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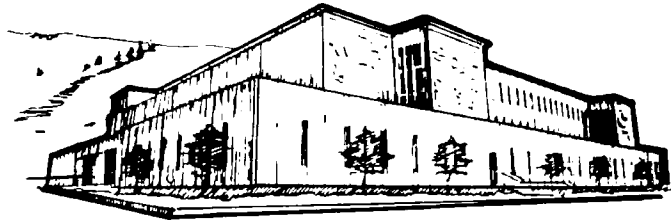
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University of  
**Montana**



Learning to Swim and Other Stories

By

Stephen David Welch

B. A., Bradford College, 1988

Presented in partial fulfillment of the the requirements

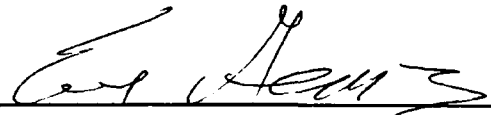
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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1990

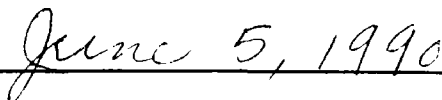
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Learning to Swim.....	1
How Far Could a Person Walk in Half an Hour.....	20
Whales.....	23
River Ice.....	34
I Held the Door for Dad.....	48
Me and Gumby.....	51
The Field.....	67

## Learning to Swim

The first summer after the death of his mother, Kevin lived with his uncle Nick at Hampton beach in New Hampshire. Kevin had just finished high school. His father had died when he was eight, and Kevin now needed somewhere to live. He was an only child. He also needed a job, so he worked at his uncle's business, a video and pinball arcade called Funland. He would sit all day in a booth and make change for people.

Though the front of the arcade was open and faced the water just across the street, the change booth was shut up with a locked door. It was hot inside and smelled of sweat, coins, and the greasy food one of the workers had eaten in there the night before. It was a sunny Wednesday

afternoon and the arcade was packed. People handed dollar bills to Kevin, and Kevin slid them their change on the metal tray under the window. Some would say, "Change please," but most understood it was a transaction that needed no talk. When they stopped coming long enough for him to arrange the bills more neatly in the drawer, Kevin watched the two teenage girls who were playing the pinball machine just across from him. Like a lot of people in the arcade, they wore only their bathing suits. Kevin knew they had just come up from the beach because since they'd been there, he had been distracted by the sweet tropical smell of coconut oil. And the coconut oil must have gotten to him, because when one of the girls called over to tell him, hey, their ball was stuck under a bumper, Kevin, who could barely play a pinball machine, much less fix one, said he would free the ball instead of just giving them their twenty-five cents.

So he slid off the stool and worked his way out of the booth as gracefully as he could--the booth was small, Kevin was fat, and the door opened in. The air outside felt good. Kevin walked to the machine and rested his hands on the metal corners. The girl who had spoken to him wore a little guitar earring. She tapped her fingernail on the glass to show where the ball was stuck between two rubber bands, and under a bumper with a drawing of a woman in cowboy boots.

Kevin studied the machine and then bent over more than he needed to to press the coin return. Nothing happened, but bending over like that, Kevin was looking right at the girl's thigh, shiny and not too tan with delicate white hairs, so he pushed at the coin return a few more times. Then he



straightened, pulled the lever, and let it spring back. He worked the flipper buttons. They felt tight and would give a ball a good kick. But the ball didn't move.

He shook the machine, then bumped it with his hip. TILT read on the backglass and the ball moved a little. He gave the machine a good shaking, feeling the flesh in his face and arms shake with it. Kevin sweated easily. He was already sweaty from sitting in the booth, and wrestling with the machine only made him hotter.

"Hey, can I get some change here?" Behind Kevin, a skinny little kid with spikey hair stood at the booth. Kevin told him there was a change machine by the skee ball.

"That one won't take my dollar," the kid said, holding up a ratty-looking bill.

Kevin told him to hold on.

He jammed the machine back against the wall. The girl with the guitar earring stepped back, folded her arms and asked, "Can we just get our quarter?" She was pretty. Her voice cut through the din of video explosions, gunfire, screams, and rocket engines. Kevin didn't get to talk to many girls except to give them change through the round hole in the window. He told her he'd have the ball free in a minute.

He grabbed the machine from underneath and lifted its front legs a good six inches off the ground. He eyed the stuck ball, then looked over at the girl, who looked at him, and then he let the machine drop.

Lights flickered, the backglass went dark, and a bell dinged. The ball

rolled from under the woman with the cowboy boots and straight down between the flippers.

Kevin slapped his hand down on the glass. The machine lit up again, looking fresh and ready to be played. It read zero credits, ball three. The girl with the guitar earring looked at him and smiled.

"Thanks," she said. A small victory.

Kevin backed away from the machine wiping his hands on his pants. The girl took her last ball and played it out. Kevin got back in his booth to make change. The skinny little kid was gone.

That night, Wednesday night, was fireworks night at Hampton Beach. Kevin and his friend Brooks, who did Kevin's job week-ends at the arcade, met in front of the Happy Hampton, a dance club that neither had ever been to, but that was a good place to sit out in front of and watch people. Brooks tried to guess the women's names by what they looked like. After a while, Kevin and Brooks crossed the street and walked through the crowd that was gathering on the sidewalk. It seemed that almost as many people came for these Wednesday nights as came for the Fourth of July.

The police had roped off part of the beach for the fireworks, so there were all these people standing on the sidewalk along a hundred-yard section of empty, dark beach littered with paper cups and plastic bags from the day's bathers. Kevin and Brooks walked through the crowd looking for a spot.

It was a good night for fireworks. Some nights made your clothes feel damp and cold after only a few minutes. But tonight the moon was

down and the sky was black except for stars. A slight breeze came in off the ocean, which, if it kept up, would mean that the water would be cold tomorrow.

Uncle Nick was taking Kevin with him on his morning run the next day. Rain or shine, Nick ran the length of the beach, from the end of his street, to the jetty, and back, five times. When the weather and the sea were favorable, Nick would get in the water and swim to the point of the jetty and back once. The idea was to start Kevin running, build up his lungs, and then get him in the water to teach him to swim.

Kevin and Brooks found a spot on the sidewalk and sat on the metal railing between it and the beach. Kevin curled his feet under the lower rung to steady himself. Next to him an old couple wearing matching windbreakers complained to each other about how dirty a place the beach had become. Next to Brooks, a young father tried to keep his little kid from licking the metal railing. Behind them, muscle cars, 4-wheel drive trucks, and motorcycles cruised Atlantic Avenue. Drivers honked their horns and passengers called to each other from their cars. A mounted police officer moved carefully between the traffic and the crowd, which spilled into the street. Both horse and rider tolerated the children who wanted to stroke the horse's mane.

Then the first fireworks went up, white, rising, and trailing sparks. They disappeared and then burst into great orange umbrellas which were reflected on the black water. People applauded. Clouds of smoke blew into the crowd. There was a strong smell of sulfur. Bits of paper and ash fell

like snow.

Another set was launched. And then more. Soon the railing became uncomfortable for Kevin, so he got off and leaned against it. As he did so, he looked down the row of people, and saw the girl with the guitar earring. She was with her pinball friend, and they seemed to be alone. Kevin ducked back before she saw him. And before he nudged Brooks to tell him, he considered that once told, Brooks would insist on his doing something about it, or would try to embarrass him. Brooks was the only person Kevin had gotten to know during these first few weeks at the arcade.

Finally, though, he pointed the girl out to Brooks and told him he was going to talk to her, but all he really had in mind was to get closer to her

People were lined up tight on the railing. Kevin had to push through to get beside her. He displaced two little kids, but there would be other fireworks, other Wednesday nights for them.

She wore a plain white T shirt and jeans. And still the earring. Kevin recognized the smell of the coconut oil.

She turned to him and smiled. "Hey, how's it going?" The other girl looked over but didn't seem to recognize Kevin, or if she did, she didn't think much of it. That was good. It was just him and the girl.

Kevin told her it was going all right.

"Yeah? What are you doing?"

He told her he was watching the fireworks with a friend. He motioned with his head. It was good to mention Brooks, Kevin decided. If something did happen, it's important that she know they'd be four and not three.

The girl's attention was on the fireworks. She seemed happy. Kevin asked her her name.

She said something, but she was facing forward, and there was a loud crackle and a bright flash of fireworks, and Kevin didn't hear. He would ask her again later. He told her his name.

She nodded, still watching the fireworks, and said, "Hi." She was young. Fifteen, maybe sixteen. Looking at the guitar earring, Kevin noticed her ear lobes were attached. Her hair, the color of which Kevin could neither remember from that afternoon nor tell in this light, was pulled back in a pony tail. Her bangs were stiff with mousse. The fireworks reflected in her eyes and cast flickering shadows that only lasted for a second or two on her face.

Kevin rested his elbows on the railing.

At that moment, there was a shift in the crowd, just down from the girl, that pushed her up Kevin's way. She pressed against him, just slightly, just enough that their bare arms touched.

Kevin began a question. She turned to look at him. Her face was very close. Her eyes and lips shined. Kevin started again and told her he was wondering if maybe she would like to do something afterwards.

She checked with her friend, who sort of raised one shoulder and cocked her head. Then she looked back at Kevin. "I don't care. Sure," she said, and turned back to watch the fireworks.

There was a bright, noisy, and rapid series of launchings from the beach at that moment, when the girl turned from Kevin, that illuminated her

face and reflected off her earring. Without so much as a half second for Kevin to say, "Great," or something, the fireworks went off, dozens of them. The grand finale. One explosion after the next, perfectly timed so as to get the loudest noise along with maximum duration. Kevin just nodded.

A minute later the fireworks fell to the ground as bits of paper. The bright flashes of white, green, orange, and red were replaced by the ordinary dull glow of street lights. As the crowd backed away from the railing and headed for their cars, Brooks joined Kevin and the two girls. There were introductions all around. The girl's friend's name was Lisa. She had a British accent, Kevin thought. And when the girl with the guitar earring introduced herself to Brooks, she did so while shaking his hand and leaning towards him. Kevin couldn't hear. He would ask Brooks her name when he got a chance.

They walked across the street to the Happy Hampton. It was Brooks' idea, not exactly what Kevin'd had in mind. They were met at the door by a large man with a beard who told them that they were restricted to the ground floor because they were under age.

It was noisy inside, and a big crowd for a Wednesday, or so it seemed to Kevin, having never been there. They sat on stools around a high table. Kevin sat between the girls and across from Brooks. A waitress came over and they ordered four Cokes. When she returned Kevin paid six dollars for them. Brooks had forgotten his wallet. The place was dark, lit dimly by orange, green, and yellow theatre lights. On the walls there were tubes of glowing blue neon that were supposed to look like breaking waves. In the

middle of the room and two steps down was a dance area lit from underneath by red lights, and lit from above by twirling blue lights, the kind on old police cars. A disc jockey played loud music, songs Kevin heard on the FM station they played at Funland, the same songs he had heard earlier out in the street coming from car radios and tape decks. The two girls and Brooks put their elbows on the table, but Kevin had to sit back a ways and rest his hands on his lap. The stools were not made for large people.

"It's kind of fun here," the girl with the guitar earring said.

"Yeah," Brooks told her. He was nodding his head and grinning. "You ladies here for the summer?"

"Yep."

"Like it?"

They both nodded. "It's kind of fun," the girl said.

Kevin could barely hear the conversation, so he leaned toward the girl with the guitar earring and asked her where she was from.

"What?" she said. So he asked her again. But she was hard to understand. "Something-or-other-son," she said. Or "-ton." Or "-town."

"How about you?" she asked.

Kevin told her he lived at the beach, and she said, "What do you do?"

He told her he worked at Funland.

"Oh, that's right," she said. And then, "Do you guys go to school?"

