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UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

DATE: 1980

OAKS

by

Susan Forker Steiger

B.A., Northwestern University, 1978

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1980

Approved by:



Chairman, Board of Examiners



Dean, Graduate School

Date

6-11-80

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THE GO-ROUND

"I'm finished."

Katie stuck the broom inside the kitchen door and pressed against the screen. Her mother closed a thick art book, keeping one finger between the pages.

"You got nice buck-eyes! Did you put the leaves in a pail?"

"Everything's off the terrace." She dented the screen with her chin. "I'm going down to the playground."

"Careful you don't punch in the screen." Her mother checked the clock on the kitchen stove.

"Is Cecilia meeting you?"

Katie hopped backwards off the porch step and shook her hair away from the wind. "Maybe."

She unlatched the gate and let it slam. Her mother walked to the door and watched her daughter's progress along the sidewalk. She was twelve, and kept away from the house.

There was yew beside the walk once the fence left off. The square hedge was twice as tall as Katie, and ran the length of the narrow yard. Katie stopped at the spiderwebs, the ones level with her eyes. In the hollows, the spider was at home. He sat in the throat of his web-tunnel, watching the threads cast on the green needles. She stuck

her face close to the web and looked at him.

"Boo!" she yelled.

The spider disappeared. The next web was deserted. She tickled a thread softly once, then again. The spider popped into the tunnel.

"Come here," she whispered, tickling more. He advanced.

"Boo!" she hollered, and popped her fingers.

She laughed, and stopped to peer down the street at the playground two blocks away. She couldn't see the boy on the wide field. He had to be near the trees, next to the cornfield.

Her mother looked up from the book and smiled at her husband when they heard the shouts.

"Poor spiders," she said, and turned on the burner under the teapot. Her father exhaled the final draw from his pipe and tapped it out on the glass ashtray. He turned his head towards the door, listened.

Katie could see him smiling as she crossed the field. He wore a blue windbreaker and corduroy trousers and sat under a tree with his hands dangling between his legs. His teeth were broad and white. There was a gap between the two front ones; like her's. She crossed the cinder track and dropped onto her knees before him.

"Hi, Katie," in his low shaky voice. He kissed her. She moved to his side so she could see out over the field. The houses were far away and only the cornfield and the Lion's

Club Park behind them.

Did you have trouble getting away?" he asked.

"No, how about you?"

"I had to eat at the infirmary first, that's all."

"Because of the ulcer?" She looked at his stomach.

"Yes. Let's go to the park."

He held the barbed wire fence open and they went under the big wood picnic pavillion, into the center of tables, and lay down. The pavillion sat on top of a hill. They kissed more and he rolled over and pushed her legs apart.

In the library basement they had sat in the back carrel and when she wore nylon stockings he held her on his lap. They had met nearly every day at four and sat in the quiet, bright room. She had jumped up and pretended to study whenever someone came in the room. The first hour always passed slowly and then it was time to walk home before it got dark.

"No," he said.

He rose up onto his knees. "I won't do that. You might get in trouble."

He lay on the ground and pulled at the thick brown leather watch-band he wore.

"That sort of hurt," she said, stretching her legs out.

"What won't you do?"

His hands were much darker than hers, but the palms almost white.

"You've never done it before, have you?" She shook

her head. "Well, there's too much of a chance. We won't do it."

"Okay," she said. "Have you done it?"

"With Renee."

"That girl at home?"

"Yeah. She has the nicest voice. I loved to talk to her on the phone."

"How old were you then?"

He pressed his face against the ground and laughed.

"Twelve."

"Twelve?" She put her face sideways on the grass.

"It's different where I live," he said. "You don't wait as long."

"I don't want to do that anyway."

She watched the swing sets coast in the breeze. The go-round shifted. She crawled out of the pavillion on her hands and knees, and stood up in the wind. At the bottom of the hill the houses ran in a neat row along the deserted street. She had visited one of them once, Debbie Fritz's house, during elementary school. The house had been warm, much warmer than her house, and Mrs. Fritz and the children all wore t-shirts although it was winter. She looked back at the pavillion. He lay on the ground and watched her.

She walked over to the old chipped go-round and climbed onto one section of board. The wind gusted and pushed the go-round. She wobbled, stepped forward, and her feet began to turn the boards. She hopped carefully over the metal rails

that reached the boards from a center pole. She was careful not to go too fast.

When she stood still and turned past the pavillion he walked towards her, smiling.

"Look at me!" She kept her arms stretched out for balance.

"I see," he laughed. He grabbed at the boards as she passed.

"No!" The jolt made her totter. "You'll make me fall!"

"Make you go faster!" he laughed, and catching one of the spokes, he pushed.

She kept pace, but was unable to jump quickly enough over the spokes. She tumbled into the center of the go-round, her legs striking the metal. Caught around her body, the go-round stopped.

"You alright?" He lifted her over the boards and she limped in a half-circle. She unzipped her pants.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd fall."

In the center of one thigh there was a dent, and the skin on either side swelled.

"Look at my leg!"

"Pull up your pants, someone's going to see!"

She cried and bent over the bruise, looking up at him as she cried.

"Look at this! How could you push me? You knew I'd fall! You're so stupid!"

"You're not hurt that much."

"It hurts like crazy!"

He sat down on the go-round, set his elbows on his knees and stared.

She got tired of looking at the bruise which just swelled and hurt more. She pulled her pants up and stared back.

"I don't see how you could do that. Anybody could see that giving a big push would knock me off--"

"I never thought it'd push so easy. I'm sorry."

"Well god," she said, and cried again. Her leg had stiffened up. "What'll I tell people I did?"

"Tell them you fell off."

"I was just walking around on it fine, having fun--"

They stared at each other. He fiddled with the watch-band and unbuckled it from his wrist.

"Here. You take this."

"That's your watch. You keep it."

"I don't want it."

"Neither do I then."

"You like it. Take it."

"What'll they say about that?" She bent and rubbed her leg.

"Oh, goddamnit, I don't care. You can hide that too."

He stood up and started walking toward the playground. His windbreaker puffed with the wind and he went slowly so she could catch up.

She strapped the watch around her wrist and followed him. She looked at how loosely it hung around her wrist. When they reached the fence he held it for her again, and took her

hand under the trees.

"How's it feel now?" he asked.

"Okay."

"Good." He kissed her.

"I've got to get back," she said.

"Already?"

"It's getting dark already."

He stuck his hands in his pockets and nodded.

"Do you want to go first?" she asked.

"I'll go the long way, so it won't matter."

"I'll see you tomorrow then, I guess."

"Alright." He looked at her.

She started across the wide field. The lamplights came on and when she looked back he was a little shadow cutting diagonally toward the school building. She crossed the street and ran up the sidewalk because her leg hurt less when she ran. Outside the gate, by the yew, she put the watch in her pocket.

Her father had moved to his place at the end of the table, and was reading the evening paper, his legs crossed. When she opened the door he looked at the clock first.

"Look--I fell off the go-round and hit my leg."

She pulled her pants down on one side and showed him the bruise. It had swelled more, so the dent in the middle was more pronounced. Her father ran one large careful hand over the spot like a doctor.

"God, what a bruise," her mother said. "Were you with

Cecilia?"

"Does it hurt alot?" her father asked. "It looks mean."

"No, it's okay," she said. She watched him. "It hurt alot then, though."

"It must have," he said. "I guess it's too late to put anything on it."

"We should eat now, anyway," her mother said. Katie went to her place at the table and sat down. Her mother put a platter on the table.

"Better take your jacket off."

She pulled off the jacket and hung it behind her on the chair. Her father sharpened his knife and began slicing the meat.

"You better be more careful," he said, as she slid her plate over. "Is that enough?"

"Yes", she said. Her mother put large serving bowls on the table and sat down, holding a big spoon ready.

"Maybe after dinner we'll try putting some ice on it," her mother said.

Katie passed her plate. "I better not run for awhile," she said.

"Well, it's not that bad," her father said.

After dinner she sat in the livingroom with ice on her leg and watched soccer with her father. Then she went upstairs and sat down on one of the twin beds in her room. She switched on the light on the little wood table between them and looked through her writing box, at pencils and some

post-cards. Then she took the watch out of her jacket and looked at it. It had a large white face, and the date in a small square on one side. The crystal had several scratches. The watch-band was wide and worn, two dark leathery braids twisting about one another. It felt substantial in her fingers. She undressed and climbed into bed, setting the watch beside her on the table. She lay awake for several moments, her eyes wide in the light. She reached up and took the watch from the table, inspecting it closely again inches from her face. She found a small knob on the side and wound it back and forth between her fingers, until it felt tight and hard and wouldn't turn again. Then she turned off the light, smiled, and lay still.

OAKS

Oaks is from Butte--the tough town in the state. Everybody around here says it's tough, or I wouldn't know. He lived next door to me.

Oaks was the first person I talked to in the building when I moved in. He was always the only one I talked to or visited. It happened that we moved in only one week apart, and the second night after I got here, he knocked and asked me over. I guess he thought I looked like his kind of person.

His place never changed at all. He would talk about cleaning up, and sometimes he teased me about doing it for him, but he never did anything about it himself. The first thing I noticed was the round table in his place. It was covered with his latest collection of beer cans and wine bottles. The whole table was always littered with them, and the amount never changed. If he threw any away, he must have replaced them immediately. There was always a clutter; never more or less. Then, he had cans on top of the bureau, the heater, the closet, the window sills, and all over the floor except by the bed and in the middle where the chairs were. What surprised me after some time was that they were all over the kitchen too, and I knew he didn't stand and drink in the kitchen. I thought he rotated the cans around the room, drinking them in the livingroom, moving them

from table to bureau to heater, until they wound up in the kitchen and he worked them around to the trash under the sink. I'd have liked to see anybody figure it out.

That night he asked me over I wasn't nervous. Oaks was friendly and considerate. But I got confused when he told me to call him Oaks. He wrote it down on a piece of paper so I could be sure it wasn't Oags, or Ohhhhs. Then he offered me the best chair (it wasn't covered with cans), a beer, and apologized for the bad shape his apartment was in. He asked if there was a record I wanted to hear, and that's when I looked over and saw all the equipment. Since I know people who spend a lot of money on stereos are proud of them, I said that was some stereo.

"Thanks," he said, and took off his hat. He wore the ones like baseball caps, except they had machinery emblems on the front where "Phillies" should have been.

"You'll have to excuse me," he continued. "I haven't showered or changed since work."

"It doesn't matter to me," I said.

He really had to bundle up in the winter, because he worked on a dam and he was outside a lot of the time. They did an overhaul of the dam in the winter--that's why they hired Oaks. So he was wearing heavy overalls and I guess long underwear, a couple sweatshirts, and huge work boots.

"Look at these," he said, and showed me his gloves. They went up to his elbows and they had a furry synthetic lining you could take out.

"Wow," I said, "Those must be warm."

He nodded, took them back, and sat down on the bed. He picked up a frisbee full of pot and started sifting through it. I got sort of nervous watching his fingers working away with the match-cover. He was square--5'8 or 5'9 tall, with enormous shoulders and arms almost as wide as his thighs. The same muscularity curved his chest and back, which looked to me like his greatest strength.

Then he asked, "Frank, would you like to do some bongs?"

My name isn't Frank. As a matter of fact, it's Violet. Oaks called everyone Frank, no matter who or what they were. He told me that right away, so I wouldn't worry.

I've found that when you don't know someone well it gives you common ground to smoke pot with them. You can talk about lots of things then--what kind of bong they have, how much the pot cost, how much prices for ounces have gone up just in the last year. So I said sure.

