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THE ANSWER TO THE UNIVERSE

by

Steven Goldsmith

B.A., University of California, Davis, 1981

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Montana

1989

Approved by

  
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## THE ANSWER TO THE UNIVERSE

There's money in a good story. I tell my customers about the time I ate a lizard at a wedding reception in Brazil ("Tasted just like chicken," I say, "Like a chicken with scales and teeny weeny bones.") and my tip jar fills with damp singles. I tell them horror stories and mysteries and adventures and sweet sad tales of women who loved me and then up and died. I tell them about the sniper who blew out my windshield on the San Diego Freeway, and they pile money on my bar, laughing like Ed McMahon and saying, No shit? and Get outa here. When they say, Oh my God, and Jesus H. Christ, it sounds to me like prayer.

They've been working hard all day, or looking hard all day for work, and they lean forward, resting their arms on the bar, and they shush each other, they order their drinks with gestures, pointing and holding up fingers, because I'm telling them about the time raccoons pushed my backpack off a cliff in the Sierras, or about the teenage girl who mugged me in Hollywood, pressing a Saturday Night Special against my fly and whispering, "Every penny, Home Boy, or you're gonna learn all about pain."

I even use sound effects: I shake the speed rail for earthquakes and explosions, rap out swizzle stick rim-shots on an ice bucket, buzz the blender to simulate trucks and

buses, planes and trains. A wine cork fired from my mouth into the brushed steel sink can sound just like a gunshot. Nobody goes near the jukebox on my shifts.

The stories are not mine. I've stolen every one of them from Jimmy, the manager of this little dive. It's called the Santa Monica Beach Club, although it's six blocks from the beach and nothing you'd be tempted to call a club. He's a kid, really, twenty-three, exactly half my age, and if I'm ever going to explain what happened to me, how I hooked in to the answer to the universe, I'm going to have to start with him.

About a week ago Jimmy came in with a long bruise on his face that looked as if a purple worm had burrowed under his skin from forehead to jaw. I mixed him a Jack and Coke and opened myself a beer. Bartenders aren't supposed to drink on duty, but Jimmy never pulls manager shit on me, so we get along pretty well.

"What the hell happened to you?" I said. This is how you start a conversation with Jimmy.

"What?" he said. He lifted his skinny little leather tie as if he were looking for mustard stains.

"Jimmy," I said. When he looked up I ran my finger along my face as if I had the bruise.

"Oh. Some lady hit me with her purse."

I shook my head. "Okay, Jimmy. What did you do to the lady?"



"Nothing. No really. See, she picked me up on the highway, out near Barstow...."

"What were you doing hitching in the desert?" I said.

"Hmm? Oh, you know." This was an answer, the only one he offered. I'm telling you, Jimmy is beautiful.

"See, she was mad before I said a word, right? She just pulls up and tells me to get in and she starts driving away before I even get the door shut. Alls she says is that there's this dumbass law that you have to pick up hitchhikers in the desert. So, she was like pissed off from the start. Oh, and she was wearing one of those maternity things, you know? With flowers and junk?"

Jimmy's voice always goes up at the end of statements, and he kind of sings the last syllable, as if everything he says were tentative, a question. Of course, he was born in L.A., so maybe that's why. He took a mouthful of his drink and swished it in his cheeks like mouthwash.

"And, hey, she wasn't pretty or nothing," he said suddenly, as if this were somehow relevant, as if I might be getting rude thoughts about Jimmy in the desert with a pregnant woman, and to be completely truthful I was, but just because I was already trying to make this into a story I could use. "I mean, it's not like she was ugly, it's just that her hair was all scragged out and she had dirty fingernails and there was a lot of junk all over the inside of her car, you know? Like you just knew she wasn't going to take care of any kid.

"Okay. So she doesn't say a word for a long time, right? Like we're driving along and nobody is saying anything. So I decide to ask her when she's due, 'cause that's what I figure you say to pregnant people. And she goes: 'Any minute.' And then, like I'm not already shitting my pants, she goes: 'But I don't want it.' And she gives me this look. I'm talking loony tunes."

It's great to start a shift with Jimmy. I got up to get myself another beer, and while I mixed him another drink, I let the story start to form itself in my mind: I'm alone with this crazy person in the desert beside a beat up VW. She's on her back on sand, my shirt is under her ass, and she's screaming, cursing the kid as its bloody head emerges. No hot water, no hot towels. I lift the kid and slap it once: no sound. I slap it again and the baby wails to life. I weep, holding its body against my naked chest. The woman gets up and wipes herself with her dress, not looking at the kid. She crawls into the car. I stand up, puzzled, my face streaked with tears. "It's all yours," the woman shouts as she guns the engine and drives off....

When I sat back down, Jimmy was drumming the table with both hands. "I got it wrong," he said. "What she said was: 'I ain't letting it out.' Yeah. She goes, 'I ain't letting it out. I'm gonna nip this little rug rat in the bud.' We're doing like seventy miles an hour on Highway 10, right? and now this woman is reaching under her seat and she comes up with this commando knife and she jams it right into her belly."

Jimmy doesn't know a thing about dramatic tension. Without even pausing for me to say Holy shit or something he says, "But she isn't hurt. She just had like pillows and junk up under her dress. I guess it was just something she liked to do to people. Okay, so after she's had her fun she pulls over and goes 'Get out.' Just like that. While I'm trying to find the door handle she hits me in the face with the strap of her purse and goes, 'Now, asshole.'

I shook my head appreciatively and waited for him to go on, but there was no more. He just ran his finger along the bruise, looking thoughtful. "She was pretty weird," he said eventually, as if it had just occurred to him.

Here's something I made up: Good bartenders borrow, great bartenders steal. I decided I had my story for that night, and I shook Jimmy's hand as if we had just closed a business deal.

I can admit right up front, though, that I was jealous of him. The maddening thing about him is that I'm the one who has been places, I'm the one who spent thirty years in the throbbing menace of Manhattan, I'm the one who hitchhiked in the sixties from New York to L.A. without having one lousy experience worth retelling over a beer. I swear to god every ride I ever got was in a station wagon. Families on vacation would take me three states at a time. But Jimmy, Jesus. When he sticks his thumb out on the freeway the Manson family picks him up and takes him to a cave in the desert for drugs and orgy and murder. Jimmy

with his thumb out on the highway is a man trolling for weirdos.

Something about him just asks for it. When you talk to him he looks blankly at you, his face simple and curious as a fish looking up from a pool. And as beautiful as that, too, calm and soft and wide and spattered with wide tan freckles as faint as a panther's spots -- a face so flat and blank that it drives people to etch some story into it. He keeps landing in the middle of other people's nightmares, all wide-eyed and baffled, and when he tries to tell you about it you can tell he never really got it. Never asks why, never looks past the flat facts of the thing. If he had a car he'd be the guy with a bumper sticker that says "Shit happens," but he doesn't have a car because his squirreleshit green Chevy Nova was stolen by a small man with a very big gun. The little guy even gives Jimmy a lift once in a while, which is just the kind of thing I'm talking about.

The night he told me about the pregnant woman turned out to be a pretty busy night for a Thursday. The regulars were all here, and a lot of people I had never served kept coming in. Bill and Laura held hands, sharing a birdbath margarita and feeding each other pretzels that I knew had gone stale. Tuesday rattled her bracelets, clicking polished nails on the bar, twin crescents of sweat showing dark on her pink leotard. ("My name's Elizabeth," she told me the first night she came in, months ago, "Gag me, right? Just call me Tuesday. It's a nick.") Dennis and Jaime,

barkers at the Santa Monica pier, gripped tall cans of Oly, talking to each other with their eyes on Tuesday.

Every few minutes the door swung open, and light from a streetlamp flashed off the bottles, hit me like a spotlight, and another customer appeared out of swirling smoke and climbed onto a stool. The bar was shaped like a horseshoe, so my customers surrounded me, no one more than three steps away.

I dunked a glass into the soapy water and then into the rinse water which by now was nearly as soapy, and then I set it upside down with the other glasses and watched the suds run down its sides and make a bubbly ring on the towel.

"So," I said to no one in particular, to everyone, "Did I tell you about the time I was hitching in the desert?"

"Yeah," Bob said. "Hey tell these guys about that lizard you scarfed down in Mexico."

A young kid with greenish hair, a surfer-type, said, "You mean this dude actually ate a lizard?"

Laura punched Bob's shoulder. "Way to go," she said. "You're not supposed to know he ate it until the end, stupid. Besides, it was Brazil, right Mike?"

"What's the fucking difference?" Bob whined. "Hey turn on the game, will you?"

I flipped on the TV, but I left the sound off. People shouldn't have to listen to something they don't want to hear.

The yuppie sitting next to Tuesday ran his hand along the surface of the bar.

"Excuse me," he said. "What type of wood is this?"

"Babinga," I said. "It's imported from West Africa. Eighty bucks a foot." It was true. The first owner of this place tried to make it a class act, but sometimes telling the truth just makes you sound like a liar.

"Come on," the yuppie said. "It's rosewood, right? I got a coffee table made out of rosewood. It's rosewood."

Tuesday lifted a five dollar bill from in front of the yuppie and held it out to me.

"This guy wants to buy me a drink." When I took the money he just shrugged. He wasn't going to get anywhere with Tuesday.

"Something blue," she said.

While I mixed her a Blue Whale, I decided to can the hitchhiking story for now. I'd tell a different one, an older one, one that would hook them right off.

I set Tuesday's drink on a paper mat and dropped the change in front of the yuppie, then stepped back by the sink, so I would have to speak up.

"The other night," I announced, as if I were only speaking to Tuesday, "I discovered the answer to the universe."

The yuppie looked at Tuesday and sneered, "What's he talking about?"

Tuesday told him to shut his yap. This guy was going home alone.

"The answer to the universe, I swear to God," I said, even louder. It came to me in the middle of the night." I winked at Jimmy, who smiled blankly.

"But," I said, raising a finger for emphasis, "I can't find a pen to write it down, and I'm afraid to turn on a light because I have this terror that the inspiration will fade away. I have this image of my thoughts scrambling away from the light like roaches."

Jimmy was looking at me with his mouth open, as if he'd never heard this story before.

"So to keep it alive I'm chanting it over and over to myself, sort of sleepwalking into the kitchen." I did a pantomime of a somnambulist, eyes and lower lip droopy, arms outstretched, hands flopping at the ends of my wrists like fish. Somebody laughed.

"I get into the kitchen, because I know I've got a marker on top of the refrigerator that I use for labeling frozen food, and I take it down and write this mantra, this revelation, in huge letters on the door. It must have been wild: me standing stark naked in the kitchen scribbling all over my refrigerator with a felt pen."

I acted this out, too, slashing a stirrer in front of me like a fencing foil.

"Zorro!" Bob shouted, and Laura punched his arm.

"You're drunk," Laura said.

"Fuck you," Bob said.

"So," Jimmy said, louder than necessary, "What did it say, Mike?" He watched Bob and Laura out of the corner of his eye. They just stared at each other.

I flipped the stirrer behind my back, caught it, and rapped it once on the register. The cash drawer popped open with a ring.

"No," I said. "You gotta wait. See, I didn't even read it, because I was still half asleep, and besides, I was still chanting it to myself. So. I'm shuffling through the living room when I hear this noise. I look toward the middle of the room and in the dim moonlight I see this man kneeling in front of my stereo system."

"Holy shit," Tuesday said.

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking. My speakers are lying on their sides, the receiver and tape deck are wrapped together with wire, and now he's taping the tonearm down so it won't flop when he picks up the turntable. All around him in a half circle are these cardboard boxes with my stuff sticking out of them."

The green-haired surfer pointed to his empty beer bottle and held up a finger. After I'd given him another beer and his change he asked for some quarters for the juke. I wanted to tell him it was busted but he'd probably have tried it anyway, so I gave him the quarters and then turned down the volume so at least I wouldn't have to shout. Then I settled back against the register and put my hands in my pockets. Christopher Cross began whining in the background. Something about the Moon and New York City. I noticed Bob



and Laura having a quiet argument, whispering angrily, looking down into the slushy Margarita. Tuesday's suitor offered to buy her a drink, and she just pointed at her half-full glass and curled a lip at him.

"Jeezus," Jaime said, and I smiled, but he was not looking at me. His eyes were on the T.V. where Mookie Wilson had just bounced off the center field wall.

"So go on," Jimmy said. "What did you do then?"

"He shit his pants is what," Dennis said.

Jaime snorted a laugh, "He wasn't wearing no pants, man."

"Don't be gross," Tuesday said, but she was smiling at them, almost laughing.

"Yeah, so anyway," I went on, "here's a guy kneeling in my living room, cleaning me out, and I'm standing there bare assed with an El Marko in my hand. So I cross my hands over my crotch, and I'm waking up fast. I'm trying to think, but what am I gonna do? Wrestle him? Run up and slash an M on his forehead? I mean, I can't even call the cops because my telephone is sticking out of one of the boxes, all wrapped up in its cord.

"And the guy is strange. I mean strange. He has one of those marine's haircuts, his hair standing straight up from his skull like iron filings on a magnet. I don't see a gun or a knife or anything, but when he looks back over his shoulder I can tell that he isn't even a little bothered that I've discovered him, and that scares the hell out of me."

I paused to pour myself a drink from the bottle I kept under the register. The label said J and B, but it was really ten year old Glen Morangie. Great bartenders steal. I drained the glass, refilled it, and wiped my mouth with my sleeve.

"The weirdest thing, then," I said. "The guy -- without even getting up -- puts a finger to his lips and lets out this little hiss, and he's grinning like an ape. Then he just turns away, and goes back to rolling up speaker wire.

"I feel like an idiot standing there holding my nuts while some guy rips me off. I mean, what could I do? I just went back into the bedroom and pulled on a pair of jeans and lay down in bed, listening."

Jimmy had to be pretty embarrassed that I left this part of the story in, but he seemed to like the way I was telling it. Scare shitless and unashamed. He swirled his glass and took a long drink. I toasted him silently. Nobody had come in for a long time, and I suddenly noticed that several people had gone, so I took a quick run around the bar, dumping ashtrays and pretzel dishes, picking up empties, scooping up tips. Jaime and Dennis were chanting "bullshit, bullshit, bullshit" at an umpire.

"All right," I said. "I'm lying there listening to this guy opening and closing drawers, packing boxes and carrying them downstairs. At least two hours go by. Then, before he leaves, he looks in my bedroom. He just opens the door a little, sticks his head in, and looks at me for a

second, the way my folks used to look in on me when I was a kid. I pretend to be asleep."

