them.

I took off the following day. I poked around in the yard for a while, reconstructed a broken bird feeder, went to renew my driver’s license, then spent a couple of hours reading before venturing off to a tavern for some beer. I also practiced out loud some fairy tales for Saturday’s story hour. It was agreed that I would tell stories for fifteen minutes, then Mrs. McElroy would read for fifteen; then we’d repeat the pattern for a second group of older kids. The story I selected for the first group—pre-schoolers—was Jack and the Beanstalk. And for the second group—elementary age—I thought Hopfrog, a little-known tale by Poe, would be just the thing. I had no idea what Mrs. McElroy had in mind. I imagined her at home brushing up on Mein Kampf. In actuality, she intended to read a story called Squanto and the Pilgrims in anticipation of Thanksgiving. She and Sandra had spent much of the week decorating the store for that holiday, which would be in two weeks. Cardboard turkeys alternating with cardboard Indians and Pilgrims dangled from the ceiling while an arrangement of dried corn and miniature pumpkins jockeyed for attention in the widow display.
Saturday morning was wet, raw, and windy, the first hint of winter. I opened the store dressed in my corduroy jacket through which I nonetheless could feel the November chill. The sky was overcast, and I feared we wouldn’t have much of a turnout.

It was understood that whoever opened in the morning would make a pot of coffee, but the minute I unlocked the door, a gust of wind blew two pilgrims, one Indian, and three turkeys off the ceiling. “Shit,” I said. I flipped on the overhead lights and proceeded to hang the items back in place but first had to determine how Sandra and Mrs. McElroy had gotten them up. They’d used string and tape, which seemed flimsy, so I went in search of thumb tacks and staples as well as a stool to stand on. By the time I finished this operation, the door opened again and in swept Mrs. McElroy, accompanied by a fresh blast of wind. This time the cardboard figures danced at the end of their strings.

Normally, I dreaded being alone in the store with Mrs. McElroy—we had so little to say to each other. But today I figured we at least had story hour to discuss. Before any amenities could be exchanged, however, she stopped abruptly inside the door, sniffed the air, then turned an incriminating eye on me that said, “What, no coffee?” Whereupon she marched wordlessly into the back room to make it herself. I wanted to explain how I’d been pre-occupied with fallen turkeys and hadn’t gotten around to coffee yet. She always had a cup first thing on arriving to work, and it was typical of her to assume I’d neglected my duty just to rankle her. And I thought, why do I owe this woman an explanation? Half the time she acted as if she was the boss and I was her stock boy. So fuck her.

I went about getting ready for the day. That included setting up the Children’s Corner for story hour, which was to commence at eleven. There was no predicting how many children would attend on such a blustery day. Regardless of the number, I decided there
was ample room on the carpet and in the beanbag chairs for them to cluster together while I myself would be seated on a stool positioned between them and the wall of books. If there were any late arrivals, they could join the group on the floor without having to walk past me. Furthermore, they’d be sitting with their backs to browsing grownups who might otherwise distract them from the story. Had we not already had our first tiff of the day, I might have consulted Mrs. McElroy on this strategy.

The tantalizing aroma of fresh-brewed coffee filled my nostrils. Mrs. McElroy returned from the back room, cup in hand, the steamy vapor clouding her bifocals.

“So,” I said in an effort to sound genial. “All set to read Squanto, are you?”

“I have decided against it,” she stated.

This was not strictly true. I’d observed the little green book on Squanto and the Pilgrims she’d brought from home and, ever the teacher, she’d made some jottings on a separate sheet of paper which I’d peeked at while she was off making coffee. One note described how in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln officially designated Thanksgiving as the final Thursday in November. But now here was Mrs. McElroy claiming that she would not read—and all on account of some unmade coffee!

“Well, hey, that’s fine by me,” I said, undaunted. “That’ll give me more time to tell stories. I just love telling stories.”

“Undoubtedly,” said Mrs. McElroy. She pivoted sharply, the click of her heels conveying, once and for all, her unmitigated contempt. It occurred to me that since she hadn’t managed to destroy Angus Whitney—justly or not, the scamp had eluded her—she would hang out at the book store and destroy me, her surrogate Angus, instead. Mrs.
McElroy was not out to save someone in the back row, as she’d claimed; Mrs. McElroy was out to obliterate the back row.