Kevin said he was finished.

Brooks, too.

"I have a whole 'nother year," she said and took a drink.

It turned out Lisa was from England, visiting for the summer

Brooks looked at her and asked, "Are there any good beaches there?"

"Oh sure," she said.

"I bet the water's pretty cold."

"Not always," Lisa said. "We get the Gulf Stream."

"What does that mean?" Brooks asked.

"It means that the water's warm."

"Oh," Brooks said.

"In fact," Lisa continued, "there are palm trees in the south west."

Brooks sat back. "Ha."

"There are," she said.

"Coconuts, too, I suppose," Brooks said.

Lisa looked at Kevin and then back at Brooks. "Maybe," she said. She was serious.

Brooks looked over at the girl with the guitar earring and laughed.

The girl with the guitar earring laughed too. Lisa was quiet after that.

The conversation wandered, broken up by long periods of silence and ice cube munching. They left the Happy Hampton and walked without a plan along the street towards where the girl with the guitar earring said she and Lisa were staying with her parents. The crowd and the number of cars that cruised the strip had dwindled. Only young people and police were left. At a corner, a black Trans Am with a T top slowed while they crossed the street and Brooks said to the driver, "Nice car." The driver looked at Brooks and pulled away.



"You like Trans Ams?" the girl with the guitar earring said.

"Yeah," Brooks said.

"Me too," she said.

Brooks cut in between her and Lisa to continue the conversation.

As they neared the busier stretches of sidewalk, it became difficult for the four of them to walk abreast, so Kevin fell behind and listened to Brooks talk about cars. Lisa bought some fried dough at a stand and that kept her quiet. Kevin's was the first street they came to. He left them at the corner, watched them for a while, then he walked home.

Uncle Nick had a small beach house. No basement and no upstairs. Just a driveway and a small front porch outside; a kitchen, a bathroom, a bedroom, and a den inside. Kevin had the den. He slept on a couch made up with sheets and blankets. It was four cushions long, and plenty wide. But Kevin didn't go in right away. He sat on the steps of the porch and picked away at the loose paint, cracked his knuckles, and sifted handfuls of sand between his fingers until he was sure he would be able to fall asleep as soon as he lay down.

To be with that girl would have been nice, but really what Kevin wanted was to be around people, around noise. In the arcade he didn't have to think about anything. He couldn't, not even if he tried. But at night in the cottage there were no bells, no sirens, no exploding aliens or crashing race cars. No fireworks. There was just that dark, quiet den. And his mother's brother in the next room. To be there with nothing but the dry smell of those blankets and the ceaseless washing up of the waves was the worst

thing Kevin could imagine.

Three weeks later, Kevin got up early to go running with his uncle as he had been doing four days a week. This morning Nick was going to give him his first swimming lesson. Kevin toasted a slice of whole wheat bread and had half a glass of orange juice while he waited at the kitchen table. Nick had a visitor from the night before, a young woman from the beach or the arcade. Kevin neither saw nor heard her, but they were always young. After a while Nick came into the kitchen alone and they went outside, stretched, and then ran easily and without conversation to the beach. Sometimes the women were there when they got back, sometimes they weren't.

Nick thought it would be good to take an easy run along the water before starting the lesson. Nick would usually talk, but this morning he was quiet, distracted. His silence made Kevin think of the woman whom he hadn't seen back at the house.

They ran to the jetty and turned around. The sun was just over the horizon, dim and peach-colored through the overcast sky. Kevin and his uncle were alone on the beach except for the plovers and a few gulls that picked at garbage and seaweed by the water's edge. They ran on the hard wet sand near the water and the birds flew away as they approached.

When they got back to where they had left their towels, they placed their T shirts on the sand and waded into the ocean. The water was cool. Kevin crossed his arms over his stomach to keep them dry. Nick stopped where the water came just up to Kevin's waist and said, "Let's begin."

First he had Kevin float on his back. "Keep your hips up," he said, "your body straight." Kevin smiled to be floating. He nervously blinked his eyes and blew air through his nose. Nick told him to stretch his arms away from his body and then bring them to his sides. "Cup your hands and make sure your fingers are together. When you kick," he said, "do it with your hips, not your knees." Kevin did what his uncle said and he felt himself moving through the water. It was a nice feeling. "That's it," Nick said.

Kevin kicked and stroked. His hips sank so he straightened his body until he felt the air cold on his stomach again. "Imagine there's a board underneath you keeping you perfectly straight," Nick said. So Kevin swam. He watched the sky. There were a few thin clouds, and some gulls looking for food.

Then Nick put his hand on Kevin's shoulder. "Okay," he said. Kevin paddled with his arms and let his feet drop to the sandy bottom. He stood and wiped his face. "That's good," Nick said, "but that kind of swimming won't get you anywhere. I want to teach you the crawl."

"You move your arms like this," Nick said, bending forward and demonstrating, reaching into the water in front of him. "Keep your fingers closed, and pull the water under you. See? Keep your body flat, and keep your head down. This is important. You want to exhale while your face is in the water, because when you turn your head up, you have time enough only to inhale. Watch me." Nick leaned into the water and swim in a wide circle around Kevin. His shoulders were powerful and his feet broke the surface without splashing. He swam with his eyes open so Kevin made sure to look

like he was paying attention.

"Got the idea?" Nick asked.

"I think so," Kevin said.

"Good."

Nick had Kevin float on his back, and then he grabbed hold of Kevin's hips and turned him over in the water. Kevin reached ahead and pulled the water underneath his body. He felt the resistance and understood how the stroke worked. Then he kicked. "That's it," the uncle said, still holding Kevin's hips, keeping him from moving. "Now try your breathing." Kevin took a breath, put his face in the water, exhaled, and lifted his head for more air. He did it several times before his uncle stopped him and let him go. Kevin stood. He caught his breath for a minute and waited for Nick to say something.

"You're doing it wrong," Nick told him. "You're lifting your head this way instead of turning to the side." He lowered himself into the water to show what he meant. Then he told Kevin to try it.

Kevin bent forward and put his face in the water. He tried, but he knew he was doing it wrong. "Here," Nick said, positioning himself in front of Kevin. "Lean forward. Now put your face in the water and breathe out. I'll help you." Kevin took in a breath, put his face in the water as Nick had told him, and exhaled. As he did so, he felt Nick's hands on the sides of his head. Kevin finished exhaling as fast as he could, and then Nick turned his head to the side so that Kevin's mouth and nose came out of the water. "Breathe," Nick said.

Kevin took in a breath and his head was turned, face down, into the water again. He breathed out. It was a question of timing. His head was turned to the side. "Breathe," Nick said. But Kevin could only open his mouth. No air came in. His face was turned back in the water and he kept his mouth closed. He opened his eyes and saw his uncle's legs and feet spread apart before him. Kevin's head was turned again. "Breathe," came the command, though Kevin could barely hear it with Nick's hands over his ears.

Kevin coughed and took in air, but his head was turned back, and instead of air he took in sea water. He coughed with his face down and water went up his nose. He grabbed his uncle's hands to free himself, but his uncle held him tight. He tried shoving off with his feet but the sandy bottom was soft and gave him no leverage. His face was out of the water again. "Breathe." Kevin tried to say something, to tell Nick he'd had enough, but he could only cough. He was back in the water. And then up again. "Breathe." "Breathe." "Breathe."

Finally Nick let him go. Kevin pushed past him, gagging, his legs shaky, and waded to shore. He knelt in the sand and coughed. "We'll try again tomorrow. Practice if you want," Nick said. He dove under and came up swimming along the shore towards the jetty, in water that he could have walked in. Kevin was exhausted. He stood. His knees quivered. His neck hurt. He watched Nick swim. His strokes were perfect and graceful. He kicked with just the right amount of hip and knee movement. He knew how to breathe. Kevin wiped himself with a towel, put on his shirt, and walked up the beach away from the water. A young woman wearing khaki shorts and

a bikini top stood at the end of Kevin's street. She seemed to be watching Nick.

"He's a real bastard, isn't he?" she said as Kevin passed her.

That was a Saturday and Kevin didn't have to work. Brooks would be the one making change at Funland. It turned out to be cloudy, so there weren't many people on the beach. Kevin left the house and went by the arcade a little after opening time and watched from across the street. The arcade was practically empty except for a few kids and their parents. Brooks had left the booth and was playing a video game. The door of the booth was wide open.

Kevin wandered around for a while, staying on the ocean side of the street. He went to a movie, tried some pinball at the other arcades, and ate steamers at the Clam Box.

As he lay on his couch that night, he thought of what his uncle had told him about swimming and about breathing. He listened to the sound of his own breath and fell asleep easily.

In the morning, Kevin had some juice and toast, put on his bathing suit, and walked to the beach. He stopped at the edge of the water and dug his toes in the sand. The sun hadn't yet come up. It would be another hour or so before his uncle came down for his morning run and swim. It was half tide and very quiet. Kevin waded in up to his waist. He lifted his head, reached out with his arms, and lay back, raising his legs and letting the

water take his weight. He floated as if on a board and blinked his eyes. The sky was a featureless blue. A sea gull flew overhead, gliding on its slender wings. It circled. Kevin moved his arms and legs and began to swim. He took long, slow, relaxed strokes and kicked just enough to keep his legs from sinking. He listened to the water at his ears.

The gull circled tighter, rising on the morning thermals. Kevin watched it for a long time. Then he watched the length of himself as he swam. Small waves washed gently over his stomach. A pool of water collected in his navel, the rest rolled back into the sea. The water on his calves and shoulders felt cooler now than before. He looked past his feet and saw the beach. He had been swimming away from land, but was still close enough to make it back.

There was someone near where Kevin had left his towel and sneakers. But Kevin was too far out to see the person's face. It might have been his uncle, wearing his bikini swim trunks, muscles bulging, his hands on his hips. He might be looking at Kevin as if to say, "You're doing it wrong. Keep trying." Kevin lifted his arm and waved. The man waved back.

Then Kevin saw, a ways down the beach from the man, a couple and a small child. They walked slowly, the child between his parents and holding their hands. Kevin couldn't see their faces. It could have been Brooks and the girl with the guitar earring, married someday and with a kid. They might have just driven to the beach in their new Trans Am. They liked it here because it was warm. Kevin waved to them and they returned his wave. The man even held the child on his shoulders so he could wave too. Kevin

smiled. He liked little kids.

He watched for another minute. He was getting tired, and he thought he should probably swim in. But there was nothing for him on that beach. Even though, on his back, he could make it. Instead, he changed his direction and began to swim in a line parallel to the land, toward the jetty.

He put his head back in the water and watched the shy. The gull was still there, and the water at his ears.

The waves came at him from the side and rolled beneath him, lifting him and letting him down. He kicked and stroked easily, slowly, keeping his body straight and his fingers together. He tilted his head back and saw the jetty upside down, maybe twice as far away as the beach. There was a man walking out on the jetty, a fat man, and then Kevin let his head relax in the water. Ten years ago, the man on the jetty might have been Kevin's father. He would sit and eat from a bag of potato chips. When he finished, he would neatly fold the bag and wedge it between two rocks. He would fill his pipe, light it, smile to Kevin, then lie back on the rocks.

Kevin looked to wave and man. As he returned Kevin's wave, Kevin saw, still upside down, that it wasn't a man at all, but a woman. Kevin's mother. She was a big woman herself, and wore a dress to go swimming. Bathing suits didn't fit her properly, so she didn't wear them. She was reading a book. Kevin waved again, and then, because it was difficult to breathe with his head tilted like that, and because he was still sore from his uncle's lesson, he straightened his neck and looked up at the gull. When the woman on the jetty finished her book, she would kiss her resting



husband and step off a rock and into the ocean. She wouldn't swim. She would just floated, with her dress billowing around her

Kevin didn't need to look back to the jetty again. He kept his course. The gull was still there, still with him, and it was calling now. Kevin listened. He was tired, but he could breathe. Nick had been right about that. He would keep swimming. He would swim to that jetty and wait for his uncle. There were palm trees in England, maybe even coconuts. Anything was possible.