Bill put his arm around Laura, and kissed her noisily on the cheek. The ring on his pinky flashed. Laura looked at me and rolled her eyes.

"Did you freak?" Tuesday said. "I mean I would have freaked."

-- Did you call the cops?

-- He took the phone, man.

-- I mean later.

-- Tell this guy he didn't have a phone. Don't you listen, man?

They were all talking at once. To me, around me, about me. I felt like a bridegroom, sipping champagne in a room full of welcome. I splashed some more scotch into my glass.

-- You put on your jeans?

-- Couldn't you get out a window or something?

-- What did it say on the fridge, dude?

-- I bet they never caught the guy, right?

-- Come on, dude, what did it say on the fridge?

The guy beside Tuesday crunched ice between his teeth and pushed his glass toward me. I ignored him.

I threw a scoopful of ice into the air and caught it, most of it, in a steel shaker. "All right, get this: I wait about an hour to be sure the guy is gone, and then I get up and go into the kitchen. I mean, my living room is trashed completely, empty, and all I can think about is the Great Message from the Gods on my refrigerator. So I go into the

kitchen and there on the fridge in these huge letters it says..."

I made my hands into parentheses and bracketed the words in the air. "THE ANSWER TO THE UNIVERSE HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH

METAPHYSICS  
AND FISHES."

A car cruised by on Bay Street, and I was sure I was the only one who heard it.

"The fuck?" Jaime said. "What did he say? Fishes?"

"Yeah, I said, smiling, "can you believe that?"

"But that don't mean shit."

-- Wait. Did I miss something. Who was writing on your refrigerator?

-- Hey, turn up the game, why don't you.

"I kind of get it," Tuesday said.

"What's to get?"

"You know, like the world, and life and fishes, and you know, everything."

Bob leaned back with one hand on his belly and the other still around Laura.

"You must have felt like some kind of asshole," he said. "I mean really."

I felt my ears going red. I should have told the other story, I should have killed off the pregnant lady on the freeway, that would have piqued their interest. I looked over at Jimmy. He was spinning a black plastic ashtray between his hands.

"Hey," I said, trying not to sound angry. "You gotta remember this happened when I was young and brainless." I gave Jimmy a look. "I mean I was what? Twenty two, twenty three?"

Jimmy got up to go to the bathroom, and I turned the T.V. up good and loud.

Except for Jimmy, who was there to help me close, Tuesday was the last to leave. She tucked her small purse under one arm and slid down off the stool. She lifted her hand to wave, her mouth half-open, as if she were about to say something, then she put her hand down, shrugged, and blew a kiss our direction. Jimmy and I said goodnight.

"I'll see you," she said, looking past me at Jimmy. I thought I saw her wink.

With the lights turned all the way up the bar looked bigger, and very empty. Jimmy went through the receipts quickly, and sat having a beer and chatting while I counted out the till. He went on and on about how I ought to be an actor, but how he hoped I wouldn't because the bar would lose so much money. I kept having to recount the change.

"That was a great touch," he said, "the refrigerator."

"It was you that girl was winking at," I said. "Don't overestimate the value of a story."

"No, really," he said. "And that guy. I told you I never even saw the guy and there you are describing the fucking hair on his fucking head."

"Damn, Jimmy. Clam up a second, will you? Let me count out."

My till was a couple of dollars short. Normally I'd make it up from my tips, just to keep my reputation pure, but tonight I didn't give a damn. Something about the way he thought of me, the way they all thought of me.

"I'm short three twenty," I said, and dropped the money pouch in front of him. "Fire me."

I opened myself a beer, crawled through the door under the bar, and sat on a stool. I could feel my feet swelling in my shoes.

Eventually Jimmy said, "So. We've figured out the answer to the universe." He giggled awkwardly. He never knew how to deal with me when I got cranky.

"Don't make fun," I said. "You know what their trouble is? You know what your trouble is? Your trouble is that you don't listen to people. You don't even listen to yourself." The more I talked the angrier I got, although I wasn't sure why. I reached over and took hold of Jimmy's tie with one hand and with the other I pushed the knot an inch closer to his throat. I wanted to intimidate him, and it was working fine. His eyes were round as bottle caps. "Why is that?" I said. "Is it because you're a kid, or are you just plain stupid?" It was a nasty thing to say and I said it with a sneer, my lips tight as fists, but as soon as I said it I felt stupid myself, tugging on Jimmy's tie. I smoothed it against his chest and put on a smile. I took another slug of beer and realized I wasn't angry anymore. Come on, I

told myself, this is Jimmy, your supplier, your wellspring, your fix. Just Jimmy. Relax.

"Look, Kid," I said, reminding myself that he was a kid. "Why do you think you have dreams like that? They're gifts, boy. You with me on this? The gods are a whole lot smarter than us, and they tell us things at night, things we can use. So when they give you the frigging answer to the frigging universe you goddam well better pay attention."

I pointed my beer at him and he giggled.

"Gimme another beer," he said.

I said: "Metaphysics and fishes. Think about it. You ever been fishing, Kid?"

He pulled two beers out of the ice and set them on the bar, looking down into the sink. "Don't you ever clean up back here?" he said. He swayed back and forth, holding onto the bottles as if they were anchored there. His eyes flew at half-mast, mourning dead brain cells. He lowered his head to the bar as if he were listening for hoof beats, and he looked at me sideways.

"I went once with my dad. I went fishing once with my dad, when I was little. I think it was fun." Then his face bloomed into a smile. "Until the boat sank."

I began to think about what a fishing trip with Jimmy would be like. The currents that could fill your waders and drag you downstream, sudden holes that could open under you and take you down, mountain roads to negotiate, to get lost on, cliffs to drive over, rock slides. The snakes, the bears. Or we could go surf fishing and be swept out to sea

by a riptide, set upon by sharks or by the Hells Angels who hang out by the pier.

"Kid," I said. "We're going fishing."

He lifted his head, and pushed a beer toward me.

"Chugalug," he said.

"Really. If you want things to happen to you in life, you got to get out and do something about it. The gods are telling you to go fishing."

He raised a hand, then let it flop on the bar. "Sure. Lez go fishing," he slurred.

"Tomorrow," I said.

His eyes narrowed even more, and I knew he was trying to decide whether I was serious or not.

"I'm serious," I said.

He looked at his watch. It was after three.

"Bullshit," he said.

"Bullshit yourself. We're going fishing tomorrow. Why the hell not?"

"You're crazy."

"Why the hell not?"

"How about the weekend? We could go next weekend."

"I work weekends, remember? Tomorrow."

We stared at each other for a long while, his smile fading, mine getting bigger and bigger. "We're taking my car," I said.

"I'm picking you up in a few hours."



The patch over Jimmy's eye is disconcerting, flesh colored, very medical looking. I'm thinking how sharp he'd look with a black leather patch held on with a black leather strap, like the guy in the shirt ads.

I wipe my hands on a bar rag and set him up with a drink.

"Here you go, Moshe Dyan," I say, winking. My voice is a little unsteady.

Tuesday licks salt from her margarita glass and waves to Jimmy.

"What the hell happened to you?" she asks.

"Just a little accident." He has his good eye on me. "Let Captain Hook tell you about it." I feel my face trying to smile.

"No," Tuesday says, "Come on Jimmy, you tell it."

I feel around in the sudsy water for a glass that has slipped out of my hands. Jimmy is blushing.

"Good idea," I say, although I'm thinking it is a bad idea, a very bad idea. "It's your story, Jimmy. You tell it. If you get stuck for details, just whistle.

So now Jimmy's telling the story, struggling through. His face flushes when he forgets things, and he keeps losing his place, but he never looks to me to help him out. Never says, you tell it.

"....I've just been spinning my line into spaghetti, scaring fish away, so Michael decides he's gonna give me a lesson. I mean, I'm so hung over I can barely stand, right?

Hell, I'm probably still drunk. Anyway, I stand way back behind him, watching him cast. He told me to watch his arm, and the tip of his pole."

I shake my head. Pole, he says.

Tuesday is sitting right beside Jimmy, staring at the patch. All the regulars are here, and they're all listening. I turn on the T.V., with the sound down low.

"...So he's casting like a son of a bitch, making these big loops with the line, and he's got this real big fly on the line...what's it called? I forget..."

A woolly bugger, Jimmy, I want to say, but he's asking the ceiling, not me, so I keep my mouth shut.

"...anyway, suddenly that fly comes popping out of the water and before I know it something hits me in the face. Turns out the fly caught me right here." He grasps the lower lid of his good eye and pulls it out slightly, pointing down the pocket of skin.

Laura gasps and Bill says, Jesus, and I can tell that everyone in the place is cringing, and having a ball. I look up at the television and see Vanna White, clapping.

"I don't really realize what's happened right away. I just feel this quick pain, like a bee sting, and I suddenly see double images of everything, and I grab my eye, and then I feel the ting between my fingers and I think, Jimmy, you got a problem. Then I lose my balance and go down in the water. The last thing I see is Captain Hook over there," he points a thumb at me and I doff an imaginary hat, which

makes me feel stupid. "There he is, his pole bent like crazy, like he's caught the biggest wopper of his life."

My customers look from Jimmy to me, going through their refrains of Holy Shit and Oh God. Someone offers to buy Jimmy a drink, but he says, Hey, I'm the fucking manager.

I would have told it differently. I would have mentioned the beauty of the stream we were fishing, how you could look all the way down the deep canyon toward San Bernardino, toward L.A., and see the brown belt of smog. How we were so high above it all. I would have said something about the stream, something about the two of us in the middle of it, how it came from somewhere and was going somewhere and we were in the middle of it.

I would have turned on the tap and run water into my cupped hands and lifted the water in the air and let it run back into the sink to give them all the sound and the feel of it. I would have talked about the red of the line as it settled on the water like a faint vein in a wet blue eye, and I would have told them how I could feel the skimmer, diving down to where the spotted browns wriggled in sand, spawning.

When I get my chance to tell it I'll make it clear that I had told Jimmy where to stand to watch my casting, that I had felt him behind me, watching, counting, that I had sensed the fly behind me with each cast, imagined it looping beautifully above his head, the line whistling. I will tell them how I stood knee deep in the stream and felt the

fishhook snag behind me, and that it felt not like a snag, but like a real strike back where there were no fish, and how I spun around and pulled back, setting the hook. And I'll tell them that when Jimmy went down his scream blasted out across the valley like something set free from the stream bottom. Then I'll look very slowly around the bar and catch every eye so they'll know that this is true, that it really happened, that finally, finally, something had really happened to me.

RENO

It wasn't the magazines. Lisa knew he would think it was just the magazines, but it wasn't. She stood in front of the sink, in case the nausea came back, and let the smoke from her cigarette cloud up in her face. Her Kools had seemed too mild for how she felt now, so she had snipped the filters off a pack of Mike's Marlboros with a pinking shears. The harsh smoke helped to mask the foulness that still coated her mouth.

The first time she had found magazines like these Mike had begun by blaming her for not understanding his "needs." Then he had apologized for making her "upset." Then he had promised, holding her by the shoulders and brushing his lips against her forehead, that he would not buy magazines like those again. He said that no man in his right mind would prefer a magazine to a real woman, and he started to sing Don't Go Changing, dancing her around the trailer, bumping everything. Still, though, still it was not the magazines that mattered. But she had found the envelope, too, and she had opened it, and for more than an hour she had knelt in front of the toilet until she was more empty than she had ever been.

When she told her mother about it, it didn't seem like such a big deal, but to her it mattered.

-- They were stuck under the mattress, our mattress on our bed. The real gross kind, Ma, where the girls would do anything.

-- Well you just tell him, Honey. He's not to have that kind of thing around the house.

-- It was unbelievable. There was this envelope. It was full of pictures of me. Of my head, just. Like, he'd cut my head out of all these pictures so he could ... oh, God, it's just so sick.

-- I don't know, Lisa. Maybe it means he's not really thinking of those other girls.

-- You open this envelope and there's these pictures of your head. Just thinking about it, Ma, my God.

-- Honey, you just talk it over with him. Make it clear how you feel. You're married now.

-- I mean, Jesus, Ma. Did he think I never turn the mattress, or what?

Didn't she have the right to just say it hurt, and not have to explain?

Lisa leaned back against the chrome-rimmed counter and fingered the chrome knob of the top drawer -- the drawer where she kept the kitchen knives -- and waited for Mike to get home. She looked out the window at the long gravel

drive to the highway, the flat and endless soy fields beyond, the sunset, gray behind thick tule fog. The bastard was really going to think it was just the magazines.

She blew a stream of smoke through the cloud and took another drag, deep, the nicotine rushing her brain, and then exhaled, inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, breathing nothing but smoke.

What changed most was the past. As she thought about their honeymoon in the spring, it seemed he always had a camera in his hand, that he was always pointing at her with the barrel of the telephoto lens. Her folks had given them a thousand dollars for a three-day weekend in Tahoe, sending them off with instructions to come back without a cent, which it turned out was easy to do. They stayed at the Dunes, paying seventy dollars a night, and ate steak for dinner, steak and eggs for breakfast. They had champagne in the room, and Mike took pictures of her toasting him. He took pictures of her in the tub, with a champagne glass in her hand. It had been no problem spending the money. Film, alone, she thought now, must have cost a bundle. He made her smile with one hand on the handle of a nickel slot machine, or holding up a handful of nickels (he had emptied a roll into her hands to make it look like she was a winner). He shot her in front of the Nugget Cowboy, and panning for gold at a tourist mine in Carson City. He photographed her standing ankle deep in Emerald Bay -- she remembered her feet turning blue while he adjusted F-stops

and focus -- and in the gondola above the brown and snowless slopes of Heavenly Mountain.

And later. He stalked her in front of the General Store in Old Sacramento, on the steps of the new Capitol Building, waving from the cab of a black locomotive at the Railroad museum, fishing from Berryessa Dam.

It was true, Lisa thought, what those National Geographic natives say about cameras taking something from you.

Mike's truck made a racket coming down the gravel drive, and the trailer shook when it came to rest just beside the kitchen. She had been waiting two hours, but she still wasn't prepared, not in any way prepared, when he came through the door smiling stupidly, chatting already, even before the door slammed shut behind him. But he didn't kiss her, didn't even pretend to want that. He must have already taken a reading from her face, or seen the ashtray filled with butts and snipped filters. He looked absently at the cold stove, just perceptibly shrugging, never slowing down his stream of empty yammering, ("Something the matter, Doll? You haven't said word one.") pulling off his boots, stashing them under the kitchen table.