A glacial silence fell over the store until Sandra arrived some thirty minutes later. She must have intuited the more-than-usual hostility in the air, because she shot me a reproving glance.

Just prior to Sandra showing up, Chekhov came in, which did nothing to alter our siege of silence. Chekhov could have been mute for all I knew; I’d never heard him speak. He directed himself, as usual, to the reference section and began thumbing through pages he must have memorized by now. I was glad to see him. Mrs. McElroy, I’m certain, loathed the odd bodkins and would have vanquished them if she could. She’d already expelled “Professor” Cluny, and since I hadn’t seen Hello Harry in some while, I gathered that she’d disposed of him, too, although I couldn’t imagine how.

But she hadn’t gotten rid of Chekhov, who behaved as if he didn’t know she existed. Nor had she come close to ousting Wheat Warren. Like some funny, irrepressible flower that refuses to leave a garden, Wheat kept coming back. That he might not be welcome never crossed his mind.

I watched with secret glee as Chekhov unabashedly scratched his balls with one hand and held a book in the other, his snub-nosed pencil shoved behind his ear. I was pretty certain Mrs. McElroy saw him do it. She was sprucing up Health and Fitness which was just opposite Reference. I watched for her reaction, half hoping there’d be one, but she finished what she was doing and moved, unruffled, into Art and Photography.

By eleven-twenty-five, several sets of parents had dropped off their charges and, after being assured by Sandra that the kids would be entertained until twelve, the adults either
went to shop in neighboring stores or stayed to browse. Outside, the wind had died down but a cold rain was falling. I thought, “What a toasty arrangement for story hour.” I began coaxing the tiny audience—three, four, and five-year olds—into the Children’s Corner to get them settled down. Wheat Warren had slipped in and was sitting on the floor, legs crossed, chin on hands, the brim of his baseball cap standing alert.

“No one’s ever told me stories before,” Wheat spoke in a loud and appreciative voice.

“I’m happy to be the first,” I told him.

A frisky little blonde-haired girl wandered off to explore the aisles of books rather than remain seated with the others. I tried shepherding her into a beanbag chair, but she was intent on roaming. Sandra was about to speak to her but had to ring up a sale. The girl’s mother was next door in the dress shop.

“Hey, you gonna do *The Three Little Pigs*?” demanded a cheeky little kid in red overalls.

“Yeah, do *Three Little Pigs*,” seconded Wheat Warren, clapping his hands.

“I thought I’d do *Jack and the Beanstalk,*” I said.

“Yeah, do *Jack and the Beanstalk,*” Wheat cheered me on.

“Aw, I heard that yesterday,” complained the boy in the red overalls. “The teacher can’t do the giant’s voice right. Here’s how it really sounds.” A terrible noise came out of his mouth.

“Well, how about if I tell them both?” I offered.

“Now you’re talking!” said Wheat.

“Let’s hear you do the giant’s voice first,” insisted the boy, as if I were at an audition.

“Have you got a potty place?” asked a squirmy girl in pigtails.
“Just one second,” I promised, “and we’ll get started.” I went in search of the little
girl whose buttery curls I’d glimpsed romping through Biography toward Reference.

I’ve struggled valiantly to recall the particulars of what happened next, with diluted
success. In memory I can still see the girl, whose face is vague, and I can see Chekhov
executing a half turn away from her, his hands in the vicinity of his belt buckle—but it
was on Mrs. McElroy that my vision stayed focused. Behind the steel-rimmed glasses,
her eyes were formidably enlarged, and her right arm was extended like a rapier in
Chekhov’s direction. She said in a loud, clear voice, “Call the police!”

“What’s wrong?” I said.

“The police!” she repeated, as if speaking to an uncomprehending student. “Call them
at once!” Her finger still pointing at Chekhov, she approached him as he stood with his
back pressed against the shelf. The girl had vanished into another part of the store.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“He exposed himself to that child,” said Mrs. McElroy.

“What!”

“He exposed himself sexually to that little girl,” Mrs. McElroy elaborated.

Chekhov made no effort to move, but I saw his body grow tense as Mrs. McElroy
closed in on him, and I fully expected him to receive the Angus Whitney treatment.

