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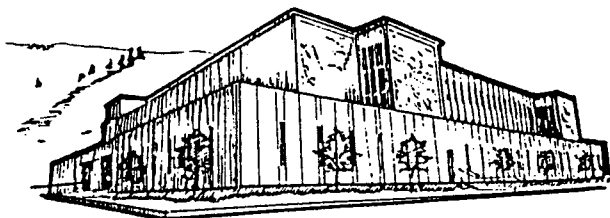
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**. D I S T A N C E S .**

**A Collection**

by

David A. Belman

B.A., Wesleyan University, 1990

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

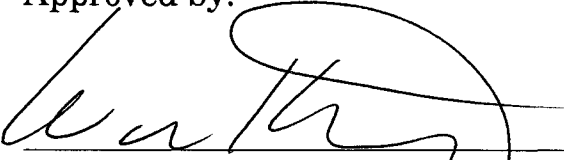
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## PACKING

WHEN I WAS 22 and living in Washington D.C., I was supposedly working toward my future, collecting skills and connections that would make me a success. I was less than six months out of college, and I'd followed the trail of recent graduates to the capitol. I told anyone who'd listen that I was looking for work that had meaning.

Even though my parents lived less than an hour away, in Baltimore, they visited Washington only long enough to buy me a new suit and a wool overcoat for job interviews. It was September, but perhaps my parents anticipated my job search lasting into the months of winter.

After the experiences and freedoms of college, Washington was a dark place for me. At my first job interview, the man behind the desk asked me what brought me to D.C. He was a wide, bald man, and there was a pronounced bulge around the shoulders of his pinstripe.

"I thought it would be a good city to find work," I answered him. "Work which I could be proud of," I added.

He swiveled in his chair to look out the window over sixteenth street, and locked his fingers together. "Do you think D.C. is a city,"

he asked, “or a policy center?”

The man edited an environmental trade journal covering pesticide issues, and I was prepared to talk about DDT. I nodded my head, and tried to look pensive.

“I guess,” I said, “I’ve always thought of Washington as a city.”

“Well,” he said and swiveled back to face me. “It’s not a city. It’s a policy center. People move here to accomplish something, to get the next line on their resumé’s, and then they move on. What you’ve got here is a collection of transients,” he said. “No one calls this place home. No one stays here, and no one dies here. Have you seen a cemetery in D.C.?”

I didn’t get the job working on sixteenth street, but by February I was in my third month of working for a small consulting firm in SouthEast Washington. The people I worked with were kind, and the job vaguely satisfying, but I still felt haunted by a sense of transience. The city that lined the pages of history books seemed empty, and my life in it felt like a chaotic ride toward nothing. I tried to join the life of the city, but the sense of emptiness was overwhelming.

On a Friday night in February, I drove the fifty miles between D.C. and Baltimore for dinner at home. We were in the middle of



dessert when I finally gathered the courage to tell my parents about my new plans.

"I called Tom and Martha last night in Nevada." My parents didn't seem to recognize the names. "They're the people I met last summer--the one's who own the pack station. They said they'll hire me and teach me to ride and pack."

My father started shaking his head back and forth but my mother had words out of her mouth, fast. "I spent \$80,000 for your education, and you're going to be some damned Jewish cowboy?" The image upset her. Jews don't ride horses and Jews don't live in the mountains.

My father kept shaking his head back and forth. Finally, his thoughts gelled into words. "Are you crazy, or are you taking hallucinogens?"

I MET most of the packers my first day at the station. Roger was a fourth grade teacher in Sacramento. From May to September, he and his mule, Jolly Roger (we called him JR), packed the East Side of the Sierra. Frank drove trucks in the winter, between Hawthorne

and Reno, Nevada. Terry cleaned ski condos. Jake and Justin, the McKewan boys, were still in school; Jake was seven, Justin sixteen. Their father had worked for Tom, but Johnny died in a car accident during the winter. Tom had hired the boys for the season.

When I asked Frank why he packed every summer, he told me he'd done it for forty years, and he saw no reason to stop. Everyone else offered roughly the same reasons. I was the only Easterner working at the pack station. I wasn't sure what brought me to the Sierra, to pack horses and mules at 11,000 feet, but it felt right. Something about the physical immediacy of the work appealed to me. The precision of stuffing provisions into pack bags, weighing them, and balancing them on the crosshairs of the mules' pack saddles struck me as beautiful and utterly real.

Tom, the owner of the pack station, was in Reno when I arrived. The next day, he drove into the loading area at ten, his Bronco weighed down with provisions for our first set of customers. His one piece of advice to me: "Smile and look like a cowboy. We're guides back to the rural West. Think of yourself as working in Disneyland."

Martha, Tom's wife, lent me a pair of shotguns and bought me a twenty dollar cowboy hat in Reno. I wore Western shirts and looked

enough the part. I rode the same trails everyday, climbed the same pass, skirted the same lakes, told the same stories to the customers. I took lawyers from Los Angeles into the backcountry and convinced them they were living in the past, that they'd left their lives behind, that the West still lived in more than their imagination. I convinced them that they could reclaim the West in one or two weeks away from the office and the telephones. Sometimes, I convinced myself.

The lives of the packers at Virginia Lakes Pack Outfit were as disparate as the dreams of settlers who took gold from those canyons, and the Paiute who summered in the high, cool hills, but I imagine we had a common sense of anticipation which brought us together. We came to the East Side of the Sierra to pack, to watch the snow pull back to the peaks, the lakes bulge with early melt-off, the meadows flood. We came to watch the mules ears and irises rise, banks of rivers recede, dry trails push up through the marsh, hard and cracked like they'd never known water. We came to ride the trails, to watch the early yellow and violet die as the columbine and paint brush climbed through the old rock slides. This we had in common, and more. We knew we would leave when the snow returned.

MONDAY, three weeks after I'd started taking customers into the backcounty, Jake stepped into the kitchen behind everyone else. Jake was normally the first to breakfast, but that day he slid in quietly and stood in the doorway, Stetson slipping down over his eyes. The hat had been his father's, and Jake's seven-year old face was swallowed by the shadow. He leaned against the door frame, and the brim of the hat hit the frame and pushed west before his shoulder found the wood. "I think Millie is dead up in the corrals," he said.

Tom looked up from the head of the table and responded to no one in particular. "She's probably just lying down."

Jake didn't move. "I think Millie is dead," he said again, matter-of-factly. "Her legs is stuck straight out, and the baby mules is kicking at her eyes."

Tom looked up from his plate and scanned the faces around the table. Everyone had stopped eating. When he was satisfied that most people understood the matter at hand, he pushed away from the table, grabbed his coffee cup and stood up. Tom didn't go anywhere in the morning without his coffee cup. None of us did.

Jake led me and Tom below the bunk house, past the laundry lines tying the trees together, and into the far corner of the corral. I had never seen any horses in that corner. It was cluttered with rocks, a stand of dead trees, no feed bunker or salt lick in sight. Millie picked that corner to die in. Sometimes, horses seem to know when they're going to die and they do it out of the way.

We had six baby mules in the corral. They were all one and two years old, too young and green to pack. When they're one, if we were lucky, we could get a halter on them. They'd buck and crow-hop and try to bunch up with the herd, but it was important to get the halter on if we ever planned on packing them. The trick was to get it off again before their skin started to form around it. When they were two, we tried to fit a saddle to them. It usually took two or three people, one person standing in front of the mule, holding the lead, reassuring the animal. When they were three, we started putting on loads. If it was scheduled just right, the three-year olds could pack 150 pounds--the weight of a person--by the end of their first full summer.

Jewel was the oldest of our six baby mules, and she was still digging at Millie's eyes. Millie's eyes bulged like the eyes of fish that

never see the light, and they were bleeding from the corners, bleeding tears, the blood mixing with blood from her nose. It was all congealing on the ground with the dry dirt and the dry shit. Her legs were pushed away from her body, pointing skyward. Her anus had swollen and exploded, and it just kept staring at me, and Jewel kept hoofing at Millie's eyes, trying to get her to move.

Jake was perched on the fence watching me and Tom. Tom turned to Jake and nodded his head. "You're right Jake," he said. "She's dead."

Millie wasn't the first animal to die that summer. Zeb died on the trail, ten miles back into the wilderness. The cats and bears cleaned the bones within a week. Nacho died on a thin line cut through a steep talus field--heart attack. Listening to Frank and Roger's stories, I was jealous about missing those deaths, jealous that I didn't own the stories, the history, the understanding. Millie was the first dead horse I'd seen.

THE PHONE COMPANY hasn't--probably won't--run phone lines up the canyon. Not enough customers and not enough interest. Tom

kept a two-way on hand for business and emergencies. He called down to Mike in town on the radio. Mike and Tom have been friends for more than ten years. They're both seasonal in the country, arrive when the snow melts and leave before the first fall storm. Tom comes to pack horses, Mike to tow cars.

It was a little past nine when Mike got up to the pack station. He drove through the main gate while I was throwing three-wire bales onto the feed truck. Our first load of feed for the summer was two-wire bales, and I'd gotten used to the eighty-five pounds. The new load of feed was trucked up the week before Millie died, and my hands and back weren't used to the extra thirty pounds.

Mike parked next to the hay stack and leaned out his window. "I hate it when these damn horses die up here. You think they'd have the sense to die back there where they ain't no damn trouble." He was looking back past Dunderberg's peak as he said this, past the red shale to the backcountry. I just shrugged. I didn't know where it made sense to die.

"Where is it?" he asked, swinging down from his rig. He started walking toward the tack sheds and the catch corral before I answered.

"She's down in the east corner near the old road. We roped her off with some cinches. The baby mules were kicking her up pretty good," I said, brushing hay from my jeans. I didn't look at Mike. Mike didn't look at me. We had business, and we'd talk later.