As she watched him talk, watched his thin mustache bob on his lip, her anger grew and would not peak. It was an ugly anger that excluded everything, that erased even his voice and his face, and made him nothing but the object of rage -- a mustache that bobbed despicably above a thin and



quivering lip. The anger was so pure it made her calm, and her hands were perfectly steady when she shook out the envelope on the table in front of him, a confetti-shower of her face: smiling, laughing, winking, demure, detached from the body he so obviously despised.

He looked down at the faces. With the fingernail of his forefinger he touched the edge of one picture, so gently that it didn't move. He was silent for a long time. But, she thought, it was a pained, screaming silence, as if his mouth had been filled with molten lead. What he finally said, very quietly and without looking up, was, "Oops."

Oops. She considered stabbing him. She thought of the pinking shears. She thought of what it would be like to snip his head off, ragged at the neck, the way he had cut away her image in all those photographs. Snip snip snip. But he wasn't taking this calmly, he wasn't shrugging anything off. His ears, sticking out past slick black hair, were red. She could feel the heat coming from them. As if to keep himself from sliding under the table he held tight to the edge, squeezing so hard that his fingernails were white. She stepped closer to him and waited.

"Gee," he said unsteadily, "you been kind of snooping around, Doll." Instantly he put up one hand and said, "All right, all right. This isn't good. I know this is not a good situation, here. But look...Doll, you don't understand."

She waited.

"We can get past this," he said.

She waited.

"It isn't really a big deal."

She waited for something to come out of him that was more than mere sound.

He said, "Can't you at least say something, Doll?"

Lisa knew that her husband was trying to look hurt, to look complex, to look troubled and loving and misunderstood. Staring at his half-smiling, flushed and blank face, was like staring into a milky-gray Polaroid, waiting to see what would develop -- but without curiosity, as if there were no possibility that the picture would be worth the wait.

"See," he said, "I think this is something you could understand. I really think that. I think you'd see my side of this if you gave it some thought. See, I think what's going on here is, what's going on here is that you are upset and you aren't really clear, and if you just give it some time, just think hard about this thing, you know, you'll see that it isn't that big a deal."

He still didn't look at her, but stared down at the severed heads, his hands still gripping the edge of the table. His voice had merely served to layer new anger on old. It surprised her that there was room in her for more, as if anger and contempt were special emotions which occupied no space inside a person and could pile upon themselves infinitely.

It made her feel ugly, this anger. It made her feel an exaggerated fullness in her hips, a heaviness in her thighs, pressing too tightly against ugly yellow slacks. She saw

herself slouching slightly, slightly hunching her shoulders, and she could see her belly curving slightly outward, a paunch. Her ankles felt fat. She could feel the skin wrinkling at her ankles and elbows. Breasts too small to please any man. Her clenched fists felt large and heavy, the knuckles like knotted cable, and she felt like lifting them and beating him for making her feel like this.

After a moment she said, "There's something about this that I'm supposed to understand, is that it? There's something about this that would not be obvious to a reetard?"

"If you thought about it, yeah. It's just pictures, is all. It's not like I was cheating on you or something. It's not like I was asking you to...."

"To what?" She said it calmly, willfully showing only cool, willing herself not to say, Come on, say what it is you think about with your weenie in your hand. Let him talk himself out of this. She dragged deeply, letting her lungs tighten around the smoke.

"Aw, Lisa. I wish...."

"Am I so ugly?" She said, suddenly unable to restrain herself. "Am I so un..." she could not think of the word she wanted: something about sexual variety, "so unfun in bed? Okay, I may not be Miss Sex Machine," she immediately regretted even this sarcastic concession, and hardened her voice, "but you aren't exactly the kind of man women dream about, pal. Certainly not those sluts. They wouldn't look at you twice. Maybe if you washed your hair once in a

while. Maybe if you lost twenty pounds. Maybe if you cleaned the crap out of your fingernails. Maybe if you didn't have such a pathetic face. God. Just look at yourself."

Mike pushed himself away from the table and pointed a finger in her face.

"Hey, you just put a cap on that shit!" he shouted, as if he didn't recognize that it was not his prerogative to be angry, that he had lost his right to be indignant, and that now it was her turn to say mean and hurtful things, even if she didn't mean them -- which she did -- as if this were like every other fight where all the rules were his. His finger was nearly touching her nose, and she stared past it into his eyes, not even blinking until he lowered his hand and hooked his thumb awkwardly in his pocket. After an endless interval he said, "Now. You are upset and you are saying stuff you don't mean and this isn't getting us anywhere. What I'm going to do is I'm going to go out and give you some time to cool off."

"I'm cool," she said. "I don't get any cooler."

Somehow she didn't want him to go. Although she was sure there was nothing he could say that would change anything, she hoped that he would have said something, at least, that would have let her put a name on what he had done that was so impossible to forgive.

"I'm not a bitch," she said suddenly. "So don't even think it."

"Look," he said. "I'll be back later tonight and we'll talk about this like two people. For now, I'm going for a drive."

"You do whatever the fuck you want," she said.

Just look at yourself.

What a thing to say. Mike hadn't wanted to yell at her, but to come out with a thing like that....

Now he stood in front of her in his dirty socks, his hands loose at his sides, trying to think of something to say, but the pictures looked up at him, all happy, and he could feel her eyes crawling over him like beetles.

Light had died at the window. The little kitchen was filled with smoke. He could hear Lisa take long drags on the cigarette. He could hear her waiting. The trouble was, there was nothing he could say. She could wait all year; what was he supposed to say? You just have to get past a situation like this, get some time between you and the bad feeling. Fighting wouldn't help now. She wasn't going to make any effort at all to see it his way. It was best if he just went out for awhile.

You do whatever the fuck you want.

God she was mad.

The tule fog was so moist it felt like gentle rain as he walked out to the wrecker. He climbed up into the truck and sat looking at the small trailer, the only light in a ring of darkness, where his wife probably paced, angry and

hurt. Thinking, maybe, of leaving him. A sudden alarm went through him, and he jumped out of the truck and got into the Chrysler. She wasn't likely to go driving off in the tow-truck.

The truth was, he was more shaken than made sense. It was just a bunch of pictures, and here he was, his hand shaking as he turned the key in the ignition. A high metallic sound whined from the starter, loud in the still night. The flywheel was worn to nubs, but it would cost the world to fix. Something else to just get used to.

He backed off the concrete slab and turned the car away from the trailer before pulling on the headlights. He coasted slowly down the long drive and then gunned the engine as he pulled onto the highway, spinning gravel back behind him and leaving behind him the fragile pink trailer (where Lisa paced and brooded) and leaving behind him the bright chrome and yellow and black wrecker which sat sweetly alone on the slab.

His insides churned, acidic with excitement and fear, as if he were going up against something unnamable and dangerous. It seemed silly to be so jazzed up, but you feel how you feel. No sense arguing with it. The night was cold, and the pavement was wet from the fog, but he drove with the window down for the misty breeze. There were very few cars on the highway -- a couple of sets of tail lights far in front of him, two points of light in the rear view mirror. He lit a cigarette and then reached down to flip the lever that moves the seat back. (Lisa was nearly as

tall as he was, but she liked to drive close to the window, hunched and alert.) He decided what he would do was to go into Sacramento and get Lisa something, some present. He pulled a handful of money out of his front pocket, and turned the overhead light on to look at it. He had a twenty and some singles and a hundred dollar bill (he always took his pay out in hundreds, and this is what was left). If he had to he would spend it all to get her something really good.

Beneath the I-80 causeway the rice fields were flooded, black and rippled as a bay. In the spring this would all be damp black loam, waving green with grassy rice. Then the rains would stop for a long dry summer and everything would turn brittle yellow, and the fields would be torched, would burn for days, and in the fall they would flood again. The way shit happens. You come home expecting a normal night, maybe even a nice night, some dinner, something halfway decent on the tube, and instead, this.

Mike had been telling himself for months that he'd get rid of the magazines (but try telling her that), that he would stop acting like some horny teenager, and now here he was driving off to Sacramento to try to set this all right.

He came up close to a truck -- it was heavy with sugar beets, two heaped trailers dusty from Woodland fields -- and the pulled into the left lane without signaling. A wind from the semi sucked at the car, then blew it hard down the highway. He wished he had at least hidden them better.

Under the mattress, for Christ's sake. God, what she must be thinking.

A sign over the highway said JCT 50 TAHOE 2.5 MI. He had a hard time not letting the honeymoon come back to him, that feeling of everything just starting out, nowhere to go but up. Jesus.

A couple of cars were riding the right lane up ahead, so he sped up to get away from them. You can never be alone for long on a California highway. He passed them, leaning back, with his wrist draped over the top of the wheel. This was good, getting away like this. Out on the road where he could think, and give Lisa some time, too, to work past this thing. He tried to think about what he could get her -- it would have to be something special, something she would know had cost him his whole wad. Like what, though? He couldn't for the life of him imagine one single thing she wanted.

When it was just the Playboys he could maybe have got her to see his side of it, but pretty soon the girls were all the same, pretending to be shy, so he went to raunchier and raunchier mags, mostly just to get it out of his system. One of the ones she had found was called Jugs, for Christ's sake. Christ, and the snapshots!

"Damn!" Mike heard himself say it aloud, and the sound of his own voice in the car startled him because it was so sad and small and real. He said it again, "Damn," trying to make it sound only angry, but instead he felt himself beginning to cry.



"Fuck me!" Then louder and louder he said, "Fuck me fuck me fuck me fuck me," more chanting than shouting, as if he were casting a spell to chase something away, but he didn't know what it was and it wouldn't go away, and his anger and fear crescendoed together as he cursed at the top of his voice, banging the steering wheel and the car's ceiling with his fists, wild as a crazy marine. Tail lights appeared in the distance and he suddenly felt ridiculous. The sound of his screaming hummed, almost visibly in the car. He could feel the buzz of blood scrambling to form bruises around his knuckles.

He came up behind the compact, a little Japanese job, unhurried in the slow lane, conserving gas. When he could clearly see the head of the driver he swerved into the left lane, and then cut quickly back in front of it, staring ahead. He hated those little cars. It was brand-new, a registration number taped to the rear window and a plate saying "University Honda" where the license plate was supposed to be. California was crawling with cars like that. You get in a wreck and they need dental records to identify your body.

In the rearview mirror he saw the Honda pull off the highway and he realized he had missed the last exit for Sacramento. What the hell, he thought. Reno never closes. Sacramento would be shut down for the night anyway.

Lisa sat at the kitchen table, cutting. She cut carefully around the edges of the women's bodies, careful

not to cut the skin, careful to cut out the backgrounds, the beds piled with pillows and lace, the open fields of daisies under open blue sky, the beaches. One woman posed, spraddle-legged across a table saw, in the middle of a lumber mill. Lisa cut her out of there.

She cut all the women out of the two magazines. Jugs and Gent, they were called. Mike was going to get himself an eyeful when he came back. He wants to look at these girls, he's going to look at them. She intended to tape them up all over the trailer, in plain view. Boobs and butts in every room, if that's what he wants. She gathered up all the paper scraps and put them in the wastebasket, and then she spread the pictures out all across the kitchen table. What was the big thrill? They looked like damn fools, these women, spreading their legs, squeezing their boobs, bending over and smiling upside-down, pointing at their privates as if they were giving directions.

How Mike would react when he got home and saw these pictures on the walls, Lisa couldn't guess, but she knew it was going to shock him, just like it shocked her when she lifted up the corner of the mattress, and again, much deeper, much worse, when the envelope fell out of one of the magazines.

The envelope. Lisa opened it now and took out one of the pictures, a good one that made her seem thoughtful, looking away from the camera, her eyes half-closed. She placed the picture over the face of a woman who was holding her huge breasts in her hands, looking down at them. It was

amazing, the change. It was as if Lisa suddenly saw herself going that, with that skinny waist and those gigantic boobs. Her heart beat so fast it was hard to breathe. She could smell her own sweat.

She took another headshot out of the envelope and mounted it on the picture of a woman whose fingers, long bright-red nails, twiddled between her legs, and now it was Lisa, grinning like a whore.

One by one she overlaid the photos with the pictures of her face, and the table became a perverse mosaic of Mike's fantasy. She couldn't take her eyes away from it. She couldn't stop thinking of Mike seeing her like this. Not her, this wasn't her, this had nothing to do with her, nothing at all. What Mike wanted had absolutely nothing to do with her. Something much more violent than mere anger came over her, and she rushed again into the bathroom to be sick.

Mountains sloped up hard and rocky to the left, and steep and spiked with trees to the right. God it was beautiful, Mike thought, even in the dark with the headlights and the large arching highway lamps lighting a tunnel through the mountains. He tried to decide the best place to go in Reno to get something for Lisa, but he couldn't remember which casinos had the best gift shops. It didn't really matter, though, because there were loads of places in that carnival of a downtown that stayed open all night, catering to the winners. He was beginning to feel

much better now; he even almost wished Lisa were here with him. If he hadn't come so far by now he would turn around and go back to her, except that he couldn't really see himself going back empty-handed.

As he crested the pass, the car picked up speed, and he pumped the brakes as he approached a wide banked curve. On his right the mountains dropped away into a black valley. He could see the lights of Reno below him. He hoped he didn't clobber some deer now, that would be just what he needed.

The names of the casinos -- Harrah's, The Golden Nugget, Circus Circus -- were going through his mind when Mike saw behind him a Highway Patrol car with the blue light spinning, and a quick whir of the siren. He had never been pulled over before, so he didn't realize it was a bad idea to pull over to the left, although when he stopped the car and looked back it felt wrong, sitting darkly beside the freeway dividing rail.

The patrolman, a tall thin man who looked too young to be a cop, tapped with one leather-gloved finger on the window Mike had forgotten to roll down.

"Do you know the speed limit around here?" He sounded angry, as if it were somehow a personal affront that Mike had disobeyed the speed limit.

"Fifty-five," Mike said.

"And how fast were you going?"

"Gee officer, I don't really have the foggiest idea. See, I was having this fight with my wife tonight and I just kind of took off...."

"I clocked you at sixty-eight from the top of the pass. Why don't you let me have a look at your license."

"Sure thing."