“Now hold on,” I said.

“Did you hear what I just said! He exposed himself! To a child! I saw him!”

“What on earth’s the matter?” demanded Sandra, hearing the commotion and
hurrying over.
Mrs. McElroy repeated her accusation, Sandra let out a squeal, and lost no time getting to the phone.

"Wait," I said. "Wait just one goddamn minute!" I looked at Chekhov, whose lips were thin and purple. His body was mashed so hard against the books that he looked as if were trying to vanish into their bindings. He said nothing, not a word; just stood looking fragile and helpless, qualities about him I'd never noticed. I half expected him to flee, as who wouldn't, seeing Mrs. McElroy coming after him? I glanced down at Chekhov's fly. It was closed. "This man's done nothing wrong," I said. "What are you trying to prove?"

Mrs. McElroy turned her glare fully on me. "If you don't call law enforcement at once, I'll have you cited as an accomplice."

"Oh, what are you, the vice squad now?" I said, and felt my fingernails dig into the palms of my hands. "Here's an idea. Get the hell out of here."

"Yes, that's right," I heard Sandra speaking anxiously into the phone. "The Turtle's Triumph. 1740 E. Gunther Road."

Mrs. McElroy and I stood as if in a Mexican standoff. I felt a muscle twitch under my eyebrow and was conscious of Chekhov trying to inch away from us. Sandra was busily matching children with their parents, trying to herd everyone out of the store.

"But it's cold," Wheat Warren protested, "and it's raining."

"Hey, what happened to The Three Little Pigs?" pouted the boy in the red overalls.

"You promised."

Sandra managed somehow to marshal them all out just as the little girl's mother came in. Seizing her daughter's hand, the woman listened wide-eyed while Sandra explained what little she knew of the situation.
“Oh, God, no!” I heard the mother gasp, and she held her daughter close.

Mrs. McElroy and I still stood in a freeze-frame. I said to Chekhov, who had his eye on the door, “No—don’t go anywhere. We’ll get this cleared up, I promise.”

The girl’s mother, wanting to get a look at the miscreant, sailed around the case of books and, seeing the wild look in my eye, pointed and said, “That’s him, isn’t it? That’s the pervert!”

“That’s my husband,” said Sandra. “It’s the other one.”

We somehow maintained that neurasthenic tableau until law enforcement arrived on the scene. A jaded-looking officer with a tawny moustache and rubber rain gear started asking a slew of questions, as if trying to decide who it was he needed to arrest. At first we all talked at once, and he had to quiet us down. The little girl started to cry, disturbed by the adult uproar. Her mother hugged her and said, “There, there,” while the officer put to use his pen and clipboard. He explained that he’d need to take statements from each of us.

I ushered everyone toward the back room. The officer wanted to interview Mrs. McElroy and me together. She was the first to speak. She claimed she’d gone into the reference section in time to observe the man known as “Chekhov” remove his penis from inside his trousers and reveal it to the little girl. According to her story, Chekhov quickly put his penis back the instant he saw her approach.

“Oh, God, did he? Did he do that?” cried the distraught mother, standing outside the door with her hands over the girl’s ears, and this caused her daughter to bawl even louder. She’d been fine before the cop arrived.

“Ma’am, please,” said the officer, shooing her away from the door.
When he asked me my side of the story, I told him pointedly that I'd seen nothing of what Mrs. McElroy had described.

"Were you present the whole while?" the officer asked.

"I was," I said. "I saw everything."

"Lies!" exclaimed Mrs. McElroy, causing the policeman's eyebrows to lift. "You walked up just afterwards, and you know it! You were talking with those children."

"I guess I know where I was," I said calmly. "And I certainly didn't see anything like what you say you saw."

To the officer I said, referring to Chekhov, who was seated on a folding chair by Sandra's desk, his knees bunched together and his arms wrapped around his thin torso like stringy vines, "This man has been coming into the store almost since the day it opened, and he's never caused anyone a moment's trouble. He minds his own business. Now, my wife will tell you that she and I have seen him scratch himself—I mean, his privates—from time to time, but that's all. I'm sure that's all Mrs. McElroy saw him do. She has a history of exaggerating," I said, and prepared myself for a mauling. I'd spoken with the deliberate intention of arousing her anger to the point where she would attack me, in full view of the law, thus putting an end to our ugly charade once and for all. But she didn't. I remembered her vow "never to lose control again."