## How Far Could a Person Walk in Half an Hour

Denise slid across to the driver's side to get out of the sun. He could have at least pushed the car up the road fifty yards so she could wait in the shade. It had been half an hour since Brooks went to look for a phone. He had insisted that there was a house not more than a few miles back and that he could call for a tow from there. Denise had been awake and paying attention as Brooks drove, and she knew that they hadn't passed anything but trees and countryside. But she also knew how stubborn Brooks could be, so she had kissed him on the cheek and wished him good luck. She'd watched him out the back window, his hands in his pockets, until he'd gone around the curve in the road.

She tapped her hands on the wheel. It was Brooks' car and she had never driven it or even sat behind the wheel before. He was about her height, and, she thought, he kept the seat back too far. She wished she had thought to ask Brooks to leave the keys so she could listen to the radio. She wondered if she honked the horn would he hear her. How much ground had he covered? How far could a person walk in half an hour?

Brooks kicked at the dry dirt with his shoe and loosened a flat stone. He picked it up, wiped it clean on his trousers, and leaning to his left, threw it sideward out over the river. The stone skipped half a dozen times on the river, skated several yards, and sank. Brooks brushed his hands together and jumped from the shore to a rock sticking above the water and just big enough to stand on. He checked his balance, squatted and crossed his arms over his knees, and listened.

The river, as wide as the road behind him, trickled over rocks choked with leaves. Its rippling surface caught the noonday sun and reflected it in white specks like camera flashes and Brooks had to squint. On the opposite shore an uprooted oak tree lay half in the water, most of its roots broken and exposed to the air, but its leaves still green.

Brooks dipped his hand in the water, opening and closing his fingers against the current. He thought of Denise back at the car. She was probably looking down the road wondering how much longer before he would admit he was wrong and come back.

Brooks stood and wiped his wet hand through his hair. He watched the

river for a moment longer until the glare hurt his eyes. Then he turned and jumped to shore. The footing was bad but he managed to grab onto a sapling and keep from falling back into the water. He had to use both hands to scramble up the steep, sandy bank. He made it to the shoulder of the road and began walking again, keeping his eyes open for that house.

## Whales

Louise sat in the shade on the back porch of the rented cottage and drank iced coffee. She watched the people on the beach, and she thought she could hear their voices, carried by the wind, and mixed with the sounds of the waves and gulls. She slipped off her sandals and put her feet up on the railing, the only part of the porch that caught the late afternoon sun. The wood and the sun warmed her feet. A breeze lifted the hem of her loose summer dress. A yellowjacket flew around and tickled the top of her foot. She brushed it away with a twist of her ankle.

She raised her head to watch a pleasure boat, dotted with the bright-colored shirts of passengers, as it passed beyond the bathers. She had hoped

to go on a whale watch, or at least take the boat from Rye Harbor to the Isles of Shoals, but Robbo had been careless and got sunburned the first day. He was to stay indoors, and the boys, according to Robbo, would only get bored and into trouble on a boat.

Inside, Robbo's boys, who spent all but the summer months with their mother, Robbo's first wife, were helping Robbo with his vinegar treatments. Louise had offered to help him, but Robbo said the boys could handle it. Besides, he said, it was a messy job, soaking towels in vinegar and laying them on his back and legs.

She sipped the drink and then held the cool rim of the glass to her chin. The screen door swung open, banging hard against the outside of the house, and the two boys, Roy and Chip, ran out. Roy was carrying a pan of vinegar. "Hey," Louise said, putting down her drink.

They hopped down the steps and ran around the corner. A splash was followed by a scream and a "gotcha." Chip came around the corner and stood on the steps, dripping wet, holding his arms away from his body.

"Look what Roy did," he whined.

Roy came around the other side of the house and peeked through the porch railing. "I didn't do anything," he said.

"Liar."

"You asked for it, you baby."

"That's enough," Louise said. She took hold of Roy's skinny arm and led the two boys inside.

Robbo lay under vinegar-soaked towels on a white sheet in the middle

of the floor. "I'm taking the boys down to the water," Louise said. "They need to get out of the house." Robbo nodded under a white towel.

On the beach, Louise spread a blanket and anchored each corner with a sneaker. The boys pointed and giggled at a heavy man in a bathing suit coming from the water. "Cut that out. Come here and let me put some sunscreen on you." They had their father's skin and would burn easily.

She rubbed the lotion over their bony shoulders and knobby spines.

"Can we go climb on the rocks?" Roy asked.

"Yeah, can we?"

"All right, but be careful." They dropped their shirts and ran, kicking sand up onto people's blankets. "Wait for me," Louise called. But they were off and running and pretending not to hear her.

The rocks were a couple hundred yards down the beach. Louise kept the boys in sight as she followed. The sand was hot so she walked at the water's edge and let the waves wash over her feet. When she reached the rocks, the boys were squatting over something and arguing. Yes they do, no they don't, yes they do. Chip turned on his heels and, still squatting, held a starfish up to her.

"Roy thinks they can grow new arms."

Louise bent over, resting her hands on her knees. The starfish had four arms and one tiny stub. "That's right," she said. "If they lose one in a fight or something, they grow a new one to take its place."

Roy cocked his head and sneered at Chip. "See? Told ya."

Chip didn't say anything. He examined the starfish for a few seconds, and then pinched off the short arm. He broke off the four good arms and threw the pieces into the sea. Robbo had warned Louise that there would be moments. Unless they get way out of line, he said, just let them enjoy themselves.

So Louise sat on the beach and watched the boys climb and poke around on the barnacle-and-seaweed-covered rocks. Other children played in the tidal pools, collected shells, or sat on the beach and made castles with plastic cups. Roy and Chip smashed mussels and snails by hurling them against the rocks. They began to argue over who would pull the legs off a crab, and Louise called them to come down and walked them back up the beach.

Roy and Chip went in swimming and Louise sat on the blanket, careful not to let the boys out of her sight. But soon they were fighting. Chip pushed Roy into a wave that knocked him over, and to get back at Chip, Roy grabbed him and held his head under water. Louise ran in to break it up while the lifeguard scolded her over a bullhorn. With one child crying and coughing up sea water, the other trying not to laugh and pleading innocence, Louise packed up and left the beach.

She put one kid in the bedroom and the other in the kitchen and told them to stay put. Robbo lay face down on the floor, his arms close at his sides. "I'm going on the porch. And then maybe for a walk," Louise told him. She wondered how, in that position, he'd managed to lay the towels over his back so neatly. "What happens if you absorb too much of that stuff?" she



said.

Outside, she sat on the railing, her toes brushing against the tall grass that grew along the house. The iced coffee she had left there was watery and warm. The sun was low, the breeze had gotten cool, and crickets chirped under the porch.

She left the porch and walked up the beach, away from the direction of the rocks, and sat in the sand. The sand was still warm. She thought of how the sun's warmth stayed with a person, and how she used to feel that warmth and smell the sea on Robbo's skin after he'd spent the day at the beach. It would be nice, she thought, just to be able to swim and relax for a few hours a day without having to worry about the boys, or having to remind Robbo to be smart about the sun.

Louise stayed on the beach until it got dark and then walked back toward the cottage. Sandpipers ran ahead of her in the darkness, dodging the waves and fluttering their wings, until they all took off together and flew out low over the water. The tide was coming in, and there was a warm breeze.

At the cottage, the boys were in bed and Robbo was asleep on the floor. The smell of vinegar was still strong. Louise went into the bedroom and opened the window that faced the sea so she could hear the waves.

In the morning, she was awakened by a commotion in the boys' room. She put on her robe and went to see what was the matter. Roy and Chip were

running around in their bathing suits, making buzzing noises and flapping their arms. Robbo knelt rummaging through a suitcase on the floor. Louise stood in the doorway.

Robbo looked up, pink and excited. "Lou, where's the camera?"

"It's still in my bag. Why?"

"There's a whale washed up on the beach," he said, squeezing by her through the door, smelling of vinegar and careful not to rub against anything.

"Yeah," the boys said. "And we're going down to see it."

Louise pulled her robe closed and followed Robbo into the bedroom. "A whale?"

"That's right. Look for yourself."

She stepped out onto the back porch. She had to shade her eyes from the rising sun, but there it was, big, dark, and surrounded by people. "Is it alive?"

"Of course not," Robbo said from just inside the screen door

"Course not," the boys repeated.

All three came hurrying out of the house. Roy and Chip ran ahead. "You coming, Louise?"

Robbo had on shorts and a white T shirt. His face, arms, and legs were pink and beginning to peel.

"What about your burn?"

"I'm fine. Are you coming?" he asked.

Louise made a face. "All right." Robbo smiled and took off with the camera through the dunes and down to the beach. Louise put on her bathing

suit and a T shirt and started after them.

As soon as she got across the dunes, downwind of the dead whale, She could smell it. She pulled the neck of her shirt up over her mouth and nose. People were commenting on its size, how long it might have been dead, what species of whale it was. A woman with a pony tail and glasses, who looked like she might know what she was talking about, said it was a humpback.

Louise had never seen a whale before, just pictures. She walked around it slowly, working through the crowd of a dozen or so people. She studied it, her arms folded, and kept a good distance. From the way its long, narrow flippers were hanging, she guessed the whale was lying on its back. She found its eye, and a fold that looked like its mouth. Its flippers and wide, flat tail were speckled with barnacles--scarred, even.

It was black, except for its belly, which was grooved and streaked with dark reddish lines. Blood, Louise guessed. She went over to Robbo, who was taking pictures. The boys were trying to push each other into the carcass. "Let's go, Rob. I don't like this."

"You were the one who wanted to see whales," he said, smiling, making white lines in his pink face. Roy and Chip posed in front of the whale's flank, trying to make a muscle with their skinny arms. "Got it," Robbo said and lowered the camera from his eye.

"I'm going back," Louise told him.

"Hold on. I want a picture of you with the whale."

"I don't think you should."

"Come on."

Louise looked at the whale. Belly up and eyes closed, the whale seemed helpless. "No," she said.

"Then at least get one of me and the boys." He held the camera out. Louise squinted and took it. He stood behind Roy and Chip with his hands on their shoulders.

Louise took the picture. They looked small and far away through the view finder. "There," she said. "Let's go."

"Just a couple more," Robbo said, kneeling between the boys. "Smile." Louise took the picture.

"Now let's have one up near the head." He lined them up in order of height: Chip, then Roy, then himself, then the whale. Louise took the picture.

"How about back here," one of the boys said. Louise minded that people were watching them, and she hoped that Robbo would be satisfied soon. He didn't seem to mind the audience at all. He told Louise to stay ready with the camera. He had the boys stand on the tail. Then he grabbed hold of the flipper and pretended to be shaking hands. Then he knelt near its mouth and pointed at it like he was telling it something. Louise thought of how the whale must have looked when it was alive--all power, grace, and gentleness--swimming through the water with the other whales. She felt embarrassed and uneasy. And the carcass stank.

It attracted greenheads. Louise had to slap at her legs. She wanted to leave even more, but Robbo and the boys still wanted her to take more pictures. So she decided to hurry them up, to use up the film as quickly as

possible. "Over here," she said. "Now move closer." "Look this way." "Keep together." "Just the boys." "Now just you, Rob." They did what she said. Flies were all over them, but they didn't seem to mind. They leaned back against the whale as if it were a car. Louise took the picture.