Mike ran his hands across his back pockets, then patted his front pockets. He felt along the crack behind the seat, along the floor, then turned on the overhead light and got up on one knee, searching all over the inside of the car. The patrolman didn't move or speak. Almost in a panic, Mike checked the glove compartment, though he knew he never put his wallet in there. Probably left the damn thing at home. Then he remembered that he had stuck it in the pocket of his coat.

"Got it," he said breathlessly. He pulled the license out of its plastic sheath and offered it up.

The patrolman gave him a look, then walked back to his car. Mike couldn't see what he was up too back there; the headlights were still on, and the blue and red beacon still spun nastily, flashing the news to anyone who approached that Mike was a speeder, and he wasn't getting away with it.

This is perfect, Mike thought.

After a painfully long interval the cop came back and made Mike sign his ticket.

"You best take it easy going down this mountain," he said. "At least until you get to Nevada. Then I don't care what you do."

"Yeah, I'm real sorry, officer. See, my wife and I, we had this fight...."

"And when you get pulled over, you're supposed to pull over to the right. You ought to know that."

"I know, but ..."

"And put your seatbelt on. I could ticket you right now for not wearing a seatbelt."

"Right," Mike said. "I know."

"I'm on this highway all night, so don't let me pull you over again. Now, be careful getting back on the road. This is the fast lane."

Mike wanted to wait until the cop was gone to get back on the freeway, but the cop obviously was waiting for him. Mike checked his mirrors, buckled up, started the car, pulled slowly over to the right lane and started down toward Reno. The Highway Patrol car sped past him. Mike cursed it as it passed and, when it was nearly out of sight, flipped it off.

He felt harassed, persecuted, as if Lisa had sent the cops after him. Just look at yourself. Fuck her, he thought, it wasn't such a fucking big deal. No, this wasn't her fault, but Christ, it wasn't as if this magazine business was the kind of thing you couldn't forget. It wasn't the kind of thing that changes things. The thing of it was, it was just so embarrassing. For her, too, of course, but what did she expect him to say? Couldn't she just forget it? Anyway, she was probably already cooling off. She was probably sitting at home, watching T.V.,

waiting for him to come back. Mike took deep breaths, leaning his head part-way out the window to take in the chill dry air coming down the lee slope of the Sierras. He wished the radio worked, but the antenna had broken off in a car wash and he hadn't got around to fixing it. What he really needed was a drink, something to lift from him the feeling that he had done something terrible.

Lisa sipped from her can of Oly, looking down at the kitchen floor strewn with cut-outs, paper dolls. The kitchen table was overturned.

When she first met Mike, just over a year ago, she hadn't liked him. He had seemed so cocky, fiddling under the hood of her Chrysler, telling her things she already knew about the fuel pump, clogged lines. When he said he'd have to tow it in she wanted to say, No shit, Dick Tracy, why do you think I called you? But she just smiled and said, Let's do it. You can't make it an issue every time a man acts like a man.

Something about him, though. When he asked her out, very casually ("I don't know. Maybe we could do a movie or something") he was so lacking in charm or wit, so lacking in artifice, that he had seemed honest. All through their brief courtship he had talked openly with her, if not very articulately. His shy frankness made it easy for her to be with him. His sincerity.

Right. Lisa drained the can and dropped it in the middle of the floor. It didn't bother her, not really, that

he jerked himself off looking at magazines. That really wasn't it. But he brought her into it, tried to make her one of those whores, thought about her the way he thought about those whores. He couldn't, at least, see that they were one thing and she was another. And he lied, probably even to himself, that he respected her. Don't go changing. Right.

"RENO -- THE BIGGEST LITTLE CITY IN THE WORLD"

The sign welcomed him, and he felt welcome. This was a place where you could go to make changes. When they were here on their honeymoon the town was like Disneyland, full of entertainments. It was easy then to ignore the homeless panhandlers, lost people who had lost it all, the divorce brokers. There were, after all, wedding chapels on every block. It was harder now to overlook the undercurrents of sadness, but that was probably just because he was a little down himself. What he needed to do was to stop in somewhere, get that drink he needed, and find out where he could do some shopping, and then get out of the enticing center.

He found a place to park on Virginia Street, The Wagon Wheel, which looked promising enough, but across the street was another bar that had a neon martini glass over the door, and a neon naked lady floating in the glass. A sign said there were topless dancers inside. He walked across the street quickly, furtively looking up and down the strip. In



the back of his mind he wondered if he had left his headlights on.

He wondered briefly at the thing in him that made him want to go into a place like that, and he vowed to get control of himself when he got back, but for now the sense of guilt he felt was just deep enough to expand the thrill. Besides, Lisa couldn't possibly know he was going in here, and this obviously had nothing to do with her. He was only here in the first place because he wanted time to think of something to buy for her, and it was late and he was tired from driving so far, and a cop had pulled him over and almost given him a ticket, and so it couldn't possibly hurt anything for him to go in and relax for a few minutes. If the place is a real dive, he thought, I can just walk right out.

It was dark, with Christmas lights strung around a long narrow stage behind the bar, backed with dirty mirrors. Two women, wearing G-strings and high-heels, danced to loud country music. Several men in feed caps sat at the bar looking up at the women and trying to catch their eyes. Someone tossed a crumpled bill onto the stage, and the dancer turned her back to him and bent down, straight-legged, to pick it up. Mike took a seat, and paid five dollars for a Budweiser.

The woman who began dancing in front of him was less beautiful than he would have liked a woman dancing nude in front of him to be. Her tits, for instance, were not nearly as nice as Lisa's, and she was older, too. Still, she had a

trim and aggressive body, and her face peeked at him, winking and smiling, demure, seeming to focus on him for some reason, until he felt self-conscious, staring, and pulled a single from his pocket and tossed it up to her. Still bent over, holding an ankle in one hand, her cheek pressed against her knee, she reached up and tucked the bill into her G-string.

He thought suddenly: what you can't explain you forget. That's all; forgive and forget. How do you even apologize for a thing like that? If he could just think of something to say, he'd maybe give Lisa a call right now. But the woman dancing there muddled his thinking. She danced so easily that you almost couldn't think of her as nude. Mike had to concentrate on her individual body parts, had to think just of a breast, just of a thigh, just a curve of back, a chokered neck, an ankle strapped with the sequined leather of a white and spiky shoe. He had to imagine the body somewhere else to think of it as erotic, and the more he watched her dance (dancing for him alone, was how it felt) the more she seemed to belie her purpose. She danced a dance so laden with sex that it made sex irrelevant and seemed to reach across a gap between the way men and women communicate with each other, something Lisa never could do. He thought, if Lisa could just be as free as this woman she'd see that sex wasn't the issue at all. He realized suddenly and with pride that he hadn't had an erection since he came in. Didn't that in itself say something about love?

He tossed another bill up to the dancer and watched it unfold slightly as she reached down for it, smiling.

He called the bartender over (a heavy woman in her forties, wearing a leotard, make-up troweled into creases on her face. Mike tried not to look at her when he ordered.) He asked for another Bud. The dancer had moved a few feet down to his right and was bending down to pick up some singles someone else had thrown. Mike took another bill out and tossed it on stage, giving a little whistle. She blew a kiss to the two men and then went over in front of Mike, dropped almost gracefully into the splits, and picked up the bill with her teeth. Mike waved at her with two fingers.

The music died for a moment, and the dancer stood with her arms crossed, looking down at Mike, smiling. She rubbed her arms elaborately and said, "It's cold."

"I'd be cold, too, if I was up there dressed like you." Mike said, and she laughed.

The music still hadn't come on. It was embarrassing to just look up at her, standing there like that, so he pulled another bill out of his pocket and tossed it up to her and he knew even before it began to unfold, maybe before it even hit the stage, that he had thrown her the hundred, and it was hers now. He saw it in the look she sent down to him, a look of suppressed joy which deliberately excluded the possibility that it was a mistake, as if it never even occurred to her that she might not deserve it.

When she picked it up she bent her knees and she didn't tuck it into her G-string, but kept it tight in her hand.

The music started up again and she began to dance toward the other end of the bar, avoiding Mike's eyes. He pulled the last of his money from his pocket and dropped it on the bar. Twelve, maybe thirteen dollars. What the hell. He might as well stay until it was all gone.

The wrecker whined against the strain, then the steel wall of the trailer began to give way. Lisa watched in the rear view mirror as she popped the clutch, lurching the truck forward and peeling down a fat panel of the wall. Glass shattered. The steel screeched, fluffy pink insulation burst from the seams, studs cracked like dry bone. Something inside the trailer fell hard -- the refrigerator, it sounded like.

The radio in the cab was playing classical music. Lisa turned it up loud because it made her feel like she was in a movie, playing all of this out. She drove forward a few more feet to drag the panel completely away. It didn't come off as cleanly as she had hoped it would; she had expected the other walls and the roof to stay more or less intact, so you could look into the trailer like a doll's house, but the sheet of steel split near the middle, and the roof buckled and leaned almost to the kitchen floor. The towing hook snapped through a stud and banged up hard against the truck. She got out of the wrecker, and then hooked the cable into the jamb of the front door. The music in the cab was all violins. You could hear it even over the groaning of the wrecker, the spinning wheels and the shuddering, crunching

trailer. She was exhilarated with the power and strangeness of what she was doing.

She hoped she would not stop hating Mike, at least until she had put some miles and mountains behind her, at least until she hit Reno and the papers were signed and she could afford to be just sad. If he came back right now she would tell him, "I'm doing this for you, too." But she knew he would be gone for hours. He was giving her time to cool off.

She pulled forward again, collapsing the front doorway. The porch cast forward like a dying buffalo dropping to its knees. One window fell out whole. She would have to remember to drive over it before she left.

## SUTTER

It was my sixteenth birthday when Calvin told how he had found me. We were eating dinner at the International House of Pancakes, and Calvin was especially excited. He kept pointing at my plate and saying how good my veal cutlet looked, that veal is the best meat you can get, that what really makes it, though, is the sauce, with all those mushrooms. He kept asking me why I ate so slowly. I didn't really eat slowly, but he went through his spaghetti and meatballs so fast it would have made anyone seem poky. Every time he said something he had his mouth full. When the waitress came with the dessert -- it was a scoop of vanilla ice cream with a sparkler in it, like a dandelion on fire -- Calvin made batons of his forefingers and swung them back and forth like an orchestra conductor, singing "Happy Birthday To You" three times faster than you're supposed to. He pretended like it was just a joke, but I could tell he was impatient to have my birthday over with.

"So how is that?" he said, pointing, before I'd even tasted it. Then he sipped his coffee, holding the cup with both hands, and said, "Guess what?"

"What?"

"Guess." He smiled so energetically it must have hurt his face. He had bright teeth that were as small as a child's, soft waxy cheeks.

"You bought me Disneyland for my birthday."

"Nope."

"Disney World, I mean. You bought it and made them fly all the parts to California so I could go to Disneyland and Disney World in the same day." I giggled.

"Wrong again. Besides, you'll never guess."

The sparkler had gone out. Now it was a black piece of wire sticking out of my ice cream. I tapped it once with my finger to make sure it wasn't hot, then I took it out and set it on the paper placemat.

"You aren't adopted," Calvin said. "You were too young for me to tell you before, but now you're old enough, I think. See, I didn't exactly adopt you. What I did is I found you. I picked you out, specially."

I went suddenly cold, as if I had swallowed my ice cream too fast, and although I'm sure I wasn't thinking whole thoughts I had a feeling that this was something huge, that what Calvin was saying was going to change everything.

"You weren't the first girl I could have taken," he said. The word made my stomach clench: taken.

I listened to Calvin tell me how he'd been looking for a girl, someone just like me, for a long long time, how he'd been so lonely for so long and he'd known all that time that he would find me if he just was patient and kept his eyes open. He said that when he saw me sitting all alone in that

shopping cart in Ralph's, my fat white legs poking through the chrome bars, he knew I had been put there for him.

"The way you looked at me, I could tell," he said. "You don't remember of course but you wanted to come with me, as much as I wanted you." There were tears in his eyes as he said this, and he reached across the table as if he wanted to touch my arm, but he just left his hand lying there, beside my ice cream dish. He said it was easy. He just picked me up and walked with me out to his car. I didn't cry or anything. He said nothing could have been easier.

He looked at me strangely. His head was down, but he still looked at me, his flat grey eyes peering, waiting. He had a slight double chin, and with his head down like that the crease looked like a thin, dark smile. I knew there was something I should have said, something that would have been the right thing to say, but I couldn't get my mind to work. I knew that what he wanted me to say was something about how it didn't matter, that he had raised me and so he was the daddy for me. What I did say was, "Wow."

Calvin said, "See, I knew, being as how I'm not so good looking and all, that I'd probably never get to marry anyone." I could tell by how he said this -- looking into his cup, smoothing the table cloth with the hand near me -- that he was trying to make me feel sorry for him. "And besides even if I did marry somebody we couldn't never have a girl pretty as you. So I took you to live with me. See? It's better than adopting. I picked you for myself."



I got up from the table and put on my jacket. It was a letterman's jacket from Sutter High, given to me by a boy on the swimming team.

As Calvin got up, quickly and chattering nervously, he spilled some coffee on the check.

"Hey," he said, winking, "Maybe they won't be able to read this and we'll get a free meal, huh?"

"What you're saying, Calvin," I said, "is that I don't belong to you."

I had it figured out.

That day, as a birthday present, Calvin had taken me rowing on the Russian River. It was an unusually hot March day. We rented a big aluminum canoe and he taught me to steer from the back, while he matched my sloppy strokes with short smooth ones of his own. I was wearing a new two-piece that he had bought for me. It was orange, with pictures of strawberries and bananas on it. It covered me more than I would have liked, but I had a good tan from lying in the front yard and I knew I looked good. I hoped there would be some boys somewhere along the way. The river was slow and wide, with lots of easy turns, lined on both sides with conifers that came right down to the bank. We stayed close to the east bank which cut sharply up into the hills. I soon got the knack of steering, and Calvin stopped telling me to row harder on the left, or to drag or backpaddle. We went along silently for a long time, the sun gleaming hot off the water, off the bright silver boat.

