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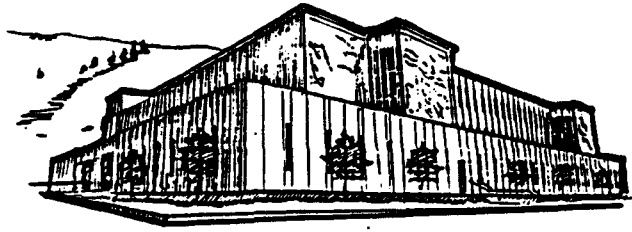
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University of  
**Montana**



WHAT DID I MISS?

Stories by

Michael Todd Pearson

B. A., Nebraska Wesleyan University, 1991

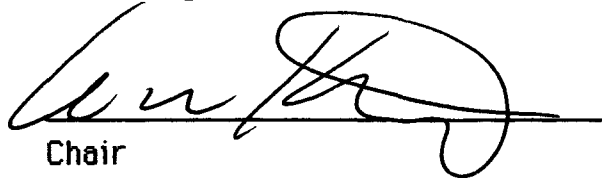
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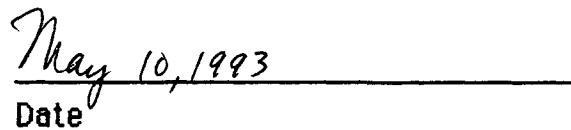
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**CONTENTS:**

**Accommodations 1**

**In the Public Interest 19**

**What Did I Miss? 41**

**Acts of Separation 61**

## Accommodations

One Saturday in the spring of that same year that I turned fifteen and my father disappeared -- unquestionably this time -- from out of our lives, Wayne Jenkins backed his pickup down the gravel driveway to our house and started unloading his things. There wasn't much: a color television set, an old Underwood typewriter, a cardboard box stuffed to overflowing with *Playboy* magazines that Wayne insisted on carrying himself and that he stashed in the basement, a pile of clothes. Probably there was more. He must have brought more with him than just those things, but at the time I didn't notice anything else.

Wayne was a slight man compared to my runaway father: lean and spare, always cinching his belt yet another notch tighter and hitching up his pants by the loops. His arms, as he lugged in the heavier items, were corded with veins and tendons, his neck ribbed like corduroy. It didn't

seem like there was ever quite enough of him there. Even what little of Wayne's hair remained was pared down to the bare essentials -- cropped short, military style. I imagined that Wayne, undressed, would have looked like a piece of jerked beef. Everything extraneous, it seemed, had worn away from him years ago.

He was here for good, he announced that first day. He intended on staying, he said, and my brother and I would do well to get used to the idea. That afternoon, standing on the tailgate of his unloaded pickup truck, he surveyed the small yard and house and smiled at my mother who was standing at the screen door talking on the telephone. Then he bit his bottom lip, wiped his calloused hands on his jeans and nodded to himself as if some great matter or other had finally been decided.

"This is absolutely for the best," my mother informed my brother and me that night. Wayne had retreated to the garage. "We need something stable in our lives."

And we -- my brother and I -- said nothing to all of this. We simply adjusted. Dan went straight for the truck. He was a year older than I and had his license, and so, on nights when he could come up with an excuse to be out of the house, he asked Wayne for the keys. When he got them, he didn't come home until late and then he answered evasively when Wayne asked him where he'd been and what he could possibly have been doing until



that time of night. I, on the other hand, headed to the basement. I cabbaged on to the dirty magazines and read them from cover to cover and started pecking out hopeless poems on Wayne's Underwood.

"It's not natural, you know," I heard Wayne tell my mother one night. I stood behind the door at the top of the stairs with my hand still resting on the knob. "It's not healthy. Holed up down there like some kind of rat."

"Oh, lay off him," she said. "At least he's not out ramming the streets like his brother."

"Well, what's with that?" Wayne asked.

"With what?"

"I mean, he doesn't go anywhere, doesn't do anything. He never has friends over. Hell, he might not have any for all I know."

"Well, that shows what you know," my mother said. "He thinks he wants to be a poet right now. He types up poems down there and I say just let him. Just leave him alone. At least he's doing something."

"You want to know what he does?" Wayne paused, waiting for an answer that never came. "I'll tell you what he does. He's got all of my magazines down there is what. The little bastard's a sex fiend is what he is," he said. He chuckled.

"What do you mean by that?" my mother asked, her voice hard.

"I'm just--"

"Take that back," my mother said. "You take it back. I won't let you talk that way about my son. I won't let anybody talk that way."

"It was a joke," he said. "Good God, I didn't mean it like that."

"Just watch it, Wayne," my mother said. "I'll kick you right out of here. Don't think I won't do it, because I will."

"I didn't mean it like that," he said. "You know good and well I didn't."

I left then. I listened that long before I crept back down the stairs to the basement where, for several hours, I sat and flipped the pages of a volume of poetry -- Rilke, I think -- and felt guilty and secretly pleased for having started something between the two of them. I stayed down there until I was sure they were both asleep.

Wayne worked the day shift at the plant with my mother (it was where they had met), and Dan and I spent the most of those early spring days in school, so we saw little of him during that time. In the evenings, when we were at home, we tried to keep quiet and out of his hair and let him relax, and he, in turn, accommodated us: he let Dan borrow his truck so he could drive around town looking for a job for the summer months, and he stayed away from the basement where I was working on my entry for the local poetry contest.

Every year in April the VFW Post's Auxiliary announced the sum that they were willing to pay for "the most deserving entry. All topics welcome." The winners were to be announced late in May by Mr. Hannah, the creative writing teacher at the high school, and presented with certificates at a small banquet at the Legion Club. That year the prize for first place was fifty dollars and, at the time, I fancied myself as some sort of great shakes as a poet, so I fully intended on winning it.

I informed Wayne of my plans.

"Don't set yourself up for a fall," he told me. "What if you don't win?"

"Well, what if I do?" I said. "What about that?"

"But, what if you don't?" he asked.

I didn't know how to answer. "I shouldn't even have told you," I said, finally. "I should have known better."

"Wait, Jeff. All I meant was--"

I didn't stick around to hear his explanation.

In May, the month of the contest, the plant cut Wayne's hours back and, consequently, he found himself with a lot of spare time on his hands. He was only working mornings then, and half a day's labor didn't wear him down nearly enough. It left him with far and away too much energy to burn; too much for his own good. He started acting cagey and restless,

pacing and smoking. On rare occasions, he even tried his hand at things in the kitchen. Mostly, these attempts were failures. Invariably, he would lose track of time staring at a hand of solitaire he had laid out on the kitchen table and something he had in the oven would get brown and hard and withered or something he had put on the stove would boil over and steam and fuss until he took care of it.

"Jesus, Wayne," my mother said on one of these nights when she came home from work. Wayne was sitting at the table trying to look apologetic. On the stove, resting in the center of a cookie sheet was a wilted baked ham. My mother poked a cautious finger at its black crust and the skin crackled. "What did you do? Why did you put it in so early?" she asked.

Wayne started to answer.

"No," my mother said, waving off whatever it was he had tried to say. "I don't even want to know. You're an accident looking for a place to happen. Just let me handle it," she said. Her face was puckered and red and her hair had fallen and clung to the dampness at her forehead. It was obvious that she was in no mood for excuses or negotiations and so, from then on, Wayne left the cooking to her.

Banned as he was from that part of the house, Wayne had to find other outlets. He started pestering Dan full-time about a summer job. Had he really looked, Wayne wanted to know, or was he just out tearing up his

truck and wasting his gas. Dan told him that he had looked, but that he was too young. The older kids got all the good jobs, he said. Maybe he'd wait until next summer. Oh, God no, he was too old for that, Wayne said. He was too old to be sitting around the house with nothing to do. So they went out looking together for a while. Wayne picked Dan up after school for a few nights and when they finally got home Dan went straight to his room, locked himself in, stereo blaring, and started lifting weights again.

Wayne was as restless as ever.

Then the pattern changed once more. After about a week of carting Dan around town for those hours from three to five when the businesses were still open down there, Wayne gave that up altogether. He left Dan alone. He let him make the rounds by himself again, and instead, after I got home from school, he would sit on the couch and watch television with me. Wayne would bring out some potato chips or some pretzels or cookies from the kitchen and sit with me and stare at the television set or out the window or simply at nothing and quietly snack until my mother got home from work. Then he would get up and follow her into the bedroom.

On one of these warm nights in the final weeks of May, after he had finished clearing the dishes away from the late dinner, Wayne came down to the basement and sat on one of the bare wooden steps and smoked a

cigarette.

"How can you stand it down here?" he asked. "It stinks like hell."

"It doesn't bother me," I said from the typewriter. "If you don't like it, you can always leave."

"I will," he said. "I don't want to interrupt. I can see that you're hard at it. I just . . . How are things going?" he asked.

I swiveled around to face him. "Things are fine," I said. "Just fine. Everything's fine."

"Good," he said. He stood up to leave. "Well, just stick with it."

The next night Wayne was back. He was hunched over on the staircase picking at a sliver of wood with his thumbnail. It had been a while since he had caught wind of one of those vague rumors that occasionally made their way around the plant about his moving back to full-time and he was thoroughly depressed. He would seriously have considered looking for a new job, he said, but it just seemed like a hell of a lot to throw away. All of the time that he'd put in and all of that. It just seemed like such a waste to throw that all away, he told my mother, to see all of that go up in smoke. So instead, he moped around the house all afternoon, and on nights like these, when Dan was locked in his room and my mother was tired and wanted just to be left alone, Wayne came down to the basement.

He didn't say anything for a while, but just sat there and picked at the stairs and watched me throw darts.

"How's it coming?" he finally asked.

"How's what coming?"

"The poem. Your prize winner. How's she coming?"

"It's done," I said, turning to look at him over my shoulder. "They're done, actually. I haven't decided which one I'm going to use yet."

Wayne quit digging at the step with his thumbnail, raised his head.

"Can I see it? I mean, them?" he asked.

I shrugged. "If you really want to, I suppose," I said, and I walked over to the jury-rigged workbench where I did my typing and put down the darts. I shuffled through a stack of loose-leaf paper, several dog-eared volumes of poetry and a slew of typed pages with handwritten corrections and picked up a manila folder. I pulled out the poems and walked them over to him. "I don't know which one to use," I said.

He read the poems slowly, painstakingly, as I waited at the foot of the stairs for his judgment.

Finally, he set one of the poems down beside him on the step and held out the other one. "I'm no judge of these things," he said, "so don't take my word for it, but I think this one's pretty good."

"That's the one I thought, too," I said, and he held out both of the

poems for me and I took them and walked them back to the bench.

Wayne lit a cigarette and tried to blow a smoke ring. "So, are you really going to win this thing?" he asked from behind the gray cloud. "You think you've got a shot, or what?"

"I think so," I said. "Who knows? It could happen."

"Boy, that would be great," he said. "That would really be something. Lord knows, we could use a little good luck about now," he said, and I watched him as he ground his freshly-lit cigarette out against the step, pushed himself up with his knuckles and treaded heavily up the stairs.

On the Friday that the winners of the contest were to be announced, I came home late from school. I'd thought about not going home at all, considered and reconsidered the consequences of just walking on by the house to God knows where, of maybe hitching a ride to some anonymous place where I would change my name and lie about my age and maybe find a job and forget about everything -- guilt and responsibility, mainly -- but it was a fifteen-year-old thing to think and I knew it even then. I knew that I couldn't just turn around and walk away from things and expect for that to put an end to them. I'd learned that much already.