Roy picked up a long, bone-white piece of driftwood and pretended to be stabbing the whale. He tried to penetrate the whale's tough hide, but couldn't. He tried everywhere, even where the animal's flesh had been cut open by the sea, but still he couldn't. Then he went to the eye, and with all his eight-year-old might, pushed the stick into the whale's head. His brother cheered. "That's the boy," Robbo congratulated him. Louise took the picture.

Roy started thrusting and pulling the stick in and out of the whale's head, right up to his hands. Milky white fluid flowed from the socket down the side of the whale. Chip dropped to his knees and put his hands in the stuff and held them high above his head facing the camera. Louise took the picture.

Roy finished with the eye and left the stick in it. He picked up another stick and started with the mouth. He tried to pry apart the lips. Chip whined that he wanted to do the eye. So Robbo held him up where he could get good leverage. There was pain in Robbo's face from the burn as Chip pushed and pulled with the stick in the whale's head. Louise took the picture.

Roy got frustrated with the mouth and walked around the whale. He climbed on top of the carcass from the tail end with his stick and tried

unsuccessfully to gore its stomach. Then he found the hole at the base of the tail and plunged the stick in deep, right up to his hands. Robbo, still holding Chip, stepped back, laughing. "Roy. What the hell are you doing?"

"I want to see. I want to see," Chip whined, having lost interest in the eye. His stick remained buried in the whale's head. Robbo hoisted Chip up on his shoulders with some difficulty and moved him close so he could watch his brother. Roy worked on the hole and there was this smell, the worst smell Louise had ever smelled. She took the picture.

Between his laughing and the burn, Robbo could barely hold Chip any more. "All right, guys, let's go."

But Roy showed no sign of leaving.

"Put me up," Chip whined. Robbo looked around at the crowd. Then he looked at Louise, made a face, and shrugged his shoulders. What else can I do? he seemed to be saying. Louise took the picture.

Robbo leaned back against the carcass and Chip scrambled onto the stomach. Roy pulled the stick out of the whale and stood looking around at the people and shouted, "King of the whale," and waved the stick in Chip's face.

"I want a try," Chip said.

"Roy, let your brother have a turn," Robbo told him. Roy handed the dirty end of the stick to Chip, and Chip went at it.

"Yahoo," he screamed. Robbo was laughing again. Louise saw it all through the camera. They sounded close, but they looked far away. Even the crowd of people seemed small. She took the picture.

"All right, guys," Robbo said. "That's enough. Come on down from there."

"No," Louise shouted, still looking through the camera. "Stay up there. And Robbo, you get up there with them."

"Louise."

"Go on," she said, pointing. "And be quiet. We're going to take a few more pictures."

Robbo climbed up the tail and sat with the boys by the hole. He waited.

Louise watched them, small and silent through the viewfinder. They were far away. They could have been someone else's family. "Chip, give your father the stick," she said.

Robbo took the stick from Chip. Neither end was clean now, but he took it. He held it with both hands.

"That's right," Louise shouted. "Now do something, Robbo. Do something. I want another picture."

## River Ice

Roger blew into his hands and shuffled his feet. Looking down at the frozen laces on his running shoes, he wished he'd taken the time to put on his boots and heavy socks before leaving the house. Some long underwear wouldn't have been a bad choice either, and one of his father's old coats. The zipper on the coat he was wearing didn't work.

The other people who'd come to meet the one a.m. train from Boston waited in their cars on the street with the headlights on and the motors running. Roger could have waited in the station wagon, but he knew the train would be here soon. He wrapped his arms around his chest and poked his head out of the board-wood shelter to look down the tracks. The rails,



dark and quiet, stretched back to the trees.

Roger stepped back into the corner of the small shelter and took out his handkerchief. Inside, out of the wind, it was very quiet and dark. He wiped his nose with the cold, soft cotton and saw, through an opening in the bare trees across the tracks, a cluster of black dots--gulls--sleeping on the frozen river. One gull stood and flapped its wings and then settled back down. The train's horn sounded.

Keeping his back to the wind, Roger stepped sideways from the shelter onto the platform. A distant yellowish light reflected dimly off the tracks as the train took the bend along the river. It was good to see it coming. Roger stood stiff with his legs together, his hands in his pockets to hold his coat closed, and buried his chin in his collar.

As the B & M train rolled to a stop, shaking the asphalt platform, the wind shifted direction and blew snow and ice into Roger's face, stinging his cheeks and forehead. The conductor opened the door between the cars and a dozen passengers stepped down ducking from the wind. Tim, Roger's younger brother, was the last one off the train.

When Roger opened his mouth to speak, the wind sucked air from his lungs. He had to catch his breath to say hello. His brother, who carried a small bag and a suit, nodded. He wore a long black coat, gloves, and a scarf. Roger motioned with his head to show where he was parked. Tim followed him over the snow bank and across the street, hung his suit on the hook in the back seat of the car, and then got in up front.

Roger started the car and spun the tires away from the snowy curb.

"It won't be long," he said, feeling for heat under the dash.

Tim sat a little lower in the seat than Roger. He took a schedule from his pocket and held it up to the window as they passed a street light. "Can you give me a ride back here tomorrow afternoon?"

"I thought you were going to stay for the week-end, and help me take care of the house and the shop."

"I know, but I've got to be at work tomorrow night."

"You couldn't get it off?"

"I'm sorry, Roger. If you want, I can maybe get some time off next week."

"That'll be too late. I'm meeting with the lawyer Friday morning to talk about selling the business."

"What about the house?"

"I don't know about the house. Part of me wants to stay here and part of me wants to sell it and get the hell out."

"Where to?"

↙ Roger shook his head. His talk of moving, he knew, was just talk. "I don't know. Anyway, the house is half yours, Tim."

They were quiet for a minute coming to the stop sign at the end of South Elm Street.

"So will you give me a ride?" Tim asked again.

"Sure." Roger checked under the dash again with his hand, but the engine was still too cold to throw heat. They drove onto the main road and past the Credit Union. The temperature read three above.

Tim moaned. "Three above. It's too early for this," he said.

"I know."

The sky was clear, but gusty winds blew snow across the road, making visibility poor. Roger concentrated on the driving. At the common, he slowed the station wagon and turned onto Salem Street, driving past the cemetery where their father would be buried in the morning. Away from the lighted houses of the town, they crawled along dark, icy roads, past grey fields and power lines, and then back along the wooded bank of the river.

They passed the iron bridge and followed the road high up along the bank. The road was rutted and barely wide enough for two cars. The few houses were dark except for porch lights. Roger took the car over the highest part of the road and then down to their house. The tires hitting the gravel driveway woke Tim. Roger backed the car into the garage, and Tim took his suit and bag from the back seat, then followed Roger up the unshoveled path to the front steps and the small light by the door.

Tim stepped in and placed his things at the foot of the steps, closing the door behind them.

"I straightened out your old room," Roger said, stomping snow from his feet.

"Thanks." Tim hung his coat in the front hall and started upstairs with his bag in hand and his suit over his arm.

"I took some of what we've been storing in there and moved it into Dad's room," Roger said to Tim, who turned and faced him from the top of the stairs. "There was a lot of junk in there. I'm going to throw most of it out.

It's just some old furniture and clothes that nobody'll ever use."

"Good," Tim said.

Roger turned on the upstairs hall light with the button at the foot of the steps. "The switch up there is broken."

Tim said good night and Roger went into the kitchen and filled a glass of water. The window over the sink rattled in the wind. He stood and looked at his reflection, a dark image made double by the window pane and the storm window behind it. He stood looking into the window ready to finish his drink.

Upstairs, the toilet flushed. Water drained and trickled through the pipes in the wall. Then there was the loud springy click of the light switch in Tim's old room, and a square of yellow light shined out his bedroom window to the back yard. Roger drank and then rested his hand holding the glass on the counter. He heard Tim's footsteps and something heavy being slid across the wooden floor. It was the chest Roger had decided would not be in the way. The light switch clicked once more and outside the yard was dark again. Finally, the bed springs squeaked.

Roger emptied his glass into the sink and went upstairs.

The next morning it snowed. While Tim finished breakfast, Roger pulled the station wagon out of the garage and let it warm up. He watched a chickadee pecking at the feeder on the post in the front yard. Seed had not been put out for days--the father had always done that--and this small bird was working to get the last of whatever was left. Roger wondered where

the other birds had gone to eat. There purple finches, cardinals and sparrows. Juncos. Grosbeaks. Crossbills and siskins. They've found another feeder, probably, or they were sitting in the trees, hungry. Roger would take care of them later

The car was just beginning to warm up when Tim got in and brushed the snow from his hair

It was slow-going all the way to the funeral home. The two brothers met the other pall bearers, a couple of men who had worked with their father, and rode with them in the funeral director's limousine to Sacred Heart Church. A woman and several other men from the father's machine shop were there, the secretary, his two sisters, Roger's friends, and what was left of the local people from their mother's side of the family. As they stood out front, the secretary, who Roger knew as Mrs. Trainor, looked at Tim and must have guessed who he was because she touched his arm and nodded to him.

When mass was over, Father D'Arcy said the committal prayers in the back of the church. At the cemetery, the priest, Roger and Tim, and the other two pall bearers got out. Everyone else stayed in their cars. The snow turned black beneath their exhausts.

The four men set the casket on a groundcloth in a cleared space beside where Roger and Tim's mother had been buried years before. After her death, when Roger was in the fourth grade at parochial school and Tim the third, their father asked if they wanted to go to the public school instead. He said it would be good for them to be with different kids. Both had said

yes, but he still took them to church on Sundays

The canopy erected over the burial plot did little to keep out the weather. The canvas fluttered and the supports bent in the wind, but Father D'Arcy, in his overcoat and black hat, seemed unconcerned. Roger stood a little behind Tim and to the side, just inside the dark of the canopy. His brother squinted his eyes against the wind and snow and hunched his shoulders, protecting his face with his upturned collar. He walked back to the car as soon as the others had finished. Roger waited a moment, and walked behind the priest.

When they got home, Tim went upstairs to change clothes. Roger brought some wood in from the back hall and set it in the basket near the fireplace. He arranged crumpled balls of newspaper and kindling, and set two logs on top of them. It lit easily. Overhead, a dozen bird books sat on the mantelpiece. One book, a worn field guide with water spots and a rip in the cover, lay flat under the father's binoculars.

By the time Tim came downstairs to put his things in the front hall, Roger had pulled the screen in front of the fire and was sitting on the couch. Tim walked into the room and stood by the big window overlooking the front yard. He opened the curtain all the way and sat in the chair in the corner.

"Those guys who worked for Dad are a pretty grim bunch, aren't they?" he said.

"They're worried about their jobs. I tried talking to them, but they don't trust me at all. The boss's son, I guess. That one guy is convinced

we're going to fold the business and sell the property."

"Are we?" Tim asked.

"I'm not planning on it. I don't want to put those people out of work."

"No. But what if we have to? What if we can't find a buyer? We've both got our own lives and I haven't seen the inside of that place for ten years. Even if we wanted to, neither of us knows the first thing about running a machine shop."

Roger sighed. "You're right. And if that turns out to be the case, then I don't know. I'm willing to suffer with it for a while, maybe hire somebody to run it, but I'm not going to be tied to it the way Dad was."

"How about selling it to the guys who work there?" Tim said.

"That's what I wanted to do, but the lawyer told me over the phone that it would never work. Nobody there makes enough on his own to buy it, and even together it would take them a hundred years to pay for it." Roger leaned forward and untied his dress shoes. He took them off and slid them under the coffee table and sat back. "I wish Dad had had a partner. Then we could just sell him Dad's half and be done with it. I'm not looking to get rich, but I think we should get something."

"Right," Tim said.

"Corporate factories close down every day. It's not the end of the world. The workers at Dad's shop can take a share of what we get for it and go out and find new jobs. Is that so terrible?"

Tim looked out the window. Roger looked too. Snow fell lighter now.