Mike weighed three-hundred pounds--his beard alone must have weighed five. I ducked under some snags and got down to the corral before he did. I climbed over the fence and took another look. A brown bridge had formed between Millie's nose and the ground. Her belly was swollen like a fertility statue. The day before she had been a flea-bitten old white, but she looked more chewed-up in death than she ever did before. The mule colts had lost interest, or they'd learned the smell of death. They'd joined the herd, bunched up in the opposite corner of the corral, pushing at the far gate.

Mike made it down to the corral and leaned up against the fence. "Son-of-a bitch," he said, arms crossed along the top post. "I can't get down here through the corral. Too many fucking rocks." He stood there and looked ahead for a minute, shook his head one last time and started back up towards his outfit.

As Mike turned his rig around, Tom came out of the house and we watched the cable from the boom dancing in the dust. "Come on,"



he said to me, "we got work to do." We walked up to the tack shed, grabbed a couple of chains out of the rafters, and walked down to Millie.

Mike backed up to the corral. Ponderosa snags grabbed at his new paint job. The truck's boom snapped off limbs and they fell to the ground, the noise muffled by the matting of needles. "You got too many fucking trees around here," Mike yelled out the window.

Tom smiled, climbed under the fence, and carried a chain to Millie's back left leg. The chain had a towing hook at one end. He turned the chain once between her hock and her hoof, latched the hook through a link in the chain, yanked hard to see that it was set, ran it to her front right and took another dally. The legs didn't move. They stayed where they were, hard and fast, like legs on a dining room table. Millie seemed stronger, maybe harder, in death.

By the time Tom finished chaining Millie's legs together, Mike had backed his boom over the fence. I was fascinated and paralyzed, perched on a rock above the scene. I'd never seen a dead body. The chain between Millie's legs looked like some bizarre twist on the string game I used to play on my fingers when I was a child--Cat's Cradle or Jacob's Ladder.

Mike dropped the boom low enough for Tom to grab the cable. Tom set the cable and the block in the middle of the chains and nodded to Mike. Mike pushed a lever forward and the boom jerked skyward. All I heard were Millie's legs, breaking in ten places. Tom nodded to Mike again, and Mike moved the lever. I turned away from the cracking. I knew her legs were going to pull out. She couldn't be set that hard. The legs were going to pull out and I didn't want to be there.

When I did turn around, Millie was starting to lift off the ground and the cracking sound had stopped and the chain was bunching up under the boom, her legs pulling together to make a pyramid. When she was high enough to clear the fence, Mike let off the lever. Nobody had said anything for a long time. Millie swayed gently under the boom, and the boom creaked when she swung downslope.

Tom and Mike gathered over the fence.

"You call Jerry?" Mike asked Tom. I was glad for the words.

Jerry was the caretaker of the Point Ranch down at the south end of Bridgeport Valley. He ran an informal burial pit at the back of the property along the edge of the valley.

"Yeah," said Tom, "he said he'll be riding ditches in the west field

today."

WHEN I DROVE into the canyon in early May, banks of snow lined the roads, balanced precariously on the ridges, almost fought for their place in a changing landscape. The early morning light was a luminous sheen of pink. Time seemed to hang still on those rays of light, and the world was full of possibility.

August is dry, clear light. The light comes later in the day, and the frost doesn't burn off. The sun slants in low in the morning, rays rising slowly across the shale, the talus fields, the golden aspen. Days are bright and short, the time filled not so much with promise, but with immediacy.

Tom and I followed the tow truck out of the canyon in a Chevy Blazer. In front of me was a sight I never imagined: a white horse swinging like a giant pendulum, but she wasn't ticking off time, only the movements of the earth, the wind, the idling engine. Pines along the south ridge of the valley shifted in and out of view between her legs.

The fifteen miles down the highway to the Point Ranch were

grueling. Mike shifted into second to slow his truck, the weight of the horse urging the truck forward, down the hill. Cars slowed down to see the sight--a white tow truck with a 1200 pound horse swinging upside down. They lined up behind the Chevy and followed us off the mountain. I felt like the grand marshall of a bizarre parade.

When the road leveled out at the beginning of the valley, we followed Mike onto an ungraded dirt road. We drove for another half-mile before Mike pulled up short at a ditch in front of the fencing. Millie smacked against the boom. The sound was deep and hard, not hollow like I'd expected. Her insides were solid. By the time I opened the passenger door to get out of the Blazer, Mike was working the levers on the side of his truck. Millie descended slowly to the ground. Her nose hit first and as the rest of her weight came down, her neck twisted hard and the body swung away from the nose. Mike let the cable seek ground. Millie's nose was forced back into her shoulder, and her neck cracked. Mike unhitched his block, threw it onto the bed of his rig, and turned to Tom. "You got any more that are going to die this year?" Tom just laughed and waved as Mike drove off.

Jerry was supposed to meet us at the east gate, but he was nowhere around. After scanning the fields, Tom pulled the extra

chain out of the back of the Blazer and hitched Millie's legs to the ball under the truck. After five minutes, Jerry was still nowhere to be seen. Tom started for the driver's door, talking to me over his shoulder.

"We'll follow the turkey vultures to the pit," he said. "Get the fence gate, and close it behind me when I'm through. You can ride on the gate of the truck and make sure Millie doesn't break free."

I jumped over the ditch and unlatched the drift gate. As Tom started to pull through the gate, the slack came out of the hitch chain, Millie thundered into the irrigation ditch, and the Blazer jerked backward. Tom looked over his shoulder, but everything was happening out of his sight. I nodded to him and he turned around and started out again. The chain pulled taut, Millie and the truck fought for a minute, then Millie was sailing across the fields, legs first. I shut the gate and ran to catch up.

Tom slowed enough for me to climb on the tailgate. Millie rumbled in and out of dips in the field, cutting down dry feed, leaving a trail in her wake. Two cows started into a slow gait behind the truck. The only sounds I heard were the Blazer, the cows moaning in the distance and the slicing grass.

The bone pit sat under an outcrop of granite, open on three sides--not a pit at all, really, just a tangle of bones, picked clean. In the shadow of the outcropping there were dead cows planted here and there. They were hides, still looking fully like cows, just deflated, or melted into the ground.

Tom swung the Chevy around to face the way we came in. Millie made an ungraceful arc behind the truck. Without turning the motor off, he got out and unhitched the chains between Millie's legs. I shut the tailgate, and climbed into the passenger seat. He shifted out of park, started back up the mountain. The turkey vultures circled lower.

AT THE PACK STATION, Jake was sitting on the haystack, ten bales off the ground. I climbed the steps of bales and sat next to him. "Millie's gone," I said.

"She ain't gone," he said and scowled at me, if seven-year olds know how to scowl. "She's dead. If she was gone, she might be coming back. But she ain't coming back." He picked up his hat, turned his back on me, and walked off the haystack. Halfway to the corrals, he turned around and looked at me, squinted into the sun. "Don't you

know anything?" he asked. "She's dead. Even I know that." He pulled his hat onto his head and walked to the hitching posts to grain for the animals due off the trail.

## **SPEAKING JEWISH**

I DON'T PRETEND to understand how I reach decisions in my life, but perhaps the seed of my conviction to stop dating Jewish women was the same seed that drove me west, to live in Montana. When I told my parents I was moving, their reactions mirrored each other.

“What are you going to do for a bagel?” my mother asked.

“They serve corned beef with mayonnaise,” my father said. “On white bread,” he whispered in horror.

“There aren't any Jews in Montana,” they both kept saying.

They were almost right. These days, the only rabbi in my neighborhood travels from town to town in a two-door Toyota pickup. There aren't enough Jews in any one town to support a synagogue. I imagine the travelling rabbi consoles herself with the thought that Judaism has always been a mobile religion.

The cultural distance my parents feared is not so acute. Bagels can be mailed overnight express; corned beef sandwiches can be made to order. Physical separation is harder to negotiate. Visits home are sporadic and difficult. My last visit was almost a year ago, a



December visit, for Hanukkah. The weather in Montana had been uncommonly warm, but when the plane touched down in Baltimore, it was the middle of winter.

Two days after I arrived home, my mother woke me at six in the morning. It was a Monday. “Your father’s having heart pains,” she said. “We’re taking him to the hospital. It’s sleeting outside, and the roads are a sheet of ice, so you’re driving. You live in Montana, you’re the mountain man, you drive.”

What was normally a fifteen minute trip turned into an hour ordeal. The beltway, the main traffic artery around Baltimore, was stopped still. When I drove past the on-ramp, my father started knocking on the window with his knuckles. “What are you doing?” he asked, staring out the window, watching the beltway pass beneath us. “There’s no way we’re going to be able to get up the side streets in this weather. You’re going to get us killed,” he said. “Take the beltway.”

When I turned to look at my father, he was slumped in his seat, clutching his chest. “The beltway’s not moving,” I said. “I’ll get you to the hospital. I like driving in this weather. I’m used to it.”

The wipers scraped over nubs of ice frozen to the windshield. I

kept my eyes focused on the road and listened to the sleet fall in sheets on the roof of the car. My mother hunched close to the front seat. When my father told me I took a wrong turn, she said “Denny,” put her hand on my father’s shoulder, and said nothing more.

The emergency room was full of accident victims. I watched my father wheeled away to triage, then went for coffee while the doctors took blood tests and hooked him up to monitors. My father had always been a strong man. He never played catch, never joined in the typical father-son activities, often working late into the night on a client’s case. But I always pictured him as strong, a moral man, a trait which sometimes drove me crazy, but made him powerful in my eyes. Early on, I learned not to question him when he came home from work with candy bars or cookies that he’d bought from colleagues selling goods for their children’s groups. Never once did he sell my Little League candy bars at the office. He didn’t want to abuse the situation, make people feel obliged to buy; it didn’t seem right to him. At the age of 37, he had a heart attack, but I was ten at the time, and didn’t fully understand the situation. What I’m saying is, perhaps most boys see their fathers as invincible, and as I drove to the hospital in the ice storm, I knew the fear etched in the corners of

my father's brown eyes wasn't from the road conditions. It isn't often that I've seen him scared.