Wayne was standing on the porch, waiting for me to get home. He had the screen door open and he was leaning his back up against it with one



hand behind him on the door knob. He was swinging back and forth, rocking the door with his butt and humming. There was no escaping.

"Well?" he said when I reached the steps.

I knew what he was asking, but I didn't look up at him. I ran past him into the house and into my room and slammed the door shut and braced myself up against it. For a few moments I stood there stretched out against the impartial wood, aching and feeling sorry for myself, and then I heard Wayne knocking on the door.

"What is it?" he asked, turning the knob. "What's the matter? Is it the contest?"

I didn't know what to say. I didn't say anything.

"Oh God, I'm sorry. I'm really, truly sorry," he said, and I could feel him aiming those words at me in a whisper through the crack of the closed door. "I really am truly sorry for you," he said once again. "But, hey. Come on now. You can't win them all," he said. "There's no disgrace in losing as long as you gave it your best shot. It doesn't . . ."

"Go away," I said. "It's none of your business. Just leave."

He was silent for a long while. Silent, in fact, for long enough that I had actually started to believe that he had given up, that he had really gone away. But he hadn't. He was merely waiting, planning his attack and manning his guns. "No, I'm not going away," he said suddenly. Once again, I

felt him straining with the door. "Now, open this thing up. Let me in or so help me I'll break it down. What in the hell's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," I said. "I lost. Go away."

"Open this door right now," he said, pounding.

I wouldn't back away. I kept my foot anchored at the bottom of the door and, Wayne, he kept hammering and he was yelling now, ordering me to let him in. I stood my ground as best I could but Wayne kept pushing. Something was bound to give way. Eventually, it was the door that did. Wayne shouldered his way into the room, ripping the top hinge away from the casement and slamming the door into my arm in the process. His momentum threw me back against the wall behind the door and I slid down until I was sitting with my knees up in the air. I put my head between my legs and covered it with my hands and cried. Wayne stood over me, holding on to the shattered door. He didn't say anything. Apparently, he hadn't planned any farther ahead than in, and getting in hadn't accomplished anything; it had merely complicated things. He couldn't leave now, just like that. He couldn't turn and walk away, but he didn't know what to say either.

He knelt down on one knee and he put his hand on my shoulder. "Oh, Jesus, I'm sorry," he said for a fourth time. He wrenched the sprung door shut with his elbow and moved over and sat beside me and put his arm

across my back. "Did I hurt you?" he asked.

I shook my head.

"I really thought it was a good poem," he said. "You've got nothing to be ashamed of."

He said that and I wished he hadn't because it only made me cry harder. He didn't know.

"I got cheated," I lied.

Wayne sat up a little straighter. He pulled his arm away from my back until only his hand was resting on my shoulder. "What do you mean, 'cheated'?" he asked.

"I mean she cheated. The girl who won cheated. She stole the poem."

Wayne wanted to know how I knew all of this so I told him that I had seen the winning poem on Mr. Hannah's desk and recognized it. I told Wayne that I'd begged Mr. Hannah to disqualify the poem and that he had called me a sore loser and refused.

"There's no way of changing his mind," I said, wiping at my face.

"We'll see about that," Wayne said. "Come on, we're going up there."

"It's too late," I said. "He won't be there."

"We're going," he said.

"It's no use."

"Well, we'll just go and see anyway," Wayne said and he grabbed me by

the arm and dragged me outside. In the empty driveway, he stopped and I could tell that he was wondering whether he shouldn't just wait until five o'clock when Dan would come home with the truck.

"I'm not going," I said. "I'm not walking all the way up there for nothing."

"Yes, we're going," Wayne said.

"Just forget it," I said. "It's not that big a deal."

"It is so a big deal," Wayne said.

"Well, you go then. I'm not." I tried to wrench free of him.

"Oh, yes you are. I'm not doing this for me," Wayne said and he set his jaw and adjusted the grip he had on my arm and started walking.

At the school Wayne found Mr. Hannah in his home room looking over some assignments at his desk. Bent over the papers with a red ink pen in his hand, Mr. Hannah looked as if he were entirely composed of hunched shoulders and bald spot. There was a transistor playing on his desk and when he heard us coming he reached up and clicked it off. Wayne's face was flushed and sweating from the long hike. He was breathing heavy.

Mr. Hannah rolled his chair away from the desk. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

"You can explain a few things, for starters," Wayne said, still catching

his breath. "Now, what in the hell's this all about?"

"What's all what about?" Mr. Hannah asked. "You lost me."

"This contest," Wayne said. "Jeffrey tells me that somebody cheated and that you're not going to lift a goddamn finger. Is that about the size of it?"

Mr. Hannah stood up and put his palms down flat on the top of his desk. "Now just calm down a little bit." He said the words slow and loud, distinguishing between each one of them. "I'm afraid that somewhere along the line you've gotten your wires crossed." He reached into one of his desk drawers and pulled out some papers. "This is all one big misunderstanding," he said. "If you'll sit down for a minute, we can straighten this whole thing out."

"That's what I thought," Wayne said and he paused, glaring at Mr. Hannah as he caught his breath. Then he backed up slowly, feeling behind himself with one hand until he came to one of the first-row desks and slid himself in. "I figured this was just some sort of mix-up," he said.

Mr. Hannah looked me over coolly with his eyebrows scrunched down into a straight line but kept right on talking to Wayne. "I think we need to speak in private," he said.

Wayne twisted his slender body around in the desk, the brittle wood straining and creaking, and nodded me out of the room with a quick jerk of

his head. I walked out into the hall and stood by the doorway and leaned my head back against the cool brick, listening. I could hear Mr. Hannah's voice, calm and placating, attempting to reason with Wayne. "This is just one big misunderstanding, Mr. Atkinson," he said. "I think I can clear this all up."

"I'm Wayne Jenkins," Wayne said. "I'm not the boy's father. He told me that somebody had cheated on this thing."

"Well, I'm afraid somebody has cheated," Mr. Hannah said. "I'm sorry to say your information's right on the money as far as that goes."

I waited around to hear that much and then I couldn't bear to listen to them anymore. I slammed through the double glass doors at the front of the building and by the time I hit the street I was at full speed, headed for home at a dead run.

Dan had Wayne's truck up on the jack and was finishing tightening up the lug nuts when I got home. The flat tire was lying off to the side of where Dan was working in the driveway. It looked like he had driven on it quite a ways without any air. I could see where the rim had eaten its way through the rubber. The tire was ruined, there was no question about that, and I had my doubts about the rim, but I didn't say anything to him. I just walked into the garage, thinking that Wayne wasn't going to appreciate

what Dan had done to his truck.

I walked through the garage and up the three steps to the door that led into the kitchen. When I got to the top, I heard my mother talking on the telephone. Her voice was tragic, very animated, and I sensed somehow that she was talking to Wayne. It was nothing that I wanted to hear.

As I turned back down the stairs something caught my eye. Lying off to the right at the bottom of the steps was a case of beer. Wayne occasionally made a stash there, there was nothing unusual about that, but I wanted it. That was the funny thing. I thought I had to have it. So I picked it up and snuck back out of the garage, hurried down the driveway and then circled around to the south three blocks and headed for the service road that ran along the railroad tracks.

Both ditches were lined by waist-high weeds and I felt safe and secluded. The road dead-ended not far from where I set the case of beer down in the gravel and there was never any traffic. I tried to drink one of the warm beers, but it tasted like dish soap and so I ended up just sitting, mounding the gravel into cone-shaped pyramids and feeling miserable. What it was I had intended to accomplish through cheating disappeared as I sat there. I couldn't imagine why I had ever done it. Pride maybe, I thought. A wish to be fifty dollars richer. But none of that seemed justification enough for what I had done, and, though I knew there were

plenty of people who were going to be demanding explanations -- my mother, Mr. Hannah, Wayne -- I knew I would never be able to explain myself to any of them. I didn't even want to have to try.

When Wayne finally found me I was standing by the side of the service road with the beer cans scattered at my feet. I was picking the cans up one at a time, chucking them at the train as it stormed by. Wayne sat in the truck and honked his horn and then he leaned over and opened the passenger-side door and honked again. I ignored him. I picked up another full beer and heaved it at the train. It landed in an empty coal car and made a hollow thud and then it was gone. Wayne got out of the truck and walked over beside me. He picked up the last three beers. He didn't try to say anything over the noise of the clacking wheels. He shifted two of the cans to his right hand and reared back with his left and launched the other one at the train. He quickly threw the other two and, when he had finished, he stuffed his hands in his pockets and stared off into a sky that was slowly fading away to night. The look on his face told me that he'd run out of knowing what to do. Maybe he hadn't ever known. Maybe there was nothing left for either one of us to do. I walked over to Wayne's truck and got in and sat there and watched Wayne making his way back, kicking through the gravel, moving toward me. His slow, short strides ate up the ground that lingered in the space between us.



### In the Public Interest

When Clayton Saunders began his little war on American Federal that spring, nobody in Bristol was overly concerned about it. In fact, most of us silently applauded his efforts. Clayton's wife, Dorothy, had been hit by a train in January -- she'd died, and we took that into account. For some of us that fact in and of itself would have merited him a kind of special exemption. For others, though, who needed more, there was: American Federal refused to pay off on Dorothy's policy. That persuaded all of us to indulge him for a while.

Dorothy Saunders had been heading in that empty coal train's direction for going on thirty-four years. We all thought so, even if we didn't say it. From the day she moved out of her father's house on the one side of Bristol County and into Clayton's house on the other, we thought it. She was just too delicate and fine boned, too sensitive for the life she'd chosen to live

with Clayton. That whole time must have seemed to her like a mistake. She didn't leave, though, and we held that to her credit. She stayed on that farm and never once spoke a public word of complaint or remorse. Then sometime in the fall of that last year Dorothy stopped speaking altogether. This must have put Clayton at a loss. He did the only thing he could think to do: he drove her to the hospital.

Because not only did Dorothy refuse to speak, she refused to dress herself and to bathe herself and even to eat. It was all the mildest form of passive refusal, but refusal nonetheless. She would allow herself to be bathed and dressed and spoon-fed and led by her arm. Left to her own devices, however, she merely sat and stared. At the hospital Dr. Abrams suggested from behind a clipboard that he might run some tests, conduct a psychiatric evaluation. Clayton flat refused. He'd convinced himself that all she needed was a few days' rest and that's what he told Dr. Abrams. It put an end to any discussion of Dorothy's mental health.

So after she'd suffered what Clayton wouldn't permit anyone to call a nervous breakdown, they moved her to an empty bed in long-term care. There her few days' rest turned into a few weeks' rest and finally into months. Until one morning in January when that troubled little beautiful brown-haired woman, dressed in only her beige robe and pink slippers, took it into her head to go walking straight out that hospital's front door and

into a cold Nebraska winter. She made it too. She made it as far as the railroad tracks even. Matt Nokes saw the whole thing. He didn't say a word in public before the trial, though. That wasn't until March.