Eventually we came around a bend and our boat drifted into a colony of nudists. There must have been fifty of them, stark-naked families hanging out on the river, a miracle of pink and browning skin celebrating an early spring. They watched us as we paddled by. They smiled, all of them, smiles full of pity for us who needed to cover our bodies. Some of them waved. One young girl -- a girl about my age -- lay on her stomach on a surfboard, very close to our boat. She looked asleep. A teenaged boy stood beside her surfboard, moving it gently back and forth, rocking it. His bent penis just touched the surface of the water. The girl's bottom looked sunburned. Calvin faced me, paddling backwards. I remember he was wearing a thin sleeveless t-shirt, brown twill pants cut off just above the knee, and black shoes without laces. He was blushing brightly, but still he looked, and I watched him look, and I knew that he was looking at that girl on the surfboard, the girl who was about my age.

So now I understood. I stopped going from my bedroom to the bathroom in my underwear, stopped sunbathing in the yard. I even stopped walking around barefoot, because Calvin once said I had pretty little feet. I understood why Calvin had brought me here where the soil is good, and where a seed grows quickly to full flower.

Before I left, before he was sure I was leaving, I helped him with his geyser. I told myself that helping him was a way of staying, a way of savoring that feeling of

being in Calvin's house and belonging only to myself. But I think I also wanted to clear everything away, to make sure that I left nothing behind, or that what I did leave behind belonged only to Calvin. He started by tilling up the yard, because nothing is supposed to grow near a geyser. The way the lawn disappeared under the power tiller and turned to furred black clods made me anxious to have a turn, to erase what had been there and replace it with something dark and new. The air filled with blue exhaust, with the smells of fertile earth and burning oil and the absolute racket of the machine. I watched Calvin as he tore up the weedy lawn, stumbling from time to time as he stepped between the damp chunks, and then I ran in front of him, waving my arms and pointing at the machine, then at myself. I had to keep dancing in front of him for a long time before he looked up and noticed me.

He stopped and wiped his forehead with the sleeve of his flannel shirt, even though plump black clouds hovered over the foothills, coating us with cool mist.

"Okay!" Calvin shouted over the idling machine. "You be careful, though. Just keep her in low. We're not running any races here."

I took hold of the hand grips and laughed at him, then shifted into high gear. When I squeezed the clutch the machine leapt, then dug deeply into the earth, straining against the drag bar. I strained back. I let the vibrations take me, rattle my teeth and the hard knuckles of my spine, and I knew that I had my hands on real power. As

I took out a long strip of lawn Calvin walked along behind me, picking up clods, looking at them, looking under them, still looking for treasure.

We came to Sutter because of the name, because Captain John Sutter was Calvin's hero. That's what Calvin always told me when he told me about our trip out here. Sutter was Calvin's patron saint of opportunity, a Swedish immigrant who had come west and found gold in the south fork of the American River, who had created California out of nothing. When I was in the fourth grade, my class went on a field trip to Sacramento to visit Sutter's fort. It was a low and stark adobe building, and the teacher told us that Sutter had lost everything he had as people rushed over his land in search of gold, that he had fled to the east, that he had died poor. But I never told Calvin that, and so for us Sutter was our hero, a man who had built himself a paradise in the Sacramento Valley and named it New Helvetia.

"This is Mother Lode Country," Calvin had said when he finally bought the mineral rights to this place. The rights cost more than the house itself, and it had taken him fifteen years to raise the money. "You never know what you can find if you look for it, if you know how to really look. If you want something bad enough, you can find it just about anywhere." He rented a metal detector and a post hole digger and poked the yard with neat round holes. All he came up with was a single piece of petrified wood. It looked like a piece of bark, but it was hard as stone. He decided that this was his treasure. He made up a lot of

signs and built a ticket booth, and then he took me with him to the Petrified Forest near Calistoga to collect "fossils." He intended to plant them in the yard and sell tickets to tourists to hunt for them but a ranger saw us taking the petrified wood and he made us put it back. He started to write a ticket, too, but he stopped and closed his book, I think because Calvin was crying. On our way home we stopped to see a real geyser, and that gave Calvin this other idea.

"That was a rip-off," he said as we drove away. "You pull off the highway and they make you pay three-fifty to stand around for forty-five minutes waiting for this little hole in the ground to blow. So right away I'm thinking ... I'm thinking, Hey, why do these people get to do this, and nobody competing with them or nothing?" He tapped his temple with his forefinger to show me he was being clever. "What I'm telling myself is, Who's gonna know if you sort of discover," he winked as he said this, and he made quotation marks in the air with his fingers, "if you sort of discover your own geyser in your own backyard? Get it? You could charge, say, two-fifty for a look, and you could have one that erupts every, oh, twenty minutes or so, and people would rather come see yours than that other one." Then he tapped his temple again.

"Hey!" Calvin shouted as I aimed the tiller at the row of tulips that were beginning to emerge beside the house. I laughed. I had planted them, so I figured I could unplant them. I watched the green buds whip back and disappear as they turned to mulch. Then I ran the churning blades

completely around the perimeter of the house where, under bare, moist earth snowdrops, windflowers and crocuses conspired toward spring. The machine kicked up in front of me when it hit rocks or the rocky foundation of the house, but it was not such a tough job, not nearly as tough as the teenage boys made it seem when they humped the tillers over their parents' yards in the summer, stripped to the waist, their ropy muscles tense as bridge cable. No, the soil here was soft, friable loam, and only a mile away they grew grapes for champagne. But I liked watching the boys, I liked to see them sweating in the sun, stopping to wipe their faces with the t-shirts they had tucked into their cut-offs, or to drink long and slow from a can of Coke, watching me out of the corner of their eyes while I sunbathed on the front lawn, and in the two months after my sixteen birthday, the two months before I left, I would leave the house at night to wait for the boys who would climb out their windows to meet me. We smoked cigarettes and drank beers and went for rides in their cars up and down the valley. If they were cute I'd let them take me down to the river, or all the way out to Clearlake to park until sunrise. If not, I made them let me drive, even though I didn't have a license, and I'd drive as fast as I could straight up Highway 99.

I usually came home after Calvin was already up, eating his Cheerios and toast, and I would have a cup of coffee with him before going to my room to sleep. I loved the way

he looked down into his cup, wishing there was something he could say.

Once the yard was tilled we rolled it flat and scattered gravel all over, because it was supposed to look dry and infertile. Then we buried a line of 3/4 inch galvanized pipe from the basement to the center of the yard where the geyser was to go. Calvin dug the trench while I dug the pool around the pipe end and lined it with black plastic so the water wouldn't seep away.

Calvin surrounded the geyser pool with a circle of volcanic rock that he had collected at Lassen Park, and then to keep people from scrutinizing the pool too closely he set a ring of cinderblocks around it, with a diameter of about ten feet. We painted the blocks red, white, and blue, and put up signs saying "Danger."

The pipe was connected in the basement to a fifty gallon water heater. To be sure there would be enough pressure, Calvin by-passed the pressure regulator, so the water was coming direct from the city's supply, at 90 P.S.I., and he replaced the temperature and pressure valve on the water heater with a plug.

Out on the Highway Calvin put up signs saying "See the Geyser!" "Big Historic Geyser, Don't Miss It!" "Genuine Geyser, 1 Mi."

It was hard work -- the whole project ended up taking almost a month -- but I didn't mind. I wanted the geyser to be perfect, so that when it failed, Calvin would have to see that it was the idea that had failed. Maybe then, I thought

vaguely, he would find some other way to view his life, maybe he would find himself a new hero. I didn't put much faith in that possibility, but I think I saw it as the least I could do, and the most I was willing to do.

The day we officially opened for business, I got up early to be in the ticket booth for the first customers. At about nine a.m. a man in a beige car pulled up and rolled down his window.

"Morning, sir," I said. "Two-fifty, please."

He was wearing a long-sleeved white shirt and a shiny blue tie. There were a lot of pens in his pocket and a name tag that I couldn't read.

"I'd like to talk to your father, young lady."

"Calvin's in the house," I said, pointing. "I don't know if he's up yet."

"Thank you, Ma'am," he said, and he drove down the driveway to the house. There was a decal on the back window of the car that said "State of California, For Official Use Only." I decided to close the shutters on the ticket booth and follow the cloud of dust to the house.

When I got there the man was talking to Calvin who stood barefoot in the doorway, smiling awkwardly and nodding at everything the man said. He was wearing his pajama bottoms and a sleeveless t-shirt, and he kept blinking, as if flies were buzzing around his eyes. When I stepped up onto the porch the man looked at me in a way that made me wish I were wearing a bra.



"What are you staring at?" I said. Calvin looked at me with his eyes wide, and the man turned back to Calvin. He said something I didn't quite understand, something about the environment, and Calvin just kept smiling and nodding. He had one hand on each door jamb and stood with one foot on top of the other.

"Do you suppose, sir, that we could have a look out back?"

"Why sure," Calvin said. He stepped back into the house. "Here, let me just get some shoes on -- see, I was just doing some things inside here and I was gonna go outside, you know, later on....Can I get you maybe some coffee or something? I got tea, I think, and some Yuban coffee. Here, come on in."

"Actually, what I think I'll do, I'll go around back and meet you there, if that's okay with you and the little lady."

Calvin looked at me as if he wanted me to give my consent.

"You betcha," he said.

When we got around back Calvin was already coming out the back door, zipping his pants as he came.

The man walked out to the ring of cinderblocks and stood up on one, looking at the pool.

"Is that a pipe in there?" the man asked.

"See, what it is we got here," Calvin was saying as he hurried to catch up to us, "...is what we got is a kind of a geyser. See, there's these hot springs all over around

here and, well I kind of dug down to get this one going....You never know, of course, when she's gonna blow. I guess I maybe should take "faithful" out of the name, do you think?"

"Is it safe?"

"Um, safe? Uh, no, no it's not really that safe. Not really. I mean, you never know, right? I mean, it could be safe, but it maybe isn't all that safe to walk on...."

The man didn't say anything. He looked over his shoulder at me, and I looked away, and then he just walked out toward the pool.

"'Course, you can walk on it," Calvin said quickly, wringing his hands, "If you're real careful you can walk on it. It's just, you're not supposed to. But you can walk on it. Go ahead. Just be careful 'cause you never know." Then Calvin leaned down and whispered to me to go turn on the geyser. I ran off to the house, peeled back the cellar door, climbed down to the basement and turned the valve. When I heard the water rushing in the pipes I climbed up to the vent to watch.

The water heater hadn't had a chance to warm up, though, and so the water that came out was not a blast of steam, but a smooth arc of cold and rusty water that splattered the man's white shirt with brown spots. The man jumped back, slapping at his shirt.

Calvin was given twenty-four hours to take down all the signs. The man gave him a long list of things he could be

prosecuted for if he didn't, from fraud to plumbing code violations. But Calvin didn't act like he was very upset. He just drove off and came back late that afternoon with a stack of signs in the back of his truck.

The next morning I found him in the ring of cinderblocks leaning on a shovel. When I came close to him he was already talking excitedly.

"...doesn't have to be that at all. What if, just what if we maybe took and built a tub sort of a deal here, like a hot tub, mineral bath sort of a deal. Could put maybe ... hmmm ... maybe ..."

"Morning, Calvin," I said.

"Hi ... Hey, what do you think we could use this for? What do you think of maybe inventing a new kind of a barbecue ... I mean, not a barbecue exactly, but a thing like to cook food with hot water ... of course maybe the water wouldn't be hot enough, but maybe ...."

Calvin ran through his ideas one after the other, without gaining any perspective on them. An idea was an idea to him, valuable simply for having been voiced. He stood looking down at the ring of rocks, at the cold pool, as if there really were something down beneath the surface, something obdurately refusing to bubble up and save him.

Suddenly he began pulling the black plastic out of the pool, and then he jumped in and took the pipe in his hands.

"What about turning it downwards? We could point it down and turn it on full blast and the water would dig way down for us. You know they used to dig for gold with water,

all the big companies used to do it. You never know what you're gonna find."

I was never really your daughter, I told Calvin when I left him in that place that was supposed to be his gold mine, the place he'd named "New Faithful." He was sitting in the ticket booth, crying, but he cried so often that I hardly noticed anymore. (My earliest memory is of him holding me in his lap in the front seat of a car and crying into my hair.) I said goodbye to him from the passenger seat of an old Chrysler 300. My boyfriend -- a tough, nervous boy whose name I've forgotten -- kept gunning the engine to keep it from dying.

I'm not your daughter, I repeated. I mostly meant it as a comfort -- he wasn't being abandoned by real kin -- but I'm sure now he didn't take it that way. I'm sure he took it as a statement of his powerlessness. I don't belong to you, is how he took it, and of course I meant it that way too. I remember he never said a word, never even looked at me. He just pressed his forehead against the wooden bars of the ticket booth and cried, his elbows propped on fat rolls of pink tickets.

That nervous boy and I drove east for hours without saying anything more than quick grunts: Cigarette? Sleepy? Do we need gas? Let me drive. We were almost to Truckee when he asked me if I was going to look for my real parents. I didn't know the answer to that question until he asked it,

until I answered, "No." He looked out the window and didn't ask why, but I could have told him why. I could have told him that if I found my real parents they would have just been two strangers I had dug up, and that wouldn't make them mine. While I was thinking about how absolutely true that was he asked me if I was planning to tell the police, to turn Calvin in.

"I don't know," I said, because he was just some boy whose name I knew even then I would forget, and it didn't seem like any of his business. But I knew I wasn't going to turn Calvin in. Going to the police would have felt like vengeance, and that wasn't what I wanted. What I wanted was to get cleanly away, out into the desert where the soil has nothing to offer, where people do not believe that wanting something necessarily entitles them to it.

I suppose I knew all along that I was wrong about Calvin's secret motives, why he took me. I must have known even then that it could never occur to him to plant a seed and to wait for it to grow into something he could use. He wanted to find his treasures whole.

I remember walking with him through the Petrified Forest, sneaking off the trail and groping around for fragments of the gigantic redwood trees that surrounded us, turned to stone.

"Pssst. Honey. Come here behind this rock. There's a million of them. Shhh. Come on."

He was hunkered down behind a stony stump, filling his pockets with petrified wood. The canvas bag we'd brought with us was almost full.

As we were heading back to the parking lot a ranger stepped out from behind an outhouse. He was very tall and he had on a Smokey the Bear hat. He asked us how we were.

"Just fine, Officer," Calvin said.

"Do you know you aren't supposed to take anything out of the park?"

"Sure, Officer. You betcha."

"Would you mind telling me what you have in that bag, sir?"

"This would just be some things we brought with us, is all." Calvin moved the bag back slightly, behind his leg.

Some people came toward us on the path. You couldn't hear their footsteps because the trail was covered with pine needles. I smiled at them as they passed, but they were looking at Calvin.