"Officer." She addressed the officer sedately. "That man who is sitting there exposed his sexual organ. I will sign a statement to that effect, and I will swear it under oath in any court in the land, because it is the truth."

"I'll talk with the child now, in the presence of her mother," the officer said wearily. He acted as if he'd rather be at home watching a ballgame.
The girl, either because she was confused, or couldn't remember, or simply didn't understand, wasn't able to provide a cogent statement in response to her inquisitor's sensitively phrased questions. She was asked to describe Chekhov's behavior and what he'd been doing with his hands.

Mrs. McElroy and I stood outside the room, on either side of the door.

"Playing with them," revealed the girl, who had stopped crying now that she was the center of attention.

"You say he was playing with his hands," repeated the officer, writing down her words.

"Uh-huh."

"Can you show me how he was playing with them?"

"This," said the girl, and twisted one finger around another.

"Tell him, Kelly!" urged her mother. "Tell the policeman what that miserable creep did. It's all right, he won't hurt you. I'm here."

"Ma'am, please," said the officer, impatiently.

"I get to go see a magic show tonight," said Kelly. "Only Gina Barlow can't go. Wanna know why?"

"Kelly," said her mother.

"She used her mom's toothbrush on the dog." Kelly grinned.

"Now, Kelly, did you see the man do anything else with his hands? Did he have anything in them?" asked the police officer.

"Just his finger."

"What about his pants? Did the man have his pants on?"
The little girl giggled. “Yes, silly!”

“Okay. Was there anything, um, funny about his pants? Anything, you know, silly? Like, could you see the man’s underwear?”

The little girl squealed with pleasure. She was plainly enjoying this game. “Noooo,” she said in high-pitched gaiety then pointed at the officer’s service revolver. “Gonna shoot him dead?”

“Thank you.” The officer spoke to the mother. “That’ll be all.”

“I wish you would have her describe in more detail what she thinks was only a finger,” Mrs. McElroy spoke up from outside the door. There was no such thing as a private conversation in The Turtle’s Triumph.

“Lady,” the officer said bluntly, not happy with all the eavesdropping, “I believe I know how to conduct an investigation. I already have your statement.”

He turned his attention to Chekhov, who had not changed his position in the folding chair. He asked him for some identification, and Chekhov rooted haphazardly through his various pockets, with the result that little scraps of paper floated out onto the floor. He didn’t appear to carry a billfold but was finally able to produce a yellowed card which he handed to the cop.

“Robert Gudiae,” the officer read. “That you?”

Chekhov nodded.

“This your current address?”

Chekhov indicated that it was. I kept waiting to hear his voice. I half hoped for perfect English to issue smoothly from his mouth, putting Mrs. McElroy firmly in her place, but I knew that wasn’t going to happen.
The officer said with a barely concealed yawn, “Okay. Let’s you and I step outside to the car. We need to check this out.” Then to the little girl’s mother: “I’ll need your address and phone number. We may need to question her further.”

The mother wrote down the essential information then left the store with her daughter while the policeman escorted Chekhov, un-handcuffed, out to his squad car.

Mrs. McElroy turned on me with the eyes of an executioner. “You lied to that officer,” she said. “You know you did.”

“Jed?” said Sandra.

“Oh, I think we know who the liar is,” I fired back. “Or maybe it’s just that you can never recognize the truth unless it bites you in the ass.”

Sandra’s eyes widened, but Mrs. McElroy didn’t flinch.

I said, “You’d do anything to get the whole world to march in step behind you, wouldn’t you? Even send an innocent man to jail.”

“Innocent?”

“That man never hurt a soul. You made up your filthy lies to get at me—to get at him—to get at anything or anyone that doesn’t tally with your poisoned view of life. Jesus Christ, woman, you’re eaten up with yourself! You are poison. I pity that poor husband of yours.”