In the meantime, Louise Atchinson was busy petitioning for a coroner's inquest and preparing her case and requesting a full-blown jury trial. And all of this on Clayton's behalf because American Federal Insurance wouldn't represent him. They had bigger worries; they were worried about their other client, Great Northern Railway, and its criminal liability in the death of one Dorothy Saunders. They stood to lose quite a sum. If, as Louise Atchinson was hoping to prove, Great Northern was responsible for a negligent homicide because that train had been speeding through town and hadn't made a full and reasonable attempt at stopping, a jury might grant Clayton quite a liberal award. Neither of those companies could afford a thing like that. Their defense was quite simple: they held that Dorothy had committed suicide.

In March Matt Nokes took the stand. He explained that he'd been sitting in his postal jeep, idling its engine at the crossing guard and thumbing through a stack of junk mail. When he looked up he saw her. She was shuffling down the tracks about a hundred yards west, headed out of town. It took a moment for him to realize what was about to happen, to decide that she truly was walking the tracks with her back to him and the

train and not just crossing over. He sat and watched for a moment. He watched her and by this time he could hear the train's bellow and he'd even begun trying to talk her off of those tracks, to curse and plead at her. None of that was doing any good, though. So he slid out of his jeep quick and ducked under the guard arm and ran out onto the tracks himself and started flagging the engineer and yelling. He jumped up and down and waved his arms, but the train only blared its horn again, twice this time. That's when Matt understood that he was going about things exactly backwards. It was too late for mere yelling and screaming and jumping up and down; that point had long since passed. So he turned around to the west and sprinted off down the service ditch, hoping to cover the hundred or so yards that separated him from that doomed and shuffling woman before that train -- now fully braked and blaring and sending up a shower of sparks -- did. Of course, he didn't.

That's as far as Matt Nokes got. It was the one and only time he ever told it and he didn't finish. He sat in the chair and held his head in his hands and started blubbing and couldn't continue. All he could manage to blurt out was that there was nothing he could have done, nothing he could have done. Judge Vance dismissed him and had him escorted out. When he treaded past we averted our eyes. We didn't dare look at him like he was then. We let him squeeze on out the doors virtually in private and didn't

look back up at the stand until we heard the door sigh shut and the bailiff call Clayton's name.

He made about as poor a witness as Louise Atchinson had thought he would. As soon as American Federal's lawyers got Clayton on the stand and asked him point blank if his wife had lost her mind, and even before Louise Atchinson could jump up and make her objection, Clayton told the court hell no she hadn't. He'd been briefed on this. He knew the consequences. But something in him, some sense of pride or devotion or simple bullheadedness, wouldn't allow him to say what even he knew to be true. And he paid for it.

Louise Atchinson suggested that they might appeal, but she also suggested that she didn't see where it would do any good. Clayton didn't either. Of course, by this time he must already have had his mind set on recouping his losses in his own way.

And Clayton's losses were plentiful. Not only had he lost the suit, but he'd lost Dorothy's insurance money as well (the verdict had voided the policy), and he still owed the hospital and now he owed Louise Atchinson for legal fees. The money was some of it, then. At least, we assumed it had something to do with it; probably we had already begun to measure his grief that way -- in dollar bills. Certainly we knew that Clayton had. So we should have seen it coming. There were plenty of signs if any of us had

been interested enough to see them, to acknowledge them, to do anything about them. The first one came later that month.

Late on a March night that year he telephoned Bud Gottschalk at home and said he needed to see him right away. He told him it was urgent, an emergency. Bud Gottschalk lay in bed propped up on one elbow and listened and wanted to doubt it; twenty-some-odd years of phone calls in the middle of the night from distraught farmers worried about their livestock had made him skeptical. If he was going to have to put his pants back on, by God, he wanted to be sure about this. "An emergency, Clay?" he said. "Because when I get out there, it goddamn better be."

"Isn't that what I just said?"

"And you're positively certain?"

"Well, I wouldn't have called you, now would I?"

"A guy'd think not, but . . . Ah shit. Give me fifteen minutes."

That was giving in easy for Bud Gottschalk. Normally, he would have demanded some specifics over the phone, found out what the trouble was and decided for himself. But not this time, precisely because it was Clayton who had called. He trusted Clayton's judgment. Clayton usually tended his own livestock and didn't relish calling and asking Bud for help. As a result they both had about the same idea of what constituted an

emergency. Bud hung up the phone and reached for his pants.

He drove through town in the rain and continued west out to Clayton's. The house and barn and quonset were set back off Highway Two and were sheltered on the north by a double row of cedars. Clayton had owned and farmed that whole section of scrub grass and sandhills north of town for over thirty-seven years. And so by this time he must have grown accustomed to failure, must have resigned himself to it. There's no other way he could have stayed out there like he did, attempting to grow corn and to raise a few measly head of cattle and trying to make a go of that place year after year.

When Bud pulled into the yard Clayton was standing in the doorway of the barn with a flashlight in his hand. Bud stepped from his pickup and sank down in the mud up to his cuff.

"This better be good," he said and swung his bag out of the truck.

"She's in here."

Bud ducked his head from the rain and followed Clayton into the close, warm barn and on into a lit stall. The cow was a red-and-white-faced hereford, still wet from the rain, and the heavy acid smell of her slick coat, tinged with the odors of blood and manure, hung in the air. She lay still in the hay, the side of her nose flat to the wood floor.

"Jesus H. Christ," Bud said when he saw the cow. "What'd you call me

for? You should've just waited till morning and called the packing house."

"I didn't know what to do," Clayton said. "If she'd prolapsed is all, I could have done something. But this is worse."

"Well, I see that much. She's hemorrhaging."

Bud unclasped his bag and dug for a needle and sutures. The cow's uterus hung from her, stretched out along the stall floor like a sopping, crimson gunny sack, coated with shit and blood and straw. There was a five- or six-inch tear along its rumpled length -- likely the result of a badly placed hoof -- that still throbbed blood. The calf which had been the result of this over-expulsion was nowhere to be seen.

"It ought to have strangulated, so she wouldn't be bleeding so much. Jesus God, Clay. How long were you going to leave her like this?"

"Is it bad?"

Bud had hold of a needle and a thin spool of silk clamped in his mouth. He spit the roll of thread into his hand, unwound a length and bit it off. Bud's face flushed as his fingers worked and he lectured Clayton: "You can't wait until the last minute with something like this, Clay. If you've got a problem you got to let somebody know. I've got to have something to work with when I get here. You can't wait until Christ himself couldn't help you before you call in the cavalry. It just doesn't work that way."

"Can you save her?"



Bud scrounged in his bag again and didn't answer. He took out a bottle of saline solution and a fist-sized wad of gauze pads and began to irrigate the area closest to the wound.

"Couldn't you even clean her up? If I put that back in she'll die of septic shock. She'll probably die now, she's lost so much blood."

"What are you saying?" Clayton asked.

"I'm saying, get the hell out of my light and go get some water. You probably killed her already farting around like you did. Because--"

"Well goddamn, Bud. I guess I shouldn't even have called you, then," Clayton said. "I should have just saved you the trouble and let her die. If she's going to anyway, you about as well just leave her be. Just don't even waste the effort."

Bud was red cheeked. The wire glasses he wore had slipped down to almost off of his nose and, with his dirty hands, he couldn't nudge them back into place. The saline and gauze pad treatment he was applying had only managed to stimulate the bleeding. From on his knees beside the cow he gazed up at Clayton over the top of his glasses. "Because cows can't use the telephone you know, Clay. What, did you expect for her to walk into the house and dial me up?" Bud stared up at Clayton a while longer before he forced his attention back to lacing up the wound.

Clayton left then. He'd probably heard as much of that as he could

take and so he walked right out of the barn. Only Bud didn't know where he was going. Bud was intent upon stitching shut that tear and, besides, he'd sent Clayton to fetch some water, so he must have supposed that was what Clayton had in his hand when he came back into the barn and stood over that cow's head -- a bucket of water. It wasn't. It was a pistol and Clayton had it aimed down somewhere just above and behind the cow's eye as her head lay there on the straw, unmoving, and stared up at him. Bud didn't even look up from his sutures. He just started ordering Clayton around some more. "Pour some of that on here," he said. "I can't see what the hell I'm--"

There was only the one quick blast. Certainly there would have been an echo, too, when the shot reached up to the rafters and then shook back down again, but Bud didn't hear it. He was caught mid-stitch and was so shocked and deafened and scared that he rolled over onto his side from where he'd been squatting over the cow and cradled his head in his arms. He waited for another shot. He fully expected another shot, one that would be meant for him this time. He lay there curled up tight for a moment, anticipating the worst. Then he finally peeked out from beneath his arms and saw Clayton just standing there with the gun hanging down at his side -- not aiming it specifically, just holding it loose, dangling it next to his leg.

"What in the . . . Jesus God," Bud said. He was hot now. He was tired and humiliated and half deaf and that shot was still ringing in his ears.

Clayton stood there with the gun.

"I guess you about as well go home now, Bud. I shouldn't have drug you all the way out here in the first place."

"You crazy goddamn fool. What in the hell kind of stunt was that?"

"Just go on home, Bud," Clayton said. "I don't suppose you'll be much use to her now anyway."

"Why . . ." Bud said. "Just goddamn you. Goddamn you, to hell."

"I shouldn't even have put you to the trouble," Clayton said, and he waved the pistol toward the doorway. "Now, get out of here."

That next morning, after Clayton had started thinning his herd with a 45, Bud Gottschalk came into the Hi-Way Diner and sat down on a stool and told us all about it.

"My lord, Bud. You might have been killed," Kathy Milligan said from behind the counter.

"Don't tell me," Bud said. "He just doesn't make any goddamn sense."

Kathy shook her head in agreement.

"Oh, for Pete's sake," Lonnie Bauer said. "Look at the two of you. His wife's dead. That's what don't make any sense."

"Yes," Bud said. "And I sympathize with that."

"Now wait," Lonnie said. "You just said the cow was dying, right?"

"Well, maybe. But that doesn't change the fact that he drug--"

"Hold on, now. Just hold on a minute. And so he put it down and now you're saying that don't make any sense, right?"

"I guess so, but you're--"

"Well, then how do you figure?" Lonnie asked.

Kathy quit wiping circles in the counter. "I'm with Bud," she said.

"That man's a time bomb just waiting to go off. Somebody ought to shake some sense into him before he does."

"Well," Lonnie Bauer said and he paused to light a cigarette, "I say a man's cattle are his own business."

Certainly most of us felt about it like Lonnie Bauer did, that his business was his own and that we ought to stay out of it. We regarded the outburst as merely a part of his grieving, as a natural reaction to the violence of her death that would eventually work its way out of his system. So long as he refused to acknowledge that anything was bothering him, we felt obliged to do the same.

For several months that was easy enough for us to do. Clayton practically disappeared. He stopped coming around the Hi-Way Diner, he

didn't turn up at the sale barn on Saturday mornings and he'd never been one to hang around the Legion Club on Saturday nights. We didn't know what he was doing with himself and we didn't agonize over it. Probably he was just brooding. Maybe that first outburst had triggered something in him, set him to thinking and calculating his losses and contemplating how he might get his own back. It wasn't long before he'd made up his mind either.

Roy Hopper sat at the counter in his uniform between Lonnie Bauer and Howard Truitt. Kathy Milligan was behind the counter and leaning over it with an order pad in one hand and a pencil in the other. Roy, who had already finished his lunch, said, to no one in particular but just out into the air generally, something about a seatbelt.