He loaded up the bowl and held the lighter for me. I went over-board, lost it in the expansion, and wound up coughing violently. It isn't that bad to cough in front of people you know, but in this case, I was embarrassed.

"Jesus," I said as soon as I could. "I can never finish the whole thing. I hate coughing."

That wasn't entirely true, because there is one good thing about coughing after a bong-hit. You get blasted; once the nausea passes, of course.

He filled up another bowl and handed it to me.

"It's good for you," he said. "Builds character."

He went over to the turn-table and asked again what I wanted to hear. I set the bong down on the table and looked at the records.

"Oh, I don't care," I said. "Anything."

"I never knew a woman who could make a decision," he said. "How about this?" and he held up a record I'd never seen before.

"Sure," I said, "Anything."

He made terrible comments about women all the time. Sometimes he'd tell me I could fuck-up a one horse parade. Other times he'd ask why I didn't clean up his apartment, because that's all women were good for anyway. I assumed he was kidding, but I never asked.

He put on the record, adjusted about ten different knobs and levers, and sat back down. He saw that I hadn't done the bong yet.

"Penalty bong," he said. "For postponing the hit."

"I've got to wait awhile," I said.

So he did one himself. Usually he'd fix the bong up for visitors, but wouldn't do many himself. He liked to keep the bong going. Otherwise he got nervous. He liked to keep the stereo going for the same reason.

While he held his breath, I looked out the window. It faced the street which is wide, busy, and loud.

"You've got a nice view," I said. "Mine looks out the

other way, towards the mountains, which is nice too."

He stared out the window. His face looked thick, like there were too many layers of skin, more than usual. His eyes were small and blue and his nose flat.

"Oh yeah," he said. "It's a nice view. This place is okay." His lips weren't different in color from the rest of his face, but his teeth and smile were sharp and clean.

"Cheap, too," I said.'

"Do you work somewhere?" he asked.

"I go to school."

"I used to," he said. "But I quit every now and then to work. Usually I work during the fall and winter."

I asked him about where he was from, what he did, and how old he was. He told me all about the dam, how no-one smoked pot in his town until two or three years ago, and why he liked the town we're in better because the people aren't so red. I asked Oaks questions alot, expecially once we smoked. Sometimes after I smoke I contemplate things too closely, like my personality. I feel better if I'm listening to someone else, like Oaks, talk.

Then the thing happened that used to happen often when I first started visiting Oaks. I ran out of questions and started to notice how big he was, again. When that happened I'd leave. It was like a big bank of heavy, humid tropical air had descended on the room, and I found it harder to meet his eye.

I stood up and said I had to go. Oaks turned down the stereo and saw me to the door. I could always hear him seeing people to the door when I was home.

"Come on back anytime," he said.

I had trouble with the lock so he had to open it for me.

"Okay," I said. "Thanks alot."

I got down the hall and to my door when he leaned out and said, "The least you can do is clean the place up for me."

Oaks would always have a parting shot.

I didn't visit him every day, or anything. Sometimes I didn't see him for days at a time, when he went home for the weekend to Butte, or I wasn't around myself for a period of time. But his apartment was like another world, and it was nice to go next door once in awhile.

The furniture and set-up of the places were the same, except he had a shower and I don't. There's a front room where you put your bed, a small kitchen with one high little window, old cream-colored appliances trimmed in black, and white cupboards and drawers; and the bathroom. Everything was pretty much the same for us except my bathroom's bigger because I've got the tub.

But the way we had them fixed up was different. I've got books, posters up from shows I saw before I moved here, a typewriter, and a TV. Oaks had a TV too, that his parents gave him for Christmas. He asked for a TV because when he gets home from work and say, his stereo's in the shop, he

doesn't have anything to do. He had a few books, I'm not sure what kind. He acted touchy about them and I didn't want to look. One time he had a "Penthouse" his brother brought when he came to visit. But after his brother left, he put it away and I haven't seen it since. He did give me a book called Caravans to read. It's long and although I haven't started it yet, from the cover it looks different from the other books he had. They've made a spectacular motion picture of it now.

The most important thing he had was his stereo. It took up most of the front room, and he kept soft cloths over it during the day when he worked. I've never been concerned with high-quality sound myself, but I spent a fair amount of time in Oaks' apartment. We always listened to records or tapes, and I could see why he spent so much money. It really did sound beautiful, especially with the digital recordings coming out now. Plus, no-one else had one that was as good.

He had Cerwin Vega S-1 speakers placed on either side of the bureau against one wall. His reel to reel tape deck was Pioneer RT 707 with a DBX noise reduction unit. The tape deck sat on a low shelf that he constructed from concrete blocks and a long piece of plywood, alongside a Pioneer PL 610 turn-table with a Shure VI5 cartridge and a Kenwood KR 9600 receiver. The whole outfit was worth around thirty-one hundred dollars retail, but Oaks only paid twenty-three hundred. He bought everything on sale, piece by piece.

It was a nice-looking system too; the speakers were big and brown with spongy faces, and the turn-table was simple and classic, black and gray metal. It looked like something you'd see in a museum of modern technology.

When I visited him sometimes we'd watch TV. Other times he'd have friends over, like he did about a month ago when I stopped by.

They were two seedy looking characters. I can't remember where they'd all gotten to know each other. Oaks ushered me in and I sat down in the middle of them, and he sat on the bed. I talked to them, and we got along pretty well. Oaks kept ministering to the stereo, and finally he stayed sitting over near it, so he wouldn't have to get up as much. The sight of Oaks in his overalls and sweaty t-shirts next to all that shiny expensive equipment always struck me. It didn't strike me as funny or anything; only extraordinary.

The less seedy guy (they were both drunk) started telling me about when he lived in a juvenile detention home of some sort, and what it was he got sent there for. I think he refused to obey his parents, or maybe he stole. He looked like one of the Dead End Kids or something. He had on a white t-shirt that was so old you could see through it, and he was blond, short, and muscular, with tattoos. The other guy was skinny, drunker, and his clothes were beat-up and baggy. It looked like he'd either been on the skids or stole them from somebody else. He and Oaks

started saying all that stuff about women and one horse parades and everything else, just to kid me. But after awhile I began to feel uncomfortable. Oaks got insensitive when he drank, and if you complained, he called you a cry-baby. But all at once the other guy broke in, the blond one, and said seriously that he thought women were wonderful, and he loved every one of them. Then we drank a toast to women, proposed by the blond guy, and they didn't make jokes anymore.

Unfortunately, last week his stereo broke down, so he had to send the turn-table and tuner in for repairs. Usually the stereo store lent him a replacement until his came back, but this time they didn't. He could still listen to tapes, but only through the headphones. So he was watching a lot of TV, and I did too, when I went to visit him. I'd noticed that when his stereo was in the shop he was lonlier at night, and frustrated too, when friends came over and he couldn't play it for them. So the other day when he told me he might move in with a friend, I wasn't suprised. Of course, the building is cheap, and there aren't many drawbacks. But the other residents aren't especially friendly, and Oaks was a sociable person.

"Getting sick of the place?" I asked him when he told me.

"Oh, no," he said. "This place really isn't bad. But I can move in with a friend and live even cheaper."

He went into the kitchen and got another beer. It was

Saturday morning, so he'd already had two or three. He'd tried to cut out drinking during the week, and he'd been pretty successful. But he smoked more pot than he did before.

"Well, yeah," I said, "You could save some money."

"I'm just tired of living alone," he said.

Because I moved here in order to be alone, I always thought it was the same for Oaks. Still, I could never picture him alone--what he did in his apartment before I knocked, even if he was listening to records.

"I can't get along with anyone like that, all the time. I'd rather have my own place," I said.

"I don't mind living with another guy. I'm not picky and I like the company," he said.

"I wonder who'll move in," I said, looking around the room. "What if it's some weirdo."

"Don't worry, Frank," he said. "They won't be any weirder than me."

"Aw, I'll only be here a few months more myself. Are you going back to school in the spring?"

"No," he said. "I'll wait for awhile. We've had trouble with the machinery so I won't get laid off, and I might as well make the money."

I got up to take another look at the only thing Oaks had pinned to his wall. It was a snapshot of his cat from home. Everything in the picture looked crooked, the way pictures do if someone's holding the pet up, or you

catch the pet in a weird position. Then I saw this strange white thing on the chair.

"What's this?" I asked, and I picked it up.

"It's a face mask," he said. "I made it to protect my face when I walk the two miles from the bus to work."

It was foam, white, with little holes for his eyes and nose, and a rubber strap to secure it around his head.

"Put it on," I said.

He did, and he looked like a monster. I asked if he'd looked in a mirror. He said no, but he went and looked because I told him how funny it was.

"What'll you do when you leave?" he asked.

"Go somewhere to get a job," I said.

"Uh huh," he said.

He was sitting in the chair that was in front of the bureau, between the two speakers. They were tall as his shoulders and they looked like two giant armrests.

I looked him in the eyes, something I didn't do often.

"I'm going to miss you. You're the only person I know around here," I smiled, because it's an embarrassing thing to admit to someone you don't know well. People don't do it often, thank goodness. He looked pleased.

"Well that's nice. You'll have to come over and visit. You can clean up for us."

"I'm leaving," I said. "Before you get started."

"Well you must be good for something," he said, pursuing

me to the door.

I got down the hall, took the key off a nail near the jam, and unlocked the door.

"Hey Frank--"

He was standing outside and he held up a piece of the black plastic he stapled over his windows this winter to keep out the cold.

"Do you want this stuff?"

"The cold's pretty much over. No thanks."

"You could make a dress out of it or something." He stood there like a tree stump, ruffling the plastic around between his fingers.

"You make a dress out of it."

"No way, I don't wear dresses," he said.

He'd retreated enough so that all I could see was his face and hat, and a piece of the plastic trailing out the door. I think he got it closed before he could hear me say, sure.

He started to move out right away. He told me what his game plan involved. On Sunday he would move most of his belongings, and probably start sleeping in the new place. During the rest of the week, he planned on cleaning up the place. For instance, he'd never vacuumed the rug in the whole time he'd lived there. I told him he'd be surprised at how different the room would look once he did, because my apartment looks much larger after vacuuming.

For two days straight, after he got back from work,

he made trips up and down the stairs with garbage bags full of trash. I thought he must have emptied out the place, but when I went in there were still cans all over. He kept drinking while he moved. He offered me the wine bottles, and pop bottles, because he didn't want to move them. He also gave me a bag of flour he'd never opened. He used to eat at Burger King, but recently he had started cooking at home.

The last time I visited him he told me I should visit his new place and he made a point of giving me his phone number. It's the same as before because he took the phone with him--that way he saved five bucks. He also asked when I would go out to see the dam. He'd asked me repeatedly to see the dam, and he said that now's the best time, since it's torn up. I can't imagine visiting him at work, even though they do give tours in the summer. But he was serious, and seemed to think it might be an interesting thing for me to do.

I didn't call before I dropped by because I figured he'd be around. I followed the directions he'd written down for me, and found his apartment in the basement of a small white house on a side-street across town. It was near eleven o'clock on a Friday night, and I could hear music blaring--that's how I knew I was at the right place.

"Frank!" he said when he opened the door. "You made it over!"

I walked in, and the place was neater than his last one.

He'd told me that having a room-mate would help him keep things neater.

He turned down the stereo, beer in hand, and pointed me towards the couch. Every piece of furniture had holes, and pieces of upholstery hanging down like pigtaails underneath the frame. There weren't any windows to speak of, and it smelled like a litter box.

"Did you get a pet?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Why?"

"I just wondered. How's work?"