When I came back to the emergency room, my father was lying on a bed, his shirt off, electrodes from the EKG pasted to freshly shaven patches of his chest. The doctors had started an I.V. in his right arm--easy access to his veins in case of emergency.

"We're waiting for the results from the tests," my mother said as I handed her a cup of coffee. "They'll probably want to admit him because of his medical history and previous heart attack."

My father shifted on the examining table to look at me. The wires to the monitors pulled the electrodes on his chest. "Tell me what it's like in Montana," he said. We hadn't had time to talk since I'd been home. "Tell me some stories."

"Well," I started out, watching the line on the EKG measuring his heartbeat, "I've been seeing this woman."

"Yeah," he said, "she's from California and she's not Jewish."

"You mean she's a schicksa, don't you?"

He shrugged, laughed, played with his bald chest. "Is it serious?"

"I don't know," I told him. "It's early yet."

He rolled to his left side and looked at my mother, standing next to him, drinking her coffee. She shrugged.

He turned back toward me. "I'm sure she's really nice," he said, fingering the electrodes at his chest, "but your mother and I would really like it if you married Jewish."

My initial reaction was amazement. Here was my father, lying on what could be his deathbed, telling me to marry Jewish. I was amazed not by the sentiment, but by the circumstance. If he had died that Monday, it would have been his final wish.

I laughed, told him again the relationship wasn't that serious, and looked for a way out of the conversation. Next to the bed was a clear plastic container, mounted on the wall. Across the top, the words "Hazardous Waste" were blocked in large red letters. Below the warning, a wide, red piece of tape cut across the plastic with the words, "Do Not Fill Above This Line," under it. A handful of needles and plungers propped the container's lid open. Two needles had spilled to the floor.

"Look at that," I said to my father, nodding at the wall. He turned his head to look at the container. "Not what you want to see," I said. He laughed and settled back onto the examining table.

My father didn't die that Monday, or the next day. He was admitted to the hospital, and the doctors performed bypass surgery two days later. When I left for Montana and home three days after the surgery, he was well on his way to a full recovery.

I DON'T SPEAK much Yiddish. My grandmother spoke what she called Jewish, fluently, and my parents know enough words and phrases to communicate, but my sister and I were never taught the language. It is a first and second-generation language, a language of immigrants, of isolation and separatism. My parents and grandparents spoke Yiddish when they didn't want the *kinder*, the children, to understand.

As a child, I spent Friday nights hiding in the bathroom next to my grandmother's kitchen. I was fascinated by stockings. My grandmother dried them in the bathtub, on a metal stand with spokes, like a bicycle wheel. I would lift the empty spokes until they were vertical, drop them and listen to the clatter as they fell into the center of the drying rack. When I tired of the game, I moved to the bathroom door, straining through the crack of light to catch bits of

grown-up conversation. If the conversation was in English, it couldn't be very interesting. But if I heard Yiddish, I stood rapt, shuffling back and forth over the spear of light falling through the bathroom door.

It seemed a language full of secrets and wonder. When I heard a word that sounded interesting, I would walk into the kitchen, steal small pieces of gefilte fish, pilfer sips of Manischewitz and listen. When I heard the word again, I would tug at my grandmother's apron and ask her what it meant. If my grandfather was in the kitchen, my question would be waved off. Often, though, the men were sitting in the den, listening to the Orioles or the Colts on the radio, and the kitchen belonged to me and my grandma Sarah.

My grandmother's explanations were patient. When it was just us in the kitchen, she sat me down at the wrought iron kitchen table, a glass top resting on twisting black flowers and leaves, and sometimes she would hand me the pupick from the chicken, and sit down next to me. Class was in session.

"Chutzpah," my grandmother would say, straightening her apron and wiping grease off her hands. "I can tell you what chutzpah means. Chutzpah is the blind man who sells pencils on the street corner in front of Hecht's. You feel sorry for him, because he's blind

and you aren't. You drop a coin in his can, but you don't take a pencil. So this man should be happy, right? He's got his dime and his pencil. As you're walking away, though, he calls out to you. *Why don't you buy two?* he asks. That's chutzpah."

My mother's answer's were simpler than my grandmother's. She explained by pointing. *Shmata* was the rag my mother wore on her head to services; *schmaltz*--rendered chicken fat and onions--was the oil my mother cooked with; *goyim* were the people who didn't know the language of secrets--the people outside the tribe.

My Yiddish education happened in kitchens standing between my grandmother and her daughters. I attended Hebrew school for seven years where I learned the prayers and history of the Jewish people, but I believed Yiddish was the language of Jews and, once you knew the words, once you knew the secrets, you were truly Jewish.

For me, Yiddish revealed a hierarchy of Jewishness. My grandmother was more Jewish. In the beauty shop, she could hold entire conversations in Yiddish, only speaking English to tell her stylist that she was dry, or ask if she could tease her hair a bit more. My mother and father were a bit less Jewish. Their Yiddish was

spotty, and they saved the words for emphasis, when they needed to get an important idea across. At ten, I knew I was Jewish, but I didn't know the true language, the language of pragmatism and secrets.

BALTIMORE has its own versions of Little Italy and Chinatown, and though there's no "Little Israel," Baltimore is home to the world's fourth-largest Jewish population.

Our house was within a mile of seven synagogues. I grew up not knowing the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish. Our neighborhood was a ghetto of sorts, a cul-de-sac of eighteen houses--sixteen of the families were Jewish. The public school I attended was ninety percent Jewish. School closed down for Ro'sh ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur and Hanukkah. Christmas was a strange holiday that people celebrated on t.v. I didn't see my first christmas tree until I entered high school.

It wasn't until I was perhaps eleven or twelve, that my father's friend taught me the difference between Jewish and non-Jewish. We were at the bottom of our street, and I was shooting baskets at the neighbor's house. My father's friend, Howard, was on my team.



Howard had hired a new secretary, a real looker, he told my father. “But she’s a schicksa,” he added.

My father nodded and smiled knowingly. On the next dead ball, I asked Howard what you use a schicksa for. He looked to my father who was sitting at the side of the court, out of earshot, then back at me. “You use one for practice,” he told me and smiled. “Schicksas are for practice,” he said again, and laughed.

I wish someone had told me that it was a joke. I wish, right then, someone had said that schicksa was a word, and that it carried no meaning. Perhaps I would have believed that person even though I now know that the words we use to tell ourselves stories are the words that shape our lives.

I REMEMBER MY GRANDMOTHER’S KITCHEN: the coffee that was too cold by the time she sat down at the table, the broken clock on the oven, the menorah above the refrigerator. Her hands were shiny with chicken fat, studded with matzoh from the passover farfel, and I remember the commotion in her kitchen when she learned her first grandson, Perry, had eloped and married a schicksa. My mother

and aunts were beside themselves. They rushed in and out of the kitchen, boiling matzoh balls, polishing silver, and talking loudly.

My grandmother never left the kitchen, would stay there until dinner was served. After she ladled the matzoh balls from the kettle, she joined me at the table. "I love Perry," she said, sifting carefully through her words. "And I only want what makes him happy. But if your grandfather were alive today," she said, "that marriage would have never happened. He would roll over in his grave. You know what your grandfather used to say?" she asked. "He used to say that what Hitler didn't do to us, we're going to do to ourselves, through intermarriage."

What she meant, or what I understood her to mean, was that my mother and aunts were scared. No one in their generation had married outside the religion. It wasn't done. To marry Jewish was to marry safe. In a world full of goyim, Jews needed Jews, but my cousin Perry decided to change all that.

What I felt in that hospital with my father, the anger and resentment, isn't as important as what I think I can see now, what I couldn't see in the hospital that day. My father was scared, and he

wasn't the only one. That fear circled around the three of us standing in the emergency room. We fixed it on anything that didn't include doctors and medical terms. We let it scrape away its own space and cloaked it with a special language all its own. But when it rose, it rose in bundles, and we couldn't separate it out. The fears were thick as a cluster of bees, and we couldn't look at just one.

MOST OF MY MEMORIES of my grandmother are in English. As I said, I never learned much Yiddish, and I never did ask my grandmother why she didn't teach it to her grandchildren. There are seven grandchildren in all, and at one time or another each grandchild asked to be taught. She never exactly said no, but there was never any time set aside. When she died earlier this year, I lost my chance to ask the question, but I think I can guess her answer.

"You don't need it anymore," she might say. "Only old people and teachers speak Jewish. You know something else, and that's good."

In my optimistic moments, I can almost believe that I've conjured her words and the spirit of her memory, and sometimes, I can almost believe she's right.

## **D I S T A N C I N G**

I DON'T KNOW how it works in other families, but in my family, men don't cry, they cook. My father has taught me gravies and dressings, turkeys and ribs, but I've only seen him cry twice in my life.

He was born and raised in East Baltimore above the delicatessen my grandfather owned. Belman's was at the corner of Baltimore and Anne Street. My father lived there until he turned eighteen, when my grandfather sold the delicatessen and my father left for college. Today, it is a townhouse.

I grew up on stories of chocolate sodas, corned beef sandwiches, and younger brothers pushed into meat lockers while older brothers held illicit poker games behind the cole slaw and pastrami. My father was a lawyer, but he cooked on the weekends and, I believe, he understood his life through food. He woke up Sunday mornings before everyone else, set a pot of coffee to brew, then drove to Edmart--the neighborhood deli--for fresh bagels, eggs, onions, or whatever else he planned to cook. When I woke, I found my father in the kitchen drinking a cup of coffee, an apron already tied around his

belly. Fresh bagels spilled out of a bag on the counter, still warm to the touch, and my father sat reading the newspaper, waiting for the family to wake up to breakfast. This Sunday ritual was indispensable to my father's routine, to his sense of who he was and where he'd come from. In the kitchen, his tone changed. Sometimes he spoke in a conspiratorial whisper; other times, exchanges became charged and serious. If he was speaking with his brothers, they argued over recipes as though their lives depended on the number of tablespoons of sugar in the coleslaw. Maybe, in some ways, they did.