Lonnie Bauer had an empty mouth. "How's that?" he asked.

"I said, 'He had his seat belt on.'"

"Who's this?" Howard Truitt asked.

"Oh, come on," Roy Hopper said.

Roy leaned back and stretched and patted his gut and noisily adjusted the pistol in his leather holster. This was for dramatic effect. Roy used it as a sort of preface to his story telling, though he always said something about having eaten too much and the holster pinching him and

the gun weighing it all down on just the one side and adding to the effect.

"Let's hear it, then," Howard Truitt said.

So Roy asked Kathy to level off his coffee and, after he sipped that, he leaned back and took a deep breath. "This was yesterday noon," he said. "I was headed back into town for lunch, driving along Highway 21. I was just north of Oconto -- about three miles out -- when I run up on Clayton Saunders. He was stomping along the road ditch, sweating like a bull, and headed back into Oconto. So I pulled over to the shoulder and rolled down the window and asked him what the matter was."

Roy paused. He stopped talking and he looked at Lonnie Bauer and Howard Truitt and then up at Kathy Milligan. "And do you know what that man said?" he asked. Roy looked at them again, each one of them in turn, and then finally he told them: "He said, 'I run into some trouble up the road.'"

This earned Roy Hopper some grins and even a few outright chuckles.

So Roy said he got Clayton into his cruiser and they drove on down the road as Roy pumped what little information he could from Clayton. It seemed Clayton was on his way back from hauling a load of corn to the elevator in Cozad. He'd emptied out his silos in anticipation of this year's harvest and was on his way back into Bristol when he'd run into his trouble. And by this time, sitting beside Clayton and headed down the

highway in his patrol car, Roy must have thought that that way of putting it was funny himself because he could see the semi lying stranded in the ditch with its face flushed up against the trunk of a cottonwood tree.

"Well, what in the hell happened?" Roy asked Clayton as he pulled up along the roadside. The semi was a cab-over pulling dual trailers and it was in the wrong ditch. It had had to cross over a lane of on-coming traffic to end up on that far side where it was with its smashed front end hugging the tree. Roy thought to ask, "You ain't hurt, are you?"

Clayton shook his head.

"Well, what happened?"

"A stray. Somebody's stray was in the road. I swerved to miss it and . . . Well, see for yourself."

They got out of the car, walked across the blacktop and Roy examined the point of impact. The cab of the truck was caved in where it had met the tree on the passenger's side; the windshield was spider webbed but intact.

"Holy smokes," Roy said. "And you ain't hurt? How fast were you going?"

Clayton looked down and spat into the weeds and looked back up into Roy's face. "Hard telling," he said. "Didn't have time to check the speedometer."

Now Roy stopped talking and looked at Lonnie and Kathy and Howard again all hunched like they were over their separate pieces of counter listening to him. "My best estimate," Roy told them, "is that he couldn't have been doing more than thirty-five miles an hour. And he was wearing his seatbelt."

"What of it?" Lonnie Bauer asked.

"Well," Roy said, "I'm not making any accusations, here. But did you ever know Clayton Saunders to wear a seat belt? Or drive thirty-five miles an hour, for that matter?"

"My Lord," Kathy Milligan said. "It's a wonder he didn't kill somebody. He probably will before he's through. You ought to lock him up, Roy. Lock him up before he gets it done, I say."

"That's a fact," Roy said. "But that ain't all of it."

Roy said he got Clayton into the cruiser and they headed back into town. Roy called into the station to have them send somebody out with a tow truck and then he started grilling Clayton.

"So how do you want me to write this up?" Roy asked.

"What do you mean?"

"My report," Roy said. "The accident report."

"I thought I already told you."

"A stray cow, then? That's how you want me to put it?"



"What're you saying?" Clayton asked.

"I ain't saying anything," Roy said. "I'm asking."

"Put whatever the goddamn hell you want in your report," Clayton said.

"Fuck your report."

Roy pulled over then. He swerved the car to a stop by the side of the highway and turned to face Clayton.

"Now you listen to me," Roy said. "Who in the hell do you think you're talking to? Whose side do you think I'm on here, anyway? Somehow you've got me turned into the bad guy on this thing and I just don't get it. The way you talk I don't know whether I'm 'us' or 'them.'"

Roy paused and waited for Clayton to say something but he wouldn't. He just stared out the windshield at the paved road.

"I'm only trying to do you a favor," Roy said. "But if you--"

"No," Clayton interrupted. "No, by hell. Just keep it. Nobody's asking you for any goddamn favors." Then he got out of the car and slammed the door shut and started walking into town.

"The simple son of a bitch," Roy finished. He looked up at his crowd of listeners there in the diner and shook his head. "That man wouldn't know a favor if one bit him on the ass."

So we watched Clayton Saunders collect his insurance money then and

we even tried to persuade ourselves that he had balanced things out, that his account was square. We attempted to convince ourselves that Clayton Saunders had salved his conscience with the fact that Dorothy's death had at least amounted to a sum equal to the value of one depreciated 1974 Kenworth semi. And we did all of that in the face of the facts. Because nothing changed. Clayton didn't return to anything close to a normal social life. He didn't begin to show up at the diner once again or even the sale barn. He stayed hidden out there and so we knew that he still thought there was a payment due him. We knew that he was only waiting to decide how to collect. Still we did nothing. In the end it was as though we had given him permission by not stopping him. Our silence must have been as misinterpreted as his was.

It took Clayton some time, though, to decide what type and size of bill to send American Federal. Then one night in August he discovered what he must have thought would be his final way to collect.

It was Mildred Powell who finally called and roused the fire department and got some of us out there. She and her husband, Frank, lived just west of the Saunder's place and by the time Sheriff Hopper and the rest of us arrived, Frank was in his front lawn standing away back from his house arcing a stream of water as high up onto the roof as he could get

it. He was dressed in only a pair of pants -- no shirt, no shoes -- and was wet from the trailing spray of the jet of water that he aimed at his shingles. Clayton sat in his pickup that was parked in the dirt lot that separated the Powell's barn from their house. He sat on the passenger's side with the door open and his feet trailing in the sand and the cab light shining over his shoulder and throwing his shadow down onto the ground at his feet. The Powell's barn was already a total loss. The corrugated metal of the roof glowed cherry red from the heat and looked as though it were only balancing precariously, as though it were about to topple.

When Sheriff Hopper pulled into the yard the emergency crew had the grass fire contained and when he saw Frank standing there, bare from the waist up and watering the clapboard, he couldn't help hollering at him.

"Hey, Frank," he yelled. "You're aiming in the wrong direction, ain't you?" He pointed at Frank's barn and, as if on cue, the roof came down, hard, and threw up a shower of sparks and even sent shards of wood flying, trailing through the night's darkness.

Frank threw down the hose and left it snaking its way across the lawn. He started down through the gate and out to the lot where Roy Hopper's car was parked with its lights still circling in their kaleidoscopic fashion. "Roy," Frank yelled. "Roy . . . Roy, by God, you better lock that son of a bitch up." He pointed at Clayton still slumped in the seat

of his pickup. "You lock him up before I kill the son of a bitch."

"Now, hold on a minute," Roy Hopper said, and he shook loose the grip that Frank Powell had placed on his arm as he'd pointed out to the Sheriff just exactly which son of a bitch it was he wanted him to arrest.

"Goddamn it, back off of me a minute and tell me what the hell's going on."

"The son of a bitch burnt down my barn is what. And, goddamn it, put him under arrest."

Eventually that was just what Sheriff Hopper did. He took Clayton into custody and drove him to the Bristol County jail after it was determined that he had indeed started Frank Powell's barn on fire -- albeit unintentionally, because he had originally meant only to burn his own. But it was August and it had been a dry summer and when that scrub grass pasture that separated Clayton's barn from the Powell's had flared up, Clayton hadn't acted in time. He hadn't thought to call the police, or even to get on the phone and warn the Powell's. Instead he got in his truck and raced over to Frank and Mildred's and pounded on the front door until he roused them and by then it was too late.

So Clayton was in court again. Only this time he was the defendant, and this time Louise Atchinson wouldn't represent him. So Clayton refused legal counsel altogether and when he stood up in front of Judge Vance at the arraignment hearing, Dale sat and thought for a moment. "Can I ask--"

Dale finally said, "Can I ask just what the hell you think you were trying to prove?"

Clayton stood blank faced and looked down at his hands on the table in front of him and didn't say anything. He wouldn't look up at Dale.

"By God, that's what I thought," Dale said. "That just about sums it all up right there."

So he had stepped on our toes then; he had jeopardized our public interests and that was about all we would stand for. He'd unleashed his outrage and it had turned on us and we felt betrayed by that. We, after all, were merely innocent bystanders, purely witnesses, and as such we demanded that we be excluded from the proceedings. And now Clayton had violated that trust, and we were hardly sympathetic to his cause. Probably we were as bothered by the fact that he'd failed as anything, because we had to see it for what it was then. We had to see that he was hurting and misguided and too proud to ask us for the help that he needed. Only, now it was too late for any of that. Now we wouldn't have offered him our help, even if he would have asked for and accepted it. We had our own interests to look after.

Clayton spent three nights in jail before he was released on bond, and, while he waited for the trial, he sold off land and cattle and machinery

until he had raised enough money to make restitution and then he must have had enough. He cleared up his debts first. He must have wanted none of that hanging over his head, must have been concerned with appearances even then. Because then he did end it. He was found only a couple of days after it must have happened -- this would have been September now -- because Matt Nokes alerted Sheriff Hopper that he hadn't picked up the mail from his box. Sheriff Hopper drove out and walked in the back door and found Clayton slumped on the couch with a bullet wound in his head.

So then it was over and done and we could admit that we had seen it coming. We could say like Lonnie Bauer did that you had to expect something like that from a man whose wife had been killed and who had been unable to find anything approaching justice through the proper circuits of the legal justice system. And we could nod our heads in consent when Kathy Milligan told us that somebody should have shook some sense into him a long time ago. We could hear all of that and, with those words, we tried to persuade ourselves that Dorothy and Clayton Saunder's deaths had taught us something more than silently to shake our collective heads.

### What Did I Miss?

When Scott finally answered the door, the first thing he said to Ethan was, "Shut up. Get in here." He was standing in the doorway in just his boxer shorts holding a drink and Ethan was a little reluctant to brush by him into the apartment. Scott grabbed the sleeve of Ethan's jacket with his free hand. He pulled Ethan inside and, just inside the door, stopped him. He pointed to the ceiling with a raised finger and then he brought it down to in front of his lips. "I thought you were going to miss this," he whispered. He still had a hold of Ethan's arm. "Listen," he said.

Ethan couldn't have stopped himself if he had tried; he listened. That was always the way with Scott, Ethan thought -- you never really knew. He wished Jill had been here to see this, whatever it was. It would no doubt have proved something to her.

The door was still open and there was a stiff breeze blowing in off

the parking lot. It roughed Scott's bare skin, making goose-flesh from virtually nothing. Scott looked tall, Ethan thought, imposing even, standing there in the vague light that issued from the kitchen, his curly brown hair matted to his head. Scott raised his drink up to his mouth and started to take a sip but then didn't. The glass made it all the way to his lips, but he didn't swallow. Ethan was still listening to the ceiling, but he was watching too. Scott was standing there in just his underwear with his head cocked to one side, one ear to the ceiling, and he was squinting his eyes as if he couldn't decide what to do first, drink or listen.