"Oh, it's just great," he said. "Exciting, stimulating."

He set his beer on the arm of the chair, gathered the frisbee and matches around him, and sat down.

"Where's your room-mate?"

"He went home to Butte for the weekend. Hey, look at what I got."

He went over to the shelf where all the stereo equipment was, and pointed to two black boxes with little red lights blinking on and off, sort of like an EKG machine.

"New noise reduction units," he said.

"Oh--what do they do?"

I noticed that he had an intense, deliberate way about him, like he did when he drank a lot. He set his beer down on the shelf and fiddled with the boxes.

"They clarify the sound even more," he said. "The highs are higher and low notes are lower. Listen."

He held one button down and looked at me. I listened.

"Now listen," he said, and he let go of the button. The red lights came back on.

"Hear the difference?" he asked, sort of leaning over the stereo like his balance was off.

"I'm not sure," I said, trying hard to hear the difference as he switched the button on and off. "I think I notice a little something."

"It cuts off all the stuff in between," he continued. "It purifies and refines the sound."

"It always sounded good to me," I said.

He left the machine alone and sank back into the armchair. I kept wondering what to say while he stared at the wall.

"Are they something pretty new?" I asked.

He looked at me long and carefully. His eyes hardly showed under his hat and his skin had that thick, colorless tone.

"Yeah," he said, and then abruptly, "I'll be back in a minute."

He weaved some when he stood up, and he went into the bathroom.

I stretched out my legs and tried to figure out some graffiti and designs someone had painted in water-color above the door. Oak's picture of his cat was pinned to a wall again.

Then an awful coughing began in the bathroom. My first thought was that he'd done a bong or something. But it went on for quite a while, first a harsh cough, then silence, and

then another ripping sound. I started to head towards the bathroom and then I stopped. The times when I'd been over at Oaks' and he'd gotten drunk, he'd just passed out. He'd pass out on the bed, and everyone else would keep putting on records and ignore him, or laugh when he snored. I didn't know what to do. I turned up the stereo in case he was embarrassed but I could still hear him in there, knocking against the walls, and spitting. It was lonely to stand there and listen to someone throwing up all by themselves, especially if it's not one quick shot. I wandered around the room, laughing a little just from nervousness, and then stopping to listen hard again, trying to figure out if he'd finally passed out. Finally I couldn't hear anything except the music and I knew he wasn't coming out.

I took my jacket off the couch, and started to tip-toe out. I don't know why I was tip-toeing, but just when I got by the bathroom door, I looked over and he was standing there in the doorway, hanging onto the frame with both hands. The suspenders on his overalls were down, dangling near his knees, and his t-shirt was wet and slimy with spit. I felt like I'd been paralyzed or something, I couldn't take my eyes off him, and he stared back at me like I was a thief. His hat had fallen onto the floor. His hair was damp and plastered onto his forehead. He looked old, and his balance was worse than before. He swayed towards me, hanging onto a table or whatever was close, and I backed away into the livingroom.

"Turn it off," he said, and he blocked the livingroom

door, the suspenders rattling on the wood.

"I've got to go," I said. "It's late."

"Turn it off," he repeated, and he staggered over to the armchair. His hands fell away from wherever he set them.

I walked over to the stereo and bent over to see the words over each knob and lever.

"Oaks," I said, "I'm not sure."

He had his eyes shut and for a moment I didn't think he'd say anything at all. Then he jerked and without opening his eyes, he moved his lips.

When his voice came it was deep and angry.

"Frank, you know how--turn it off!"

"Okay, okay," I said, and I crouched in front of the stereo.

"You're going to have to tell me. I see this button here, but what about those boxes."

"There's a switch on the turn-table," he said, still loud and harsh. "Get that."

"Okay," I said. "I got that one."

I waited, watching him.

"Then down on the tuner," he muttered. "The two ones on the left."

It seemed like it was taking me forever to find them.

"Okay," I said. "Is that all?"

It scared the heck out of me when I looked over and his eyes were wide open, staring at me.

I stood up. "Oaks," I said, "Did that do it?"

"Come on, Frank, get the ones on the new units!"

The red lights were still flickering on the boxes. I fumbled around and located a round, serrated switch. I rolled it till it slid off, and the last breathless noise coming through the speakers quit.

"There!" I said in a loud voice, and I turned around. He was still staring at me with bloodshot pale blue eyes.

"See you later, Frank," he said, and it was like his lips weren't moving at all. I smiled, and started to walk by the chair to the door. He smiled back, and we smiled at each other while I walked carefully and slowly by the chair, keeping close to the wall. I kept up that slow, deliberate walk past him, and across the linoleum floor of the kitchen that creaked under my feet. I didn't look back, and I felt the knob of the kitchen door in my hand. I opened the door, stepped onto the little landing before the steps leading up to the lawn. I closed the door tight, and looked around me at the black shadows a big tree cast down the stairs and on the grass around the rim of the yard, up above. I lunged up the stairs, taking them two or three at a time, and ran.

CHICAGO

At night we wanted to get into something new. We'd go to bars on the north side of Chicago, fifteen minutes from where we lived on the cooler, cleaner end of the city, on the outskirts of the wealthy north shore. Friends from the south side would visit on weekends to get out of the old neighborhood bars. It seemed like everybody was on the brink of something, I don't know what.

In June heat sealed the city up. One pink line of smog ran the roofs like a seam. We took Gwen, my room-mate, to the airport for a visit home to New York. It was the only time we drove downtown and west through the flat sweating towns during the day. I looked at the air conditioners spitting water over crowds, the brown greasy stains slick on the sidewalks, the tar softening in potholes. When Gwen took off it looked like there was an old wavy pane of glass between us and the plane.

I went home then to our still unfurnished apartment on Noyes Street. It came cheap because of the el tracks next door. I sat on the porch steps in the afternoon to get a feel for the neighborhood. Every so often an old woman ventured out of a small red house across the street and carefully swept the sidewalk and the gutter. She collected the bit of dirt and trash, and disappeared behind the house. Her husband went after a few twigs on the lawn with a rake.

When the el roared by every fifteen minutes or so, they'd stop sweeping and raking to stare like they'd never seen it before.

I thought about a lady who lived across the alley when I was little, in Pennsylvania. In the summer she'd garden all day long. She had a beautiful long thin garden that sloped along the alley. Little steps led from one level to another. The sunflowers and roses in there would get so high you could barely see her, wearing a faded old housedress and apron. She dug away the weeds and packed in shoots. I didn't know where she went in the winter until one day my mother and I were getting the car out of the garage, down by the alley, and I looked up at one of the diamond shaped windows under the eaves. I guess it was the first time I'd ever looked up there. She was peeping out at us around a curtain. I stared while my mother backed out the car, and she stared too. She didn't care that I'd caught her. Every time I'd walk down the alley in the winter I'd look and there she'd be, watching me. I ignored her, the way you ignore old people that get into strange habits.

The people across the street were obsessive in a different way. They couldn't stop moving for a second. It seemed like they only disappeared to circle through the house, grab a different tool, go back outside, and sweep the sidewalk over again. I went inside after awhile.

Anyway, Gwen had a boyfriend, John. He was the one from the southside who had friends coming up to visit. There're some nice suburbs down there, and he was from one of those. He was half Italian and half Irish, like Gwen. Their families hadn't been in this country long, but in both cases, they'd done okay. John's father was a football star at a Big Ten college, then he went to law school, and finally he got into construction. He built houses all over the city, in the new developments, and John's mother decorated the interiors. They were expensive houses but Gwen had seen a couple and she said they were ugly--gaudy, and built with multi-colored bricks. Gwen's father had stayed a lawyer and drove a Mercedes, so I guess she thought she didn't have to make any bones about what she thought.

John was a football star at a Catholic high school in the city, but once he got to the university he lost weight and all the muscles too. You could say he became an intense young man. He didn't want to get into business or law the way his family planned. He read poetry and studied Italian so he could write poems in Italian, and he didn't go home though it only took about an hour on the train. His mother used to call and tell him he was worthless and upbraid him about everything in general. He was intelligent, but they were worried about whether he'd make money. To make matters worse, he'd get bad grades most of the time. He'd decide to make his papers masterpieces, then he'd get hung up trying to create masterpieces and hand them in late, and they

wouldn't be written the way you're supposed to write papers in college. If I'd been in his shoes, I wouldn't have worried so much about the papers, and I would've told my parents I was majoring in business and let them find out after it was too late. I wouldn't have made any difference in the long run, and it would've avoided alot of ugliness. But John was lazy I guess. He wasn't playing in the same ballpark as everyone else alot of the time. It was like the rest of the world had gone to Wrigley Field, and John went down to Cominsky Park.

With Gwen, It was a real case of pointing a finger at someone and saying, "I want you, and I'm going to have you". That's the way she was about John from the word go. But she had to wait. Although John just went out with one girl during high school, he was one of those people that gets to college and suddenly realized if he wants to, he can have about ten different girls. They just liked him. He had thick wavy red hair and yellow eyes with eyelashes longer than a girl's. He walked like he needed someone to tuck in his shirt, slouching around with his pelvis stuck out. He had a fox's smile, narrow and toothy. Even though he wasn't very tall, and he'd lost the weight, you could see he still had a good chest and shoulders, like an athlete.

He had a number of affairs before giving into Gwen. He carried on with her from time to time, but in between he'd fall back in love with his old girlfriend, or I'd see him with girls from the dorm, or he'd be eating dinner at his

writing teacher's apartment. It hurt Gwen's pride, especially when he went with people she sknew. Sometimes I'd look at her and I'd think she was pretty, and other times I wouldn't. She had a stubborn straight nose, black eyes swimming in milky whites, and a round face. Her body was short and chunky-- wide shoulders and hips. But she had beautiful hair, pre-Raphaelite hair. It was chestnut colored, thick, and it curled way below her shoulders. And she had a way of walking and talking like she was the best looking thing on the earth. She'd swing her behind, wear low-cut shirts and big platform shoes. Sometimes I'd sit talking in her room, and she'd be just back from taking a bath. She used to take long baths all the time. She'd apply moisture lotion all over her legs and stomach and breasts, not smoothly, but sort of slapping her flesh, talking all the time but admiring herself too. After awhile I'd feel funny, because I'd be watching the whole process like a man. I guess that's what made it possible later on for me to understand John's point of view.

The last few people John carried on with turned out to be sort of crazy. They were older than him, but he had to take care of them anyway, when they had nervous breakdowns, or got desperate and felt like they couldn't fulfill their college requirements. All in all, it wore on him quite a bit, and by our second year he was spending all his time with Gwen. That's when I really got to know him. Gwen and I lived together so he was around alot. Gwen had strong mother instincts, and she got him back on the right track. She was

studious, organized, and responsible. She made him go to classes, did his laundry, arranged his schedule, reminded him to call home; she bossed him around, and he loved it. She started taking Italian and they had plans to visit Italy and look up their relatives. After awhile I got to like him more than Gwen. I could talk to him better. When Gwen wasn't around he'd sit in the other chair in the room, or on the trashcan, and we'd tell stories. Sometimes we'd borrow a car and drive up Sheridan Road into the northern suburbs, looking at the mansions and drinking beer. After awhile I hated the way he let Gwen push him around. I began to think he'd be better off with me.