By the time I was ten, my mother began roasting two Thanksgiving turkeys. My Uncle Dick came to the house with his own cutting board and knives. Even after the brothers had their own turkeys, the fights continued. "You're butchering that bird," Dick yelled from his cutting board. "It's a turkey. It's not a loaf of bread."

"Why don't you buy a real knife?" my father responded. "You've got to stop buying those things off the t.v."

I never did learn how to carve a turkey. I was scared to ask either brother for fear of starting a family war. Instead, I learned that food was family, food was memory, food was life. My father spent his happiest times in kitchens, fighting with his brothers over who

remembered mom's gravy recipe better; who made the best chocolate soda.

MARCH SNOW in Baltimore isn't a common occurrence. March in 1983 was different. On that March midnight, the moving vans crept through the white, muffled streets of the city and parked inside the locked gates of the Colts' training complex. Men in brown jumpsuits moved the history of the city--the history of generations--into the cold, green and yellow Mayflower moving vans. It took a fleet of twenty-six trucks to move the team, the semis packed full of office desks and computers, helmets, weight-training equipment, trophies. Robert Irsay, the owner of the team, had made a deal to move the Colts to Indianapolis. By the next morning, when the snow had stopped, the moving vans were rolling the highways towards Indiana.

When I woke that bright Sunday in March, I heard the radio playing loudly in my parents' room. I padded out of my room, across the beige carpet, under pictures of family weddings, and peered into my parents' bedroom. My mother was in a tangle of extra blankets thrown hastily on the bed when the temperature dropped. She was curled in a ball, and turned towards the radio. I guess she heard me.

She rolled towards the door and told me to go say hi to my father. I walked out of the bedroom and found him standing barefoot in his underwear staring out the windows at the trees lining the edge of the property. The March sun had started to melt the snow. "I can't believe they're gone," he was saying to himself, nodding his head back and forth. "It just doesn't make any sense." He pulled his glasses off his ears and ran the back of his hand over his eyes and his nose.

"Papa," I said when he'd put his glasses back on. He turned to look at me, and his face sagged a bit, under the eyes. "Whose gone?" I asked. "Did someone die?"

He smiled a little, forced more tears out, dragged his fingers around his eyes one more time and said "no. "No one died."

"What's gone?" I asked.

He looked at me, stretched his arm, and patted me on the head. "I'm not sure what's gone," he said. "Things are changing. We'll just have to wait and see what's different." He ruffled my hair again, then walked to the kitchen to make breakfast.

The Colts had always been a part of my father's life. He started going to the games in 1954, when Art Donovan, Lenny Moore, Alan

Amache, Gino Marqueti and Johnny U. electrified the small, blue-collar town of row houses and marble steps. My father was 12, and he saved \$15 dollars from working in a shoe store. My grandfather, George, matched the \$15, and with \$30 in hand, my father took the old trolley, the number seven, down to Memorial Stadium and bought a season's worth of tickets to the games. The seats were in the end zone, the view obstructed by the goal post, but my father didn't mind.

I've only seen one picture of my father from that time in his life--his bar mitzvah picture. He was thirteen, a talit draped over his shoulders, prayer book open in his hands. I imagine though, that the twelve-year-old riding the number seven trolley to the stadium to buy his tickets wore the same face as my thirteen-year-old father, a face full of anticipation and expectation. He was embarking on something bigger than him, the trolley ride and the new talit both rites of passage. I believe my father, riding the yellow and red trolley that shuffled and banged along East 33rd Street thought he was embarking upon a world full of secrets and mysteries, wonders he was about to learn.

When my parents married in 1965, my father was twenty-three



and his season tickets were on the 25 yard line. Before games, he and my mother would go to Jerry's, on the corner of York and Belvedere, order rare roast beef on fresh poppy-seed kaisers, thick slices of bermuda onion, horseradish, and barbecue sauce. They got the sandwiches wrapped in foil, and dropped them in a brown paper bag next to the thermos of coffee and the bottle of B&B. On the way out the door, they'd stop at the package goods counter and have Charlie make them a sack of fresh roasted peanuts. Each year, as fans died or sold their seats, my father's seats would get a little better. "I'm trading up," he would say, a big smile on his face. By the time Irsay decided to steal from town in 1979, his seats were on the forty-nine yard line.

I NEVER INHERITED my grandfather's recipes, but I inherited his love of food. After I graduated from college, I stayed in Connecticut to work as a sous chef at an Italian Restaurant called Fiasco. My grandfather had started his cooking career sixty years earlier in Hartford, Connecticut at the Highblind Hotel. It was a time when the restaurants of the large hotels were the best in the country, and the

cooks the most skilled. On visits home, I would remind my grandfather I lived in Connecticut and cooked in a restaurant. "Like you used to," I would say. He'd look puzzled for a minute, try to place the information, then launch into his stories about the Highblind. From what I could gather, they tore down the hotel in the mid-sixties to make room for a parking lot.

I was cooking in Connecticut when my family decided to put my grandfather in a nursing home. The process had been gradual, but I missed it all. The three sons never got together to talk about the move. It was a subject they avoided. I think each one, individually, knew their father needed help. Together, they couldn't admit it to each other, couldn't admit that the man they remembered was gone.

It was actually the wives, the sisters-in-law who organized the move. It started with what I assume were innocent enough comments, some, probably, jokes. "Do you think he's becoming color blind, or did he always match his clothes like that?" Or, "Something needs to be done about your father. I don't think he's eating right." Or, "Did you see the way your father's apartment looked the last time we were there?" Gradually, from what I understand, the weight of the comments began to collect like the weight of memory from

eighty-three years of life. Family dinners and gatherings inevitably turned to the subject of George.

CherryHill Manor is crammed between a McDonald's and a Morty's Chicken on Reisterstown Road. It is the nursing home that my father and his two brothers chose for my grandfather. "None of these places are any good," my father had said before we went in, "but this is the best one we could find that had space."

The foyer of the home was a hushed place. The automatic doors closed quietly behind us. The foyer was carpeted and ate sound. A large woman in a white jacket sat behind a small window cut in the wall. Her head bobbed along over the white formica of the counter. The overhead fluorescent light glared off the shiny surface.

"Hello, Mr. Belman," she said to my father. She knew him, so I figured we could pass by the attendant without checking in, but I was wrong. My father nodded over to the clipboard.

"We need to sign in," he said, and then looked over at me. He must have sensed my confusion, because he continued. "It's a record. They want to know that we were here. If Papa starts throwing fits about his family never visiting, they can point to the chart and show

him the names. Sometimes he recognizes the names as family. That's on the good days." I walked over and signed the register.

The carpet ran past the dining room, past four-foot walls topped with plastic rhododendron twisting against the institutional wallpaper that covered the barrier. They called it a dining room, but it wasn't even a glorified cafeteria. The table cloths were thick plastic covered with bits of food. Wheelchairs and walkers crowded around the tables, their occupants either sleeping or staring off, waiting for an attendant to retrieve them.

Past the dining room, when the carpet ran out and the hallways widened into corridors and other rooms, my father started to look into doorways. He asked other residents if they had seen George. No one had. "How about trying his room?" I asked. My father just shook his head. We stopped at the nurses station, placed strategically at the crossing point of the two main hallways. My father asked a nurse in a violet jumper if she had seen George. "George who?" was her only reply. My father shook his head in disgust.

Down the hallway to the right, I saw him in front of us. He was shuffling away from us. My father saw him too. "Dad," he called down the hall. My grandfather didn't stop, didn't hear him. He kept

shuffling down the hall, down between the walls with rails, floral prints, gurneys leaning up against them, wide floor boards to take the merciless abuse from the rubber wheels of stretchers and wheel chairs, from the rubber stoppers at the bottoms of canes and walkers and crutches. My grandfather kept shuffling down the halls, between the walls, shuffling on to I don't know what. What did he think was at the end of the hall?

"Dad," my father said again, a little louder, but his shoulders dropped as he stood in the middle of the hall trying to call his father back to him. There was no response. My grandfather kept walking towards whatever he imagined at the end of the hall. I turned to look at my father, and he looked more tired than I had ever seen him before. He took a deep breath and exhaled words. "Georgie Porgie."

My grandfather stopped dead in his tracks and turned around slowly. He cocked his head to one side. His glasses were askew, no one had shaved him in a while, his dentures were missing, and he was wearing someone else's pants. The cuffs made it down to the middle of his calves. "Pudding and Pie," my grandfather said and his white whiskers spread to reveal a gummy smile. "Kissed the girls and made them cry. When the girls came out to play, Georgie Porgie ran

away." My father sighed again, walked down the hall and put his arm around his father. In that way, they shuffled back to his room, my grandfather looking at his son, a question forming on his face, my father, eyes cast down, a look of defeat on his face.

Sometime in the months while I'd been away from home, the months when my grandfather's mind eroded faster than anyone could grasp, they'd discovered a lifeline. My father had been removing his father's shoes, or shaving his beard, or taking him to the bathroom to clean his pants and had said "Georgie, Georgie," probably with some sense of regret and resignation. "Georgie, Georgie," my father said, and I imagine he was shaking his head and remembering the times when George had been a father, when my father was six and standing behind the deli counter, perched on a coke box so he could see over the zinc counter, watch his father, and learn. George making corned beef sandwiches and kibitzing with the customers, my father barely reaching the soda fountain, already proficient at making chocolate sodas.

I imagine my father was shaking his head and remembering the days when his father had taken care of him. "Georgie,Georgie," he might have said, and my grandfather responded with a nursery

rhyme he remembered from his own childhood. Most of the time it was all they had left between each other--a nursery rhyme. It was all they had left of a lifetime lived apart and together.