Things were quiet for a minute and then Ethan heard something break. A dull, muted thud came at them from the ceiling and then splinters of something, glass or china maybe, rained down on to the linoleum floor of the apartment above them. He heard a man's voice scream something incomprehensible and then just as suddenly things were quiet again.

"What the hell?" Ethan asked. "What's going on up there?"

Scott grinned at him and finished off his drink. He looked down through the clear bottom of his glass at his wriggling toes and shook the ice, went over to the door and swung it shut with a bare-footed kick.

"Lover's spat," he finally said as the door slammed. "Newlyweds. They moved in a couple weeks ago." When he laughed his nose wrinkled up.

"Thank God," he said. "Finally, they're in the kitchen." Then Scott fingered



out one of the nearly melted cubes, crunched it up, and padded away across the living room floor and on into the kitchen without saying another word.

Earlier that afternoon, the telephone had rung while Ethan was still in the shower. He wasn't sure he'd actually heard the first ring -- maybe he'd only imagined it or his ears were playing tricks on him; maybe it had been the neighbor's phone. He stood still and listened, holding his breath. Somewhere down the hallway a stereo was playing and the music bled through the walls and mingled with the noise from the faucet. Maybe that was it. Goddamn loud neighbors anyway. But he heard the ring again and he was sure of it this time. There was no mistaking. It was his phone and he knew it for a fact now and felt relieved. He shrugged. He figured he'd just let it go. The hell with it, they'll call back. It wasn't easy to ignore, though. It just kept ringing and ringing and, by the time it had hit its twentieth or so, he'd come to the conclusion that something must be wrong. Oh God, what now? he thought, and he threw back the shower curtain and ran to the phone naked and stood there dripping onto the floor, onto the arm of the couch.

"Yes, I'm here," he said, lifting the receiver. "This is Ethan."

"Ethan. Finally. God, it took you long enough," a voice said.

"Scott? Christ, you scared me to death," he said. He let his glistening

shoulders slump, relieved. "The way the phone was ringing, I thought maybe something had happened or something."

"Wait," Scott said. "You can tell that by the way the phone rings?"

Ethan blew a puff of air through his nose that was almost a laugh and moved the receiver to his other ear. "Very funny," he said. "Oh, you're a laugh riot."

Well, he did what he could, Scott said, and he'd really like to stop and chat, but he didn't have time. He said that this was strictly business. He had big plans for the evening. He called Ethan an integral part.

"An 'integral part,'" Ethan said. "Boy, I'm gonna hate to miss that. But I can't." Ethan tried to explain his long-standing Saturday night arrangement with Jill -- she made dinner and he sprang for a movie -- but Scott wouldn't listen.

"Be here by eight," Scott said. "Eight sharp. If you're not here I'll be so distraught I'll probably have to kill myself off or something."

"Oh, sure. Promises, promises," Ethan said.

Scott laughed and hung up.

Ethan smiled, put the receiver down and shook his head. The music was still blaring from somewhere down the hallway. It soaked through to his apartment and it wasn't even from next door. He could tell that. It was more than just a few doors away and he felt like going down there,

wherever it was; felt like telling them a few things. Why they couldn't keep it to themselves was beyond him.

He heard a low hum and looked up at the window. The pane was rattling in the windowsill. Oh, for Christ's sake, he thought. He put his hand up to the glass to steady it and the vibration stopped; the hum died away. He hunched over and studied the bottom of the sill. The caulking had dried up and cracked and sections of it were missing altogether. If it wasn't one thing with this place, then it was another. He looked up and out across the street. In one of the apartments across the way a curtain fluttered and fell back into place. Ethan took a quick little suck of air. Christ, how long had he been standing there like that? he wondered, and he snatched up a pillow from off the couch and tried to cover himself as he ran back into the bathroom and jumped in the shower.

The woman in the apartment above Scott's was pleading with her husband. Scott and Ethan were in Scott's kitchen listening. Ethan couldn't make out every word that was being said up there, but the gist of it was that she hadn't done anything, that he was making a big deal out of nothing.

"Likely story," Ethan said to both Scott and the ceiling. "Are you going to let me in on this or what? Shouldn't we call somebody or something? The police?"

"Hell no," Scott said from the sink. "They've been at it for about an hour. Jesus, sit down. You're making me nervous."

Ethan sat down at the kitchen table. "So what the hell are the big plans, anyway?" he asked.

"Be patient. All in good time. You want some of this?" Scott asked, holding up his drink and a bottle of Scotch. "Come on," he said when Ethan didn't answer. "Come on."

Ethan shrugged and Scott handed him his drink and turned back to the sink. Scott started to make another one for himself. There was another crash over their heads.

"What the hell's going on up there?" Ethan asked again.

"They're fighting," Scott said.

That night during dinner, Ethan had laughed again about what Scott had said to him over the phone, about the suicide bit. They were sitting at the table in Jill's apartment, finishing up. He leaned back in his chair and stretched and let slip a little premeditated laugh. Then he sat there waiting for Jill to take the bait.

She set her cup down. "What's so funny?" Jill asked. Her eyebrows were pinched down into a line and she swiped at her bangs to get them out of her face. They fell straight back again, a brown veil over her eyes. She

stared through them.

"It's just Scott," Ethan said, and he leaned back again, grinning and patting his gut. Then he told her about the phone call and Scott's threatening to kill himself. He told her it was practically one of his hobbies, a regular pastime for him. One time even, Ethan told her, while Scott's parents were out of town, he had decided to have a party and had actually gone into his bedroom and come out with a shotgun in his mouth. He'd stripped off the shoe and sock from one foot and was hopping around on the other with the blue metal of the barrel clicking between his teeth. But jumping around like that he couldn't get his toes up to the trigger. He was only messing around, anyway, Ethan told her. The gun hadn't even been loaded. Scott just liked to be the center of attention, Ethan said. Scott would pull just about anything for a kick. The party had been an incredible success.

Jill didn't seem amused. She'd never particularly cared for Scott in the first place. She had, in fact, a list of grievances against him: a dented rear fender and a poisoned goldfish, just for starters.

She put her fork down. "You're not going over there, are you?" she said. "Not tonight?"

"Well, I thought, maybe," he said. "If it's no big deal."

"But it's Saturday night," she said and she left it at that. She looked

at him as though she thought that had carried a considerable amount of weight. She sat there for a moment biting her lip and then she finished her dessert.

"We should probably call somebody," Ethan said. They were still in Scott's kitchen -- Ethan at the table and Scott leaning up against the stove -- and the neighbors were still going at it.

"Call who?" Scott asked. "The police? You know exactly what they'll do about it. They'll knock on the door and say, 'Uh, the -- uh -- neighbors downstairs reported some -- uh -- domestic violence at this address and -- uh -- ' Bullshit," he said. "Then they'll be all over my ass," he said, pointing at the ceiling again, "and I don't want to deal with that. It's no majorly big deal, anyway. They're at each other constantly," he said, and by the time he was finished his cheeks were glowing and he had spilled his drink down the front of his bare legs.

"Son of a bitch," Scott said and he looked down at the floor, accusingly. He carried what was left of his drink into the bathroom with him and Ethan heard him turn on the shower.

Ethan shook his head and laughed. He got up to make himself another drink. He poured himself a glassful and set it down on the table. Then he rifled through Scott's cupboards, found a roll of paper towels, and cleaned

up the mess Scott had left on the floor.

After dinner, Ethan and Jill had cleared the table together in silence and then he'd gone into the bathroom while Jill ran water for the dishes. He was just finishing up in there when she started saying something to him through the door. He only caught pieces of it.

"What?" Ethan asked, as he walked back into the kitchen drying his hands.

"That's what I'd like to know," she said. "What?"

"What, what?" he asked, shaking his head.

"The attraction," Jill said, and she held up a finger that dripped dishwater and suds and that pointed back over his shoulder. "What in the world is the attraction, is what I'd like to know?"

Ethan waved the hand towel at her like a matador. "We're just old friends," he said. "It's not something I can explain." He went back into the bathroom and hung the towel and, for her satisfaction, turned off the light.

"Well, can't you even try? You can try, can't you?" she asked.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "Okay, okay," he said and he called for a time-out with his hands. "Okay, but just give me a minute, here," he said.

Ethan stood there tapping on the kitchen counter and thought about it

for a while. But how the hell was he supposed to go about explaining this thing, he wondered? Why had she even brought it up, for that matter? That was a better question. What the hell did it matter to her? He thought it was ridiculous to have to be explaining himself like this. The only things that really came to mind were images not explanations: Scott standing on the back porch of his parent's house, snorting Everclear from a teaspoon in the pale moonlight while small air-raid squadrons of june bugs and moths and mosquitos performed their kamikaze rituals with the porch light; Scott running, screaming mad and naked, through the shallow water of a stream, and then falling and splashing and, when he emerged again, Scott yelling at Ethan to join him; Scott reclining on the hood of his Dodge, smoking a cigarette. But how could you tell those things, Ethan wondered?

"Oh Christ, I don't know," he finally said, waving his arms. "Just curiosity, I guess. I mean, he's an interesting guy. He's one of those guys that you just want to be there to see what the hell he'll do next. You just never know about him," Ethan said, "and so he makes you curious." Ethan stopped, embarrassed because he could tell that Jill didn't understand what he was trying to say. "That's about the only thing I can come up with," he said. "Just curiosity." He shrugged.

Jill brought her pink hands up wet and laid them on the edge of the sink. "Curiosity killed the cat, you know," she said.



"Well, that's productive," he said, in an exaggerated voice. "That helps a lot. I mean, if you were going to be pigheaded about this thing, then why did you even ask?"

Jill wiped her forehead, pushing her bangs with the back of her hand. "Pigheaded?" she said.

"Yes, pigheaded," he snapped.

"Well, screw you," she said and she hurled a soggy dishrag at him that went high and to the left and plopped against the wall.

"See," he said, and he threw his hands up over his head and looked down at the dishrag as if it had proved his point. "See, you're too frigging pigheaded to want to try and talk about this."

Jill's jaw tightened and her face went flat. She looked absolutely reasonable. "Out," she said and she pointed the way. "If you're going, then just get to it. Leave."

"Fine with me," Ethan said. He turned around and headed for the door. "Just more pigheadedness," he said.

"God, you always have to get the last word in," she said. "Screw you."

He stopped with his hand on the door. "Oh, just blow it out your ass, Jill," he said. "Just blow it out your ass." He slammed the door shut behind him.

The girls arrived while Scott was still in the bathroom. Ethan had been in the kitchen staring at the walls and wishing that Scott would hurry the hell up in there: he desperately needed to go. When the bell rang, Ethan hurried to the door and there was a brief, awkward moment there. Two girls that he'd never seen before were waiting on the stoop. A short, pretty brunette in front and a taller one with glasses peering over her shoulder.

"Yes?" he said.

"Hi," the lead one said.

"Well, hi," Ethan said and he just stood there in the doorway, one hand on the doorknob, the other on the casement, waiting for some kind of a sign.

"Um, can we come in?" she ventured.