There were things, personal things, that I saw and heard living so close to them that I couldn't have done without. They few times I spent the night at home he slept in the top bunk with Gwen, and after the five minutes I guess they thought it took me to fall asleep, the mattress and springs would begin to squeak. I'd have to tell them they were keeping me awake. Or they'd get into squabbles, the kind that start with friendly punches in the arm and gradually get serious. This happened when I was in the room during the day. They'd start picking on each other, and finally someone's feelings would get hurt, and I'd have to sit there like a referee, and embarrassed referee. I'd try to make jokes and if that didn't work, I'd get mad at both of them. All the time I'd witness these fights ending with Gwen in tears, or John walking out, or worse yet, Gwen losing her temper and

throwing something, like a glass of water. After awhile I couldn't understand them as a couple. I could understand them alone, but not together.

Then we got to know Robbie. He was also part Italian, and they'd met him in Italian class. He came from the same place as Carl Sandburg, in southern Illinois. He lived in an apartment down in Rogers Park with Jumping Jeff Jones. They hung out in particular with a graduate student named Steve. But I didn't see those two much before the summer. Robbie started coming by every day.

He struck me as gawky at first, but you could see he'd be a beautiful man someday. He had a huge handsome head, with big cheekbones and a broad, soft mouth. His nose was blunt and his eyes dark and bright, like Gwen's. He stood a skinny lanky 6'4. His skin was a beautiful brown color, and on his chest, thin and smooth and brown, hung a tiny gold medal. It must have been worth alot of money, because he almost died anytime you touched it. The medal brought him good luck, along with a palm leaf from Easter he kept tucked up in the visor in his car.

At the end of every summer he'd go to Italy to visit his relatives. They were northern Italians, aristocrats, and they never worked. They just traveled around from one villa to another, to the beach or ski-slopes, or whatever. His father worked as a surgeon, and his mother made quilts that sold in places like Bloomingdales and Saks. She was six feet tall, a big horse-faced woman with glasses, wearing Levis.

He had a sister who went to the university too, and she was an artist. She did a painting of Jumping Jeff that looked just like him. In the picture, he's wearing overalls with nothing underneath. Robbie called it "Huck Finn Goes to Chicago".

Anyway, things got better once Robbie started visiting. Gwen and John didn't fight as much when he was around, because they didn't know him well. It took pressure off me, too. I knew Robbie liked me, because Gwen told me so. He liked to tease me. Once he found out I came from a small town, he made up a big long story about how my father owned the whole town, and all the citizens were our serfs. He'd tell people this story when I'd meet them and he loved the way I'd deny the whole thing and punch him in the arm. Also, he had a funny way of ranting and raving when he got mad. He'd talk in superlatives. Someone was either the biggest asshole he'd ever met in his entire life, or the most beautiful older woman in the world. He'd absolutely refuse to put up with any shit of any kind, and then he'd sit there in the chair with one bony knee swinging over the arm, his chest folded over like a lawnchair, and grin at me from under his hat.

Whenever he went somewhere with friends, it was like he was in front, and they were following. He had the ideas, and he had lots of friends. That's the way things stood when we moved into apartments for the summer.

None of us planned on working much. Robbie and Jumping Jeff painted houses, John got a part-time at a lunch counter and the rest of us went to school on and off. You could never tell when people would have time off and show up, or who would be working when.

Gwen had gone home the day after we took the apartment so it wasn't fixed up yet. We had beds, a couch and TV in the livingroom, and that was about all. I liked the place during the day. The wood floors would get hot from sun pouring in the big windows. I'd put on records and dance around in the diningroom where there wasn't any furniture at all. When I got tired of that, I'd unpack a box or two. I'd do about one box a day, and take hours looking through everything: my old postcards, photographs, papers, all the junk I'd been carrying around with me for years. Sometimes John came over and helped me look through the stuff, or we'd sit outside on the porch. Then the old people didn't bother me as much.

At night, though, I'd get scared. First I couldn't get to sleep because of the el. The tracks were six feet away, two stories up. It didn't come by as often at night, but still, it seemed like I could hear it a mile away, a faint rumbling like the roar in a shell. I might as well have been waiting for someone to snore. The sound would grow and grow until I'd open my eyes to the ceiling and think, it's got to come now. But it wouldn't. It'd grow, and by the time it passed it'd turn harsh like a throaty holler. A breeze would

sweep over my bed and the windows would shake. I'd lie awake for hours, and that's when I'd get scared. I'd think I saw a face at the window, and I'd wonder if I'd locked the door. It drove me crazy. After a couple nights I was getting used to the el, but I was still scared. So when I got the chance, I asked John if he'd stay over.

It was around eight o'clock at night, and Robbie, Steve, Jumping Jeff, and another crony of their's named Lupa had stopped by. John went into the kitchen for beer and I followed him. We were bent over the refrigerator at the same time, pulling different ways on a six-pack, and I said,

"I wanted to ask you--I get scared staying here at night alone. Would you mind staying ⁱⁿ Gwen's room tonight?"

"What are you scared of?" He slammed the refrigerator door and leaned against it. He hitched up his pants and left his hand on his hip.

"I don't know what I'm afraid of." I kept my voice down so they couldn't hear out in the livingroom. "All I know's I am, and I wondered if you'd stay over. She's got blankets and stuff on the bed already."

"Sure. I will. I just think it's funny that you're scared."

"There're no screens on the windows, there's an alley along them, a lousy lock on the front door, seniles across the street--"

"Okay," he said, "It's fine with me."

He put his hand on my shoulder. He was just a little

shorter than me. Then he walked ahead of me into the living-room, pushing back his hair. It was getting longer because Gwen hadn't cut it for awhile.

They were all sitting on the couch, except Robbie, who was sitting on a speaker.

"Nice for the speaker," I said.

"She's got a bug in her bonnet," he said to everyone else.

"Just let her be that way," Jumping Jeff said.

Steve kept reading a magazine and drinking his beer.

"No I don't," I said. "Go ahead and sit there."

"We're going down to the Po," Robbie said. "You want to come along?"

No one else had a car so we all went in Robbie's. He had a silver Mustang he called the "silver bullet". I always got the front seat when I road with Robbie. He was a gentleman about things like that, if he liked you. Everyone else had to fit in the back.

We took Sheridan Road, through suburbs at first. It's one of those roads that's supposed to be two lane, but shouldn't be because it's too narrow. So the cars were driving close to each other, and with all the bumps and corners and turns, I felt like we were in a race. We got to the best turn and the road bent a big half-circle into the lake. On one side there were shadowy white rocks and the rough lake, and on the other a graveyard with tall pointed monuments, tall as trees. We all yelled when we went wheeling out along the curve

practically attached to another car. Then the road pulled back into the city, and we were about two blocks in from the lake, two blocks of old brick apartment buildings turning seedy. We passed the bar Biddy Mulligans, restaurants and more bars, and turned off onto Devon and the Po.

The most unusual thing about the Po was the fringe of wood-chip canopy that ran around the top of the bar, like you'd see in Hawaii. Then it had pooltables, an enlarged TV screen on the wall, bowling games, and polished wood tables. All kinds of different people frequented the Po, and it was never crowded.

We lined up at the bar and started on pitchers, the Po's specialty. Robbie and Steve started up a conversation about a Fiat they'd bought jointly to fix up and resell. They were working on it in some parking lot on the north side. Robbie had money and supposedly, Steve had the know-how.

"Somebody better buy this thing when we're done," Robbie said.

"Robbie," Steve said excitedly, "someone would buy this car even if it wasn't right. Do you realize how easy it is to sell cars to people? Most people have no idea of what they're doing. They're stupid. Besides, this is a good car. An incredible, efficient car."

Steve was almost hypertense when he talked, like the kids in grade school who never sit down for more than five seconds. They're up tugging at the teacher's sleeve or picking on someone else, and they never seem to think

straight for a second. He was like that, but he struck you as smart too, from the first time you'd meet him. He knew a lot about almost everything, and knowing all that made him impatient, restless. Half the time he'd try to be nice, then he'd get exasperated, make a nasty joke, and when people blamed him for it, he'd feel bad.

"Oh yeah, it's a good car," Robbie said to John and me. We were just standing there listening.

"Of course it is," Steve said. "We just need to find a sucker to buy it." He giggled, and then they got started on the engine.

John and I bowled a game, keeping our beers on a table near the machine.

"Look at those guys," I said, nodding at Jumping Jeff and Lupa. "Don't they look debauched?"

"Aw, they try," said John. "Don't tell me you're scared of them too."

He rocked back on his heels and laughed. He had a loud, infectious, chortling laugh. We went on bowling, and in between turns I watched them. They wore beat-up clothes, and they were both skinny and slightly built. They sat on the bar stools with their legs spread wide. They had their heads together, talking. They really only liked Robbie out of the whole bunch of us.

Later on Robbie and Steve came over to bowl. Steve told me about the school he went to before our's, how wonderful the administration was, and how much sense everybody made back

there. He asked me what I thought about school, and I told him. I wasn't much interested in the subject but I liked talking to him. He told me I was smart, and nice. Robbie was watching the whole time but he didn't join in the conversation. He didn't like it when Steve talked a lot, I guess he'd heard most of it before. Pretty soon he said we should leave.

Before we could get out the door the bartender wanted to armwrestle somebody. He was a big blond man and none of us could have beaten him. But Steve tried, and then he gave us pitchers for free, so we got home pretty late.

John and I didn't go inside until Robbie's car turned the corner. I switched on the only lamp in the livingroom, and turned on the TV. I sat down on the couch and John went into the bathroom. All that time we didn't say too much.

"What's on?" he asked when he came back. He sat down on the floor in front of me, and then he slid over until he was sitting between my legs, his head leaning on the couch.

"Some movie," I said.

He was watching the movie, but I kept staring at his hair. It was spread out on the couch, between my knees, and it looked beautiful in the light. It shone red and brown streaks on top and darker under the thickness of it. I wanted to touch it more than anything, but I kept my hands on my thighs.

He pulled my legs away from the couch and hooked his wrists around my ankles. He covered the tops of my sneakers with his hands. Then he pulled the laces loose and I said

hey. My voice sounded funny and deep. He shook his head and the hair fell over my fingers. I moved them, pulling the strands through them, but never letting go when I reached the ends, just sliding them back up till my hands were flat against his head. He started sliding his hands up the backs of my legs, along the calves, and when he'd get to my knees he'd hook his arms underneath them and stretch back with his hands over my thighs. He did it soft and slow like he'd been thinking about doing it before. I don't know if he had his eyes shut by then but I was sitting up there looking down on the whole thing, as if just feeling it wasn't bad enough. Jokes or ways that we'd always teased each other kept coming into my head, whole sentences forming in my mind, but I couldn't get anything out. It was completely different. It was treating and looking at someone in a whole new way.

Then he reached back, took hold of my arms, and pulled me over him, turning his head around, and kissed me. "Come here", he said, and I slid onto the floor. Then we went at it, the kind of making out when you can't remember how you got your clothes off, and nothing's funny, not even when you've got one shoe off or your shirts pulled around backwards, or anything. We got so twisted that we had to crawl across the bare floors to my bed.

We couldn't sleep later but it wasn't because of the el. There were roaches crawling around on the walls. John stood up on the bed and killed all of them within his reach, and then we pulled the bed into the center of the room, a

four-poster island. Even then I didn't feel safe--one of them might still have climbed up the wooden leg and found us under the damp sheets. First John would twitch, and then I would, so we kept each other awake all night. We were certain the bugs would come.

Towards morning, when it was already light, John got out of bed. I went looking for him, and he was sitting out in the diningroom on a big down patchwork quilt on the floor. The quilt was all in a pile and when I sat down too we sank in. We hadn't put on any clothes so we sat there naked. I asked him what he thought would happen and he said he didn't know. That worried me some. He was glad, but he wasn't sure what would happen.