At this Mrs. McElroy appeared to lunge at me even as she stood her ground. She said in a voice husky with emotion, using contractions for the first time since I’d known her. “Don’t you dare mention my husband. Don’t you dare speak his name. Never once did you inquire into his condition, not once have you expressed even a modicum of concern. Only your wife has cared. Only she has ever asked—so don’t you mention him. Don’t
you!” Mrs. McElroy said in a burst of fury, “You lied to cover up your own weakness. You are a despicable man. You should not be forgiven.”

I turned my appeal to Sandra whose face was like chalk. Her lips were quivering.

Mrs. McElroy’s anger was replaced by fatigue, and her gray face seemed to sag behind her glasses.

In minutes the police officer returned, water coursing down the crease of his rain gear. He directed his comments to me, surprisingly candid. “His name is Robert Gudiac and he stays in a halfway house on Doe Street. Nothing dangerous about him as far as what’s on his record. He draws social security and sees a counselor from the health center who will be notified. I’m taking him down to headquarters for questioning. An affidavit will be filed, of course,” said the officer for Mrs. McElroy’s benefit.

“Does he talk?” I asked.

“Pardon me?”

“That man—Gudiac. Did you hear him talk?”

The officer just stared at me, as if I’d suddenly gone moist in the head.

The case never got to court. The assistant state attorney (the same one, it turned out, who was involved in the Angus Whitney case), on reviewing the affidavit and reading our statements, and no doubt recalling Mrs. McElroy’s dubious reputation, conferred with the judge, and the case against Robert Gudiac, a.k.a. Chekhov, was nolle prosequi.

As the squad car passed the window in the rain, whisking Chekhov away, I saw his basic training haircut and bullet-shaped head for the last time and resisted an absurd impulse to wave goodbye. He never returned to the book store. An inspection of the odd
scraps of paper he'd dropped on the floor revealed nothing. They were a hodgepodge of senseless scribblings.

Mrs. McElroy gathered her things together, including her book about Squanto. She walked over to Sandra and squeezed her arm. I felt that I'd lived through this scene before. "Now you take care," I heard her say in a firm voice. "In this world there are too many defeats and never enough victories, but we carry on. Keep your eyes open and never be afraid to speak the truth, no matter what the odds." And then she was gone—out the door, into the rain, out of my life.

Sandra looked at me, or rather looked past me, a look so lost and forlorn that I wanted desperately to rush over and hold her close to me.

But she turned and fled out the door in pursuit of Eleanor McElroy.

IX

We're still together. Nothing has been said so far about separation or divorce, although there are distinct probabilities for both. It's a little like having a corpse in the house that nobody has bothered to bury, but a funeral is inevitable. There have been no fights, no discussions, even, about what happened. In fact, there's been very little talk at all. It seems neither of us knows what to say, or perhaps we're afraid of an explosion if we try. It's all so civilized. After the holidays, I expect things will come to a head, but for now things are booming at the store. Christmas must be gotten through, and there is the stigma of disappointing family and friends at what is traditionally the happiest time of year.
In preparation for what we both know is coming, I’ve taken an assistant manager’s position with a local hardware outfit, something akin to what I used to do at Kincaid Pumps and Accessories. And of course I’m looking into alternative living arrangements.

I also have finally enrolled to begin course work in January, with the goal of instructing high school English. If all goes as planned—irony of ironies—I eventually will be prodding the boys in the back row to stay awake. In order to bone up on my subject, I’m auditing the tail end of an American literature class at the junior college. There should be plenty of time to study, because even if Sandra and I do remain under the same roof, which is doubtful, we go our separate ways, seldom speaking, never doing things together. On most evenings she’s out of the house. I have no idea where, and I don’t ask. It’s not likely that she’s seeing anyone—somehow you can sense those things. What seems more likely is that she’s spending time with Mrs. McElroy, learning new issues, staying involved.