"Oh. Geez, yeah. Sure. Come on in," he said. Ethan backed out of their way and closed the door behind them. "Scott's just in the, uh -- Go ahead and sit down. I'll be right back," he said and he rushed to the bathroom door, knocked and opened it a crack. Steam came pouring out at him and Ethan crawled through the opening against the wet gust. Scott was standing at the sink wrapped up in a towel, clearing the mist from the mirror with the back of his hand.

"You set me up, goddamn it," Ethan said. "You never said a word about

this."

"Are they here already?" Scott asked. He glanced at his wrist but he wasn't wearing a watch.

"I've got a girlfriend," Ethan whispered. "This is not a good time for this," he said, and he told Scott, vaguely, about the fight. "Jill will absolutely have a cow if she finds out about this."

"She's pissed anyway, right? Well so what she doesn't know, won't kill her," Scott said.

"No, but she might kill me," Ethan said. "That's what I'm worried about."

"Relax," Scott said. He assured Ethan that it wasn't really a set-up. He told him that nothing even had to happen, but that Ethan should keep the taller one company while he took care of business. He punched Ethan in the shoulder. "Lighten up for Christ's sake," he said. He told Ethan a little bit about the girls and said, "Now get out there," and pushed him back through the door.

The girls -- Sarah, the taller one; and Tracy, the shorter brunette with outrageously long, red nails -- were sitting on the couch. They'd gotten rid of their jackets somewhere and were both holding drinks. One of them had turned on the television set and they were laughing at something on the screen. Ethan threw himself into a chair.

"What did I miss?" he asked.

By the time Ethan had weaved his way across town to Scott's place it was nearly eight-thirty. The Saturday night traffic had been maddeningly slow, but the drive had actually done him some good. It gave him time to sift things through. At a stoplight, he noticed a couple of high-school kids in the car behind him leaning over toward the center of the seat with their faces pressed together. Ethan adjusted the rearview mirror. Brother, get a room, he thought. And by the time he found a place to park in the overstuffed lot, he had resolved to at least try and patch things up with Jill in the morning.

Scott came out of the bathroom with a pink face, clutching the towel in a knot at his waist. "Miss me?" he asked. "Back in a jiffy." The girls giggled and sat there sipping Scotch. Ethan shook his head and rolled his eyes. The girls laughed again. When Scott came back out he was finally dressed and lighting a cigarette. "How's he treating you two?" Scott asked, kicking Ethan's chair. He flicked a cigarette out onto Ethan's lap and passed them around to the girls as well.

"We were doing fine until you got here," Ethan said, and he let Scott light his cigarette.

Scott sat down on the couch between the two girls and they all sat there smoking and talking and Ethan looked over these two. The taller one, Sarah, was a very pale, listless-looking girl who, Scott had assured him, got very easily sexed-up if he was at all interested. From the looks of her though, it appeared to Ethan that she was probably the type to get more conned into it than actually worked up to it. Tracy, the darker haired one with the nails, could almost have been beautiful, Ethan thought, if she hadn't tried so hard at it. She was made-up to the hilt: bright red lips, dark blue eye shadow, heavy foundation, the whole nine yards.

They all sat there, alternately talking and puffing and sipping their drinks. Sarah, Ethan noticed, kept flicking and flicking her ashes, like real smokers don't -- like Scott and Tracy didn't do -- and Ethan made a conscious effort not to ash so often.

As soon as Scott had drained his glass, he stood up. "Anybody for a refill?" he asked. He took all of the glasses, and the girls sat on the couch whispering until Scott came back with what he called "the reinforcements." They all laughed.

"Sounds like everything's quieted down up there," Scott said, raising his chin toward the ceiling.

"Where?" Tracy asked.

Scott told them about the fight that had been going on upstairs.

"That's awful," Tracy said. Sarah agreed, nodding.

"Just wait. They'll be at it again," Scott said. "Just wait." Then he took Tracy by the arm and led her into the bedroom.

Ethan looked at Sarah and she gave him a little commiserating smile as if she understood what a fix he was in. "Look," he said, "I don't know what Scott told you about me but . . . God, I'm just no good at this," he said.

"That's all right," she said. "Don't worry about it." She set her drink down and got up and went over to his chair and sat in his lap.

Ethan tried to say something, but she shushed him. "It's okay," she said. "Don't worry about it." Then she covered his mouth with her lips.

Ethan was in the bathroom trying to regain a little composure. The alcohol had done some damage and so he filled the rest of his glass up with water and drank it all down. He filled it up again and drained it. He slapped his face as he looked in the mirror. Then he heard a racket out in the living room.

He stuck his head out the door and one of the girls squealed. "Oh God, no," the other one said.

Ethan went back out there and found Scott on the telephone. He was holding one arm out like a traffic cop, trying to keep everyone quiet. Sarah chewed on her thumbnail. "Kristie?" Scott whispered into the phone, then,

"Oh," he said, and he hung up.

"Who the hell was that?" Ethan asked. No one even looked at him. From overhead, there came the sound of a telephone slamming back into place. Ethan knew exactly who it'd been. "Son of a bitch," he said, stupidly.

The sound of heavy foot treads filled the apartment. Everyone was quiet, listening. They all stared up at the ceiling and the husband upstairs started yelling. "They're at it again," Scott said. He laughed into his drink and the glass steamed over as if he were breathing ice. The girls looked at each other; Sarah was grabbing her arms. Their eyes got wider and wider until they finally broke down laughing.

"Son of a bitch," Ethan said again and he started to laugh, despite what he felt. What could he say? "Are you totally out of your mind?" he asked. "You are," he said. "You're out of your skull."

Scott sat there by the telephone looking up at him with his legs crossed. He smiled and started dialing again. "No," Ethan said, and he interrupted the connection with the toe of his shoe. "No more, Scott. Not while I'm here," he said. "Leave them alone for Christ's sake."

"Take it easy," Scott said. He still had the receiver up to his ear.

"No," Ethan said. "It's not funny anymore."

"God, you're really turning into an asshole," Scott said.

"I'm turning into an asshole?" Ethan said. He reached down and grabbed the receiver and threw it into the seat of the chair. The recoil of the cord pulled it from the cushion and it thumped when it hit the floor.

Scott looked up at Ethan and then over at the receiver.

"Don't even think about it," Ethan said.

"Hey," Scott said, "this is my place. Who are you, to tell me, anyway?"

He leaned over and started to reach for the phone.

Before he knew what he was even doing, Ethan lunged at him. He grabbed Scott around the chest and the force of his momentum rolled them both over onto their backs. Scott was quickest to right himself. He got to his hands and knees, Ethan still clinging to his chest, and put his forearm across Ethan's face. The girls were screaming. "That's enough," one of them kept yelling, "Stop it. That's enough." Ethan managed to throw Scott over and they slammed into the coffee table. Someone's drink upset and it ran over the edge of the table. It made a puddle on the carpet before it started soaking in.

"Cool it," Ethan said, giving up his hold. "Just cool it for Christ's sake." The way he said it made it sound as if he'd already forgotten who'd actually started the whole thing. He stood up and backed away warily.

The girls were sitting on the couch. They'd stopped yelling and Tracy had her hand over her mouth as if she were embarrassed for having ordered



them to quit fighting or maybe worried that somebody had been hurt.

"Get the fuck out of here," Scott said. He sat there with his legs crossed by the spilled drink, his back up against the coffee table. He tried to straighten his hair with his hand. "You're turning into a serious asshole," he said.

"No. It's not me," Ethan said, "it's you, Scott. It's you. It's fucking sad. I can't even take it anymore."

The girls just sat there on the couch not taking sides. Scott picked up the receiver and listened into it again. Ethan walked over to the door as Scott dialed. "You're pathetic," Ethan said from the door. "You're a waste."

Scott kept listening into the receiver. "Jill?" he finally said. "Hey, long time no see."

Ethan shook his head and slammed the door shut behind him.

On the way out to his car he looked at his watch while he took deep, even breaths. It was twelve-thirty. He looked up at the sky and it was a fine, autumn night. Clear as a bell, he thought. He could see for miles. The stars were out in numbers. When he got to his car he stopped and listened to see if he could hear the couple fighting, but he didn't hear anything. Nothing. It reassured him a little. He didn't know what he would have done if he'd heard them fighting. He'd have to call over there in the morning and try to straighten things out with them, he thought. How could

he go about getting their telephone number, he wondered? He got into the car. He figured that, if he pushed it, he could make it to Jill's by one.

There was going to be a lot of explaining to do; he realized that. He sat there behind the wheel revving the engine. He wished that he could convince himself that he'd only been an innocent bystander, but he hadn't been, and he realized that too. He was as guilty as anyone in this thing. He slipped the car into reverse and eased it out of the lot.

### Acts of Separation

Aaron moves into Laura's apartment on a breathless Friday morning in mid June. The sun, already white hot, beats down at a glancing angle onto the wide, tree-lined street where Aaron's car sits, nudged into a space entirely too small. He makes several stumbling treks from the curbside to the front room of the new apartment, arms loaded down with boxes and eyes squinting into the reflected heat that bounces off the sidewalk. Lugging in the final load, he kicks his dog Sandy out of the doorway where she lies panting in the last breaths of air-conditioning that sweep out of the apartment. "In or out," he orders, agitated by the heat. "One or the other." But he doesn't give her time to decide. He nudges her into the apartment and swings the door shut behind.

Amid the wreckage of his morning's work, Aaron slumps down onto the unfamiliar couch. Save for the futile, humming whirr of the air

conditioner, the apartment is silent -- enticingly silent. He stretches back and picks the sweat-soaked front of his shirt away from his chest, fighting the desire he has to go rummaging from room to room, inventorying the items in the refrigerator and medicine cabinet, fingering the contents of drawers and closets. It's a childish desire to know and control; an urge, finally, to have the upper hand, and one that, for the time being, he overrides. He sits up, instead, and reaches for the telephone. He dials his parents' number quickly, denying himself any chance for second thoughts, and gets his mother on the phone. "Mom," he says without preamble, "Mom, I'm engaged. I thought you might like to know. I'm getting married." The lie is almost laughable, he thinks, but he persists with it, delivers it again as though he were repeating some vital statistic from a news report.

There is nothing insincere about the congratulation his mother offers. "My God, this is quite a surprise," she says. "How did all this come about?"

Later that afternoon, Aaron apologizes for the mess as he widens a path for Laura; he makes a trail that beelines its way through the boxes from the front door to the kitchen. She follows it a few steps but stops just at the edge of the couch, and looks down, despairingly, at the dog. "What the hell is this?" she asks and takes half of her lower lip between

her teeth. For the past three hours, Aaron has attempted to brace himself for this moment, but now he's choked for words. In what he had considered merely an act of discretion, but that now seems to him more and more like borderline insanity, he had conveniently neglected to tell her about Sandy -- his overweight, red-and-white spaniel with broad back and arthritis.

"What is this dog doing here?" Laura wants to know.

"Didn't I tell you?" Aaron asks. "I could have sworn I told you."

Laura has both arms around a bag of groceries. She swings the sack to her hip, pokes angrily at the oversized lenses she wears and then leaves them unmolested for a moment, allows them to resume their oily skid down the crest of her nose. "Oh, for Christ's sake," Laura says. "I do not want to have to deal with this. Does he pee?"

"What?" Aaron asks. "In the house? God, she's not stupid or anything."