Then he said he had to go write some poems, and he left. He was taking a poetry course in school and he was supposed to write a poem each day or something. I'd never seen any of them, but I guess they were good. He had potential, anyway.

I went back in the bedroom and put on my bathing suit and some shorts. I pushed the bed back against the wall, and cleaned the roaches off the bottom of the shoe John had used when he killed them. By the time I'd finished, Robbie walked in. He had a towel under one arm and shorts on. It was the first time I'd seen him in shorts. They made him look younger and more awkward. So I whistled at his legs.

"Aren't you guys painting today?" I asked him after I got him a beer. It was early, but Robbie liked to take it

easy in the summer while he had the chance. He liked to enjoy himself.

"Hell no," he said. "I was asleep when they came by so they went on their own."

"So now you're going to the beach?"

"Yeah," he said. "Come on. What's John doing?"

"I think he's doing some work today," I said.

"Well hell, let's go. Come on, get your stuff."

"I'm all ready," I said. "If we go to the rocks I don't need a towel."

"Yeah," he said. "Let's go to the rocks. It's still too cold to swim anyways."

I never was sure where they got the rocks to line the lakefront, or how they moved them there. Big slabs of limestone are piled all along the lake, except where they made little beaches at the parks or wherever. They aren't stacked nicely or anything--it looks like they just pulled down the back of the truck and let them fall any which way. Some of them stick straight up, some are slanted like loungechairs, and a few lie flat. We always went to the rocks instead of the beach because less people go there. The lakefront curves so if you sit on one side of the point you look up the coast towards the north shore, and if you face the other direction you see the city, pale in the haze. Robbie and I went to the side facing north. I liked that side better. Sailboats come drifting down, the sky's clear and blue, and the shoreline looks dark green and kind of wild, running up to Wisconsin.

I lay down on one of the flat rocks and Robbie sat a little above me looking out. He liked to tan sitting up.

He'd tell me when a boat or waterskiers were passing close, and I'd sit up. Every once in a while I'd turn my head so I could see him and I'd say something like brother, it's hot, or nice day, huh, and he'd be looking down at me, smiling.

"Tell me about your town," I said, "and then I'll tell you about mine." I rolled over so all I could see were the rocks piled up above us.

"What do you want to know that for?"

"What's your house like?"

"Okay--my house is nice. My parents got some man from Chicago to design it. It's in a circle with a couple other houses and we all share a pool in the middle."

"You all got together on that?"

"Yeah. Our house is modern, lots of windows, a real high livingroom ceiling, everything's spread out on different levels. The back faces the country club golf course, so it's like that's our yard."

"We didn't have a country club. What's the town like?"

"It's flat, anyways. Flatter than here. The downtown's small. We've got malls like everywhere else. Some of the buildings are old. I don't know, I guess it's pretty nice."

He looked at me expectantly, like he didn't know what else to say.

"What did you do when you were younger? You go to bars?"

"Yeah, we did some of that. We drove around alot. I played some basketball too. In the summers I built Harvestores. That was something else, out on some farm, hot as hell, way up high on top of some Harvestore looking out on the plains."

"That sounds allright," I said. We sat there for awhile.

"Okay, so what'd you do?" He said it like we were playing some game where you take turns answering questions truthfully.

"My town's smaller than yours," I said. "There's one street with a dimestore and banks and a grocery, a few bars. It's hilly, even in town. I had one of those extended families. They all lived there too. We had farms, and I used to go out to them with my grandfather. People hung out at the Tastee Freeze and the bowling alley, but I didn't. I didn't do much. There wasn't anything really to do. It's all farms ."

"Sounds the same as mine." He laughed and so did I.

I rolled back over and he got up and climbed down the last rocks between us and the lake. He chucked some rocks into the lake and dug around with a stick in the slimy stuff at the base of the rocks. He moved like a heron or some water bird. His legs were long and thin. He did everything slowly and carefully, gracefully. It reminded me of when I was twelve or thirteen, and growing about an inch a month. I wasn't ever used to my height. I had to be careful because I had bad balance and I'd fall easily and break bones. I had to look out for myself. Once you've had to do that, you

move like Robbie did, testing the ground before giving up your weight to it.

There were only five days left till Gwen was coming back. John and I did things together; we made the most of it. I was happy, but he wasn't. He was worried about Gwen. I didn't think about her side of things much. I figured we wouldn't tell her, there'd be a grace period while he broke up with her, and then we'd go out. I thought that because they didn't get along, and John and I got along well, she'd throw in the towel. I didn't ask John about it. Half the time I didn't get the chance. Robbie and Steve and the others were around all the time, and we'd go out to bars with them. We didn't want them to know what had happened, so most of the time we acted the same way around each other that we always had. It got confusing, and I spent less and less time alone. We were always drinking and forgetting about time. Robbie, Steve, and guys we met came on to me. It was the summer and all. Spring's bad enough, but in the summer people fall in love right and left. It was fun, but I wondered where it got you in the long run. They were supposed to be my friends. I didn't like any of them that way. I liked John. But he got a cynical attitude seeing the different choices I had. He thought I didn't need him the way Gwen did. That was all wrong. I knew what I wanted. I began to think confused people were dangerous. Not that they could help it. That was the worst part, that, and the fact that not being sure made them interesting.

The day Gwen was coming back we couldn't pick her up at the airport because Robbie had his car at work. He didn't like Gwen too much anyway--he thought John should punch her out. I waited around in the apartment by myself. Finally the taxi pulled up outside, and she burst in the door. Against her tan her eyes looked even blacker, excited. She hugged me, stomped around on the platforms telling me I should've decorated the place. Finally she sat down on the couch.

"Where's Johnny?" she asked.

"Oh, he'll be coming," I said. "He knew when you were coming but he didn't want to just wait around, you know."

"Has he been working?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "I think he's gotten a lot done."

Then John came in the screen door and she practically wrestled him to the floor, She was that excited to see him. It was nice. When she got excited she was as unself-conscious about it as a little kid. She didn't have any reserve. John sat down and we all tried to talk, but it didn't work. Gwen kept looking at him, and I could tell she wanted to be alone with him. When she suggested taking a walk I said I had something to do, and they left.

I went and lay down on my bed for awhile. I got so tired thinking about things that I fell asleep, and I didn't wake up until I heard Robbie yelling outside. I went out and he was sitting there in the chair, reading the paper.

I sat down on the couch. "What time is it?"

"Seven o'clock. What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing. I was just sleeping."

"Gwen get back?"

"Yeah."

"So Johnny's back in heaven."

"Yeah." I got up and went into the kitchen for some water. On the way, I washed my face in the bathroom and then I felt better.

I gave Robbie a beer and sat back down. "What're you doing tonight," I asked.

"I'm going to visit Roslo. I haven't seen him lately."

"I don't think I know him."

"Well come on," he said, "Come with me. They're alright."

He stood up and did a few dance steps. It occurred to me that he like it better with John absent.

"You're in a good mood," I said.

"Nobody's begging you to go."

"No," I said laughing. "I'll go. I want to go."

"Fine," he said. "Get your stuff."

"You always tell me to get my stuff--what all stuff do you think I'm carrying around with me? I'm ready to go!"

"Women carry around more stuff than I can believe,"

"Oh brother," I said. "Well, I don't."

"That's good," he grinned, "That's fine."

I'd gone with Robbie on his nightly visits before. He was like that--he'd pay visits to all his friends. He'd just drop in , but not for too long. He had enough different

places to go that he didn't see anybody too often. He was always welcome. He like to take me with him, and I liked to go. I'd meet new people, and some of them had interesting things in their apartments--tropical aquariums, sculpture, murals painted on walls.

Roslo lived in the Jonquil Jungle off Howard street, a Mexican neighborhood. Roslo lived there because it was cheap. Inside the apartments were kind of nice, old with large rooms, and sometimes fireplaces and fancy woodwork.

I followed Robbie up the stairs after we pushed the buzzer, and we walked into a dim smoky room. Everybody said hey to us and I sat down on the couch between what must have been two ex-athletes. They weighed down the couch at both ends leaving me high and dry in the middle, staring down at the difference in size of our forearms.

Robbie introduced me to the other five . Some were kids he knew from home dressed in cheap clothes and thin, and the others the ex-athletes, looking for jobs. We watched TV with the sound turned down and listened to the stereo. Robbie and Roslo talked a little, but I couldn't hear them over the music. The others exchanged a few cordial remarks and sank back into their contemplation of the screen. On another night I would've made more of an attempt at conversation, but I was just as happy then to stare at the screen like everyone else. I never worried about how I'd be treated when I went with Robbie on his visits. His friends moved carefully around me, made sure I found a

chair, remembered my name when we said goodbye. They were used to having people over at night, traveling at night in the summer from one scene to another.

When Robbie dropped me off the lights were out in the apartment. At first I didn't want to go in, but once I did I saw that Gwen's door was shut and she'd gone to bed. I did some dishes in the kitchen, undressed, and climbed into bed. I felt safe knowing she was in the next room--it was the first time I wasn't afraid. Gwen was the kind of person who number one, would wake up at the slightest noise, and number two, would be the first one trying to find out what was wrong. She was like the characters in horror movies who go down the cellar stairs to investigate the weird knocking, when anyone else, including everyone in the theatre would get the hell out. I always feel a kind of admiration for those people, at the same time I think they're crazy. Gwen would always settle things once and for all.

That's what she tried to do for the next two weeks. She and John spent alot of time together, away from me. She told me they were trying to get some things decided. He wasn't sure about something. I knew he hadn't told her about me, he'd have been too scared to do that. But she knew something was wrong, and she was doing her best to fix it. She really did love him, and I guess he loved her too.

I never saw John alone because I didn't want Gwen to suspect anything. But ^{then} things took a turn for the better. I think she figured she didn't have to suffer while he was

making up his mind. She started seeing someone she'd met in a class during the year.

She didn't like him that much. He was nice enough, but boring, and he was the opposite of John when it came to his looks. He kept his hair short, he wore conservative brown glasses and he was cute like a Ken doll's cute. He stared at Gwen's legs and played the forceful male. It unsettled her some, but she liked it too. She had as bad a daddy fixation as anyone I'd met. His name was George, and he was interning at a political set-up downtown. He thought we were on drugs when we laughed hard.

Anyway, one Friday night he came by for Gwen, and they were still around when John walked in and asked me if I wanted to drive south with him to visit friends. I said sure and it all looked legitimate but Gwen said a remorseful goodbye. She'd met John's friends before and she liked them. She missed being part of the crowd. We borrowed a car from someone John worked with, and headed downtown.

The sun was still setting over the web of telephone wires and gray chimneys decorating the horizon to the west. It gave a burning, reddish glow to the grimy apartment buildings that ran at diagonals towards the Dan Ryan and we sped with the rest of the cars like ants as fast as we could to the south. A last hot white light crashed against the round greenish domes of the orthodox churches so they looked like spinning tops among the dull brick siding lining the neighborhood streets.

Across town the el lunged up through the concrete meridian and careened down the center of the expressway between the six traffic lanes. I watched everything. I didn't get downtown often and I'd never been to the south side before. I asked about everything I saw--I wanted to know. Up on the el platform women sat their shopping bags beside them on the bench, watching kids in denim jackets and tight jeans smoking near the edge. Housing projects appeared in the midst of brown grass and black-top scattered with glass, and inside them whole dark empty floors burned out from fire framed through curtainless windows the city beyond. I looked back toward the cubist buildings downtown, near the lake, and the lecherous Magikist lips sign smiled a big hyper smile, ground its teeth over the hustle of the midwest core. When we neared the suburbs where John had grown up among families who'd made good money in contracting like his father, he told stories about the schools, described local characters for my benefit, because I'd never seen that world before.