"What about the house, Roger?"

"The house? I'm going to live here forever "

"And my half?"

"I'm sorry. You're right." Roger shook his head. "It's just that I would like to think that at least one part of all this could be settled simply."

"That's okay," Tim said. "I've been away so long that I don't even feel like I belong here."

The grief Roger had missed all day came to him then. Tim had all but said he wanted nothing to do with the only thing they still shared, the house. Their talk seemed like a negotiation, like there should be a lawyer present and they should be signing papers, to transfer rights and absolve responsibilities. Burying your father, it seemed to him, should be enough for one day.

Tim stood and went to the window. "Have there been many birds on the river." His voice was quiet.

"Yeah." Roger put his feet on the table and crossed his legs at the ankles. "Goldeneye. Mergansers. Bufflehead. We had a few bald eagles a week ago. Dad was down the river every day looking for them."

"No kidding."

"He was building a new blind. Until all this snow came. The other blind was too close to the marsh. Some kids were using it to hunt from. So Dad took it down and started to build a new one upriver "

"Did he finish it?"

"No," Roger said.

"Too bad."



Tim stepped back and looked at his watch. "It's quarter past two," he said. "We should probably leave around three, the roads the way they are."

"You don't want to stay?"

"I can't."

Roger said, "Okay, I'm going to take a shower and change and then we'll leave," and started upstairs

"By the way," Tim added, "I looked through some of that stuff in Dad's room. I took a few things."

Upstairs, Roger undressed and sat on his bed. Soon he would take Tim to the station and Tim would get on the train and that would be that. He listened to his brother moving around downstairs, from the living room to the kitchen, to the hall. The front door opened. Roger moved toward the window and saw Tim carrying a bundle down the path and into the garage. Putting his things in the car, Roger thought. The room felt cold so Roger got up to go into the bathroom. He passed his father's room and thought of all the boxes and cases and drawers to be cleaned out. There was that room, the rest of the house, and the business too. Roger walked to the bathroom and got in the shower. The hot water warmed him.

He dried off, put on a pair of jeans, grabbed his sneakers, a clean shirt and socks, and went downstairs. In the hall, covered by Tim's folded suit, was a cardboard box from the father's room. Roger lifted the suit. The box had no top. In it were an old shirt, some ballpoint pens, a dictionary, a calendar. Under the shirt lay several spy novels and a blank pad of paper. It was somehow the saddest thing Roger had seen all day. His brother had said

no to the house, and then had gone to some trouble to collect a box of junk. Roger put the coat back where it was and went into the klitchen. Tim had left a note written on a napkin on the kitchen table saying that he'd gone to the blind and that he'd be right back.

Roger went into the living room, wiped the dust and crumbs from his feet on the rug, and stood near the window. The snow had stopped. The trees were black and bare against the white earth and sky. A trail of broken snow led from the garage to the feeder. The feeder had been filled.

Roger looked down to the river to see if he could see Tim. A large bird was circling on broad, flat wings, it's white head clearly visible. He put his shirt and sneakers in the chair and took the binoculars from the mantelpiece. The leather strap dangled against his chest as he brought the huge bird into focus.

He watched it dip and circle low over the river. Roger remembered the morning his father, winded and talking fast, woke him to tell him in a whisper, as if the eagle might hear, to come down to the blind. He hoped that Tim could see it, if he was at the water by now. Maybe that's what drew him down there.

Roger watched with the glasses. He felt a chill and thought to put on his shirt but didn't want to lose the eagle. The bird circled lower and Roger saw it against the snow and trees on the opposite bank. As he followed the eagle, he glimpsed two blurry images behind it. He let the eagle go and focused in on two boys he didn't know wearing dirty parkas. One was pointing a rifle at the bird. The boy's shoulder jerked and there was a loud

report.

Roger took the binoculars from his eyes and saw the eagle as it fluttered and rolled and spiraled down and hit the ice. The two boys started up the opposite bank. The one with the rifle looked back several times.

Roger watched the boys go, then focused the glasses on the eagle. It hopped in a circle, one wing slapping the ice, the other dragging at its side. Roger took the binoculars from his eyes.

He saw Tim walking out on the ice toward the fallen bird. Roger held his breath. Water dripped down his temples and the back of his neck. He shivered. The muscles in his back and shoulders tensed. Tim took short steps. Then he stopped and crouched. He froze for a second before going through. The ice gave way to black water and he went down waving his arms, grabbing at slabs of ice that would not hold him.

Roger threw the binoculars onto the floor and grabbed his shirt from the chair. He ran from the house down the driveway and across the road, pulling on his shirt as he went. He followed Tim's trail down the bank to the river. The crust beneath the new snow pushed up at Roger's pant legs and cut into his shins. His shirt still unbuttoned, he fell and tumbled the rest of the way through snow and dense brush. Snow stuck to his hair, his chest, his jeans.

Tim had hauled his upper body onto a shelf of ice and lay on his stomach, facing away, his arms outstretched. Roger cupped his hands around his mouth and called to his brother. He walked fast and awkwardly onto the thick yellowish ice. Frozen plates had jammed and wedged and overshot

each other. The craggy surface cut hard into Roger's feet.

Where the ice became smooth and level, he tried to run. But his feet ached. He missed his footing, slipped, and fell hard on his hip. A muffled crunch echoed far beneath and all around him. The ice had cracked but Roger could not tell where. He got up and took shorter steps. Then he got on all fours and crawled. His knees went numb and his hip stiffened. He had trouble moving his legs. His palms ached and slipped.

He moved closer and could hear the water slapping at the edge. The ice rose and fell with the swell of the river. He thought of all that water moving beneath him. He got on his belly and crept forward. He pulled himself along by grabbing at the frozen-over cracks in the ice.

The eagle lay flat, one wing twisted under its body, on the ice just across the open water from Tim.

When Roger was almost able to reach his brother, his own weight made the ice shelf sink deeper so that water washed up onto the ice and under Roger's stomach into his face. It tasted clean, but it was bitterly cold. Roger gagged and choked. His body shook and he lost his breath.

He knew he would need to pull Tim onto the ice so he hooked his feet around a jutting edge behind him for leverage and reached out. "Tim. Give me your hand."

Tim lifted his head and faced Roger. His eyes were barely open. His hair was tangled and frozen around his ears. He began to move his arms this way and that across the ice. His heel broke the surface of the water and he started to slide away. The ice sank deeper and water splashed Roger's face,

his eyes, he could not see. He had no sensation but in his one outstretched hand and could not find Tim. As he felt the ice, unable to see anything, there were sirens and a shout from the river bank, a neighbor's voice. Roger let go with his feet to get more reach. The muscles in his shoulder popped and stiffened. He touched something, it was a frozen clenched hand. His brother had slipped into the river but was still holding on. Roger squeezed and pulled. "I've got you, Tim. I've got you."

## I Held the Door for Dad

Slowly, and with as much care as I had ever seen him do anything, my father climbed up the narrow stairs from the cellar holding in his arms the giant picture tube from his dead father's--my grandfather's--old television set. I watched from the landing in the middle of the stairway where I had been told to hold open the outside door to the driveway, where our Rambler station wagon was waiting with its tailgate open to take the tube to the dump. My mother stood above me, at the top of the stairs, with her hands on her hips, a red apron tied around her waist. She couldn't see Dad coming up because he was around the corner from her. So she listened and looked at me to see how he was doing. From my landing I could see both down into the

cellar and up into the house.

In my father's arms, as he ascended the stairs, the picture tube looked like a giant, squared wine glass with no base. If my father stopped to put it down, it would tip and everything would spill out. His face, under the plain, blue baseball cap worn only on Saturdays, was taut and serious, not because the tube was heavy, but because it was awkward. The steps above the landing where I stood were clean and wide enough, but below me, where, as you went down, you met the cold foundation wall on your right and the open musty smell of the cellar on your left, the stairway was narrow, and the steps themselves were taller than they were deep.

As you came up from the cellar, as my father was doing, there was a wooden, slatted grate which covered pipes in the floor. At the first turn, there was, not so much a landing, but three triangular steps. It was the part that I was most careful on when I had to carry a load up or down the stairs and couldn't see my feet. Near the wall these steps were wide, but width there was good only for storing small cans with nails in them, or the dirty dish towels my mother tossed down to be picked up later and put in the wash. On the outside of the turn, these steps narrowed away to nothing. And there was no railing.

"Do you want some help, Howard?" my mother asked.

"I've got it, Margaret," my father said, and then took in a breath and put his foot firmly on the first of the turning steps as if to say, It's a bit tricky, but a job for one person, really. Thanks anyway.

The strain in his face mixed with concentration. As he turned on the

narrow, unforgiving steps, he pulled away from the wall just enough to clear the drain pipe in the corner. He measured angles and distances that he could not see, but that he knew. Each move was exact and deliberate, but also graceful.

I looked up, my shoulder blade pressing against the door knob of a door that would have stayed open whether I was there or not, and my mother kind of smiled and shook her head. She knew that my father liked to do these projects, as he called them, by himself. Almost always, though, he'd ask me to help him. It was my job to fill the watering can on Memorial day at the cemetery; to watch to make sure that none of the long planks or two-by-fours slipped out the open end of the station wagon as we drove home from the lumber yard, and to hold open a cellar door that wouldn't swing shut unless you tilted the house sideways.



## Me and Gumby

### I.

#### The Driver

"I'll send you money for the book," I said, walking along the sidewalk of the four-lane, divided highway, holding Marie's hand, practically pulling her behind me, the loose metal buckle of her leather jacket clanking and squeaking against her thigh every other step.

She and I had come most of the two miles to the bus stop. It was the middle of April, and on the ground there was still snow, packed in dirty, icy, hard-to-see-at-night clumps on the sidewalk, and piled up black at the curb.

Marie was not dressed for the cold; she wore high heels and a short skirt. I wore boots, a sweater and a jacket. She had to catch a bus back to the city that night because in the morning she was leaving, quitting school in Boston after only one year, to fly back to Los Angeles to live with her mother. I was living twenty miles away in Natick. I would not see her again.

We came to an intersection and I stopped quick to let a car pass, its tires spitting up wet sand and ice. Marie bumped into me. She must have been watching her feet and didn't notice the slack between us when I stopped.

"Careful," I said, right away hating the way I'd said it.

"Sorry, Peter," she said. "Why are you so grumpy? And why are you walking so fast? We'll make it."

The week-end before, she had stayed with me and had left a library book from school in my room. Later she called to ask for it, but I could not find it. It was gone. I would learn weeks later that a friend of mine had been over and decided to borrow it. So, a few days before she was to head back to California, Marie and I argued on the phone:

"Is it there?" I told her it wasn't. "Did you look?" I told her I had. "Could your roommate have taken it?" I said I'd already asked him. "What'd he say?" I told her he knew nothing about it. "How can it not be there?" I suggested that Rob--my roommate--might have taken it and forgotten about it. "Could you ask him again?" I told her to forget it. "It's going to cost me fifty bucks." So I told her I'd pay for it. "Why not just ask Rob again?" But I told her he probably hadn't taken it after all. "You just said he might have."

To that, I must have said I was pretty sure he hadn't. "That's so stupid." I told her to forget it. "This is idiotic." I tried to tell her I'd take care of it. "Peter, you're ridiculous. Good-bye"

So we argued about the book. But we had done a lot of other things in the two months since we'd met. We had gone to places to eat. And we got into a few bars in Boston with our fake IDs. "Take me where there's water," Marie had said. So we went to the ocean and sat on the rocks and watched the surf. I took her for her first time to Maine and to New Hampshire. We ate at the Press Box in Portsmouth where there are dozens of old typewriters on the walls. It had all been fun. But lately, we argued about the book.