I REMEMBER walking out of the nursing home, between the automatic doors, and under the cement awning that stretched from door to drive. My father's steps slowed as we left the home and neared the car. When we got to the car, he reached for the hood and leaned on it with his left arm, straight and hard. His left shoulder tensed, but the right one dropped: dropped low towards the ground, seeking earth, seeking rest. His tears were slow and breathy. He stood there a minute, pushed off of the hood of the car, and again ran the back of his hands across his eyes.

Inside the cold car, the leather seats grabbed me. My father didn't turn on the car, but looked ahead down the road of strip shopping centers and free standing fast food joints. "Promise me you'll shoot me before you put me in a place like that." I didn't say anything. I just looked away at the three-foot tall cherry trees freshly planted around the circular drive. The mulch was pushed up into mounds around the trees. Half of them wouldn't make it to winter.

Another quarter of them would be dead before the spring. "If I'm in a wheelchair, take it and push it down the steepest hill you can find," he said. "Promise me. I never want to be put in a place like this." I let my eyes wander around the curve of the circular drive to the bright McDonald's sign at the end of the drive.

OCCASIONALLY, my mother calls me, but my father never calls. My parents have a strange notion that children call, children write, and children return. When I am not in Baltimore, my parents don't visit me and they don't call me. When my mother does call, it usually means that I've been remiss in my duties as a son. When my father calls, it means catastrophe; at best it means hospitalization.

When I got home from work, there was a message from my father. I returned the call at midnight, still wearing my black and white checkered pants, still carrying pieces of a hundred meals clinging to the soles of my shoes, a large purple stain from a blueberry-rhubarb chutney on the lapel of my chef's jacket. My father picked up the phone on the first ring. "I've got some bad news" he said. "Papa died earlier tonight."



WHILE I KNOW the traditions of Jews, I don't pretend to understand many of them. Jews don't believe in embalming, and they don't believe in keeping a body from the earth. The body of the deceased is buried within twenty-four hours of death. I drove the six hours home, and slept two hours before my mother woke me at eight, told me she was glad to see me and said I had better get ready. I showered and pulled a suit out of my closet that I hadn't worn in 5 years. I borrowed socks, underwear and a belt from my father. At 10:15, two black limousines from Sol Levinson's pulled up to the front door. From my parents' house, the limousines drove the two blocks to my uncle's house, where we picked up my father's two brothers and their families. The ten minute drive to the funeral home was silent.

The rabbi waiting for us at the funeral home was from my parents' synagogue. The rabbis who knew my grandfather were all dead. He shuffled us off into a side room and motioned us to sit. He sat down across from us and his yamulkah slipped off the back of his head. He picked it up, kissed it, and fastened it to his hair with a bobby pin.

“If anybody wants to say their last goodbyes before the service, the body isn’t ready for viewing yet,” he said. “The women aren’t done preparing it.”

“Preparing it?” I asked.

“Getting him ready for his return,” the rabbi answered. “He needs to be bathed and prepared before the funeral.”

I nodded my head, accepted the rabbi’s explanation.

When we walked into the casket room, a short man in a black suit was sitting next to the casket, my grandfather laid out next to him. A white sheet was draped over his body, fastened at the neck by a collar. His cheeks were hollow, sunken. I could barely recognize him.

The stranger sitting next to the casket didn’t move as we filed by. He had been sitting with my grandfather’s body all night. In the old countries, when people died, the family sat with the body until it was buried. It was a tradition of respect, the deceased never being alone until they make their return. Shiva started as soon as the person died. Today, the Chevra Kedescha society sits with the body. It’s a mitzvah for them, and it makes things easier on the family. It’s a compromise, between tradition and modern society.

After the viewing, the guests started filing into the building. We greeted them in a small room adjacent to the chapel, and when most of the relatives had arrived, we followed into the chapel. The service was short. The words the rabbi read were my father's. "Nobody will ever forget George's corned beef or chocolate sodas," he read. "Nobody will ever forget the smile that greeted them when they walked in the door of the deli." Everyone smiled. The only ones who cried at the service were my Aunt Mary, my grandfather's sister, and my sister. The sons were stoic.

My father has two brothers, and they each have one son. The six of us lifted the pine casket off the bench in the funeral home and carried it out the back door. It was a simple, unfinished casket, a cotton lining inside, the star of David the only decoration on the box. It slid easily onto the rollers in the back of the hearse. My grandfather weighed 119 pounds when he died.

At the cemetery, the casket was lowered into the earth on a pulley system laced with blue webbing. The rabbi said a short prayer as I watched my grandfather descend--return. The rabbi threw dirt, soil from Israel, into the hole and walked away. People filed by and threw handfuls of dirt onto the coffin. A hollow sound drifted out of

the hole. We left the cemetery as two workmen in brown overalls, shovels slung over their shoulders, moved in to finish filling the hole.

WHEN JEWS ARE HAPPY, they eat. When Jews are sad, they eat.

Shiva was held at my parents' home. The normal period of mourning is seven days, but we shortened Shiva for George to three days. We spent the day making Chocolate Sodas. Friends filed in over the course of hours, and the chocolate syrup simmered on the stove. The visitors brought food for the mourners--my family--and if we caught them before they came over, they also brought ice, paper cups, dutch cocoa and two-cents plain soda water.

The syrup wasn't done by evening Maariv services. My mother stirred as the men filed into the basement to round out the minyon. Dinner was a deli platter sent over from Edmart's, a delicatessen owned by an old family friend. We took turns stirring the syrup and fixing sandwiches.

Somewhere between the evening services and the rye bread, someone didn't remember the chocolate. Everyone blamed everyone else, and the only thing that people agreed on was that the sodas weren't as good as Georgie made them.

## **THIS COULD BE HOME**

LYING ON MY BACK, I'm half in half out of the granary, corn spilling all around my legs. Triple-A bins, "Tanks of Steel for the World." There's a thirteen-foot eave height, but looking up, all I see are crests of corn, red-streaked hills sloping into the darkness above.

My eyes flit between the cool dark of the corn and the sky. Outside, I watch the clouds slip along the distance. Birds feed on the grain scattered around my legs. They peck at my toes. When I rise from the bin, birds, like the grain, scatter. They fly low over fields planted in corn last year, breathe small life into the stalks. Wings clip still air. The dead stalks bend west.

A FLATBED TRUCK bounces down the dirt road. The dust rises like heat from behind the truck, settles on my fields.

Used to be, no one but farmers wanted to live out here, pushing against the desert. From town, the Soda Flats are part of the horizon, alkali bordering fields of alfalfa, bull thistle and quail brush yielding to dirt roads. From town, my farm and life are the distance.

That's always been fine with me, but it's changing. I can still

drive a mile north or west and lose myself in the ridges and dunes. But all around me they're selling off. The Roberts spread down the road, the McCormick Dairy across the street, all up for sale. The water rights are worth more than the land. Sell the water to the Conservancy, subdivide, bring in some roads, and sell. You can make more in one year breaking and selling a hundred and sixty acre tract than you can farming alfalfa, soybean and corn for twenty. A water-righted acre is worth \$2000; you might get \$800 for dry land.

My father-in-law, John, calls it Mormon Capitalism. He says you move into the devil's mouth, sprinkle a little water, and sell a piece of heaven. He tells me that fifteen minutes after Brigham Young marched into the Salt Lake Basin, he had his brethren digging irrigation ditches. "God gave us this land," he declared, "let us make it green."

I DON'T WANT any part of selling, but Arlene wants to move, says I'm a fool not to take the money and run. Run to what, I ask. I'm living the only life I know, and I think she's doing the same. When I get desperate, I remind her she's living in Fallon, incorporated 1908, "The Oasis of Nevada." She doesn't laugh when I say it anymore.

Her friends are leaving, and I can't say I blame her for wanting to leave. Fallon isn't exactly exciting. Route 50 comes in from the East, crawls through town, escapes to the West. I guess that's what she wants to do, follow that road and escape, but I don't feel trapped. I like walking my fence and mending holes. I like desert seasons. I like my pigs. They're warm, clean pigs, not quite pink.

THERE'S A GEOTHERMAL PLANT five miles across the desert from my farm, smack in the middle of the salt flats. I drive out there somedays. It soothes me, but I couldn't tell you why.

The stacks of the plant rise out of low-flung dunes. Sometimes, sitting in my pickup, it feels like the weather gathers around the stacks, clouds bending in hard, pushing the concrete pilings to a point. Sometimes, I think I can feel the heat swell under my truck, see the road ripple, the old irrigation ditches rise and fall, the tumbleweed in the ditches rock, but then it all flattens out again. Dry, hot land.

ARLENE AND I drive past the Naval Base to the auction. The sky is shifting, east to west, and I can see the sand move in the shadows.

Arlene looks straight ahead. I don't know what she watches

anymore. When we were first married, she sat next to me on the bench of the pickup, knees pressed against thighs, denim, friction, heat. Today, if I opened her door from the outside, she'd tumble to the ground.

At the Johnston's, dead cottonwoods line the road, already limbed for firewood. Hay is stacked next to empty corrals, the outer bales bleached and mold-ridden. A rusted pitchfork is loose in one of the bales, its handle broken off.

Arlene stays in the truck. I could ask why, but I know. She won't build off someone's loss. I walk between the machines, look under axles, test chairs. White, 6-row-corn planter, Deere Diesel tractor, grain augers. Sometimes, you can find a bargain in other people's miseries.

Back in the truck, Arlene turns to look at me. "Do you think that machinery is going to do you any better than Mike Johnston?" she asks, and they're the first words she's spoken. We didn't fight for our first two years of marriage. Too busy to fight, Arlene used to say. Maybe, now, we're too busy to talk.