Only once since the incident in the store did I make a fleeting gesture to rekindle what once was so dear. It was on a rare occasion when we were both at home and I happened to read a statement by Henry James about Robert Browning, Mrs. McElroy’s favorite poet. What James wrote was this: “None of the odd ones have been so great and none of the great ones have been so odd.” I felt an immediate impulse to humble myself, to run to Sandra and admit to her that I’d lied about seeing what Chekhov had or had not done, to beg her forgiveness. I wanted to shout to the rooftops, “We’re all odd bodkins, we all make mistakes, we all deserve another chance! You, me, Chekhov, Mrs. McElroy—everyone!” But I was met with eyes filled with the chilly obstinacy of a snow bank, so I gave up, never to try again. I just don’t know how.
To intensify my pain, one day I wandered into the bedroom we previously shared (I now reside in the guest room), in search of a favorite shirt I misplaced. I noticed that the mahogany case on her dresser was wide open. The case was empty. The letters, the many love letters I'd written to her in college, were missing. Not missing—gone. Never to be seen again, I suspect. I broke down and cried, sprawled diagonally across the double bed, "weeping like a child for the past." I couldn’t help myself.

One afternoon not long after Thanksgiving, I came home from my job at the hardware store and saw in the middle of my bed the local section of the newspaper. Circled in accusatory red marker, for my eyes, was this item on page four: "ALLEGED SEX OFFENDER ARRESTED IN DOWNTOWN PARK.

Taken into custody was Robert Gudiac, age 27, of 504 Doe Street. Gudiac was observed by witnesses to expose himself sexually to two juvenile girls, ages seven and eight, as they played on the facilities. Police were summoned, and Gudiac, who offered no resistance, was booked into City Jail on charges of indecent exposure. Bond was set at..."

I crumpled up the paper and tossed it into the can. Suddenly I could feel myself sitting beside Chekhov in a clammy cell, awaiting sentence. Glimpsing my face in the mirror, and thinking of what had become of my marriage, I realized that sentencing in my case had already been pronounced. I snatched up my coat and headed for the nearest bar.

I mostly avoid the book store. The Turtle’s Triumph—once the emblem of romance—is now a mockery of things past. Except to show up to buy a paperback novel or help move stock, I stay away. Sandra has hired a new worker, a man in his forties who was once some sort of engineer but is currently drawing disability due to an injury sustained on the job. He seems affable, and quietly goes about his duties, but has
difficulty lifting heavy objects, so I go in from time to time to lend a hand. For the holidays, Sandra has also recruited a couple of able-bodied college students.

The odd bodkins are gone now, with the single exception of Wheat Warren. His high trills can still be heard in the Children’s Corner where the introduction of any new illustrated volume fills him with glee. Recently, and with no motive other than to do a good turn, I presented Wheat with my old copy of The Little Prince, a gift from my grandmother on my seventh birthday. From his reaction, you’d have thought I’d bought him an entire library. Now he follows me everywhere. When I glance over my shoulder, I can usually spot him loping along, shadow-like, a short distance behind, The Little Prince tucked like a treasure under his arm. And it crossed my mind that one reason Mrs. McElroy may never have tried banishing him from the store was that Wheat loved to read, and he always shared what he read with the children who came in. That had been his saving grace in a garden where grace was limitedly bestowed.

*Childhood is the kingdom where nobody dies...nobody important, that is.*

Now and then someone will come into the store and display some peculiar trait or effect, and I’ll recall with nostalgia how Sandra and I used to assign nicknames to customers, identifying them as odd bodkins. Last Sunday afternoon a gentleman in a bright red band uniform, complete with gold spangles and epaulets, marched up to the counter and requested trombone music. He sported a steel-gray goatee and spoke with the trace of an accent. “The Crown Prince of Austria,” I thought at once, and out of habit glanced at Sandra. But there was nothing in her eyes—no memory, no recognition, nothing; as if for her the past was dead. Nothing in it mattered.
"You will find trombone music in the instrument shop on Wise Street," she told him flatly.

The man in the band uniform thanked her in his charming accent, bowed at the waist, pirouetted, and passed through the door as if he were leading a twenty-piece band, complete with drum majorettes. I followed him irresistibly along the pavement, marveling at the way the cold sunshine bounced off his epaulets, making him a glowing figure on that crisp December afternoon. And in my mind was a line from Dante: *Come, follow me, and leave the world to its babblings.*

I tagged behind the man all the way to Wise Street, where he executed a neat right turn into the instrument shop, his imaginary band marching behind, even as Wheat Warren marched behind me. As I passed the shop and headed down the street, I realized that my feet still kept time to his music many blocks after his music had faded from my ears.
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