Laura shifts her attention back to the dog. "It's a she?" She sets the groceries down on the floor, tucks a few strands of dark brown hair neatly behind her ear, kisses at the dog. "Come here, pooch," she says, unpleasantly. "What's her name?"

"Sandy," Aaron says.

Laura says it once to herself and then once to the dog. She scratches the dog's head, roughs its ears. "God, I just don't know," she says. "If it wasn't for the landlord -- I mean, I'd like to, but we'll probably get kicked

out of here.”

“Don’t worry,” Aaron says. “She’s very inconspicuous. You won’t even know she’s around.”

Laura stands up with the groceries. Sandy is flat on her belly, all four legs splayed out like a fallen cartoon horse. “I should never have let you talk me into this,” Laura says, shaking her head. “I can tell already this is a bad idea.”

Aaron had, in fact, talked Laura into letting him move in with her, but, to be honest, the stunt hadn’t called for any full nelsons or hammer locks. She was living alone then too -- another victim of that general migration peculiar to the summers in a college town -- and, frankly, needed someone to share the rent. They’d met over drinks at a little pub downtown, had exchanged, for the most part, a number of irrelevant biographical details and, an hour later and just closing in on drunk, Laura had nodded her consent. “For a while,” she said. “Just as a sort of a test run.”

There had been no question of Aaron’s living alone. His finances had prohibited any such luxurious arrangement as that: he needed to lay something aside for fall tuition, had a month’s worth of the unpaid bills Tad had stranded him with to take care of. So, for the first couple of weeks of June, he’d lived out of his car. Everything he owned was either

stuffed into the trunk or piled in a heap in the back seat. He showered in the thin stream of the public facilities at the city park, ate strictly what little he could steal from work, strapped Sandy's leash to the bumper of his car when he was on duty. It was June; he managed. Meanwhile, he'd bargain shopped for a roommate. He worked mainly by word of mouth, hoping to find a friend of a friend who knew somebody and, eventually, the haphazard strategy had paid off.

"A test run," Aaron said. "That's perfect." He reached across the small table and covered her tan hand with one of his. Aaron looked at her. Her hair fell loosely to her shoulders; the dim light played back and forth across her glasses, obscuring her eyes. Laura pulled her hand away. "It's just what the doctor ordered," Aaron said. He felt distinctly more optimistic than passionate, and feared that maybe he'd given the wrong impression. "You can't even imagine how perfect this is going to be," he said. "Just wait till you get to know me."

When Laura gathered her purse, ready to leave, Aaron stood up with her and tossed a couple of bills onto the table, then he snatched them up and recklessly flapped down a five.

Aaron works the night shift, from five to two, at a coin-op laundromat. Video games and pinball machines line one wall, and in a

corner of the building there's a small, recessed lunch counter. He makes change for customers, squirts ketchup onto hot dogs, wipes down all the machines, mops up after he locks the door. It's a strictly minimum wage, going-nowhere job as his father seldom fails to point out to him, but Aaron doesn't mind. He ignores the frequent offers his father makes to help him find something new. Just a phone call, his father tells him when Aaron rings his parents on Saturdays, one phone call is all it would take. Aaron's father is a lawyer in Denver and has, he swears, enough connections in Nebraska to get Aaron on as a runner with one of the firms in town. Aaron doesn't even consider these offers. The laundromat isn't such a bad deal, after all. There are even some fringe benefits. He can do his laundry for free, and, that first Saturday, he offers to do Laura's as well.

She's a bit apprehensive at first but, finally, she concedes. "I just like to have things done my way," she says. "I'm some kind of a control freak or something, I guess."

"Hey, no problem. I'm a professional. This is how I make my living."

"Well, it's nothing to brag about," Laura says. She hands over her laundry with a smirk.

"God," Aaron says, "you're worse than my dad."

Aaron carries the basket out to his car on his way to work and slides



it into the passenger-side seat. At the first red light he comes to, he leans over the rumpled pile of dirty clothes and inhales her body's smell. a complicated amalgam of evergreen and *Opium* and locker room. The smell reminds him, for some reason, of the infrequent bronchial attacks he had suffered as a child and of the close, mentholated smell of his bedroom -- there is that same tightness in his chest, that same overwhelming feeling of powerlessness.

Aaron sits on the couch, trying wholeheartedly to read a book. He has his feet propped up on the coffee table. The inane images of a daytime soap opera flicker noiselessly across the television screen: women in beachwear chat at poolside, a waiter balancing a silver tray distributes umbrella-ed drinks. This is Aaron's ideal of summer, but it's certainly not his summer. He'd rushed into this one with grand dreams of reform, and, although his resolve may be flagging now, he is still reading, still determined to finish up at least some of his uncompleted coursework. These periodic bouts of self-improvement have afflicted him since early adolescence. At various times then, he'd flung himself at weightlifting, jogging, the alto saxophone; and he went at these endeavors like he went at most everything -- with the sort of dogged determination and single-mindedness that ultimately got him, exactly, nowhere.

Aaron hears Laura come into the apartment at just after five o'clock. He is resting with an open book spread on his lap and Sandy spraddled out on the floor at his feet. Aaron's head lolls over the back of the couch. Laura approaches him from behind and puts her hands over his closed eyes. "You're late for work," she says, whispering the words into his ear. "You're late for work." Aaron's awake but doesn't attempt to move her hands. He arches his chin higher and presses back into the warmth of her thighs. "You're late for work," she whispers again. He takes hold of her wrists but doesn't try to move her hands; he holds her there that way for a moment, feeling the soft hiss of her breath. "You're late," she says again, only louder this time and pulls her hands free. "You better get a move on it," she says as she climbs the stairs up to her bedroom. Aaron drags himself off the couch.

Despite the fact that he's already late, Aaron stops off at the local florist's on his way to work. The shop is closed, but he pounds on the door and a bald-headed man fumbles with a ring of keys. Aaron orders roses and has them sent to the apartment. He writes five or six different notes, but finally settles for, "I'm watching you." As he reads over the card it strikes him that the message is a bit more ominous than he had intended, but he leaves it anyway and hurries back out to his car.

At work that night, Aaron miscounts some change. He shorts an elderly woman five dollars and she points out the error with a sour face. "Young man," she says, "if you think I'm dimwitted, you've got another think coming." Trivial confrontations like these annoy Aaron; he's simply not equipped for them. He apologizes and re-counts the change but the woman goes away with her money, still looking vaguely dissatisfied. Something in the woman's manner reminds Aaron of his father, of a letter he received from him in April, just before his twenty-fourth birthday. *You are*, his father had written, *helplessly and hopelessly, a boy*. His father was referring, directly, to his job at the laundromat, but the message, Aaron had little doubt, was meant to reverberate, to apply to his other failures as well -- his poor academic standing, his recklessness in terms of financial matters. But these are not pleasant thoughts, and Aaron abandons them. He concentrates, instead, on the memory of Laura's thighs against the back of his head, of the dry kiss of her whisper on his ear.

When Aaron gets home that night he rifles through his dresser drawer. Near the bottom, he finds the pair of underwear he's searching for and rubs them between his thumb and forefinger, touches them to his cheek. The room is dark and he moves over to the window and holds them up against the moonlight. The briefs are worn and cotton and nearly transparent. He's been saving back a pair each week from Laura's laundry, has acquired two

pair thus far. This last time, Laura had questioned him about it. "Um, I'm missing some things," she'd said, and, at her request, Aaron had actually gone upstairs and simulated digging through his own clothes basket before he'd come back down. "Nope, I can't find anything," he said. "What are you missing?" Laura told him that they were just some things and that they must have gotten lost. "Those dryers," Aaron said. "You have to feed those things regularly, you know." His words seemed to have satisfied her.

Now, in the dim light that issues from the window, Aaron slips his arms through the leg holes and slides in up to his elbows. He buries his face in the taut, thin cloth, but the briefs smell only of fabric softener. Disappointed, he stuffs the underwear back in his drawer and readies himself for bed.

"I don't know where they're coming from," Laura tells him. It's Saturday and she's referring to the flowers. Aaron sends them twice and, occasionally, three times a week.

"Beats me," Aaron says. "Isn't there a card?"

Laura checks the flowers again. They are roses, three red roses. "Sometimes," she says, "but not always. It depends. Usually, it's just three roses."

"And it's not Jeff?"

"No. I asked him. He's not real happy about it either."

"Crazy," Aaron says. He widens his eyes, shakes his head. "Must be some secret admirer."

"I don't know what to think," Laura says. "It's spooky." She picks up the flowers and carries them into the kitchen. There is a vase on the table with three roses drooping over its rim. She plucks out the wilted flowers and replaces them with the fresh.

Later that afternoon, the telephone rings while Aaron is upstairs gathering his laundry. The very first ring strikes some subliminal chord in him, and, in a mad dash, he rushes down the stairs, cuts Laura off at the receiver. He answers with the certain conviction that he is diverting a catastrophe and when he hears his mother's voice, he feels justified, relieved. "Hi, mom," he says and rolls his eyes at Laura. She pads back into the kitchen.

"How are you?" his mother asks. "How was your Fourth?"

"Okay, I guess. It was fine. I had to work."

"Did you get your grades?" she asks, cautiously.

Aaron lies, says that his grades were good. A pleasant surprise even, he says.

"That's terrific," she says. "Just super. I kept telling your father

things would turn out. But you know how he is."

Yes, Aaron says, he knows exactly how he is, and, for a brief moment, he hopes that she will begin some violent denunciation of his father, enumerate his faults one by one. But, of course, she doesn't. She asks about Laura.

"When are we going to meet her?" she wants to know. "We're so curious. It's just wonderful. Your father and I think things are really looking up for you. Don't you, honey?"

"Oh, yes," he says. "Definitely. You'll meet her. Don't worry about that. We'll fly out sometime," he says and lets his voice trail off vaguely.

The conversation is nearly more than he has energy for, and, after he hangs up, Aaron chastises himself: he should never have forgotten to call his parents. It could have been a very horrible mistake.

That night, he keeps back another pair of panties and a bra from Laura's wash.

One week later, Aaron comes home from work and sets Laura's clothes basket down on the living room floor. He goes up to his room. He undresses and paws through the drawer where he keeps Laura's underwear. Toward the end, the searching grows frantic; he empties the drawer out onto his bed, but can't find the underwear among its contents. They are

unmistakably gone.

Laura goes out to the grocer's that next morning and, while she's away, Aaron goes to her room and searches out the missing underwear. He drags them out of a bottom drawer, puts them on top of her freshly washed basketful of laundry and lays a note over the top. The note explains that her stuff had apparently gotten mixed up with his, that he is sorry about the inconvenience. After he's put the note there, he can't decide whether it covers his tracks, as he'd intended, or further confirms his guilt. Regardless, he leaves it there and hopes for the best.

Aaron is in his room when Laura stops in his doorway, the note in one hand and three roses sticking out of the curled fist of the other.

"This has got to stop," she says. She shakes the flowers at him. "No more. I mean it. And don't even try to tell me it wasn't you because I stopped off at the floral shop on my way home --" She holds out the card that had come with the latest batch of flowers. Across its top border are the words *Bahlman Floral* in curlique print and she points at it with a tight little "so there" sneer on her face. "It was you," she says. "They told me it was you and this has to stop. If it's not flowers then it's my underwear, for God's sake. This all has to stop and it has to stop now. You've got one week to get the hell out. One week. I mean it."