RAGTOWN is west of the Johnston's, back toward town. A mile past the Ragtown marker, the sidewalk begins, the street lamps are planted at even distances and the Naval Air base lies at the foothills of the Stillwater Range, concrete hash-marks lining the basin. When Nevada was still part of the Utah territory, Asa Kenyon and his wife Catherine built an emigrant station, here at Ragtown, where settlers washed their clothing and hung it to dry on the desert peach and antelope brush. Despite the name, in 1858, I imagine Ragtown was a place of anticipation, where eager travelers prepared to meet their futures with a clean set of clothes. From Ragtown, they followed the Humboldt River to its death at the Humboldt sink, crossed the Forty Mile Desert to the Carson River, and then headed west, dreams of new homes spurring them on.

A T-47 blasts overhead from the east, low, loud. I don't hear anything but the boom. My ears still ringing, I pull to the side of the road, crane my neck to see two more planes follow, close, in formation. When the birds are gone, I turn to Arlene and smile. Her hands are clasped tight, over her ears, and her head is bent to her knees. She's rocking, back and forth. Her lips tremble, and maybe she moans a bit, but the ringing is still in my ears. Perhaps she

doesn't understand the future of jet aviation. Perhaps she doesn't like Fallon's future.

TROUBLE with the roof again. I woke up and Arlene was gone to work, took the Nova. There's a teflon pan on the couch and a soup pot in the bathroom, next to the toilet. I thought it might be a hint for me to cook, but the note on the dinette said "Roof leaked last night. Buy the wood, finish the porch, and please, just finish roofing the damn thing."

There's always food, but for the extras, Arlene and I save and collect. She jars anything we can't eat or sell. Every year, she wins a blue ribbon for her bread-and-butter dills, usually a yellow for her pigs' feet.

Old road signs fill the gaps in the fence. They're easy to find. Boomtown, Silvertown, Rat City. I can almost believe there are more ghost towns than people in this country. Sometimes I meet tourists with their cameras and children. Sometimes, nothing.

Horse corrals are as easy as metal panels mounted on railroad ties. The farrowing stalls are an old roller-coaster car. My pigs come into the world knowing they're going for a ride.

The roof has leaked, on and off, for five years. Arlene says we should build a new house, but I think you can always use something again. It's my philosophy. Arlene and me, we're organ donors. There's a little sticker on the back of my license. Eyes, liver, heart. Arlene is eyes only.

ARLENE'S TIRED of "the shit in the yard." I load a broken propane refrigerator, somebody's yellow stove, and about ten tires onto the flatbed and head for the place where I planted the old Ford in an irrigation ditch last spring. We burn most of our extras, but I bring the big pieces out here.

Where Cox Road makes a "T" with Gummow and deadends, two dirt ruts begin and run off into the dunes. There's a two foot lip to climb, and then the tracks flatten out, weave between scrub pine and some bluffs. Sometimes, I run into a dirt biker riding the hills. Today, I can hear the sand.

The Ford is buried to the door handles. A year's worth of wind. Tumbleweed collects around the antenna. When I add the tires, it looks like a desert-survival course. The stove door gets hung up on the ball hitch of the flatbed, so I push it off the other side. An alkali

puddle for the kitchen, an irrigation ditch for the garage. Someone might live here.

ARLENE'S UP TO HER ELBOWS in the pickle crock, sleeves rolled to her shoulders, garlic cloves and peppercorns stuck to her arms.

She doesn't turn to look at me when I walk in. Cukes, with short, cut stems, spill off the counter next to her. "Never pull them off the vine," Arlene told me first time we pickled, "they'll rot where the stem was broken from the skin." I cut them now.

Jars are lined along the counter, lids and seals submerged in a bread pan, covered with boiling water. I bob my fingers into the water, pick out a lid and twirl it between my thumb and forefinger. The heat feels good against my skin. "We should have a good store for the winter," I say, but she looks at me as though I told her I killed the cat for dinner.

THEY used to hold a cantaloupe festival at the corner of Maine and California. In September, farmers from ten miles about would come round with hay bales. Two-wires, three-wires, balanced high on buck boards. On the corner they'd gather and build the hay palace and on

Saturday they crowned the Cantaloupe Queen on a throne of bales.

We have a picture, in the bedroom, of Arlene's grandmother.

"Nevada Gold Cantaloupe Queen, 1916." That was after the reclamation project, when the town was young and the dirt was sweet, cantaloupe sweet. Today, it tastes like ash. Sometimes I think I can taste my father's bones when I lick the dirt from my fingers.

ARLENE'S KNITTING a sweater or scarf. I'm watching one of those true crime shows about some colored ivy-league kid in Hartford trying to sell dope for automatic weapons. Wanted to start his own war, bring the race question back into the papers, but he ended up dead in the front seat of his Ford Tempo. Seems to me he should have been driving something else if he wanted to start a war.

We hear a noise outside and Arlene looks up from her yarn. My .22 is leaning-up in the corner of the room, next to the door, and I walk over and pick it up.

"What are you doing?" she asks, and I know she's thinking I watch too much tv.

"Shouldn't be anyone on our land this time of night," I say, and brush my arm and shirtsleeve up and down the barrel of the

Winchester.

“I’m not sure I heard anything,” Arlene says, but then there’s hooves outside clattering across metal sheeting and it isn’t just one animal. Arlene shrugs and turns back to her knitting. I crack the door, butt of the rifle resting on my hip, and I see Lacy J., my best mare, leading a collection of mule colts around the generator and out past the granaries.

“Did you close the gate after feeding?” I ask, but I’m out the door before she answers.

I grab a halter off the hitching post, and start going for Lacy, knowing the mules will follow her back. I walk up to her. The mules are dancing on the panelling and Lacy is spooked, jittery. I slip the halter over her, try to lead her into the corral, but she hedges and throws her head back. I give a strong yank to pull her in, and her cheek catches the hot wire strung around the top of the corral. She crow-hops back, and then she’s gone across the sage, five mules trailing after her.

I mount a halogen off the passenger side of the truck and start driving, sweeping the sage with the lamp. About a mile out, I think I can see the herd, but the dust looks like snow in the beam, and I

can't be sure.

Two miles out Cox Road, past Sorley's Junkyard, there's nothing but a trailer planted in the middle of some sage with a small, jack-fence corral and a sorry-looking Appy. After that, tumbleweed, rabbit brush, an old tire or two.

I find Lacy J. and the mules milling around the jack fence and the old Appy. I cut the engine, walk towards the corral, and hear someone pump a shell into a chamber. I can see the mules under the corral light. I can see the blue haze of a television in one of the trailer's windows. I can hear a woman breathing.

HER NAME is Terry, and she's scared. I show her the halter every minute or so and explain about the horses, point to the halogen mounted on my rig. After five minutes, she takes the weight off her front foot, rocks back, eases her finger a bit. "They'll be back by morning," she says and I know she's right, know I didn't leave the house to look for the animals.

"We're neighbors," I say.

Her husband's gone to Vegas. He raises game birds and releases a thousand at a time for rich folks to shoot. It's a good living, she

says. The bird's don't have a bad life, and cowboys with turquoise belt buckles and alligator boots get to do something besides gamble and sit by the pool. "Makes them think they're part of the landscape," she says, shrugging her shoulders. At Harrah's and Circus Circus, the chef will even cook the birds.

ST. PATRICK'S sits on a plot of irrigated land in town, a block south of Route 50. Father McShane is the pastor. He was new to the town when he married us ten years ago. His skin was pocked, and you could still see a young boy under the skin and flabby smile. Today, walking through the church, he wears a pinched, concerned smile, ducks under the painter's ladder, and out the back door to lean on the electrician's truck. The church is being renovated.

"I wish my marriage could be renovated with a few coats of paint," I say. The Father strikes a match off the license plate on the truck, lights a cigarette.

"Look Jimmy," he says, "I know both of you and it's a little, it's a little awkward for me to start counseling one of you."

"I know," I say, "but I need to talk. I think Arlene and I need



different things, and I don't know how that fits into ten years of marriage."

He takes a deep drag off his smoke and I see his collar bulge, his face turn red, the old rutted skin on his face pulsate, and then he exhales and everything is white. "I think you should make it work," he says. "Arlene's a wonderful woman." He slides down the van, sits on the chrome bumper. "Ten years is a long time. Love gets buried."

A BUSHEL OF CORN was down to \$2.50 at the close yesterday. I climb into the cab of the pickup, wad the paper, shove it behind the seat, and drive out the gate, west, to the geothermal plant.

Terry's outside her trailer, raking dirt back and forth. I pull off the road, stop next to her, lean over and open the passenger door. "Get in," I say. She looks over her shoulder, back at me, and drops the rake.

I pull to the side of the road, cut the engine, and we sit there. We can't see the plant, just the stacks. The sky is a white blue, and there are only a few clouds here and there, but they move in, slowly. I feel something building, but I don't say anything.

Terry is looking out the window. Her knees are together, leaning

against the door. Her jeans are tight. They bulge at her thighs. She is a dusty woman. She knows work, I think. She doesn't look at me, but I see her chest heave and fall. After a while she asks "Can you feel it?" I don't care what she's talking about. I can feel it. A gentle rise in the earth, pulsing heat, pressure, breath. I turn the key and pull the truck back onto the road.

WE invited Tom and Martha for dinner tonight. Tom is carrying a bottle of wine, red. Martha is behind him, over his shoulder.

"I don't know where Arlene is," I tell them. "She's had a lot on her mind," I say, and maybe I wince a little when I say it.

"Don't worry," Tom says, "we'll do it next week," and Martha nods, but I can see behind her eyes. She shrugs.

"Next week," I say, and Martha is already turning around, ready to go home. Martha is from Kentucky, Tom from California. I wonder where Arlene wishes she was from.