I spent the evening leaning against a wedge of the bar, swaying back and forth among the half-naked people filling the place. All John's friends were there, back from Europe or the university downstate. Early on John got involved in a conversation with a friend, and I talked by turns to the rest. They shouted summer jobs over the noise, and the names of the Irish girls they

had in tow. Hawkin, slightly built, had rimless glasses, and worked in the laundry unit of a hospital, sneaking into a closet and sleeping when he could. Kearney, whose thick black hair and dark eyes gave him an eastern appearance, read a book a day while posing as a night-watchman in an office-building. And Lawler, the only one going east to school, smiled a rodent smile when he called me a Protestant bitch soon after the introduction. His father had gotten everyone else their jobs, and they assured me that he was always nasty. The girls smiled pleasantly, bar-maids fought their way through the crowd. We grabbed bottles off the trays, and money fell in the ashtray, the sound lost.

Outside on the street Hawkin tore off his shirt and begged to be taken to water. They staggered off towards the lake and John and I pulled onto the strip. We bore down on the expressway and the ride back seemed shorter, dulled.

"Did you have fun?" I asked.

"Yeah. Did you?"

"I wish you'd talked to me more. They're all nice, but you didn't talk to me at all."

"Oh come on."

"No. I don't like standing there alone. I thought you'd be with me more."

"Well, alright. I'm sorry."

"You must think I don't need you just because I was talking to them."

"You looked like you were having fun."

"You didn't even notice. This is the first time in a while we've even gone somewhere together."

"Okay--I didn't realize it was that important."

"You don't want them to think we're together."

"Would I have asked you to go?"

"Gwen was with George."

"That guy. Look, everything's okay. I don't care what she does."

"You don't know what's important," I said, and we drove the rest of the way home silent.

Back at the apartment I searched unsuccessfully for my keys. We tried to break in a window by climbing on cars parked along the house. I held John's legs steady while he wacked at the screen-hooks with a stick, laughing nervously when he stopped every so often to curse. Then we sat down on the porch steps to wait for Gwen and her keys. The el went by twice before we said anything at all, and I set my head on my knees and stared at the dark house across the street.

"Maybe I should knock again in case she's asleep and didn't hear," I said.

"She would've heard us trying to get in." John whispered, scratching with one finger at the cement step. A car wheeled around the corner and Robbie coasted up and stopped. I walked over and leaned down to talk. His head disappeared for a second as he turned down the radio.

"What're you doing out here?" he asked.

John swore again. "I'm locked out," I said.

"When're you going to learn?" His eyes were red, half-shut when he grinned up at me in the porch light.

"What're you doing, protecting her?" he yelled at John.

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"I'm headed home," he said. If he'd been just driving around or whatever, I would've asked to get in. It must've been three o'clock by that time though. So I leaned in the window and said goodbye. He said he was going home the next day. I wished he'd asked me to go with him.

After Robbie drove off, John stood up and walked into the middle of the street. He scuffed around some, looking up and down the road, and then he turned around.

"Come on," he said. "We'll go to my place and tell them we were out all night."

We walked the two blocks to his house, leaving the car in the alley. Gwen didn't know what it looked like anyway.

I woke up sweating, and the sheet came off me like an old snakeskin. The sun already burned through the glass of the sunporch where we'd slept. I started to yawn and my lips cracked, so I took it slow, licking them carefully.

"I feel like hell," I whispered--then I heard Gwen's voice in the livingroom.

I turned over, saw I was alone, and spotted my clothes across the floor. The windows were on the first floor, fronting on a garden, so I crawled over and sorted them out. I'd been dreaming the early morning dreams you remember later on without being sure if they're real or not. I remembered waking

earlier and thinking, just for a second, that someone was in the garden.

She hammered on the door. I rolled onto my back, yanking my pants up by arching my spine.

"I know you're in there," she yelled. "Don't try to hide."

The platforms thumped back down the hall. I rested for a moment, staring at the clean, even whiteness of the ceiling. I could've escaped through the windows, found Robbie, gone to the beach, never returned. But Gwen waited. I could see her on the sofa, dressed in a nice skirt, showered, moral, ready to make us squirm.

I cuffed my white pants up to the calf and buttoned up a flowered island shirt. Then I opened the door, walked down the hall, and sat down in the livingroom. I looked at the sweaty marks my feet left on the floor.

John shifted in his chair, running hands through his hair. Gwen looked like someone had died, alone on the sofa, trying to stare us both down. The lower John and I sank into our chairs, the higher up she sat.

"I feel like getting on a plane and going home," she said finally.

"Oh Christ, don't do that," I said.

"How am I supposed to live with you now?"

"It's nothing big," I said, pleading. "Nothing happened. We couldn't get in the apartment. It was late, and we wanted to go to sleep."

"Oh, nothing happened, huh?"

John looked at me.

"No, nothing happened. You know how we've always been close. It was nothing more than that," I said.

"I can't begin to tell you how I feel." She was talking to John then. "I've told her how I felt the whole way along. She was my friend. Now I find out everything I said was being used for I don't know what."

"No," I said.

"That's bull and you know it," she said, and I shut up.

"What're you two going to do now?"

I'd been waiting for that one, and I watched John.

"I don't know," he said. "Hang out some, I don't know. What the hell did you expect? I've been attracted to her for three years. We've hung around like some damn trio or something!"

"Oh, so you're going to go out some, and I'm supposed to live with her. That's rich," she said. "I didn't think that things were over, John."

He didn't say anything.

"I sat up there this morning, and I waited," she said. "I thought this might have happened and then I said to myself, no no, I'll wait. Then I come down here and I find out I was right. The person who was supposed to be my friend and you are down here--"

I'd never seen Gwen that bad off before. I thought she would go crazy or something. Her words ^tstrung out like a

clothesline that's being cranked in, the clothes plucked off, and the clothesline whipping round and round. I looked at John and thought he was a miserable excuse for something--for a friend, and anything else. I'd lied for him, and that was as much as I was going to do. I stood up.

"Look Gwen," I said, and my voice shook worse than hers. "I know it looks bad, and you feel like you can't stay around. But nothing's going to happen. It'll be okay. We aren't going to go out. It's not like that. It's not anything like what it looks. I'm sorry." I started for the door.

"Where're you going," she asked.

"You better talk," I said. "Just take it easy. We'll live together okay. Whatever you do, don't get on a plane."

It was one of those beautiful summer days where it's hot and clear up north, but the wind coming off the lake saves you. I thought about heading for the beach, but then I remembered that Robbie had gone home. So I went home, into my room, and shut the door. It was cool and quiet--the eel wall kept the sun from my room. I got into bed, and in spite of all the hurt we'd done, I felt good. He'd been mine the night before, when we cooked breakfast, he came up behind me and slipped down the shoulder of my blouse and kissed my neck. I slept most of the day, waking up to hear Gwen and John come in, and leave again quickly. I figured we'd avoid each other for awhile.

We were fairly successful at that. I barely saw either one of them at all for several days, and then only at a

distance. If I was in my room and I heard Gwen come in the apartment, I'd stay there until she left. John didn't come around at all. I couldn't face either of them, but Gwen was able to at least act pleasant. She was good at acting cheerful and saying hello, and after awhile I almost felt like nothing had happened. It was her pride. She couldn't forgive me, and she'd never ^{tr}ust me again. I could see she and John were taking it slow, going out again, but she had to find out if she could trust him either. I realized that in all the time I'd spent with them I hadn't known much at all. I still wanted to see John alone some time and talk to him, though. It was a week or two before I got the chance

It just was a matter of catching him. One day Gwen went to lunch with a friend, and I sat out on the porch, waiting. I knew he'd come by at a certain time after work looking for her. Finally I heard someone scuffling around the corner in the alley, and there he was, ready to mumble hello and keep on walking.

"I want to talk to you for a minute," I said, and I went in the house. I sat down in a chair and after a minute he came in the door and sat on the floor across the room with a sheepish grin on his face. I waited two awkward minutes, hoping he'd say something first even if it was only I'm sorry everything's screwed up. But he didn't. He grinned and pulled at the frayed part on his shoelaces.

"You two are going out again," I said .

"Well, yeah," he said.

"She hates my guts now."

"No she doesn't. She knows it was mostly my fault."

"I thought you were through with her."

He looked down.

"You never even made any effort to say anything to me. I'm the odd person out now. The villain. I can't be friends with either of you."

"I'm sorry."

"Well, what was in your head, anyway?"

"Look. We couldn't have gone out."

"Why not? We've always liked each other, you know it's true."

"We're too much alike. I'd never be able to say anything to you, without you seeing right through everything. It'd drive me crazy."

"There's a lot of stuff that's different about us. She's not the right person for you anyway. She's so loud, she says the dumbest shit sometimes. She pushes you around."

Remember after she came back and we were sitting around with those guys and she was there with that shirt on, half her chest hanging out, I mean god--"

"I know," he said. "I can't help it."

"We can talk better," I said.

"Yeah, I know. But that's the whole thing. When I talk to you you see all that's wrong with me and I see it in you too. Sure she's embarrassing sometimes. I know that."

"What're you going to do, get married, have five kids..."

He smiled and I smiled back and looked away.

"I thought you knew more what you were doing to do," I said.

"I don't know. I just did what I did because I've always wanted to."

"Well things are sure screwed up now."

"I know. She doesn't know if she can forget it."

"You mean so it'll be okay with you?"

"Yeah. The fact that it was you really got her. You saw her. She's always tried to ignore how I liked you. She knew."

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

"That doesn't make any difference. You've got friends-- Robbie, all the rest."

"Robbie likes me too much."

"Robbie loves you."

"That's what I mean."

"So."

"So he's my friend."

"Robbie's a good person." He stood up.

"I know. He looks out for me alot."

He retied a white rag he'd been wearing Aunt Jemima fashion since it got hot.

"Do you want to talk about anything else?"

"No."

I sat there smiling at him, but already it was getting

strained, the way it'd be the next time I saw him. I smiled until the screen door slammed.

Around that time, late July, the lake had gotten just right. You could go in swimming and not have your legs numb after two seconds. Robbie took me to the beach almost every day. Sometimes Jumping Jeff or Steve would come along but mostly we went alone. It was getting easier to talk to Robbie. I didn't have to ask as many questions. We'd swim, or I would and Robbie would wade around like a whooping crane. Then we'd head up to the rocks, find ourselves a nice spot, and make pillows out of our clothes. Planes flew by overhead trailing streamers advertising fairs, concerts, or whatever. Old men would climb down past us on the rocks to the water and fish. Robbie asked me questions.

One time he shaded his eyes and looked down at me.

"Are you glad Mama Gwen's back here?"

I was pretty sure he didn't know about John and me, so I just shrugged.

"It's okay," I said. "She hangs out with John mostly."

"She gives me a pain," he said.

"She's not that bad," I said. "John likes her."

"He's just too lazy to do anything about it."

"You think so?"

"Sure. You don't hang out with them much."

"Not anymore. I get tired of it too."

"You were friends with John."

"Yeah."

I sat up and crushed a bug on my leg.

"What do you do when you go home?"

"I see my family," he said. "My little brother and sister. I go out sometimes."

"You still have friends there?"

"Yeah, from high school. It's strange to see them though. They're married, with kids. Even the dirty girls."

"You knew the dirty girls, huh?"

"Sure." He dropped some pebbles on me.

"How about the nice ones?"

"They're married too."

"How about the ones in between?"

"No such thing," he laughed. "I'm kidding."