She starts to cry and Aaron feels sorry for her. He feels ashamed of

what he's done to her. "Okay. No more," he says.

"You're damn right, no more," Laura says, "because you're moving out. I won't tell Jeff about any of this, but you've got to leave. I can't live like this. I just can't."

"No more," he says again. "I promise. And I'll look for another place. I never meant for any of this. It's just that . . ."

"Well, so?" Laura says. She works her pinkie finger inside the cuff of her blouse's other sleeve and dabs at her eyes. "Maybe you didn't. But how do you think this makes me feel? You just can't go around doing this. God, and I liked you too. That's how stupid I was. I want you out of here. One week and you're gone."

"One week. I promise," Aaron says. "I'm sorry."

Laura turns and leaves, still crying.

Aaron sits down on the edge of his bed. "Come here, Sandy," Aaron says and pats his hands together. The dog waddles over, her I. D. tags clicking with every step.

For the next few nights, Aaron parks his car on the street because Jeffrey's truck is parked in his space. Aaron punches off from work around two-thirty in the morning and it irks him to have to come home and park at the curb. It makes him feel like a stranger in his own apartment. He's



certain that Laura must have told Jeff, that Jeffrey's there at her request.

When Aaron gets inside, Jeffrey and Laura are usually snuggling on the couch in front of a late show. Laura has to be to work by nine and is occasionally dozing by this time, but she seems to need to make this stand. She puts everything she has into her hearty hellos when Aaron comes in the back door and climbs the stairs up to his room. She hollers up the stairs after him asking about his night. Aaron only mumbles something incomprehensible and shuts himself up in his room and reads until early into the morning hours.

On other nights, though, when he gets home, they are already in her room, shut off from him by a closed door. On these nights Aaron generally stands in the closet before he undresses and listens for anything that might seep through the dry-wall from her room. After he undresses he crouches in his closet again, on his hands and knees, and sticks his face up against the far wall and he hears them making love -- hears, at least, the low incomprehensible sounds that might be the sounds of love-making. And one night he hears it for sure, the gasps and sibilant murmurings that he can only attribute to the crisis-point. He pushes away from the wall and then turns back again and with the motion sets off a jangling thunder of clothes-hanger applause. He reaches up to grab them from his haunches and loses his balance. His elbow smashes into the wall and his head

follows. He sits deathly still for a moment, hearing nothing. They've obviously heard the noise, couldn't have avoided hearing it, in fact. Sandy's even awake, staring at him with her dog eyes as he waits. There is a moment or two of protracted silence after the wire hangers have ceased their racket and in that moment Aaron makes his way over to his bed and covers himself.

He lies there in bed for nearly half an hour before he hears Laura's door open and sees the streak of light in the crack above the floor that confirms someone has emerged. He lies flat on his back and cocks his head toward the door feigning sleep. Laura opens his door, sticks her head around the corner of his doorjamb, listens, watches for some sign. Aaron slits his eyes and watches back. She emerges full into the light that shines down the hallway from her bedroom and stands there holding onto the door frame with one hand and tugging down on the edge of her nightshirt with the other. The shirt falls just at mid thigh, is sleeveless. He notices the damp hair clinging to her forehead as she reaches for the knob of his door again and swings the door slowly, noiselessly shut, before she goes down the hall to the bathroom.

Aaron is still lying awake on sweaty sheets an hour later when Jeffrey finally leaves.

Laura is up early the next morning -- a Saturday, the Saturday Aaron is supposed to move out -- and she starts running the vacuum as soon as Aaron hits the shower. He comes out of the shower and dresses for work. He's scrounged all week for boxes and they sit empty, lined against the far wall of his room. That's as far as he's managed to come to moving out. He hasn't looked for a place to live and Laura hasn't asked him about it all week. The boxes are apparently enough to satisfy her. Aaron's put off the packing because he thinks there still might be a chance.

Aaron grabs four slices of bread and a soda from the refrigerator and goes to the park for the day. He feeds the bread, in crumbs, to the ducks and geese that squawk around the lake. It's a beautiful day and he just can't make himself go back to the apartment, can't stand the thought of facing Laura, all those empty boxes and the act of filling them. If he just stays away from the apartment, he figures, Laura won't have a chance to ask him to leave. He moves from the park bench for the first time that afternoon and drives to the laundromat.

"What the hell is all this?" Aaron asks when he gets home from work that night. The living room floor is crowded with cardboard boxes. Laura has one of them between her feet, loading it with books.

"I just can't take it anymore," Laura says. "I'm moving your ass out." She flicks hair from in front of her face, pokes it behind her ear. She

seems to be waiting for some sort of objection on his part, but none comes.

Aaron is just inside the door and motionless, heeding the same instinctual advice that, as a young boy, had kept him from provoking the neighbor's german shepherd, from nervously fidgeting under the weight of one of his father's lectures.

Laura pokes at her finger-smudged glasses. "Your mother called tonight," she says, "and I heard all about your little wedding plans. And I think you're sick. You're leaving." With that, she turns her attention back to the box and starts jamming his books at it again.

"Just leave those," Aaron says. "I'll do that in the morning."

"What the hell were you thinking?" Laura asks. She stops packing books. "I mean, did you believe all of that stuff you told them or what? Because I'd really like to know."

"I don't know what I was thinking," Aaron says.

"Well, was it just a line?" Laura asks. "Or did you really believe it?"

"I don't know. I just did it. I really don't know."

"You know that's exactly what I think, too," Laura says. "I seriously don't think you do know. I don't think you know the difference between what you want to believe and what's real. You just do things and say things and concoct these fantasies and then you believe them." Laura stops

long enough to drop another book into the box at her feet. "Well, all I know is, you better wake up. You better wake up quick."

Aaron can't think of anything appeasing to say, so he simply says, "Leave that stuff. I'll get it in the morning," and then strides up the stairs and into his room. Sandy is spraddled out, asleep at the foot of his bed. He pushes her down on the floor, looks at the clock. It's two-thirty in the morning. He sits staring at the luminous digits wondering, stupidly, how he could have managed to let a thing like this happen.

After a few minutes, Laura comes upstairs and goes to her room, slamming the door behind her. Aaron sits on the edge of his bed for a moment and then grabs Sandy by the collar. He leads her into the kitchen, opens the door to the basement, walks her down those stairs as well. He grabs a shovel and goes out to the back yard and starts digging. It is a clear night and the moon shines at half-mast, mingling its light with the stars overhead and the pale, sanitized glow of the street lamp. He digs furiously, intently. He jumps on the shovel with both feet and wiggles the handle, throwing his whole body against the wooden shaft in order to remove the biggest plugs of earth that he can manage. He digs deep, widening the space to shoulder width and piling the fresh earth in a neat mound by the side of the hole. After he's gone down about two feet and squared the sides, he flings the dirt back at the hole, tamping it as he

goes, stopping only occasionally to roll loose his shoulders and drag his arm across his sweaty face.

When he goes back inside he props the shovel up against the house and washes the soil from his hands. He takes off his shirt and dries his hands on it and wipes down his face and chest. Then he crawls up the stairs and cracks open Laura's door and speaks her name softly through the opening. He hears the bedsprings and then her husky, sleep-dried voice asking what's the matter

"Sandy died," he says. "Sandy's dead. She's out in the yard. I buried her. I can't take it anymore. Can I come in?" He is crying and wringing his shirt in freshly blistered hands. His sobbing is uncontrollable. He feels so truly alone that he's nearly convinced himself of Sandy's death, of the dog's abandonment as well.

Laura gets out of bed and opens the door. "What are you talking about?"

"It's Sandy," Aaron says, and he tells her again.

"Are you sure?"

"What do you mean?" Aaron says. "Of course I am. Christ, of course."

"But -- I mean, I'm sorry; I really am -- but what can I do?"

"Well, can we talk? Can I just come in for a minute?"

Laura stands in the door, then closes it and when she comes back she's

wearing a robe. "I'm sorry," she says. "This is pretty awful timing for all this. I really am sorry. I liked her too." She puts a hand on his shoulder, steers him down the stairs. Aaron shivers, sweat-soaked, and she takes his hand and leads him over to the couch, sits down with him.

"The digging made me stiff," Aaron says and stretches his arms out. He's not crying anymore.

"I'm not sure you should have buried her out there," Laura says. "I know you probably don't want to hear this right now, but I think it's illegal. Turn," she says.

Aaron looks at her and she motions for him to turn around. He twists his back to her and Laura starts to knead his back and shoulders.

Aaron feels grateful and heart-broken and alone and he needs to tell her those things, but he tells her that he loves her instead as she massages his shoulders. He turns to her and says it again and tries to kiss her, but she pushes him away.

"You just have to ruin everything, don't you?" she says.

"But I love you," he says.

"Well, don't," she says. "You can't. You can't, because I won't let you."

She starts to rise and Aaron grabs her wrist. "No, wait," he says. He has a firm grip on her arm but she stands up and manages to shake free.

"Don't you touch me," she says.

But Aaron can't stop his hands. He takes hold of the pocket of her robe and keeps her from leaving. "Just wait," he says. "Don't I even get a chance to explain?"

"Get your goddamn hands off me." She twists away from him and he lets go. "You've had plenty of chances," she says. "You used them all up already. You don't get anymore. Why don't you just go to bed?"

He reaches for her again but she takes a step back and stands there out of reach. "I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry; I'm sorry; I'm sorry."

"It's too late for sorry," Laura says. "Go to bed. And you're out of here in the morning." Laura gathers her robe at the neck, and goes upstairs to her room, looking back over her shoulder as she goes.

Aaron stays on the couch for a few minutes, looking at the boxes of his books that Laura had half-filled earlier that night, then he goes upstairs to his own room.

Aaron hears Laura downstairs the next morning and goes down there. She has two boxes full of dishes -- one box for dirty, one box for clean -- and now she's taking his things from a drawer in the kitchen and stacking them into another box.

"Just leave that stuff," Aaron says. "You don't have to do that."

"Oh, no? Well, I wish I didn't have to, but I don't see any other choice."



Jesus, you used me. You're just sick."

"What?" Aaron asks. "What are you doing?"

"I'm moving you out," Laura says. She goes to the basement door, opens it, and whistles. Sandy trots into the kitchen, oblivious. "And that's why," she says. She points at the dog. "That's just sick. There's nothing normal about that at all," she says and turns her attention back to the boxes.

By twelve-thirty Laura has packed all of Aaron's things -- except those in his bedroom -- and carted the boxes to the middle of the living room floor. Then she tells Aaron she's going over to Jeff's. She asks for Aaron's telephone number at work so she can square up the bills with him come the end of the month, and tells him that he's got two hours to get moved out. She doesn't care where he goes, she says, but if he's not gone when she gets back she's calling the cops. She leaves Aaron standing in the middle of the floor, not even offering any protest.

Aaron sits down in the living room and Sandy plops down on the floor at his feet. He sits for a minute, assessing things. He wonders if things are truly too far out of control, wonders if he can't pull things back into alignment. He picks up the telephone and dials his parents' number.

"Dad," he says, wondering how much his parents already know from yesterday's call. "I'm moving out of Laura's. She's throwing me out,

actually. I guess the wedding's off -- for now, at least. We'll see," he says. "Maybe we'll work something out."

"Oh, yes," his father says. "You'll work something out. No question. How are you fixed for money?"