The ranger said, "May I have a look in the bag, please?" He reached his hand out and stepped forward.

"These are mine," Calvin said. "They're my things."

The ranger stood in front of him and gently reached down and took the bag. Calvin started to cry.

"Finders keepers," he said weakly. He pointed at the bag. He said, "I found those."

## SHAMIR THE STONECUTTER

I am Shamir, son of my mother. The gods alone know who my father was (or could know, if they cared) and so it was my mother, love-lender, luckless slave girl, unhappy entertainer of alien soldiers, who gave me my name. Shamir: blackest and heaviest of the quarry stones. It was a name appropriate enough for a boy as dark and rough as the shrubless crags, a boy who weighed over sixteen pounds at birth. (Poor mother! How she suffered from the beginning!) But during the construction of the temple my name took on an unfortunate second meaning: black worm. Solomon had forbidden the use of iron within earshot of the temple. He called it an instrument of war. So stonecutters used millions of black worms to hew quarry stones on temple grounds. They would release the worms from little kid-skin pouches, and the tiny serpents would burrow down into fissures, not making a sound, until the stones would halve themselves magically. Often, a slave working too near a large stone would be crushed. "Shamir" came to be the name of the worms.

Of course my innocent mother could not possibly have known the new meaning my name was to acquire, but it was a sad thing to be called, all the same. If only because it

would sound unflattering in the songs when I finally took my revenge on Solomon:

As a wind rises in the deathlike desert  
stirring tiny grains into great clouds,  
So a single Canaanite rose up 'gainst Solomon,  
dark stone-headed worm-boy Shamir,  
brainless, blinded, worm-spined hero...

The poets can be cruel.

Still, could it be that we grow into our names the way  
a wolf-cub grows into its paws?

My vendetta against Solomon began on the day I received my name, my fourteenth birthday. That afternoon I stole a pomegranate, a gift for my mother in exchange for my name. I took it from the tree of a blind priest who believed his god protected him from thieves. As I ran back to my mother, I kept checking the cloudless sky for some sign that I was being watched, but I knew that the gods have no interest in a single piece of fruit.

My mother was alone, for once, when I arrived at the tent. She sat with her elbows on her knees, sharpening her fingernails with a rock. I could see right away I had come at a bad time: nail-dust flew as she ruthlessly chipped at her fingers. The veins at her temples pulsed like breathing worms. Her short tunic was untied, her hair tangled, and I knew that she had been chosen again by a low-ranking soldier.

A large, powerful woman from a once-powerful tribe, my mother was easily angered by the carnal appetites of these scrubby Israelite yeomen. She lent herself to them in silence, and treated them as roughly as she dared. When



they would leave, scratched and bruised and grinning like baboons, she would bathe for hours. Usually at such times I would stay away. I would dawdle by the well, waiting for the tiny Ammomite slave girls with their long black hair, their miniature bare feet arching as they leaned to dip their pots in the water; or I would sneak into the overseer's cooking-tent and sprinkle sand in the flour; or I would maybe strangle a goat, or drown a chicken in the wine barrel. But now my salad days were at an end. This was my naming-day, the day I was to be taken from my mother and put to work in Solomon's quarries.

I rubbed the pomegranate with a little nose-oil and shined it up on my sleeve before holding it out to my mother. She took it between her thumb and forefinger, closed one eye, and frowned. The expression on her face when she looked up at me was dark and unreadable. It frightened me. When she moved her hand a shade in my direction I flinched, idiotically afraid she would fling the fruit at my head. A descendant of the Anakim, an ancient race of giants, I was by then over seven feet tall, with hips that reached almost to my mother's neck. But she was no dwarf herself, and her arms, as thick as an Ammomite's thigh, swung from the strongest female shoulders in Gibeah. I took a nervous step back from her bed mat, stirring up dust. The pomegranate looked no larger than a strawberry in her fingers.

I stood looking at my feet, chewing my lip.

"It's a present," I said. I scratched my shoulder.

Without a word she lifted the fruit to her mouth, bit off the spiky top, spit it into the dirt, and, holding it upside down, squeezed the juice into the palm of her hand. I could hear the seeds popping. I watched her suck up the red nectar and then raise her hand toward me. I shook my head, smiling stupidly, and waved for her to continue. Again she gave me that look. She threw the rind over her shoulder. As I backed slowly toward the flap of the tent she stood and threw her hair out of her face, girted the tunic under massive breasts, and then stormed past me, reaching back for my arm almost as an afterthought. When we reached the hill behind the village she took the slopes in strides equal to mine, never letting go of my wrist.

Near the top of the hill she stopped, turned her back to the north and sat down facing the City of David, picking burrs from the hair on her strong-muscled calves.

I sat on a cracked grey boulder, heated by the high afternoon sun. It burned my legs, but I was afraid to move. Something was up. Solomon's god had once told Abraham to butcher his boy as a sign of faith -- had my mother been chatting with our gods? At close to four hundred pounds I'd make a nice present for Mammon, say, or Astaroth. (She had no knife, but her fingernails were as sharp as daggers.) We sat there in silence for a long time, the desert stark around us. I remembered, looking at the empty vastness of our lost land, that my mother had once said that nothing grows where innocent blood has been shed. When she suddenly

leapt to her feet, deeply indenting the sandy earth, I clapped my hands over my heart.

"Pig! Whoremonger!" my mother suddenly shouted into the air, "Keeper of apes!" She grabbed up a stone the size of my fist and flung it in the direction of the unfinished temple, three miles away. She threw more stones, each bigger than the last, until I began to fear that next she would catch me by the hair, spin me once or twice over her head, and send me, too, hurtling toward Jerusalem.

"Son of that filthy slut Bathsheba!" She screamed, "Maniac, murderer, fool."

Her teeth were red with pomegranate juice. The tone and pitch of her rage terrified me (her voice at top volume could crack living bone) and I remember I began to cry, to howl Mother! please, Mother! When she stood behind me and put her hands on my head, I cringed; but she just pulled my face against her breast and said, almost to herself: "He is a fool, my son."

I put my arms around her, sniffing, and licked the salty tears from my upper lip. The dry yellow heat and the scent of drying weeds made it difficult to take breath. She sat beside me, then, her face moist with sweat, sweat soaking the hair on her forehead.

"They will be coming for you soon," she said. "It is time you heard the truth about our glorious king."

My mother stared serpent-eyed at Mt. Zion as she told me a story familiar to me, familiar in fact to everyone from Dan to Beersheeba. The Tale of the King and the Infant and

the Harlots of Gibeah was the most popular pantomime at the festivals. I myself had once played Solomon at the festival of Ishtar, sitting on a stump for a throne, a crown of grape vines on my head.

But the story sounded strange coming from my mother. She recited it in a monotone, tinged with an eerie bitterness, and she spoke not in Hebrew, but in the old Canaanite language, which was difficult for me to understand. When she got to the part about the king drawing his sword to divide the baby, I nodded impatiently, but something in my mother's voice kept me from shrugging. She stared at me for a moment, then pushed back my curly hair. I could feel my heart pounding as she put one finger on my chin.

"It was you," she said.

If she had moved her finger I would have tumbled down the hill. My jaw swung unhinged against my chest. Me? I thought.

"Me?" I said.

"You." She looked with disdain toward the temple. "And King Bright-Eyes gave you to the wrong girl."

Looking out to where the king did not yet live and imagining the throne-porch where he did not yet sit in judgement I felt the way you feel when you see a lion-cub in the barrens and imagine running into it next spring. Solomon's wisdom was like none before him and neither after him shall any arise like unto him. The poets were always saying things like that. And now my mother was telling me

he had been wrong. And about that! And I, bastard son of a Canaanite harlot, had once been before Solomon in his pavilion. It was too much for a fourteen-year-old, barely a man.

My mother held my hand in her lap and traced the thick blue veins with her finger while my mind (tiny, dark thing) flitted like a moth in a barrel. I thought: If Solomon could be so wrong, then this god of his who was supposed to have given him his wisdom might not be so brilliant after all. But what did that say about our own gods? The whole holy pantheon of Canaanite deities had somehow been deposed by this god of Abraham who, without lifting an omnipotent finger had cast them aside, cast us into slavery, and given to the moron son of David absolute power not only over us but over the animals and the winds and the earth itself! All the sacrifices my people had squandered! All those first-born sons tossed into Moloch's hungry maw for nothing! (Although my mother never mentioned it, an infant brother of mine was surely among them. She was a religious woman.) All the slaughtered lambs! The wasted incense! Baal, rider of the clouds, beautiful Astarte, and El, graybeard father of the heavenly host, all banished or killed. Was there, I wondered, a heaven for dead virtuous gods? A hell below the demons' own? Or had they just given us up? still sitting in their hidden kingdoms, paring their nails, maliciously disloyal?

Apparently deep in thought, my mother said nothing. She folded my fingers into my palm and kissed my knuckles

one by one. She rubbed my fist, weighed it in her hands the way women select melons at the market. The look she put across then told me that she was not merely kissing her boy farewell -- she was contemplating the tremendous strength I had acquired: at fourteen years old, hands that could crush the skull of a king.

"You are Shamir," she said firmly. At the time, of course, I misunderstood. I was flattered. "Shamir," she repeated, and then she hugged me so hard that she cracked two ribs. It was weeks before I could breath without pain.

What is this coming up from the desert,  
 like a column of smoke?  
 Ah, it is the litter of Solomon;  
 threescore valiant men surround it,  
 of the valiant men of Israel:  
 All of them expert in the sword,  
 skilled in battle,  
 Each with his sword by his side  
 against the danger in the watches of the night.

The Song of Solomon. The poets still sing it, verse after cloying verse, at the gates of Jerusalem. It's enough to turn your stomach.

But, fool or not, Solomon knew something, that much was sure. Borne in his magnificent sedan shimmering gold and purple in the courtyard of the temple under the sun of the mighty god of Israel, and surrounded by all those smug warriors (each with a sword dripping Canaanite blood) the king must have known something about power, something I could use.

They came that night to take me for the corvee. They came with a whole company, and although we knew it was

useless to struggle, it took twelve of them to pull me from the tent, and seven more grappled with my mother as she fought and screamed. She ruined the face of one of them, and took from two others three eyes before they pierced her heart with a spear.

As they pulled me toward the cart I vowed that before I rang Solomon's neck for murdering my mother I would learn what trick or magic, what power bestowed by an unjust crazy god, could allow a frail fool half my size and nine times my age to throw me into a quarry to crack rocks for his fortresses and cities, so that he could sit in an ivory throne twiddling his scepter.

But getting to the king, surrounded by the threescore valiant men of the valiant men of Israel, skilled in battle, etcetera, and armed against the danger (me) in the watches of the night, etcetera, would take more than a resolute spirit and the power of a bull. It would take a vision.

Time, heavy and formless as heat, the chip and crack of iron on stone, the relentless sting of the whip ... every swing of the hammer a sword-blow upon the head of Solomon. Dream-blows, because I had neither seen the ineffable king nor had I been within the walls surrounding his temple in the thirteen months of my unhappy employment -- walls I myself had helped to construct.

I hung suspended midway down the cliffwall, harnessed to a long rope (fraying a bit in places, but you can't think about those things.) I pounded a chisel into the solid face

of the cliff, danced off a little to the left, pounded in another, swung back to the right ... burying a line of chisels to weaken the heart of the stone. A khamsin, the late summer wind of the desert, blew down the leeward slope of Mt. Lebanon, a dry wind but too hot to lift the sweat from my body. It seemed to heat you from the inside, boiling the blood against the inner surface of the skin. A bad wind, a battle wind. I had heard that Solomon could control the khamsin. He could pick up his scepter and point northeast to Babylon, or south toward Edom and the land of Pharaoh, and there it would blow with the power to drive men to evil.

Such an enemy, and me hanging from the cliffwall in his quarry.

Distracted by thoughts of Solomon, I was careless placing the chisels, so when the stone broke it crumbled, dropping as worthless rubble into the hollow below. And the iron chisels, tied to ropes around my waist, fell, banging against my shins. Then I felt myself being lowered toward the overseer who was shouting at me and brandishing his whip. Another whipping. Fine, I thought, for I felt I deserved it. It had been nearly a year and still no useful plan had chipped its way into my skull. Time pressed down upon me and I had grown more and more restless, more murderous, but I had done nothing but add to the king's wealth. It had been over a year since my mother told me the true story of the King and the Harlots; a year in the Lebanese quarries of a beef-witted, invisible king; over a



year after my blameless mother's death at the hands of the king's agents, which -- were I not brainless as the shamir-stone, were I not spineless as the shamir-worm -- should have been inspiration enough.

As I neared the base of the quarry stone-dust drifted up and settled on my tongue. I spit. The wind carried it back into my face.

"You are clumsy," the overseer said, "Canaanite son of a whore. Tie the brute to the post!" he shouted. I let the slaves tie my hands, though there were only two of them, and they were not large. Like me, they were Canaanites. Just doing their jobs.

The overseer walked around in front of me to show me the whip he would use. It was made of tightly braided ox hide, with a handle of mountain-goat horn, and two separate tips made of gut forked from the end of the whip like the tongue of a serpent. The tips were stiff as ivory needles; it had been soaked in brine.

"You aren't paying attention to your work, big fella," the overseer said. "Now how many lashes do you figure it will take to make you pay attention to your work? You can count, can't you, Canaanite?"

I didn't say anything. Talking to overseers, even when they ask you a question, only makes them mad.

"Twenty? Forty, maybe? Fifty? Your hide is thick and scarred like the hide of an ox. A hundred." He tapped me on the forehead with the whip handle. "I'll do the counting," he said.

As always when I am whipped the pain made me drift away to a place where thought and dream were one, where the gods can speak to you.

**"Fifteen! Sixteen! Seventeen!"**

The overseer's voice grew faint, far away, as I moved closer and closer to the place of dreams.

I thought of the temple. In the month of Bul, the eighth month, we had returned from a three-month shift in the Forest of Lebanon to find, as we drew near Mt. Zion, that in our absence the temple for which David had been commissioned by his god and which he had been unworthy to construct (even less worthy than his son! the crimes he must have committed!) had been completed. No command was given but the ten thousand carriers and stonecutters, a thousand overseers, and five hundred horses stopped dead in the road, wave after wave of men and beasts looking up in awe as if a wind had blown back their heads.