Now the walking was harder. I had to fight the ice and, worse, Marie's slow, high-heeled pace. When we got near to where we wanted to be, the bus was already in the mall parking lot across the highway from us. People were getting on. "Okay?" I said and ran into the street, Marie running to keep up with me. We got to the bus just as the last person boarded. We would not have made it if we had walked even just a little bit slower, but I didn't say anything. Back at my place, earlier, neither of us had mentioned the commuter buses that would be there in the morning.

Winded, we kissed and said our good-byes. The bus driver sat in the dim glow of the controls with his hand on the lever waiting to close the door.

"Good-bye, Marie."

"I'll call you in the morning before I leave," she said. "Lighten up, will

you?"

She turned and climbed into the bus. I stepped back onto the sidewalk and tried to see her, but the windows of the bus were dark and I couldn't see inside. I looked at the driver watching in his mirror until Marie found a seat. Then he closed the door and took the bus out of the parking lot and onto the highway. I had been walking fast, and now, standing still, I was cold. The jacket and sweater I had worn were not enough.

On the highway there were other cars, but I could still follow the sound of the bus as it accelerated away down Route 9. When it was gone, consumed by distance and traffic, I started back.

I walked carefully around the patches of ice. I took my time climbing over the mounds of snow. Someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to throw sand and salt, to plow with machines, to clear it all away. But they had done a poor job.

## II.

### A Red Light

A few months after we'd stopped seeing each other, Lisa and I met for pizza on Comm. Ave. in Allston. We had been together for a year. During that time I was back in school, having grown tired of working for wages. I was

living half with Lisa and half at my parents' house. I was glad to see her again. The only odd moments were when I recognized a gesture, or a way she had of saying something. The way she tilted her head to the side and pulled back the corner of her mouth in a sarcastic smile when I teased her; the way, with her thumb and finger, she had of holding her hair out of her face and away from the table when she leaned forward to grab a mouthful between sentences.

When we had finished eating and paid the bill, Lisa went to the bathroom and I told her I would go out and bring the car around. It was raining, and the car was parked on the next block; there was no reason for both of us to get wet. Since the restaurant was on a one way street and I had parked past it, I had to drive up to the next block and circle around two blocks and then back to pick up Lisa. On the way back, just around the corner from the restaurant, I had to wait at a red light. While I sat there with the wipers going, Lisa came out and started up the sidewalk away from me to where the car had been parked. She stopped when she saw that it wasn't there and stood looking around for it. I watched her, and thought of a night when I had seen her do the same thing:

We had been at a club where Lisa's band was playing--Lisa played guitar. Towards the end of the night she and I were standing at the bar and she said she had to go help pack the equipment. I stayed at the bar, glad we would be leaving soon. Going to see her band always made for a long night. I didn't particularly like their music, and Lisa was usually busy talking to

people or getting ready or packing up. I would spend most of the time nursing a warm beer. On the way back to her place, though, Lisa always told me how glad she was that I had come, and that she appreciated what I had to put up with.

As I waited, I put my beer on the bar and looked toward the back of the club where she and a few other band people had been packing up chords and putting away cymbal stands. But everything had been packed up and carried out. Lisa, now, was leaning against the back wall, her coat draped over her arms. She was talking to a guy from one of the other bands. She was laughing and nodding at whatever it was he was saying. I waited for them to finish. Other people were leaving.

Eventually, I headed for the door to get her attention, but she didn't notice. I went outside for a minute and when I came back they were still talking. They hadn't moved. I stood at the bar again. The beer I had put down had been picked up by the barmaid. Then a friend of the guy talking to Lisa went over and interrupted the conversation for a moment. I walked over to Lisa. She looked up and smiled.

"I'm going to leave now," I told her

Her smile went away. In her face, now, was surprise and hurt. She looked at me as if asking what had happened, what was she being accused of.

"I'll talk to you later," I said. As I walked alone to the door I knew she was watching me. I was wrong and cruel and stupid, but I had come to see her band again and she'd left me alone at the bar and hadn't even noticed that I'd gone out the door just a few minutes earlier.

Once outside, I walked down the street to where the car was parked and before I turned the corner I looked back but Lisa had not followed me. The car was two blocks away. I walked fast. I had to drive back the way I'd come, back to the same corner. I braked just short of the intersection, looked down the street toward the club, and saw Lisa come out. She had on her coat and walked in a half circle on the wide city sidewalk looking over parked cars and around passersby. Then she stood in the middle of the sidewalk, her hands at her sides, as she would do later in front of the restaurant, and looked around once more. She looked in my direction but could not see me as it was dark and my car was back from the corner, blocked from her view by parked cars. But I saw her, the expression on her face, and what I could not see I could imagine: that hurt, worried look she gets, and the way she tucks her hair behind her ear when she needs to make sense of things.

I watched her until she went back inside. Then I found a parking space and went back in to see her. She was sitting alone with her hands in her lap at a table in the empty bar. "What is wrong, Peter?" she said.

"Im stupid."

Now, through the rain-streaked window, I watched her standing outside the restaurant looking for me. I waited for the light to change and then pulled the car up. I leaned across to open the door. Lisa got in and pulled the door shut. Her hair was matted. Water dripped from her face. I was supposed to have made it so she wouldn't have to walk in the rain. But

it was no good. She was already quite wet.

### III.

#### Coffee, Alcohol, and Cigarettes

I was still in school. Now and then, Kathy and I would see each other in a bar in Boston. Sometimes we would just talk, and sometimes, after the bar closed, we would go to her apartment or drive to the beach.

"Shhh," Kathy said, long and breathy, trying to find the keyhole. I stood being quiet behind her in the hallway and watched. "Susan might be sleeping," she said. Susan was her roommate.

We went in and Kathy dropped the keys as she took them from the door. "Oops," she said and giggled.

I stepped around her, placed my hand gently on her shoulder as she knelt to get the keys, and walked to the kitchen. It was a big kitchen with a small red table and one chair. I sat down. Kathy said something and laughed to herself out in the hallway as she closed the front door. She had to push it hard to get it to close all the way. Some dirty glasses standing close together by the sink rattled.

"I'm going to make some coffee," she said. She put a cigarette, unlit,



between her lips and filled a pot with water. She lit her cigarette by holding it over the gas burner and then set the pot down. We waited for the water to boil. Kathy went into the other room and turned on the radio at low volume. When she came back, she got a cup and sat in my lap with her coffee and her cigarette. She put the cup to her lips to drink and I felt her unsteadiness.

"Want some?" she said.

"No thanks."

"Oh, I forgot. You don't drink coffee. You don't smoke. And you don't get drunk." She closed her eyes. After a minute she smiled and opened her eyes and I knew she was back with me. "You're a silly person. I've known you for five years, Peter, and I've never even seen your house." She giggled and finished her coffee. Looking away, she started to rub the back of my neck. I had my arms around her waist.

She played with my hair. She licked her lips and kissed me. Behind the coffee it tasted like a bar kiss. It tasted like Kathy. I liked it. "Come on," she said, and took my hand and the rest of me to the other room where the music was playing. From the couch, we then went to her room.

It was dark except for what the street light outside showed of Kathy's room. There were clothes on the floor, and a lot of shoes. Books lined the wall under the window. A light-colored dress hung from a hook on the back of the stained-wood door. A giant plastic Gumby looked down at me from the corner. Kathy got undressed, lay down on the bed, and pulled the covers over her. "Let's go to sleep," she said.

I awoke later feeling hot and sweaty so I pushed the blankets off me.

"Kathy," I said.

She half turned over and felt for me. Her fingers brushed my shoulder and then trickled down my back. I leaned over and kissed her. Still the beer and tobacco.

She rolled onto her side and put her arm around me. We lay there for a while.

"So what happened?" she said.

"With Lisa?"

"Yes."

"I blew it."

Kathy was breathing slowly and deeply.

"What about you?" I said. "How are things with what's-his-name?"

"He's a jerk. I hate him. He won't stop calling me." She spoke softly from sleep and because it was dark. "I only see him once in a while," she said.

"Why at all?"

"Because it's fun." Everything Kathy says at five in the morning sounds the same.

I got up. There was just enough light to find my clothes. They smelled like a bar.

"Are you leaving?" she said after a while. I could never tell when she was asleep or not.

I tried to balance myself as I pulled on one leg of my jeans. "Yes. It's

five o'clock. I have a class today."

"First," Kathy said, sitting up, "you have to say good-bye to Gumby."

I stood in the dark with my pants half on and faced the corner. Gumby was as tall as me and looked me right in the eye. "Good bye, Gumby," I said.

Kathy giggled. "Go home, Peter. Go to your class."

I had to pull the front door hard to get it to close all the way.

#### IV.

#### My Pocket

My mother and father stood on the porch of their house in Massachusetts and waved to me that morning as I pulled out of the garage on my way to Montana. But at the end of their street, instead of turning west toward Missoula, I turned left to go see Victoria one more time.

I rode through town the mile or so to the campus where we had met a year before and then up the circular driveway and parked in front of the main building where Victoria lived. It was early on a Sunday morning and the campus was very quiet. I knocked at her room on the third floor and she opened the door immediately. She was dressed and awake but looked tired.

"I really want to just get going," I said. We'd had our good-byes the night before.

"I know, Peter," she said. "But I have something for you." She went into the side room that was her bedroom and I looked around at her things. On the wall hung a painting that I had done the spring before. It was not very good, but Victoria had taken it from the art studio to keep. In the corner of her room was a fish tank, something of a joke because every fish Victoria bought died in a matter of weeks. A single guppy, though, who had outlived the paradise fish who was supposed to have eaten him, still swam in the big tank.

"Here," Victoria said, coming from the bedroom. She handed me a small bundle of letters. "I wrote them for you to read on your trip," she said. I fanned them and saw that each white envelope was labeled with a day of the week, starting with today. I imagined her sitting at her desk late the night before, after our good-byes, after I had gone home to pack, after all the noise of Saturday night had fallen to quiet, writing me letters to keep me company as I crossed the country alone. I put the letters in my pocket.

She hugged me for a long time and kissed my cheek. Very quietly, almost as if I weren't supposed to hear, she said, "I'll miss you," and put her face in the hollow of my shoulder

"Okay?" I said.

She nodded.

She walked me down the stairs to the lobby and then outside.

It's a ridiculous thing trying to say good-bye to somebody from a motorcycle. You get on the bike and put on your helmet, the other person

standing right next to you. You're still there with the person, outside, not like with a car which at least puts a door between the two of you. So you feel like you should hug or kiss one more time. But you can't, not without getting off the bike and taking off the helmet, so you don't, and you really feel like you don't. You nod and you feel stupid for it and there is nothing to do but leave.

I rode away down the driveway and came out onto the main road below the school. As I passed by again, Victoria waved to me.

Seeing her on the steps from that distance, the huge white columns and the four-story, red brick building behind her, I thought how small she should look, how very much alone. But she did not look small. And as she waved her arm high and strong over her head, I saw her smiling to encourage me. Behind her was a place she knew and where she had friends. She was wishing the same for me. I returned the wave. And how she must have seen me then, faceless inside my helmet, moving away, with just the few things I could carry.

## V.

### Miles

Before I ever knew her, Anne, who at the time lived and worked in

Manhattan, decided she had to go to Cairo to live with her father: a father who, twenty-four years before, had been married to her mother for exactly three months. But before she could leave the country, Anne had to visit, one last time, Missoula, Montana, to say good-bye to her mother. I met Anne then, two weeks before she was scheduled to fly back to New York and then on to Egypt.

Anne had told me, a few minutes into the conversation that first night in the bar, that she would be leaving in ten days. So I called her the next morning. We drove up a logging road fifteen miles east of town and sat on the top of a mountain and looked down at the line of the interstate, far below, and at the narrow corridor between the green and yellow hills. Another time, we spent an afternoon by a creek and I brushed larch needles from her hair. And at small bars outside of town, we picked through juke boxes for songs neither of us liked but wanted to hear. On the morning of the day she was scheduled to leave, Anne called the airline and told them she would be staying five more days.