TOM ONCE TOLD ME that the only thing he regrets from his first marriage is leaving his homemade wine. He was a fancy salesman for some big, electrical company that did lots of defense work. On

weekends, he made red wine. He said he buried it under the foundation of his house, probably a thousand bottles. When he met Martha and decided to leave his wife, he didn't bother to dig up the wine. "Probably still down there," he'd said, and I could tell it was a regret, to leave that wine behind, untouched.

NINE O'CLOCK and still no word from Arlene. Didn't call to cancel dinner, to say she'd be late. I get into my truck and drive toward town. It looks like a fist planted in the distance.

I drive past the sheriff's office where Arlene works, but her car's not in the lot. Kent's Food Store, First Interstate Bank, Sportsman's Paradise, building, building, sidewalk. Sometimes, I wonder what she's thinking, what passes for a good day for her. She spends more and more time in town, and if you asked me, I couldn't tell you why.

WORK on the foundation for the new shop today. I climb into the cab of John's backhoe and drive to the spot I picked, between the well and the loading chute. The first frost was two weeks ago, and the dirt moves like boulders. Three feet down and I know I'm not going to finish the job, don't see the point. I pull the backhoe around, and

head north across the fields. Corn stalks fall like ice under the tracks of the backhoe.

Just inside the north gate, I put the machine into neutral, climb out of the cab and walk over to a pile of old road signs. Detour, Stop, One Way. I pick up an armful and walk to the backhoe. The orange and black and red of the signs look good against the yellow machine. By the time I finish piling the signs in the bucket, the stack reaches above the teeth. No Hitching. Dead End. There must be fifty signs, crusty with sand.

Over Gummow Road, I lay the signs, head to toe, in front of the backhoe's tracks. The metal paths stretch fifty feet in front of me. It looks like some bizarre version of *The Wizard of Oz*. I drive out to the end, idle the backhoe, collect the signs from behind and start laying them out in front again, running deep into the desert. When I look behind, even I can't tell anyone has been here. It is a clean beginning.

Past the dumping grounds, I find the alkali puddle I've been looking for. The dirt is wet, and it moves like pudding under the shovel. After three hours, the hole is deep enough for a small foundation.

My arms are itchy from sweat and the sand. To the north, a heavy wind kicks up the hills, shifts the face of the land. To the west, even though I can't see the stacks, I know the geothermal plant is pumping steam, in, out, steady as a heartbeat. Terry is probably at home, maybe her husband is with her. When I close my eyes, I can see her long, slim fingers, bony blue veins, knuckles, a little swollen, the skin cracking. I can almost feel them, their roughness on my chest.

I wipe my palms on my chest, brush sand from my arms, toe in the backhoe and lower the scoop into the hole. When Arlene comes home, we'll talk. "We can live here," I'll tell her, and I know this is a rare day, a day when I feel the beginning of something.

"We can live here," I yell above the churning engine, and wonder how far the words carry, if they echo off the dunes.

"We can live here," I yell again, the words scraping the back of my throat, scraping against the sand and the dry salt air.

They sound good, these words and I know I'll yell them again, know I'm trying to get it right, practicing for home.

## MAKE, MODEL, YEAR

ART had done fifty-four windows that week and it was only Tuesday. Fifteen windshields, eight rears, ten vents, the rest door glass and quarter windows. A good week for Blaustein Glass. The claim forms were piling up, but he knew the insurance companies. Thirty years popping glass, and he understood the system. Deductibles, waivers, liability clauses. Art didn't do any work that wasn't covered.

He'd seen the good and bad of the glass business. He opened the shop in the sixties with his brother Phil, started out working salvage. Stores in downtown Baltimore were fortifying, pulling plate glass and bricking over. Between the riots and looting, glass didn't make economic sense. *If they see it, they'll want it.* Art had read that in the trade journals; it had been the selling point for glass store fronts. He'd liked the big-glass fronts, the window shopping, the reflections in the panes. Then the masons started moving in and laying brick. Most of the big picture windows were gone. Art had worked custom, mirrors, residential and plate glass. Now he was auto. Less travel. They came to you.

Art was in his late fifties. He was a Baltimore native, born in a rowhouse in Butcher's Hill, the Jewish neighborhood of the thirties and forties. Wendy, his wife, had been pining for the suburbs since the riot in '68, but they'd never moved uptown. He'd never seen any reason for the added expense and commute. They lived in lower Pimlico, two miles from his shop, six blocks from the racetrack. Their neighbors weren't Jews, and it wasn't the safest place to live, but they owned their house. They didn't need a big backyard, and the way Art saw it, they didn't owe anybody anything. He paid for everything in cash, never had a credit card, and he wanted to keep it that way.

AS ART SAT DOWN at his desk to run some figures on the calculator, the telephone rang. He picked it up before the second ring.

"Yeah," Art said, then corrected himself. "Blaustein Glass. Can I help you?"

"The little bastards got me," a man's voice said. It was seven in the morning, and Art thought he could make out the drip of a coffee

machine in the background.

“This is Blaustein Glass,” Art said again. “Can I help you?” He listened to the drip on the other end of the phone.

“I walked out to warm it up this morning,” the man’s voice said. “I hadn’t even put on my tie. I do that after breakfast,” the man said.

“Look,” said Art. “This is Blaustein Glass. We sell windows.” He swiveled in his chair, faced the wall, and leaned back. “Do you need a window?”

“I’ve been telling you,” the man’s voice said. “It must have happened last night. They busted them all. Probably used a bat, the little bastards. It’s the second time this winter. Can you believe that?” the man asked. “Twice in two months. My insurance agent’s going to kill me.”

Art dropped his legs to the floor and pushed the chair around to face the desk. He tapped on the calculator keyboard with his index finger and took a deep breath. The office smelled like Lysol and stale coffee. “Somebody vandalized your car,” he said flatly. “What’s the make, model, and year?”

“My insurance agent’s going to hit the roof,” the man said.

“Look,” said Art, placing both feet on the floor under his desk. “I



need your specifics if I'm going to fix your car. I might need to order the glass. What type of car do you have?"

"A Caravan," the man said. "Wood panelling. That was my wife's idea. She likes the rustic feel. Says it's real New England. I bought it to take the kids to baseball games. It's good for carpools."

Art made a note in the right-hand margin of his desk calender, placed his elbows on the desk blotter and leaned down hard. "Year and model," he said.

"Town and Country," the man said. "Ninety."

"Bring it in by eleven," said Art. "I'll see what I can do for you." Then he hung up.

Art looked at the calculator, leafed through the stack of claim sheets in front of him, then reached down to pick up *The Morning Sun* off the floor mat. He remembered reading a headline about vandalism in the paper, the Maryland section. He flipped through the pages and found the headline--*Teenage Rampage*--on the sixth page, next to the obituaries. The cops called it entertainment. The teenagers were bored, they said. The damage in the month since Christmas alone probably exceeded \$80,000. The police hadn't made

any arrests, but they suspected the vandalism was a fad--probably twenty different sets of kids getting their kicks.

Art walked into the bathroom and poured himself a cup of coffee from the machine sitting on top of the toilet. He poured in a packet of sweetener and stirred it with a blue plastic spoon. When he walked back into the office, he picked the paper up again. The principal of a local high school was quoted. "They don't see where they're going, and they don't like where they are," the principal said. "The world's not opening up for them, and this is their way of airing it out a little. To me, it seems a perfectly natural response."

Art folded the paper and placed it on the desk. He took a sip of coffee and leaned back in his chair. He could imagine the kids doing it. Six kids packed into a four-passenger sedan. Probably a Nova or a souped-up Monte Carlo. All wearing baseball caps, probably high on something. Pop, dope, maybe on the guns shoved under the floor mats. They turn the music down, then take a quick spin around the block, eyes darting from cars, to porches, to sidewalks. If it's clear, they circle the block and pass back, the window already rolled down. They angle the pump gun out the window, edge the barrel over the molding and let it go. Art could see the crack spreading from the

impact, hairline fractures spidering out from the pellet hole. Safety glass, he thought. Safe for the damn kids. They're at least a mile away, feeling big, and no one's wiser to the business.

He turned on the desk calculator, tapped at the keyboard and watched the red and black figures scroll up the paper. He flicked the printout with his forefinger. Kids, he said to himself.

BY TEN, the bays in the shop were full. When Art walked onto the shop floor, Jack, his shop manager was standing next to a Caravan. He was talking to a young man with silver hair. The man was tanned and wore a dark blue suit with cuffed pant legs. He held a paisley handkerchief over his mouth. Maybe he thought the urethane was toxic, or maybe it was Jack's cigarette he was trying to avoid.

Art looked around the shop. Eight cars, mostly utility vehicles, angled out from the walls. His boys were working on four of them. Art felt safe in his shop. He wasn't close with any of his employees, but he thought they liked him. Despite being the boss, he thought he was an o.k. guy. If he had to line out one of his employees, they usually had coffee in the office, and Art would calmly lay out his

complaints. In turn, he was willing to listen to their excuses, hear out their family problems and girl troubles. Things rarely got out-of-hand.

He looked to the front office, made sure there weren't any customers, then walked around the Caravan. He looked at the windows--what was left of them. Jagged triangles of glass hung limply from the rubber and chrome moldings. Inside the car, fragments of glass and a fine dust covered the seats. On the driver's seat, someone had placed a brown bag from Giant Groceries over the bits of windshield. The car was running and heat pushed through the defroster vents, blowing little pieces of glass into the air like popcorn.

At the driver's door, he ran a finger along the chrome molding. Half-way up the window, he stopped and rubbed at a small dent. "This is where the bat hit," he said. "It wasn't a clean hit. They got lots of car, not so much glass."

"They got enough glass," the tanned man said.

Art looked up from the window. "You the guy that called at seven this morning?" he asked.

"I had to cancel two meetings to bring the car in here. Can you believe that?" the man asked. "Do you think the insurance company is going to cover my hourly fee?" The man looked like he was done

asking questions, but then he added, “Do you think that makes my partners happy?”