"Sure you are," I said, and I ignored him for awhile. I'd never seen Robbie go out with anyone, not in all the time I'd known him. I asked Gwen and John about it when I first met him but they said he hadn't for awhile. I figured he hadn't met anyone he liked or something.

"When're you going home?" he asked.

"The end of August, about the same time you're going to Italy."

He lay back down on his towel, contented. He had a dark tan, his skin was olive brown to begin with. His eyes were shut and his broad mouth pink, full, almost smiling. His gold, good-luck medal shown in the sun--it was yellow gold. He must've known I was looking at him, but he just lay there, and his hard cheekbones had a polish. I reached

down and took the medal in my fingers, turning it over and over, flashing the sun with it. It had a picture of some saint. Then I leaned back on my elbows and watched the old men walking up and down along the water with their pails of bait.

The thing was Robbie never pushed it. He never did anything about how he liked me. All it would have taken was one kiss and there were a couple times I thought he was on the brink. But he never did. The way I looked at it was I needed a friend like him, and I liked him alot. I liked him better than anyone else, but the way he held off all the time would get on my nerves. And then too, I would think about what happened with John, and I'd think it was probably better the way we were, friends. It was like everyone watching to see what I'd do with Robbie' everybody could see he liked me. I don't think he came right out and told Jumping 'eff or Lupa or Steve how he felt, but it was past the point where anyone needed to be told. Maybe that's what put the idea into Steve's head, or maybe he liked me too-- I don't know. The thing was, I wanted to get away from the apartment so much I didn't give it much thought. Like I said before, we weren't doing alot of plain thinking, excpet maybe Robbie.

During the day I'd see Robbie alone, but at night we still hung out in a crowd, and Steve was always there. He and Robbie were good friends. Not as good as Robbie and Jumping Jeff, because they were both from downstate, near the river, and they had a common way of looking at things. Past a certain

point they thought Steve was full of air, especially because he came from California. Robbie used to say that people from California were the worst people he'd ever met in his life. But he and Steve worked on the Fiat together, talked stereos and skiing. They had competition going on too. They'd try to out-smart each other, or be more caustic than the other, or something like that. And Jumping Jeff and Lupa would sit in the background, flanking Robbie, grinning meanly. I guess I was somewhere in between, but more on Robbie's side because I knew him best.

Anyway, in the beginning of August John had a party. Gwen invited me so I thought it'd be okay to go. Robbie and everyone else, including John's friends from the south were going too, and she was especially excited about that. I think she wanted to show them she and John were still together or something.

I sure wasn't going to walk in alone so I waited at home for Robbie and the others to come get me. Gwen spent quite some time getting ready. She tried on different outfits, and asked me what I thought looked best. She set her hair and put on three gold necklaces. She walked out carrying a couple bags of pretzels, dressed in a short blue-jean jumper with a tank top underneath. The tank top dipped way below the bib of the jumper. Her broad shoulders and chest were tanned, and because her breasts were tanned, there was a beautiful expanse of strong, smooth breastbone, not bony but flesh and shaped like a heart.

After she left I got dressed. I wore a white skirt I'd been wearing all summer, and a white shirt. I borrowed two barettes from Gwen's room for my hair, and put on a record. I danced around some, just to get in the mood, to "I Heard it Through the Grapevine", the version by Marvin Gaye.

By the time they showed up, it was dark outside, and we walked down the street in a pack. Everyone was on the lawn, dancing or yelling or talking. I went up and said hey to Gwen and John and his friends. They had to get back to school by the end of August, so they wanted a last big bang out of things. I couldn't talk to them longer but Gwen looked annoyed. So I walked across the lawn and stood near one of the pine trees that blocked off the street. Robbie and Jumping Jeff headed for the keg and Steve came over and stood next to me. He shifted from one foot to the other like he was bored and exasperated with everything.

"What're you so jumpy about," I asked.

"Who are these people, anyway," and he looked around like he was at the zoo.

"I don't know," I said.

He looked to me like a racecar driver or something. His eyes were watery blue and his nose hooked over a crooked wide smile.

"Let's dance," he said, and he pulled at my arm. He looked so frantic all the time that you felt special when he spent a few minutes talking.

"No one's dancing now," I said.

"Aw, they're all too shy," he said, and he grabbed me around the waist and danced me around the pine tree.

"You look like a little Serbian in that dress," he said. "You're adorable."

As we whirled I could see faces turning to watch. I began to think it was funny. When the song ended he said, "Come on, I'll get you a beer." We went to the keg and he filled my cup for me.

"Dancing, huh," Jumping Jeff said to me.

"Yeah," I said. Robbie moved away.

"Damn," I murmured.

Steve nudged my side. "What is it?"

I turned so Jumping Jeff couldn't hear. "Oh, Robbie," I said.

"What about him?"

"I think he's mad."

"Because we danced?"

"I guess."

"Well that's no big deal. Relax."

I looked at the group near the house. Everybody was laughing, heading inside.

"I'm getting out of here," I said. I gave Steve my cup and started down the sidewalk.

"Wait up," he called. I kept walking.

When he caught up with me, I was almost home. He had a six-pack under his arm and he was breathless.

"Where're you going?" he asked.

"Home."

"Why? Look what a nice night it is." He tipped my chin towards the stars. "Come on, let's go to the beach or something."

He took my hand and dragged me down the alley around the house, so we'd circle in back of John's and get to the beach without seeing anyone. He pulled me into a run and we were laughing by the time we stumbled onto the sand.

We walked off the beach onto the rocks, down the long curve bringing the city into view. We went all the way to the lagoon, around the black water, and sat down on the last point of rock before the shore bent back into town. There weren't any clouds in the light brown sky lit up by the city. The skyline to the south looked like a miniature computer, blinking and busy on the edge of the lake.

Steve opened two beers and cursed the inefficient flip-tops.

"So why didn't you want to stay?"

"Because I didn't know what to do," I said.

Then, I don't know why, but I told him all about Gwen and John and why we weren't friends anymore. He listened carefully, and he asked me questions, and when I was done, he sympathized.

"Oh, I've done the same thing," he said. "They always hate you afterwards. They treat you bad because they're jealous."

"I don't see why the hell they should be jealous."

"Because they're screwed up and you're not. You're wonderful."

"You must not have been listening."

"You aren't listening to me."

"What about Robbie. He's always around, I can't do anything. You're his friend, what does he say about me? What does he want?"

"Oh god," Steve said, and set his elbows on his knees laughing. "Everytime we're together we end up talking about you. He loves you."

"No he doesn't. He just doesn't have anyone else."

"Yes he does. Lots of girls would like to. But he says to me last night, 'she sits back and she doesn't say much but she knows what she thinks.' He really likes you."

"I don't like him that way. I want him to be my friend."

"That's impossible." He took a big drink. "You can't have that."

"I have it now," I said. I watched his profile, noticing he had a weak, smallish chin. He moved his hand towards my leg, brushed my skirt, and let it rest on the rock. He looked back at me a long time, and shrugged.

I leaned over and took his oval cheek and jaw in my hand. I wrapped my other arm around his neck and kissed him, pushed him down on the rock. Out of the corner of my eye I saw his one hand still holding the beer up in the air. I moved my mouth round and round on his lips, pressing his head into the cushion of my arm. The breeze blowing down from

Wisconsin puffed my skirt and shifted it across my skin like a leaf. With his free hand he held me through the folds of it, pulled me onto his strong-boned leg. I slid farther onto him and we rolled with the waves swelling into the lagoon. The beer can fell sliding and crashing down the rocks to the water. I brought up my knee and he cradled it in the hollow of his hand, drawing it into his chest.

A car motor sounded in the distance and grew louder with tires rumbling on the gravel near the rocks. I lifted my head and peered at the park.

"The cops," I said, and we sat up. "We got to go, they'll chase us out."

Car doors slammed. We gathered the cans and climbed onto the road. A flashlight shone on us for a second as we passed the car and when we looked back, running again to town, I saw figures flushed like birds from the darkness near the lake, shadows holding hands running over the field.

I slept in Steve's room that night, a room I'd never seen in all the times I'd visited his apartment with Robbie. His room-mate's bedroom opened on to it, so he had the bed screened off by two six feet high speakers that were only about three inches thick. He explained the mechanics of them to me; their beautiful design and efficiency. He also had pictures on the wall of the town he lived in when his parents sent him to school in Switzerland. He'd gotten into trouble as a kid, stealing motorcycles and doing drugs. I guess Switzerland had done the trick. He got into ski racing and

reformed. The only other poster on the wall was of a dark-haired girl, fourteen or fifteen, in a black leotard. I figured he'd gotten that in France or something.

In the morning, around six o'clock, his room-mate came through, waved, and went off to work. I hid under the sheets, but Steve laughed.

"Why's he going to work so early, and on a Saturday?"

"He's W. Clement Stone's chauffeur," Steve said.

"That's too bad." I crawled out of bed and picked my clothes off a chair.

"I better get out of here before Robbie shows up. I bet he's wondering where we went."

"That's probably a good idea," Steve said. He rolled onto his elbow under the sheet and watched me getting dressed.

I sat on the edge of the bed. "So, do you want to hang out some?"

He laughed and took my hand. "That's great," he said. "Hang out some. Yeah, let's hang out."

"But not in front of Robbie," I said. "I'm afraid of how he'd feel."

"No," he said, "We don't want to let Robbie know. That would be bad."

"Okay," I said. I stood up, and looked around at the room.

"Do you feel better now?"

"Than last night?"

He nodded.

"I guess so."

"Good," he said, "Good."

"I'll see you later," I said, and he waved from the bed.

I got home about seven. Gwen's room was empty, so she must've stayed at John's. I'd taken the el through town to get home early. It'd been empty that early in the morning, just me and the conductor on the four block ride. I'd sat sideways in the seat near his little booth, and he asked me how I was doing, and I said fine. He leaned over the half-door, the wind breezing through all the open windows, and he said it was already a hot one, and I was dressed right for it. When I got off I told him not to get lonely, and after I ran down the steps onto the street I looked up and waved. He slammed the doors, tipped his forefinger, and the train rolled on up north.

When Gwen arrived in the afternoon she asked me what I'd ended up doing the night before and I said not much.

"Didn't you leave with Steve?" she said, and watched me closely.

"Yeah, but he just walked home with me. Then I don't know where he went." I said it evenly, like I knew it was a lie and I didn't care.

"Robbie was looking for him later on." That was her parting shot as she went in the bathroom.

Robbie didn't come by to see me the next day, or the next. He didn't call, and when I called him he wasn't around or he said he was busy. Steve said he was down at

Jumping Jeff and Lupas' all the time--he'd been avoiding Steve, too. Sometimes it made me so sad when I went to the rocks alone I cried. Steve didn't make me feel any better. He was so worried about his own friendship with Robbie that between the two of us, someone was feeling guilty all the time. We'd end up talking about Robbie. After about a week I didn't even like Steve anymore. He'd ask me to go somewhere with him and it'd turn out to be a stereo store where he had to get a new part or look at improved models, and then we'd go back to his place and I'd sit there bored while he fixed the tuner or whatever. He wouldn't even talk to me much, he'd be so involved with getting everything put together right. He'd apologize when I'd decide to go home but he didn't really care. The worst part was when we did talk it'd be all about how much he wanted to help people and care about people, and about this religious experience he had at a camp back in California. I don't think he exactly saw the light, but it amounted to something like that. You never would have thought he'd be religious from the way he'd carried on in the past, and the way I figured he'd continue to carry on in the future. I found out more about that too; all the women he'd tried to help. And then he had a thing about little girls. I told him he was sick, and that pretty much finished things off. I'd never met such a complete liar in my life, and it took me about two weeks just to get over the shock. He felt so damn bad about everything too--he was so sorry he was

always fucking things up, but he couldn't help it. Then he'd be blatant as anything, tramping in my place and cooing up to Gwen like nothing had ever happened. Like I said, it finished me off. If it hadn't screwed things up with Robbie, it might've been funny. In all that time I still hadn't seen him.