Her last night in town we went out and then came back to where I was living. We talked for a while but it was late. She took out her contact lenses and put them in a glass of water.

"Don't drink them," she said.

"I won't."

We went to sleep with a candle burning. I woke up later and so did she. We stayed awake for a while and then went back to sleep. But I woke up again. The candle was still burning and it made everything soft and

warm. I didn't know what time it was, but I could see out the window that there was no light in the sky.

Soon Anne would get up, dress herself, and go to the bathroom with the glass to put in her contacts. I would get dressed also and walk her to her car in the gray light of early morning. We would say something and she would get in her car. She would drive and then she would get on a plane and fly three thousand miles and then get on another plane and fly three thousand miles more across an ocean to a place I will never know.

I thought about Marie from eight years before, and about Lisa. I thought about Kathy, and Victoria. What I saw gave me a sharp pain that shot from my stomach down to the insides of my knees, but I wanted to think. Marie had left me because it was time to go home; and I was eighteen. The business with Lisa I have never liked. She and I did things and went places for a year and when it ended and she asked why, all I could say was I had lost interest. Whenever I saw her afterwards I wanted to take it all back, but she seemed so strong and set that every time I thought about it I tried to think of something else. As for Kathy, whom I knew for so long and barely knew at all, she and I had been leaving each other forever every time we said good-bye. In the beginning she was exciting and dangerous, but that wore off and it became routine. For both of us. With Victoria it was essentially this: we had planned early on that she would come to Montana. Later, when she wanted details about what it would be like there, I told her I didn't know. Then she asked around, found out for herself, and said she wanted to stay in Massachusetts to finish her degree. I told her she could do

that just as well in Montana, and then she said she didn't think so. She wanted to finish where she had started. It made perfect sense to me.

And so, Anne's leaving, was as fixed and certain as if it had already happened.

So I lay on my side and put my arm across her. Her eyes didn't open and her breathing didn't change. Her hand came to rest on my wrist and the fingers closed with the grip of a sleeping person. I watched her profile against the white wall made orange by the flame and I was thankful for the candle. Careful not to wake her, I pressed as close to her as I could, so that there was nothing, not six thousand miles, not even an inch between us. In a while she would be gone, but for now I could smell her close breath and feel it, warm and steady, on my cheek.



## The Field

Stooped over in the dark with one hand on her knee, a flashlight in her other hand, my sister Marty hunted for night crawlers. She walked through the grass with such care and grace as if in slow motion. A piece of wax paper over the lens dimmed the light from the flashlight, which Marty directed in a careful sweeping motion. A hood protected her head from a light rain, and a pair of L. L. Bean clamdiggers kept her feet dry. Her step was deliberate, measured, and quiet. There was an alertness and a readiness in the way she carried herself, in the way she did everything. I had a flashlight too, and was looking. The worms we carried in a faded blue plastic pail.

We were in the field, as we called it. To get there we had had to walk about two miles beyond the dead end of our street, beyond the pavement, the houses, and street lights, then along a dirt road. In the early dusk it was pleasant to go quietly along that road with Marty. Rain patted the leaves overhead, but the sky ahead of us was beginning to clear, all grey and yellow as the sun set. When we had reached the end of the dirt road we sat for a moment on the boulders that were there to keep cars out. We could hear the spring peepers from the swamp near the woods on the other side of the field. We also heard crickets, a pair of nighthawks catching insects, and from the highway a mile or so beyond the woods, the faint hum of trucks that would be turning on their headlights soon as the sky grew darker and as Marty and I looked for worms.

After an hour of walking around in that wet grass, my sneakers were pretty much soaked through. And on top of that, I wasn't having much luck. Marty, though, was doing well. It was dark now and we had to use our flashlights to see. I noticed Marty's light go out, and then I looked over to see it glowing red around the flesh of her hand. I knew she had seen a worm and was covering her light to keep from scaring the worm back into its hole. I also knew that she had her eye fixed on the spot, as if she could still see it in the dark. I heard her get down on one knee. Her nylon windbreaker whispered as she moved into position over the hole. Finally, kneeling in the wet grass, she let a sliver of the dim light shine through her fingers. She braced the butt of the light against her chest and reach for the worm with her free hand. "Got you," she said, sitting back on her heels. She stretched

over to drop the worm in the pail, which was nearer to me.

"How many do we have?" she asked.

I flashed my light into the pail to see. "About ten, I guess." They were all knotted around each other and it was hard to tell exactly. I knew I had caught only one. "Maybe a dozen," I said.

Marty must have been keeping track of how few I had caught because she started giving me tips. She said, "Try to spot them with the edge of the light." She explained the trick to catching them, it was to use the light carefully. But I knew that. "By the time you get them in the brightest part of the light," she said, "it's too late."

She moved away from me then, to keep a workable distance between us. Maybe I wasn't concentrating enough. So I refocused my attention and scanned the ground in front of me. Two worms slid into their holes before I even had a chance. I was slow with my hands and clumsy with the light. A few yards from me Marty was already on her knee again, her free hand open over a line of light so dim and narrow it could have slipped between the wet blades of grass without ever touching them.

I slowed my pace. Moving with the light, I took a careful step and saw a worm. It didn't react, so I grabbed it, forgetting Marty's technique of covering the light and everything. The worm started to pull itself into its hole, fighting to get away from me, struggling like it cared, like it knew something. I felt the worm's hold in the ground, felt it pulling itself down. It was strong for a worm. I pulled back too hard and broke off its head and neck. The piece in my hand contracted and wiggled.

"Did you get one?" Marty asked.

"Half a one," I said, feeling it squirm in my palm. I flashed the light onto the hole. The raw end of the part that had escaped was barely above ground. No longer did it try to get away. Lightly, I touched it with the broken end of what was now my half, and it shied. I lay my piece by the hole and left it alone then.

"That's okay. We'll still have plenty," Marty said.

Neither of us had been fishing for a long time, but that afternoon Marty had come into my room and asked me if I wanted to go fishing the next day. It was a Friday and Marty had just had her friend Jody over. I was surprised by her mentioning fishing. We still had our Mitchell rods and reels and our green tackle boxes in the callar, but none of that stuff had been touched for years. Though I didn't care one way or the other about fishing, Marty has this way of asking a question that makes me want to say yes. Her eyes widen and she smiles. So I agreed. Then Marty said we'd need to get some worms, and we planned to go night crawling.

It rained a few hours later, just after supper. I complained about it, but Marty said it would bring the worms up and make our job easier. And she was right. Though I couldn't catch any, with every pass of my flashlight I saw at least one or two. If someone were to have walked across that field without paying attention, he'd have stepped on a hundred maybe. There were many more worms than we could catch.

Stooping over, reminding myself to be patient and sure I would get the next one, I asked Marty, "Where should we go tomorrow?"

"Chadwick Pond," Marty said. "I don't think the weeds'll be bad yet. And if it's hot we can go swimming."

"Okay," I said. All of a sudden we weren't just going fishing anymore, we were going to an actual place. A place I knew. And for the first time since Marty had mentioned it, I was sincerely looking forward to tomorrow. So I again tried to concentrate my worm finding efforts.

"We should take our bikes," Marty added, "and maybe bring a lunch or something."

Since Jody had been over that afternoon, I thought--hoped--maybe the idea to go fishing was both of theirs. "Will your friend be coming with us?" I asked.

"You mean Jody? To come fishing with us." Still stooped over with her hand on her knee, Marty turned toward me. "And swimming with us?" she said.

Obviously she hadn't asked her, but I thought maybe I could encourage an invitation. "It's okay with me," I said.

Marty shined her light in my face. "Yeah?"

I could almost hear her smile and I knew I was being foolish. I didn't think she saw me blush though, because I turned away real fast and her light was dim.

"Anyway," Marty continued, taking the light from my face, "Jody won't be coming with us."

I went back to looking for worms, trying to think of something to say, anything that didn't have to do with tomorrow or fishing or Jody.

Marty and Jody were in their first year of high school. I was in eighth grade, so for the first time Marty and I were going to different schools. They were both in track and I went to all their meets because I was a runner too and told Marty I liked to see her compete. Jody was athletic and pretty. I was careful not to let her catch me looking at her. But she knew. And Marty knew too. Whenever I was around them I felt my face get hot.

But I enjoyed watching them run. Marty, because she was my sister, and Jody, for her white shorts and long legs, and to see her sweat. She and Marty were serious, and I could see that they raced against each other as well as against the other teams. They were so fast and so much better than their competition that I imagined them never having to worry about losing. They trained hard and were smart. They won every meet and had the luxury of knowing they would.

So I was around them quite a bit during track season. And sometimes, if Jody came home with Marty after school, I'd listen to them talking. They'd talk about people I didn't know, about track, and about school. They discussed training, and their bodies. They talked about sex, though neither of them, I learned, had any first hand experience. They talked about what boys they liked, and I expected them to tease and laugh at each other the way my friends and I did when we talked about girls. But they didn't, not when it was important. Instead, their voices got quiet and breathy, and they stopped interrupting each other. They were serious, asked each other questions, and gave each other advice. Neither one suffered embarrassment.

There were long moments of silence during which I imagined Marty

sitting on her pillow with her legs crossed under her. I could see her braiding and unbraiding the short fringes of her bedspread. She would be looking at her hands and smiling.

Sometimes they talked about guys they thought were silly. Once, Marty and Jody talked about a teacher at the school. He was a lech, they said, and looked at them in ways they didn't like. They would sit in the back row of his classroom to keep from feeling his eyes on their legs and ankles. They ridiculed him, and I was sure he deserved it. But there were others they talked about. Men they didn't know. Someone in a car at the beach, or taking the nearest booth in a restaurant, or pretending to ask for directions on a street corner. Jody said she was followed home from practice one afternoon. She said later she couldn't stop shaking and was unable to eat that night, and she didn't know why.

Through all this, I sat and listened, sometimes from the stairs above the landing, sometimes from inside my room with the door cracked and the lights off. And I never moved. I didn't make a sound.

I had been listening that afternoon too, before Marty came to me about the fishing trip. Jody was over. I was in my room with the shades up and the windows wide open inventorying my drawers and closet, kind of a stupid thing I did once in a while to find and get rid of anything that might embarrass me if I was unexpectedly killed and someone had to go through my stuff. Not that I really thought I would be killed, it was more of a game, a way to pass the time and to impress whomever it was I was imagining as going through my stuff. That day I imagined it would be Marty because my

parents were too busy making funeral arrangements.

I pulled the top drawer from my bureau and sat with it on my bed. The first thing to consider was an elastic band my teacher had worn on her wrist one day. She took it off and put it on her desk, and I picked it up after class. An elastic seemed a safe thing to keep.

Actually, most of what I had, taken by itself, wasn't very incriminating. But what would Marty make of a drawer full of elastics, chewed pen caps, used postage stamps, clippings from the local paper about people I didn't know, an empty match book, an unopened box of fish food? The one thing I did have that would change Marty's opinion of me--or so I thought--was a school picture of Jody that I had taken from Marty's room. It was a dangerous thing to keep, but at the same time to keep it gave me a sense of security. I liked to look at it and to read the handwriting on the back. It said simply, "To you. From me. For always." I knew I should probably have gotten rid of it, but I could never think of just throwing it away. And for it to suddenly reappear in Marty's room after so many months might raise my sister's suspicions. So I was looking at the picture not wanting to get rid of it when Marty called to me to ask me about fishing. I got up to answer the door and put the picture in my back pocket, to keep it there for the rest of the day until I decided what to do with it.