Art didn’t know what pleased the man’s partners. It occurred to him that possibly nothing made them happy.

Art walked back to his office with the man, whose name was Michael, following behind him. He poured himself another cup of coffee before he sat down, but didn’t offer any to Michael, who sat in an orange plastic arm chair in front of Art’s desk.

“You spoken to your agent yet?” Art asked.

Michael shook his head, only then dropping his right hand and the handkerchief into his lap. “This has been a busy morning for me, you know,” Michael said. “I don’t mind telling you, but I didn’t pencil vandalism into my morning schedule.”

“You should have told me you had tinted glass,” said Art. “And those side windows are tempered. I don’t normally keep that glass in stock.”

“Listen,” Michael said, starting to push the handkerchief back into his breast pocket. “My business isn’t glass, yours is. I mean, my god, how difficult can it be to remember to ask a few pertinent

questions on the telephone?”

Art stared at him. He stared at the man's manicured fingernails, the skin beneath them turning red as the man pressed his fingers into the desk top. Art had expected the questions and the man's tone, the sort of self-importance he'd always attributed to suburban life and hand-painted ties. "Look, it's your car," Art said at last. "You tell me what's wrong, and I fix it. That's the way it usually works. They call this a service industry, and me--I'm the one who does the servicing."

Michael brushed his tie flat with his right hand, straightened the knot under his collar with his left, and then looked at Art. "Do you have the glass, or don't you?" he asked.

"I've got the glass," Art said, "but I can't fix your car. It's not covered."

Art watched the man's shoulders bunch up and his hands grip the desk and turn white around the knuckles. "What kind of nonsense are you talking?" he said, and pushed his chair back from the desk. The black metal runners of the chair scraped on the floor, and Art thought the man was going to stand up. Instead, Michael let go of the desk and leaned back against his chair. "That's simply ridiculous," he said, and crossed his arms, thrusting his hands into his

armpits. "You're wrong," he said.

Art sat up in his chair and coughed. "You're a lawyer," he said. "Am I right?"

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"So I can assume you know something about insurance claims and unrecoverable losses," Art continued.

"A good deal more than you, I would guess," the man said. "Do you know what my monthly premium is?" he asked.

Art continued. "As far as the insurance company is concerned, that vehicle of yours is totalled. You're probably familiar with the term," he said, and took a sip of coffee. "Everything that makes a window expensive, you've got on that car." Art picked up the Nags Auto-Glass Listing off the desk and turned to the Chrysler/Dodge section. He ran his finger down a column of numbers and then stopped. "Front, flat glass," he said. "\$1,200 list." He moved his finger down another line. "Side tinted, tempered. Lists for \$1,900. Do you need me to go on?" he asked.

The man, Michael, just sat there and stared.

"Even if everything about that car was perfect," Art said, "and the only thing trashed was the glass, they'd total it."

“I’ve got insurance,” the man said. “I pay on time. Damn it. I pay early.”

“It’s surprising to me too,” Art said shaking his head. “You run into the damndest things in this business. Things like this, though, that keeps it interesting.”

Michael sat in the chair, his shocked eyes wide open, and he seemed unable to blink.

“Look,” said Art, leaning over his desk. “It’s really not that surprising. I see it everyday.”

Michael didn’t seem to hear him. He was staring at some spot on the wall above Art’s head.

“Hey guy,” Art said, waving his hand in front of Michael’s face. “You still with me?” he asked.

Michael closed his eyes and pinched the skin at the bridge of his nose between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. When he opened his eyes, he looked straight at Art. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you,” he said. “You have something against me, and you’re enjoying this,” he said. “You aren’t like this with everyone.”

Art looked at the man for a minute, then stood up. “I’m going to



take a leak," he said.

In the bathroom, he poured himself another cup of coffee, and jiggled the handle of the toilet. He ran the water in the sink. He replaced the paper towelling under the coffee machine. As he was about to flush, he heard the man talking in the other room. When he opened the door, Michael was sitting behind the desk, his hand cupped over the telephone.

"My insurance agent wants to speak with you," the man said.

Art walked behind the desk and stood over the man. He was small, Art thought, not much bigger than a boy. "You're in my seat," he said.

The man stood up, handed Art the telephone, and brushed past him. He sat down on the other side of the desk and crossed his legs. Art pulled on the cord of the phone, then gently placed the receiver down in its cradle and stood there, looking at it.

"What the hell did you do that for," the man said. "Are you crazy?"

"I didn't hear it ring," Art said. He opened the top drawer of his desk and picked out a red pencil. He opened another drawer and took out a box of staples. "There wasn't anybody on the phone," he said.

When he started refilling the stapler, the man pushed his chair back from the desk and stood up.

“Thanks for trying to help,” Art said, “but I answer my own phone. Always have.”

The man started to walk away. At the door, he turned to look at Art, who looked up from the stapler. The man shook his head, turned back to the door, and walked out.

AFTER TURNING OFF THE COMPUTER and the overhead lights in the shop, Art switched on the answering machine and walked out the front door, locking it behind him. He lifted the hook out of the trunk of his car, walked to the bay doors and hooked the grapple around the handle of the rolling steel gate. He pulled the gate down until the pole hit the cement, then reached above his head and brought the gate the rest of the way to the ground, where he locked it in place.

It was six o'clock and already dark by the time he pulled up to the curb and parked behind the Chevy Cavalier in front of his rowhouse. His car, an Oldsmobile Eighty-eight, wasn't out of place in

the neighborhood. The chrome molding on the driver's side was peeling off, and the car needed a paint job, but it ran great. Reliable transportation, that's all he asked for.

The light under the green-aluminum awning was on, and Art thought it looked like a huge banker's lamp. He walked to the chain-link fence that set his small brown yard off from the rest of the block, and started to reach over to unlatch the gate when he heard a car door slam behind him. He turned around, and saw another small, dark figure emerging from the driver's door, coming towards him.

Art looked to his house, the light soft and warm under the awning and then back to the two boys in the street. They were wearing big, hooded jackets, and even though they were still ten feet away and jogging towards him, Art could make out the Raiders' insignia on the breast of one jacket.

When they were closer, Art nodded to the boys. He'd never been good with children's ages, but he guessed they were thirteen and he couldn't figure out which boy drove. If they had been Jewish, they would be bar mitzvahed by now, he thought.

"Can I help you?" he asked when the boys pulled up next to him.

"Yeah, you can help us," the first boy said, and Art watched the

two boys nod at each other. The street lamp overhead was broken, and under the heavy hoods their features were all shadows.

“Are you looking for somebody?” Art asked and moved his hands to open the gate.

“You got the wrong idea mister,” the first boy said, and moved between Art and the fence. “You don’t see it, do you?” the boy said.

Art looked at him. The boy’s hands were thrust deep into the jacket pockets, and from the angle of the hood, he guessed the boy was looking at his shoes. The hood came up to Art’s chest.

“I don’t see what?” Art asked.

“The situation, mister. You’ll be giving me your money,” the first boy said.

“What?” Art asked.

“Your money,” said the second boy, and they were the first words he’d spoken.

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Art said and took a step towards his house.

“We ain’t kidding,” the first boy said. “You think this is a funny world? Well, we ain’t got time for jokes. Your money,” he said again.

Art put his hand on top of the gate and took another step. He could feel his heart racing. It was loud in his ears. He started to push the gate open when the first boy straight-armed him in the sternum. Art staggered backward, surprised, and then felt pressure on the back of his right arm. He twisted his arm forward and turned his head to see a gash in the sleeve of his canvas jacket.

The quieter boy stood there holding a knife in his hand. It looked like a steak knife, the kind you get in a set of six. The boy's hood had fallen back and looked like a huge collar around his head. Art could see the boy staring at the knife, then lift his eyes to Art's sleeve. He couldn't be sure what the boy was thinking.

"Money," the first boy said, but Art didn't turn around. Impulsively, he grabbed the fist clutching the knife, and closed his fingers around the boy's. The small fingers felt warm, and the boy's fist fit Art's palm like a tiny ball.

"Aw, shit," he heard the first boy say, but he didn't let go, didn't relax his grip.

"This isn't serious," Art said, and he wasn't quite sure who he was talking to. It didn't sound like a question. They stood in the half-light of the porch lamps and Art listened to the rushing in his ears.

“You know what I’m thinking,” Art said after a time. “I’m thinking,” he said, “this isn’t personal. I’m thinking you should tell me that,” he said. “Tell me this isn’t personal.”

The boy stood there, staring at the knife, and at Art’s hand. He shuffled his feet back and forth, and then stood still again. If the street light were working, it would have been like daylight where they stood, and Art could have seen the boy’s hooded eyes. As it was, he stood there for another minute, holding the boy’s fist, his palm starting to sweat. He listened to the engine of the running car, and tried to figure out what the boy was thinking. When he looked into his face, he couldn’t see a thing. Art cut the boy a look and tried to stare him down. The boy just worked his jaws, ground his teeth. When the boy’s lips parted, Art thought he was about to talk, thought he might tell him something. The boy just stood there, the fur edges of his hood blowing in the light breeze. Art wanted to tell the boy he should pull the hood back on, that it was cold. Instead, he said “Go,” and pushed the boy back into the street as he released his grip.

He watched the first boy come around and tug on his friend’s sleeve, and then they were in the car, the engine racing, driving

down the street.

Art turned back to his house, and then stopped for one more look. The car was already out of sight, but he raised his hand as if to wave, then dropped it to his side.

He lifted both hands to his face and cupped them around his mouth. "You're too young to drive," he yelled after them, then added, "There's laws about that, you know. It's for your own good."

When he closed the gate behind him, the latch missed. The fence gate bounced open and scraped the pavement where the sidewalk had buckled and risen. He didn't turn around, kept walking towards the front door. Somehow, things always stayed shut. For a time, he might feel exposed, but he knew there was no danger, nothing that could really get inside.