In the last weeks of August a real heat wave set in and the pollution count rose daily. Everybody was complaining all the time. We just waited for night-time when it cooled down to eighty and you could drink a beer and feel half-alive. I even watched TV one or two nights with Gwen and John and it was pretty amiable. It was hard to be angry in all that heat. I guess in the inner city it makes people riot and commit crimes, but we just wilted and went to the kitchen for more ice cubes. The first thing Robbie said when he walked in the livingroom the third night of the wave was, "I absolutely cannot take this unbelievable heat one minute longer." I didn't see Steve behind him until later, when we'd all quit laughing.

They sat down and drank a beer with us. Robbie acted normal. We all talked about the hottest we could remember it getting when we were kids. When it got dark we didn't turn on any light. We just sat there talking and after awhile it was hard to see anyone's face. Steve started reading a magazine anyway. Robbie told me he'd gone home to get ready for Italy. He said he was taking his skiis, and when we laughed he said, no, really, he could go skiing in Italy

once he got there. That's how high the mountains were.

Then there was a moment of silence while we all listened for a breeze and drank our beers. He stood up, and he said, "Come on, let's go down to the Po. It's airconditioned."

I wasn't sure whether he was just talking to Steve so I waited while Gwen and John said no, they were going to stick it out at home. Then he turned to me and he said, "How about you? You coming?" I broke into this big smile and said, "Yeah, I want to go."

"Get your stuff," he said, and smiled.

"I'm still not carrying any," I said, and I aimed a kick at him.

"Come on, Abe," he said to Steve, and he led the way out the door, bounded down the steps, and opened the front door so Steve could climb in back. Then he shut me in, and went whistling around to the driver's side.

We went straight through town on our way to the Po instead of taking Sheridan Road. We stopped at a traffic light on Howard Street, where the bars and the city line begin. A middle-aged woman crossed the street wearing tight pants and a thin vest with nothing underneath either of them. We were all staring as hard as if she'd been naked, maybe harder.

"Hot damn," said Robbie. "I need a rich older woman."

"That's disgusting," I said. The woman disappeared through the glass doors of a pinkish apartment building.

"Let us not be bitter," Robbie said in a sermon voice.

I crossed my arms and ignored him.

"Speaking of older women, Steve, how'd you get along with Mardy after I left last night? She looked pretty, shall we say, willing--" He glanced at Steve in the rear-view mirror and smiled at me.

"Shut up, Robbie. I don't know what she wanted," Steve said, but they both snickered joyfully. I tried to grin but I looked out the side window because it looked fake.

"What's all this?" I asked faintly, and I looked at Steve. He'd been hanging over the seat but when I turned around he sat back.

"A little midnight comfort," Robbie jeered. "Let's get naked time."

The light changed and we swung into traffic and Robbie kept it up, laughing and looking back at Steve in the mirror. I took it as long as I could.

"Allright," I said. "Let's change the subject."

"How about baseball," Robbie said, and I started to wish I hadn't gone with them. But they did talk baseball until we got to the bar, and I went and played pinball as soon as I got my beer.

Robbie let it alone after I went back to the table, and things seemed okay. But it kept bothering me, so when Steve went to the bathroom, I casually asked Robbie 'who that Mardy is'. He wasn't fooled. He got this angry frown he usually only wore when somebody bashed in his car.

"Some hog, I don't know," he said.

"Don't talk like that," I said. "You sound like a jerk or something."

"Christ, that's what she is," he said. Then he snaked one long jacketed arm around my shoulders and his eyes were black and dull.

"Smile," he said, so I did.

It was only one week until Robbie and I were leaving town. Other kids, like John's friends from the university in Champagne were going back to school soon. The city was emptying out as people headed north for one last vacation at the cottage or whatever before they locked them up for the year. Gwen and John disappeared for days at a time--sometimes they went downtown, and twice they went to visit John's parents. Steve quit work, he'd been operating a fork-lift in a warehouse, and he started on a money spree for skis and stereo equipment--all the newest, most efficient things he could find and afford. He'd had a lousy time at work and he was ready for the pay off.

I spent most time with Robbie again on the rocks, stretched out flat next to him with our heads aimed at the water, watching the water-skiers carving the waves, kicking up spray. We took drives up north through the shady suburbs where everything was greener than ever, the garage doors open, the weather vanes twirling again since the heat wave broke. We cruised along with the sports cars and motorcycles and everyone wore shades like moviestars. We liked to see the rich

folks having fun.

The night before Robbie left we met at Biddy's on the northside, off Howard Street. The bar stood in a bad section cornering on the Jonquil Jungle. Mexicans held ground on one side, blacks on the other.

Biddy's was mainly a black bar at that time, bands playing rhythm and blues every night except Monday. Big names in the city like Bob Reidy, Mighty Joe Young, Big Twist and the Mellow Fellows played on weekends. That last night the place steamed with sweaty bodies dancing in the aisles, fat women in sleeveless knit pantsuits creased around their crotch, upper thighs, and cleavage, wiping their foreheads with pink hankies. I pushed ahead of Robbie, Steve, Gwen, John, and friends through the pack, searching for stray stools. The regulars, older, skinny guys in suits and sneakers, took advantage of the press to rub against Gwen and me and murmur lust at us white girls. 'Hey, babydoll, hello--my you look healthy', they said. We bumped with them to the music on the jukebox, found some seats, and Robbie went to the bar for pitchers.

I understand now that whites stop in at Biddy's because of the good dancing music, but that night I only saw seven or eight others in the whole place. Pimps were leading their women up and down the aisles. I sat next to Robbie and Steve kicked his feet against the stool across the table. A dart game was in progress at the end of the bar. Plump men in dark felt hats leaned forward on tip-toe, keeping their stomachs balanced while darts leapt out of

their fingers fast as grasshoppers. Gwen acted anxious to dance--she bumped back and forth with John next to the jukebox.

On the small raised stage men began to rearrange chairs and plug in equipment, tilt the microphone and tap it. Two big white guys at the door let the crowd filter in through the lighted hallway from the street. A small Brazilian girl that Steve knew showed up. She couldn't have been more than five feet even and her body was slightly bent. She regularly drank too much cognac. There was wild embracing between them. The stage darkened, and an older man in a blue shirt, with straightened hair shining beneath a black derby grabbed the microphone.

Most of his speech got lost in the cheers and whistles of the crowd, but I caught something about queen of the blues by way of the Mississippi. Koko Taylor, beads of sweat dripping down her cheeks, waddled into the spotlight waving a white handkerchief at the crowd. With a firm slap of her hand against thigh the stagelights went up and the band dropped into a blues tune. Most of the band were older, but the drummer had long hair, and a round, young face. The regulars began making the circuit of the crowd, asking girls to dance. They pulled reluctant ones by the hand into the light.

I clicked my glass against Robbie's. "You dancing tonight?"

"Don't even ask." He moved his shoulders back and forth

to the music, brushing mine.

"Why not? Your last night here, you'll never see any of these people again."

"I can think of easier ways to make a fool of myself," he said.

"Are you excited about Italy? I'll be thinking of you when I'm home, raking the grass."

"Sure I'm excited. You'll have to come with me sometime."

Pat, the Brazilian girl, elbowed her way between us. Big glasses distorted her already large cheekbones and eyes. Her skin was dark, pockmarked around her broad mouth. She spilled cognac on my arm.

"Isn't Steve full of it? Here I love him and I'm the only one he won't--"

"Yeah," I broke in. "He's weird. Don't listen to him."

Steve left for the bathroom. Somehow, she knew about us. But I didn't feel like being called on as witness in front of Robbie.

"You're better off anyway," I began.

She stuck her face close to mine, raising her voice.

"You know," she said, "Men suck, they really--"

I saw Robbie grinning over her shoulders at me.

"Aw, he's just a jerk. Don't worry about him" I said, and I put one arm around her thin shoulder. Steve worked his way back through the crowd, watching us. I didn't want him to think I cared.

"Maybe you should talk to him about it," I whispered.

Then I put my hands up to show I had no more advice.

"Or maybe," I said enthusiastically, "You can forget about it?" She squeezed me around the waist and moved away.

I put my head on the table and sighed. "What the hell was that?"

"Two idiots," Robbie said.

I watched Koko, a pretty woman wearing stretchy red pants. She must have been in her forties but it was hard to tell. She opened her hands, fingers spread and palms to the ceiling, and shook her hips. She strutted from one side of the stage to the other, pointed with her handkerchief into the crowd, bent double, wet rings showing under the arms of her lime-green tunic. One of the whores dragged a bar-stool near the stage and climbed on top, shaking from the waist up. Her spike heels pierced the red vinyl cushion and her dress hiked up when she clapped hands above the people. Some white girls were learning to fight off the regulars' straying hands, drunk and a little lost in all the noise and craziness of the place. Two women flapped their arms like birds in front of Koko, careened around the floor in modern dance gyration, caught each other up and swayed back and forth. At the end of the song they shook wildly until the last note faded.

Koko drew another kleenex out of her tunic and burst into "All Night Long" without any introduction. No-one left the floor. I heard Gwen yell and pull John out to dance. I looked at Robbie, but he smiled and shook his

head. The most faithful regular was making his way down the line, but his hands had scared off the women. His white cotton pants clung to his legs, flared at the bottom. His face was broad and even and he looked close to thirty-five. I'd seen him countless times in Bidy's wearing the same tennis shoes and blue pullover v-neck.

When he grabbed my hand I slid off the stool and followed, clicking my fingers, swaying behind him through the people. I hesitated near an open space on the edge of the dart game but he drew me into the brightly lit dancing crowd and tried to pull me in for a close one.

"No, no," I said, shaking my head.

His friends grinned from the sideline along the bar.

"What's the matter?" He laughed and backed away.

"Too fast!" I shouted.

It was Koko's big number, played on the jukeboxes around town. The whole bar danced in the aisles, or between the stools. I tried to match his moves, one step each way, slide the feet, but I couldn't imitate his fancy smooth spins and hip grinds. Gwen and I smiled through the bodies from habit; it used to be our favorite song. Koko bent the microphone out over the crowd and screamed the chorus in a deep throaty voice--

"I'm gonna fix--"

The whore on the bar stool leaned towards Koko and mouthed the words back.

"Your wang dang doodle--"

My partner pulled me close and we rocked together. He was smooth from practice and we both laughed, pleased when I completed a successful spin and wheeled back into him.

"Allright!" he breathed in my ear.

"All night long!"

The fat women waved their forefingers in the air, looking better than anyone else. Koko threw away the wet, transparent hankie. She plucked the microphone from the stand and stepped twisting and shaking into the crowd, beckoning with one hand.

"All night long--All night long--All night long--I'm gonna fix--"

I felt looser and looser as the music closed down on Koko's screaming crescendo. I bent down, shook my hands at the dirty floor, raised up slowly in time to the music, my hips shaking in the opposite direction of my arms. My partner spun me again. In the dizzy circle of faces clouded by smoke I caught a glimpse of Robbie's hat against the wall, his teeth shining in a silent wide laugh beneath it's shadow. He seemed to reach for his glass, glinting in the light. I thought I saw him raise the glass so I reached one hand over all the others, waved back, mouthed goodbye. On the next spin, he had gone.