Marty stood in my doorway. Her eyes were red. And I had heard Jody go down the stairs and leave by herself a little while before. But my windows had been open. Noises from the outside had been coming in and I didn't necessarily have to hear what had been going on in the next room.



But that night in the field, Marty reached over, dropped another worm into the pail, and asked me, as she started looking again, "Did you hear me and Jody arguing today?"

I said, "Yes."

"She says she doesn't trust me."

"Why not?"

"She says she has things she wants to talk to me about. But she thinks I won't understand."

"What kinds of things?"

"She won't tell me no matter how much I ask her."

"What does that have to do with trusting you?" I said.

"Not trusting me to understand, I guess."

"She'll forget about it," I said.

"She acted real scared. And then I got mad at her for not telling me what it was all about."

"Do you think she'll be all right?" I asked.

"I don't know." she said.

I saw another worm, and, using Marty's technique of the sliver of light and the open hand, I knelt and grabbed it. The worm pulled long and hard for its hole. I felt it slipping away, its insides backing up behind my pinched fingers. I tried pulling it gently to loosen its grip on the earth, but it was just more of the same. The head opened and the insides squirted onto my fingers. I let go and watched the worm. It went slowly and with great effort, I imagined, into the ground. It took a long time for it to pull its

ruined end in behind it. I felt bad. Not sorry bad, but wrong bad. I didn't like any of it.

Marty was quietly searching again. I wiped my hand in the grass, put out my light, and stood up. I hadn't noticed how stiff my back and knees had gotten. It hurt to stand. The little bit of light that was in the sky when we'd reached the field was gone now. There was no light at all except for Marty's flashlight, and she had her back to me so all I saw around her was a dim glow.

Looking back at the dark opening where the road was, I was surprised at how far we'd come--crawled, practically. I had been staring at the ground for so long that I lost track of where we were going. I could see now that we had worked our way around the soggy bottoms near the trees and were almost to the middle of the field, where the ground is highest and where it slopes off down to the swamp. I thought of the spring peepers, but they had stopped calling. It was too late for the robins and nighthawks. And though the highway still hummed, the trucks I had heard earlier were now a hundred miles away. From my spot in the field, the woods all around us, except for a dense grove of trees near the swamp, seemed like an enormous black wall whose distance from us was impossible to gauge.

I tapped the pail with my toe to knock a few worms off the sides. I knelt and shined my light in. The worms were tangled and hiding amongst each other. The pail smelled of dirt, plastic, and worms. My feet were cold, and my socks were wet and baggy around my ankles and toes. We had plenty of worms, it seemed to me, and I wanted to go. But Marty was still busy

hunting for nightcrawlers.

So I rejoined her in the hunt, and we worked our way deeper into the field and along the top of the slope. In spite of my wet feet and my frustration at not being able to catch worms as well as Marty, I was getting better at it. Still, even at my best, Marty dropped three or four worms into the pail for every one of mine.

We got around to where we could see what before had been hidden by the grove of trees and I was startled to see a person standing all alone, and the orange glow of a cigarette.

Marty must have seen it at the same time I did because she stood, turned off her light, and said, "Let's go."

She put her flashlight in her pocket. I picked up the pail and tapped it again. We started walking back the way we'd come to stay above the wet ground that we had avoided all night, and to get out of view of the person down below as quickly as possible.

Marty walked fast and I kept up with her pace. But then we heard a man's voice call out to us. I looked back and saw him, twice as close as he had been before, walking towards us up the hill. So I stopped.

"Come on," Marty said. But she stopped too, because I did.

When he was close enough for me to see that he had on a suit jacket, he stopped and raised his cigarette to his mouth. It glowed brighter for a second. Then he lifted his foot to his other knee and put out the cigarette on the sole of his shoe. With his hands in his jacket pockets, he came towards us again.

He stood in front of me and Marty so that the three of us formed a triangle. "Hi," he said. He waited for an answer. His jacket was unbuttoned. He wore a plain white shirt underneath. I couldn't see his face too well in the dark, but I knew I didn't recognize him. When neither Marty nor I said anything, he took his hand out of his pocket and said, slowly, "I been watching you. I seen you come over that hump, creeping around with those flashlights, and was just wondering what's going on."

"We were getting worms," I said. There was an apology in my voice.

"Oh," he said. "Can I see them?" He held out his hand and I passed him the pail. He took my flashlight too. As he looked in, the blue glow from the pail reflected up to his face. He had fair skin, a movie star's features, and a crew cut. "Wow," he said. "That's a lot of worms."

He handed the pail back to me. "You're good," he said, nodding, pointing the light in my face. He looked from me to Marty and then back to me again, using the light, all the time smiling. "Listen," he said, "why don't you two come join me. I'm just down there, where you seen me before, behind them trees."

"We were leaving," Marty said.

"Come on down. I think you ought to." He held the light on Marty. She squinted a little, but not much.

"Sorry," Marty said, sounding very polite.

"Oh, come on," he said. He took a step toward me, shined the light in my face, and put his arm around my shoulders. His touching me made me angry, but he was a foot taller than me and there was no way I could have

gotten away from him. His jacket was soaking wet and musty smelling. I was annoyed at myself for stopping when he called to us. We should have just started running. "You have to come," he said. "You too, Marty." And he put the light on her. I was surprised that he knew her name, and a bit relieved, oddly enough. Maybe she knew who he was. I looked at her, but she seemed as surprised as me.

He walked me down the slope, holding me very close, Marty following behind us. "Let me go," I said. But he ignored me and tightened his hold. He kept the light in my face and told me that it had been raining and that he was sorry about his jacket. He wished he had a nice waterproof windbreaker like mine. I didn't say anything, so he took another look into the pail, which I held against my chest. Then he shined the light back in my face. "Boy oh boy," he said, "that sure is a bunch of worms."

At the bottom, the ground was spongy. My sneakers filled with water. He took us around the grove of trees and stopped by the edge of the swamp. He still had his arm around my shoulders. Then he sat me down on a fallen tree and left me there. Like everything else, it was soft and wet.

He took Marty's arm and sat her right beside me. The man held the light on us.

"Here we are," he said. "See how quiet it is."

He was right. I couldn't hear the highway anymore. All I could hear was dripping water. Water dripped in the woods, in the trees above us, and into the swamp. The sound was everywhere.

"I'm Cam," the man said finally, and he held the light to his face and

smiled. "You're Marty." he flashed the light on her. "And you're the guy with the worms," he said. "I wish we had better weather for this."

"What are you doing out here?" Marty said.

"I was just watching you guys. I followed you down the road. That's how come I know your name? The guy with the worms must have said it half a dozen times. 'What do you think of this, Marty?' 'What do you think of that, Marty?'" He stepped closer to us. "I thought for sure you'd turn around and see me when you stopped at those rocks. But you didn't."

Marty stood up and touched my back. "Let's go," she said, and got by him before he had time to react. He seemed surprised that we would try to get away from him. He let her go, but grabbed me as I tried to walk between him and the trees. He pulled me back by the arm and put his hand around my throat. Then he slapped my face. When he raised his hand again, I put up my arm and blocked it. He dragged me a ways by the throat and shoved me over the log. I came down so hard into the cold wet ground that it made me dizzy. He leaned over the log pointing his finger in my face, sliding his knee between my legs. "You don't do that," he said and slapped me again. Then he crawled over the log and lay on top of me. I tried to roll out from under him but he was too heavy and I couldn't get any leverage on that soft ground. He had his mouth by my ear. "Okay, let's start. Give me your money," he said.

"I don't have any." It was hard to speak with him on top of me, his chest on mine, his breath in my face.

"You don't mind if I have a look, do you?" he whispered. He slid off me just a little and put his hand on my thigh and rubbed where my pocket was.

Then he felt the other one.

"I don't have anything," I said.

"That's okay," he said. He was breathing fast. I tried not to move. Then he rolled me onto my side and held me so that my face was against his. He felt in my back pockets. He took my picture of Jody. "What's this?" he said.

"A picture."

"I know that. Who is it?"

"A friend."

"A girl?"

"Yes."

"A girlfriend."

"Yes."

"Good. That makes it better," he said. He reached up and put the picture on the log. Then he placed his hand on my hip and rolled me onto my back. "Your picture is safe," he said and slid his hand from my hip to my thigh.

I arched my neck and tried to free my arms but he had me pinned. I couldn't move at all. I closed my eyes and tried with all my strength but there was just no way.

When I opened my eyes, I saw Marty standing over us holding a stick. I turned my face away as she brought it down on him. The stick broke and pieces of it landed on my face. It was wet and rotten, but still it was enough to hurt him a little and give me a chance to roll free. I got up and

started away, but he had Marty by the ankle.

"You," he said.

He got up and slammed Marty back against a tree. He had her by her throat. Her jacket ripped loudly. Marty tried to jump, she twisted her body, screamed, and kicked at him. She tried everything to break free, but he was too strong.

I yelled at him to stop. He turned to point at me and jerked Marty away from the tree as he did so. He warned me to stay the hell away from him unless I wanted the same. Then I half saw him pointing at me, and half saw Marty take the flashlight from her pocket and slam it, butt end, into his face. I had never heard anything like it before, the sound of teeth breaking on metal. He let go of Marty and fell back into the water hollering. Marty looked at me. I ran to the log. The picture had fallen to the ground, but I found it. "Come on," Marty said, and we both started running. The man was getting to his feet but we were already around of the grove.

I couldn't get the picture into my pocket as I ran so I just held onto it. Cam was running behind us, but I couldn't judge how close he was. I expected any second to feel a blow on my shoulder or behind my knees, or a boot in the middle of my back, and then his hand on my throat. Marty was a few paces ahead of me and I told myself that if I could just keep up with her

We ran up the slope to firmer ground and instead of running straight across to the opening where the dirt road was, we went around in a half circle, the same way we had come to keep above the wet bottoms. It was



Marty's doing. She was thinking more clearly than I was. I just followed her.

She had her stride, and it was perfect, like she was running the four-forty around the asphalt track at her school. Cam, probably thinking he would cut us off, ran right into the low part and had to look for hard ground again. I heard him splashing around and swearing. I think he even fell down. When we neared the end of the field, I looked back and saw him still sloshing through the muck. He was coming pretty fast, but it had slowed him down and given us a good lead.

We got to the road and Marty hurdled over one of the the boulders. She was ahead of me by half a dozen paces now. I tried to make it around the last boulder, between it and a tree, and fell trying to avoid a puddle. I landed on my side. My hip and shoulder hit the ground hard and I had no wind. I could hardly move. I heard Cam yell something, but it didn't make any sense. In a second I felt Marty's hand on mine, pulling me up. "Come on," she said. "Hurry."

It was darker there under the trees than it was in the field. Almost as dark as it had been near the swamp. I couldn't see Marty's face at all. I could barely see her outline. But I felt her hand, wet and cold, but strong. "Come on," she said again. I was hurt, but I got up. I still had the picture. We started running. I was right behind Marty. I put my feet where she did to keep out of puddles and pot holes.

She had stopped and come back to get me twice. And running down that dark road behind her, hearing her feet hit the ground, watching her wet

hair bounce and fly around her head, her hood long since fallen away, listening to her breathing, which was steadier than my own, I thought of how far we would have to run. But the sticks on that road weren't rotten, and I knew what we could do to him if he caught up to us. He had done his worst, had held me down and Marty against a tree, but still he didn't have us. Though he was older and stronger and probably gaining on us every minute, I knew.

I knew even before we made it to the first street light where the dirt road turned to asphalt. I knew before we got to our house and were able to put home and a locked a door between ourselves and violence. I knew before I explained to Marty later about the picture with the faded message and told her I was gong to keep it. I knew before we both grew older and left Longmeadow and had our own lives. I knew, especially as I ran behind my sister with that picture in my hand, that she would be safe. That we would both be safe.