A hundred feet above the crest of Zion the peaks of three golden pyramid-topped spires shone the light of the sun back into the heavens. Splayed windows trellised with carved fir looked out from either side of an archway three stories high: gilded entrance to the temple porch. Beneath the archway the double olive-wood doors, gewgawed with open flowers and gourds, must have been the width of five men standing abreast. It was at once inviting and inaccessible as joy, and we all stood there in the road agog over the new temple, empty-minded, dazzled.

"Forty-two, forty-three..."

The temple gates were guarded by a pair of motionless charioteers who held in one hand a sword and in the other the reins to a barrel-chested Cilician horse. You could see the swords' hilts gleaming, the drivers' scarlet cloaks. You could see, too, the ornate caparisons draped over the backs of the horses, the dark, jeweled hoof-skirts, leather battle-masks, the purple-plumed headdresses.

I was sure I heard a horse snort.

"...sixty-eight, sixty-nine, seventy, seventy-one..."

Tails swished at flies. Horse-sweat filled my nostrils.

I passed out.

Strange, the way desire finds its vision, slow, random musing becoming something deliberate, a snake working its mouth over an egg. Soon we were once again on the road to Jerusalem, and I had my plan.

Solomon, collector of pea-fowl and concubines, fanatic about apes, was also a maniacal horse-lover whose demented quest for more and better horses was the subject of uneasy conversation among soldiers and overseers. Since his father's death he had imported over 12,000 horses from Cilicia, paying twice the cost of the Hittite and Aramean chariot-drivers. They say he had ceded ten cities to King Hiram of Tyre in exchange for a pair of matched stallions.

It was well known that any slave caught mistreating a horse would be taken directly to the king for a tribunal before being publicly drawn and quartered in the courtyard

of the temple. In the Jerusalem stables alone, Solomon had over six-hundred of the finest horses in the world; not to mention the hundred or so palfrey mares ridden by his wives; not to mention the great Egyptian draft-horses used to haul cedar logs and marble from Lebanon -- horses like the roan gelding standing a few feet away from me, its reins held by a scrawny Ammomite. (I, too large and powerful to be wasted leading animals, pulled a dray more heavily laden with timber than the one harnessed to the gelding.)

The time to act came when we were less than a day from Jerusalem. In spite of the dry air my palms felt clammy as I grabbed the Ammomite from behind (his face fit in my palm like a pomegranate) and the joy of beginning at last my assault on the king had so charged me with mad energy that it took tremendous restraint for me not to break his neck. When he finally stopped flailing and squirming I shifted my hand from his face to his throat. I was probably scaring the little drayman to death -- I could feel the demonic grin squeezed onto my face. I put a finger to my lips and winked. He half-smiled and nodded as best he could with my thumb on his Adam's apple. I released him, patted him on the head, and pushed him aside. The roan shuddered insects from its flanks.

The horse stood about fifteen hands high; I had to bend over to whisper my apology in its ear. I stroked its mane, kissed it on the nose. Like its groom, its stable-boy, its best pal among humans, I reached my arm across the beast's shoulder and spoke to it: "Easy, boy," I said. "Easy. I'm

sorry, boy. Good horse." It was all I could come up with. Then I gripped my wrist underneath the horse's neck and squeezed, choking it the way I would soon be choking its owner. The hair of its neck was coarse against my hairless chest. The head cast back once, the nostrils gaped. It gurgled out a miserable whinny and kicked some boards out of the dray. By the time the overseers got to me Solomon's pony was lying on its side with a little blood dripping from the open eye.

Magicians and giants, assisted by the gods, could never have built such a temple. It could not have been built, impossible. But I had cut stones from the quarries myself, pulled carts of cedar logs down the long road from Lebanon, seen the molten bronze poured into molds by the craftsmen of Tyre.

Still, it could not have been built.

The walls of the Hall of Judgement, where I stood barefoot and bound, were hewn stone (hewn by the worms! impossible!) overlaid with cypress wood which was then covered with Parvaim gold and embossed with palms and chains so that no stone could be seen. Archways, pillars, and ceiling were gold-leafed and adorned on every surface with lions and oxen and laurels and lilies and wreaths of ivory and gold. Moldings and capitals blinked precious stones. A pair of bronze columns rose eighteen feet above the polished fir floor and were topped with two hundred cast bronze

pomegranates nestled in acanthus leaves. (What a present one of those would have made for my mother!) Near the narthex of the Hall stood a gigantic basin cast in a single mold, deep as a lake and mounted on the backs of twelve bronze oxen: three facing in each of the four directions. It was, I supposed, a kind of swimming pool for the high priests. The nave was separated from the Sanctuary of the Ark, "The Holy of Holies," by carved olive-wood doors as thick as a man's waist and hung on hinges of bronze and gold. Twin ivory cherubim -- giant baby angels whose combined wingspan reached from one wall of the chamber to the other -- overlooked the doors.

There must have been some kind of altar inside the sanctuary. I could smell burnt lamb.

And before me, the impossible throne, cathedra for the inconceivable king: the one of ivory and cast bronze, the other, breathless and unblinking, seeming so.

And lions, solid gold lions three feet tall at the shoulders, over-topped by eagles, flanked Solomon's throne; and twelve more lions, carved from ivory and covered in gold, guarded the six marble steps. When you approached the throne, the poets said, the lions were supposed to roar, the eagles were supposed to spread their wings above the king's head, and as I was led in that direction I did think I heard a brazen ruffle of feathers and the guttural roll of animal thunder.

The king's robe reached halfway down the steps, the elaborate orphrey looking like stacks of chain. He was shod

in Egyptian sandals; the nails of his toes were long yellow deeply grooved talons, hooked into the leather. One liver-spotted hand lay on his lap, the other held a scepter: a sycamore staff topped with a golden replica of himself seated on his throne. On the index finger was Solomon's magic ring. From where I stood, fifteen feet away, I was, remarkably, able to make out the characters printed on its surface: YHWH -- euphemism for an ineffable god.

His eyes were grey and blank, with veins like cuts, under thin white brows, white as his beard, thin and white as his hair which stood in translucent arcs on his thin and crownless head. His skin seemed brittle as papyrus. I knew that behind the beard his neck must have been more frail than a vulture's, thin enough to encircle with one hand.

But I had to be patient. The ropes around my throat and wrists were held by six yeomen, stiff and silent as bronze columns, and seven others pointed spears at my back (cross-hatched with whiplash scars and broad as a cliff-face to these puny footmen). They were afraid of me, I could tell, their sweat-damp faces were pinched tight. Seeing them on the verge of wetting their loincloths, I felt gigantic. They had the weapons, true, but I was the barehanded strangler of horses, a madman. If they dropped their spears, I'd grab one by the ankles and use him as a club on the others. I'm crazy, I thought, big as a mountain....

I seemed crazy, driven as I was to insane behavior by my plan -- gentle worm-boy, quiet as stone, cast into lunacy

by the force of his mother's wisdom, by the fruit of the seed she had planted. The king, on the other hand, was truly mad.

"Canaanite."

The voice came at me small and weary, without force. But they tell me a scorpion's sting can bring down a lion. "The murder of a horse ... a flawless, efficient, beautiful creature ... cannot be explained within the pale of rational human conduct. A horse, a creation of pure power and uncluttered wisdom, a creature with the genius of an obdurate, selective myopia which apprehends the universe a few feet at a time, each step it takes becoming an opportunity -- a life of instant, perfect decisions, instantly forgotten ...." He sighed deeply. He looked not at me but at his scepter: Solomon contemplating the miniature image of Solomon. "I find it unfathomable, unacceptable, unforgivable, that even a Canaanite would take the life of such an animal."

It seemed to me that he was genuinely grief-stricken, and listening to his senseless lamentations made me, even, feel something like grief creeping up on me, and I had to whisper to myself, "A horse! Just a horse!" I shook my head, trying to shake off the king's spell. "A lousy horse."

"Before you are taken outside," the king said with tight-jawed restraint, "you will tell me what drove you to kill this animal. You knew you would be captured. What could you have hoped to accomplish?"



"Hope?" I said. My voice resonated in the huge hall, and the sound of it gave me a measure of confidence. "A slave does not hope. A slave merely acts. I have acted. Your horse is dead. Can the great King Solomon make it run again, eat straw?"

I rubbed it in: "Can your god, even, bring it back to life?"

Four steps to the throne. I could grab him with one hand and snap his neck before the guards could ....

The king leaned back and spoke, bitterly, to the vaulted ceiling.

"I want two teams of horses tied to each limb of this boy. Have the slaves walk them slowly ... very slowly. Everyone in Jerusalem shall hear his last screams."

The guards began tugging on my ropes. I tugged back.

"King!" I hollered, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Do you not recognize me? The child whose life you once threatened before all Israel? Why don't you just pull out your sword and cut me in half -- as you offered to do before my mother fifteen years ago!"

For the first time the king looked beyond his scepter at his prisoner: dull, slack face (dark as stone) pulled down by the ponderous weight of a jaw already darkened by dusty growth. Look how huge, king, I thought, bigger than your horses, more brutal than a bull. Set close upon the bridge of a twice-broken nose my black eyes looked into his own. I knew he'd never seen anything like me before: a defiance that must have flattered his power. Not the lifeless eyes you expected, eh, king? I tried staring him

down but my eyes disobediently blinked three, four, five times while his wrinkled lids didn't so much as twitch.

"What is your name, Canaanite?"

"Shamir," I said, standing taller, and from years of habit clenching my fists. "Son of Beth-Aron, harlot of Gibeah ..." I was almost shouting, but I couldn't help it. My voice filled the hall. "... stonecutter, truth-seeker, descendent of Goliath. I am Shamir, slayer of the prized horse of Solomon."

He made me talk like that. Something about him.

"Or so the poets will sing, hmmm?" I swear I saw him wink. "Or perhaps they will sing instead of a mad slave justly executed by the king, torn apart by the king, torn apart by the horses of Solomon the Wise. The poetics of the punishment will appeal to them, and besides it is my bread which feeds them, my gold stuffing their purses."

I frowned at the exaggeration. He was right about the poets, though; they were easily bought. But when I'd pulled him from his throne, when I'd pulled off his head, my two-pound thumbs dug deep into his eye sockets, then we'd see who the poets sang about:

Angry Shamir, quarrydust-eater,  
gripped old Solomon by the throat,  
Where death of the soul comes most swiftly,  
and tore the regal pate from the kingly body,  
For a moment the lifeless head remained,  
stared in horror, terrible to behold,  
And then fell backward, mute and forever unseeing,  
and the floor of the holy temple  
was soaked in royal blood.

"So," the king said. "You are that child." He put ... across what was probably for him a smile. "You've grown," he said.

"You were wrong," I said.

His eyes locked on mine, terrible as an old god's. Their meaning was clear: I was to continue, but one wrong word .... Behind me the guards had tensed. I could smell their sweat, though they pretended not to listen, obedient as dogs.

"Fifteen years ago," I began, "you showed the people of Canaan how you had been given by the god of Abraham the power to judge all men. But you got it wrong. You gave the Canaanite baby to the wrong woman."

I pulled my arms together to cross them over my chest, the guards feeding me some slack.

The king sat still and blank for a long moment, and I thought maybe he had fallen asleep, but then I saw his face change slightly and he nodded, his mouth open, eyebrows up, as if he had received some divine inspiration. He pointed at me then with his staff, the tiny figurine bobbing.

"You killed that horse so you would be brought here ... I should have seen it right away ... you want to beg some favor ... no ... you could not have expected to be granted a wish after such a crime. Perhaps you are here to attempt to overthrow me."

He squinted against imaginary sunlight, pretending to search distances. "But a hero needs followers and I see none .... No, you are no politician, you are a less

complicated type: come to kill the king for simple, meaningless revenge."

Sorcerer! Reader of thoughts! I saw my plan crumbling to dust.

I looked around helplessly at the little soldiers. They were smiling, a bit nervously but pleased that soon they would be poking holes in the cocky slave. I sneered at them and their smiles vanished. I said, "Don't you see? Your brilliant, perfect king is a fraud and a fool!"

Spear-points touched my back, ropes went taut. I could feel blood trickling where the spears cut, invisible to the king. Solomon, though, raised his hand and the guards backed a few steps away, reluctant, wary, and then, incredibly, I saw him lift his scepter an inch or two, dismissing the soldiers, and I was left untethered the way a horse, stupid enough, spiritless enough to be trusted is sometimes left, it's reins hanging down. Some god or other was on my side.

Did he think he was safe? Did he think his scepter would ward me off? I'd use it to dash his brains out, and to pick my teeth afterward.

"So my son ..." He dared to call me his son. I nearly killed him right then, secret or no secret, overcome as I was with contempt. "I presume your mother told you this story."

I nodded, not trusting my voice.

"And it was she who told you that I had given you to the wrong whore." His word choice was petty. I took it as a sign of fear.

"Now naturally a boy can be expected to believe what he is told by his mother, but tell me, do you not think it odd that your real mother would tell me, while my sword wavered above your head, that I should slice you in two?"

So that was it. The poor bastard didn't believe me. His arrogant stupidity was almost pitiable.

"What else could she do?" I said. "The second you made your famous deal the little Hittite threw herself at your feet and begged you not to kill me. My mother knew what you were doing. If she did the same as the other woman, pleaded for my life, your clever little trick would have been spoiled. Who knew then what your next step would be? I mean, a man who'd threaten to butcher a baby ...." I was aware that I was quoting my mother, and glad of it. Let her anger reach Solomon through me. "She was afraid of what you would do after failing in front of everyone, so she let you have your little victory. She waited a few days for the story to cool off and then one night she smothered the Hittite with her own blanket and dumped her body down the well."

King Solomon said, I see.

He said, How about that.

The king said, A clever woman.

The murderer of my mother told me: I would have liked to have known her.

Yes? And?

I waited for him to make some apologetic gesture, to bow his head in shame and beg my forgiveness, to admit to me how false his claim to wisdom was, how unjust and illegitimate his authority. I waited, at least, for him to forgive as justified the crime which had brought me here. Not that it would have kept me from ripping off his head, but still.

Nothing. Unbelievably, the king seemed lost in thought, as if he'd forgotten I was there.

"Devil!" I shouted. The fury rose in me like a wind. I swung my arm up, pointing, and the rope hanging from my wrist cracked as it whipped out toward the king. "You were wrong, fool!" My patience broken, I stepped forward.

A sound of split air, stabbed wood.

A thousand black-shafted arrows appeared in the floor, inches from my feet, their feathers pointing obliquely toward unseen archers at the side chambers of the hall.

Solomon said calmly, "The bows are bent, Canaanite. Speak, but speak with care."

When the arrows hit I had, unthinking, pulled my hands to my chest, and I now noticed with embarrassment that I was standing stupidly on one foot, covering my breast with crossed arms like a virgin surprised in her bath. Speak Canaanite. What, with an army hiding in the wings? Solomon was going to tear my arms and legs off. I was going to lie on my back in the courtyard, blood spurting from every socket, and then they'd disembowel me and hang what was left

from a gibbet. It was pure stupidity to have expected the walls of the temple to shudder and the ceiling to open for the gods to descend upon Solomon, or even to have expected him to openly apologize. But something ... some reaction other than this, the indifference of a cow.

I reached out one foot and touched the feathers of an arrow with my toe.

"But ..." My voice broke, high-pitched and childish, and it struck me, horribly, that I might cry. For me, a nearly-grown Canaanite to weep in front of this demon would have been a horror too unspeakable to endure. "But you didn't know. You didn't. You tricked everybody into thinking you knew who the right mother was but you didn't. You didn't know." I paused, shaking, hoping the archers would shoot me before the tears started.

Solomon closed his eyes and leaned back, his hands across his belly like a man overstuffed after a feast.

"You should have heard the applause," he said dreamily. "Delegations from all the twelve tribes were gathered in my pavilion with requests, recommendations, tests of my wisdom. When I returned the baby to its mother and resheathed my sword, you should have heard the applause."

"The wrong mother," I whined.

"Not to me," he said, and he chuckled. "Oh, come now. You don't think I actually believed that huge dark lump of a thing to be a Hittite baby, do you? Of course I had guessed who the real mother was. But what use was that information to me? I needed to prove that I could make a wise and

impeccable decision, that I could provide security and judgement for all Israel, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, as the poets say. I'm telling you, boy, you should have heard the applause."

For the first time since my vision at the whipping post I was afraid. Not afraid of death or even of torture (not yet) but of something in the king's manner, his attitude.

"You are the king and you can kill me," I said. "But that does not make you right. A king is not a god."

"Gods!" Solomon laughed so contemptuously that I jumped back and ducked my head, expecting maybe a thunderbolt, a burst of flame. "A god is not a king either, boy. God is as infallible as the man who creates Him and who, created in turn by God -- in turn, mind you -- is only as perfect as God permits him to be. I created for myself and my people a perfect God who, unbounded in goodness and wisdom, created a perfect Solomon. Are you following this?"

I was sure he must have been toying with me. Almost sure. I had heard of people, crazy people, who did not believe in the gods, but that was like not believing in sunlight, or sand. I looked over my shoulder to try to see the archers in the hopes that they would, upon hearing their own king's blasphemy, rush the throne. But they were soldiers, trained to listen only for sounds that would indicate danger to the king.

I looked at him sideways. "You don't believe even in your own god," I said, astonished.



"Oh, I believe. Oh, yes, I do that. I believe in Him, I worship Him. I built this temple to Him. To consecrate the house of my God I sacrificed harts, roebucks, fallow-deer and fatted fowl. I sacrificed one hundred twenty thousand sheep and twenty-two thousand of my best oxen -- twenty-two thousand oxen: is that the act of an unbeliever? I believe, all right. I just happen to know He does not exist."

I stared at him. It hit me like a whiplash that Solomon was insane, and it took all my strength to keep my mouth from flying open, and my fingers from flying into it.

The king said, "The people of this land believe I am their king and it is their belief which makes it so. If they were to believe instead that I were a goat, for instance, they would keep me tethered in a yard, or sacrifice me at some altar." He saw me look up, and I'm sure he heard me thinking goat! goat! but he didn't interrupt himself. "I share with my people a belief in one God, maker of heaven and earth. Were I to divide my faith the way you Canaanites do, distributing it among a thousand flawed and quarrelsome deities, I would be as powerless as you."

"But you have divided your faith," I said. Ah, I thought, I have you now. "What about the idols you had made for Astarte and Chemosh? And for Milcom of the Ammomites? What about the altar you built in Dan to Moloch -- I've seen that one myself, on the hill right across from Jerusalem!"

"Ah, yes." He grinned. "The sins of Solomon." He scowled at me as if trying to make sure I was serious, and then, seeing my humorless stare, he began to laugh.

"Those were for the girls," he said. "Haven't you learned even that much in your little life, that you have to keep the girls happy?"

Worse than insane. He was pretending to be crazy to hide what he really believed, because his faith was his power. It had to be. Maybe he had found a way to believe in everything, and pretending the opposite was a way to protect the truth he had discovered: that all gods and demons and ghosts and jinn and angels were as real and as numerous as grains of sand.

"Either you believe or you don't," I said. "You can't worship something you don't even believe in."

"You can't."

He dipped his scepter in my direction, the tiny Solomon matching the stare of the king, and my stomach sank. But you want to, his face accused. My heart, heavy organ of reproach, slammed itself against its cage, because what if in some way I couldn't understand I wanted to hedge my bets too, in the hopes that maybe some Phoenician sea-spirit would sweep me from this hall and drown the place in salty water.

But no. That was just something he was making me think. I could feel him tinkering with my thoughts. Candlelight glinted off his ring, and I averted my eyes.

I muttered, "If something is not true it is not true."

The king let out a sigh. He tapped his scepter against the marble step: click, click, click. I could tell I was wearing out his patience.

"Shamir," he said. It was the first time he had pronounced my name and I was startled to find that I liked the sound of it coming from him. "When you murdered my horse you were choosing to deny something you knew to be true. You denied your fear of the tremendous power which surrounded you; you acted as if it existed to serve your purposes. And it worked. Look at you now, standing unguarded before the king of all Israel. See? You found power by pretending to yourself that there was a reason to behave one way rather than another."

"You're lying," I whispered. He nodded, acknowledging nothing. "There are lots of reasons to do things ..."

"Of course there are," he said.

"There are!" My eyes filled with tears, and I looked away.

He said nothing for a long time. Finally he spoke in a voice deeper and older than before, and somehow far away. His tone was measured, almost a chant; a voice from another world:

All rivers go to the sea,  
yet never does the sea become full  
Nothing is new under the sun.  
Among all things that happen upon earth  
this is the worst:

(He leaned forward, then, and raised his voice.)

Things turn out the same for all.

Hence the minds of men are filled with evil  
And madness is in their hearts during life,  
and then they go to the dead.

I shook my head. "No," I said. I had intended to sound defiant, but it came out like a plea.

"Trust me." His grin was sly as a demon's. "I am Solomon, son of David, king of the united kingdoms of Judah and Israel; my wisdom and understanding and largeness of heart are more vast than the sands upon the seashore; I command even the winds; I speak to the beasts and the fowl and the creeping things and the fishes." He winked. "You see, I too listen to the poets. I suggest that you get busy fooling yourself, and quickly."

To have been within bone-crushing distance of this devil I would have given my soul. I offered it, in fact, to a dozen gods while I stood there half-listening to his pitiless blather, though I received no sign that they were listening, and my soul remained my own.

The weight of my failed revenge pressed down on me. I thought of my mother who had once stood before Solomon and outsmarted him, who had given me my name and my mission, who had died for me.

Just so I would not be misunderstood, I told him squarely, "I would kill you if I could."

The white moustache lifted like a curtain above his grin.

"Why everybody would kill everybody if they could, boy. That is how come you have kings." He gave a quick, indecorous snicker.

I shook my head in resignation, and gave a petulant kick at the little corral of arrows. A few broken shafts flew toward the king, clattered on the steps, but the archers remained motionless behind the pillars. I stumbled, and with my hands still bound behind me I did a ridiculous heavy-footed dance to regain my balance. Solomon broke into a hearty laughter, the laugh of a feeble old man who knows he has nothing to fear from a four hundred pound giant who is nothing but a boy.

His laughter crackled like firewood, and I felt myself fall to my knees. I was sure he believed I knelt out of deference to him, maybe to beg forgiveness, but I didn't care. Let him think it. Maybe in a sense it was true. Maybe I deferred to his insanity because I recognized it as a force too great to combat. Or maybe (I felt so completely enervated, half-dead) he had used his magic ring to put some kind of charm on me. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Speak on, Solomon, explain the universe. If he were to tell me at that moment that all existence consisted of the hall in which I knelt, that outside the bronze columns was blackness, the endless spiral of eternity, I would have shrugged. Fine. If I had been told that my own past didn't exist and that the future would never come, I would have nodded in agreement, closed my eyes and, with luck, fallen asleep.

I bowed my head to the floor and said, sullen, "If you brought me here to be judged, I guess your judgement is

made. Take me to the courtyard. Someday, perhaps, my gods will take vengeance where I could not."

Now the king made no effort to control himself. He banged his scepter on the floor, stamped his feet, roaring. "You have not ..." he sucked wind, tried again, "... you just haven't been paying attention, boy." I looked up and saw him holding himself, chortling like a crazy wizard. Tears streaked his face. I sat back on my heels and watched him snickering unashamedly, the mighty and wise Solomon, son of David, king of Canaan.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw a group of soldiers coming at me from the side chambers. I heard a knife leaving its sheath at my back. The king wiped his eyes on his sleeve, and, still chuckling, waved at me with the back of his hand.

"Go," he said. "When it is time for the shamir-stone to be cut, it is cut by the shamir-worm."

I felt a quick tug behind me and my hands fell to my sides, and the little soldiers were running for the shadows.

I hang again suspended midway down the cliffwall, harnessed again to a long rope, fraying a bit in places. I have returned to the quarry. The worm returns to chew stone, though I am nearly sure now that that is not what Solomon meant. I pound a chisel into the center of a stone ten times my size. It wedges in tight, buried like a thorn in a foot. I tap in another, an arm's length from the first, then another, until I have buried a line across the

belly of the stone and I can hear the gritty whisper deep inside that tells me it is beginning to split. This is my favorite moment: when my next blow, or the next, could be the one to separate the eternal stone from the eternal cliff.

My hammer mis-strikes. Stone-chips and iron sparks fly up. The rock groans, and in its groan I hear the voice of Solomon.

-- Shamir.

I remember hearing my name as I reached the pillars of the temple, heading out. I stopped, but did not turn.

-- How old am I, Canaanite?

-- Pardon me, I said.

-- What is my age. Surely you have some guess.

I turned my head halfway toward him, fearing some trick. Ninety, I said. A hundred.

-- I am forty-two years old.

-- No. At least twice that.

-- Forty-two. I became king when I was eighteen. I was a mere teenager when the infant Shamir was brought before me; a boy, like yourself. I was only a child.

I shook my head. I looked down, strangely embarrassed.

-- Forty-two, said the king.

Solomon, with no help from me, is dead. I heard that while some slaves polished the gimcrackery in the throne-room the king's sycamore staff -- eaten, apparently, by

worms -- crumbled to dust, and the mighty, wise, and glorious king fell upon the cedar floor, dead for all eternity and eternally resting in memory.

Seems he got to the poets before retiring.

But the news of his death came with the sharp surprise you feel when you put your hand into an eagle's nest in the cliffs: the sudden fear, the quick talons.

I should have made him talk sense. I should have jumped to the throne, ducked behind him when the arrows flew, and strangled the truth out of him, forced an apology to my martyred mother. I should have refused to leave; I should have lashed myself to his throne and insisted that he cut out the riddles, or cut out my heart. I should have shut him up.

The head of my hammer has loosened. I hold it with both hands, and pull the leather thong tight with my teeth, the vague taste of animal hide causing a liquid rush under my tongue. I bite through the leather, the hammer cracks into the cliffside and slips from my hand. I kick forward, trapping it between my calf and the rough stone. I recover the hammer and hug it to myself. My mouth has gone dry with terror: the penalty for dropping your hammer is death. The penalty for nearly everything is death. Life in the quarry is free of the labyrinthine judgments of kings.

I look out over the rubble'd quarry, past the rockslides and the quarry-pool, backed by the dead sea of the Arabah, backed by the land of Ammon where Ethram's sons are said to be gathering strength to attack Judah, and I have the



strange illusion that the earth does not reach flatly off to some precipice of nothingness, but that it moves somehow away from itself in all directions, the way the skin stretches over the back of a sow, meeting itself somewhere invisibly beneath her in the mud.

The heat must have gotten to me. I swing my hammer with one hand, bring it down on the nearest chisel with all my strength opening a crack down the center of the stone. It slowly slides free of the cliff, making a sound like a lid being torn from a magnificent sarcophagus.

Solomon knew nothing. I have been repeating this to myself a thousand times a day. Nothing, he knew nothing. I clench my teeth, grinding sand between them. I want to cry out to my gods but I'm sure they are still in hiding from the God of Abraham, probably huddled behind some star, shooting dice.

The stone hits.

Shouts come up from below, and some half-hearted applause because it is the largest stone cut today. I raise my hammer and wave it, thinking of the attack on Adoram.

Solomon was succeeded by his son, Rehoboam, who is hated not only by the Canaanites but by all Israel. A thousand slaves had been added to the corvee, hanging like spiders along rock walls, since Solomon's death. Many of the new recruits were Israelites from the Southern cities. So much for every man under his vine and under his fig tree.

Less than a month after his father's death Rehoboam

came to the quarry with his labor superintendent, Adoram. "Whereas my father put a heavy yoke on you," he told us, "I will make it heavier. My father chastised you with whips; but I will chastise you with scorpions!" When the stones flew, Rehoboam fled in his chariot, leaving Adoram to be stoned to death.

Mine was the first stone cast, and easily the largest.

But I do not hate Rehoboam because he is a tyrant (you do not hate a hog for being fat) but because he is not Solomon. It is said that if he were to raise his staff against the wind it would be torn from his hands and blown into the sea. I am sure this is the beginning of a schism, that we are at the center of a widening fissure between the two halves of Solomon's kingdom.

Dizzy from the heat, I allow myself to spin slowly on my rope, whispering: Solomon knew nothing, Solomon knew nothing. But I stop abruptly. I have not developed his ability to believe the unbelievable. I know that Solomon knew something about why men live.

I know, too, that I could never have made him tell me anything true. I know, as well as I know my name, that if I had him by the throat at the edge of this cliff he would just smile and maybe laugh and then, even with the veins in his neck near bursting with purple blood, he would lie -- he would lie to me without shame because he hated anything that looked like faith, and it is the nature of wise men to hoard the truth like a treasure.